

Small is ^{S32°11'38.1" E019°56'54.3"} beautiful

Gamkaberg Nature Reserve in the Klein Karoo may have two brand-new camps and be a biological hotspot, but it's still an isolationist's dream. That's because the camps are designed so you feel you have the whole place to yourself. By Dale Morris



ON TOP OF
THE WORLD
Accommodation
at Oukraal is
rustic; the setting
spectacular.



PERFECTLY PEACEFUL Tune into the sounds of the veld at Fossil Ridge eco-lodge.

MOUNTAIN MAN Gamkaberg reserve manager Tom Barry

NESTLED BETWEEN THE MIGHTY SWARTBERG, LANGE-BERG AND OUTENIQUA MOUNTAINS, the Gamkaberg Nature Reserve near the Klein Karoo town of Oudtshoorn is so tucked away, only those in the know have ventured there. The Karoo skies are big here and the stars at night beautiful because there is no light pollution. There are blood-red rocks that change colour with the setting sun and oodles of odd-shaped succulents decorating the hillsides. Aromatic fynbos plants and glorious protea flowers glow at dawn like lanterns.

The reserve's camps and eco-lodges have been designed to be invisible from each other, courtesy of the lay of the land. You won't bump into anyone else, you won't hear anyone else, nor will there be traffic or generators to spoil the evening ambience. It's a spot for anyone who wants to feel a million miles away from everywhere (and everyone).

What's more, the camps are booked on an exclusive basis only, so you get the whole place to yourself. Sound a bit expensive? Exclusivity generally is, but at Gamkaberg you can enjoy seclusion without it costing you an arm and a leg.

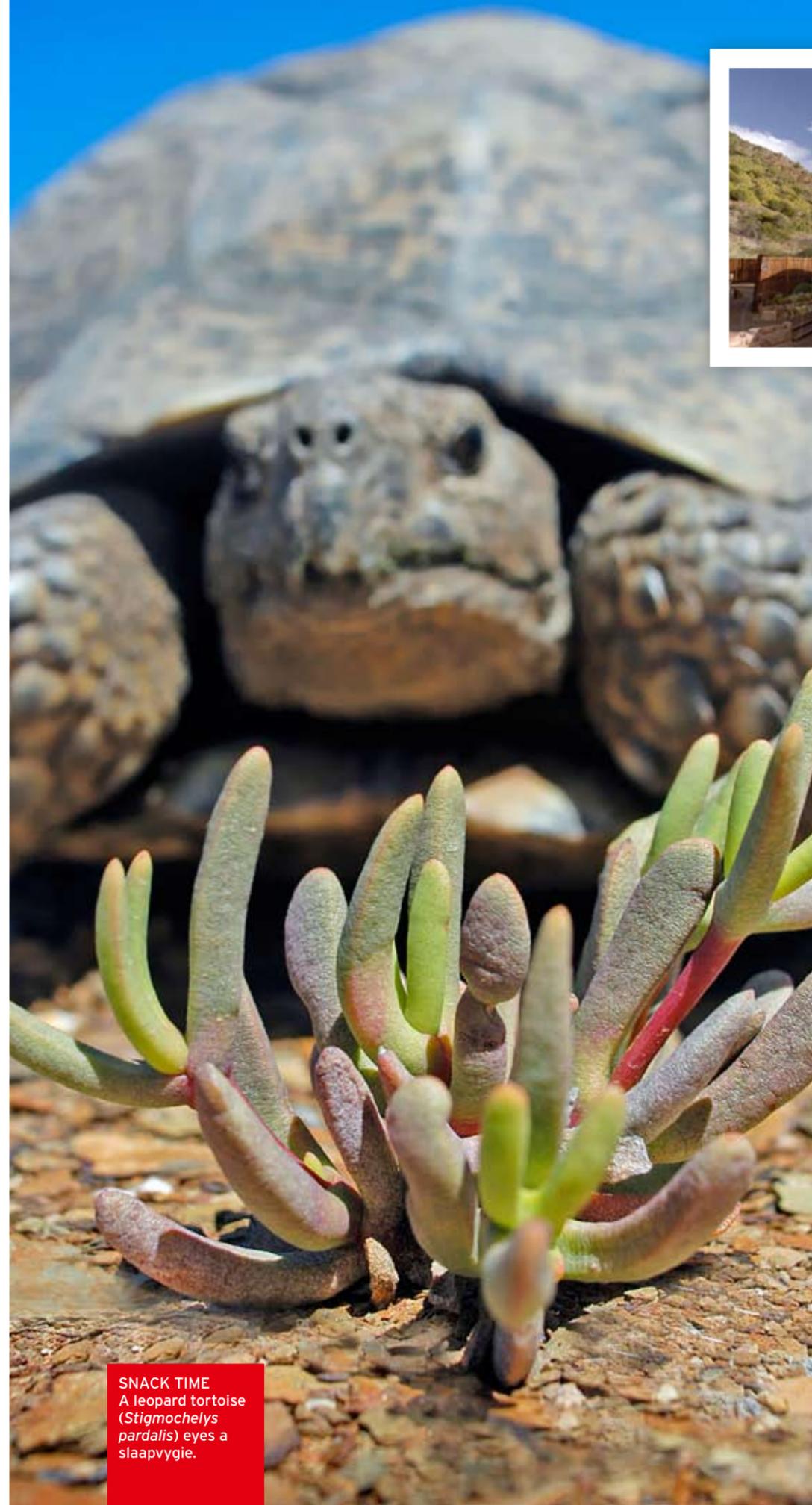
The main camps, two of which are brand new, consist of several safari-style furnished tents on platforms. There are braai and lapa areas, as well as splash pools, fully equipped kitchens and, of course, the tranquil ambience. Each camp has its own particular flavour and atmosphere. Sweet Thorn has sweeping views across the Klein Karoo to the Swartberg. Fossil Ridge is surrounded by rusty red rock formations which are, as its name suggests, full of fossils. Tierkloof peers up into a beautiful kloof which leopard, dassies and klipspringers frequent.

