

# Chariots of fire and feathers

The stakes are high as, in South Africa's Klein Karoo, Dale R Morris accepts the ultimate challenge: a place in the ostrich derby. He's a total novice - but has he got what it takes to ride to victory?

South Africa. A dramatic blend of cultures, stunning landscapes and wildlife. A veritable smorgasbord of flavours for all the senses. And home to Oudtshoorn, the ostrich capital of the world, where oversized birds with undersized brains outnumber the locals seven to one.

This peculiar statistic was intriguing enough in itself to inspire a visit to the Klein Karoo region. When rumours reached me of high speed derbies in which specially trained jockeys rode on ostriches' backs, I couldn't wait.

Thus it came to pass that, in the interests of research, I found myself sitting atop of one of the world's largest birds waiting nervously for the starting whistle to blow.

The Oudtshoorn ostrich racing scene is a legacy of the great 1920s feather boom, a heady time when high-society ladies throughout the world wore outrageous hats festooned in feathers and, as a result, ostrich farmers enjoyed a lifestyle of affluence and opulence. They built palaces for themselves, drove around in smart motor cars, developed posh accents and titled themselves the Feather Barons. Their estates grew, as did their staff, and these local folk began riding around on ostriches during their lunch breaks for a bit of a laugh.

Eventually the global demand for feathers dwindled, but the ostrich industry is still flourishing thanks to tourism and the successful marketing of ostrich meat and leather. Nowadays tens of thousands of birds are farmed and made into hamburgers, handbags and feather dusters each year.

A few get lucky though and end up as sats and racers: fine specimens who compete daily in the high-stakes Oudtshoorn derbies.

And now it was my turn to take part in one of the strangest racing events on the planet.

In the starting stall, my steed fidgeted and



Gritting my teeth, I squeezed tighter on the wings and whispered encouragement into my mount's little ear: "Go Orville go! Run like the wind!"

shuffled her massive clawed feet with agitation and excitement as I sat precariously upon her feathered back.

"Be careful not to upset her," said the jockey to my left. "Those feet can do terrible things to a man."

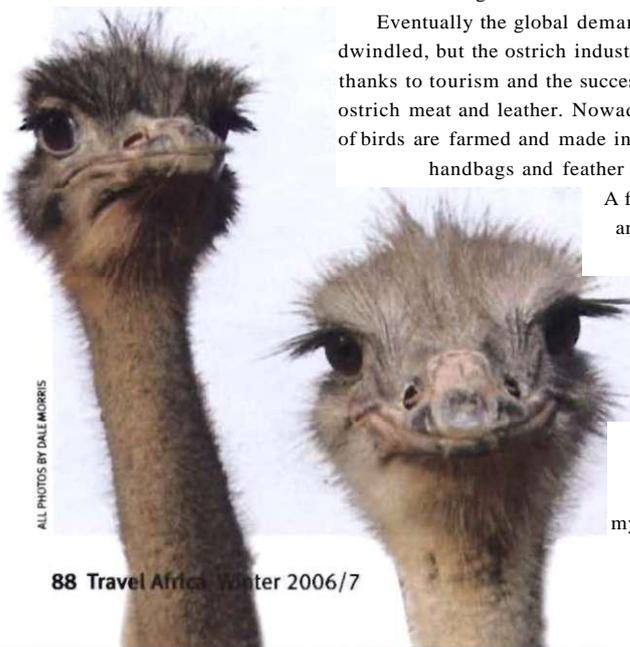
"What upsets them?" I asked, genuinely intrigued. "Amateurs," he replied.

Not for the first time did I wonder at the folly of this assignment.

Then without further ado, the whistle shrieked, the gates flew open and we were off like bullets from a gun. The crowd at the edge of the racetrack went wild, but discipline kept me from turning my head or waving. Instead I focused on the lead ostrich and the little man riding upon its back. He had a large number 8 on his jersey. His bird was Red Rum, everybody's favourite to win

Gritting my teeth, I squeezed tighter on the wings and whispered encouragement into my mount's little ear: "Go Orville TO! Run like the wind!"

