

# SWARTBERG NATURE RESERVE

## 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 2004. It is bordered by Gamkapoort Nature Reserve immediately to the north (8 000ha) and Towerkop Nature Reserve immediately to the west (51 000ha).

### Climate and geology

Climates are extreme here. Very cold winters bring snow to the mountains and temperatures can drop to well below zero. 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.

### Flora

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.

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).

### Fauna



Mammals likely to be seen include klipspringer, grey rheebuck, 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 has scenic lookout points while Meiringspoort has scenic picnic and braai spots.

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 an overnight hut at Bothashoek (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.

### 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 Baines, 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.

## 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 self-catering accommodation in eleven restored historical cottages sleeping between two and eight people.

Of these, **Stappies Cordier cottage** is fully equipped for people with disabilities. There is a bushcamp (sleeping up to 12 people), with hot showers and braai facilities. Towels are provided in all the cottages, but visitors staying at the bush camp need to bring their own towels. 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 sufficient food stocks for their stay.

Visitors to Gamkaskloof can enjoy picnicking and angling at the Gamka River with permission from Reserve Management. Permits for angling in the Western Cape (freshwater and dams) are available at the reserve office and are valid for one year.

There are two hiking trails – the 6,3km (3 hours on average) **Grootkloof interpretation trail** and a 1,4km trail leading to Koningsgat. Historical artefacts such as the antique Norwegian mill can also be explored.

The use of quadbikes is prohibited but motorcycles are allowed with prior permission (contact **Nicolette Mouries** on 087 087 3022, or alternatively [nmouries@capenature.co.za](mailto:nmouries@capenature.co.za)).

Before the road was built into the Gamkaskloof 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](mailto:info@donkeytrail.com) or visit [www.donkeytrail.com](http://www.donkeytrail.com)

### 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. Right of Admission Reserved.

## Stay safe when venturing outdoors

- Wear comfortable walking shoes, sunscreen and a hat
- Don't hike alone
- Carry enough food and water for the trip
- Make sure you know what the weather conditions are before you depart
- Take a warm jacket/raincoat in winter
- Make sure you have a map of the area
- Take a field medical kit along for emergencies
- Obey all signage
- Stay in a group and keep to marked trails

### Contact numbers

RESERVE OFFICE  
087 087 3002  
(OUDTSHOORN)  
087 087 3943  
(GAMKASKLOOF/DIE HEL)

