

53460 Tradouws Pass



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This story about Tradouws Pass between Zuurbraak and Barrydale is a personal travel in time. In fact, my earliest memory is of our family moving house from the farm Lismore at the southern entrance of Tradouws Pass to Barrydale at the northern exit. I was 3 years old at the time (1960). The detail in between was gathered during the next 15 years of childhood that I spent in Barrydale. Of course, the story of Tradouws Pass itself starts much earlier.

Over the aeons the Tradouw River (a branch of the Buffeljachts River) has cut a ravine through the Langeberg Mountains with such steep sides that humans could only pass it on foot. This ravine became known as Tradouwskloof, the name Tradouw being derived from the Khoisan words "tarras" (path) and "doas" (woman) - "footpath of the women".

During the 18th and 19th centuries white farmers settled in the fertile valley on the northern side of the Langeberg mountains, growing deciduous fruits and grapes, apart from keeping livestock. But the markets were long distances away – through Cogmans Kloof to the west, or Plattekloof further to the east. Meanwhile the Barry family had set up a lucrative trade route with ships between Port Beaufort at the mouth of the Breede River and the Cape.

The farmers of the Little Karoo to the north of Tradouwskloof desperately wanted to tap into this market and in 1858 they petitioned the Cape parliament for a road through Tradouwskloof. It took 9 years for the issue to be raised in parliament - by the Colonial Secretary Robert Southey, who incidentally used to be the Civil Commissioner at nearby Swellendam some time earlier. A decision was taken to build the pass "as soon as enough

prisoners were available for the task". (At the time every available prisoner was involved with building the Robinson Pass between Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn, though!)

However, Thomas Bain was instructed to start surveying and draw up plans for the new pass. Building of two prisoner stations started immediately – one at the southern entrance at Gatplaas and another near the northern exit. A small group of prisoners were transferred to the area to start building a pilot road.

Thomas Bain arrived in 1869 (staying at the same Lismore mentioned earlier) and the construction work started in earnest. It took a lot of blasting and dry wall building over a period of 4 years to finish the pass. Governor Henry Barkly officially opened the 12km long winding pass in 1873. It was officially named "Southey's Pass" in honour of the colonial secretary, but the name never stuck and with time Tradouws Pass became the accepted name.

The people on the Little Karoo side of the pass were so grateful that they built a church and founded a town around it in 1880, which they named Barrydale after the trading Barry family.

The Tradouws Pass was a typical Bain masterpiece and one of the most beautiful mountain passes of the Southern Cape. It served the leisurely travel by ox wagon and horse cart well, but became increasingly dangerous with the arrival of motorcars in the 20th century. It was so narrow that vehicles travelling in opposite directions couldn't pass one another without one of them having to move to the side of the road and stop. There were several sharp turns and deep abysses on one side for most of the way and only low retention walls preventing drivers from going over the edge. Which indeed happened, with many fatal accidents as a result.

So in the early 70's of the previous century it was decided to widen the road, cut out some of the sharp turns and change it into a tar surface. Due to pressure from environmental groups, special construction techniques like catching nets to prevent blasted rocks from falling into the ravine, and very high retaining walls had to be used. Work started in 1974 and the "new" Tradouws Pass opened in 1980, retaining its former beauty, but to a certain extent losing some of its romanticism.

The pass has great natural beauty throughout the year, but especially so in springtime when many species of proteas and ericas are in bloom. In late autumn flowering aloes add to the spectacle and several small waterfalls can be seen in the rainy season. Rock dassie (*Procavia capensis*), chacma baboon (*Papio ursinus*) and klipspringer (*Oreotragus oreotragus*) are common, and leopard (*Panthera pardus*) is occasionally seen.

There are several historical and natural landmarks along the way. The first being at the turn off from the R322 between Heidelberg and Zuurbraak. To the left is an old house with a type of barn next to it. In the days of horse drawn carts this served as a halt for the postal cart where horses were changed for the stage through Tradouws Pass. The "barn" used to be the stables and the place became known as the Posstal ("postal stable").

The actual pass starts about 1,5km from here, following the Tradouws River, which is on the left. After another 1km the road winds to the right, following a small tributary, the Gatsrivier. At 3km there's a slight turn to the left, with the road straightening ahead. Here, on the right amongst some black wattle trees, is an old ruin – this place is Gatsplaas, the site of the southern prisoner station during the construction period. It served as a farmhouse for some time thereafter.

