

Leopard Trail

21 - 24 July 2025



It was about an hours drive from the turnoff to the Cedar Falls Basecamp through some of the most spectacular mountain scenery the Eastern Cape has to offer. We had to negotiate the Nuwekloof Pass, considered the official entrance to the western Baviaanskloof with its towering cliffs and amazing rock formations. We also passed the "Baviaanskloof Sleutel" (Baviaanskloof Key) which is a large overhanging rock. Legend has it that if this rock falls then access to this side of the Baviaanskloof will be blocked forever. But never fear as I foresee a few more generations of hiking club members being able to pass this way on the way to the Leopard Trail before that happens.

We eventually arrived at Cedar Falls Basecamp and made our way to the very well laid out reception centre with its small shop, swimming pool, relaxation area, toilets and showers. We were directed to our accommodation for the night, with the majority of us staying at the Red Cliffs Farmhouse and others staying at Cob Cottage. I can't speak for Cob Cottage, but the Farmhouse was very well equipped. One hint though: bring kitchen scissors. Rooms were sorted out and vehicles unpacked. Two of us were then despatched to the reception centre to collect the boxes that would be used to cart our belongings from hut to hut. Another hint: check that the boxes as far as possible have both wheels and two working clips.



With all of that out of the way, we got down to the serious business of relaxing. We congregated in the lounge area. A fire was lit, drinks were poured, and conversation flowed until it was announced that dinner was ready. A delicious and very convivial meal followed. After all the usual cleaning up was done, people went off to pack their boxes for the following morning and get ready for bed as a relatively early start was in store for the next day.



Report Day Zero by - Barry Jennings

DAY 1: KICKSTARTING THE LEOPARD TRAIL ADVENTURE - 21 JULY



This journey will end at the same place you started. So it's not really about the destination.

The trail wastes no time warming you up, unless by “warming up” you mean “immediate hill climb.” The opening ascent, affectionately dubbed Kick Start Hill, lived up to its name. Hiking poles click-clacked in determined rhythm, punctuated by the occasional (and completely dignified) gasping pause, but the climb rewarded us with the first of many breathtaking views, rugged ridges, sweeping valleys, and a whisper of the wild expanse we’d be traversing.

Around the 5km mark, we took a short detour to the legendary Gabriel’s Pools for lunch. Words failed us. Imagine: a cool, shaded canyon revealing a crystal pool nestled between ancient cliffs. We unpacked our lunches and sat in awed silence, well, until someone announced they were testing the waters. It was winter, so unsurprisingly, the verdict was “brisk.” One toe and one brave full foot made brief contact before sanity prevailed.

With spirits lifted and legs refreshed, we rejoined the trail, eager for more surprises. And we got them. Towering cliffs rose dramatically on either side, their layered rock faces telling stories of millennia past. The formations demanded admiration and craned necks as we wound our way between them, dwarfed by their grandeur.

Somewhere along the way, a hiking pole staged a brief solo adventure, prompting a minor search and rescue mission (successfully executed). With all limbs and gear accounted for, we reached our first overnight hut, a welcome sight tucked into the landscape, ready to cradle our tired feet and dreaming minds. But the day’s delights weren’t over yet.

We were treated to a delicious Moroccan-style dinner that warmed both body and soul, followed by gooey birthday chocolate brownies, because hiking calories don’t count. enjoyed in front of a roaring indoor fireplace. A few celebratory beverages and heartfelt toasts marked a special birthday in the group, adding a touch of sparkle to an already magical evening. Under a night sky spilling with stars, we tucked into our warm sleeping bags, lulled to sleep by the hush of the wilderness and the happy exhaustion of a trail well begun.

Report Day 1 – Rebecca Wakeford



This was it—the day we’d been dreaming about (and booking) for a year. Our briefing was set for 9am, but as a group of enthusiastic early birds, we were up with the sun, sorting, packing, repacking, debating the importance of extra socks, and negotiating over fridge space like seasoned logisticians. Boxes? Check. Cooler? Check. Freezer? Definitely check. With our gear crammed into the car like a well-played game of Tetris, we made our way to the trailhead. Here, we received the all-important safety briefing and ceremoniously handed the satellite phone to the designated sweeper—who, thankfully, had no plans of sweeping us off a cliff. With phones switched to airplane mode (because connectivity is overrated when you’ve got mountains), we turned our boots toward the bold, wooden sign that simply read: START.

DAY 2: - 22 JULY 2025



We were expecting bad weather on this day and we got our fair share but it was mostly mist precipitation. Wet enough for a rain layer. The path was a challenging climb after backtracking for a kilometer on yesterday's path, we walked through Rheeboek Valley before climbing 500m and then down to Reflection Pool where we stopped for lunch. A beautiful spot on the rocks, this place must be amazing in summer!! We then pulled hard as we walked the 18kms, through the lovely views which rolled out bigger and grander around every whirl of the canyon rocks around us. The mist had lifted by late morning and although still overcast and a tad chilly, it was nice hiking weather. We eventually reached Hut 2, which was a stone's throw from Cedar Falls Basecamp where we had started!! It seemed a bit unfair really, but once we were settled and showered, a roaring fire going, we were all relaxed and comfortable after a surreal day in Baviaans and a meal shared in great company. Another early night for another early start, in trepidation for the 22kms day tomorrow!!

