

A NOT SO REGULAR HAUNT

Whether you believe in spooks or not, going ghost-hunting can be an unsettling experience. **Oliver Roberts** checks out a haunted pub with SA's only ghostbusting team

THE thing about ghosts is that you want to believe in them, but when you actually encounter one, you tell yourself, out of fear, that they don't exist. This is what I discovered the night I went ghost-hunting with this country's only paranormal explorations team. They call themselves the Supernatural Phenomena Investigation Team of South Africa — Spitsa for short — and their mission is to uncover and meet our local ghosts who, for far too long, have been ignored in favour of the American ones seen on fuzzy reality TV programmes. We may not have ancient Indian burial grounds and medieval castles, but there are still plenty of places in SA — old houses, hotels and pubs — whose halls are haunted by lost souls and those who don't realise they're dead. Spitsa was started six months ago by Tracey Johnson, a 49-year-old field administrative officer with a life-long interest in the

paranormal. "I've just always been able to feel it," she says of her spiritual sixth sense. Spitsa has three other members and a website that posts reports on its investigations, including video and photo footage, and electronic voice phenomena (EVP), which are staticky recordings of ghosts' voices. All four members are from Joburg and have day jobs; the investigations are a ghoulish hobby that they practise free of charge, though donations are accepted. "It's amazing how many people are contacting us — we're surprisingly busy," says Johnson. "And a lot of the time, people don't actually want to get rid of their ghosts; they just want to know why they're there." Investigations (more than 10 so far) have included houses in Sandringham, Orange Grove, Centurion and Peace Haven; a hotel in Pretoria and the Rissik Street post office in the Joburg CBD. Most investigations, it seems, have merely resulted in photo-

graphs of orbs, considered by some to be ghosts in the form of balls of light. Trail through the photograph section on the Spitsa website and you'll see these orbs presented in somewhat indiscernible and vague pictures. Most believe that these "orbs" are merely the reflection of light or dust particles bouncing off a camera flash. However, according to Johnson, there have also been more tangible and eerie encounters with entities from other realms. She claims to have an EVP recording of a demonic growling from one house, and she investigated and related to me the story of a two-year-old boy in the Northern Cape who spoke to an unseen woman: "He used to say to his mother, 'Mom, come and see the woman,' and point at nothing. "Sometimes he would complain that this thing was hurting him and once told his mother, 'She's looking at you.'" A Spitsa investigation resulted in EVPs and a photograph with the shadow of a woman in it. During other



investigations, digital cameras have stopped working and compasses have jammed. "A ghost is basically one of two things," Johnson says. "It's either someone who has experienced a sudden death and doesn't know they're dead, or someone who has become very attached to something or someone and doesn't want to leave, even after they've passed away." Johnson admits that the majority of the time, people's suppositions that they're being haunted are the result of an over-active imagination, a reaction to

some traumatic incident or, in one case, a brain tumour. Spitsa's reports on their website reflect this, as some cases are deemed to be false or unconvincing. The basic paraphernalia required to hunt ghosts are: digital recorder (with EVP software), a video and photographic camera (preferably with thermal imaging), thermometer, electromagnetic field (EMF) detector, and headlamp. After every investigation, Spitsa assembles the data and puts it onto a CD for the client. The investigation I attend was requested by the owner of a pub in

Queensburgh — a sparse little town on Durban's outskirts. The story is that people have been hearing footsteps and doors slamming when there's no one there; electronic equipment (lights, TVs, computers, music systems) has been flickering and shutting off by itself, and a regular once encountered a ghostly figure in the bathroom (though it was never ascertained how drunk he was at the time). It's 10 o'clock on a dank Sunday evening, Johnson and other Spitsa member Mitch Tuba are setting up their gear inside the pub. It's here that I see another vital piece of equipment in the ghost-hunter's arsenal is cigarettes. Lots and lots of them. Tuba, Johnson, and her sister Dawn (a spindly-fingered clairvoyant who has come along for the ride) are puffing away, listening to accounts from the pub owner and a few of the staff, asking questions, taking notes. The pub has only been open for six months; before that it was a scouts hall and it's located near a post office built in the '40s. Rumour has it a man was murdered on the site some time ago and that a lot of soldiers were killed in this area in World War II. While Tuba hooks up the EVP devices and cameras, Johnson begins walking around, a digital thermometer attached to her wrist, checking the readings. It dips up and down between 20 and 22 degrees Celsius — nothing significant, but Johnson claims she feels cold. "I sense something following me around," she says, before looking upwards at nothing and asking, "Are you going to talk to us tonight?" I had come to this pub full of

