



*The runner*

*The firefighter*

*The volunteer*

*The photographer*

# TALES *of* TABLE MOUNTAIN

ANCIENT ICON, NEW WORLD WONDER: TABLE MOUNTAIN'S LEGENDARY BEAUTY CARESSES THE CITY THAT SURROUNDS HER. IN CELEBRATION OF 'THE MOUNTAIN', JANINE STEPHEN ASKS SEVEN CAPETONIANS WHAT THE LANDMARK MEANS TO THEM

PORTRAITS *by* MICHAEL ELLIS





*The baker* .....

*The researcher* .....

*The herbalist* .....

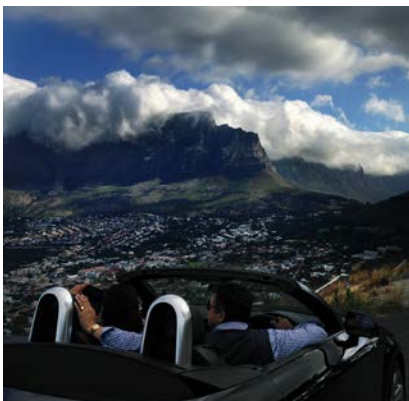


'When you're up there, especially at night, and you have wafts of the city blowing in, and you see lights and you're very much above it all, it's a different psychic space. It's as if the dreams of the city rise, like hot air... there's that space where dreams are, alongside the real. It's that more ethereal spirit that is what's interesting to me about the mountain. Capturing that is like the snow leopard of photography. Not easy, but that's the challenge. I'm not trying to document everyone on the mountain.'

'Table Mountain is like 260 million years old, ancient. It's sat there, unmoving and unchanged, a witness to human history – from when Jan van Riebeeck rolled in and brought farms and slavery, to the removal of District Six.'

'When I first moved to Cape Town I remember Table Mountain as this big, intense presence. Jo'burg is really sparse in terms of nature and I'd always go hunting for a view, for personal space – but it would be the top of a koppie or something, limited and kind of dodgy... and suddenly there was *this* space. It was an incredible resource for a city kid, a daily relationship with the mountain. Now I live against Signal Hill; my back door opens out to the mountain and I really feel like it's got my back – it's strong and present.'

'About two years ago I was on the mountain with friends in the moonlight; it was so bright it was almost like we were getting sunburnt. And suddenly we saw two unknown men coming towards us, with *knobkieries* [wooden clubs], in this



## ALEXIA WEBSTER

*A photographer in the midst of a personal project that focuses on the mountain*

### FIRST VISIT

At age eight, on holiday with her parents.

### TOP SPOT

A walk that circles Lion's Head. Also the silver trees above Rhodes Memorial, 'like old majestic creatures, shimmering silver when the wind blows through them'.

### ALWAYS PACKS

A camera, even if it's just a mobile phone. 'Because the mountain is so changing and shifting, there are these surprising, spectacular moments'.





bewitched, haunted landscape. They came closer and closer, until we could see this younger and older man, wearing Zionist Christian Church badges. They greeted us and passed, walking off into the forest. And I thought: I want to follow them. They must have been on a magical, spiritual journey.

'It made me start thinking about what the mountain gives to people: a psychic or spiritual or healing thing... There are so many religious ceremonies held on the mountain, from Muslim to Christian to pagan. It makes sense: if you're looking for a god, you're probably going to find it on the mountain.

'I came across some young Congolese families in the parking lot one day. They'd been doing this epic religious journey for days – at a particular spot under a beautiful canopied tree. That day they were "crossing the River Jordan". These were recent immigrants; they'd done a real journey or pilgrimage to South Africa, and now they were having their spirits catch up with their bodies. A lot of it was about being settled, finding work and success. My mother's family are from Greece; her parents arrived here from a poor village and tried really hard to make this new life... And I thought about how the mountain was neutral space. And the rest of the city is not.

'The idea of the mountain as public space is important to me. People – all kinds of people – are claiming the mountain as a human, inclusive space, even as there is this desire to keep it exclusive. But this is our mountain. It is for everybody and that is incredibly rare and incredibly beautiful.'





