

## Report White South Africa

A self-defence lesson in an arid patch of Orania, an otherwise verdant private town in the Northern Cape. Founded by Afrikaners in 1991, it sees itself as independent from the rest of the country





# THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

White South Africans are flocking to the racially exclusive Orania community, where business is booming — as is nostalgia for apartheid. Is this the starting gun for a new era of segregation in the Rainbow Nation?  
By RW Johnson. Photographs by Brent Stirton



Oranian schoolgirls in traditional 'Volkspeler' clothing celebrate Afrikaner culture in July, while the schoolboys (right) perform a play set during the Boer war

As you drive through the arid vastness of South Africa's Great Karoo you become used to the dying small towns where the local populations eke out a bare existence. Then, wham! — you're in Orania, an 8,000-hectare area where hundreds of springbok wander amidst green fields and green trees, where the community is clearly absolutely booming, where everybody is white and Afrikaans and where the old South Africa still happily exists. Throughout the town there are large busts of Hendrik Verwoerd, often regarded as the principal architect of apartheid.

This is, visibly, a whites-only community, something that's not supposed to exist in the Rainbow Nation. Yet here the old idyll of white South Africa has been fully reinvented. People leave their keys in their cars, live with their doors open and children play, unmonitored, in the street until dark. The sense of shock doesn't end there. In the middle of the settlement is the house where Verwoerd's widow, Betsie, lived. Outside stands a huge sculpture of her late husband. The house is not so much a Verwoerd museum as a shrine. There are endless pictures of the man and tributes to his crowning

achievement, a republic outside the Commonwealth. Everywhere else in South Africa Verwoerd is execrated. It's as if Orania doesn't realise that the sensibilities of the rest of the country have moved on.

Our guide for the day, Dr John Strydom, takes us up to the top of the highest hill in Orania where, near a memorial to the Irish volunteers who fought for the Boers against the British,

stands a bust of President Kruger of the Transvaal Republic. Next to him stand the busts of past Afrikaner nationalist prime ministers. I point out that they are somewhat short of a full set: there's no John Vorster, PW Botha, or FW de Klerk. Of de Klerk, the man who ended apartheid and introduced universal suffrage, which brought the African National Congress to power, the less said the better in Orania: "He just



Left: a bust of Paul Kruger watches over Orania. Above and right, inset: Orania's location



gave everything away,” says Professor Carel Boshoff, Orania’s founder. “After all we had struggled for down the centuries. He was quite deaf to appeals for a white homeland. He was incredibly naive.” As for Vorster and PW Botha, “We don’t much want them,” says Dr Strydom. “Everyone after Verwoerd was part of the decline.”

Professor Boshoff – Verwoerd’s son-in-law – first conceived the notion of a white homeland nearly 60 years ago. He never really believed his father-in-law’s blithe assertions that white minority rule would last. As long ago as the 1950s, he dreamt of setting up a separate white homeland, where Afrikaners could fulfill the vision of the early trekkers who set up the Transvaal and Orange Free State republics.

In 1991 Carel Boshoff got his chance and set up the Orania homeland by buying a ghost town of abandoned buildings next to the Orange river (the remnants of a government water project) with 11 people on 450 hectares. It has now become is a thriving community of 820 – a number that is increasing rapidly. Building sites are everywhere. Plots of land that went for £1,000 four years ago now change hands for

## A POLL SAYS MORE THAN HALF OF ALL AFRIKANERS IN NORTHERN SOUTH AFRICA WOULD PREFER TO LIVE IN A WHITE HOMELAND, A COMMENT, LARGELY, ON THE SHEER DESPAIR AT SOARING CRIME RATES

£20,000. There are supermarkets, all manner of other shops, a doctor, dentist, lawyers, architects, a bank that deals in Orania’s own currency, the Ora, two schools and a radio station. Orania has organised many trips to Israel to study Israeli farming techniques – the Israelis too have made the desert bloom.

Orania exports jewellery to the whole of South Africa, air-freighted vegetables to British supermarkets and pecan nuts to China. The community is probably the greenest in South Africa: all farming is organic, everything is recycled and alternative energy is used wherever possible. “Recently growth has become explosive,” says Dr Strydom. “It’s stretching us in every sinew. Our present land can house 25,000 people but of course we’ll buy more land.”