RESERVATIONS  
087 087 8250

Gate times  
07:30 to 16:00

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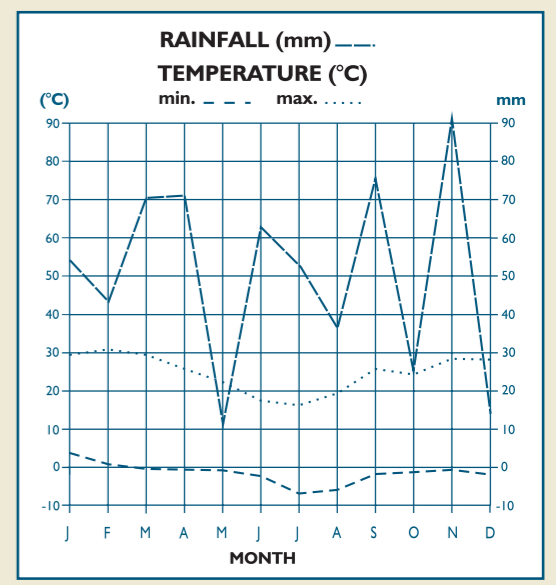
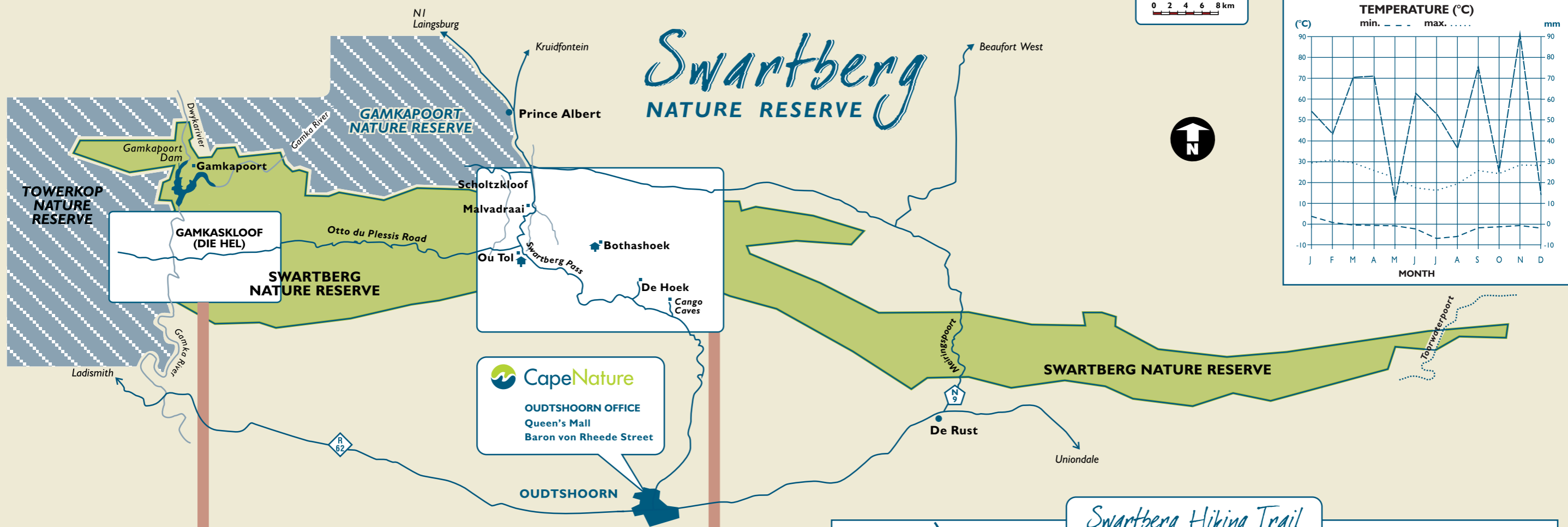
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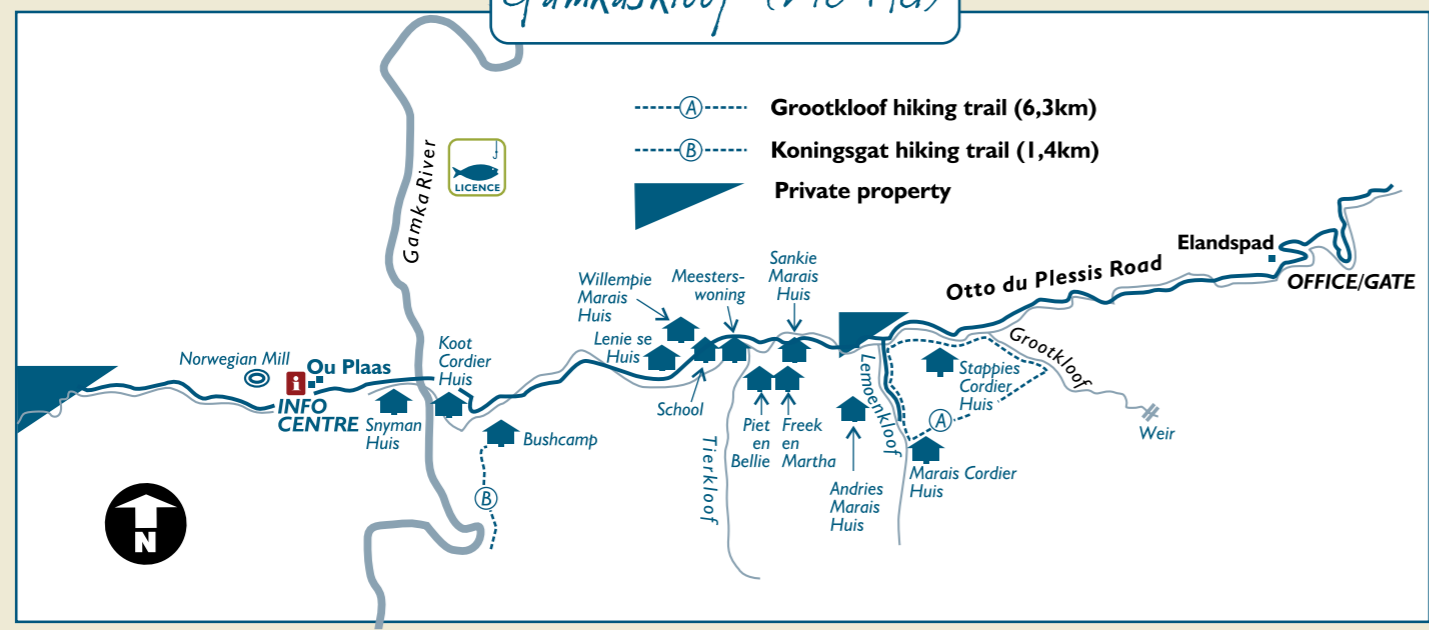


# Swartberg NATURE RESERVE



**CapeNature**  
 OUDTSHOORN OFFICE  
 Queen's Mall  
 Baron von Rheede Street

## Gamkaskloof (Die Hel)



## Swartberg Hiking Trail

