



Rock stars of the Karoo

The Donkey Trail from the Little to the Great Karoo is a heritage adventure with its roots in conservation and community development. Marion Whitehead met some of its stars.

Marmite du Toit was proving elusive.



Marmite's proved a natural at reclaiming the donkey heritage

We'd already had a picnic lunch on the mountain and she had yet to put in an appearance. Not that she's shy. The young star of the Donkey Trail is the darling of hikers who trek over the Swartberg Mountains with these patient asses along a path forgotten for the past 50 years.

We heard all about Marmite at a briefing on our first night at Living Waters farm, the starting point 15 kilometres outside Calitzdorp. She's one of 13 beasts of burden that transport hikers' kit to the campsite just over the crest where they spend the second night in tents amid the fynbos in the Swartberg Nature Reserve, a World Heritage Site.

'The donkeys carry no more than 20 kilograms,' hike manager Erika Calitz told us. 'You'll each be allowed five kilograms in half a pannier for your overnight kit.'

Since food, sleeping bags with pillows, inner sheets, mattresses and stretchers were supplied, we needed only warm clothes and a few toiletries. Our raincoats, spare water, swimming costumes and cameras would go in

our daypacks, the only things we needed to carry on this new slackpacking trail in the Little Karoo.

Donkeys are capable of carrying half their own weight, so 100 kilograms would be acceptable, Erika said. 'But we don't do that to our donkeys.' Most are rescue cases and endured years of abuse before arriving at the farm.

But not Marmite. She was born on the farm and seemed destined for better things. She's proved a natural at reclaiming the donkey heritage associated with Gamkaskloof, known as Die Hel. For more than 130 years, a community of subsistence farmers or Klowers lived in this valley hidden in the folds of the Swartberg, isolated from the rest of the world but for five footpaths which they used to reach the nearest towns, Calitzdorp and Prince Albert.

It was the Klowers' donkeys that made this life possible: these old-style 4x4s were inspanned to plough the fields, thresh and grind the wheat and then carried dried fruit and beans to town to trade for cloth, sugar, tools and the main luxury item: coffee. >

The campsite on top of the Swartberg is a low-impact arrangement and tents are taken down after use.



The paths north and south along the banks of the Gamka River were destroyed by the construction of the Gamkapoort Dam in 1962. The steepest, Die Leer, is on private property and not open to the public. The path over Wyenek to Calitzdorp was not the shortest, but is the only one still in use and, at 1540 metres, is almost as high as the top of Swartberg Pass further east.

The Wyenek trail had become overgrown through disuse and was scouted by Hans Calitz, owner of Living Waters who guides many of the hikes himself, together with Tony Marshall, former head of Swartberg Nature Reserve, using old aerial photographs and a GPS. The trail then had to be cleared. 'I think we've got it 97 per cent accurate,' said Hans.

Goldie the pack donkey knows the path up Wyenek so well she strides confidently ahead of her handlers. The trail provides employment to seven youngsters from local farms.

The Donkey Trail is a joint venture between CapeNature and the Calitzes, who run it as a community development project and have trained young guides and donkey handlers from farms in the area.

Zigzag into the sky

In the morning, we'd breakfasted early in time for a 07h30 start and were introduced to our pack donkeys for the day. A loaded Goldie was too busy pinching Buddy's ration of mealies on the lawn outside the house to take any notice of us.

But where was Marmite, cutest donkey in the pack and the first to be adopted by the Du Toit family from Cape Town? 'She went up yesterday to take supplies to the camp,' Erika said. 'You'll meet her on her way down today.'

The boots of eight hikers, three guides and two donkey handlers crunched on the gravel track as we set our sights on Wyenek, where the path crossed over the Swartberg 1100 metres above us. Eight hooves followed two soft, furry noses that lost

no opportunity to grab a mouthful of green grass when we stopped for a breather at the last farm fence.