In keeping with CapeNature's philosophy on treading lightly, all have been built to minimise human disturbance to the reserve. Hot showers and lights are courtesy of a solar panel. Loos are waterless. Garbage is recycled. Harmful chemicals are not used.

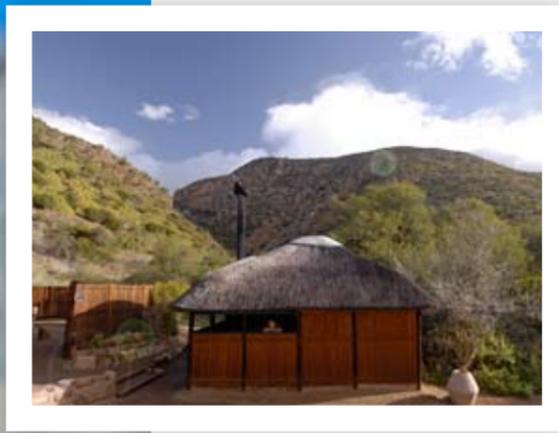
My personal favourite is Oukraal, a thoroughly rustic camp perched on the top of a mountain. It's not much more than a zinc roof bolted atop a big pile of boulders with a few dry stone walls to hold it all together. But where it lacks in comfort and luxury it certainly makes up for with character.

The design is a blend of natural features with a few man-made additions that merge into the scenery as effectively as a chameleon in a bush. You get a lovely feeling up there amongst the fynbos and if you're really fortunate, you might just wake up to the sight and sounds of the Gamkaberg's rare mountain zebras, a species for which the park was originally founded.

"The Gamkaberg was officially established to protect one of the last viable ▶



SNACK TIME A leopard tortoise (*Stigmochelys pardalis*) eyes a slaapvygie.



HIDEOUT At Tierkloof eco-lodge you won't see other people; only the occasional klipspringer.

Mountain zebras, as lovely as they may be, are but one component in the rich biological tapestry that is Gamkaberg.

ALL EARS Listen for rustling when you hike - there might be a striped mouse (*Rhabdomys pumilio*) in the bushes.





herds in the wild,” said Tom Barry, the reserve manager. “Now, thanks to our conservation efforts, the animals are breeding well. In the not too distant future, we plan on sending some of them to other projects and parks. Although our herd is quite small, some 50 or so animals, they represent something like 33 per cent of the entire species’ genetic diversity. That makes our zebras very important indeed.”

