

Swartberg Nature Reserve lies between the Great Karoo and Klein Karoo, forming a narrow but long stretch of 121 000ha. The reserve was declared a World Heritage Site in 1997. It is bordered by Gamkapoort Nature Reserve immediately to the north (8 000ha) and Towerkop Nature Reserve immediately to the west (51 000ha). These two reserves are not open to the public but are managed in conjunction with Swartberg. The entire conservation area - a massive 180 000ha - is critical to the management of mountain catchments and water yields in the region. The nearest towns to the Swartberg Pass are Oudtshoorn (40km), De Rust (55km) and Prince Albert (5km).

History

Numerous rock paintings and artefacts found in caves all over the reserve, show that the area was frequented by San people for many centuries. European farmers arrived in the 1700s, establishing small settlements and building roads, including three historic routes connecting the Great and Klein Karoo: Toorwaterpoort railway, Meiringspoort road, and the untarred Swartberg Pass, built by Thomas Bain, which takes vehicles over the Swartberg mountains and reaches a height of 1585m above sea-level. Gamkaskloof (also known as Die Hel), was first inhabited by farmers in 1830 and accessible only by foot until 1962 when a road was finally built, winding from the Swartberg Pass down into the valley. Gamkaskloof is a Cultural Historical Site.



Bat-eared fox

Climate and geology

Climates are extreme here: very cold winters bring snow to the mountains and temperatures well below zero, while summers can be uncomfortably hot with temperatures reaching 40°C and higher. Rain occurs throughout the year, peaking in early winter and spring, with thundershowers in the summer months.

The Swartberg mountains are part of the Cape fold mountain range, with geological formations common to the Table Mountain group and, to a lesser extent, the Bokkeveld and Cango groups. The Swartberg and Meiringspoort passes impressively show the rock formations from these groups.

Vegetation

Vegetation in the Swartberg is remarkably diverse, including renosterveld, mountain fynbos, Karoo-veld, spekboom veld and numerous geophyte species. Some species bloom virtually throughout the year although most plants flower in spring. In early autumn, many protea species flower, attracting large numbers of sugarbirds and sunbirds. During mid-summer (December - February) notable plants on the higher Swartberg peaks are in flower, including the rare *Protea venusta*.



Protea venusta

Animals

Mammals likely to be seen include klipspringer, grey rhebuck, kudu, baboon and dassie. Springbok occur on the flatter areas of Gamkapoort. Leopard and caracal are also present in the area, but seldom seen. More than 130 bird

species have been recorded here, notably, black, fish and martial eagle species, Cape sugarbird and the pied kingfisher.

Activities

Visitors to Swartberg return frequently to experience its sense of vastness and tranquillity. Swartberg Pass and Meiringspoort have scenic picnic and braai spots, while the Gamka River and Gamkapoort Dam offer plenty of opportunities for canoeing, sailing and fishing (fresh-water angling licences are required).

The best times for hiking are April to May and September to October, with options ranging from easy day-hikes to a fairly demanding three-day route which leads hikers past rock formations, incredible views and unspoilt mountain fynbos. This trail has two alternative starting points, with overnight huts at Ou Tol and Bothashoek (both accommodating up to 12 people) which provide panoramic views of a landscape dominated by Cape fold mountains.

Spectacular views are also a feature of Swartberg's 4x4 route, which can be booked as a day or overnight route.



Pied kingfisher



Gamkaskloof (Die Hel)

A Cultural Historical Site

The remote and isolated Gamkaskloof valley has a rich ecological, archaeological and cultural history and is a must to visit! As well as being part of the World Heritage Site, it was declared a Cultural Historical Site and deserves special care to ensure it is preserved for future generations. It offers camping and self-catering accommodation in eight restored historical cottages sleeping between two and eight people. Of these, Stappies Cordier cottage is fully equipped for people with disabilities. There are ten camp sites and a bushcamp (sleeping up to 10 people), all with hot showers and braai facilities.

About 90km from Oudtshoorn and 60km from Prince Albert, Gamkaskloof is only accessible from the Swartberg Pass via the Otto du Plessis road. This road is inaccessible to caravans and there are no shops or fuel stations along the way. Visitors need to bring their own towels and sufficient food stocks for their stay.

Visitors to Gamkaskloof can enjoy picnicking and angling at the Gamka River, walking the 6km (3hr) interpretation trail, and exploring historical artefacts like the antique Norwegian mill. No quadbikes or motorcycles are allowed without prior permission (contact Erika Swanepoel (044) 203 6325 or eswanepoel@capenature.co.za).

Before the road was built into the valley in 1962, a donkey trail over the Swartberg Mountains from Calitzdorp to "Die Hel" was the only commercial lifeline with the outside world.

Hikers - accompanied by donkeys and guides - can now enjoy this heritage trail and hike the original route in the manner of the pioneers of yesteryear. The 25km Donkey Trail starts on the farm "Living Waters" in Groenfontein near Calitzdorp and takes three nights and four days with a maximum of eight people walking at any time. Guests' luggage is portered and all meals are included.

For bookings contact Erika Calitz 0836289394 or info@donkeytrail.com or visit www.donkeytrail.com



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ENQUIRIES

Tel: (044) 203 6325
eswanepoel@capenature.co.za

RESERVATIONS

Tel: 0861CAPENATURE
(227 362 8873)

www.capenature.co.za



