

A HIKE THROUGH TIME

If you follow the footpaths over the Cederberg, you'll find a landscape of stories, written in the rock and the hearts of the people.

HIGH UP IN THE ROCKY CRAGS OF THE CEDERBERG, IN A TINY

VILLAGE CRADLED BY A TEA-GROWING VALLEY, THE SHOW IS ABOUT TO START. Past the white thatched cottages tumbling down the slopes, past the rooibos plantations and the donkeys milling in the dirt road, to the small Moravian church. Hymns float in the chill evening air.

Inside the plain church hall most of Heuningvlei's 85 people are assembled. Tannies and ooms, babies and toddlers. Teenagers, home for the holidays and running the festivities. Most seated expectantly, though not the scampering toddlers nor the teenagers slipping in and out of the stage curtain.

The curtain finally opens with *Die Nuus van Heuningvlei*, delivered by a girl behind a desk, in tie and stiff white shirt, a female Riaan Cruywagen. *Beulin and Maxon have been arrested for stealing R2's worth of goods from Auntie Ounooi's house ... Village youth are fundraising for a new pair of velskoene for Kobus, who lost both his shoes and donkeys in the mountains ... Uncle Hennie is searching for his missing tortoise. Reward: one sunhat.*

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PICTURES: KARIN SCHERMBRUCKER

ROCK OF AGES
The stunning Pakhuis Pass, a giant warehouse of startling rock formations.

The hall roars with laughter as the villagers, young and old, take the stage for a story, skit or dance. When one old man, grizzled with a bad eye, tells a story in the vernacular and then starts dancing, flinging his legs all over the place and joined by a little boy clapping, we ask ourselves: “How on earth did we get here?”

The simple answer, confirmed by aches from the feet up: we walked.

The people's route

Heuningvlei is the flagship village of the Cederberg Heritage Route (CHR), an ecotourism project started in October 2007 to uplift local communities. The brainchild of veteran hikers Denis Le Jeune and Peter Hart, both from Cape Town, the CHR has so far hosted nearly 300 hikers on four trails. A fifth trail, the four-night Gabriel Trail, opens in March this year. The trails wind through the Cederberg Wilderness Area, which is managed by CapeNature (a CHR partner and *Wild Card* partner), with local people acting as guides. Accommodation, including tasty boerekos, is in locals' own homes or guesthouses.

“It's not a hiking trail,” says Le Jeune, the CHR's honorary treasurer. “You're working with and being helped by the local community. The only thing like it that I've ever seen are the tea houses serving trekkers in Nepal.”

It's called slackpacking, Le Jeune explains. You carry only a light daypack; your luggage gets transported by bakkie or donkey cart, the area's traditional transport. Every step you take on the CHR is not only lighter, it's a step towards helping local people, a step into their lives, history and culture.

Let it be said: the three-night Pakhuis Trail, which we did, is not for couch-potatoes. Roughly 34 kilometres, mostly hiked over two days, it's rated 3B by Cederberg African Travel (CAT), one of the CHR partners. “*Steeper walking/hiking and/or a longer distance ...*”

“I'm sending you on this one because it's the most beautiful, especially from Pakhuis Pass to Krakadouw,” says Michelle Truter, CAT's helpful point person for the heritage route. Hikers from the minimum age of nine to 70-something have made it, she says. But in December, with 37-degree heat? “If you want a bit of coolness, sit under a rock,” Michelle grins. There are plenty of those.

A rugged landscape

The next day we're up at 04h30 to beat the heat and to catch the sunrise over Pakhuis Pass, 900 metres high and the start of

our journey. Michelle drives us up the winding road north of Clanwilliam into the mountains, in the near-dark. At the top we disembark: three ‘tourists’ (myself, my 13-year-old son Rafe and photographer Karin), Michelle, and guide John Mbulelo Mountain (an apt name if there ever was one).

The light of the full moon bathes the giant sandstone amphitheatre, full of enormous rocks sculpted by a wild imagination. A huge silence. You feel very small up here.

“Another tourist who came here,” Michelle says in response to our awe, “said ‘no, it can't be true God made the world in seven days. Surely he needed more time to stack all these rocks on top of each other!’”

John points to three peaks in the distance. “Faith, Hope and Charity,” he says. “Named by the poet Louis Leipoldt, whose grave lies not far away.”

Michelle reluctantly departs, headed back to the office. John leads the way on the white sand track, fringed by mountain fynbos, as the rising sun shades the rock walls pink and ochre. Soon the cicadas are chirping, growing louder.

