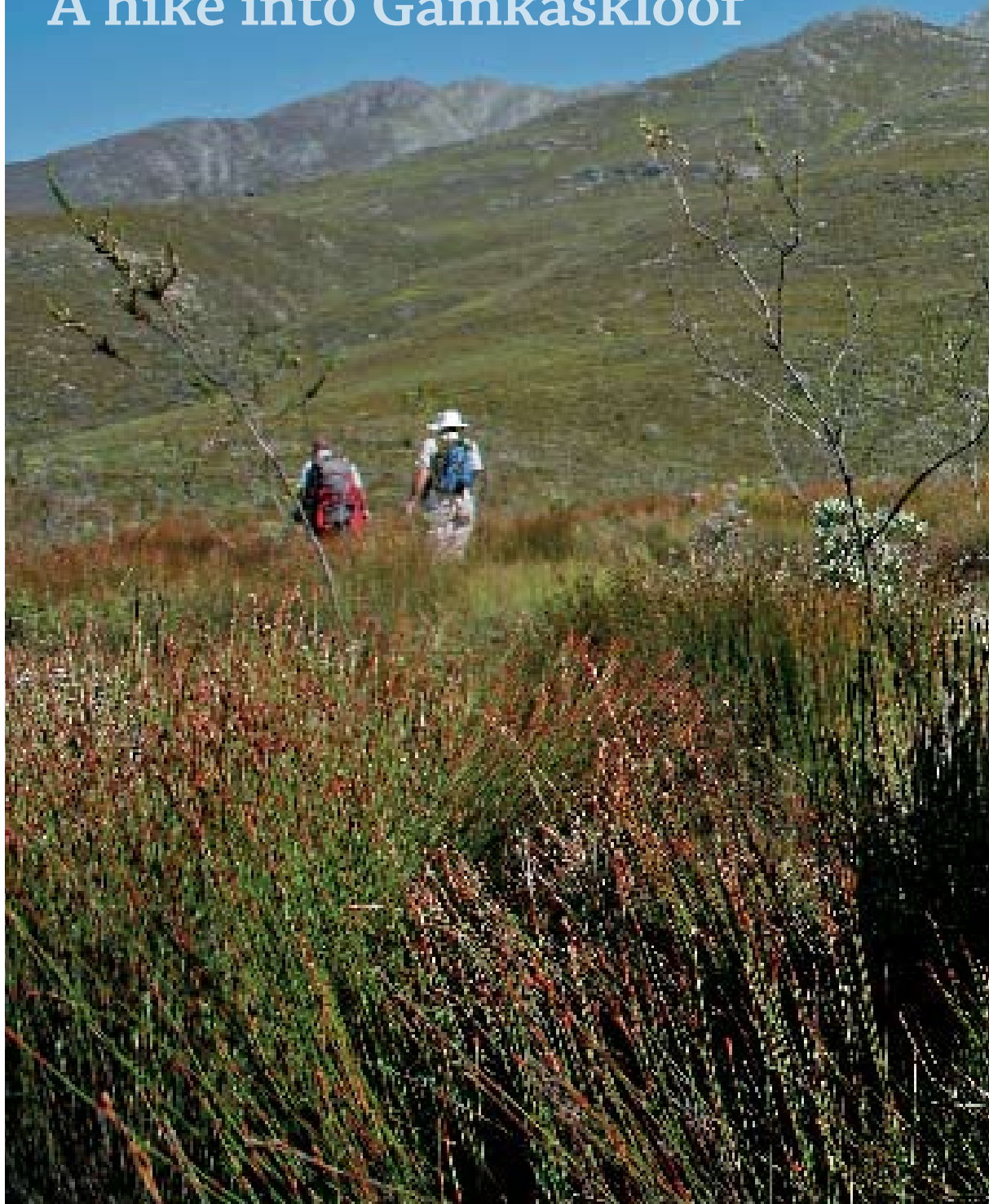


A century ago, before you could drive into the Gamkaskloof in the Little Karoo, people crossed the Swartberg on foot or by donkey. **Jeanne van der Merwe** and photographer **Ruvan Boshoff** tackled the Donkey Trail.



Let a donkey do the donkey work

A hike into Gamkaskloof





It's early evening when Ruvan and I arrive at Living Waters farm, the starting point of the Donkey Trail, 12 km from Calitzdorp.

Over the next two days, we will follow one of the original donkey paths along which all goods and people entered the farming community of the Gamkaskloof ("Die Hel") before the gravel road into the valley was built in the 1960s.

