

PRINCESS IRENE

# Bergplaats

*A story about the relationship with Nature*

KNNV Uitgeverij

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*'We cannot avoid using power, cannot escape the compulsion  
to afflict the world,  
so let us, cautious in diction and mighty in contradiction,  
love powerfully'.*

*'All real living is meeting'.*

*'Everything depends on inner change; when this has taken place,  
then, and only then does the world change'.*

MARTIN BUBER



# Foreword

When you visit South Africa's Great Karoo for the first time, its arid terrain may appear harsh, but when you pause to ponder, intimate stories emerge from its silence.

I discovered the Karoo when I went to South Africa to explore its remarkable botanical biodiversity. Its flora bears testimony to life's ingenuity to thrive under harsh conditions. Life is ephemeral here, but resilient. Rainfall is sparse and erratic. Wild seasonal swings mark each year and the contours of the land reflect the longer cycles that have shaped it over time. Glaciers scoured the earth here once, but they gave way to an inland sea, from which forests eventually emerged that supported strange mammal-like reptiles, who were wiped out by volcanic activity on a massive scale. Echoes from those epic events are still apparent if you know how to decipher the silent language of the rocks.

It is not clear when the first humans made their way into the Karoo from the more benign coast where hominid ancestors thrived for a long time. But we do know that Khoisan people lived here. They left a light imprint of their existence: Delicate traces of their lives inscribed on rocks are testaments to a lifestyle of hunting and gathering, which came to an end when Europeans began to colonize the Karoo. Dutch settlers hauled their heavy wagons into the wilderness and their arrival ushered in a new era of exploitation, which transformed the land and diminished its wild creatures to a marginal existence.

Princess Irene was drawn into this ancient landscape when she was introduced to Bergplaas in 1998. She was wooed by its stark beauty and made a promise to herself to heal the land from generations of human impact.

She invited neighbors to help her restore it. They joined for a private dedication ceremony during which these wishes were proclaimed:

“May everything that lives here retain its own intrinsic value.”

“May both people and animals co-exist in peace here.”

“May black and white cultures co-exist in peace here.”

“May Bergplaas send her golden light out to places tinged by sorrow and need.”

Through Princess Irene’s deeply personal experiences we learn about Bergplaas’s intricacies once she becomes its steward. The story carries on beyond her own discoveries to how she galvanized the engagement of other people to liberate Bergplaas from its past as a heavily grazed farm to a new life as a sanctuary and as a setting for retreats, which become opportunities for people to reconnect with others across boundaries of culture as well as with nature.

Protecting nature for its own sake is a relatively new endeavor. It has been practiced for only a few generations and we are still figuring out how to do it in a way that can be sustained. We used to think that a proclamation and a plaque at a gated entrance were the essential markers of a commitment. But we are learning that connecting people with nature and nature with people may be a better strategy in the long run.

By opening her heart to Bergplaas, Princess Irene was able to initiate its revival and that in turn has enabled Bergplaas to begin to inspire other people. In a turbulent world where organic connections between people and nature are shrinking, Bergplaas has become a Hope Spot.

We need more Hope Spots and we need more people who know how to create them and look after them, so they can nurture yet others for more to come.

*Frans Lanting, Nature Photographer*

*Bergplaas is an insightful account of a deeply personal story of Irene's connection with nature and her efforts to allow people to rediscover their own connection with the Earth. In the book we share her hopes and dreams, along with challenges and frustrations, triumphs and heartbreaks.*

*As an African, I can relate to this all too well. Despite its magnificent beauty, wildness and extreme landscapes, Africa is a harsh place, a continent that continuously tests one and presents enormous challenges and tasks. For someone from a European background, these can undoubtedly appear particularly overwhelming. And yet through sheer determination, indomitable spirit and love for the land, its people and its capacity to touch people's hearts, Irene shows us that we need no longer feel estranged from nature, and that rather we learn from, and work with her.*

*Carrying a powerful message, this is a truly inspiring story.*

*Richard Leakey, KENYA*







*Each time I leave The Netherlands, the rain, so prevalent in my country, appears to travel with me, all the way into the semi-desert interior of South Africa. The people here, in the Karoo, have even started calling me 'the Rain Princess'. It feels like a fairy tale ...*

Once upon a time, fate brought me to a magical place called Bergplaas, meaning 'farm in the mountains'. There I was given the opportunity to allow nature to run her course once again, while simultaneously creating a place where people would be able to rekindle their own relationship with nature. It is said that in ancient times this achingly beautiful arid place in the heart of the Karoo was covered by a huge lake; it might even have been part of the ocean. Brittle remnants of shells here and there attest to this theory. Nowadays rivers carve deep into the vast wild landscape, where massive mountains tower over the thirsty land. I had no idea why I felt so drawn to this place. Why did it cry out to me? I strongly felt that I had been brought here for a purpose, and that this purpose would reveal itself to me if I just learned to listen. I had five thousand hectares of pristine semi desert to explore and get to know. And I fell in love with it. I ensconced myself in an old stone cottage on the property which served as a base from which I walked across the land in a personal quest to listen, observe and bond with this unique mountainous land. The breath-taking beauty that surrounded me during the first two years that I lived here on my own moved me beyond words. It proved an endlessly joyful experience to climb the rocky hills, hike across the wide valleys, admire the views, drink from the rivers and bathe in her clear waters; all the time discovering. Being immersed in this wild environment, all

my thoughts and worries simply ebbed away. This land invited me to just *be*.

