

The Wonders of the Whale Trail

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Dates: 15th – 19th January 2025

Location: De Hoop Nature Reserve, Western Cape

Photos: Various hike members

Hike Leader: Lizette Gerber

Distance: 56kms

The Whale Trail is a five-day slack-packing hike in the magnificent De Hoop Nature Reserve and is run by Cape Nature. The reserve is nestled below the Potberg mountains and extends to the rugged coastline. From the coastline, a Marine Protected Area extends for about 6kms. The hike is named after the Southern Right Whale that often makes an appearance between May to September, among other sealife. Each hiker is provided with a 70l crate for his/her gear and two additional crates are advisable for communal food and items that require refrigeration (bring your own ice packs). Each morning the crates are collected and dropped off at the next cottage.

Arrival: 14th January 2025:

After a three-hour drive from Cape Town airport, a grocery/food stop in Bredarsdorp, and a random detour courtesy of Google Maps, we found a reception committee (a herd of Blesbok with their babies) awaiting us at the entrance to De Hoop Nature Reserve. However, our reception committee did not provide adequate directions to the Potberg cottage. Once we found the cottage, we could off load our bags, find an unoccupied bed and pack our crates. Several of the beds were in the loft, which could only be accessed via a “death stair” that had a rather inadequate handrail.



The cottage had a lovely outdoor deck and braai area, unfortunately, the weather was not cooperating. Despite the indecisive weather, the team assigned dinner duty for the first night put on a delicious celebratory meal, with enough leftovers for lunch the next day.

Day 1: Potberg to Cupidoskraal

Distance: 15.5 Kms

Elevation: 611 meters

An overcast morning greeted us, and after a debriefing provided by a Cape Nature representative, 12 intrepid hikers set off. At first the trail wound through some trees and a few stream crossings, but the higher we climbed the more the vegetation morphed into beautiful fynbos.

The path zig zagged up the Potberg mountainside, but the gloomy weather made for some wonderfully dramatic photos.





About halfway up, the Cape vultures put on a spectacular show for us, climbing the thermals and circling above us.



However, the wind did not treat us hikers as kindly as vultures. The Western Cape is not known as the 'windy province' for nothing. By the time we arrived at the top, the wind was howling and forced us to find any remotely sheltered spots for our tea break, overlooking the meandering Breede

River.

Little did we know what was in store for us after tea. The next section took us along the mountain ridge where we felt the full force of the infamous Western Cape wind. Hats were hastily removed, and we tried to keep our feet and poles as close to the ground as possible.

After crossing the ridge, shaking but relatively unscathed, the trail meandered downhill through the fynbos blooms and ended at the only water stop on the way at the Melkbos river.

The water was the typical rooibos tea colour that is common in the Western cape (the colour apparently comes from the tanins leaching from the fynbos) and deliciously cool to hot, sweaty, sore feet. We stopped here for lunch and to recharge for the climb up the next mountainside. This was the sheltered side of the mountains, but we soon began to wish for the refreshing qualities of the cape wind.



As hikers, we know that what goes up must, eventually come down and the descent to Cupidoskraal seemed to

never end despite the relatively gentle slope. However, the prospect of jumping into the dam above the cottage gave some strength to our limbs. (This swim did not materialize). Cupidoskraal is well hidden behind a thick wall of trees and the trail wanders past the old tumbledown remnant of the old cottage (sadly burnt down during a fire). Eventually, the forest revealed the cottage with its outdoor braai area and solar array. We settled down to recover and choose our rooms. Two of the rooms were quite a tight fit for four people (two bunk beds), so some of us chose to move our mattresses to the floor.



Dinner that evening was an eventful affair, with the sous chef being demoted to dishwasher in the proceedings. Nevertheless, the 3 amigas provided a hearty, tasty dinner to hungry, grateful hikers.



