Kuruman, the so-called “Oasis of the Kalahari”, is a bit of a shock at first glance. It’s a country town without the country. Littered with rubbish, swarming with traffic and packed with people, a quick look reveals no stately old buildings, no local characters passing the time on a stoep and no lazy animals taking shade under gnarled old trees. Instead, Kuruman is all hustle and bustle, building and growth.

Back in the day, before diamonds and gold were discovered, when the north of the country had nothing but bush and more bush, Kuruman was a speck on the map, a place for weary travellers to stop, drink and rest at Die Oog, the natural spring that caused it to be a speck at all.

In 1816, the London Missionary Society founded a mission station for the scattered Batswana tribes in the region. Robert Moffat and his wife Mary came here from Scotland a few years later and spent the next 50 years changing Kuruman from a speck on the map to an entry in high-school history textbooks.

The Bible was printed for the first time in Africa right here, and this is where David Livingstone took his first steps towards immortality. It’s also where, for a brief period in the 1820s and 1830s, you could find the biggest building on the Highveld: the church at the Moffat Mission.

Still, Kuruman remained a small town. It was only in the early 1950s, when iron ore was found, that the town started to grow. Digging began at the Sishen Mine and in the 1970s manganese was discovered. The population grew steadily and rambling housing schemes sprung up on the outskirts of town. These days road workers wield jackhammers in the streets and the town’s many four-way stops struggle to cope. You can even get stuck in a traffic jam in Kuruman, something long-time residents find hard to get used to.

“When I was young we used to drive 200km to Kimberley for take-aways,” says resident Richard Kauffman. “Now we’ve got two pizza places, a Spur, a Maxi’s and a Wimpy.”

“In the 1980s it was still a small place,” says Alan Morrison. “You bought your bread at the baker and your meat at the butcher – all the shops were on one main street.”

“Yes, life was quiet,” says Ursula Cowburn, who has lived in Kuruman for 60 years. “There were no tarred roads; but now…”

Now Kuruman is a hub for all things commercial in this part of the Northern Cape. Growth like this won’t last forever, though. The minerals buried in the earth will eventually run out. When? Some people say 25 years. And what will remain?

The town itself has the answer. As you walk around, there are places where the quiet and history of this rural outpost return suddenly, waiting in the bush, hovering over the lilies at the natural spring. Leave town, and wild game is a common sight. The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is nearby. The conditions around here are great for cross-country paragliding, and you can even visit a sangoma if that’s your thing.

Climb a kopje and your place in the world will be put in perspective: nothing but scrubland and thorn trees from horizon to horizon. There’s a cave nearby, as old as the hills, soot-stained from countless cooking fires, deep, and covered in rock art. Stand in it and be reminded of a simpler time.

Finally, at the end of the day, visit one of the local bars or restaurants and meet the other travellers doing what’s always been done around here: passing through, taking time to grab a slice of the frontier and the past before moving on.
6 things to do in and around Kuruman

1 Learn about the Moffat Mission’s legacy

Scottish missionary Robert Moffat was so passionate about converting the Batswana that he learnt their language and translated the Bible, printing his Setswana version on a hand press that was brought to Kuruman from the Cape by ox-wagon in 1830. The mission was also the first African home of David Livingstone, who married Moffat’s eldest daughter, Mary. There’s a sense of history wherever you look. The Moffats’ garden still exists, although forlorn, as does the irrigation canal dug by Moffat and his helpers to irrigate fields with water from Die Oog. All the old buildings were constructed as materials became available — the 800-seat church took eight years to complete. From the 1950s to the early 1980s, the mission fell into a serious decline. The Land and Group Areas act effectively shut down all its education initiatives and many of the buildings were abandoned. Since then, however, the complex has been revived. It’s worth making the detour. The mission played an important part in South African history; plus it’s simply a pleasant place to spend an hour or two.

Where? Follow the sign on the R31, about 5 km north of Kuruman.

Hours: Daily from 8 am – 5 pm; guides only available on weekdays.

Entrance fee: R10 per adult; R5 per child; guides at no extra cost.

Contact: Moffat Mission Trust  053 712 2645; mkmuccsa@yahoo.com

Stay over.

Basic accommodation can be booked in advance: R400 per four-sleeper chalet per night; R25 per tent to camp; R35 per caravan.

