

The face of South Africa By Maré Mouton

A display of pumpkins in an old farm wagon outside a Bushveld-style restaurant in Gamkaskloof is a sad reminder of a lifestyle lost forever. The secluded kloof in the Swartberg between Oudtshoorn and Prince Albert, also known as "The Hell", was home to a few families – Cordier, Mostert, Marais, Nel, Snyman and Joubert – for over a century. The people largely kept to themselves, and stories were told of strangers being shot at. Produce – dried fruit and wild honey – was taken to the nearest towns once or twice a year on the backs of donkeys. Then in 1962 the government decided to build a proper road to the Kloof from near the summit of Swartberg Pass. The secluded community was thus exposed to the outside world, young people left to find work, and the population dwindled. The last farmer left in 1991. The Kloof has now become a popular tourist destination for people with robust vehicles. CapeNature and two private properties offer accommodation in the restored former farm cottages and at campsites. But there is no sign of the fields and orchards of before: the road through the valley meanders amongst impenetrable thorn trees, the riverbed is overgrown with reeds, and rumour has it that the dried fruit and witblits (moonshine) sold here are actually produced elsewhere... Sadly, a plan put forward by conservation-minded people in Prince Albert to keep traditional farming activities going in the Kloof, thereby creating an open-air museum, was never acted upon.

