

verve feedback

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A guide points out the variety of bird life to visitors on a walking trail.



For the adventurous, quad bikes provide a good way to do some exploring.



The spa's two cold water pools are more popular in the summer months.

WASHING AWAY THE WINTER BLUES

An important ingredient in getting through the winter, to my mind, is going away over a cold weekend to hot mineral springs somewhere to ease the freeze in your knees.

In Jane Austen's lingo, it's the perfect time to "take the waters" (as her heroines used to do at the pumphouse in Bath).

After all, when the sun is distant, the earth's core is still boiling, so it makes sense to gravitate to where its heat is bubbling to the surface.

Having done the Bela Bela (Warmbaths) thing so many times before, and gazed at the stars with a lover in the "Cuddle Puddle" in Swaziland, I had been wondering if there were other hot springs within reasonable distance to Joburg, in which to prune myself.

Recently, I discovered the Natal Spa Hot Springs resort, a rustic oasis on the road between Vryheid and Paulpietersburg on the Battlefields route.

It is equidistant from Durban and Joburg, and although it is not, as it boasts, a 3,5 hours drive from Joburg (more like 4,5 hours), it's worth the journey if you leave after lunch-time on a Friday.

The Natal Spa was built in the late 19th century, so it's been providing rest and supposed healing to travellers for well over 100 years. It is set on 800ha of KwaZulu Natal bushveld, with the Bivane river flowing through the property.

The water emanating from the springs is apparently just as strong as it's always been – it contains chlorides and sulphates believed to help a myriad complaints, from arthritis to gynaecological disorders.



Packing up her chilled winter bones, Helen Grange found a worthy weekend retreat to 'take the waters' in style.

And, at source, it is 40°C.

There are five mineral pools of different temperatures, and whether or not the virgin water from Earth's womb has physical healing properties, I find that being warm and weightless is remarkably healing in itself. And, mirroring your sangroid, rock rabbits lazily sun themselves on top of dome-like boulders.

There are also two cold swimming pools and a twisting waterslide, and the resort has plenty for children to occupy themselves with, from jungle gyms and trampolines to horse-riding, table tennis and pool tables. It wasn't long before my seven-year-old found a "friend" to play with.

Since the Gooderson Leisure Group became the new

owners of this establishment in 2006, there has been a lot of renovating to the hotel building, which I was assured will be completed by early November, though that seems a bit hopeful to me.

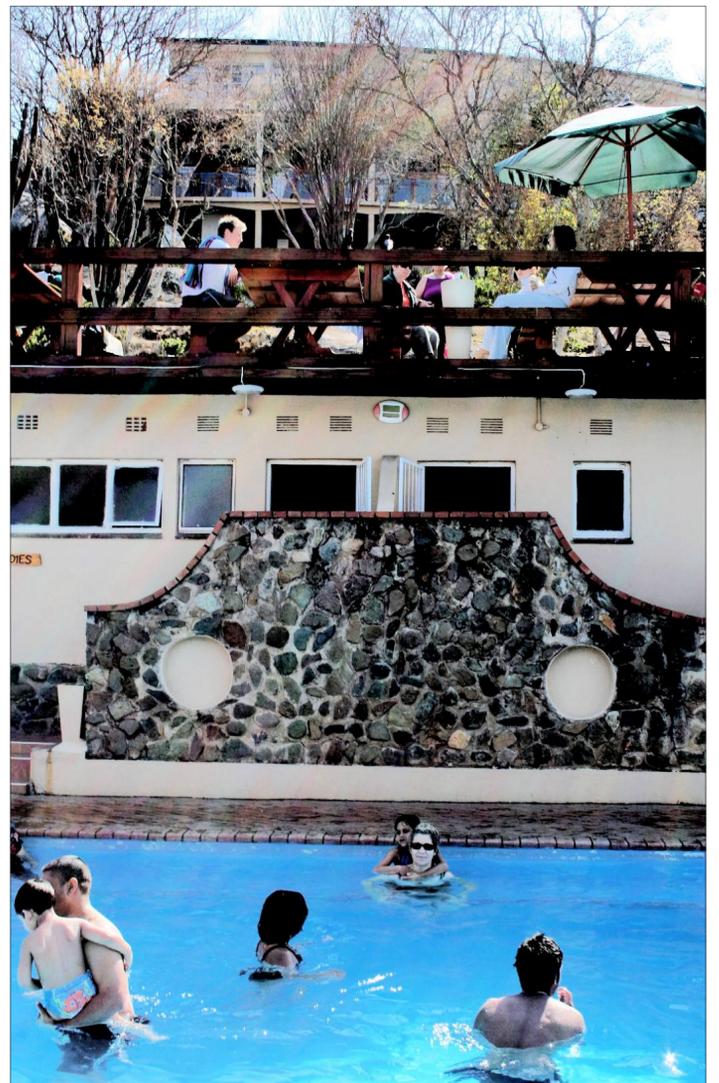
A new wellness centre is also being built, featuring a sauna and plunge pool, Jacuzzis, steam rooms and gym, due for completion at the end of this month. When it is complete, it will be similar to the Wellness Centre at the Drakensberg Gardens Golf and Leisure Resort, another Gooderson Leisure resort.