'Is your foreskin wet yet?' asked one of the German tourists in the group, stumbling a little on his English and getting another part of his anatomy mixed up with the forehead.

'If you can make it up Zigzag Hill, you can manage the hike,' Hans pointed where the path angled up a steep section. The fit 20-somethings galloped ahead, eager for the challenge, but I found the donkeys' steady pace a comfortable one and elected to walk with them.

We caught up with the others at the top of the hill and took a snack break. As soon as my packet of peanuts and raisins rustled, Buddy became my best friend, nuzzling me and acting like he'd never known a harsh word in his life.

We were in the heart of a biodiversity hotspot where three biomes meet: mountain fynbos, succulent Karoo and sub-tropical thicket. Wyenek, our objective for the day, was still a good distance away across the folds of the steep southern foothills of the Swartberg.

The spiky pink and white flowers of sugar bushes contrasted with the silky maroon centres of Protea lorifolia



Below us was the valley where the farm lay like a warm Karoo secret next to the Nels River, hidden from Route 62 by the Red Stone Hills. Beyond them, Calitzdorp peeped out between its green vineyards and the Gamka Mountains marched from east to west.

‘There’s an orange-breasted sunbird,’ Hans pointed.

‘Like my ex-girlfriend,’ quipped the German.

The path traversed steadily eastwards, alternating steep sections with easier gradients that gave us time to smell the steenbok buchu and admire the long stems of the besembos, a res-tio traditionally used to make brooms. The spiky pink and white flowers of sugar bushes contrasted with the silky maroon centres of *Protea lorifolia*.

We crossed a ravine where there were two pools of crisp, clear mountain water for the brave to lose their breath in. At the next stream, the donkeys went ahead while we tucked into our lunch boxes packed with tasty sandwiches, boiled eggs and energy-boosting goodies.

A donkey’s pace

The biggest challenge of the day lay ahead of us: the trek up Wyenek where the land rapidly rises 400 metres. The uber-fit 20-somethings were intent on racing each other to the



These old-style 4x4s were inspanned to plough the fields, thresh and grind the wheat and then carried dried fruit and beans to town

top, so Hans sent them ahead with Johnifer Nel, one of the young guides whose nickname is Speedy.

I continued at donkey pace, pausing to catch my breath and study the tortured rocks of the Swartberg. Enormous pressures as the earth’s plates grated against each other some 250-million years ago had caused them to buckle and fold like cardboard. Layers of rocks that had been horizontal were upended, sticking four kilometres into the air. Time has eroded them down to their present height, with the tallest being Seweweekspoort peak at 2325 metres, the highest spot in the Western Cape.

Wyenek is a saddle at the top of a shallow valley that makes it a natural choice for a winding path. Our advance party had long since disappeared and was already enjoying a swim and shower under a small waterfall at camp as I puffed away, scanning the nek hopefully for a glimpse of the trail’s celebrity donkey. At 15h10 Marmite made her appearance, silhouetted

against the sky at the top of Wyenek. I quickened my pace, eager to meet the young star of the rock.

At 15h30 I got to stroke her soft, furry, white nose. She really was adorable: large, luminous eyes, framed by long, silky lashes that matched her dark coat. Not yet four

Hikers’ verdict

‘I’d rate the first day seven out of 10 for difficulty and the second day about a five.’
Super-fit Thomas Bothert, London.

‘The food was very good and that’s important to keep the spirit up on a hike.’
Kai Layer, Stuttgart.

‘To have the opportunity to be on a mountain trail and have it all to yourself is amazing. It doesn’t happen in Europe.’
Steffi Layer, Stellenbosch.

‘It was the most luxurious hike of my life.’
Morné Vrey, Stellenbosch.





'It was good to have the donkeys carry our stuff. They were very healthy and in good condition.'

Anya Klapper, Ravensburg, Germany.

years old, she graciously posed for pictures, presenting first her right and then left profile.

