



COLD MOUNTAIN

Claire Keeton braves the weather for a pony trek to a Lesotho village. Marianne Schwankhart took the pictures



RIDE out of the 21st century on a pony to a faraway village in Lesotho, where adventure and time travel converge. The trail up a mountain only takes about five hours but it leads back into a traditional way of life, where shepherds watch their flocks by day and oxen plod in at night.

Wrapped in patterned blankets, the 30 or so families of Ha-Sehlahla fetch water, plant crops and tend to livestock. In winter they live in subzero conditions, which reminded me of camping at Everest Base Camp, with fewer comforts.

Travellers who want an extreme village sleeperover can go pony trekking in July like we did, but we would recommend a warmer time of the year.

Ntate Kefuoe Namane, 44, runs the pony trekking adventures in Morija, about 45km south of Maseru. This is an invigorating option for families who want to get outdoors and be invited into another culture.

My eight-year-old son has no concept of "normal" holidays so he enjoyed the horse riding, his first ever, despite the cold.

Soon after we arrived in Morija, Kefuoe knocked on our door and told us what to expect. He said, for example, that we had two saddlebags in which to pack overnight gear (torches, toothbrushes, hot water bottles, books etc).

I first met him 20 years ago on a holiday when we galloped his horses into sinking river sand and one bolted. His energy has not abated although he lost teeth in an accident, giving him a distinctive smile.

The pony trekking operation, just like Morija Guest Houses, with which it is run, is real eco-tourism and both have deep roots in the community.

The guesthouses where we stayed, for instance, support the Ha Matela Youth Centre, run by volunteers.

The main stone house is on a rocky outcrop above the historic village, where



CHILL SPOT: Clockwise from top, Ha-Sehlahla village; a pony takes a break; inside the cooking hut; and Kefuoe Namane leading the pack

IF YOU GO . . .

GETTING THERE: Morija is located between Maseru and Mafeteng, off the main South Road. From Maseru, pass the airport and drive about 20km. Signs on the left point to Morija.

THINGS TO DO: Morija Pony Trekking: Call Ntate Kefuoe Namane on +266 6353 2422 or e-mail kfnamane@yahoo.co.uk. The Morija Arts & Cultural Festival is on from September 23 – October 5. See morija.co.ls/festival/practicalinfo.

THINGS TO SEE: Patrick Rorke has a studio at the Morija Arts Centre. There is also an art gallery featuring local artists. Morija Museum is Lesotho's only museum and a landmark, as is the church spire. Among the displays is a replica of a dinosaur footprint, the Lesothosaurus, whose prints have been found in the area.

WHERE TO STAY: Morija Guest Houses offers a house that sleeps 16, the Mojaki cottage and Mpojane rooms. We stayed in the rustic cottage. A village sleeperover costs R800 per rider, including meals. To book, call Moseo Ntsihlele on +266 6306 5093, e-mail mgh@leo.co.ls or call Brigitte Hall on 073 8735 435, e-mail bcathala@mweb.co.za. Or visit morijaguesthouses.com.



PICTURES: For more multimedia, go to www.timeslive.co.za

we met a family from Pretoria doing a road trip.

We left all roads behind the morning we plodded off on our ponies — Tina, Staccato and Bibi — up the mountain. We took three to allow one adult the chance to hike.

The sure-footed ponies climbed up a steep trail until the trees and boulders below us looked like toys. On the plateau, we ate a packed lunch and Marianne was kicked in the shin when Tina got startled.

As the shadows got longer, we rode at a walking pace on the escarpment where we saw ploughed fields and sheep. We reached Ha-Sehlahla village, at about 2 050m, before sundown and were welcomed with tea.

Going for a walk, we were struck by the cold once the sun had vanished. That night, we ate a large dinner around a paraffin heater, on top of which bread was baking in a pot.

The hosts then led us to a one-room house — the owners slept elsewhere — with beds behind a curtain, pictures of saints on the walls and a long-drop about 20m away.

The water in a bucket for washing soon turned to ice and we buried ourselves under heaps of blankets.

Three nights prior to this, I had spent a freezing 12 hours about 300m up a cliff, after my partner and I got benighted. Once again I found myself jolting awake from the chill.

We were happy to see the sun in the morning and joined our hosts for tea and bread. We met a wealthy villager who works in banking in Maseru and had just returned from Morocco.

To get to Ha-Sehlahla by rocky road requires a robust 4x4 and we wound our way down this route. Our ponies were unable to drink at the first stream we crossed since the water was still frozen.

Slowly the streams, and our bodies, thawed. At the bottom of the final switchback on the descent, Zade hopped onto a bakkie and we cantered back to the Morija Guest Houses.

We had a festive dinner there with American guests. The next day we visited the arts centre and museum before moving north to Afriski, a destination best visited in winter.



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