To think they were almost wiped out! “Just before our fences were completed in 1974,” continued Tom, “a neighbouring farmer shot half of the population in a single afternoon. He probably would have finished them off too if we hadn’t intervened.”

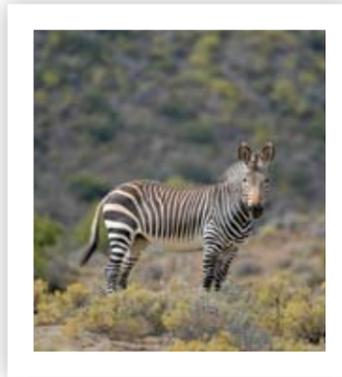
Thank heavens CapeNature did, for without the Gamkaberg zebras’ precious DNA, the entire species may have become so inbred that they would eventually be facing extinction.

More than zebras

Mountain zebras, as lovely and important as they may be, are but one component in the rich biological tapestry that is Gamkaberg and its surrounds. Botanically, the reserve is quite incredible and within its boundaries you find three major biomes, all of which harbour a great many species.

The mountain fynbos is one of the most botanically rich habitats anywhere, even compared to the rainforests of South America. The succulent Karoo is the richest arid habitat on the globe and home to an array of wonderful plants such as “babies’ bottoms” and an entire array of aloes. The subtropical thicket biome at the base of the mountain is a remarkable place due to its diversity of bird and animal residents. All combined, the Gamkaberg is one of the most important biological hotspots on the planet.

Anyone with even just a passing interest in flora will delight in a visit to the Groenfontein section of the reserve, where you can find a rare example of intact lowland succulent habitat. Colourful fleshy plants, many no bigger than a jelly baby, sprout from between white quartz pebble patches and crevices in the rocks. Just like the mountain zebra, if it were not for the presence of the Gamkaberg Reserve, these habitats would most likely have perished.



EARNING THEIR STRIPES
Gamkaberg’s breeding projects conserve the mountain zebra.

“Ostrich farming is a very big deal out here in the Klein Karoo,” Tom told me as we walked slowly along a path lined with lovely little plants. “As a result, most of the region’s low-lying areas have been heavily trampled. Groenfontein escaped this fate, fortunately, and thanks to a grant from WWF we were able to purchase the land from its owner.”

There are some very delicate and delightful succulents doing rather well in Groenfontein, but the real jewel in Gamkaberg’s botanical crown must surely be the eloquently named golden pagoda, a flamboyantly shaped protea (of the *Mimetes* genus) discovered only in 1987. “It has been hailed

as the South African botanical discovery of the century,” said Tom. “We are very, very fortunate to have it here.”

I asked if I could perhaps visit this fabled flower of the fynbos ridges, but Tom told me they grow in hellish places. “It’s a mission to get there, which is probably why they went undiscovered – and unharmed – for so long.”

Although the golden pagoda is out of reach to all but the most determined of climbers, there are many other things a visitor can do in the reserve. These include hiking a series of graded trails and exploring some of the 60 km of rugged 4x4 tracks.

Those with strong calf muscles might want to consider embarking on the 27.5 km circuit route to Oukraal and back. It can be quite an arduous slog, especially in the height of summer, but a night up at the rustic camp and an early morning sunrise makes it all worth the effort. The scenery along the way is nothing short of awesome.

Earlier this year, the Gamkaberg won CapeNature’s prestigious Best Reserve of the Year award. Impressive indeed, especially when you consider it was up against another 23 parks, all of which are pretty stunning places. Gamkaberg came out on top not just because of its wonderful camps and tourist infrastructure, but also because it has pioneered a number of community involvement and conservation projects. Add to this the fact that it is one of the most biologically important hotspots on the planet and what you end up with is a reserve that well deserves the award.

Gamkaberg truly is one of the Western Cape’s best-kept secrets. Or, should I say, was. Now the cat is out of the bag, people are sure to start flocking.