She flicked her right ear to indicate the photo session was over and hurried on, picking her way daintily between the stones, carrying her load with ease. Home beckoned – or perhaps she'd picked up the scent of one of the leopards that roam these mountains. Her retinue of handlers and Saartjie, her sidekick ass, followed.

A magical world

The view from the top of Wyenek was worth the sweat. Beyond the

Approaching Gamkaskloof (Die Hel) from the south, you get a different view of the famous valley to the one normally seen from the hairpin bends on the far right.

Recovery plan

- Treat your tired muscles to a massage at The Salon @ Die Handelshuis in Calitzdorp (tel 078-585-7699).
- Visit the Calitzdorp Spa and soak in the hot mineral springs. Residents only (day-visitor facilities were washed away in the last flood). Tel 044-213-3371.

rocky barrier of the Gamkaberg, the Outeniqua Mountains smudged the horizon mauve in the south. To the north lay the Great Karoo: the Swartberg plateaued out before dipping sharply into Gamkaskloof, our destination. Beyond that were more mountains, cleft by a river.

The campsite was hidden next to a series of pools in a stream and the large, green tents blended into the rocky hillside. No fires are allowed in this sensitive environment, so we gathered at a table in the mess gazebo for a gas-cooked dinner of pasta, home-made pesto sauce and parmesan cheese, followed by canned fruit and custard. I watched the full moon cast its magic spell over the mountains, then took a hot-water bottle and snuggled into my sleeping bag.

In the morning, a cup of hot chocolate was delivered to my tent. Breakfast was accompanied by sun-

rise, transforming big slabs of cold grey rock into golden buttresses as the Great Karoo dusted itself off for a new day.

It was time to say farewell to the donkeys as they would be returning to the farm with our dirty linen and camp rubbish while we walked on into Gamkaskloof. We turned out our pockets for carrots and other treats to thank them for their gentle-natured labour.

It wasn't downhill all the way into Die Hel, where the Klowers had led a subsistence life from the 1830s until the road was bulldozed in 1962 to link them to the Swartberg Pass in the east. The small community crumbled as their children made for the bright lights of Oudtshoorn and old age and drought took their toll. The last farmer sold to CapeNature in 1991 and restoration of the old farm cottages started in 2000.

The trail at a glance

Day 1: Arrive at Living Waters farm 15 km outside Calitzdorp in time for a briefing and a hearty, farm-style dinner with local wines before an early night in your solar-powered cottage.

Day 2: Breakfast before a 07h30 start on the 14 km trek 1 100m up the mountain. Swim in mountain pools just before the lunch stop, then continue over Wyenek before descending to the campsite. A flask of hot water, eco-friendly soap, facecloth and towel is provided in case you don't feel like showering under a small waterfall or swimming in the river. There's an eco-loo with a view.

Day 3: A more leisurely, 09h00 start before walking 6 km to where the path joins Elandspad into Gamkaskloof. Choose whether you want to hike or drive down the famous hairpin bends to the cottage where you braai and overnight.

Day 4: After an early visit to Die Hel Kiosk, take a scenic drive out of the valley, down the Swartberg Pass and back to the farm by lunch time to collect your vehicle.

NB: You need to be reasonably fit and older than 10 years. There are no escape routes and cellphone reception is patchy.



From our vantage point, we could see all the way from the western end of the valley, 20 kilometres to the east where the zigzag Elandspad enters it. A ribbon of green followed the water trickling from between the toes of the mountain foothills. There was no sign of the old farmlands as most of Gamkaskloof is now part of the Swartberg Nature Reserve.

The youngsters had gone ahead and jogged down Elandspad to Piet and Annatjie Joubert's little kiosk in the middle of the valley, where they farm with tourists nowadays. I was happy to catch a ride with the mini-bus bringing in fresh supplies for us and relished a hot shower at the Schoolteacher's House after emptying my lunchbox.