Erika Calitz, our host, explains that the donkeys take some of the baggage up the mountain and that she will bring the rest the next day. "You won't always see the donkeys on the trail," she says. "Sometimes they go faster than the hikers, sometimes slower."

Erika's husband Hans tells us that in the old days the Gamkaskloof donkeys knew the trail so well that they crossed the mountain on their own.

After a dinner of cold meats, salads and bread we're off to a comfortable night's sleep. I'm almost in dreamland when a loud "haaaheeee... haaaheeee" shatters the silence. They say a donkey only brays when it is separated from its companions.

DAY 1 LIVING WATERS FARM TO MOUNTAIN CAMP (11 km)

Buddy filches trail mix

We're up at six for a delicious breakfast spread: home-baked bread, cold meats, cheese, muesli, yoghurt, fruit juice and coffee.

We're climbing 1200 m and walking 11 km today, so we tuck in.

On the lawn outside our three pack donkeys are being loaded up while snacking on a last-minute dose of high-energy feed. Buddy is light grey and almost the size of a pony; Goldie is golden brown and slightly smaller; Thyme is the smallest, and she has a few scars on her flanks.

"Most of the donkeys we use on the trail are rescued animals, and they were rehabilitated right here on the farm," Erika tell us.

A donkey shelter in De Rust



helped her find the animals and gave her advice on how to regain their trust.

In the old days, the Gamkaskloof donkeys used to carry up to half their body weight, but Erika and Hans's donkeys never carry more than 20 kg.

As we chat, I spot Buddy as he nuzzles out a packet of trail mix from someone's bag.

We set off. Hans tells us that Living Waters was originally part of a bigger farm known as Groenfontein, which once belonged to the Nel family. It borders on the Swartberg Nature Reserve, which includes Gamkaskloof.

In her book *Die Hel, Vallei van die Leeus*, Sue van Waart recounts the origins of the trail. Groenfontein became too small to support all the Nels, so one of the sons, Koot, moved over the mountain into the fertile but near-

THE ROAD IS LONG. The first part of the trail goes along an old farm road, where natural veld is slowly reclaiming the old farmland.

inaccessible Gamkaskloof.

To get into the valley, the Nels used the route we're hiking today. It became known as Wyenek. The Nels apparently carried an entire watermill, piece by piece, over the mountain on this path.

As we walk, Hans points out a Verreaux's eagle nest, rock paintings, a klipspringer on the cliffs, and a dam that is home to terrapins.

Suddenly the trail steepens sharply. We've reached Zigzag. Wyenek, the summit of our trail, is hidden behind granite outcrops that punctuate the slope.

There's a bottleneck up ahead; Goldie has stopped in her tracks.

Down in the valley, a small white building that used to house a farm school looks like a doll's house. The imposing Red Stone Hills look like a few red warts from here, and further south the



TOOTHY GRIN. Donkey handler Johnifer Nel with Buddy. Each donkey has a handler.

“As we get going, I can’t help thinking about the Nel brothers, Pietie and Danie, who carried a millstone over this mountain.”



TREAD CAREFULLY (below). The descent into the Gamkaskloof is spectacular – and steep!

Little Karoo rumples away towards the hazy Outeniqua Mountains.

A link with the past

At the top of Zigzag one of the hikers sits down and says: “That’s it. I can’t go on any more.” It’s Robbie Merrifield, a seasoned hiker from Cape Town. He and two friends walked all the way from Calitzdorp yesterday – 12 km along a twisty gravel road, with the temperature close to 40 °C.

Hans comes back from the front of the pack to make sure Robbie gets back safely.

It’s still on the wrong side of 30 °C today, and there’s no shade on the mountain. My second water bottle is starting to feel light, but luckily there’s a river crossing up ahead. Just as I wring the last drops out, we reach the gurgling stream with its narrow strip of riverine bush.

Gratefully, we find shade under the trees and gulp down delicious, cold mountain water. Fellow hiker Jane Green dunks her cloth hat in the river – she’s clearly a veteran of long, hot hikes.

After the water stop, our donkeys are still slow to get up the hill. We push on and up for another hour before we stop for lunch, just as a lone cloud moves in front of the sun.

We ponder the hilly Little Karoo over sandwiches, meatballs and a hard-boiled egg, and steel ourselves for Wyenek.

As we get going, I can’t help thinking about the Nel brothers, Pietie and Danie, who carried a millstone over this mountain when they moved from Groenfontein to Gamkaskloof back in the 1880s.

It’s hot, steep and heavy-going, but I’m here of my own choice. >



The Nels' lives depended on this path. I look for somewhere to rest my wobbly legs. I flop down next to a protea bush that was probably in full bloom a month ago.