“I love the mountains,” John confides as we walk, mostly not talking. “They are quiet, though you hear a lot of sounds: baboons, for instance, instead of cars. I usually fast before going into nature, to get the feelings of nature better. When you respect nature you can respect yourself.”

John's been trained as a guide through the Clanwilliam Living Landscape Project (another CHR partner), including learning about rock art from the renowned John Parkington, professor of archeology at the University of Cape Town. As he taps ahead with his walking stick, he's in his element, kept his ability to be awestruck. One of his favourite words is “wow”.

“Will we see any animals?” Rafe asks. Maybe baboons, daisies, antelope, a leopard if we're lucky, John says. He's seen two leopards in the past two years, as well as, of course, many of the other Cederberg species: African wildcat, lynx, bat-eared and Cape foxes, aardvark, grey mongoose, a puffadder and a black spitting cobra. We probably won't see many of them, though John points out porcupine tracks and where an aardvark has ravaged a termite mound.

Nor will we see the carpet of flowers that blooms here every spring, though stray wildflowers, pink, purple, white or yellow, add a splash of colour.

We will see a lot of rocks. John says: “You can spend the whole day staring at the rocks and using your imagination.” ▶

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1. There are more than 3000 known rock art sites in the Cederberg. Highly knowledgeable guide David van der Westhuizen will open your eyes to their beauty and meaning.

2. You can hike for days on end. This troop of scouts was into its 120th kilometre.

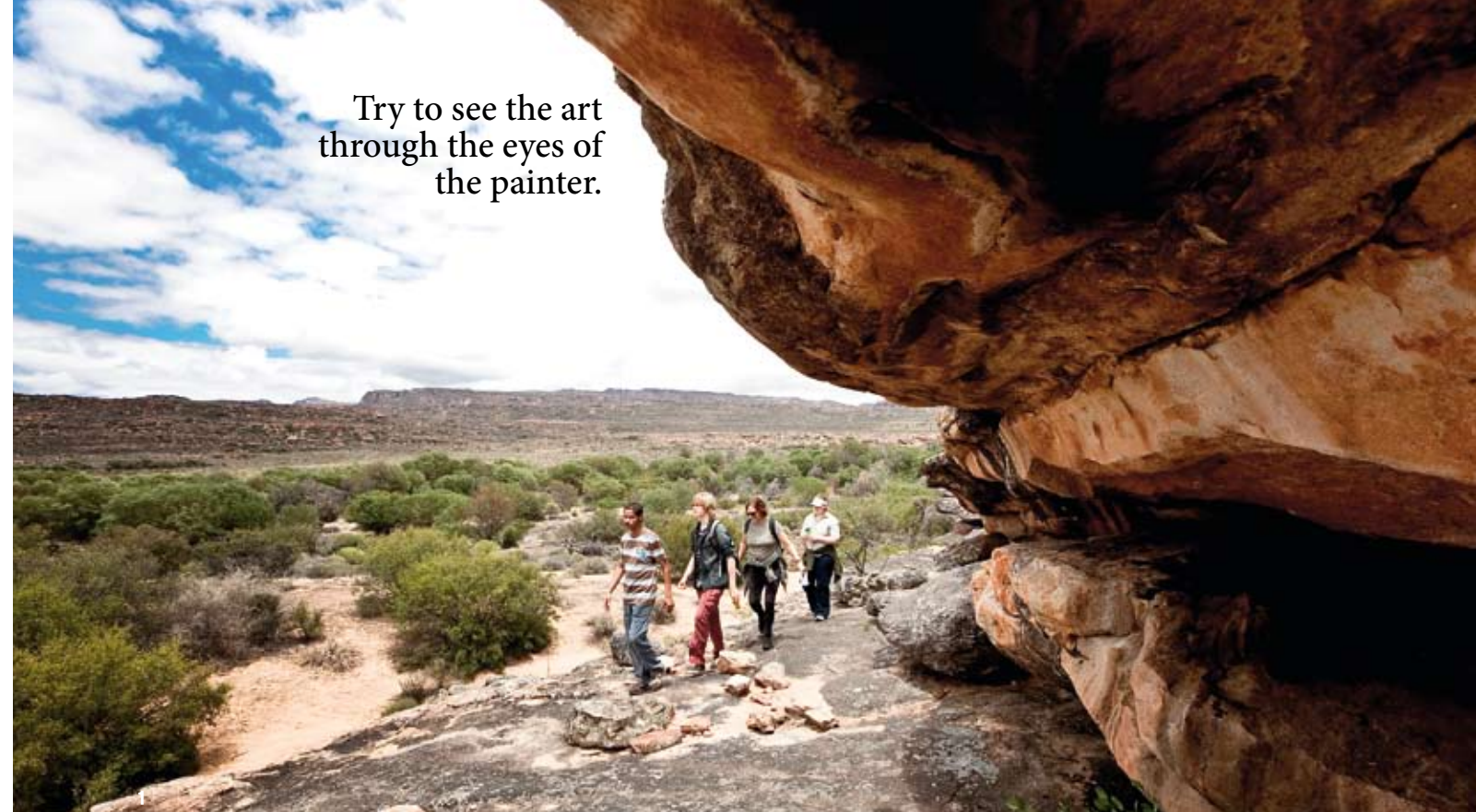
3. The moon sets over the Pakhuis Pass.

