

# RHODES: A MOUNTAIN GEM

By David Walker

Rhodes is a little-known village that could be described as the last bastion of a long bygone era. Dating back to 1891, its Victorian streetscape is unchanged – but is just one of its many attractions

The village is far off the beaten track, located in the Eastern Cape highlands at the southernmost end of the mighty Drakensberg range, on the escarpment between Barkly East and Elliot. It's often confused with the faraway university in Grahamstown, but it's actually a haven for the post-graduate phase of life. Turn-of-the-19<sup>th</sup>-century dwellings have been lovingly restored and maintained. In order to protect the character of the village, concerned property-owners embarked on a campaign that resulted

in the village being proclaimed a Conservation Area in 1997. Its National Monument status affords it a measure of protection against unbridled development. This has gone a long way towards maintaining its unique character.

According to rural legend, the village's founding fathers hoped that if they named it after Cecil John Rhodes, he'd bless it with beneficence. The story goes that although Rhodes never made the pilgrimage there, he did send a wagonload of pine trees that were planted along the main street

of the village. An anecdote added to the tale is that £500 accompanied the trees, but disappeared – together with the Town Clerk.

“All those cheesy clichés about pristine rivers and unspoilt, serene mountain landscapes are actually true when it comes to Rhodes Village. In the 30-odd years I've had a home there, the village has never failed to deliver. It seeps charm and history. We arrive with all the stress and heaviness of a city life and leave there refreshed,” remarks Johannesburg-based Bruce Cohen, one of the early investors in

Rhodes and a regular visitor.

Established at the behest of agricultural development that saw the first agrarians arriving in the late 1800s, the village continued to attract permanent residents who were mainly involved in providing goods and services to the surrounding farming community. Since transport was largely animal-based at the time, a hotel was soon established in the village, auguring its future tourism industry. The hotel was essential, since it was impossible for those living on outlying farms to complete the journey for provisions to Rhodes and back in a single day.

The Great Depression took its toll on the agricultural community and, in turn, on the village. Rhodes went into a decline, but experienced a brief revival during the “wool boom” of the 1950s. The next phase was the “hippie” era of the late 1970s, but this also passed, as the climate of Rhodes makes the ideal of “living off the land, man” extremely difficult.

Historically, properties changed hands for the arrears in rates and taxes and, in one case, for a piano. At one point, some of the investors of the Eighties were gathered in the local pub, De Wydeman. Once the euphoria of having bought property in Rhodes had worn off, they realised that something had to be done to increase the value of their investment. As is the way of things, people are more easily attracted to a place if an event is established there. This, it was hoped, would result in property purchases. Among the assembled revellers in the pub were a runner or two, who surely had a masochistic streak in their souls. The nett result was the establishment of what's now known as the Rhodes Trail Run, an epic 52km route that starts and ends in the village and involves a cumulative climb of 1 450m. Since it's run in mid-winter, sub-zero temperatures often prevail. 2014 saw the 26<sup>th</sup> instalment of this annual event. With a field of 330 entrants, it's by far the biggest and

A homestead in Rhodes.

longest running event in the village.

The pub revellers proved to be wise young men, since several properties in Rhodes have indeed been bought by race participants.

Plots in Rhodes are 535m<sup>2</sup> and the houses and cottages built on them are generally two- or three-bedroomed dwellings. There's also a handful of four-bedroomed “mansions”. The introduction of electricity in the Nineties was initially opposed by short-sighted property-owners, who felt it would cause the village to lose its “old-world” charm. The contractor duly bypassed Rhodes and continued along the Bell River valley, supplying farmers there. However, a recalcitrant few in the village eventually succumbed to the advantages of power, resulting in almost all the houses now having electricity.

Many of the dwellings are available for hire when the owners aren't in residence. The relaxed atmosphere and beautiful surrounding make it an ideal family holiday destination. Enjoy local cuisine at the village eateries or partake in the Rhodes Stoepsitfees, which attracts participants from far and wide. This event is a great opportunity for fly-fishermen to indulge in their passion while their partners are meandering from stoep to stoep – thus alleviating interminable





► “gone fishing again” complaints.

