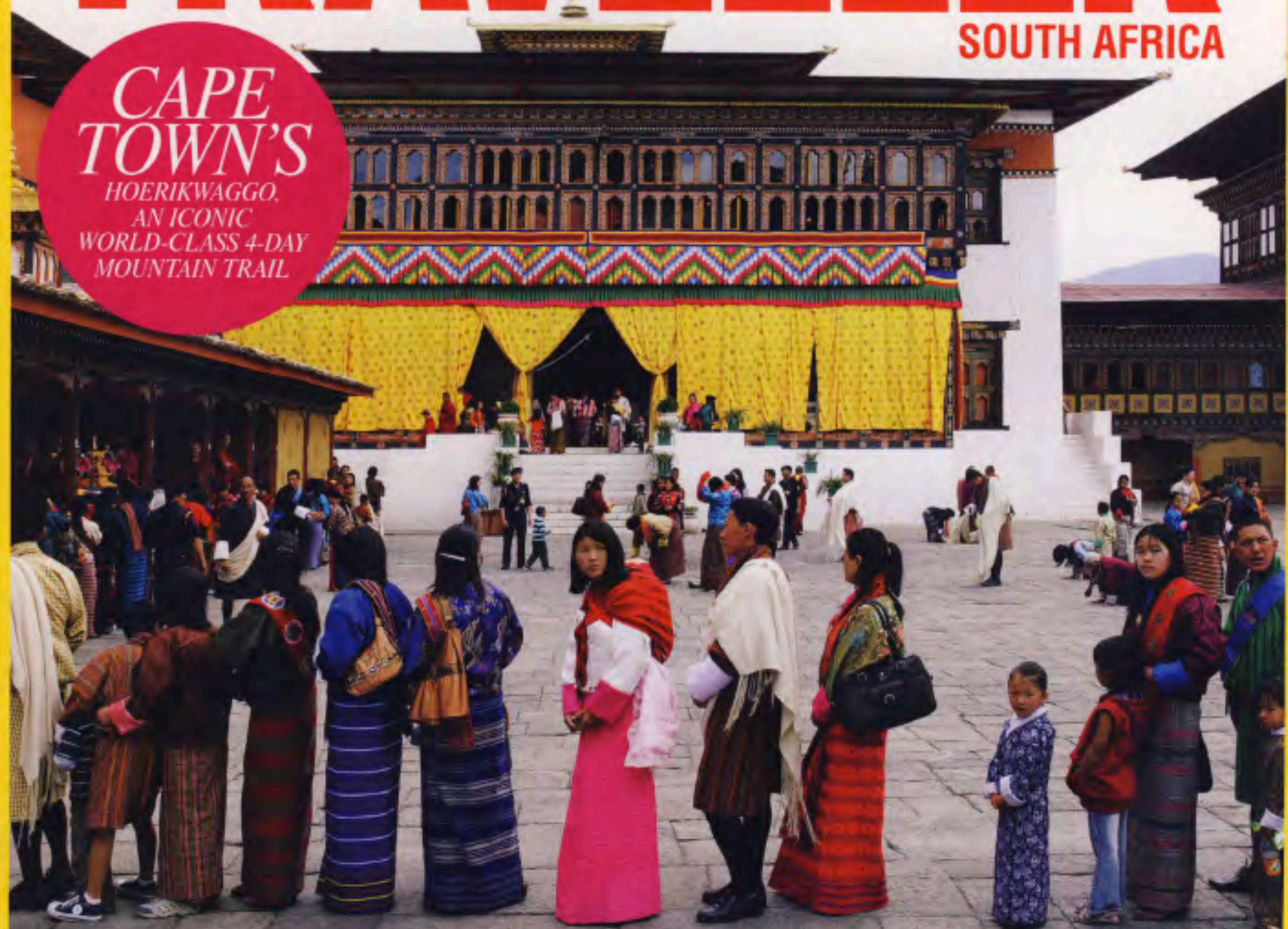
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Photography safari

AN ARABIAN STUD IN NORTHERN ZULULAND PROVIDES THE PERFECT SETTING FOR CREATIVE EXPLORATION THROUGH A LENS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS KELDA LUND

Clouds of brown dust swirl up behind the horses thundering past at what feels like an arm's length away. I am crouched down in an apprehensive, awkward pose, ready to embrace my own call to fight or flight. I am exposed, but utterly transfixed. The horses are wild-eyed: treading a fine line between showing off their magnificence against the dawn backdrop and wanting to run as far as their precious legs can carry them. Slowly my muscles, tense with adrenaline, sink into relaxation and I start to focus – I am safe in the forked base of a tree perfectly positioned in the middle of the paddock.