'I had to ask for directions to get to Table Mountain for my job interview. But I thought the mountain was just beautiful, amazing. I stood here for quite some time, just looking around, you know? It was a hot day, and I remember seeing Chinese people, who I don't see down in the city – actually, all sorts of foreigners. I remember thinking, "Yoh! I'm far away; I'm not even in Cape Town." Nowadays, I can give tourists directions.

'I wake up 3.30AM, do my chores and cook porridge for my three kids. Then I take the train from Kraaifontein to town, and the 6.18 MyCiti bus to the mountain. It's so peaceful and quiet when I arrive; I see the sunrise. My day starts at 7AM. I bake chocolate cake, carrot cake, lemon meringue, milk tart, mini apple pies and muffins, biscuits and a pudding called the "bakery special" for the restaurant. We can mix up to 55kg of chocolate

batter on a busy day, and bake eight milk tarts. Or 800 biscuits daily for the children's special – shaped like a dassie, using white icing and shortcrust pastry.

'One lady comes to the kiosk twice a week, just for my apple crumbles. She leaves me a message to say that they are amazing. Sometimes I wonder, is it me that's doing all this? I work until 4PM. People are still coming up as I leave.

'Every few days I go up to the top of the mountain to check on supplies. The first time was incredible, seeing those tiny people walking up, the pathways on top, the view. And the dassies... and everyone is talking different languages.

'I don't get used to the cable car trip; every time I go, it's like, wow! I still want to walk up one day; that's in my plans. It is a wonder, Table Mountain. Everyone who comes here wants to come back; people from all walks of life. And the mountain influences us: it gives you peace, it makes you feel close to nature. I brought a friend from Kimberley last year. We took the lift up to level five. And there was this tourist by the cable car, and she grabbed him to pose [for a picture]. I thought, "What if he has a wife or girlfriend?" But he seemed to enjoy it.

'My dad has visited. He's proud of me. We're not that close, but I gave him tickets

to come up and he loved it; the last time he'd been here was when I was a baby. He's got a very sweet tooth, my dad.

'Working here has changed me. One, it's given me peace. And the support I get has changed me from being a negative person to a positive person who is seeing differently now. I feel like I'm blessed to work here, to have a place like this. You just don't get that stress.' [tablemountain.net](http://tablemountain.net)

## OCTAVIA TUMEKA NKOMBINI

*A baker who works in the tiny, round kitchen at the lower Cableway station, supplying the café on top of the mountain and the kiosk*

### FIRST VISIT

As a baby, with her father. Her next visit was at age 35, when she came to the Cableway for a job interview.

