



Exploring the pristine rock pools of De Hoop's inter-tidal zone with a qualified guide

SOUTHERN CAPE

In the rush to get from Cape Town to the well-known 'Garden Route', the areas between are often overlooked. But ask the locals and you'll hear of the hills of the Overberg, the wildlife of De Hoop, and the offbeat corners of the Little Karoo. Currently these areas are quieter, but no less interesting – and in many ways they're better for hiking, walking, and nature.

THE OVERBERG

East of Cape Town, in the heart of the Overberg region, it's worth stopping in Swellendam for at least a night or two. Potter around this historical town's craft studios or museum, or head to Bontebok National Park for spectacular hiking.

On the edge of town, **The Old Mill** is a rustic, idiosyncratic little guesthouse with a popular, if slightly spartan, restaurant serving local cuisine. There are six cottages here; expect open fires, terracotta-tiled floors and whitewashed walls. Across the road, the immaculate **Rothman Manor** has six rooms of different designs and is on the retro side of trendy. It has a large beautifully landscaped garden with a viewing deck and Jacuzzi overlooking a small reserve for zebra and springbok. On the outside it's a traditional building, but we were surprised at how very comfortable and modern it is inside.

The welcoming **Schoone Oordt Country House** remains a favourite of ours. Centred around a beautifully restored Victorian house and set in lush gardens, its ten rooms have antique furnishings, high ceilings, fireplaces and spacious en-suite bathrooms. Enjoy meals in the restaurant, The Conservatory.

A short walk from the town centre, the **Hideaway** is a friendly owner-run Victorian guest house. It has four rooms with handcrafted furniture and works by local artists, all facing the immaculate rose garden and large swimming pool.

Not far from Swellendam is South Africa's smallest national park, the Bontebok National Park. Activities here include birdwatching, game viewing, nature trails, fishing and canoeing on the Breede River. **Lang Elsie's Kraal Rest Camp** has ten self-catering chalets with views over the Breede River, designed to have minimal impact on the environment.



Eland are one of the more numerous antelope in De Hoop

DE HOOP NATURE RESERVE

Although only 60km of gravel road south of Swellendam, De Hoop Nature Reserve seems well off the beaten track and is bypassed by most visitors. That's a shame, as it's a first-rate park that is well worth exploring for a few days.

De Hoop was proclaimed a nature reserve in 1953. It's a fairly small park, covering 340km², but has an amazing diversity of ecosystems within its boundaries; it is home to a remarkable 1,500 plant species. There are four main environments here, and it's best explored on foot.

Our planning manual

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Most of the park is dominated by gently rolling hillsides covered in pristine lowland fynbos vegetation. This is thick, but in the valleys it opens out onto grassy plains where you'll often find herds of bontebok, Cape mountain zebra and surprisingly large numbers of eland.

Grey rhebuck (aka 'rhebok'), caracal, and apparently leopard also live here, as well as baboons, yellow mongooses and the occasional impressively large leopard tortoise. Because few of the park's animals are dangerous, walking is allowed here and generally safe. De Hoop has a number of marked hiking trails; travellers can walk by themselves or hire a guide.

De Hoop is one of South Africa's most important birding areas (and its first RAMSAR birding site); 260 different species of birds have been recorded here. It's often observed that De Hoop's Potberg Mountain area has the only remaining breeding colony of Cape vultures in the Western Cape; it's less often noted that this same mountain area is home to 12 plant species which grow nowhere else on Earth!

In contrast with the dry fynbos is the 16km-long De Hoop Vlei Lake. It is skirted by a superb walking trail, from which a myriad of water and wetland birds can be seen. On a short morning's walk, on just a fraction of this trail, we saw flamingos, spoonbills, pelicans, white-fronted cormorants and black-necked grebes.

Another very different eco-system lines the coast: spectacular sand dunes rise up to quite a height between the fynbos and the beach. Some are vegetated and most seem to be patrolled by African harrier-hawks. These dunes are a real feature of the environment here, as well as a place where the park's younger visitors can have great fun.

Walking across the dunes leads to a very natural, unspoilt and rugged coastline; the park has more than 70km of pristine ocean frontage. Calcified dunes make up cliffs and caves and, near the waterline, terraces which hold enormous, pristine rock pools. Intermingled with these are some very lovely sandy beaches; it's a fascinating shore to relax on and to explore. From the beach up to about 5km offshore is a protected marine area, and in season (June–Nov) you've an excellent chance of seeing southern right whales, dolphins and seals.

The only place to stay within the park is **De Hoop Opstal**. This is privately run, although its wide range of accommodation options

hints at its origins as a restcamp run by the park's authorities. The Opstal centres around the Opstal Manor, a farmhouse built in the 1800s complete with beautiful yellowwood floors, high ceilings and, outside, a couple of vast, spreading Natal white fig trees.

There are many different types of rooms here, from good-value cottages equipped for self-catering (which are great for families), to historical rooms in the Opstal Manor and beautiful suites. There are also several farmhouses and cottages dotted throughout the reserve suitable for small self-catering groups. A small shop beside the Opstal Manor sells a few necessities, like firewood, for self-caterers, and the à la carte Fig Tree Restaurant serves three good meals per day.

While many visitors drive and walk around the reserve by themselves, it's also possible to join guided activities such as interpretive marine walks, guided mountain biking, birdwatching walks, and even stargazing sessions. There's a lot in De Hoop that's worth visiting.

THE LITTLE KAROO

Jans Rautenbach is a well-known feature film director. He and his wife, Almeri, designed and built a gem of a place about 55km east of Oudtshoorn called **Oulap**: a unique stone house on its own hilltop with stunning views.

Everything in this eclectic house has a story, and Jans makes a gracious yet ebullient raconteur. Almeri's cuisine is excellent and dinner is always relaxed, with lively conversation accompanying a good bottle of wine. Outside is a swimming pool, while inside you will find a cellar bar, lounges and an extensive library including many films.

The more conventional **Rosenhof Country House** is situated on the outskirts of Oudtshoorn and dates back to 1852. Its main building is a renovated homestead, which houses a fine restaurant serving traditional country cuisine. Surrounding the lovely rose garden and swimming pool are 12 stylish rooms and two private suites each with its own pool.



Starfish can live up to 35 years



Whitewashed cottages at the Drostdy Museum in Swellendam