Revering Rivonia and the raid

The reopened and revamped Liliesleaf, where the struggle suffered an almost fatal neck blow in 1963, is a coup of conflict tourism, writes EUGENE GODDARD

LIKE struggle groupies swooning at the prospect of being inducted into our own imaginary hall of fame, we joined the melee on the N3. We had a date with heritage and didn't want to get entangled in traffic.

It was still early when we turned into Rivonia, the heart of SA's ultra-left legacy.

Residents from the sleepy suburb were doing the bumper grind, eager to get to work on time. We were going the other way, to Liliesleaf farm, eager to stake our claim in SA's history as the first official public visitors to the site where the clandestine headquarters and almost the entire upper echelons of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) were raided and routed by Hendrik Verwoerd's Bureau of State Security (BOSS).

It hasn't been a farm for many years and much has changed since the BOSS brutes blunted the Spear of the Nation on July 11 1963, 45 years ago. But a lot has also stayed the same.

The geese made an unholy racket when we nosed into the parking lot of Liliesleaf.

It was the same kind of goose honking that had shattered the peace when a van that read "Trade Steam Pressers", and another representing a florist, paid a visit to the top structure of the struggle.

That Thursday afternoon in 1963 the men who got out of the vans were up to dirty business; they certainly didn't have laundry on their minds, nor did they come bearing flowers.

Their clothing alone — uniform blue safari suits with a few grey-shoed, plain-clothes clowns noosed in broad, brown ties sporting diagonal stripes — merited vocal protestation.

Nicely nestled in country-style tranquillity, Liliesleaf was never meant to have an arresting look. That's what we expected: a kind of preserved, eerie mystery. To our surprise we turned into the highly stylised property, all paving and quaint landscaping surrounding a postmodern, bare bones building, that read Liliesleaf Resource Centre on the side.

I thought: "What is this, some kind of hi-tech library?"

And a library of sorts it is; a research facility housing most of the material from the Rivonia raid and subsequent trial that resulted in the long incarceration of the top leadership of the African National Congress and South African Communist Party.

Considering its bleak foyer, echoing the architectural starkness of the Apartheid Museum in Booysens and the Hector Pieterson Memorial site in Soweto, you wouldn't say that the spare "reception centre" at Liliesleaf has a bellyfull of rare research material.

Like neatly arranged paintings, maps on the wall testify to a kind of decorative deception. Step closer and their cartographic significance becomes clear when you read how police found about 100 maps of SA dotted with key attack points in a coal shed during the Liliesleaf raid.

The maps formed an integral part of Operation Mayibuye, the armed revolt that topped the agenda during apparatchik meetings in a thatched cottage at Liliesleaf, MK's nerve centre.

Another priceless document in the archives is the original warrant of arrest for the "caretaker and cook" of Liliesleaf, a man who went by the name of David "The Walker" Motsamayi. The name on the warrant: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

But who wants to pore over yellowing documents when you can absorb the Liliesleaf story interactively? It's on the multimedia side of things, situated between the Resource and the Liberation Centre, where the real mystique of Liliesleaf lies hidden.

Although most material is stored in the Resource Centre, the best exhibits are located in and around the grand old house and outbuildings.

One such exhibit is the original transistor radio positioned in the kitchen on a table where Mandela sat listening to the acceptance speech that ANC leader Albert Luthuli made when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, in December 1961. Against a life-sized, black-and-white backdrop of Luthuli bedecked with traditional Zulu headgear, the radio still "broadcasts" the chief's wise words.

But it's really Mandela's famous "Submit or Fight" speech, made from the court benches at the onset of the Rivonia trial in 1964, that captures the imagination. Located in the room where he lived as a "servant", the same

"Rusty looked up and said: 'My God! I saw that van outside the police station on my way here today.' We jumped up and helped three guys who were in disguise, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Ahmed Kathrada, get out through the window"