

The Best Detour We Ever Took

Sometimes, the best adventures happen when you make a last-minute decision to change your plans. That's exactly what happened to us—two eager birders and her parents on a road trip from The Vaal to the Underberg. We had planned to take the usual route, a straightforward drive that would get us there in good time. But as we neared Harrismith, Luca glanced at Dad and Dad at me, all thinking the same thing.

"What if we take the long way?"

The decision was made in seconds. Instead of sticking to the highway, we veered off onto an alternate route, one that promised winding mountain passes, rolling farmlands, and, hopefully, some incredible birding opportunities. Little did we know that our quick decision would turn our trip into a 12-hour scenic journey—one filled with unexpected beauty, unforgettable sightings, and a few moments of wondering if we'd ever reach our destination at all.

The first stretch of road was smooth, with vast open fields stretching out on either side. Almost immediately, we spotted a pair of Blue Cranes dancing in the morning light. My first sighting of a Bokmakierie was all it took to ignite the excitement for what promised to be an unforgettable drive for me. The drive took us through small, quiet farming towns where cows lazily grazed near the fences, and dust swirled in the afternoon breeze.

As we climbed into the foothills of the Drakensberg, the scenery transformed. Towering cliffs rose on either side of us, deep valleys carved through the land, and waterfalls trickled down rocky outcrops. We rolled down the windows, breathing in the crisp mountain air, the call of a Jackal Buzzard echoing overhead.

As if we hadn't had enough adventure already, when we reached the turnoff leading up Sani Pass, we once again glanced at each other and thought, "What the heck, we're right here—let's go up to the lower border post."

It turned out to be one of the best decisions of the trip. The road climbed higher, revealing breathtaking views of the valleys below. And then, just as we were soaking in the scenery, Luca suddenly yelled, "Ground Woodpeckers!" Without thinking, he practically dived out of the (still moving) car to make sure he got a glimpse of his sought-after lifer. We barely had time to register what was happening before we spotted them too—right there, in perfect light, giving us one of the most incredible sightings we could have hoped for.

Little did we know that these beautiful birds would bless us with over 15 minutes of incredible views and interactions. We watched, completely captivated, as they hopped along the rocky slopes, calling to one another and foraging with their strong, chisel-like beaks. Seeing them so close, in their natural habitat, was a moment we knew we'd always cherish.

Further along, the landscape shifted again, opening up into vast grasslands dotted with wildflowers. In the distance, we spotted movement—a Secretarybird striding gracefully through the golden grass. It paused, tilted its head, and then stomped down, catching its

prey. We sat in awe, realizing that had we stuck to the original route, we never would have witnessed this moment.

Of course, not every part of our detour was smooth sailing. There were stretches of gravel road that rattled the car, a few questionable turns where we weren't entirely sure if we were still on the right track, and a brief moment of panic when the fuel gauge dipped lower than expected. But every challenge was met with laughter, knowing that this was turning into one of the most memorable birding road trips we had ever taken.

By the time we finally rolled into Underberg, exhausted but exhilarated, we had no regrets. What was supposed to be a quick, direct journey had become an adventure filled with incredible bird sightings, breathtaking landscapes, and a reminder that sometimes, the best experiences happen when you go off the beaten path.

So, next time you're on the road and the opportunity for a detour presents itself—take it. You never know what birds, landscapes, or unforgettable moments might be waiting just around the bend.