Tom Sutcliffe, doyen of fly-fishing, says: “Rhodes is a dreamy village surrounded by streams and endlessly beautiful landscapes that always seem to lead to the pale purple horizons of distant mountains. It’s the trout and the abundance of nearby streams that have brought us back to this little hamlet year after year since the early Nineties.”

Fly-fishers can gain access to more than 200km of running water within an hour’s drive of the village by purchasing day permits from the Wild Trout Association (WTA), the biggest sport fishery on the continent, whose headquarters are at Walkerbouts Inn in Rhodes. The WTA has been organising annual fly-fishing events in the area since 1992. These have introduced enthusiasts to the area and also resulted in property purchases in and around Rhodes.

In addition, the region’s a floral wonderland, with Alpine flowers attracting visitors from as far afield as North America and Europe. Flower tours also provide an opportunity to enjoy birding opportunities, particularly of rarer species such as the threatened bearded vulture, Cape rock jumper and black harrier,



which have been among the 230 birds spotted in the area.

Following the electrification of the village, the advent of modern technology in Rhodes took a giant leap forward when the first cellphone coverage (installed by Vodacom) came on line in 1999. The old “wind-up” service was

**Top:** Fly-fishing in the Bell River near Rhodes.  
**Above:** An unusually busy morning on the high street.

superseded when Telkom finally caught up in 2002, the year its system was automated. At present, telecommunications have improved to the extent that Rhodes has become a “dormitory” village, to which people who don’t need to be at the coalface all the time can return to enjoy rural living, but remain in touch. ►

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neighbours across the English Channel.

Also singing its praises is Darrell Raubenheimer, one of several runners who's invested in property in the village. "Twenty-five years ago, the remote village provided a safe haven for both children and parents," he says. "No tarred roads or electricity ensured kids could be effortlessly transported back to [a space of] pure play and fun. Now there's still no tar within an hour's hard drive. [For some residents], flickering candles, the homely, warm glow of paraffin lamps and the hissing of Coleman pressure lanterns eventually gave way to electricity and the plethora of electronic communication and convenience. The Rhodes secret is that the rest of the world is truly optional."

Although a day's drive each way from major centres, this has been the saving grace of the village – unlike many a town within close proximity of the "bright lights" that have become over-priced tourist traps. Rhodes visitors appear to be a special breed of people who prefer frequenting remote places such as Hogsback, Nieu-Bethesda or Prince Albert. A quick scan of property prices in these and comparable towns shows the distinct impact of their proximity to major centres. By contrast, property prices in Rhodes are still relatively low, despite a steady increase over the past two decades. In fact, the average property price has increased 26-fold, from R21 000 in 1993 to R554 000 by mid-2014. The highest price paid thus far for a property has been R1,25 million, a snip compared with prices in other

➤ One would think electrification resulted in nocturnal light pollution, yet – with no street lights in Rhodes – this hasn't been the case at all. On moonless nights, the sky remains absolutely stunning. The clear mountain air lends itself to making the Milky Way look close enough to touch – especially after a visit to the local pub!

Rhodes has long been associated with snow-skiing in winter. Hardy locals have made the journey to the ski slopes of Ben Macdhui (3 000m), the highest peak in the Eastern Cape, on horseback since the Fifties. 1994 saw the opening of the Tiffindell Ski Resort on the same site. The resort

## **“The Rhodes secret is that the rest of the world – with its tarred roads, electricity, electronic communication and convenience – is truly optional.”**

was eventually run into the ground in 2010, but re-opened in time for the winter skiing season of 2013. It's now fully operational, auguring well for property values in the village a mere 22km (40 minutes' drive) away.

A more obscure attraction of Rhodes, noted by retired British Airways pilot and regular visitor Brian Heywood, is that jet-lag isn't an issue when making the pilgrimage there from the UK or its immediate

**Top:** A street in Rhodes in autumn.  
**Above:** Village green cricket in Rhodes.

popular towns in SA.

The common threads that weave the magic tapestry of Rhodes shine through like security strips on bank notes. As Wayne Rubidge, Pam Golding Properties' Manager for the Karoo, says: "Due to its location and historical status, Rhodes offers a sound investment for anyone who loves the outdoors and is looking for a very special getaway place to enjoy the clean, crisp mountain air." 🌈