Report Day 2 - Hettie Randall



Amber-Engelbrecht



Alli-Humphries-Engelbrecht 22 July 2025

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DAY 3: NATURE'S MASTERPIECE IN MOTION - 23 JULY

The gentle strains of Saint-Saëns' **Carnival of the Animals** floated through the morning air, coaxing us from slumber in our sleeping hut. It was a wake-up call unlike any other elegant, playful, and oddly fitting for the day ahead. We knew it would be a long day, but none of us could have anticipated the artistry that nature had in store.

The trail welcomed us kindly, with a steady, almost imperceptible incline. Around us, the land blossomed into an open-air gallery. The dramatic rock formations took a back seat to the true stars of the show the flowers. With the eye of a master landscaper, nature had woven delicate pink bell-shaped blooms among tufts of sedge and restios, while white, button-like flowers peeked between smoky white boulders and equally toned foliage. The effect was subtle, yet breathtaking.

Encircled by mountains, we played the guessing game: **Which one of these giants will we climb today?** A distant saddle eventually revealed our path. With the landscape distracting us at every turn, the ascent felt effortless. Our first summit, ****Honeybush Hill****, greeted us with wisps of white boulders tucked between hardy shrubs a perfect rest stop with front-row seats to the sprawling vista below.

The descent was a dreamscape. Shoulder-high pink proteas lined our path, as if ushering us down in celebratory fanfare. Their bloom blanketed the slope—an organic rival to any Chelsea Flower Show exhibit. Nature had clearly chosen her colour palette with care: pinks, whites, greys—all repeated and echoed like a theme through a symphony. Pelargoniums brushed our legs, releasing a medley of fragrances with each step. Among them, the rose geranium stole the show its tiny, serrated leaves barely hinting at the powerful perfume they contained.

The trail continued to unfold like a well-paced novel. Beyond our second summit, a dramatic scene opened before us: rugged stone peaks divided by a wide, dry riverbed strewn with polished grey rocks. It was as if we'd stumbled into a Japanese garden crafted on a continental scale.

Even the ground beneath our feet captivated the eye. Stones in hues of black, terracotta, pink, and smoky white crunched beneath our rhythmic footsteps. Some stones were zipped with gleaming quartz lines. These were my favorite: the earth's hidden seams, exposed and glinting in the sunlight.

Lunchtime found us lounging on sun-warmed boulders, scattered like daisies soaking in the midday heat. A soft hum of bees began to accompany us—a sound that would become the background score for the rest of our day.

With lunch behind us, we traded our earlier climbs for a meandering journey along the riverbed. Hopes for soft, sandy trails were only half-met. In true Leopard Trail fashion, the path refused predictability—shifting from shaded forested tunnels to towering stone corridors, and finally, the vast openness of sand and scattered rocks.

Later in the afternoon, the group fell into a playful rhythm. Barry initiated the comic relief with an impromptu "ground bow" to the beer gods. Not to be outdone, Ali chose a precariously balanced rock as her throne. Three seconds later, she was flat on her back in the sand, triggering a chorus of laughter. Her attempt to regain verticality nearly ended in a face-plant, much to the howling delight of her sympathetic audience.

As the sun dipped lower, the welcoming sight of the pool and dinner hut came into view. Laughter and chatter echoed around us, not from obligation but from joy. Tired feet and weary legs aside, we had clearly been restored.

Our souls? They'd been lifted—somewhere between the proteas and the peaks.

Report Day 3 - Daryll Jacobs





DAY 4: LEOPARD TRAIL — 24 JULY

The final morning arrived, bright and clear, carrying a mixture of anticipation and bittersweet emotion as we prepared for our last day together in this extraordinary corner of the Karoo. Medical tape was wrapped around hiking boots one final time, backpacks were replenished with snacks and drinks, and trolleys were gathered and brought to the collection point.

After a hearty breakfast, the group assembled, ready for the day's challenges. None of us quite realised what the trail still held in store. We began with a gentle walk along the valley floor, continually awestruck by the towering stone walls rising majestically around us. Each summit, and there were many of them, rewarded us with breathtaking views. Rocks, sand, gravel, boulders and climbs, tested our legs and feet for this final stretch. A welcome break in a dry riverbed provided a chance to regroup before tackling the last leg of the hike.

Returning to civilization came as a jolt, a sudden reminder of the world outside our quiet adventure. Our fearless leader, quietly hidden in the bushes and snapping candid photos, greeted us at the approach to home base. We finished together, ringing the completion bell with enthusiasm and pride.

Over the days and nights spent on the trail, old friendships were rekindled, and new ones forged. The memories we created will endure in our hearts and minds for a lifetime. This hike is a true must do, for anyone seeking a rewarding challenge and an unforgettable experience.



Report Day 4 - Ali Engelbrecht