Day 2: Cupidoskraal to Noetsie

Distance: 15.2 Kms



An overcast morning dawned which helped us climb the winding path out of the valley. The trail took us around the dam to a point that overlooked the cottage. The views from the top offered staggering scenery and our first sighting of the azure Indian ocean in the distance.

A surprise awaited some of our group at the top, connectivity! After a quick internet stop, for those who needed to contact the outside world, we continued along the ridge through thick and thriving fynbos.

Eventually, we arrived at the start of the descent to the valley which meandered down the mountainside and slowed us down as the path was littered with loose rocks and pebbles. Another surprise was awaiting us near the valley floor, two enormous restios, which dwarfed several of the hikers in the group.



Our first sighting of Noetsie almost blew us away, mostly because we had finally made it. However, some of us were longing to plunge into the enticingly cool water. Noetsie is situated in its own protected little bay, across the beach from the trail and a Rooibos tea coloured lagoon meandered close by.



However, before the long-awaited plunge, there was a steep descent to navigate, that zig zagged down the cliff. This descent had some rather tricky sections, especially for the vertically challenged members of the group.



The descent only made the baptism into the azure waters of the Indian ocean that much more rewarding. Only two members of the group risked a plunge before heading to the cottage. With the warning from the debriefing on day 1 about the strong current at Noetsie foremost in our minds, our “plunge” consisted of sitting in the rocks/pebbles where the waves lapped the shore, all the

while keeping an eye on the other swimmer, in case one of us needed assistance. Luckily, the current did not manage to grab either swimmer, it certainly tried to.

After our dip, it was a short trek across a patch of rocks to the cottage. Noetsie is comprised of two A frame structures that stand close to each other and a third that stands closer to the water. The first A frame houses the kitchen and a dormitory at the back, while the second A frame consists of two dormitories separated by the ablutions. The last building is a covered boma with a fire pit from which sunsets and sundowners can be enjoyed.



Later, several members of the group then decided to try out the lagoon waters. Despite the rooibos colour, up close the water was clean and clear and provided a sharp contrast to the white sand beneath our feet. A lovely time was spent floating around the lagoon, which also had a conveniently sheltered alcove in which we escaped the wind for a short time. The day ended with a spectacular sunset show.



Day 3: Noetsie to Hammerkop

Distance: 8.5 kms

Day 3 introduced us to the techniques of beach hiking. Normally boots and sand do not mix, however it is a requirement to get to the next cottage. We soon learnt that the trick was to use the foot holes of the hiker in front of you to make the various beach crossings somewhat easier.

Interesting times were had when it came to



keeping our boots out of the water and judging the gap between the waves, particularly when the waves came close to the rock walls.

Some of us reverted to the time old tradition of looking at shells and other bits that the waves deposited on the shores. Among the shells and seaweed, we came across several dead puffer fish and an unholy amount of man-made waste. (Tip: take extra plastic bags or use the ones provided at the cottages and collect the rubbish that threatens to smother our beautiful beaches. The full bags can be disposed of in the rubbish bins at the cottages.)



After a quick bite to eat, we made our way back to the trail, heading for the legendary Stilgat rock pools. These pools are accessible via several, steep staircases built into the cliffs. Our timing was perfect, the tide was out, and the water was inviting us in. However, the rocks are incredibly sharp, and it is highly advisable to invest in some beach/water shoes to protect your feet.

Once we had made it over the rocks unscathed, the water was crystal clear and deliciously invigorating. There wasn't much aquatic life to observe, but that didn't stop Kevin. He was the only hiker who brought his snorkelling goggles, however, more time was spent searching for the glass that popped out of the frame and disappeared into the soft whitish sand, than actual snorkelling.

A happy time was spent revelling in the sublimely cool waters and enjoying a bite before hitting the trail again.



The cliffs on the second part of the trail became more rugged and spectacular, with fascinating shapes/caves etched into the rock by the millennia of crashing waves. The vibrant colours of the Cape coast are simply staggering, bright white cliffs with highlights of orange lichen on the rocks, set against a backdrop of ocean that starts off a bright turquoise colour close to shore and deepens to a majestic royal blue.



