

# Get a natural high in the Overberg

With fynbos, penguins, sharks, whales and even leopards, The Overberg is paradise for nature lovers – and it’s blessedly uncrowded for most of the year, enthuses **Nick Dall**.



**ZOLA NENE**  
Food author & TV chef



**ON HERMANUS**

I went whale-watching in Hermanus a couple of years ago and stayed at the Bamboo Guest House. It was a beautiful place, very quiet and peaceful.



ABOVE: From breaching to lobtailing, you can observe energetic southern right whale behaviour from the cliff-top path at Hermanus (top).

Stretching from Gordon’s Bay to Cape Infanta, the Overberg region of the Western Cape takes in rugged coastline, pristine beaches, unspoilt fynbos and babbling brooks. And it’s just an hour or two from Cape Town.

**Watch whales in Hermanus**

Every year between June and December, southern right whales leave their icy Antarctic homes to mate and calve in the warmer waters off South Africa’s southern coast. Whales can be seen throughout the Overberg at this time of year, but Hermanus is, without doubt, the region’s whale-watching capital. Visit between September and November and you’re virtually guaranteed to see loads of the leviathans mere metres from the town’s delightful clifftop path. Simply heed the call of the charismatic Whale Crier who uses a bugle fashioned from kelp to signal their whereabouts.



**Explore the sea cave at Arniston**

If there was a prize for ‘most charming seaside village’, quaint, rugged Arniston would win hands down. There’s also loads to do and see: wander the streets of Kassiesbaai (the town’s historical fishing village), swim in the gorgeously warm waters of Oyster Beach, or stroll out to the famous wreck of the Arniston.

But Arniston’s biggest drawcard is Waenhuiskrans, the enormous sea cave which gives the town its Afrikaans name. It may be huge, but you’d never find the cave if you didn’t know what you were looking for. First you have to scramble down a limestone cliff and then squeeze through a tiny porthole into the back of the cave. Once you’re in, you’ll be struck by the ferocity of the waves pounding and crashing beneath the perfect archway facing the sea – a poignant reminder that the cave should only be visited at low tide.



ABOVE: The first part of the Oudebos Trail involves a steep ascent up the zig-zag trail in the Harold Porter Gardens.

**Marvel at the fynbos in Betty’s Bay**

The Cape Floral Kingdom, aka fynbos, is the most biodiverse plant kingdom on the planet, with more species per square kilometre than the Amazon rainforest. The true jewel in this very splendid crown is the Harold Porter Botanical Gardens in Betty’s Bay. Botanists get extremely excited by the cornucopia of species on offer but there’s also plenty to do for the uninitiated.

The walk to the Disakloof Waterfall is flat and well within most people’s abilities. Go in January and February when the cliff behind the falls is emblazoned with red disa flowers which glisten in the mist. Leopard’s Kloof is a more strenuous walk, but the effort is rewarded by great views and a pristine series of pools and cascades. The Oudebos Trail is Betty’s Bay’s real challenge: it runs from the Palmiet River near Kleinmond, all the way back to the Harold Porter Gardens, passing through some untouched indigenous forests on the way.

**Explore the dunes at De Hoop**

The adjectives ‘rugged’ and ‘luxurious’ aren’t often used to describe the same destination, but in the case of De Hoop they are ideal bedfellows. This vast coastal reserve encompasses 34 000 hectares of lowland fynbos and duneveld, as well as one of the largest marine reserves in South Africa. The landscapes are incredible, the whale-watching is unsurpassed and the bespoke accommodation options ([www.dehoopcollection.com](http://www.dehoopcollection.com)) ensure there is something for everyone.

The jewel in De Hoop’s crown is undoubtedly the spectacular five-day Whale Trail ‘slackpacking’ route. This 55km trail allows moderately fit hikers to experience the reserve’s varied landscapes, fauna and flora and – in whale season – the ocean’s gentle giants. ▶





### Hike from McGregor to Greyton

As the crow flies, the delightful mountain retreats of Greyton and McGregor are only 28km from one another, but the shortest road link entails a circuitous detour of over 100km. Who needs cars, anyway? The Boesmansklouf Hiking Trail cuts straight through the imposing Riviersonderend Mountains, and takes in amazing scenery, chilly rock pools and incredible fynbos along the way.

The 14km trail can be hiked in one day, but most people choose to do a there-and-back hike, staying overnight in either town. Just be warned: the trailhead on the McGregor side is 14km from town but Eagle's Nest ([www.boesmanskloufmcgregor.com](http://www.boesmanskloufmcgregor.com)) offers rustic accommodation nearby. They're also happy to buy groceries for hikers for a small fee.

While you're in the area also check out the Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve (great mountain biking and bird hide) and the Eseltjesrus Donkey Sanctuary, which provides pastures green for previously-disadvantaged asses.

Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve

“In 1982 a few intrepid African penguins decided to call Stony Point in Betty's Bay home, so starting the oldest penguin colony on the South African mainland.”

### An estuary to yourself at De Mond

The De Mond Nature Reserve, located midway between Arniston and Struisbaai, is one of the Western Cape's undiscovered natural gems. The centrepiece is the magnificent Heuningnes Estuary, one of the best saltwater fly-fishing destinations in the country and the ideal place for tranquil swims and kayaking excursions.

Hiking trails wend their way through the dune forests, around the pristine estuary and onwards to the rugged coastline. De Mond has an amazing forested picnic site and one solitary overnight cottage - the real magic begins when the day visitors go home and it's just you and big, boundless nature. Book at [www.capenature.co.za](http://www.capenature.co.za).

### Get personal with penguins

In 1982 a few intrepid African penguins decided to call Stony Point in Betty's Bay home, so starting the oldest penguin colony on the South African mainland. These days there are thousands of birds and the colony is a great, low-key alternative to the exceedingly popular (for humans) colony at Boulders, near Simon's Town. Stony Point was the site of a whaling station at the turn of the last century, so check out the large concrete vats where the blubber was boiled, as well as the wreck of the *Una* in the bay. If you're really lucky you may even glimpse the not-so-innocent Cape leopard which broke into the colony earlier this year.



### Catch a trout in Hemel en Aarde

Only five kilometres from Hermanus lies the Hemel en Aarde valley, a gorgeous mountain hideaway with something for every kind of nature lover. Pedalheads can use the fantastic network of mountain bike trails which range from a five-kilometre route for the whole family through to a 'mountain-goats-only' 35km behemoth which features a 1300m elevation gain.

Thanks to the efforts of the Hermanus Flyfishing Club you can fish for trout in four of the valley's dams. You won't find a prettier backdrop anywhere in the country, and the fishing's pretty decent too - especially in the cooler months. If this all sounds too slow-paced for you, fret not: Hermanus Forest Adventures offers paintball, quad biking and zip-lining through the trees ([www.saforestadventures.co.za](http://www.saforestadventures.co.za)).



### Eyeball sharks at Gansbaai

Home is where the food is, which is why the Dyer islands off the coast of Gansbaai are so darn popular with sharks. With a population of about 50 000 seals and an equivalent number of penguins, the islands are one of the best places in the world for a spine-tingling encounter with great white sharks.

Weather permitting, boats head out to the islands every day. Tourists can choose between watching the show from the safety of a boat or entering the sharks' lair in a secure cage. No scuba equipment or experience is necessary; what is obligatory, however, is an ironclad stomach. ■



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