

LIGHTEN THE LOAD AND LET LOCAL GUIDES COLOUR YOUR SLACKPACKING TRAILS THROUGH THE CEDERBERG WITH A FEW FLAMBOYANT TALES

By Richard Holmes

CUT YOURSELF SOME SLACK

STARTING OUT

NEW TO THE MOUNTAINS? NOT SURE IF YOU COULD HANDLE LIFE ON THE TRAIL? **MICHELLE TRUTER** FROM CEDARBERG AFRICA SUGGESTS YOU TAKE IT EASY WITH THE KLEIN KRAKADOUW TRAIL.



'A donkey-cart ride on the first day means you don't have to hike all the way; you can hop on and off the cart as you go. Hikers overnight in Heuningvlei, where they tuck in to home-cooked meals and meet the locals. You can add an extra day to spend more time meandering in and around the village. On the final day, the trail takes you from Heuningvlei to Boskloof, which is mostly an easy downhill walk. For those who are just starting out, I would recommend the Klein Krakadouw Trail to get a feeling for what it is to hike in these mountains.'

I have been hiking for as long as I can remember, at first exploring the trails of the Du Toits Kloof Mountains outside Cape Town, and later taking on the high peaks of the Cederberg to the north. Here, time and weathered sandstone have shaped an unforgettable wilderness. It is a wild and inhospitable place; unwelcoming unless you know the way, but still one with magic aplenty if you take the time to seek it out. Leopards hide among the high peaks, magical fynbos springs to life after winter rains, and cosy huts sit perched above far-flung valleys. This is a place far away from the madding crowd.

The downside? You often need to pack half your cupboard and the kitchen sink into a rucksack, and cart it over hill and dale to get there. Sure, it's nice to be out and about and enjoying Mother Nature, but I always find myself thinking: Do I really have to carry my own body weight in kit? Not when hiking these valleys with Cederberg Heritage Route, you don't.

This non-profit organisation has stitched together a collection of walking trails that criss-cross the backcountry of the Cederberg. Local guides accompany hikers each day, leading the way and sharing the rich social history of the region, as well as pointing out the Cederberg's remarkable San rock art.

Win!

A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC BAG VALUED AT R1 899

DETAILS ON p56



ADVENTURE



Heuningvlei Moravian mission station



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Evenings are spent in cosy local guest houses in the Moravian missionary villages cast away in mountain valleys; places with magical names such as Heuningvlei, Eselbank and Brugkraal.

The following day, you hit the trail from one village to the next, admiring the otherworldly rock formations and scanning the skies for the Verreaux's eagles that call the cliffs home. Best of all, as you walk, your luggage is portaged from one village to the next. On your back you carry a light daypack, with just your packed lunch, water, a camera and a few basics. Rain gear and warm clothing are essential in winter, while summer calls for plenty of sunscreen, along with a good hat.

This form of hiking – dubbed 'slackpacking' – has become commonplace overseas, and in South Africa you'll find excellent slackpacking trails offering unmatched scenery, from the Wild Coast to the Garden Route. The Cederberg Heritage Route first opened in 2008, and today six trails are on offer.



WHEN TO GO

The winter months are wet and cold in the Cederberg, so you'll need decent rainwear and a good sense of humour. Likewise, the summers are scorching. Spring and autumn are best, with the rivers flowing and fynbos in bloom.

WHAT TO TAKE

Hikers' overnight accommodation and meals are included in the cost, so you'll only need a good pair of walking shoes, clothes, rain jacket, sun hat and a light rucksack to carry water, lunch and personal items.

COST

From R2 250 pp per trail until 28 February 2016, and from R2 650 between March 2016 and February 2017. The cost includes meals, accommodation, trail permits and the service of a guide.

And that's a large part of the appeal of the Cederberg Heritage Route: a range of lengths and difficulty levels give options for experienced hikers and those who are new to this enigmatic mountain range.

The Klein Krakadouw Trail is ideal for a taste of what's on offer, with two nights out on the trail and an itinerary that includes a two-hour journey on a traditional local donkey cart. The roads are rough and the suspension is rustic, so be prepared for a bumpy ride!

The longer Groot Krakadouw Trail takes you through the heart of the Cederberg Wilderness Area, while the Wupperthal Trail will lead you through the wild thicket to a historic Moravian missionary village. If you have the stamina and the will, you can extend the trail by one day to scale the impressive Krakadouw Peak: at 1 744m, its imposing summit is only just below Joburg's altitude.

Perhaps the most interesting walk is the four-night Gabriël Trail, leading you over some of the area's most dramatic mountain scenery and into the local villages. A popular quirk of this trail is that local pack donkeys carry your bags and walk alongside you for the final two days; a true taste of authentic mountain meandering.

And that's precisely the magical charm of the Cederberg Heritage Route. While it is easy enough to don your backpack and stride off into the mountains, these guided tours offer tales with the trails.

The area's dramatic mountain scenery may amaze, but the guides will amuse and entertain. Village hosts will welcome you like they would long-lost friends, and although you may leave with aching feet, you will have a headful of memories to soothe them. Whether you are new to hiking, or just looking for an easy way to discover the Cederberg wilderness, now is the time to lace up your boots and soak up some heritage. 📷