Just yesterday I was road-tripping solo, on a blissful four-hour drive that took me past the endless sugar-cane fields of KwaZulu-Natal to northern Zululand, close to the town of Pongola and the border of Swaziland. My destination was Pakamisa, a private game reserve and stud farm, and the home of horse lover Isabella von Stepski. Horses? I love them. Photography? I try. So the prospect of a horse photography weekend had me feeling both excited and slightly terrified. Now here I am, gripping my camera between my thighs as I balance precariously on the wooden paddock poles to better survey these Arabian beauties.

Our photography teacher, Ute Sonnenberg, signals the grooms to stop rattling the stone-filled bottles, not meant to irritate, just set off what the horses seem born to do – run freely together, no saddle, unbridled. They come to an abrupt standstill, nostrils flaring, ears pricked up, eyes focused on the strangers in their midst. The dust is settling, the energy palpable. My legs are shaky as I bend down and under the wooden poles to make my way out of the enclosure. My arm is heavy from carrying my camera, but I'm enthralled.

Pakamisa Lodge is magnificently set on the top of a ridge. Twice a day we wind our way down from its comforts to the stables in the valley to photograph and learn. Ute, whose company Roho Ya Chui conducts private photographic safaris at a range of destinations, sets various photographic tasks for us. There is no right or wrong, just your own interpretation of the scenario. We get to know the horses by name and know which group lives in which paddock. I am off to the mares, while my *compadre* Alison is shooting the foals. We gravitate towards our favourites.



HIGH SPIRITS

Speed, refinement, endurance and strong bones are hallmarks of Arabian horses, a breed that archaeological evidence shows may date back 4 500 years.

5005 EPP

5005 EPP

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KODAK



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It is in the routine of the weekend that we find the space to be. We are told in advance what is going to happen next and have time to shoot at leisure. Ute's main aim is to give her students a creative space in which to play, whether they're advanced experts or holding a camera for the first time. Each group is different, she says. Ours is a group of like-minded folk with different skill sets. We talk about any and every topic at each meal, before we scuttle off to select and prepare the best images for informal presentation. It's daunting to reveal our pictures to the group but we applaud everyone's work with interest and learn from one another.

There are no notes, no strict instructions. This is not a technical course but more an unlocking of our unconscious creativity. We are given the freedom to express ourselves, but just enough boundaries to push us out of our comfort zones. And while it's not about returning a new photographer immediately, it is about being humbled by nature as seen through the lens. The effects of this creative immersion linger for months. What I learn about myself is that I can't recall a photographic setting in my head. But I can tell you how I felt in the moment I took the picture.

With Ute's gentle guidance and subtle navigation, we are steered in a direction over the course of the weekend. It is in reviewing my body of work that I realise I have been able to circumvent my fear of the technical side of photography and unlock a new level of creativity through following my intuition.

Months later I hear that one of the magnificent unicorn-grey geldings has died of African horse sickness. I have the most exquisite photograph of his grey-white withers taken in soft dusk light. What an honour it was to meet him, and in such a special place. I cannot believe that he is no longer around – whenever I look at this photograph, he still exists.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Tap into your creative spirit and expand your boundaries during a horse-photography workshop at the five-star Pakamisa Lodge – with the added bonus of improving your technical skills

Roho Ya Chui A four-day, three-night photography workshop with Ute Sonnenberg at the five-star Pakamisa Lodge including all meals, drinks and horse rides is R7 250 per person sharing. Roho Ya Chui also offers wildlife photography workshops at Lake St Lucia and Cape Vidal, Sabi Sands and the Pilanesberg in South Africa, and the Masai Mara and Samburu in Kenya. For further information call 076 508 5850 or go to www.rohoyachui.com

Pakamisa Private Game Reserve 034 413 3559; www.pakamisa.co.za

