



WORDS KAYANG GAGIANO PICTURE SHAWN BENJAMIN



Cederberg Heritage Routes are slack-packing hiking trails designed to give those who enjoy their creature comforts a chance to appreciate one of South Africa's most majestic wilderness areas.

TREKKING WITH THE SPIRITS OF THE SAN

IN THE ANCIENT CEDERBERG

Morning mists swirl around us like spectres as the jeep ascends the Pakhuis Pass above the town of Clanwilliam. Here, in the heart of Rooibos (red tea) country, a rainstorm is brewing. Our day packs are pleasantly light, filled only with the hearty ham and cheese sandwiches, juice, water, yoghurt and locally-produced dried fruit supplied by the genteel kitchen staff at the Longhouse Guesthouse.

It was in this lovingly restored and elegant Cape Dutch farmhouse that we spent last night luxuriating, in preparation for all the leg stretching that's about to commence. At the top of the pass we park, exit the vehicle, quickly don rain garb and follow our two friendly guides towards uncharted territory and into the wild. ■■■



An unforgettable donkey cart ride.



Old-world Heuningvlei.

Pics © Kayang Gagliano



San rock art.

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All I can say is thank goodness for slack-packing. Firstly, you save yourself from the indecent shoulder ache associated with carrying your bedroom and kitchen on your back like a hermit crab on steroids. Secondly, you get to sleep relatively late and in a comfortable bed with sweet-smelling sheets. You awaken to drink decent coffee, or that famous red herbal drink they're always going on about in these parts. And to seal the deal, if you're not already convinced, someone else cooks you tasty, hot meals comprised of real meat and fresh vegetables that don't come freeze-dried in sad little foil packets. All you have to do is tramp, inhale oxygen-rich air laced with herbaceous odours, stare at amazing views, take far too many photos and say "ooh!" and "aah!" a lot.

The Cederberg Wilderness area – one of the eight World Heritage Sites which comprise the Cape Floristic Kingdom – is a great place to do all that. Named after the near-extinct (and endemic) Clanwilliam Cedar tree (*Widdringtonia cedarbergensis*), this is a magnificent world of craggy, grey shale and reddish-brown sandstone outcrops, mountain fynbos (fine bush) and some of the world's finest examples of San rock art.

Which is precisely why philanthropist Denis le Jeune and associate Peter Hart set about engaging a number of stakeholders to collaborate on this community-based eco-tourism initiative. They are: Cape Nature Conservation (which manages the protected wilderness area), the Moravian Church (custodian of various subsistence- ■■■



Heuningvlei



Rooibos tea, Groenkol Rooibos Farm, Clanwilliam.



A curious Chacma baboon peeps from above.

THE GREATEST FLOWER SHOW

After the winter rains, from late July to September each year, the Cederberg region comes alive with colour. Don't miss the carpets of bright vygies and Clanwilliam daisies, or the eye-popping splendour of blooming fynbos. Hike the wilderness area, drive the Biedouw Valley route and prepare to be amazed. Clanwilliam Wild Flower Show: 26 August to 1 September 2010.

farming settlements in the Cederberg at which hikers overnight), the Clanwilliam Living Landscape Project (which provides experienced rock art guides) and Cedarberg African Travel (which manages bookings).

Launched at the beginning of 2008, the Cederberg Heritage Route currently offers four trails (differing routes) with three- to five-day, all-inclusive packages to choose from. We've chosen a four-nighter, which, because we're feeling fighting fit, includes the optional extra day – an ascent of Krakadouw Peak, the highest in the northern part of the Cederberg at 1 745 m above sea level.

Our guides today are David van der Westhuizen and the aptly named Mbulelo Mountain (aka John). They will lead us on our 17 km, somewhat squelchy descent (thank you, rain) into the Boskloof (Forest Ravine) Valley. The two men complement one another well. David is diminutive, careful but kind, well-versed in the legends and lore of the mountains and wise beyond his years. His DNA was recently analysed by scientists from the University of the Witwatersrand and he can claim

direct San lineage on his maternal grandmother's side.

John Mountain, on the other hand, is a lanky ex Orlando Pirate – a chatty, former professional soccer player who trains both pensioners and children in the finer points of the beautiful game when he isn't guiding curious journalists along river banks and down mountain slopes. John's nation, the *isiXhosa* tribe, famously incorporated the clicks of the San (or Bushman) language into their Nguni tongue, as he later demonstrates for us with glee.

The spirits of the San, the first people of our planet, can be felt everywhere we go. They are present in David's eyes and John's dexterous tongue-clicks. They are present in the ancient paintings John will show us on our last morning, when we visit nine of the 10 sites on the Sevilla Rock Art Trail. There we see faded yellow elephants, processions of women, eland, hunters with bow and arrows and strange, dinosaur-like creatures depicted on cave walls. As we walk along now, our feet are on the earth they walked. When we sit for lunch, we do so in the shelters where they rested. ■■■

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We see and smell plants the San used for food, medicine and to make fire – a powerful sensory memento of the hike. Shrubs, ferns and fynbos are gold green, grey green, grass green. Their corresponding smells, intensified by the moisture in the air, are like honey, sage and – hang on a minute – is that Worcestershire sauce?

The first time I catch a whiff of it, I think it must be emanating from a fellow hiker's backpack, perhaps a condiment to accompany a sandwich, but long after comestibles have been scoffed and juices quaffed, I notice it again. So, yes, there's a plant in the Cederberg that smells like Worcestershire sauce.

John and David bid us farewell at Frikkie-se-Huis (Frikkie's house), one of the cosy Krakadouw Cottages. The next leg of our journey will be undertaken with Barend Ockhuis from Heuningvlei (Honey Valley) as our guide.

He will lead us along the banks of the Dwars River up the Krakadouw neck towards his home, a small Moravian mission outpost and home to 25 families who make a living farming organic Rooibos and vegetables such as sugar beans and sweet potato. But for now it's time to spark up a fire, take a hot shower and curl up with a good book in the little loft room that makes me feel like Heidi in the Alps.

In the morning we slowly wend our way to Heuningvlei with tall, quiet Barend, who has lived there all his life and would have it no other way. En route we encounter a lively party of chacma baboons and spot two large aardvark burrows.

Later, a klipspringer (rock jumper) antelope darts across the path in front of us. Barend points out a copse of indigenous cedars and fresh Cape mountain leopard tracks. In Heuningvlei, we admire the rustic whitewashed cottages and spend hours drinking tea and chatting with host *Tant* (Aunt) Maria Solomon.



Cederberg wilderness.

Rain keeps us off Krakadouw peak, so we cosy under the covers instead, perversely pleased to have an excuse to return here in the future. On our last morning, a donkey cart transports us from the settlement back up to the Pakhuis Pass.

For now, it's time to bid this place farewell. But soon, I know, the flowers will be out, and then I'll come back to this beautiful place, where people are warm and kind, with smiles as sweet as the honey their valley is named for. 🐻

CONTACT DETAILS

Trails include park fees, accommodation, all meals, guides, road transfers in itinerary and luggage transport between stops.

Prices range from R2 500 to R5 000 depending on length and group size.

Trails range from easy to challenging.

Further Cederberg Heritage Route information can be accessed at:

www.cedheroute.co.za

For bookings, contact Michelle Truter at Cedarberg African Travel:

Tel: 27 (0)27 482 2444

Fax: 27 (0)27 482 1420

Email: michelle@cedarberg.co.za