

# WINTER BLUES ANTIDOTE

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JEREMY JOWELL

When winter comes along, most South Africans haul out extra blankets and stock up on firewood, hunkering down for the cold months ahead. All thoughts of local travel are put on the back burner as stormy seas and icy temperatures send most of us shivering indoors, the remote for the television close at hand.

But there's no excuse to hibernate at home with hot soup and DVD's. Crashing waves are dramatic to watch and the crisp mountain air is ideal for hiking. Whether you're a romantic, an adventurer, a nature lover or you just enjoy spending time with the family, there's a wealth of winter weekend getaways to enjoy in our beautiful country. Here are four to choose from.



## HIKE THE DONKEY

South Africa is blessed with hundreds of great hiking trails, ranging from short ambles to strenuous multi-day treks, and everything in between. The Donkey Trail is a 26-kilometre two-day hike, starting from Living Waters Farm near Calitzdorp and finishing in the historic valley of Gamkaskloof. The trail traverses the Swartberg Nature Reserve, following an old route over the mountains used by the inhabitants living in the isolated settlement many years ago.

In its golden days, Gamkaskloof, also known as 'Die Hel', was home to 220 people. There were no roads back then and the locals used donkeys to transport their produce over the mountain to nearby markets in Calitzdorp and Prince Albert. After the road was opened in August 1962, access to the valley was much easier and the residents began leaving Gamkaskloof permanently.

The Donkey Trail was launched in 2008 by owners of the farm, Erica and Hans Calitz, in conjunction with Cape Nature Conservation. Members of the local community have been trained as guides and donkey handlers. Hikers pack their clothing and toiletries into panniers that are transported by the donkeys to the overnight hut and down to Gamkaskloof. The trail is steep on the first day but most reasonably fit people should be able to complete it comfortably.

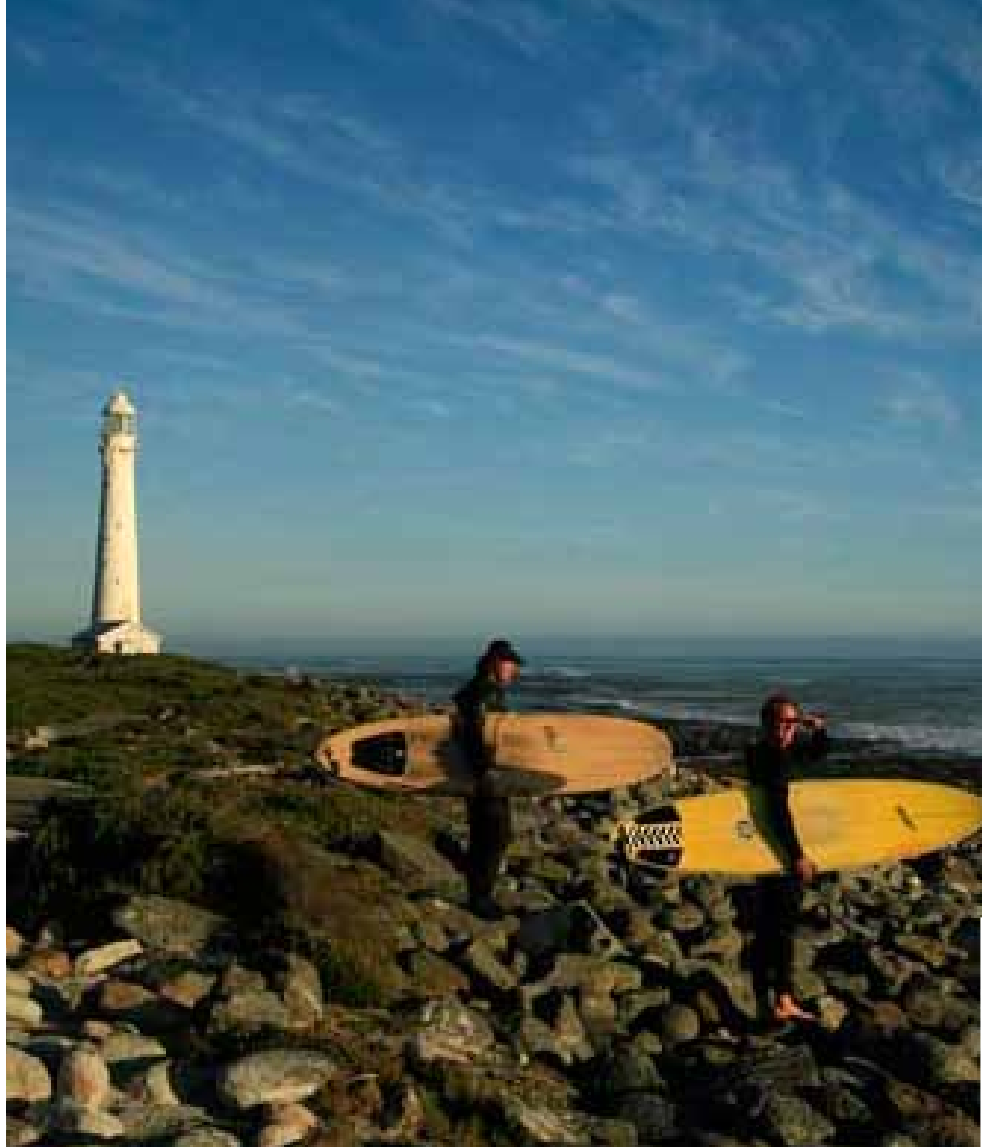
The sun rises as we set off with our donkeys, Goldie and Buddy. When we reach the winding stretch called 'Zig Zag', I'm sweating and out of breath. Fortunately we stop often to admire the proteas and panoramic views to the distant Outeniqua mountains.

