

The Groot Winterhoek Wilderness Area lies about 120km north of Cape Town, in the Grootwinterhoek mountain range north of Tulbagh and east of Porterville. Featuring extraordinary rock formations and popular hiking routes, it forms part of the greater Groot Winterhoek conservation area comprising 30 608ha, of which 19 200ha was declared a wilderness area in 1985. The conservation area is particularly important for the conservation of mountain fynbos and wildlife, as a source of clean water to the Cape metropole and the west coast, and for outdoor recreation. The landscape here is rugged and mountainous, with altitudes of 1000 to 2077m above sea-level. The weathering of Table Mountain sandstone has created exceptional rock formations that are a special feature of the area.

History

Various rock paintings indicate that San and Khoi people once inhabited this region. Perdevlei, De Tronk, Louws Legplek, Driebosch en Kliphuis were among the first farms to be established - some being registered as early as 1875. Early settlers in the area used animals to transport produce and supplies to and from Porterville and Saron. Their tracks are still visible above Driebosch and Weltevrede. In 1909, a group of Portuguese-speaking herders, known as the Makatse, stayed at De Tronk. They all died, apparently of flu, and their stone graves can be seen at De Tronk and near the CapeNature office complex.

Climate

As the name suggests, winters are cold and wet, while summers are moderate. The average annual rainfall is 1450mm, with the heaviest rains occurring between April and September. Winter nights are very cold with temperatures falling to below freezing level, accompanied by heavy frost and frequent snow. The weather at Groot Winterhoek is unpredictable and hikers should always be prepared for sudden cold and mist.

Vegetation

Mountain fynbos is the predominant vegetation here. Various rare, threatened and endemic species are found, such as the *Sorocephalus scabridus* - a member of the protea family, which grows at Kliphuisvlakte. A large variety of red disas flower abundantly along the streams near the reserve office in January and February. Many erica species flower almost throughout the year and are particularly beautiful in the summer when the veld resembles a colourful patchwork.

Animals

Klipspringers, grey rhebok and grysbok are common and easy to spot. Leopard, caracal, wild cat, mongoose, genet and other predators also occur, but are seldom seen. The area is home to about 100 bird species, including the endemic Cape rockjumper and numerous raptors like the black eagle, goshawk and jackal buzzard. Of the reptiles, tortoises are absent and snakes scarce due to the high altitudes and cold winters, although sand snakes and boomslang are occasionally seen. A few rare lizard species occur, most notably the southern rock lizard.

Rock art

Various examples of rock art, believed to be between 300 and 6 000 years old, are found in the area. The paintings illustrate the religious and social life of the San people, who have inhabited southern Africa for more than 100 000 years. It is a criminal offence to damage rock art.

Accommodation

Veepos cottage is located near the reserve office, sleeps six and is fully equipped. Groot Winterhoek also has four basic hiker huts at De Tronk which are equipped with bunk beds and mattresses only. Located at the edge of the wilderness area, these huts can only be reached via a 3.5 hour hike. Hikers may also overnight anywhere in the reserve or wilderness area.

Hiking

There are numerous options for hiking in the wilderness. Hikes have varying lengths and many provide welcome swimming opportunities. Parts of the greater conservation area, like Sneeugetrivier and the mountain peaks, are true wilderness - showing no traces of human intervention. It is advisable to book in advance as capacities are limited. Times below are based on hikers with average fitness levels carrying a backpack. Numbers correspond with those on the map.

1 Parking area to De Tronk via jeep track (14km, 3½ hrs)

This route is fairly easy but water is not available for the first 11km, until Weltevrede. Hikers should not use this route if making their way back to the parking area. Vegetation along the route is very attractive and includes tolbos, erica and exceptionally large waboom trees.

2 Parking area to De Tronk via river (13km, 3 hrs)

This route leads from the parking area along the Kliphuis River to

the low-water bridge. It then follows the jeep track to De Tronk. Plenty of water is available on this stretch and there are lots of swimming pools and beautiful patches of ericas along the way. In winter, the Groot Kliphuis River is difficult and dangerous to cross.