Lovely lashes: they may look rather ungainly but ostriches are built for speed; they can run at up to 70 kilometres per hour



ALL PHOTOS BY DALE MORRIS



### Plan your trip

The ostrich farming industry and the famous public access Cango Caves near Oudtshoorn have put this part of the Western Cape on the map. Nestled between the awesome Swartberg and Outeniqua mountains, the Klein Karoo is also great for nature and outdoor adventure, with plenty of activities to take part in. You can climb up or abseil down mighty peaks, take microlight and hot air balloon flights, go quad biking, meet tame meerkats, and of course, ride on the back of an ostrich. Several ostrich farms offer guided visits.

### Find out more

The Oudtshoorn Tourism Bureau can offer advice on local accommodation, restaurants and tours of the surrounding area. [www.oudtshoorn.com](http://www.oudtshoorn.com)

Poetry in motion: feathers fly as the jockeys race for the finishing line

That's when I heard my wife calling enthusiastically from the sidelines.

"Red Rum, Red Rum, Red Rum!"

Hardly surprisingly, this stab of betrayal caused a momentary lapse in my concentration. The next thing I knew, I was flat on the ground watching a multitude of featherless legs dash past me towards the finishing line.

Orville's little head materialised at the periphery of my star-swimming vision. She looked at me with Goldie Hawn eyes and then lunged at my throat. I watched helplessly as my Saint Christopher pendant vanished with an audible gulp.

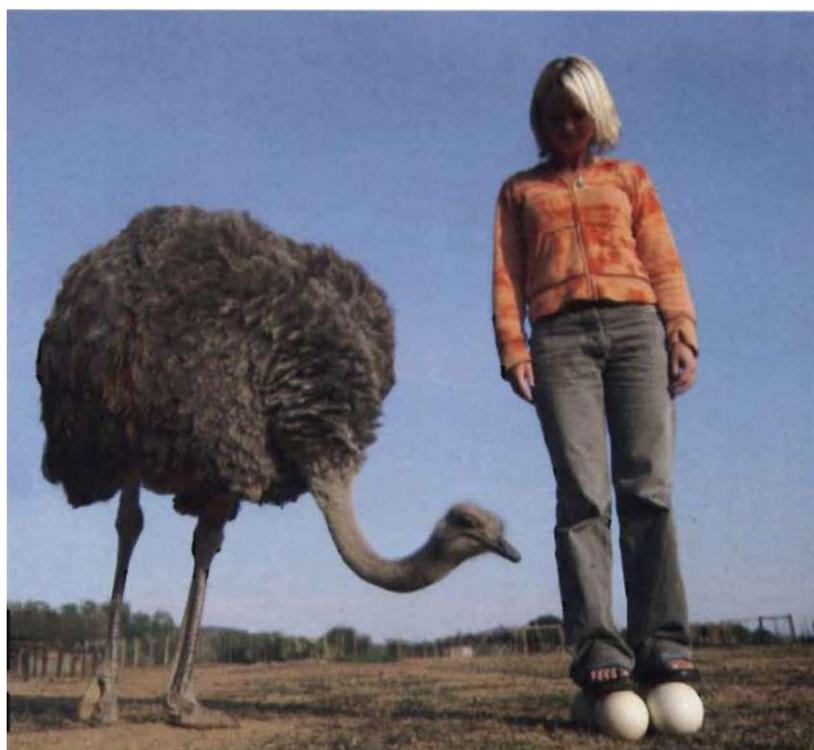
Ostriches can't resist eating shiny objects!

I may not have won the race that day, but merely to take part in such a prestigious event (and survive it) was enlivening enough. I felt a bit like Charlton Heston in Ben Hur.

Later that evening we dined upon ostrich steaks and eggs at a local restaurant, paid for with the money my wife had won on Red Rum. I then sneaked off to the thoroughbred stalls for a little pep talk with my steed.

"Tomorrow, Orville," I whispered gently whilst feeding her with peanuts, "you and I, well take on the world. Tomorrow we're going to win."

Of course we didn't, but I certainly had fun competing in what I will always remember as the world's wackiest race. £f



Strong enough to stand on: an ostrich egg is over twenty times the size of a chicken's and its 2mm-thick shell can be sawed open without shattering. It also makes an excellent, very yellow, omelette!