2 Explore an archaeological site

Wonderwerk Cave is a 140 m deep cavern in the side of a hill. Bushman paintings are dabbed across the walls and a 4 m-high stalagmite stands guard at the entrance. The ceiling is between 3 and 5 m high, and the floor is a patchwork of string measurements and markers above deep archaeological excavations, giving the cave a sense of history and mystery. Local beliefs tell of a snake spirit that calls the cave home, a powerful entity to be respected as both an ally and an enemy. Whatever your beliefs, it’s easy to imagine a different time and a different way of thinking. A guide leads visitors through, answering basic questions and pointing out photo opportunities. There is a learning centre adjacent to the cave and braai facilities for day visitors.

Where? On the R31, 43 km south of Kuruman.

Cost: Admission to the cave costs R20 per adult and R10 per child.

Contact: 082 222 4777 (David Morris); mmkarchaeology@yahoo.co.uk

Stay over.

Picnic at the spring

Said to be the biggest natural spring in the Southern Hemisphere, Die Oog, The Eye of Kuruman, or Ga-Segonyane (The Little Calabash) discharges an estimated 20 million litres of water a day. The spring has created a lake that sustains carp, barbell and cichlids. It’s also a permanent source of water for Kuruman and its inhabitants.

In the 1970s, there was a roadhouse at Die Oog and residents would spend long Kalahari evenings on the lawns. Today, the dam is fenced off and access is regulated, but it’s still a good place to find some peace and quiet away from the busy town centre.

When I visited, the area around the dam was clean and well kept, with benches and tables under willow trees.

Fill your water bottle with the clear water as it cascades from the source, a free drink as sweet and clear as anything bought in a shop.

Where? Main Street, Kuruman.

Entrance fee: R11 per person.

3 Archaelogy rocks.

The inside of Wonderwerk Cave is a maze of demarcated research sites. It’s open to visitors, but you need to keep to the path in the middle of the cave.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE. Kuruman developed around Die Oog, the strongest of several natural springs on the Ghaap Plateau. The southern mouthbrooder is a cichlid species that occurs here.
Meet a nyala on foot

Red Sands Country Lodge is a good place to break your journey if you’re driving to Namibia or the Kgalagadi. If you’re staying over, walk the 8 km hiking trail, which is easily accessible from any of the chalets and the caravan park.

The lodge is situated on a private game reserve. On your walk, you might bump into some of the 14 species of game that call the reserve home, including gemsbok, nyala, waterbuck and zebra. There is also an abundance of bird life.

Cool off in the pool when you come back and have dinner at the restaurant – the food is excellent.

Rates: B&B chalet accommodation from R600 single and R770 per person sharing. Camping R80 per adult and R50 per child.
Contact: 053 712 0033; www.redsands.co.za

Get airborne or see a sangoma

Into the Sun Adventure Tours is the go-to source for all of Kuruman’s “alternative” activities. They can arrange for you to go paragliding, see various geological and archaeological sites, and visit pans, wetlands, wildlife reserves and craft centres. They’ll even make an appointment for you to consult with a sangoma!

One of the most popular activities is a guided tour to a village on the outskirts of Kuruman. Visitors are hosted by the residents of the village themselves. You learn all about Setswana culture and craft and eat a traditional meal afterwards.

Cost: Tours are structured according to demand. Contact Angie Fotheringham for details about specific packages.
Contact: 082 856 5800 (Angie); angie@foxcorporateservices.co.za

Check out the local wildlife

Kuruman Nature Reserve is a 1 610 ha sanctuary just outside town, managed by the municipality. It’s a no-frills affair, but the entrance fee is minimal and it’s fun to explore the well-maintained dirt roads. Stop at one of the lookout towers next to a waterhole – you might see game like sable antelope, giraffe and blue wildebeest. These eluded me on my quick visit, but I did see bushbuck, kudu and a lone warthog prancing down the road.

If you call ahead, you can arrange a guide to show you around. Horse rides are also on offer, as is a spoor tracking course and even something called “crystal hunting”.

At the small wetland you can tick off red-knobbed coot and pygmy kingfisher, among others.

Where is it? There are entrances 2 km from town, one on the N14 west (direction Kathu) and the other on the R31 north (direction Hotazel).
Cost: R14 per person and R22 per vehicle.
Contact: 082 856 5800 (Angie Fotheringham); angie@foxcorporateservices.co.za

How to get there. Kuruman is on the N14, about 520 km south-west of Johannesburg.

Where to stay. The town is packed with B&Bs and hotels for all budgets and tastes. We recommend you stay on a farm or game reserve outside town – it’s more peaceful. Visit www.northerncape.org.za for a list of places to stay.

Where to eat. You’ll find the well-known restaurant chains in town and it’s likely your hotel or B&B will have a good restaurant.

Cellphone reception. All networks have reasonable reception but internet access is slow.

Fuel and money. All the major banks have branches in Kuruman, and fuel is readily available.