The school now far below is a mere dot in the valley, and we feel pleased with our progress.

Hans tells us how he and Erika discovered their farm's link with the past quite by chance. "We bought the farm 12 years ago. People would come to visit the graveyard. Then, about four years ago, someone from the Simon van der Stel Foundation was helping us restore a farm building and told us that one of the original donkey routes over the mountain into the Gamkaskloof started from our farm. They asked us if we would let people hike the trail again."

After four years of fundraising, planning and negotiations with CapeNature, the Calitzes finally opened the trail in September last year.

Finding the route wasn't easy. After the gravel road from the Swartberg Pass was opened in 1962, donkeys were used less and less. The path became overgrown, memories faded and it became difficult to find out exactly where the original route ran.

"In places you could still see the path, and we also used old photographs and spoke to a lot of people," Hans says.

WE SPREAD OUT as the trail climbs on, up, up, up. It feels like hours. Then I look up and see Ruvan sitting on a rock right above my head, a big grin on his face, and beyond him only blue sky!

On top of the mountain everything looks different. In places, circles of white grass punctuate the green grassland between clumps of wabome with bright-pink teapot-sized flowers.

I've fallen into step with Stephan Theron, a programmer, behind the rest of the group. We wonder at leucadendrons, restios, white and pink sewejaartjies, tiny strawberry pincushion proteas and a myriad of plants I've never

"After the gravel road from the Swartberg Pass was opened in 1962, donkeys were used less and less. The path became overgrown, memories faded..."

ANYONE FOR COFFEE? The story goes that Gamkasklowers stopped at this overhanging rock, Koffieklip, to make coffee.



JUMP! If you scan the cliffs carefully you should spot a few klipspringers along the way.

seen before.

"Can anyone spot the camp yet?" Hans asks as we take a breather. At first we don't see anything. Then a camouflage tent pops out of the rocky expanse across the river, like a hidden image on a 3D postcard.

We pass an overhanging rock, about the size of half a single garage. The inside of the overhang is blackened by smoke. It's where people used to stop to brew coffee; they called it Koffieklip.

We cross a stream that cascades over rocks and then we're home for the night. Soon, we're sitting at a table enjoying coffee, served in enamel cups with pictures of donkeys on them.

Later, some of our party head for the swimming pool at the base of a natural sandstone amphitheatre. Out of the wind it's nice and warm here as the afternoon sun bakes on the rocks. Fronds of fynbos and ferns trail above us, sunbirds dart around among the flowers and a waterfall that tumbles down the mountain out of the pool supplies a comforting, never-ending chatter.

We end the day with some red wine and tomato pasta. No fires are allowed here because we are in a wilderness area, and a cold wind soon drives us into the tents and to bed.

DAY 2 MOUNTAIN CAMP TO GAMKASKLOOF ENTRANCE (9km)

The descent

It's rained overnight. As I pull on my ice-cold pants, I remember a piece of my tent-mate Else's camping advice: Put your clothes under your sleeping bag when you go to bed so they stay warm.

It's still cold. The wind doesn't let up. My fingers and the tip of my nose are numb. I just want to start walking so I can get warm.

First we stop to say goodbye to the donkeys. They're going back to yesterday's starting point.

"They walk a lot faster on their way home," Malcolm Tarentaal, one of the handlers, says.



HEAVEN. The mountain pool at the camp is at the bottom of a small waterfall. It's the perfect place to rest your limbs after climbing the Swartberg.



We hike up tall rock shelves where the mountain winds have sculpted boulders into strange formations, like a seahorse.

From this vantage point you can truly appreciate the scale of the Swartberg. Giant bulges and rents are testament to how the

vast, multi-layered mountain got mashed and squashed and carved up over millions of years. There are countless hills in all directions.

It's not easy to get down the mangled slopes. The steep path zigzags downhill in a way that makes yesterday's Zigzag look

tame. In places, bits of crumbly shale come loose under our feet. We gingerly step down jagged rocky staircases and walk through depressions before ascending the next rocky outcrop.

Finally, after about three hours, the Gamkaskloof comes into view.

It's a ribbon of green cupped in the long causeway carved out by the tributaries of the Gamka River.

Eventually even the famous road into Die Hel – the Elandspad – comes into view. It's the road that changed everything in the kloof. >

■ SWARTBERG HIKE

“This road was supposed to make things easier, but in the end it was just a way for all the young people to leave,” Hans explains.

In the decade after the road opened in 1963, the kloof gradually emptied out.

I find out later that the last original resident still to own a farm in the valley, Annetjie Joubert, now divides her time between the family farm, Fonteinplaas, and Mossel Bay.

