

## Postcard from...South Africa

In the Western Cape, a grassroots sports project is giving hope and opportunity to township children living on the poverty line



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JULY 21, 2017 by: Francisca Kellett

Michael Lutzeyer is crying. The owner of Grootbos, a luxury lodge in South Africa’s Western Cape, is standing in a sun-washed football field watching the under-18 team get a pep talk before a big match. Silent tears roll from under his glasses, and it should be awkward, but no one notices. Anyway, I’m crying, too. Just a little bit, behind my sunglasses. The young men sit on the ground — tense faces, jiggly legs — focusing on their coach, ignoring us completely. Lutzeyer wipes his eyes, grabs me by the elbow, and marches me over to the next field.

He’s showing me around the Football Foundation, one of many local projects funded by his lodge. This used to be a scrubby no-man’s-land between the local township and the smart holiday homes of Gansbaai. Now it’s a huge swathe of emerald green, swarming with kids brandishing hockey sticks, kicking balls, screeching gleefully. Whistles are blown, instructions are shouted, laps are run. There is a cheerful air of business.

So why the tears? “Because these children had nothing,” says Lutzeyer, passionately. “Now they have somewhere safe to go every day.” These are all township kids — over 2,000 of them come each week — most of them living on the poverty line. In the idle hours between the end of school and

when parents arrive home, they used to have little to do but roam the streets. Since the foundation launched in 2009, they have a place to go.

On the hockey pitch, the kids are barely bigger than the sticks they're holding. Most of them are barefoot — “We provide shoes, but a lot don't like wearing them,” explains Lisa, one of the young German coaches. Lutzeyer is originally German and has strong links to the country, as well as to the UK's Premier League — the pitches were funded with the help of the chair, Sir Dave Richards, as well as Barclays bank. Lutzeyer's passion seems to rub off on others and he ropes in all sorts to help. His Green Futures horticultural college, which trains up disadvantaged adults, is supported by the Eden Project, Kew Gardens and Steppes Travel, bringing pupils to visit England every year. “I'm always meeting people and talking them into things,” he beams.

At the heart of it all is the accommodation: a slice of eco-chic set high in the hills, surrounded by a 2,500-hectare nature reserve. There are two lodges — one rustic, the other contemporary — both with pools, smart restaurants and impeccable green credentials. I'm staying in the newest addition, a huge private villa: four bedrooms, bright white interiors, floor-to-ceiling glass that means your bath probably has the best view in the Cape. And what a view: all the way along the hazy, salt-washed sweep of Walker Bay, where tourists come to whale-watch or dive with great white sharks, and the mountains of the Winelands rising dramatically in the distance.

It's the wilderness that draws most visitors — adventurous types keen to explore empty hills covered in fynbos, that curious family of low-lying, endangered plants endemic to the Cape. Chief botanist Sean Privett is the man to show you the highlights: ancient milkwood forests; tiny pink *Erica irregularis*; big, showy proteas. Guests can horse-ride, whale-watch, hike . . . or visit Grootbos's projects, funded in part by a R50 daily charge (about £3) on their room rate, to see its organic farm, its beehives, its conservation and horticultural college. Or go and kick a ball with the kids.

Back on the playing fields, Lutzeyer is on to another story (he tells a lot of stories). This one is about the under-9s hockey team and how they recently took part in an important local tournament. Hockey is perhaps the most remarkable sport to be taught here as, traditionally, it was an affluent, privileged (read: white) sport. And here was this team of poor, underprivileged (read: not white) children taking part. Township kids versus private school kids; a tiny snapshot of South Africa's complicated political landscape.

Not only did they play, but they won. They won the entire tournament. To celebrate, they were taken to the local KFC for dinner — an unimaginable treat. We watch them now, knocking about

balls in their bare feet. Lutzeyer is crying again, and so am I, but no one notices.

## Details

Francisca Kellett was a guest of [Africa Travel](#), which offers a five-night stay at Grootbos Nature Reserve from £2,590 per person, including return British Airways flights from London, car hire, all meals, horse-riding, guided walks, nature, marine and coastal drives, and land-based whale-watching

*Illustration by Matthew Cook*

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