1. The hardy *Euphorbia coerulescens* (noorsdoring) can withstand the chilly Karoo nights. 2. The tips of *Crassula pyramidalis* (rygbossie) burst into sweet-smelling tufts of white flowers. 3. The blooms of *Crassula arborescens* (beestebal) produce nectar that attracts insects and birds. 4. Contained within a capsule, the seeds of *Gibbaeum heathii* (bababoudjies) are only released when it rains. Raindrops then scatter the seed in all directions. 5. Flowers of the *Mesembryanthemum* genus,

commonly known as vygies, open to daylight, keeping the petals protected from damaging frost. 6. Triangular-shaped leaves earned *Crassula pyramidalis* its name. 7. *Pachypodium succulentum* (bobbajaankambroo) has thick tuberous stems that act as water stores and enable the plant to withstand periods of drought. 8. *Gibbaeum heathii* has delicate flowers. 9. Can you see the star-shape? This succulent is called *Astroloba spiralis*, from Greek ‘astros’ for star.



There are some very delicate and delightful succulents doing rather well in Groenfontein.

SPECKLED SHAPES
The succulent leaves of *Adromiscus triflorus* (eendvoet) are gently spotted.



DESERT BEAUTY
Tylecodon wallichii (nenta) grows widely in South Africa's arid areas.



PERFECT ORDER
The stems of *Euphorbia heptagona* form a striking symmetry.



Colourful fleshy plants, many no bigger than a jelly baby, sprout from crevices in the rocks.

FIELDS OF STARS
Piaranthus geminatus looks like a starfish stranded in the desert.



Make time to drink in the view of the Outeniqua Mountains in the south.

TRIP PLANNER



With a Wild Card you don't have to pay daily conservation fees at Gamkaberg - or any of the more than 80 parks in the programme. Turn to page XX for more information and an application form.

BE AMAZED
Wind your way through the labyrinth located near The Stables.

BUNDU BASH
A 4x4 trail leads to the Oukraal shelter, perched on top of the mountain. Drivers of soft cars can enjoy mountain views from the Rooiberg Pass.

GETTING THERE

Gamkaberg Nature Reserve is between Oudtshoorn and Calitzdorp, just off the R62 highway. It's around 6 hours' drive from Cape Town, 2 hours from George. Look for road signs along the way.

WEATHER

Gamkaberg lies between winter and summer rainfall regions, with gentle soaking rain in winter and thunderstorms in summer. The reserve is in an arid region, so rain is not a frequent event.

Summer months may be a bit hot for some people but generally the climate invites visits throughout the year.

ACCOMMODATION

ECO-LODGES (SAFARI-STYLE TENTS)

As you book exclusive use of an eco-lodge, minimum base rates apply and any extra people pay R180 a night weekdays, R220 weekends. During peak season (public and school holidays) a fixed rate is charged, irrespective of the number of guests.

Tierkloof (sleeps 8, base rate is for 1-4 people): R710 a night weekdays and R870 weekends. Peak season R1300 a night.

Sweet Thorn (sleeps 6, base rate 1-4): R710 a night weekdays, R870 weekends; Peak season R1000.

Fossil Ridge (sleeps 4, base rate 1-2): R360 a night weekdays, R440 weekends; Peak season R700.

RUSTIC OPTIONS

Take a sleeping bag to bed down in **The Stables** (sleeps 8, base rate 1-4) R210 weekdays, R240 weekends. Communal ablution and kitchen facilities. You can also camp nearby, weekdays R50 a person, weekends R55. Visitors to the remote **Oukraal** campsite (sleeps 8) need to take all their own supplies, weekdays R50 a person, weekends R75.

ACTIVITIES

Hike up the spectacular Tierkloof where, even on the hottest of days, it can be shady and cool. There are several other hiking trails of varying distance and difficulty. If you have a 4x4, take a trip up the mountain to Oukraal. Those who don't have a 4x4 can get an idea of the scenery by taking Rooiberg Pass, a public road which bisects the park. Overnight guests should ask at the office to gain access to the Groenfontein succulent trail - pick up an interpretation leaflet before you go. A picnic or braai at the day visitor facilities is a good option if you're not spending the night.

CONTACTS

Bookings: 0861 CAPENATURE (0861-227-362-8873) www.capenature.co.za; Reserve 044-213-3367 🐾