To understand Orania it is best to start in Namaqualand, the other side of the vast Northern Cape province, across the barely

populated semi-desert region, the Great Karoo. The latter is a burning thirstland with temperatures of 40C, even in early Spring.

This is where the early white trekkers first had to traverse the Karoo. The harshness of the Karoo challenged the Afrikaners and although they triumphed over it, something of its dry vastness conquered their hearts so that today it is here, and in the even older and hotter deserts of Namibia, that one finds, over many thousands of square miles, societies that are uniformly Afrikaans-speaking.

The region is not just the home of white Afrikaners. Originally the area was inhabited by bushmen (the San, believed to be the world’s oldest race), but they gradually mixed with another group from the south, the Khoikhoi (nicknamed Hottentots by European settlers) – and there was some interracial mixing with white Afrikaners too. The result is today’s ➤➤➤

Right: building new houses in Orania — there is currently room for up to 25,000 homes, with plans to buy more land. Below centre: an aerial view of the town

“coloureds”, as mixed-race people are known in South Africa, who all speak Afrikaans and attend the same sort of Calvinist churches as the whites. There are effectively no blacks at all. So all the towns strung out across the vastness of the Karoo (around 400,000 square kilometres of it) are coloured-white affairs, but the arrival of universal suffrage has reversed the old social hierarchies. The whites mainly vote for the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) while the more numerous coloureds vote ANC.

**M**any of the small Karoo towns are dying. The closing down of local museums (which represent both high culture and a tourism-based future) is generally a tipping point — it convinces local whites that it’s time to go. So the richer whites leave, property prices fall, the poorer whites flee in panic, the number of people paying rates drops, municipal services fail and the town simply collapses.

This is particularly clear as you approach Orania. Nearby Philipstown is a ruin. The whites have left and unemployed coloureds mill around listlessly, almost all on welfare. Many of the girls carry babies — each child earns them another welfare handout. Shops are boarded up and there are empty houses going to ruin. Property prices are effectively zero: why buy when you can take over an abandoned house? A dying town can be a poignant sight but a dead town is just awful, something you want to leave quickly. And then, a few miles further on, booming Orania, with rocketing property prices and more than 50 businesses exporting to the world — a little green paradise. The contrast is disturbing.

“Orania was an experiment,” says Professor Boshoff, “and it has worked. Of that there is no doubt.” A gentle old man of 83, his Calvinist missionary zeal still burns bright. A widower, he lives now with his sister, who was Betsie Verwoerd’s secretary after Verwoerd himself was assassinated in 1966. Betsie spent her last seven years in Orania where, famously, Nelson Mandela came to have tea with her in 1995.

“We have to think of what to do next,” Boshoff says. “Expansion here may not be the right way. We need another Orania on the West Coast and another in Calvinia.” He hands us a map of the entire Northern Cape with a shaded area along



the coast, an area of early trekker settlement that is still one of the most Afrikaans-speaking parts of the country. This is not just his idea — he has written on the margin of the map in Afrikaans: “As recommended by the Volkstaat Council.” For although Orania theoretically falls under neighbouring Hopetown’s ANC council, the town has its own semi-official council that runs everything — the mayor is Carel IV, Boshoff’s youngest son, universally known as “Carel Vir” (pronounced “Fear”). He is a young intellectual, a former university lecturer in philosophy, considered liberal by many Oranians



## ORANIA MAY BE BOOMING BUT IT CANNOT BE DOUBTED THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL BECOME INCREASINGLY HOSTILE IF THIS WHITES-ONLY SETTLEMENT CONTINUES TO EXPAND AT BREAKNECK SPEED

though still politically conservative. The council schemes endlessly about how to become more “independent” and even how to retrieve the lost dream of the Boer republics, though everyone insists that even an autonomous Republic of Orania would want to contribute to the new South Africa.

