



hoofing it TO HELL

Retracing the route that once formed the only link between South Africa's most isolated community and the outside world, **Jeremy Jowell** follows the newly resurrected Donkey Trail and finds himself in a valley whose astonishing beauty is at odds with its diabolical name.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEREMY JOWELL

Sweat streams down my neck and, gasping for breath, I slog up the steep slopes of Wyenek. This ascent in the Swartberg mountain range is a serious assault on my muscles and, when I spot an agama lizard sunning itself on a rock, I use it as a good excuse to stop for a breather and take some photographs. Finally I stumble to the summit and start to relax as the route levels off to meander gently through fynbos and proteas to the overnight camp.

I'm following the 26-kilometre Donkey Trail. Starting from Living Waters Mountain Estate near Calitzdorp and ending in the historic Gamkaskloof valley, this two-day heritage hike was launched in 2008 by the owners of the farm, Erica and Hans Calitz, in conjunction with CapeNature, the provincial conservation authority in South Africa's Western Cape.

In its heyday in the first half of the 20th century, the isolated valley of Gamkaskloof, known evocatively as 'Die Hel' (The Hell), was home to 220 people. There were no roads back then and the locals relied on donkeys to carry their produce over the Swartberg to sell at markets in nearby towns like Calitzdorp and Prince Albert. Their children also faced a strenuous weekly walk to school, doing the 50-kilometre round trip from valley to town and back to their homes for the weekend. After the road was opened in August 1962, access to the area was easier and Gamkaskloof's inhabitants left for the cities. Today, just one descendant of the original residents still lives in the valley.

'We discovered that our farm used to be the halfway house for the travellers and their trains of 60 donkeys,' said Hans, who is descended from the family after whom Calitzdorp was named. 'In order to revitalise this culturally historic route, we teamed



up with CapeNature to reopen the path as a guided tour for hikers. The local people also benefit as the trail provides employment for members of the isolated farming community that lives in Groen-fontein valley, home to Living Waters. Part of the income goes to support its school.'

Community members have been trained as guides and donkey handlers. The donkeys come from a rehabilitation centre in nearby Oudtshoorn, where they'd been rescued from abuse or ill-treatment. 'When they first arrived they were frightened of people and ran away into the bushes. But we've regained their trust and now they are friendly and tame.'

The donkeys are not used to carry the hikers; instead they transport clothing and equipment. Guests are each allocated a pannier into which they pack toiletries and clothes for the night spent on the mountain. Binoculars, cameras, water ►



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and jerseys are carried in their day packs. While the terrain is tough and a level of fitness is required, most people are able to complete the trail. The oldest successful hiker is a 78-year-old woman; the youngest an 11-year-old girl.

The Donkey Trail passes through the Swartberg Nature Reserve, a proclaimed World Heritage Site, and follows the original route taken by Die Hel's early residents. Animals that inhabit this area include baboons, grey rhebok, grysbok, klipspringer, mongooses, porcupines, kudu, caracals, aardwolves and jackals, and CapeNature has plans to release Cape mountain zebras. Leopards are present in the mountains, although they are seldom seen. There are also 214 species of birds.



The night prior to the hike is spent at the Calitz's farm, and I drift off to sleep accompanied by the steady pouring of rain outside, and hope that it won't be too wet in the morning. But the new day dawns calm and clear, and the rain clouds have vanished, leaving the Swartberg silhouetted against a deep blue sky. Dewdrops glisten on the green foliage and birds begin to chirp. After breakfast we load our packed panniers onto two donkeys,

Goldie and Buddy. The sun rises as we set off along the rocky trail, bathing the distant mountains in soft shades of golden light.

'Marius and Johnifer are our donkey handlers, but Franklin is carrying both the first aid kit and our lunch packs, so we really need to look after him,' jokes Hans. Our equine porters have gone on ahead but the smell of fresh donkey dung along the track tells me we're not far behind.

It's just gone 07h30 but it's already hot and humid and my clothes are drenched in perspiration as I crunch along the Swartberg slopes. Hans stops and points out the site of Bushman rock paintings. 'Unfortunately we won't get to see them; there's a beehive next to the rocks and last week I was stung 10 times. It's best to avoid that area!' he tells us.