Zig Zag levels out and we come to a stream where we enjoy a much-needed swim. Then comes the toughest part of the hike, a slog up the steep boulder-strewn valley of Wyenek. One super-fit member of our group speeds off ahead. The rest of us plod on individually, walking at our own pace.

Once over the top, it's an easy stroll through the fynbos to the wilderness camp, idyllically situated close to a large rock pool. The overnight camp consists of four spacious two-man tents, equipped with stretcher beds, mattresses, bedding, hot-water bottles and towels. We've made good time and enjoy a lazy afternoon swimming and exploring the rocky surroundings.

After a good night's sleep we gently meander down the mountain before the final stretch into the remote beauty of historic Gamkaskloof.

**CONTACT:** ☎ 083 628 9394  
[www.donkeytrail.com](http://www.donkeytrail.com)  
[info@donkeytrail.com](mailto:info@donkeytrail.com)



## LAZING ON LONG BEACH

For a romantic weekend with your loved one, there's no better place than The Last Word Long Beach. This five-star boutique hotel in the picturesque village of Kommetjie looks out to a long sandy beach with the mountain backdrop of Hout Bay and Chapmans Peak. From central Cape Town it's a scenic drive past the white sands of Noordhoek. We're lucky to be here on a gorgeous winter day without a cloud in the sky or a breath of wind. After checking in, I stand on the balcony watching couples walk their dogs and surfers enjoying an offshore break at this premier surfing spot.

A member of Mantis Preferred Boutique Hotels, The Last Word Long Beach has six luxurious en-suite rooms, with stylish interiors, private patios and sea views. Once you settle into your love nest you probably won't want to leave. But the beauty of the outdoors beckons and we take a stroll along the coast towards Slangkop Lighthouse. There are many activities to enjoy in the area - township tours, horse riding, baboon walks, bird watching and scenic drives. Noordhoek Farm Stall is worth visiting for their food barn,

curio shops, galleries and kids' playground. After a great seafood dinner at a restaurant in Noordhoek, we return to find our candlelit room has been transformed into an intimate honeymoon suite. Rose petals cover the duvet, bathrobes and slippers are laid out and champagne is on ice at the foot of the bed. There are also small crème brûlées as our turn-down treat.

We wake the next day to the sound of crashing waves. The weather has changed and the mountains are shrouded in cloud. A wild wind whips up the ocean and the kite surfers are in their element. Dressing warmly, we head out to brave the weather and take a walk down the beach. Seaweed, jellyfish and bluebottles are strewn along the sand and seagulls and cormorants fly up as we pass. But it's too cold, so we return to our suite and snuggle under the duvet. After all, that's what one is supposed to do on romantic weekends.