### TOP SPOT

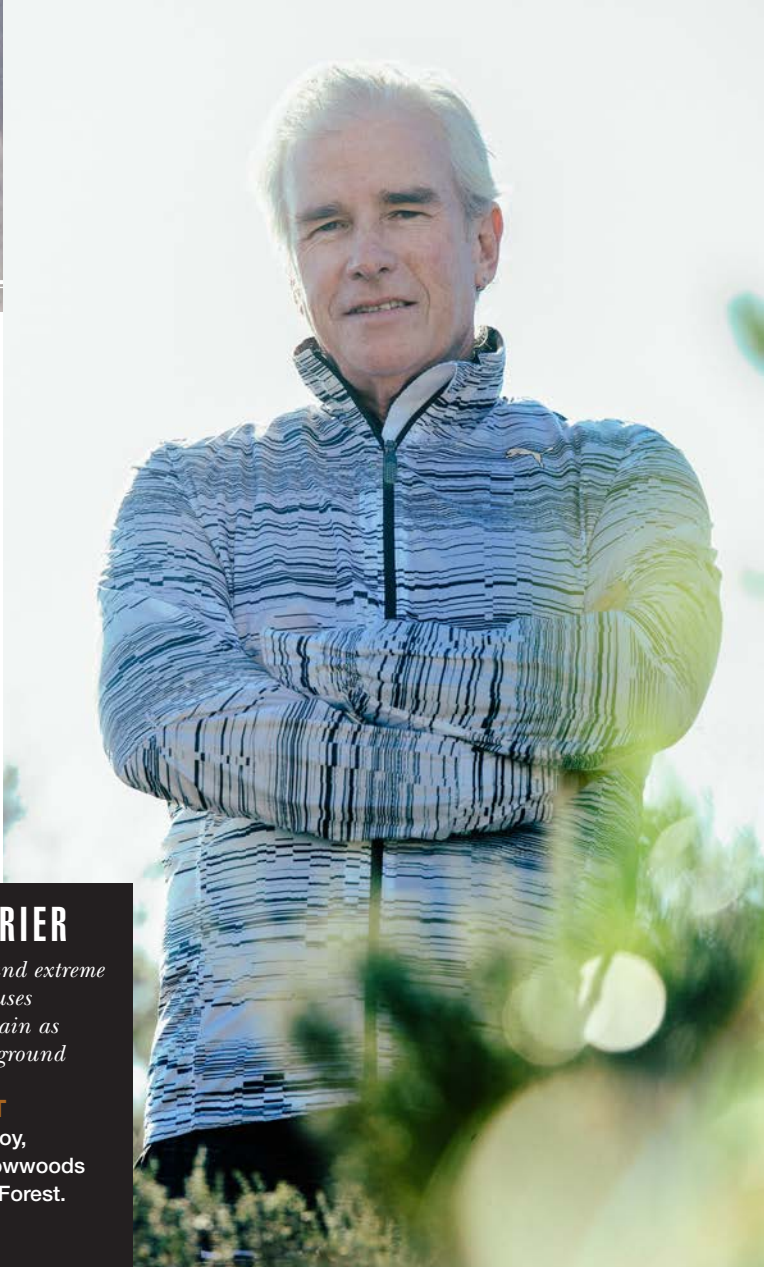
The deck on Tafelberg Road in the early morning, when the air is fresh. 'You feel on top of the world.'

### ALWAYS PACKS

Water and sunscreen; a jersey for trips to the summit.







'For the past nine years I've run thousands of kilometres over and around Table Mountain. I'm currently training for a run across North Korea with my running partner, Andrew Stuart – we need to be ready to go, so we're ramping it up. I do all my journeys for a reason; for a charity. But also to find out more about myself.

'The mountain has always been that gauge to my mental and physical state, integral to my preparation. There are places and points on the mountain that I judge my fitness by. I know that when I can make a certain point in a certain time, I'm ready. It can take five or six months of training to get there, but when you conquer that point you're physically ready *and* mentally you believe you can achieve the goal – the two come in unison. If I get up Newlands Ravine in under 45 minutes, I'm getting there.

'When I was training for the Great Wall of China run [4,200km in 93 days] I ran three times a day on the mountain for three months: one-and-a-half or two-hour sessions. But my most intense encounter with the mountain was last year when we did the Mad Run: seven times around Table Mountain in seven days to put kids through surgery. The mountain, the Seventh Wonder, was the catalyst. It took us an average of six hours a day: from the bottom car lot at Kloof Nek, around the front to the blockhouse, then the contour path up and around to Orangekloof, up Noordhoek Peak behind Suikerbossie, all along the top and the 12 Apostles, down Kasteelspoort and back to the front. It was hectic. But we raised over R200,000.

'The mountain's this nurturing structure in the middle of a city; it's central to everything. Mayhem and chaos surrounds it all day, but you can get to the top in the middle of the week and you're the only person there. I see more and more people from different communities using the mountain, escaping into this tranquil space. I once took a group of girls from Khayelitsha to the Pipe Track; they

## DAVID GRIER

*Adventurer and extreme runner who uses Table Mountain as his training ground*

### FIRST VISIT

As a schoolboy, planting yellowwoods in Newlands Forest.

### TOP SPOT

At the back of Orangekloof, a gorge with natural jungle 'full of disas and yellowwoods'.

### ALWAYS PACKS

A jacket, phone and space blanket – plus water if it's hot (he trains with as little liquid as possible).

said they'd never felt so free and safe and protected. We don't realise what it does to people.

