The Cederberg Wilderness lies some 250km north of Cape Town, stretching from the Middelberg Pass at Citrusdal to north of the Pakhuis Pass at Clanwilliam and encompassing some 70 000ha of rugged, mountainous terrain. It is renowned for its spectacular landscapes and rock formations as well as the increasingly rare Clanwilliam cedar tree, from which it got its name.

Geologically, the Cederberg is part of the Cape Fold Belt and consists mainly of Table Mountain sandstone. Weathered sandstone formations, most notably the Wolberg Arch and the Maltese Cross, are typical of the Cederberg.

History
San and Khoi people inhabited the Cederberg area from earliest times. European settlers began stock farming here in the early eighteenth century and from 1903 to 1973, exploitation of natural products was rampant. Large amounts of cedarwood, rooibos tea, buchu and rockwood bark were harvested. Fires added to the destruction and cedar trees are now on the brink of extinction.

The Cederberg was proclaimed a wilderness in 1973 and received World Heritage status in 2004. The 12 000ha Matjiesrivier Nature Reserve, obtained in 1995 with the assistance of the World Wide Fund for Nature (SA), is situated on the drier eastern boundary of the Cederberg mountains. It is managed as an integral component of the Greater Cederberg Conservation Area.

Climate
Winter in the Cederberg is cold and wet while summers are warm and dry. Most rain falls between May and September and it often snows on the higher parts. In winter, night temperatures drop sharply and harsh frosts may occur, while in summer temperatures reach as high as 40°C. Matjiesrivier Nature Reserve is located in an area of semi-arid and semi-wet, with its eastern slopes generally drier than those at high altitude or facing west.

Vegetation
Vegetation in the Cederberg is predominately mountain fynbos. The lower slopes support protea, silky cone bush, sand olive and cedar tree. Clanwilliam daisies, with wild olives and mountain maytenus on the rocky outcrops. Waboom veld also occurs at this lower altitude. The eye-catching purply-blue ridderspoor, rooibos tea and buchu grow against the lower cliffs while higher up one finds fynbos restio, with red dasia along streams on the plateau.

The Clanwilliam cedar grows in rocky areas at altitudes of more than 1 000m above sea level. In the wetter ravines, red and white alder, yellowwood, hard-pear and Cape beech occur, while wild olives, Infosky bark and spoonwood prefer dryer kloofs. The endemic snow protea is perhaps the most attractive plant on the highest peaks – it is very scarce and only found at a few sites in the wilderness.

Matjiesrivier Nature Reserve falls in a transitional zone between the fynbos and succulent Karoo vegetation types. The drier conditions and fine-grained clay soils of the western slopes of the reserve also support central mountain renosterveld, which is dominated by members of the asteraceae family. Growing on more fertile soils than fynbos, renosterveld is believed to have once supported herds of large game and predators such as lion.

Animals
Baboons, dassies, grey rhebok, klipspringers, dulska and grysbok are fairly common in the Cederberg. Porcupine, honey-badger, Cape clawless otter and the aardvark also occur although they are seldom seen. The leop- ard is the Cederberg’s largest predator and is fairly common although very shy. Smaller mammals include African wild cat, lynx, bat-eared fox, aardwolf and Cape fox. The small grey mongoose and striped polecat are often seen. Various interesting rodents occur, including the spectacular dormouse.

More than 100 bird species occur here, with black eagle, rock kestrel and jacco buzzard being the most common raptors. About 16 snake species are found in the Cederberg, the most common being berg adder, puff adder and Cape cobra. The armadillo lizard is one of the endemic reptiles found here.

Conservation
Clanwilliam cedar tree numbers are declining despite past protection efforts. They are being cultivated in a nursery at the Cederberg’s value and visitors are encouraged to discover them on their own. Rock art is protected by the National Heritage Resources Act no.25 of 1999 and vandals who deface rock paintings face severe penalties.

Rock art
The Cederberg features hundreds of rocky overhangs and caves with fine examples of rock art. The most famous of these are the elephant paintings at the Stadsaal Caves on the Matjiesrivier Nature Reserve. These paintings vary in age between 300 and 6 000 years and are very sensitive to damage. They are an integral part of the Cederberg’s value and visitors are encouraged to discover them on their own. Rock art is protected by the National Heritage Resources Act no.25 of 1999 and vandals who deface rock paintings face severe penalties.

Facilities
The peaceful atmosphere of the Algeria campsite has broad appeal. Here, 48 sites are situated along the banks of the Rondegat River. The more basic Klipsig camp- site is located on the Pakhuis Pass on the Olifants-Rondeagat river route to Biedouw Valley and Wupperthal. This campsite has 10 spots under shady trees along the Klipsig River. Algeria also offers seven chalets, ranging from fully-equipped to comfort- able, basic accommodation, all close to the Rondegat River and its swimming holes.

The wilderness is divided into utilisation zones, which helps to maintain the unspoilt atmosphere and limit the impact of visitors. Groups are limited to a minimum of three and a maximum of 12 persons per group. Visitors are urged to book well in advance to avoid disappointment.

Access
The bridge crossing the Olifants River at Kriedouwkrans, between Citrusdal and Clanwilliam, sometimes floods during winter. There are alternative routes to Algeria via Citrusdal and Clanwilliam - contact the Algeria office for a road condition report before departing.