3 Parking area to Protea Pool (1,5km, 40 min)

This route is easy and begins at the parking area. The route takes you through one of the few sections of flat areas in the reserve and stops at the small but refreshing Protea Pool. From here you can explore the tributary of the Groot Kliphuis River. Remember to keep an eye open for the disas that flower between December and February.

4 Parking area to Groot Kliphuis via river (16km, 4 hrs)

This easy route starts at the parking area, follows the Kliphuis River for a short distance before swinging away in an easterly direction. The route winds through exceptional rock formations and passes a wonderful swimming pool as it enters the koppies. Many ericas and disas grow along this route. Water is plentiful but in winter the streams can be difficult to cross.

5 De Tronk to Die Hel (5km, 1½ hrs)

From De Tronk the path leads south under oak trees and over a small footbridge towards Die Hel. The route is easy until just above the gorge and swimming pool. The descent into the gorge is very steep, difficult and dangerous. There is an overhang with rock art on the left of the footpath as it begins to drop very steeply. The pool is very deep and one of the largest in the Western Cape.

Please note:

- Only competent swimmers should attempt the pool.
- Hikers are not allowed to overnight at the pool or overhang.
- Fires are not permitted at the pool or overhang.
- The rock art in the overhang may not be damaged.

Wilderness etiquette

- Hikers are not compelled to stay on the trails and may explore the rock formations and caves that are 'off the beaten track'.
- Open fires are not allowed due to the high risk of veld fires.
- The trails do not have route markers, but small cairns indicate directions where trails lead over plate rock.
- No toilet facilities are available. Hikers are requested to carry a small spade for this purpose. Please do not use soap or shampoo in the rivers and streams.
- Hikers must leave their vehicles in the parking area at the office complex.
- Firearms and pets are not allowed.
- Permits must be carried at all times.



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- The route and area around the pool is dangerous, particularly for children and elderly people.
- The caves around the pool are entered at your own risk, as they may carry diseases.

6 Groot Kliphuis to Perdevlei via jeep track (7km, 2 hrs)

This route is fairly demanding but offers magnificent views. Water is only available at the start and end of the trail. Protea grow in abundance along the route.

7 Groot Kliphuis to Perdevlei via river (6km, 1½ hrs)

This route leads south from Kliphuis to the Klein Kliphuis River where hikers must turn east (left) to reach Perdevlei. The river usually has water.

8 Perdevlei to De Tronk (12km, 2½ hrs)

This beautiful route follows the Klein Kliphuis River and joins the jeep track leading to De Tronk. There are many swimming pools along the way.

9 Die Hel to De Hoek kloofing (9,5km)

This demanding route is for true adventurers. It has no footpath and the route follows the river, with sections through the water. Hikers may also walk along the edge of the ravine. In both cases hikers must obtain permission from the landowner at De Hoek before entering the private property. The route can only be tackled from Die Hel to De Hoek and not the other way. Leave a vehicle at De Hoek.

Directions

The Groot Winterhoek entrance is 33km from Porterville. Take the Cardouw turn-off about 2km north of Porterville, travel up the steep Dasklip Pass and follow the signboards to the office and parking area.



EDUCOAFRICA

EDUCO AFRICA is an NGO whose purpose is to serve people by drawing forth new awareness, personal resilience, vision and responsibility through facilitated experiences that help them to connect with themselves, each other and their world. Since its inception in 1994, it has worked primarily in the Wilderness using experiential learning methodology and has used the Groot Winterhoek Wilderness since 2002. Currently it runs a base camp and environmental sustainability learning centre at Bosdorp for over 400 participants a year.

DISCLAIMER OF LIABILITY

All persons entering this conservation area and using its facilities, do so entirely at their own risk. The Western Cape Nature Conservation Board and/or its employees and/or agents and/or its successors in title shall not be liable for any damage, loss, theft, injury, accident or death suffered by any person, howsoever caused.

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ENQUIRIES

Tel: 022 931 2860/
022 931 2315

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Tel: 0861CAPENATURE
(227 362 8873)

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