cynical bravado, expecting a lame display, but I begin to get a slightly creepy feeling. In this kitschy pub after closing time, with its empty bar, vacant tables and echoing TV, sensing a ghostly presence is easy. "Right, I'm ready to roll," says Tuba, who, despite his serious demeanour, is wearing an elasticated headlamp that makes his hair sprout madly in all directions. He's got a digital video camera with him and an EMF detector; Johnson has a torch and a camera. A sensor has been put up outside the bathroom door that will sound if there's any movement there. The lights are switched off (according to Johnson, this

sharpens your senses and makes it easier to see ghosts), and everyone is given a portable light. "If anyone feels threatened or can't handle it anymore, turn on the light and we'll stop and you can leave," Johnson says. "Everyone just breathe... relax," says Dawn, who appears excited. Tuba and Johnson begin roaming around, pointing and filming, taking photographs of empty space. "Is there anybody here? What is your name? Why are you here?" asks Tuba. "Show yourself. Reveal yourself to us." Part of me hopes there isn't a ghost. What if something actually appears, or an object moves? Paranormal activity is so abstract that it's impossible to be prepared for it, or to know how you would react if you met it face to face. "We're not here to harm you, we'd just like to document you." "Are you male or female?" "I can feel you in the room; you may touch me if you like." After about 25 minutes of questions and invitations from Johnson and Tuba, I begin to lose interest and realise I'm not going to see or hear or feel anything. In fact, now that it's close to midnight in this dark, empty pub next to a large veld, I'm more concerned about the unexpected presence of a different, more realistic kind, such as burglars with guns. But then, something happens. Johnson walks over to the bar and says, "If you're here, give us a sign, move something," and, almost immediately, there's a rattling from behind the counter, the sound of bottles being shaken. It lasts for maybe two seconds but it's enough to make everyone in the room gasp and hope it was just a heart-pounding coincidence. It couldn't possibly be something, could it? Just then, there's a high-pitched whining — it's Tuba's EMF detector flickering madly at some empty space near the stairs. I hear someone at the table next to me say: "I can't do this, I want to switch my light on." It's tempting, but I'm desperate to see what happens next. "I can smell sulphur," says psychic Dawn, "and I see a face in

my mind, a woman; she's disfigured, she's been burnt." "Ask her if her name is Charmaine," says the pub owner. "If your name is Charmaine, give us a sign, move something," says Tuba. But there's nothing. The EMF detector goes back to normal and for the next five minutes the Spitsa duo try to provoke the spirit into action by accusing it of playing around and wasting their time. It doesn't work. Whatever was there is now gone or has lost interest, or was never there in the first place. Once the lights are back on, it's revealed that a few months ago a woman named Charmaine had an accident with a cigarette in the pub, set her face alight and burnt to death. Dawn thinks this might be the woman she 'saw'. Two days after the investigation, Tuba calls to tell me that a study of his video footage shows the figure of a woman sitting at the bar, and Johnson has an EVP recording of a woman calling herself "Patsy". I view the video stills, but they're as hard to make out as an ultrasound image. However, I am also in the image, sitting just a few metres from the supposed ghost. I realise then that what's most frightening is not seeing a ghost, but thinking that a ghost has seen you. Spitsa considers this a successful investigation and Johnson declares that the Enigma pub in Queensburgh is "definitely haunted". Now that I'm far enough away from the place, I'm willing to believe it is too. ● View footage from Spitsa's investigations: www.spitsa.co.za

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