Meeting Bergplaas, has given me more than I had dared hoped for during those early days. Numerous wonderful projects have developed during the 15 years that I spent here, in a natural way and people have passed on the knowledge and wisdom gleaned here – far across the high mountains and out into the world. The power of the land allowed my own inner power to fully develop. This ancient, truly magical and wild land has brought a sense of completeness to many. It is a place where healing occurs naturally, a place to become and a place to be. And, in time, Bergplaas became a fully gazetted Nature Reserve.

An entry in my diary from November 1999 reads:

*'Each day brings me closer to the land. The unknown reveals itself to me, and simultaneously, I slowly open myself to the land.'*

This ancient Karoo landscape, which covers a large part of South Africa, is like a library of the history of the Earth; her fauna, her flora, but also that of various human cultures. This was once the land of the Bushmen, or Khoisan, and most likely to people going back even further in time. They have all left their traces, many of which I came across during my long walks. Shards of pottery, rock paintings in the caves, fossilised remains of plants and animals in the sedimentary rocks and solstice markings on the hillsides – all these are testament to the enduring spirit of human life over the ages.

Bergplaas is located in the country's south east, a four-hour drive north of Port Elizabeth, between Middelburg and Graaff-Reinet. The area is part of the Sneeuberge, a mountain range with peaks reaching between 1600 and 2505 meters high. The rains that fall over this mountainous landscape feed the Orange River. The guesthouse at Bergplaas offers views of a single, lonely old poplar standing on the south-eastern horizon; a silent witness to the spot that was once known to people as *Wamaakerspoort*.

The name is derived from a Dutch word, which refers to the place where the early Voortrekkers were able to have their wagon wheels repaired during their trek to flee the Cape Colony during the first half of the nineteenth century following British colonisation. The original Dutch word would have been 'wagena-makerspoort'. The brittle remains of small houses echo tales of harsh lonely lives. It is almost incomprehensible how the Voortrekkers managed to make the trek from the Cape coast, venturing across rugged mountain ranges with their oxen pulling the bulky wooden wagons carrying women, children and their scant few belongings. There were no roads, but an abundance of wild animals and endless miles of uneven rocky terrain, dotted by thick scrub, to venture across. Their only navigational means were the sun and stars, while food consisted of padkos; biltong and rusks. It might have actually been easier for them to walk, as the indigenous Khoisan had traversed the land for millennia. But the Khoisan were born to the area and knew how to live off the land and survive the wild semi desert by gathering food and hunting animals. Inside, on the walls of the caves where they lived, high above the river, you can still find their red and ochre rock paintings; most often these represent species such as the eland and praying mantis, to which they ascribed specific magical powers. Paintings also depict spiritually and symbolically meaningful events. These are their legacy. For the Voortrekkers it must have been extremely difficult to adapt to what for them were completely foreign circumstances. Many opted to stay in this part of the Karoo, because the river yielded water from the abundant mountain streams, the caves offered shelter and the wild animals were a means to survive. The direct vicinity around Bergplaas was one of the places where at least one such family chose to settle, close to the river that to this day only very seldom runs dry. The resident willows, poplars and pine trees, introduced and planted for wood and shade, are their legacy, for no indigenous trees grow at this altitude.

Times may have changed since those early pioneering days, but this remains a harsh land:

*'I can't sleep that very first night. Too excited, too curious about all the unfamiliar sounds and smells. What animals belong to what sounds? I look forward to living here, knowing that wild animals are out there and to become familiar with them. And all those thousands of stars!!! When I go outside in the dark of night and walk into the open veld it feels as though I am walking into an ocean of light and space. I recognize the Milky Way, Orion and the Pleiades. Along with them, there are two intriguing clusters clearly visible that resemble the Milky Way as seen from the side; I have no idea what they are called. Towards the early morning, the Southern Cross appears, in the shape of a kite; the beacon for seafarers in the southern waters throughout the ages.'*

There were a number of houses of different size and proportions on the land. Several labourers' cottages embraced the large farmhouse where three generations of Kingwills had lived while farming cattle and sheep. A small stone house stood further up the road. The walls of the farmhouse's family kitchen were black with soot owing to the coal fumes emanating from the cast iron Aga stove. The place clearly needed a severe facelift, just like the other cottages, all of which were in an equally deplorable state. A layer of animal droppings, at least 10 to 20cm thick, covered the floors; most of the windows and doors had long vanished. But the fundamental structure was solid and the cleaning and restoring of the cottages promised to be less of a job than to repair the farmhouse that I wanted to convert into a guesthouse.