For the moment, however, the renovations are causing some annoyances, like having to clamber over boards and cement patches to get down to the pools, but the end is in sight and this charming old place will surely be better for it.

A far ruder imposition is people who disobey the rules by allowing their kids to splash and jump in the hot mineral pools where adults are serenely floating. A pool supervisor, nowhere to be seen while I was there, could surely sort this out, as I pointed out on leaving.

And I do hope that with the extra hotel space, it won't become like Bela Bela, which gets overpopulated at weekends.

With that in mind, I recommend going in low season, and book into one of the self-catering units, which are housed in a separate wing. They are cheaper (R695 for a four-sleeper unit, while the hotel is R429 per person per night), and you can cook or braai rather than attend dinner in the hotel, which offers a set, three-course affair with pretentious dishes that aren't very suitable for children.



SOOTHING: There is nothing quite like a pool of warm mineral water to ease the winter chill and stress out of one's city bones, and the children get to enjoy the benefits too.

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The Internet is bursting with potential travel companions, writes *Suzy Bennett*



WITH CYBERFRIENDS, THERE'S NO NEED TO TRAVEL SOLO

'Good company in a journey makes the way seem shorter,' wrote Izaak Walton, author of *The Compleat Angler*, after what was presumably a very sociable fishing expedition. Other well-known travellers would no doubt agree: Samuel Johnson and David Livingstone both famously enjoyed the benefits of companionship on the road.

But what about single people? While some happily embark on trips by themselves, most still prefer the security, companionship and economy of travelling with someone else.

Until recently, if friends or family didn't share your interests, it meant signing up to a singles' holiday, joining an agency or cruise, or posting an advert in a newspaper or magazine.

But as people began to book their holidays at the last minute, this process became outdated. Something quicker and more efficient was needed, and it was only a matter of time before the internet came to the rescue. Travel networking was born.

Social networking sites such as MySpace, which allow like-minded people to meet and chat over the web, have been big news for a couple of years. What's new is that travellers have joined the party.

In the past year, about 25 internet-based clubs have been set up with the sole aim of introducing holidaymakers to each other and helping them meet people local to an area they want to visit.

The advantage is that instead of being confined to a four-line advertisement or an agency's questionnaire, travellers have entire pages to themselves – a kind of cyber CV – on which to post photographs, list their favourite destinations, their likes and dislikes and describe the kind of companion they are looking for.

On some sites, such as MySpace's travel arm (www.myspace.com/roaminggnome), you can even post your home videos.

If you are a single traveller, the chances are there's something for you. High society? *Asmallworld.net* is an exclusive, invitation-only club whose members are rumoured to include Naomi Campbell, Paris Hilton and Quentin Tarantino.

Pensioner? *Retiredbackpackers.com* hooks up adventurous oldies. If you're looking for love, *Travelhotties.com* cuts to the chase, matching people

looking for romance, while *Welcome-traveller.com* connects people with local hosts.

There's no need to worry about your street cred, either. 'A few years ago there was a stigma attached to meeting someone on the web, but now it's normal to be looking for a travel companion online,' says Tom Hall of *Lonely Planet*, whose *Thorn Tree* website was one of the first to connect travellers.

How much time you spend with your fellow traveller is up to you: you can search for someone to join you on a gap year, or for a local to meet for a drink and insider knowledge. You don't even have to meet. Many people just exchange tips by e-mail.

There are, of course, risks associated with meeting people over the web. Information is rarely checked, and the person in the flesh can vary wildly from a persona that has been crafted over a keyboard. But for the most part, communication is friendly and horror stories tend to be more of the "we did not get on" variety rather than anything sinister.

According to Christine Davies, who set up a travel-networking site, the *Thelma and Louise Club*, after searching for a companion herself, the chances of getting on with someone you meet in cyberspace are about 60%. 'It's a spin of the roulette wheel, but when it works, it really works,' she says.

Her company boasts dozens of success stories, including that of Chris Baker, a recently retired pharmaceuticals manager from Scotland, who went on a two-and-a-half week holiday to South Africa earlier this year with a woman she met on the site.

'Jill and I both had a burning desire to go to South Africa, so we did, and had a super time. We went diamond shopping, ate in lovely restaurants and went to wildlife reserves. We got on really well, with no cross words, and spent 90% of the time together. We'd both be happy to travel together again.'

Travelchums.com, one of America's biggest travel networking clubs, has had its share of successes too, and its first marriage. Its home page is crammed with endorsements from customers, including a pair who got on so well they wrote: 'We are twins separated at birth.'

– *The Telegraph*

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