

# Creatures and comforts

Hiking

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Bobby Jordan goes slack- packing on the Cape coast's three-day Hunter-Gatherer trail.

'A Cape Lizard, male, adult, 14 centimetres. Heading south.' Our guide is pointing with his stick, eyes focused and directed, at a tiny squiggle on the sand dunes above Fransmanshoek. This is his hundredth field observation, or thereabouts, all equally impressive, everything from a female leopard to a tok-tokkie beetle with a left-side limp.

"That there is bokdrol," he says a bit later, the tip of his stick stirring the chocolaty pellets. "Grysbok. You can tell by what he has eaten.

"And see, here is that leopard again. Definitely female. Mmmm."

Out comes the field ranger palm- pilot for a GPS reading, and now a couple of pictures with his cellphone camera, "just for the record".

We are suitably impressed.

His name is Cobus, this maestro of the veld and flora, whose own tracks above Fransmanshoek are made by sturdy, size-nine Hi-tech boots moving purposefully along the Hunter-Gatherer trail. He has led us from our campsite above the coastal town of Vleesbaai to Fransmanshoek at the bay's western extremity, so called because a group of French castaways lived a while on this craggy cape after their ship came to grief in the roiling surf below.

By contrast we are a pampered party with our binocs and packed lunches of trail mix and cheese-and- tomato sarmies. We will not scrounge for grasshoppers or the sour, red berries of the bitterbossie; we will bunk down tonight in a four- star coastal chalet with hot showers and Old Brown Sherry on tap. Such are the benefits of slack-packing along the southern Cape coast.

Of course the irony of it all makes the experience more delicious: we are following in the footsteps of the earliest modern humans who literally carved out a precarious life here along the cliffs and beaches of the wildest place under the sun; sun- scorched men and women who fended off lions with pointed sticks and ate periwinkle bredie morning, noon and night. We are tracing the footpaths of brave, hunter-gatherer tribes who survived rock falls and earthquakes and died of old age at around 35. We, a bunch of city-slickers pushing 40 with barely a bone fracture between us.

In our day-packs are dream diaries and packets of marshmallows and novels by authors who wouldn't know a bokdrol if it hit them in the back of the throat.

And there is no shame in this.

There is only the sense, stronger with every kilometre, that we have never had it so good down here on the more interesting end of Africa.

Relative comfort is one of the key ingredients of the Hunter-Gatherer trail, a three-day affair that is both a heritage tour, a coastal walk and a chance to kick back and gaze into some rooikrans firelight. The 24km trail — an offshoot of the better- known Oystercatcher trail between Mossel Bay and Gourits Mond — combines the attractions of a conventional wilderness trail with elements of Survivor, School-in-the- Wilds and a luxury safari. Instead of



**Ahoy fair midden:** The hikers approach a compacted pile of ancient hunter-gatherer rubbish, the remains of millions of shellfish suppers



**Bummer:** A piece of driftwood makes a convenient resting point





**Dune what comes naturally:** Leave only footprints in the sand. Pictures: Bobby Jordan

“Tracing the footpaths of brave hunter-gatherer tribes, we carry dream diaries and marshmallows in our day-packs.”



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


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walking from A to B, the group embarks on day excursions tailor-made to suit their fitness level. Routes are circular and flexible, with several options available, including the option to do extremely little.

But even the laziest hiker would be curious to discover the extraordinary heritage sites littered along this picture-perfect stretch of coast, an experience heightened by trained guides with encyclopaedic knowledge of everything under the sun — and quite a bit beyond it.

On our first day, for instance, we take a comfortable 6km wander, first to the tip of Fransmanshoek, then along the curved belly of the adjoining sandy beach and up an 80m-high dune with views north to the Swartberg Mountains; east to a pristine, rocky Cape flanked by deep, sea pools; and south to infinity.

“See over there: old Khoi-fish traps,” says Cobus, extending a tanned arm. “And see the pattern of the sandbanks in the surf — there’s a rip over there. And there. And there.”

Two hours later, a late-afternoon tide pulls us gently back to “camp” — a clearing on a farm outside Vleesbaai — where a row of tents has been pitched on raised wooden platforms in luxury bushveld style, complete with bed bases, mosquito nets and cooler boxes filled with chops, wors and beer, and one or two bottles of decent plonk. All that remains is to gooi some blitz on the fire and throttle back into one’s deckchair to count one’s blessings — chief among them the fact that the trail is fully catered. This means one carries very little in one’s day-pack and arrives at the end point to find generous provisions to cook.

Dawn comes gently the next day, as does a fruit-salad breakfast. Then it’s down to the beach — no need to pack up, that’s taken care of too — for a swim and a brisk beach walk to Dana Bay. There we join Cobus for a tour of the many shell middens and stone “workshops” that litter this ancient bay.

A word of advice for readers who prefer adventure sports to slack-packing: don’t underestimate the thrill of a solid, six-foot- deep shell midden. These compacted piles of ancient hunter- gatherer rubbish are the remains of millions of shellfish suppers that illustrate the depth of history in the southern climes. Middens are our cathedrals, our temples and shrines; our outdoor museums, where ancient stone tools lie about as if our ancestors have just nipped off for a swim.

To stand next to a sea-facing midden, to share its sound and its outlook, is to feel the breeze of ten thousand ghosts breathing down your neck. “See here: white mussels and periwinkles,” says Cobus, enthusiastic as ever. “And over there!” — out goes the stick — “and there and there.”

Several dozen middens later and we begin to feel deep appreciation for the comforts back at the chalet overlooking Vleesbaai, where we spend the second night. From there we set off on our third and final day trip, floating down a pretty section of the Gourits river in double canoes. No middens here but plenty of birdlife and fish, the latter a tasty entrée for our farewell braai on the last night.

Which brings me back to Cobus, now leaning into a hangover at the side of rooikrans braai, one eye at the bottom of a glass of sherry, the other swimming in Orion’s Belt. “What’s the weather going to be like tomorrow, Cobus?” asks somebody from the group.

“Well ...” he straightens up, checks the horizon, the wind direction, the upper atmosphere cloud-cover, and then flops back onto a cushion. “I have absolutely no idea.”

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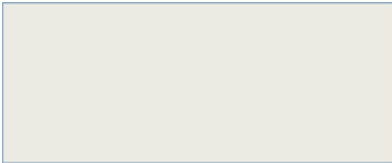
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