'I've run every single piece of Table Mountain. Often we come down on the cable car, otherwise it's too hard on the knees. Every now and then I get smacked by Mother Dear – I fall hard sometimes; I've had stitches. No matter the route, you get entranced by the beauty

and aura of what's around you. It can be 40 degrees in summer, and in winter you can catch snowflakes. But I'll never go out without a jacket. That mountain: you respect it. She changes her mood quickly.'





'I didn't know a lot about Table Mountain before I arrived to begin the caracal study in September 2014. Starting out was pretty overwhelming; everything was more difficult – I had to have cages specially built, whereas in the US you'd just order them online. There's the overwhelming beauty of the mountain, but I've also had a trap and cameras stolen, and the fire [earlier this year] burned a third of my research area. There has been a lot to adapt to.

'Trapping caracals, you're trying to understand their biology and how they see the landscape. I enjoy the challenge of moving through the fynbos, and trying to recognise how other animals use the landscape and leave trails – so in dense areas with older proteas, you have to get down to ground level and look for signs of, say, how a mongoose creates a trail.

'I've been to hundreds of animal captures, from bobcats to mountain lions to coyotes. These animals have personalities – or behavioural differences between the species. In the US, I could tell

what I'd captured just by listening. I somehow had an assumption that caracals would be nearly equivalent to bobcats, but when we caught "CI" or Laduma, I didn't have to see him – I knew I'd caught a caracal by the sound. He was fierce.

'I quickly found that bobcats cover a lot less territory than caracals. We had this expectation that Laduma would use the Front Table and Signal Hill, and that would be it. But before we

knew it he was using Orangetkloof and Rhodes Memorial and the Back Table and Kirstenbosch and Constantia. He's been all the way to Noordhoek! This is a species that's solitary and territorial, and it raises the question: how many other males can be in the same area? He's also preyed on very different species, from guinea fowl to grysbok.

'I'm hoping to collar at least ten to 15 animals, but it's been tough [Serieys had reached nine by print time]. We've seen some interesting behaviour. A female in Noordhoek hunts on the beach – shore birds. She killed an oystercatcher. Super cool, hey?

'Table Mountain National Park is a very disturbed environment, despite the fact that so many people come here to experience pristine nature. Rapid change has been imposed on species. Not just animals – predators affect the small mammals, which affects the plant life that so many people come to see.

'I regularly walk more than 20km a day. I can't trap animals on trails, so I have to go off-road and that's special – I go places people don't get to see. There are some unbelievably beautiful ravines. I don't hike for fun; I like to be working because then you're exploring, and thinking about how the animals use areas, and searching for spoor. You also see a lot of human activity: trash, sleeping spots, even places people go to have sex. It's learning the mountain in a whole different way.' *urbanacaracal.org*



## DR LAUREL SERIEYS

*Urban carnivore specialist and coordinator of the Urban Caracal Project, a study being undertaken in Table Mountain National Park*

### FIRST VISIT

Google Earth, from California. In the flesh, with SANParks rangers to familiarise herself with the terrain and area.

### TOP SPOT

'I saw my first free caracal near the antelope paddocks [near Rhodes Memorial], so I do like that area.'

### ALWAYS PACKS

A taser and pepper spray, bobcat pee (for traps), water, cable ties, a hammer, a multi-tool, knife, blow pipe with darts, radio collars.





'We take kids on day hikes or sleep-overs. Newlands Forest is good for young children; they can walk under the canopy of the trees, see the river flowing, take their shoes off and play in the water. If it's early, I show them spider webs full of dew drops that I call crystal bracelets. Sometimes we're just silent and listen to the birds. I always tell them they're all part of this mountain; their families share the history of this city. Up at the Woodhead Dam, I show them names of workers written on stone: old Cape names, some of which they share. Or at the Woodhead Tunnel, depending on the wind, a draft can suck air in or blow it out like a ghost. The children stand close and their hair moves...

