

Bewitched by Blue Mountain

Combine walking through wildflowers with the warmth of locals and you have one of the hottest new slackpacking trails in Elgin Valley

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Evan Kortje and Debbie Stegmann enjoy their perch on the Perdeberg Trail, looking over the Palmiet River mouth.



LEFT: Alison Green, one of the masterminds behind the Blue Mountain Trail. ABOVE: Hikers stride out on day one. BELOW: Our first evening at Wildekrans Country House started with a tasting of PaardenKloof and Ecology wines hosted by Mohseen Moosa and Daphne Neethling.

The sky is streaked pink. The air is crisp, the first rays of the sun are lighting up the peaks. After a short orientation from our lead guide, Andreas Groenewald, we shoulder our packs and head up the gentle slope.

We're the first hikers to stride out on the Blue Mountain Trail, a three-day, three-night slackpacking trail along the southern side of the Elgin Valley, and developed by the same team that established the well-known Green Mountain Trail that traverses the northern side of the valley.

And they know how to impress. We spent the night in four-poster beds at Wildekrans Country House, a grand old farmhouse that's home to trail masterminds Alison Green and her husband Barry Gould.

After wandering around the artworks in their lovely rambling garden we sat by the fire as Mohseen Moosa and Daphne Neethling of PaardenKloof Estate in Bot River introduced us to their fine wines. Dinner was a three-course feast accompanied by Elgin wines and rounded off with apple pie. A perfect start to our ramble through the Elgin Valley.

As we continue up through an area recently harvested of pine trees, we reflect that the guiding also is top dollar. Devastating fires swept through the area in January 2016, and the landscape still bears the scars, but Andreas has a positive spin. "It's a wonderful opportunity



to see how the veld is recovering from the fire," he says, as he explains the stages of the regeneration, and points out the pioneer plants – the reeds, grasses and daisies.

The trail swings to the right and the vistas change. We look down over Bot River all the way to the wind turbines on the outskirts of Caledon. The dawn song from birds intensifies, and we catch flashes of colour as Orange-breasted Sunbirds flit alongside us.

As we round a corner the landscape opens, offering a view over the wheat fields to Walker

Bay and the coastal settlements of Hawston and Fisherhaven. Andreas points out Babylonstoren, the mountain separating Bot River from Hemelen-Aarde Valley. On its slopes is PaardenKloof, where grow the grapes for the wines we so enjoyed last night. The geography falls into place, as does the careful choreography that has gone into planning the trail.

Andreas and Alison spent several months reconnoitring the route but Andreas' passion for nature is such that he's as excited as a kid. As is his companion guide, Evan Kortje. Although an

experienced guide, Evan has never walked on this side of the valley so, for him, as for us, it's a voyage of discovery, the chance to traverse land not generally open to the public.

The two men are eagle-eyed and curious, pointing out the tracks of wildcat, caracal, Cape fox, mongoose and baboon, and locating some of the special flora of the area. In the last hour we've been down to ground level a dozen or more times to check out dainty lilac roella, exquisite trumpet-shaped, candy-cane sorrel, delicate silky puffs and spider pincushions. More conspicuous are the red heaths and yellow daisies.

Walking with us are Zela Martin and Julian Kent, a young South African couple busy relocating to Europe, and two local

farmers Debbie Stegmann and Sue Harper. They too are caught up in the interpretative journey, the chance to glean a little knowledge from the fundis.

After skirting the boundary fence of Houwteq, a quasi-government facility that apparently tested rocket technology for a while, we follow a jeep track down into the Haasvlakte, a CapeNature property, startling four grey reedback before lunching at a tributary of the Kromrivier.

As we cool our feet in the stream, a raptor cruises overhead. Andreas takes the opportunity to explain the difference between Jackal Buzzards and Verreaux's Eagles. He's a great teacher. In such an ideal classroom it's easy to be overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge

the guides have, but his delivery is clever. Everything is in context, and often thrown out as a question.

