

Battlefield CHARACTERS

The Battlefields of South Africa have some of the best guides we have found anywhere in the world. What makes them so passionate about their subject?



The Storehouse, now a church, at Rorke's Drift

FACT FILE

A two-week trip including the highlights of Zululand and three nights in the Battlefields, a visit to the mountains, a short safari and a beach stay costs from £1,800 per person including flights and based on two people sharing. For further details contact Michael, Marilyn, Jill or Sarah on 01993 838 550.



The northwestern corner of KwaZulu-Natal has brought together some unusual characters over its history, most notably during the conflicts between the Zulus, Boers and British that ravaged the region in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There are two modern additions to this cast at Isandlwana Lodge, the perfect base for time spent in the Battlefields. Firstly there is Pat Stubbs. One-time senior executive in the insurance industry, hailing from the southern United States, Pat found that retirement wasn't to her liking and looked to Africa for further challenges and investments. A series of happy coincidences led her to the Zulu community at Isandlwana, with whom she forged a remarkable bond and built the lodge. Now, seven years on, the lodge is flourishing and is a major source of employment for the local people. Guests have played their part, repaying the tremendous hospitality shown by the community with gifts and initiatives ranging from school supplies and clothes to week-long dental clinics and sports pitches.

Working alongside Pat is Rob Gerrard. A military man from a military family, Rob had his interest in the Anglo-Zulu conflict sparked during years spent in Johannesburg. Upon retiring from the army, Rob came to Isandlwana and started to lead battlefield tours: his reputation has grown steadily and he now stands right at the forefront of his profession. We took this opportunity to ask him a few questions about himself and the historic events that have become so much a part of his life.

Audley: How did you come to be a battlefield guide in KwaZulu-Natal?

Rob: British military history has always been my hobby. I was brought up in a military family, held a commission in the British army and having retired from both the army and 26 years of business in Johannesburg, I decided to take people around the Boer War battlefields: at the time, my main passion in South Africa. I discovered that the Boer War didn't interest British visitors as much as The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, probably because of the film "Zulu" about the battle of Rorke's Drift which seems to have been shown annually in the UK since about 1960.

Audley: Which of the personalities of the Anglo-Zulu War interest you the most?

Rob: That is a very difficult question. There are so many wonderful characters. However, if we stick to the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift I think I'd select three people. Colonel Durnford, Qumbu Magqubu Ntombela (he was not present, but his father was, and he comes into the story I tell at Isandlwana) and C/Sgt Bourne. Incredible people, fascinating lives.

Audley: What do you consider the single most decisive factor of the Zulu victory at Isandlwana?

Rob: British arrogance.

Audley: There are those that suggest that the VCs awarded at Rorke's Drift were a PR exercise by the British Army – do you think those medals were completely merited?

Rob: In my opinion there are modern historians who have a desire to change and/or challenge historical facts as originally written. The awards given to those at Rorke's Drift were most definitely merited.

Audley: Is there a battlefield that stands out in your mind more than others?

Rob: In all honesty, there isn't. But I can hear and feel the battle of Isandlwana. It is alive in my mind.

Audley: Why would the battlefields region appeal to someone without a major interest in military history?

Rob: For me, no complete understanding of military history is possible without the human factor. Everybody is interested in hearing a good story. To tell a good story that will prove of interest you have to talk about the characters who participated in the battle, where they came from, their family background, what happened to them during the battle and afterwards, which is what I try to do.

WEB PLUS

www.audley.co.uk/features/sabattlefields

For information on the battlefields and maps



British Memorial, Rorke's Drift



Sandlwana Lodge



Rob Gerrard