'I grew up in District Six but ended up in Mitchell's Plain. Scouting and getting into nature opened doors for me; a normal child in the District wouldn't have had that. I wouldn't be the same person. Differences aren't important on the mountain – everyone gets as tired. On the mountain you get to grips with yourself: what your strengths are, who you are. The mountain has grown into me.

'Since Table Mountain was named a New Seventh Wonder, even more people want to climb it. Platteklip can be like a supermarket mall with so many people going up and down. The paths are getting quite a beating, and there's erosion. But you can still sometimes spot caracal and porcupine in Orangekloof, or pick up spoor. You can only say you know the mountain *fairly* well, because there's always something new to learn. And it can be dangerous, which is why we teach safety. The thing people misjudge the most is going off-route, taking shortcuts but not knowing where they're going. Or they go ill-equipped: no water, in flip-flops...

'We offer disadvantaged youth empowerment programmes and tour guide training, too. Once I took what they call problem kids – in drugs, in gangsterism – for a hike. If you'd seen us you'd



## ASLAM LEVY

*A volunteer with SANParks, who despite a 9-to-5 job takes young people to the mountain, teaches safety and helps with rescues*

### FIRST VISIT

A sleep-over at the ruins near Deer Park with his Scout group as a young boy. 'It was my first experience of the mountain and it felt wild, like we were in the jungle – there was this feeling of creatures around, like baboons. We never encountered them, but the possibility was amazing.'

### TOP SPOT

A flat rock above Africa Ravine and the Tranquility Cracks.

### ALWAYS PACKS

Weather-appropriate gear, dates and a Fizzer, water, first-aid kit.

have gone, "Oy! Steer back, just steer back!" You wouldn't want to cross their paths. I got them into an isolated area and asked them to scatter, to find a space on their own – focus on a tree or a cloud, anything, and listen to my voice. And I asked them to think back on the first time they'd hurt someone, and imagine the person's face. And I took them right through their actions and consequences. At the end, you could see the relief and the hardship on their faces. Some had never been on Tafelberg Road, let alone the mountain. For guys like that to come to me and say thank

you ... there's no money that pays anything like that feeling.'





'Nature teaches you to be humble. If you walk in nature, it cools you down; it's good for the soul. My mother was born a flower seller like her mom; she sold flowers in Trafalgar Square, near the Standard Bank. When I was young I'd help my mom, too, but I wasn't so interested in nature. I found a job in the navy, and another at Safmarine. But my life started when I decided to work with herbs, about 30 years ago.

'I went to sleep one night, woke up and decided this was my path. The first time I went into the mountains – out in Stellenbosch – it was like new life had been breathed into me. Now I had a purpose, to heal people. And my relationship with nature changed.

'I learnt about plants from other Rastas – back then there were only a few, you could count them on your fingers; now we are thousands [2,500, researchers say]. I also got a well full of knowledge from a lady who used to sell herbs on the Parade, Aunty Maria. People need herbs every day – see that woman, she's come to pick herbs for sugar diabetes. Nature needs help now, because of urbanisation, so the more plants we can grow the better for the environment and the community.

'Of course, picking herbs in the National Park is not allowed. Yet the mountain has been created for everybody. We have dominion over the Earth

because we can reason, but we all need to share what is on Earth – whether you're hiking or walking in the veld or picking sour figs.

'This is crystallised dassie urine; it's good for womb ailments or pains and also treats kidney and gallbladder stones. Wild celery grows on Table Mountain; you take it for water retention and high blood pressure (it's also called the blister bush – when you handle it too much it tends to leave blisters on your hands). As my knowledge has grown, I have become more

advanced. Now I prepare packages of mixed herbs, like this one for skin problems (with lavender, rosemary, *kruidjie-roer-my-nie* and wild dagga). I also prepare extractions with an olive oil base: I use sun energy to cook the herbs for 14 days, which adds more to the healing. I've come so far that I've created an oil for muscle pain which works in five minutes.