**CONTACT:** ☎ 021 783 4183  
[www.thelastword.co.za](http://www.thelastword.co.za)  
[info@thelongbeach.com](mailto:info@thelongbeach.com)



### SIGHTS OF SAMARA

For a weekend of wildlife, treat yourself to a safari at Samara Private Game Reserve. Situated close to Graaff-Reinet on the Eastern Cape's Camdeboo Plains, this is one of the largest private reserves in South Africa. The accommodation at the three lodges is five-star and has been awarded several international accolades.

In 1998, the owners bought over 11 farms and stocked the land with wildlife, concentrating on endangered species like the cheetah and Cape mountain zebra.

Cheetahs were reintroduced to the area after an absence of 125 years. The star has been Sibella who produced 18 cubs that were relocated to other reserves. Some of the cheetahs have radio collars and a highlight of a stay is tracking these cats on foot.

Activities at Samara include game drives, guided bush walks and visits to fossil sites and Bushman paintings. Animals often sighted include white rhino, buffalo, cheetah, giraffe, zebra, kudu, gemsbok, black wildebeest and red hartebeest.

We arrive at the reserve after a three-hour drive from Port Elizabeth and are transported by 4x4 to the Mountain Retreat. This remote homestead offers exclusive use for small groups, making it the ideal private getaway.

There are five luxury en-suite rooms, a dining area and a lounge with fireplace. The retreat has no electricity, but candles and oil lanterns

just add to the air of romance.

It's freezing when we wake before dawn and head out in a thick mist on a game drive. Baboons bark at us when we stop to photograph a spider web glistening with dew. Loud beeps on the radio transmitter indicate that Mozart the cheetah is nearby. Our guide stops the vehicle and after a safety talk, we set out on foot over the stony ground. We follow the beeps for a while but unfortunately Mozart's on the move and we can't seem to catch up with him.

We see several species of wildlife, but the highlight is our giraffe encounter. Crouching low to the ground, we walk from one bush to another, getting to 50 metres from 12 giraffes grazing on pomegranate trees. 'Watching animals on foot is far better than from a vehicle. It really feels like we are part of the wildlife,' whispers someone behind me.

**CONTACT:** ☎ 021 794 6561  
[www.thelastword.co.za](http://www.thelastword.co.za)  
[info@thelastword.co.za](mailto:info@thelastword.co.za)







## DE HOOP DELIGHTS

If you want a special place to take the family, De Hoop Nature Reserve should be on top of your list. This World Heritage Site is a three-hour drive from Cape Town and offers a wide range of accommodation, from camping and caravan sites to self-catering chalets and five-star lodges.

Activities are varied and include hiking, mountain biking, 4x4 routes, birding and exploring rock pools and beaches along the coast. The popular Whale Trail runs through De Hoop and in the winter months the reserve offers some of the best whale-watching opportunities in the world.

Wildlife is also plentiful and animals often sighted include bontebok, zebra, eland, ostrich, baboon, yellow mongoose and kudu. De Hoop is famous for its birdlife and more than 260 species have been recorded. It's a cold wintry day when we enter the Overberg, passing green wheat fields and grazing sheep. We arrive at De Hoop and settle into Koppie Alleen, our self-catering home for the weekend.

With its remote location and close proximity to the dunes and beach, Koppie Alleen is a great weekend getaway for a family or small group of friends. The fisherman-style thatch cottage is serviced daily and contains four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a well-equipped kitchen, outdoor braai and a lounge with fireplace. There is no electricity. Candles and oil lamps are used at night.

It's cold and misty the next morning so we dress warmly and walk to the beach. After a short hike on the dunes, we explore the inter-tidal rock pools, home to marine life like mussels, starfish, periwinkles, crabs and sea anemones. We're also lucky to spot a large octopus that extends its tentacles to investigate us.

The bird life is plentiful. African black oystercatchers forage for food in the shallows and Cape cormorants soar above, shrieking in protest at my presence. Archaeological excavations along this coastline have discovered shell middens and stone tools that belonged to the Khoisan hunter-gatherers who lived here for thousands of years.

We hike across to a sandy bay where I put on my mask and snorkel and plunge into the frigid water. A wetsuit would go down well right now. For the first few minutes I shiver, then become accustomed to the cold and swim amongst schools of small silver fish and beds of kelp moving in the current. ©

**CONTACT:** ☎ 021 405 4587 or 0861 334 667  
[www.dehoopcollection.co.za](http://www.dehoopcollection.co.za)  
[info@dehoopcollection.co.za](mailto:info@dehoopcollection.co.za)