Until a somewhat bedraggled group crested the last sandy hill and set eyes on the Hammerkop cottage which sits on top of a wide beach and is somewhat hidden behind some sand dunes. However, the cottage does have a deck leading from the loft. The deck came in handy for watching another stunning cape sunset.

The cottage is home to “a friendly Frankolin, who was promptly dubbed “Susan”. She was tame enough to take food from hikers hands. She provided much entertainment during our stay. However, hilarity ensued after a research sleuth enlightened the group that only male franklins have spurs on their legs and her/his name was changed to Benjamin (Franklin).

The day ended beautifully with a delicious supper and another mesmerising sunset.



Day 4: Hammerkop to Vaalkrans

Distance: 10.5 Kms

A glorious sunny morning awaited the next morning us and took us along the beach to the first inland detour around the cliffs, which soon had us longing for the sublimely cool cape wind. The trail meandered along white sandy beaches and gorgeous sandstone cliffs until we reached the blow holes.



We spent some time searching for shade, interesting looking shells and enjoying the cool sea spray from the blow holes. Much fun was had when Kevin and Luis risked getting drenched by creeping closer to the blow holes which made for some epic photos. While David was the sole member to seize an opportunity to swim in the rock pools, as the tide was on its way out.

As the name suggests, Vaalkrans cottage is perched atop the cliffs with a private cove just below where the waves provide a soothing background murmur. The cottage is equipped with solar panels, gas stove and a lovely outdoor lapa with fire pit. However, we were warned that the water pump wasn't working, but Cape Nature had provided

several huge containers of water.

Despite this, our last supper was a merry affair, after which Luis entertained us all by making S'mores over the fire under the lapa. We spent a memorable time chatting under the stars and remembering this fantastic hike.

That night we fell asleep, slightly footsore but happy, to the lullaby of crashing waves knowing that this was our last night on this magical reserve.



Day 5: Vaalkrans to Koppie Alleen

Distance: 7 Kms

It was a bittersweet, and early start the next morning, knowing that this was our last day immersed in the gorgeous cape scenery.



The trail led us above the cottage and along the cliffs towards Koppie Alleen (a secluded restaurant that is only available to people staying in the reserve). This section of the hike was the most rugged in patches, with narrow paths that are slowly disintegrating from the constant battering from the. However, the thought of one last swim at Hippo Pools gave us strength to continue.

Along the way, the cliffs put in a display, morphing into fantastical shapes etched over millennia by the endless crashing of the waves.



We arrived at Hippo Pools eager for the cool plunge. As inviting as the water was, only three of us took the plunge and spent a wonderful half an hour floating in the crystal-clear water. Entering the water was an interesting exercise, as the pool is protected by a line of rocks submerged in the water, close to the shore, that must be climbed over to get to the soft sand of the pool. Beach/water shoes are a necessity here.

After the swim, it was a bit of a dash to Koppie Alleen to catch the shuttle that was collecting us at 10:00am. The scenery changed from cliffs to gorgeous white beaches until a board walk appeared that took us to 'civilisation'.

The café, Koppie Allen, was invitingly cool where we made the most of some rejuvenating beverages. The photo opportunities from the deck of the café were too much to ignore, with the pristine sand dunes, azure ocean, and the deep blue sky.



It was a short walk up to the parking lot, where a shuttle took us through the reserve and back to our cars. The drive was about 45 minutes, and gave us an opportunity to see some wildlife, including several ostriches and a secretary bird.



The shuttle dropped us off at the car park, where we could enjoy a rejuvenating shower in the adjacent ablution block, while we waited for our crates to be delivered.

Then it was a hasty repack of our gear into our travel bags, a quick goodbye and a mad dash to the airport.

Thus ended our sojourn along the magical Whale Trail. An absolute must for the bucket list.