

Horses and a “nutty” English lady

When you live in this area, you get to meet some really charming — and sometimes eccentric — people and Catherine Cairns, who describes herself as a “mad Englishwoman”, is one of them. Originally from the UK, this ex-banker and management consultant has an MBA from Wharton in the USA and has lived and worked all over the world. When she was asked in 2000 to come to South Africa to consult for a mobile network operator, she was very reluctant, she says, but then, like so many people coming to South Africa, she became enchanted with the country.





Being a “nutty” Englishwoman, she had always been into riding and fox hunting and when her contract ended, she decided to take a sabbatical to explore South Africa and learn to play polo.

On her travels, she fell in love with the Eastern Free State, especially the polo clubs that she discovered were the complete opposite of the elitist clubs found in England which are open to only a select few. She says that local polo clubs are not “posh” at all and that she was amazed to find that “ordinary folk” play polo here. With a giggle, she says that some of the tack that players use probably dates from the Anglo Boer War.

Catherine began looking around for a farm and soon decided on Uitgedacht near Ficksburg. The beautiful farmhouse was built at the turn of the century as a honeymoon gift and, she said, it was clear that a lot of thought had gone into the design.

Almost the first project undertaken on her new acquisition was the construction of a polo field and Catherine makes no bones about the fact that she thinks she has one of the most beautiful fields in the country. She now has the services of a polo pro, Gavin Chaplin, who teaches clients polo and gives private polo lessons.

As the farm developed, Catherine started PoloAfrica, a school for the children of labourers in the district, and in no time found that there were many kids, including girls, who wanted to learn to play polo. Most of them had dropped out of school, but Catherine used polo as a way to get them to return to school by requiring them to do so before they could learn to play polo. Now with PoloAfrica, which offers an array of subjects like life

skills, English, maths, welding and carpentry, as well as other sports, like cycling and boxing, she has created a safe haven for underprivileged children in the area.

After establishing her polo field, Catherine started buying up horses retiring from the race track for her staff to train and sent a couple of teams of black polo players to compete in a tournament at the Inanda Polo Club in Johannesburg. John Robbie from Radio 702 spotted them and helped to get them affiliated to the Laureus Foundation, which now assists her project.

Apart from all this, the farm offers glamping and a few open days during the year, plus a polo tournament — and for the not-so-horsey, bicycle polo will soon be introduced as a sport. Visitors have the opportunity to experience an authentic farm-style life here and enjoy the produce from the beautiful organic vegetable garden, as well as the fresh eggs from the free range fowls.

On your arrival at Uitgedacht, you are greeted by a pack of friendly dogs yapping to call Catherine to welcome you to the farm.

To get to Uitgedacht, you travel along the R26 from Ficksburg towards Fouriesburg. About 10 km from Ficksburg, you will see the S384 road on your left. You then travel one kilometre along the dirt road, until you see the sign for PoloAfrica, where you turn right.

There are beautiful walks on the farm and the views are really spectacular throughout the year and, as you travel up the driveway lined with trees, you could imagine yourself to be in England. What a fitting farm for an English Lady!