The scenery changes as we drop down into farming territory. Our path leads through cool, shaded orchards and along a river before popping us over a ridge. The sight of the magnificent orchards and vineyards of Rockhaven farm, our home for the next two days, is welcome. We're all ready for tea and a dip in the dam.

Liz Wood, our hostess, welcomes us to our farmstay. Our cottage is open-plan and, with lovely wooden shutters and views from all the windows, it's airy and superbly well-equipped. Liz is a wedding specialist and her attention to detail is immediately evident in the decor and furnishings, the quality linen and the added



ABOVE: The viewpoint overlooking the lower Palmiet River and False Bay in the distance. ABOVE RIGHT: Guide Evan Kortje finds a natural rock art piece in which he can see a wolf howling at the moon. RIGHT: This striking nivenia, a Kogelberg special, delays us not ten metres from the trailhead on day two. BELOW: We stop often to learn how to identify the spoor of various animals that inhabit the valley. In this case we note that a leopard has walked the track for several kilometres.



ABOVE: Andreas Groenewald, our lead guide. ABOVE RIGHT: Our tea stop on day one. At every stop the guides whip out flasks and tasty snacks. BELOW LEFT: Debbie Stegmann chills out at the lunch stop on day one. Each day is a good, challenging hike, but with plenty of time to listen to the birds, smell the flowers and picnic in scenic spots. BELOW RIGHT: Our overnight accommodation on nights two and three is at Rockhaven farm.



extras. The sight of an espresso coffee maker and milk frother in the kitchen is divine.

After a lazy afternoon we regroup for a sunset wine tasting at the dam. Shan Pascall takes us through four of the top-quality offerings from Oneiric Wine Farm, her family's estate a little further down Highlands Road. Again, it's the personal touch and the story behind the wines that make the tasting so special. As we talk through the day's discoveries, Shan is intrigued. She decides to join us on the walk.

By the time we return 'home' Liz has dinner ready. We eat out on the veranda looking at the stars and listening to the sounds of the night. Zela and Julian, both vegetarians, are particularly delighted with the imaginative dishes, largely prepared from vegetables, herbs and olive oil and other treats grown on the farm. By the time I've eaten the rich chocolate dessert and made my way to my room, I've fallen in love with Elgin Valley.

I sleep like a log in my king-size bed and wake refreshed. Although we were on our feet for five hours yesterday, the pace was such that it was not taxing.

It's a short transfer to the Perdeberg trailhead, the start of today's walk. The trail, which leads deep into the mountains of the CapeNature's Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve, is a gem. We've barely walked from the gate for ten metres along the jeep track when we

stop for the first time. Andreas has spotted a Kogelberg special, a deep blue nivenia. I laugh. "This trail is intended as a good cardio workout," Alison had insisted in the briefing. But the chance to learn about the reserve's incredible flowers makes it impossible to rush.

After inspecting various other floral beauties we pass through an area of bizarre rock formations. Andreas takes his cue to explain the geology of the area, and we let our imaginations run free to spot baboons, wolves and other animals that the elements have sculpted on this high plateau.





ABOVE: The route takes us through big stands of restios on the circular Perdeberg Trail. ABOVE RIGHT: Walking past the vineyards of Iona Wine Farm. A highlight of the multi-faceted trail is the changing landscape, the orchards, vineyards, farms and wilderness areas that we cross. RIGHT: Natalie Opstaele of Almenkerk takes us through some of their wines on our final evening. BELOW: We enjoy a tasting of Iona wines with Karin Gabriels. BOTTOM: The author revels in the trailhead of the wonderful CapeNature Perdeberg Trail.



Jeep track gives way to single track as we climb to a ridge. The Elgin Valley is still in mist but from the top there are stupendous views of False Bay and the mouth of the Palmiet River. A short detour takes us to the lookout overlooking the dramatic cliffs of the Kogelberg Nature Reserve, the perfect spot for a tea break.

The circular trail winds back along the south side of the ridge, and the views improve as the mist burns off. Andreas calls a break at a stunning viewpoint and we tuck into the tasty salads in our lunch boxes, supplemented by dips, falafels, flapjacks and other goodies that the guides are carrying. At each stop they unpack flasks of tea and coffee and baked treats. "It keeps me fit," laughs Evan when

I comment on the weight of his pack.

