Publication: Sunday Times (Early Edition)

Date: Sunday, November 02, 2025

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Step, sip and savour

This 60km slackpacking route in the Overberg offers a rare blend of luxury, wilderness, art, wine and fabulous food. By **Claire Keeton**

● The Green Mountain Trail in the Western Cape is, like the Blue Train, in a league of its own in South African travel: both offer novel experiences gilded by luxury. Many hikers who finish this 60km slackpacking trail through the fynbos of the Kogelberg Biosphere, in a Unesco World Heritage Site, return to do its companion Blue Mountain Trail, overlooking the Overberg coastal region.

Proteas flowering high in the mountains; picnicking alongside streams with freshly-baked muffins – portaged by guides whose knowledge is extraordinary; views over the Elgin Valley; and eagles, sunbirds and klipspringer are among the trail's attractions.

The internationally acclaimed Green Mountain Trail also stands out for its gourmet dining, ecofriendly wines – from the world's first biodiversity wine route on family-owned farms in the Elgin and Bot River area – and modern art in the historic Wildekrans Country House.

Hikers spend four nights in the four-star manor, on the outskirts of the hamlet of Houw Hoek. The generosity of Alison Green, an engineer, art collector and Groenlandberg Conservancy activist, who founded the trail 18 years ago, enhanced our stay.

The afternoon our group of five arrived – the trail accommodates up to 10 – she welcomed us with carrot cake from the oven, hot drinks and/or apéritifs in front of the fire. The flames kept the chill of early spring weather at bay and, besides one fleeting drizzle, our hiking conditions were fine.

All hikers had walking sticks – with their names, measured to their height and created by a community project called Walking With an Alien – waiting in their rooms with a pair of tiny veldskoen attached to the top.

The trail

Day 1, 16km: Sculptures and fruit orchards in blossom marked the start of the trail from the house's garden towards the Jackal River. We boulder-hopped across the river, which had broken its banks during the 2023 floods, to enter an abandoned forestry plantation.

As we walked past some alien trees, guides Andreas Groenewald and Patrick Mapanje reported on farmers' efforts in the Groenlandberg Conservancy to clear them. But soon we reached the indigenous fynbos for which the Kogelberg, home to nearly 2,000 species of the endangered Cape Floral Kingdom, is famous.

We hiked among myriad proteas and ericas of all shades, from shoulder-height giants to tiny species, hidden on the ground. Following a sandy path up into the mountain, we reached a ridge overlooking the Elgin Valley, where we had breakfast. The hikers carry lunchboxes and every morning the guides unveil muffins, gourmet sandwiches or other surprises along with filter coffee and tea.

Following a high contour path in Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve, we wound our way down to the Paul Clüver orchards and vineyards for a late lunch. Here we had a wine tasting and the family patriarch, who is in his 80s, joined us for lunch at their restaurant, Bloem.

A short shuttle ride and we were back at Wildekrans. Before dinner, former human rights lawyer turned vintner, Mohseen Moosa of Paardenkloof Estate in Bot River, hosted a wine tasting in the barn.

Day 2, 16km: We started from the Paul Clüver wine estate, crossing a misty dam on a wooden walkway – a section of a popular mountain biking trail – to head into the mountain. Once again the scenery was spectacular, and surprising.

On our descent, we entered a rare indigenous forest, where the ferns and trees are unlike any flora higher up. Moodie's Meander, as it is known, evoked a *Lord of the Rings*-style setting with its flowing stream and greenery.

The second day ended on Oak Valley Estate, described as the historic heart of the apple and pear orchards of Elgin Valley. Its restaurant, The Table, offers hikers a charcuterie and cheese lunch with homemade ice cream but we were fortunate to have a three-course meal.

Day 3, 12.5km: This was a magnificent day, my favourite. We followed a steep mountain trail nearly to the top reaching 1,130m, higher than Table Mountain (1,086m). We scrambled up rocky outcrops and, along the path, examined geological formations, including distinctive tillites dating back to the Ice Age.

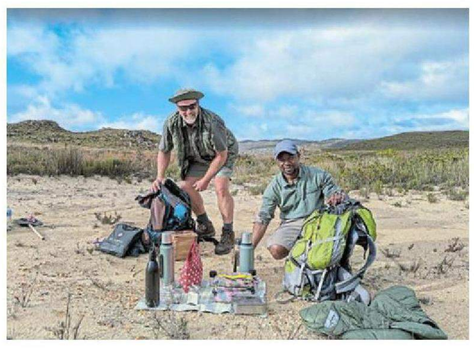
Orange-collared sunbirds and Cape sugarbirds were fluttering in fynbos. A klipspringer and its mate, lizards and spiders in dewy webs were among the creatures we saw up close while the faraway views into the valley were unparalleled. The descent was a narrow, steep trail through fynbos, technically the hardest, back to Wildekrans where we had homemade lemonade and L-Gin from Elgin and lunch waiting, under the trees.

