

BEYOND THE BLUE

THE FABULOUS FYNBOS, STUPENDOUS VIEWS, DAILY WINE TASTINGS AND GOURMET FOOD OF THE BLUE MOUNTAIN TRAIL MAKE THIS THREE-DAY SLACKPACKER THROUGH THE ELGIN VALLEY A REAL TREAT

BY FIONA MCINTOSH

Perched high on a ridge in the pristine Kogelberg Nature Reserve, we marvelled at the 360-degree view. To the south was the shimmering Indian Ocean, while the north boasted equally exquisite sights, from the orchards and vineyards of Elgin to Groenlandberg and the Cape Fold Mountains.

We were on day two of the Blue Mountain Trail, a three-day, three-night slackpacking trail that showcases the magnificent flora and scenery of the Elgin Valley. The sun was shining, the wind was in my hair, and I was entranced by this mountain wilderness. Expertly guided, the trail ticks every box a hiker could wish for.

After settling in at Wildekrans Country House on our first evening, we were treated to a wine tasting and a three-course dinner accompanied by Elgin wines before retiring to our four-poster beds. By the first night's standards, we would definitely not be slumming it on this adventure...

The following morning, we were transferred to a high point at the eastern end of the valley, where we shouldered our packs and, accompanied by the dawn chorus of birds, strode out into the fynbos. Our passionate guides, Andreas Groenewald and Patrick Mapanye, were fonts of information, introducing us to the unique ecology of this mountain reserve, part of the Cape Floral Region Protected Area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and identifying the colourful sunbirds and long-tailed sugarbirds that flitted alongside us.

As the trail wended around the mountain, the vistas changed. Stopping often to orientate us, Andreas pointed out Bot River, the wheat fields of the Overberg and Walker Bay. He directed our gaze to Babylonstoren, the mountain separating Bot River from the Hemel-en-Aarde valley. The grapes for the Paarden Kloof wine that we so enjoyed the previous night were grown on its flanks.



FAST FACTS

► **Difficulty:** Although you cover 50 km over the three days, the pace can be tailored to suit any moderately fit group. There are two route options on day 2: one a good workout, the other an easier meander.

► **When to go:** The trail is offered year round except during July, but autumn and spring are particularly wonderful as the weather is at its most predictable and the flowers are at their best.

► **Reservations:**
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Around midday, the guides called a break and unpacked flasks of tea and coffee, along with savoury and baked treats to supplement the tasty salads that we were carrying in our lunch boxes. We should not have been surprised by the artfully presented picnic: The spoils and our hosts' careful attention to detail were apparent from the start.

Bathing our feet in a pristine mountain stream, we tucked in before continuing on a path lined by striking red fire heaths and yellow daisies. Rounding a bend, we surprised four grey reedbuck and Patrick took the opportunity to point out the tracks of wildcat, caracal, Cape fox, mongoose and baboon that had traversed the path. We also went down on our haunches often to check out the magnificent flora of the area: the distinctive red, pink and white tubes of numerous erica species, delicate silky puffs and lobelias, bright purple vygies and striking blue roella.

As we descended into the Elgin Basin and approached South Hill Vineyards, our home for the next two nights, the scenery changed, with orderly vines dominating the landscape. It was still early, so after tea, we had some down-time before reconvening for a wine tasting and dinner.

Day two, on the Paardeberg, was one of the best days I've ever had in the mountains. When offered the choice of a 19 km route, described as a 'good cardio workout', or an easier 12 km ramble, we went big, and didn't regret it. The trail, which took us deep into the rugged Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve, not only offered spectacular views and magnificent rock formations; it was a botanist's dream. The guides were animated, pointing out multi-hued pincushions, yellow-tufted heuningblom, rooistompies, feather bushes and deep blue bush irises.

Gaining the ridge, we stopped for tea at a viewpoint overlooking dramatic cliffs, then followed the trail as it stayed high on the peaks. We lunched at another stunning lookout, watching jackal buzzards and Verreaux's eagles soar overhead as we lazed in the sun, before continuing along the ridge to the vineyards of Iona Wine Farm, where we celebrated a fine day in the hills with a wine tasting and tea before the short shuttle back 'home' to South Hill.

Our final day saw us rambling through the valleys of the Kogelberg. We were now in the swing of things, and were pleased to recognise many of the familiar



GEAR

They supply a detailed list of recommended gear, but in addition to robust, comfortable boots, warm and waterproof hiking clothing, I'd recommend carrying at least two litres of water, a swimming costume and kikoi, binoculars and bird book. Carry cash or a credit card in case you want to purchase wine at the estates along the way.

plants and birdcalls. As the mist rose to reveal the Paardeberg and the ridge that we walked along yesterday, we swung into a big natural amphitheatre. A steep climb took us to Dragon's Head, a rocky koppie which, with the help of the guides, we scrambled up. From its summit, we surveyed the picturesque valley with its patchwork of orchards, vineyards, forests and untouched wilderness flanking the meandering Palmiet River.

As we celebrated the end of the trail with a wine tasting and lunch at Almenkerk Wine Estate, we reflected on the accessibility of this memorable trail. We'd covered a remarkably big area over the three days but even so we were astounded by the diversity and sense of wilderness that we'd experienced. Although only an hour's drive from the Mother City, we'd felt a million miles from the rat race. ★

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