'Herbalists don't always follow the paths on the mountain, so we come across a lot of nature – snakes, spiders. We treat them with the respect we give anyone. Table Mountain has the best setting for any walk, and the flatness of the mountain is very picturesque from a distance. There is so much energy on this mountain from all the cleansings and rituals held on it. When you walk there, you interact with Creation, be it physically or spiritually, you understand? But it touches you, it brings healing, definitely. No one can walk off the mountain without feeling calmed down.'

## NEVILLE VAN SCHALKWYK

*A Rastafarian herbalist who gathers plants and grows herbs in his own garden in Seawinds. Also works on a 'herbanisation' programme with the Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation, which grows medicinal plants for the community (livelihoods.org.za)*

### FIRST VISIT

To pick flowers as a child.

### TOP SPOT

Kalk Bay. 'When I was a Scout I'd go and play and sleep in a cave on the mountain, and later I regularly harvested herbs there. It's also the only mountain I've stood naked on – open arms, feel the breeze. I don't know why, but I just felt free.'

### ALWAYS PACKS

An empty herb bag.





**AD**



'Fire can be quite a beast. It's an entity with a life of its own and you can't really control it – you can contain it sometimes, but otherwise you just do your best: anticipate it and deal with it as it goes about doing what it's going to do. Fighting fire is difficult to describe. It's extremely hot, so hot you're sweating continuously. Sometimes you just have to step back. Sometimes your boots will catch alight. And the sound, the crackling: a big tree burning is an incredible, unnerving sound.

'I joined the Volunteer Wildfire Services when I was 18 and it sort of took over my life; I concentrated more on firefighting than varsity because I enjoyed it so much. I'd actually thought of joining the fire department after school, but my parents said "Hey, you've got into Uni now"... so I researched volunteering and went to a recruitment meeting at Newlands firebase. They described what they did as "high speed gardening", because a lot of the time there's no access to water so we use tools to chop away vegetation and create firebreaks. We use a rake hoe to clear vegetation down to the soil. How fast can I clear ten metres? Depends how close the fire is! We also use beaters – a broomstick with a floppy appendage – to smother flames.

'In your first fire season, the most important thing is to learn to pace yourself; you need to avoid dehydration and heat stroke. Training includes map work, basic first-aid, and using pumps and hoses. I remember a session in Deer Park once, at night, when I was pretty new to it. They started the pump and the leader says: "You! Take that hose up that embankment." It was steep, and I didn't realise I had to switch the hose off, so I created an absolute mud bath. The guys thought it was the funniest thing ever.

'This last mountain fire [over four days in March] was so big it felt like everywhere was on fire, leaving just wasteland behind. It was like Mordor [from *Lord of the Rings*]: this land of fire and ash. We'd hold a line one day and drive past it the next and everything would be gone.

## MICHAEL BOYD

*A history masters student and volunteer with the Volunteer Wildfire Services*

### FIRST VISIT

To Kirstenbosch Garden as a child (his family is Southern Suburbs based).

### TOP SPOT

Elephant's Eye – 'before the March 2015' fires [it's currently off-limits].

### ALWAYS PACKS

A 'standard' pack that weighs about 14kg, containing 'six or seven litres' of water, food, a tea kit, rain gear, a machete and hand tool, and a dry change of clothes ('because a lot of the time we get dropped on by the water helicopter').



When Elephant's Eye burnt it was sad. And when it hit Tokai Forest, that wasn't a good day. I used to run there every Friday, and it was just so beautiful, with the views and the sound of the water and the little animals now and then.

'As a history student, I know a little about how runaways and fugitives from society would once hide out on the mountain. Everyone I know has this intense passion and love for the mountain – you can't usually find anyone who doesn't. Where else in the world is there a city where you can go out and hike in this kind of beauty? And it heals fast. After the fire, I was privileged to see some of the regrowth areas, and it's beautiful – all these green shoots among the ash.' [vws.org.za](http://vws.org.za)



### GET GOING DESTINATION: CAPE TOWN

The Table Mountain Challenge, a 40km trail run, is on 12 September. For more info on Table Mountain National Park, visit [sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org). British Airways flies to Cape Town from Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth and London. Visit [ba.com](http://ba.com).



**AD**