If you go to Orania’s only restaurant the menu is wholly in Afrikaans and boeremusiek or rugby plays endlessly on the big screen overhead. The menu, even at breakfast, is all meat. Boerewors, bacon, steak, ribs, springbok, monster steak — an echo of the trek through the Karoo, when the trekkers just shot and ate game: vegetables were

not on the menu then and neither are they now. Hence these man-mountain Afrikaners — fabulous rugby players — who consume prodigious amounts of steak and red wine and then have heart attacks in their early sixties. Looking around the restaurant you see a fair number of retirees but also lots of young children playing between the tables: with no black servants to act as baby-minders in Orania, you have to bring the kids (and Orania pays a £1,000 handout for every child born). They all look like solid members of the volk albeit in holiday mood. You wonder how far they share the ideological dreams of the Boshoffs, Orania’s founders. ➤➤➤

Students at the conservative Orania CVO Skool, where the curriculum places strong emphasis on Afrikaner history and religious studies

“We endured six armed burglaries,” says Dr Johan Combrink, “and then we came here. My wife just couldn’t take it any more. Here, there is no crime at all and I can go hunting every day. Wonderful. They really needed a GP here so that job fell on my shoulders.

“Make no mistake,” he says. “A good 85% of people here have endured armed burglaries, seen family members shot dead in front of them or suffered similar traumas. They’re here because it’s safe and a slice of the old South Africa. They’re willing to go along with the ideological stuff as part of the deal, but that’s all.” I tell him that Professor Boshoff probably senses that too — he said that all sorts of people had settled in Orania, and that as it grows one must accept that they won’t all share the founders’ views — but he sees this as a successful experiment.

Most Oranians say they came for pragmatic rather than political reasons — they needed a job. But then everyone mentions the lack of crime. Nobody actually says “that’s because we only have whites here”, but it’s understood. They insist that they are not racists. Orania’s flag shows a white child pulling up his sleeves to work — indeed, whites do all the dirty work. They clean their houses, maintain their gardens and wash their cars. All gardeners or domestic servants are white: poor Afrikaners — some simple-minded, some the products of orphanages — who carry out manual labour for the others.

Orania may be booming but it is certain that the ANC government will become increasingly hostile if this whites-only settlement continues to expand at breakneck speed, providing an increasingly embarrassing example of what white enterprise can achieve among a sea of non-white poverty. Moreover, if Orania continues to expand it will also have to increase its powers. At present, for example, there is no police force and problems over, say, domestic violence or unruly behaviour are met by straightforward community intervention. This only barely works in a community of 800, but a town with a population of 25,000 will need a police force, a fire brigade and many other services that the government may be loathe to provide. Already the town council has had to move to bigger offices.

Thus far Orania has enjoyed good relations with the provincial ANC government — several



## SOUTH AFRICA AS A WHOLE REPRESENTS A FUTURE GONE WRONG AND THE WAY AHEAD IS NOTHING IF NOT UNCERTAIN. ORANIA'S FUTURE, LIKE THAT OF ISRAEL, IS EVEN MORE DIFFICULT TO PREDICT

provincial premiers have come here and admired what has been achieved, for Orania contributes healthily to local taxes and GDP and requires no grants or subsidies. But Orania’s relations with the central government are distinctly rocky, despite section 235 of the constitution, which guarantees “self-determination of any community sharing a common cultural and language heritage”.

This clause was pushed through as a sop to the Afrikaner Right and the trouble is that the ANC do not really believe in it at all. “That’s the problem — they’re instinctive Leninists and centralists,” says Jaco Kleynhans, head of the Orania Movement, which describes itself as “an Afrikaans cultural movement with the aim to restore Afrikaner freedom in an independent, democratic Republic based on Christian values”. “We need to ask ourselves whether, to preserve a culture and a heritage you really need a city,” he continues. “Many think so, and Pretoria was the Afrikaners’ city. But that’s gone now. I’m not so sure you need a city.”

His ideal model, he says, is Quebec — where French Canadians preserve their own culture locally and veto initiatives within Canada as a whole by the threat of secession. There is an

angry feeling amongst many Afrikaners who feel that de Klerk should have bargained for something similar. Professor Boshoff’s dream of more Oranias scattered across the Northern Cape gives them the the potential bargaining power that Kleynhans envisions. This would of course be a nightmare for the ANC — and the government would do anything to stop it.