The narrow path swings back towards the gate and onto another jeep track that takes us high on the coastal side of the ridge to the vineyards of Iona Wine Farm. After tea and cake in the tasting room, perched on a hill overlooking the valley, Karen Gabriels takes us through their wines in front of a roaring fire. We toast a memorable day in the hills.

But there's more to come. Back at Rockhaven, we have time to freshen up before the next episode in our great adventure, a tasting of Almenkerk wines with co-owner Natalie Opstaele. Again, as we imbibe their elegant wines we feel the privilege of these intimate tastings, and the genuine passion of our hosts. The sun is setting as we sit down to an idyllic meal. So removed are we from busy everyday life that I feel like I've been on holiday for a week.

On the final morning, Andreas and Evan arrive with guidebooks to the flowers, eager to share details of the rare species we've spotted on the Perdeberg Trail. A short bus transfer takes us to the boundary of the area devastated by the previous year's fire.

As we walk through the burnt area into mature fynbos, we're treated to a fascinating lesson in fynbos ecology, which culminates in a treasure hunt to spot young protea, and bulls poking through the earth. "The spring flowers will be incredible," Evan assures us. "You really should come back to see the display."

Our eyes are now trained and we notice details – a little crab spider rests on a white Cape edelweiss, dew glistens on intricate spider webs, heavily-armoured Cape mountain

cockroaches are on the hunt. We discover porcupine dens and recognise familiar bird calls.

As the mist rises to reveal the Perdeberg and the ridge we walked along yesterday, we swing into a big natural amphitheatre. A steep climb leads to the distinctive koppie of Dragon's Head, and from the top there is a 360-degree view down to the patchwork of orchards, vineyards, forests, untouched wilderness and meandering Palmiet River.

A gradual descent takes us onto the farm of Debbie and her husband Ross, where our journey ends with a gourmet picnic above the waterfall at the confluence of the Palmiet and the Klein Palmiet. "There's normally water pouring over the falls," Debbie tells me, as Andreas and Evan lay out our final feast. But, with the Western Cape racked by water shortage, we're delighted to be able to swim in the pool. It's a wonderful finale.

Throughout the journey we've felt a strong sense of community. Everyone has been warm and welcoming. The people of Elgin appreciate the good things in life, they take pride in their environment and want to share their bounty.

Driving back towards the N2, we stop on a rise and look back. We've covered a remarkably big area over the last three days and now have some understanding of the diversity of the valley and how it hangs together. What an escape it has been. The stunning Blue Mountain Trail is complemented by the best hospitality I have experienced on any slackpacking trail, anywhere. It won't just be the flowers that entice me back in spring. ■

Map reference G2 see inside back cover



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ABOVE LEFT: Debbie Stegmann captures a shot of a brunia or coffee bush (*Brunia albiflora*). ABOVE RIGHT: One of the pools on the Palmiet River at the end of the trail. RIGHT: The grand finale, a luxury picnic above the falls. BELOW: The long-leaf sugarbush (*Protea longifolia*) is found mostly in iron-rich gravel and clay soils between Sir Lowry's Pass and Cape Agulhas. BELOW RIGHT: The Cape mountain cockroach (*Aptera fusca*) is commonly seen in the fynbos. When alarmed it squeaks loudly and releases a foul-smelling liquid that stains your skin.



In a Nutshell

When to Go The trail is offered year round except during July. Spring (August to November) is wonderful as the weather is at its most predictable and the flowers are at their best. Autumn is also divine. In summer the guides will have you up early to avoid the heat.

Difficulty Although you cover 50km in two and a half days the pace can be tailored to suit any moderately fit group. Despite all the diversions, we were in before 2pm each day, with plenty of time to chill and enjoy the spoils. There is the option of a shorter route (10km rather than 19km) on day two. Those wanting a longer hike can do a circular route combining both the Green Mountain and Blue Mountain trails.

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