I chose the cottage on the other side of the river from the farmhouse and the cottages to live in for the time being to create some space from the main building activity. This small dwelling had once housed a coloured\* family. Later it also served as the schoolhouse. Someone had obviously loved roses because there were two crumpled rosebushes in front of the cottage;

one a light yellow variety and the other one soft pink. I wanted to honour the person who had obviously once lovingly planted the roses and tried my best to nurture them but they no longer wanted to open their hearts to the outside world, and instead stayed half closed and sadly wrinkled.

With joined forces we set about and once the rooms had been cleaned, the walls and ceilings repainted and rugs had been draped across the floors, the cottage looked fine again. There were two small bedrooms, a bathroom and living room with a fireplace and lastly a kitchen with a wood stove. Unfortunately it was too battered to be used, but I recognized its decorative use and decided to keep it for old times' sake. My little house was basic but cosy, even if it didn't have a loo yet and I had to resort to the bushes.

*'At 7 o'clock I am woken up by rays of sunlight shining on my face. I remain lying down, listening to the melodious communication between two birds. This morning I am planning to clean the cupboards, the kitchen and every nook and cranny of my little cottage, after which I will start decorating the house with picture frames of family and loved ones. It is gradually turning into a tiny dream house!'*

The word Karoo is probably an African derivation of the Khoisan word *garo*, which means desert and refers to the characteristic aridness of the land. Whenever it rained, which was obviously a blessing, the only problem was that for one reason or the other, the tap would go dry and I had to make due with half a litre of bottled water to both bathe and wash the dishes. I was surprised by how a person can cope with so few means. Actually, it felt quite liberating. And then there was a stunning waterfall about ten minutes' walk from the cottage where a pool had formed at the foot of the endless cascade of droplets. I took my morning bath in this pool.

Searching for small crevices in the rocks to support my feet, I was able to climb down the steep stone wall, spend a little time enjoying the sun on my face and admire the tiniest of yellow

flowers. Later I learnt that they were called *Eryops*. A little further down I found blue daisies flowering, along with *witblometjes* that were perched between the clefts of the rocks, green mosses and the old stooped, twisted willow trees that stood patiently rooted in the hollow crevice that over the centuries had been sculpted by the flow of the river. The green colour of the leaves bring a splash of brightness in this dry land. Approaching the water, I would then carefully put one foot down in the pool, feeling the mud oozing up between my toes before I allowed myself to slowly slip into the water. I swam slowly and deliberately, keeping my body as flat as possible so as not to cloud the water, discovering that I could perform exactly thirteen strokes before I reached the end. Plunging the tips of my fingers into the muddy bottom of the pool, I veered around like a surf board to avoid brushing my skin against the stones. In this manner I swam back and forth. The feeling of being the only person on 5000 hectares of wild land was absolutely thrilling.

My only small worry was that a troop of baboons might turn up to watch me from the edge of the cliff, and that if they did, I would be seen in all my vulnerability. Fortunately this never happened, perhaps because in due time we befriended and we respected each other's privacy. Every time I heard the raw deep barks of the alpha male in the early morning I would climb onto a cluster of russet-coloured boulders, or 'koppies', right behind my little house and shout back in an attempt to mimic his call. It felt like a morning ritual and a salutation to all life around me. What beauty, what vastness, what freedom. I would fling my arms in the air to greet the sun and felt intensely thankful to just 'be'. I greet the sun every morning and that same feeling is always there.

*'In the middle of the night a heavy storm sweeps over the mountains and valleys of Bergplaas. Bolts of thunder cause the cottage walls to tremble; a massive rain shower ensues. Unfortunately the dry, thirsty Earth cannot possibly absorb this sudden deluge of water all at once; it just runs off,*

*streaming straight into the river, followed by a veil of sand and soil.*

*The continuous ticking of raindrops on the corrugated roof gives me a safe and cosy feeling; I pull the duvet a little further up and go back to sleep in my warm nest. The next morning I notice that the velvety dark-red roses that I have recently planted have opened themselves up to the world. The colours have deepened after the rain. Delicious voluptuous and sensuous scents caress the senses; The storm has knocked the telephone out of order, so I have no communication with the outside world; simultaneously the connection with the water-sated natural world around me seems even more intense and vibrant after the generous gift from the great black clouds. I feel intrinsically connected with all life around me and also to my children and friends. Even from this distance there is an experience of “inter-being”, in the form of a gentle, peaceful feeling. We are, each in our own way, like the water in the river, each droplet unique, and yet one with all the other droplets that together constitute the body of water’.*

