

# The people's economist

By Claire Bisseker

Financial Mail 15 December 2006

**Award-winning economist** Réjane Woodroffe (32) lives a schizophrenic existence that straddles the first and second economy divide, and enables her to enjoy a richer life drawing the best from both worlds.

For the past year, Woodroffe - who comes from a Muslim family on the Cape Flats - has spent alternate weeks in her corporate job as chief economist and head of international portfolio management at Metropolitan Asset Managers in Cape Town, and living among traditional Xhosa women in a mud hut on the Wild Coast.

Sitting opposite the manicured brunette in one of Cape Town's trendiest eateries, it is hard to believe that last weekend she was sweating under a *doek*, cooking and serving *umngqusho* to migrant miners who had returned to Nqileni village for a neighbour's funeral.

Nqileni, located 30 km south of Coffee Bay, is a crime-free paradise inhabited by a magnanimous but impoverished community. The 800 residents have partnered Woodroffe and her husband, Dave Martin (32) - a fellow BBusSci graduate from the University of Cape Town (UCT) - to run an extraordinary backpackers' lodge right on the water's edge.

The Lonely Planet guide (2004 edition) says Bulungula Lodge should be on the must-do list of visitors to SA, and the Rough Guide will soon list it as one of the 25 ultimate tourism experiences worldwide. This is not only because the lodge is located in pristine surroundings and is ecofriendly (using only wind and solar power), or even because of its ownership structure (40% of profits go to a community trust) and many community empowerment initiatives, but mostly because at Bulungula, jaded travellers can experience life in a Xhosa community that has barely changed in centuries.

"There are lots of lodges on the Wild Coast, but our 10 huts form part of a bigger village, so visitors can live as equals and wander at will among an ultratraditional community. Nothing is staged here and nobody speaks any English," says Woodroffe.

It isn't possible to drive to the lodge without a 4x4 and the sky's so clear that any guest who looks at it for half an hour without seeing a shooting star gets that night's accommodation free.

Despite this rural idyll, Woodroffe is impatient for change. She laments the lack of basic services like potable water, a road, toilets, a school and a clinic that would prevent babies dying from diarrhoea and families from having to relocate to crime-ridden townships in search of sustainable livelihoods and better schooling.

As a couple, their long-term mission is to help build a thriving, vibrant rural community and for the lodge to be managed by locals. After an aching slow three-year consultative process, in March 2004 Martin managed to secure the only legal lease for any lodge on the Wild Coast, which he holds jointly with a community trust established for this purpose.

One of the trust's first projects, using profits from the lodge, has been the creation of a seedling nursery so that the community can grow vegetables and

fruit - not just maize. In addition, the lodge provides work to about 40 of the 85 village households and has helped to set up a dozen small businesses for locals supplying services to visitors.

Through their UCT network, the couple have enticed several young Cape Town doctors to the nearby Madwaleni Hospital, where they have made antiretrovirals accessible.

On her weeks away from the office, Woodroffe stays linked to the office network using the Internet and a satellite phone. "I live between the first and second economies every day," she says. "It's often challenging and tiring. But it gets under your skin and you form deep bonds with people. This is now my home."