Her son Piet and his wife look after the day-to-day running of the property, one of only two still privately owned in the valley, and the last working farm.

The road runs over the veld like a white crayon stripe. Erika’s silver minibus is waiting for us next to it. I have a feeling there are cold drinks in the back and start walking faster like the donkeys on the home stretch.

We emerge onto the road from a path surrounded by house-high aloes, not far from the sign marking the 33rd kilometre from the Swartberg Pass.

“Congratulations!” says Hans. “Not many people have done what you’ve done now. Not recently.”

Do the twist

At the minibus, Erika offers us a choice of beer, cider or cooldrink. Then we dump our daypacks in the minibus and walk down the



HOME SWEET CANVAS. Your tent on the mountain comes fully stocked with bed, towels and even hot water.



CARBO-LOAD (above). You have to eat quickly on the mountain – the food gets cold fast in the chilly wind.

MADE IT! (right). Thyme and Buddy have a drink at the camp after their 12 km slog.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION (below). The camp is next to a river, with a beautiful view of the Swartberg’s cliffs.

Elandspad, the crazily twisty final descent into the kloof you always see on postcards.


Occasionally, dusty SUVs drive past us with wide-eyed occupants. I’ve never been in the Gamkaskloof before, but having trudged over the mountain, I somehow feel closer to the tough people who used to live here than I would have if I’d driven here in an air-conditioned 4x4.

In the evening, after a long nap, we gather around a braai fire big enough to make up for the one we didn’t have last night.

The cottage we’re staying in

used to belong to a woman named Lenie Marais, who was a legend in these parts. She renovated it single-handedly, and would often hike over the mountain to Calitzdorp for the day to go shopping.

“Look! A satellite,” Erika says and points to a pinprick of light moving across the night sky, amid millions and millions of stars.

Tomorrow, we leave the kloof by car, along the road that heralded the end of the road for a 150-year-old community. 

Go! paid in full for the trip.



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SWARTBERG HIKE

HOW GREEN IS MY KLOOF (right). The final stretch of road into the Gamkaskloof is called the Elandspad.

LEGEND LOST (below). The Lenie Marais cottage, which used to be the base for the Donkey Trail in the Gamkaskloof, burnt down in February. Erika Calitz is currently raising funds for its restoration.

GAMKASKLOOF 101

➤ **What's in a name?** The nickname "Die Hel" has nothing to do with how hot it gets in the valley (it's cooler than either Prince Albert in the north or Oudtshoorn in the south). It is believed the nickname originated with a livestock inspector, Piet Botha, who had to travel into the kloof from Calitzdorp to dip sheep during a drought in the 1920s. The arduous journey by donkey cart down Die Leer made it "hell on earth" for him. The Gamkasklowers themselves never took to the name.

➤ **Over, under, sideways, down.** There were several footpaths into the Gamkaskloof. The most famous one was called Die Leer, a hazardous north-westerly passage towards Prince Albert. Two poorts along the north-south flow of the Gamka River were known as Onderpoort or Suidpoort (south to Calitzdorp) and Noordpoort (to Prince Albert). The Noordpoort exit, also known as Skietpoort, was closed up in 1969, when the Gamkapoort Dam was built.

➤ **All but forgotten.** After the gravel road was opened in the 1960s it was no longer necessary to trek over the mountains by donkey, and the donkey paths became disused and overgrown.

➤ **Hotspot.** The Gamkaskloof is one of 34 biodiversity hotspots worldwide – areas threatened by human development in which an unusual amount of endemic vegetation occurs. It's the only hotspot in an arid region; you hike through succulent Karoo, subtropical thicket, mountain fynbos and renosterveld vegetation in one day.



I want to do it too!

- **How long?** If you do the hike on a weekend, you arrive on Friday late afternoon and leave again on Monday just before lunch time. You hike 11 km on the first day and 9 km on the second, and return to Living Waters by car.
- **How fit do I have to be?** You have to be reasonably fit – the trail crosses rough terrain and it's very steep.
- **What's included?** All meals, non-alcoholic drinks, portage, transport, guides, camping equipment and conservation fees for the Gamkaskloof Nature Reserve. You pay extra for alcoholic drinks.
- **What should I pack?** Water bottle, insect repellent, warm and windproof clothing, sunblock, a sturdy wide-brimmed hat and a beanie.
- **How many friends can I invite?** Maximum eight hikers per group.
- **Is it safe?** One guide always has a satellite phone on hand in case of an accident.
- **When should I go?** The mountain is beautiful all year round, but from August the wildflowers are in bloom.
- **How much?** R2 500 per person.
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