A grey rhebok spots us and bounds away over the rocks. After reaching a safe distance, it turns to watch us warily, standing silhouetted against the sky. Calitz tells us that only 200 or so people have crossed this mountain range before us. 'Since the Donkey Trail opened in September 2008, 100 hikers have completed the walk; before that, about 100 inhabitants from Gamkaskloof used to traipse back and forth regularly along this tiring path transporting their produce.'

I understand their trials as I struggle slowly along the winding stretch aptly named Zigzag and the muscles in my legs begin to burn. 'It's very hot today,' Calitz says, 'but it'll get cooler once we reach the next plateau as there's usually a breeze there.' Others in the group are also taking strain, so we stop often to admire the proteas and panoramic views to the distant Outeniqua and Langeberg mountains.

I drop back for a while to walk with the donkeys and get chatting to 19-year-old Johnifer Nel. 'I really enjoy my job as a donkey handler,' he tells me, scratching Buddy's ear affectionately. 'It's exciting because I love working with the animals and hiking up these beautiful mountains. When I give the donkeys apples they lick my hand. I hope to be with them for a long time.'

Zigzag eventually levels out and we stroll along comfortably, enjoying a gentle breeze that takes the edge off the sweltering heat. The first river is just 30 minutes away and we're making good time so we will stop there for a swim. We really need it.

The dip is chilly and refreshing, and we resume our hike. Here, the path meanders gently and I enjoy the easy walk before the arduous climb up Wyenek. One ultra-fit member of our party picks up the pace and forges ahead up the mountain. The rest of us are strung out, alone with our thoughts, as we plod along the boulder-strewn valley. I plug in my iPod, hoping that some hyped-up Talking Heads tunes will spur me on to the top.

We reach the overnight camp shortly after lunchtime. Situated beneath towering boulders and beside a gurgling stream, it lies in an idyllic wilderness setting. The camp has been set up by the advance guides and comprises four spacious two-man tents, fully equipped with stretcher beds, mattresses, bedding, hot-water bottles and towels. Ablution facilities are basic.

A blissful afternoon is spent lying in the sun and swimming in a wide rock pool. As the setting sun colours the landscape a soft shade of gold, I hike up a rocky outcrop for a panoramic view over the green valley that lies silent and tranquil in this isolated part of Africa.

After a delicious pasta dinner and chocolate for dessert, I stay outside for a while, watching the night sky. Here, the heavens are crystal clear and I am awed by the shooting stars and billion pinpricks of silvery light.

The next morning I wake before sunrise and walk down to the stream where an African river frog poses in the bubbles for

infotravel

Getting there Calitzdorp lies some 300 kilometres east of Cape Town and can be reached on the R62 via Barrydale. In Calitzdorp, turn into Calitz Street at the Groenfontein sign and follow the dirt road for 15 kilometres to reach the Living Waters farm.

Who to contact Hiking the Donkey Trail will set you back R2 500 (about US\$330) per person, which includes all meals, bedding, hike costs and transport back to the farm from Gamkaskloof. Contact Erika Calitz at Living Waters Mountain Estate: tel. +27 (0)83 628 9394, e-mail info@donkeytrail.com or go to www.donkeytrail.com



my camera. I click away, and also experiment with slow shutter speeds to blur the moving water. Climbing the rocks, I sit and listen to the sounds of nature – the gurgling of the stream, the wind blowing and the soft chirping of birds. Then my attention is caught by a movement and I look down to see Johnifer clambering carefully over the rocks to bring me a cappuccino.

After breakfast we set off and immediately tackle a short sharp ascent. The track flattens and we begin the final stretch to Gamkaskloof. 'There are good views to enjoy, but there are also lots of loose stones around and it's easy to sprain your ankle, so watch your step,' Hans warns us.

Our final descent is through a field of aloes and then a long trek down the rocky path into the wild beauty of Gamkaskloof. A sense of calm washes over our group of happy hikers and, as we near our destination, I notice the picture on the T-shirt of the person walking ahead of me. It depicts a hiker silhouetted against a sunset with a caption that reads 'Refresh your soul'. I smile to myself – it's a fitting description of this interesting trail. ■

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