Three hundred metres ahead on the left are some oak trees on the bank of the Gatsrivier. This was the site for a day of picnicking and merrymaking by the local farm folk on New Year's Day for many years during the previous century.

Another 200m ahead the road turns sharply to the left, crossing the Gatsrivier over the Andries Uys Bridge, with an old wooden bridge next to it. Originally Thomas Bain built a stone bridge across the Gatsrivier, known as "Lettie's Bridge", but floods washed it away 2 years after completion of the pass. The wooden bridge was constructed from teak in 1879 and painted white – it subsequently became known as Die Witbrug ("white bridge"). In the early

60's the Witbrug became unsafe due to structural damage and was replaced with a concrete bridge. The old wooden bridge was left in place and declared national monument. Between the two bridges is a dark pool in the river, which served as a swimming place for the New Year's Day merrymakers mentioned earlier. Some of them even dived from the bridge into the pool, but this is not recommended, as there are some concealed rocks under the surface.

From here the road climbs steeply up the mountain, joining up and following the Tradouws River well below to the left. After 1,6km there is a shallow cave on the right. During the rainy season a small waterfall plunges over the rocky edge in front of the cave, with water mostly dripping down at other times – this earned it the name of the Drupkelder (“dripping cellar”).

Just over 1km from here one reaches a small plateau, known as the Suurplaat (“acidic plateau”) due to the character of the vegetation. This is the highest point in the pass and due to the general openness of the area it was a favourite overnight stop for heavily loaded ox wagons. This place is simply beautiful in the flowering season and grey rhebok (*Pelea capreolus*) are commonly seen here.

The rooibos shrub (*Aspalathus linearis*) from which the well-known herbal tea is brewed is also fairly common along the mountain slopes here and this area was previously regularly used for harvesting. This is also an area where stinkwood (*Ocotea bullata*) and yellowwood (*Podocarpus sp.*) trees were formerly harvested (drawn up the mountain slopes with oxen), sadly, to almost virtual local extinction – the exotic black wattle is now the predominant tree along the Tradouws River.

Roughly 1,7km from here a small stream (with a beautiful little waterfall in the rainy season) runs down the mountainside with a lovely picnic site under trees on its bank. An impressive retention wall was built here to cut out one of the more dangerous curves of the old pass, allowing one to see part of the old Thomas Bain dry wall road, which leads to the picnic site.

A further 2km from this spot there is a sharp curve to the right, cutting through a mountain ridge. Immediately past the cutting an old road leads down to the river on the left and ends abruptly 400m further amongst trees. The secret of this road is that it was part of the original Thomas Bain road. Sections of it were completely washed away by floods, either in 1902 or 1906, and had to be rebuilt higher up the mountain slope. This left a remnant of the old road to serve as a path to some of the best swimming pools below a rapid in the river. Visitors will note that the water of Tradouw River has a dark brown but clear appearance, which is a common feature of almost all mountain streams of the Southern Cape. This is not caused by pollution; it is due to dissolved plant material and the water is perfectly drinkable most of times.

Less than a kilometre further one reaches a small house on the left of the road. This is the site of the northern prisoner station during the building of the pass. The building later served as a tollhouse for the pass and still later as a farm workers' house for the property on the other side of the road. A Scotsman named Markloo, who moved to the Cape for health reasons and decided on this place, apparently because it reminded him of the highlands of Scotland, built this impressive semi-detached house in 1928. He named it Stone Haven and lived a rich and full life here, which included musical evenings by local artists.

From Stone Haven (which was later renamed Tradouwskloof by a new owner) one reaches a stream 1,3km further. From here a 500m long footpath leads up the steep mountainside to a shallow cave with Bushmen paintings. They were once quite impressive but were unfortunately vandalized and had to be fenced in, which makes viewing now more difficult.

From here it is 2km to the exit of the pass. The road swerves to the right, avoiding a low hill, which lies straight ahead. This hill was the site of a number of English forts during the Anglo-Boer War, strategically well placed to guard the entrance to the pass, with clear views on the road curving around it. Although not visible from the road, the ruins of these forts (in the form of dislodged stones) can still be viewed on foot.