4. Guide John Mountain has been walking these peaks for years yet he's still blown away by the natural beauty.

5. Stray wildflowers add a splash of colour. In spring the Cederberg is blanketed in fields of flowers.

6. The rocky landscape is heaven for Southern rock agama. When threatened their bright colours fade and they blend into the rock.

Try to see the art through the eyes of the painter.



What does that rock look like? An aeroplane, a rhinoceros, Pinocchio?



The Moravian mission station of Heuningvlei, population 85, is a highlight of the trail.



Villagers still travel largely by donkey cart or on foot.



RIGHT: The engine behind ecotourism in Heuningvlei, Abraham Ockhuis. The village land used to belong to his family.



ABOVE: Tannie Noss, one of Heuningvlei's charming hosts and a great storyteller.

He skips the standard lecture on the Cederberg, about the 100-kilometre long mountain chain being part of the Cape Floral Kingdom and a World Heritage Site. One of the four best places in Africa to see rock art and home to the San for thousands of years. Named after the Clanwilliam cedars *Widdringtonia cedarbergensis*, once plentiful on the upper slopes but decimated in the 19th century for furniture and telephone poles.

Rather he leads us on and into a game: What does that rock look like? A clipper ship, John says. An aeroplane, says Rafe. I think it looks like a rhinoceros.

The game continues as we walk through the pass, built between 1874 and 1877 by the famous Thomas Bain to link Clanwilliam and Calvinia and open a stretch of road to Heuningvlei. Pakhuis literally means warehouse, and at first it all looks like oversized storage of rocky goods. But then we see horses, eagles, Asian dancers, Pinocchio. And just rocks again, mammoth boulders perched precariously. Rocks above us, around us, and beneath us where we have to watch our step.

Roughly 15 kilometres later we reach the edge of a cliff. Down below in a farmer's green field lies a welcome sight: the little white cottages of Krakadouw, our day's destination. Way down below.

"We're almost there, not far now," John says, trying to console us as we wind slowly down the snaky, steep path of loose stones. The others are coping but I, quite frankly, am ready to die. My joints are screaming.

"Only an hour to get there," John adds. An interminable hour.

All I can hear is Michelle's voice: "We've had only one rescue mission so far. A group of ladies were training to hike Mount Kilimanjaro and got caught between two rivers. We had to send in a helicopter to get them."

We, I, make it at last. Without a helicopter.

A village of stories

It's much cooler the next day, with rain spitting. Rafe and Karin take off from the Krakadouw cottages with guide Barend Ockhuis, to climb up and over Krakadouw Nek (1745 m) and descend to Heuningvlei. I catch a lift with the baggage transfer, the old bakkie that is Heuningvlei's only vehicle, driven by the amiable David Engelbrecht. Nearly two hours later, through the Biedouw Valley, past plantations of feathery green rooibos, ringed by jagged mountains, I reach the village.

Once a farm belonging to the Ockhuis family, Heuningvlei is now home to 28 families. Mostly subsistence farmers growing rooibos, sugar beans and potatoes. Children play in the gravel road; women do their washing in colourful buckets outside; the ubiquitous donkeys find a patch of grass for themselves.

At the top of the village, in a cottage set over glacial rock, lives Tannie Noss, Maria Solomon, whose Nossie's Place is one of the three CHR accommodations in town. "People like to come here," Tannie says, settling down at the small kitchen table to share a cup ▶