But incredibly, Orania has so far managed to woo the ANC presidents. Nelson Mandela was welcomed on his famous visit to Betsie Verwoerd. His successor, Thabo Mbeki, asked to endorse the town’s claim to self-determination, said diplomatically that he’d rather talk of practicalities: “Confront us with reality so we can talk about it.” This Orania has certainly done.

**O**n September 14 President Jacob Zuma visited Orania, walking round hand in hand with Professor Boshoff, who declared Zuma’s visit “a red-letter day”. Even the firebrand president of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, visited Orania recently and was treated as a guest of honour. Malema demanded to put up ANC posters on every lamp post, apparently with the intention of sparking a confrontation. The laid-back ➤➤➤

Top: Carel Boshoff IV, the current mayor of Orania. He is the youngest son of the community's founder, Professor Carel Boshoff (below)

Oranians merely told him to get on with it and he departed nonplussed.

But the problem that won't go away is that of race. What if an Afrikaans-speaking coloured applied to join Orania? "It's never happened," says John Strydom. "We'd look at it on its merits. We're not racists. But word gets around that this is a pretty conservative community. We've got nothing against gays if they're not exhibitionist, but in practice they tend not to apply."

**S**o I turn to Carel IV, a deeply thoughtful and liberal young man, surprised to have been elected as mayor because most Oranians are more conservative than him. "My father's vision did not really work out," he says, picking his words carefully. "He thought Afrikaners were a mobilised community and that you just needed to change direction, so we could go from a white South Africa with black homelands to a black South Africa with white homelands — a new Israel, if you like. We live in a post-nationalist age. Today's Afrikaner is a modern, atomised individualist but we still have an identity which is transmitted across generations. Here, because we are succeeding, every day we face a bigger picture and we have to be open to that."

The Orania experiment is certainly gaining traction. A recent poll shows that more than half of all Afrikaners in the northern half of South Africa, including Johannesburg and Pretoria, would prefer to live in a white homeland — a comment, largely, on sheer despair at soaring crime rates, ANC corruption and incompetence. They've given up on the new South Africa. The sheer scale of ANC failure is measured not just in the permanent discontent in the townships — but elsewhere in the protests of white residents who refuse to pay their rates to corrupt mayors in towns and villages that are run by the ANC. For these whites, fed up with the seemingly intractable corruption, Orania gradually seems less wacky than they first thought, maybe even a way ahead.

Carel IV talks purposefully of retaining the republican perspective, which means grasping every chance of sovereignty and also providing public services for the community. Councillors in Orania are unpaid and expenses are limited to



the Northern Cape too. This new DA represents a successful white-coloured alliance. When I ask whether Orania might join the wave, Carel IV is hesitant. "We would like to make an alliance with the coloureds," he says, "but it will not be a fusion. We will remain Afrikaners. We must be careful, in any alliance, that we do not become a footnote to our own project."

Up on the hill the sculptures of Boer heroes such as Kruger, Malan and Strydom continue to stare blindly across this hard land, which gives up nothing without huge and well-applied labour. Below the green fields, the intense

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£15 a month. There is no corruption. The contrast with generalised ANC municipal corruption is again very stark. I pull the conversation back to the coloureds. "Look," he says, "we have made endless overtures and initiatives towards the coloured community. None have borne fruit. It is not easy. What seems clear is that the coloured masses of the Northern Cape do not wish to become Afrikaners in the same sense as us, even if they are partially our own blood, our own relatives."

Things are changing. In the Western Cape coloureds are leaving the ANC en masse and voting for the DA. The DA are making gains in

irrigation effort, the ubiquitous building sites show what can be done. South Africa as a whole represents a future gone wrong and the way ahead is nothing if not uncertain. Orania's future is even more difficult to predict. True, it has brought verdant crops to the desert but that alone won't be enough. Israel has also made the desert bloom but its future remains uncertain too. Carel IV will have to lead Orania into that maelstrom of uncertainty, knowing only that the original Verwoerdian dream will not suffice, that accommodating other races is essential. Those busts up on the hill are, after all, sightless ■