Anica Louw from Pamper Wellness offered us complimentary massages.

Day 4, 12km: From Wildekrans, we walked out of Houw Hoek along a sandy road that roughly traced the railway line through the valley, glimpsing a disused old bridge above a gorge. Turning left, we crossed the fast-flowing Jackal River and climbed up the side of a mountain.

Our picnic spot at the top had the remnants of Stone Age tools and a rock as towering as the royal pinnacle in *The Lion King*. We had spectacular views towards Bot River and across the valley. On a steep slope opposite, we glimpsed the old oxen trail and wondered how they managed that descent.

An easy walk down into Bot River took us across the river and onto the Beaumont farm, where a friendly Sebastian Beaumont and his dogs welcomed us to lunch and more wine tasting. A smooth end to a trail without any rough edges.



Clockwise from top: Hiking through the fynbos; a view of the Elgin Valley; sculptures at Wildekrans; guides Andreas Groenewald and Patrick Mapanje; fine dining at the Table; and Wildekrans Country House, the base for the Green Mountain Trail.

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The Country House

Wildekrans Country House, dating back to 1811, has the charm of centuries embedded in its thick walls, beyond which is a peaceful garden adorned with sculptures, bordered by the Jackal River and Kogelberg Biosphere. No surprise then that it is a sought-after artists' retreat.

Furnished with antiques and art, the rooms have every comfort. Green's hospitality as the host and owner – she and her architect husband Barry live alongside it in another historic home – infuses the morning ritual of collecting our lunchboxes and treats, and afternoon tea with warmth.

The art

"I would rather buy a painting than a new car," admitted Green, adding that she'd driven her last car for 350,000km. "Art allows the mind space, it frees your mind," she said, pointing at a Diane Hyslop artwork, *No Room For Dogs on the Pavement*, which hangs above the fireplace. A compelling image, it features Joburg's iconic Ponte building.

"Art's value is to the viewer, it's not about efficiency," said Green, whose eclectic collection focuses on works from 1990 to 2000.

The artworks at Wildekrans include works by William Kentridge, Penny Siopis, Sheena Ridley and Simon Stone, and ceramic sheep sculptures by Wilma Cruise, five of which cluster in her garden.

"A lot of our art was collected by chance. I was driving past the Goodman Gallery and I saw a life-size woman in the parking lot (by Cruise)," said Green, who subsequently viewed the sheep and called Cruise to see if she had any extra sheep for her. During the Open Garden Show in Elgin in November, artists exhibit in the barn and have created land art in the garden.

Feasting on family farms

No predictable, packed lunchboxes or post-hike pasta on this trail. Instead, every meal was an epicurean treat, starting with the fresh, seasonal fare served at Wildekrans for lunch and dinners.

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The menus at Bloem and The Table are on a par with acclaimed restaurants like Fyn in Cape Town. At Bloem, at Paul Clüver Family Wines, we had delicious tapas dishes prepared with imagination. While famous for their wines, their Clüver & Jack cider is the best I've ever had. At The Table, the twice-baked cheese souffle lingered long after plates were cleared. A gruyere, thyme and onion confit tart with kale salad, toasted seeds and rosa tomatoes was the centrepiece of our final meal at Beaumont, paired with the Hope Marguerite wine, named for the family's matriarch.

A bacchanalian romp in white

Each of these wine estates in the Overberg has won multiple awards and, on the hike, whites and pinot noirs were on offer every day. Paul Clüver Wines has a tasting room alongside Bloem. My first choice: PC Estate Chardonnay. It won a gold meal at the International Wine Challenge.

PaardenKloof Wines has a tasting room at the Bot River Hotel. My favourite was The PaardenKloof Kiss Pinot Noir 2015, which won a silver medal at the Fine Wine Awards. Every bottle label is an artwork with a historic story.

Oak Valley wines were paired with our three-course meal. My number one was the Sounds of Silence Pinot Noir (4.5 stars in Platter's Wine Guide).

Beaumont Family Wines has a tasting room next to its restaurant and deli. The flagship Hope Marguerite Chenin Blanc 2023 stood out.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO:

- **Effort:** Slackpacker SA rates it 3.5/5.
- **Bookings:** The trail is open from Mondays to Fridays.
- **Cost:** R19,250 per person sharing and R24,750 for a single person until July 31.
- **More information:** See greenmountain.co.za or e-mail info@greenmountaintrail.co.za

Keeton and her partner were hosted by Green Mountain Trail.

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