Over the braai fire that evening, we ragged the guys who'd raced each other to the top of Wyenek. 'You won. I give you my lamb chop,' Thomas Bothert offered Speedy, the victor, who'd earned his nickname yet again.

I thought of the donkeys, whose pace was slow and steady, and decided that Marmite, Buddy, Goldie and Saartjie were the true stars of the trail. ■



footnotes

Getting there

Calitzdorp is on Route 62 between Ladismith and Oudtshoorn. From the town's main road, follow the sign to Groenfontein at Calitz Street. It's 15 km to Living Waters farm, mostly on a narrow gravel road.

Costs and contacts

The Donkey Trail costs R2 750 a person and includes all meals, three nights accommodation, guides, conservation fees and transport back to the starting point. Tel 083-628-9394, e-mail info@donkeytrail.com, web www.donkeytrail.co.za.

Places to stay

\$ Living Waters farm has two solar-powered cottages with cosy fireplaces. The largest has three bedrooms and the other sleeps two in one large room with en suite shower bathroom. DB&B is R450 a person sharing. Outrides on the farm horses are R100 an hour. Contact the Donkey Trail (see above).

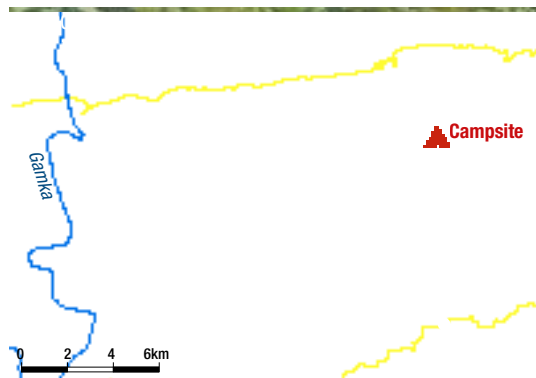
\$ to \$\$ Gamkaskloof/Die Hel has 10 camping sites with shared ablutions (cold-water showers only) and cost R140 to R160 a site (max six people). The eight restored historic houses sleep up to eight people and cost between R150 and R190 a person a night sharing. CapeNature central reservation office tel 021-659-3500, e-mail bookings@capenature.co.za, web www.capenature.co.za.

\$ to \$\$ Calitzdorp Spa's 20 modern poolside chalets sleep four (two in the living area) and have shower bathrooms. They cost from R371 to R829 a night (sleep four), depending on season and proximity to the pools. Beside the tennis and squash courts, there's a shady, well-grassed camp ground. Sites cost from R147 (max six people). Tel 044-213-3371, e-mail info@calitzdorp-spa.co.za, www.calitzdorp-spa.co.za.

Where to eat

Die Dorphuis in Van Riebeeck Street, Calitzdorp, has a shady veranda where you can scoff home bakes or a reasonably priced meal. Tel 044-213-3453.

Die Handelshuis at the end of Van Riebeeck Street is a coffee shop with a snooker table. Tel 044-213-3172.



'The view from the top of Wyenek was worth the sweat.'

Marion Whitehead

What to do in the area

- Go wine tasting in the country's port wine capital at Boplaas, Die Krans and Calitzdorp Cellars.
- Scenic drives include the Swartberg and Huisrivier Passes and Seweweekspoort.
- Calitzdorp on foot is a self-guided walking tour of the Karoo architecture of the village. Pick up a brochure at the museum in Van Riebeeck Street.
- Amalienstein is a historic mission station off the R62 between Ladismith and Calitzdorp. The 150-year-old Lutheran church and bell is a photographer's delight.
- Gamkaberg Nature Reserve has a 4x4 route, hiking trails, a rustic bush camp and is a good place for bird-watching. Tel 044-213-3367.

Our wheels

The Land Rover Defender 110 is a great confidence booster when heading out on unknown back roads. It's at its best off-road, but with its six-speed transmission, radio/CD player and air-conditioning, it cruises the highways with ease. Available from R331 500. Web www.landrover.co.za. ■

