

Getting back to nature



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Is it my imagination, or are the years getting shorter? The months have just flown by and here we are getting ready for the summer holidays once again.

Many families take time off at this time of year to spend time together. For some there is the mad rush to the coast to laze away the long hot summer days on the beach, working on that tan or more likely on second-degree sunburn. The long evenings lend themselves to dinners alfresco, sipping a long, cool drink while the meat sizzles on the braai. For others, however, this time of the year is seen as a great opportunity to get out into the countryside and to experience the wonderful gifts that the natural environment can offer.

We are so fortunate in this country of ours to have so many wonderful places to get away to - where we can shake off the cares of our busy lives and take time to commune with nature. Stick a pin in the map anywhere in South Africa and find somewhere special to visit that is within easy reach. This is particularly important when one considers the current petrol price. Not only does it not have to cost a small fortune to get to your destination, because if you plan properly, you can even take your accommodation along with you in the form of a tent, or if you prefer a bit of luxury, a caravan. What's more, you don't even need to own the tent or caravan, you can rent one for the trip. Of course, if you really want to splurge on your accommodation, there are thousands of really great B & B's and guest houses throughout the country.

So what is it that you fancy doing these holidays? Perhaps you and your family have decided on doing one of the many trails through one of the nature reserves; or you

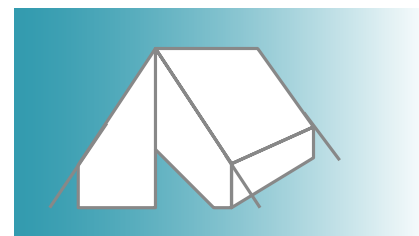
have a more adventurous spirit and plan to go kloofing or rock climbing. Trailing or mountain biking may be just the thing for your energetic family. On the other hand you could be on the lookout for something completely different. How does shark diving; scuba diving; sailing; and game fishing strike you? If you are a keen bird watcher, you might find new areas to explore by using the web. Whatever it is, make sure that you do your homework well ahead of any excursion - it will pay off in the end.

To help you decide, I will direct you to some of the really useful web sites that I found.

I think that one of the best web sites for information on the various wilderness areas in the Western Cape is that of Cape Nature: www.capenature.co.za. The homepage has links to 'Reserves' in the Western Cape. Using this link you will be able to access information on all of the reserves. I chose a few reserves at random and was fascinated to read about the flora and fauna to be found in the various reserves. Historical data about the areas and any special features to look out for - rock art, endangered species, et cetera are also provided. Accommodation is available in the form of huts, camping and caravan sites. The facilities available at each site are listed and the rates provided. It is essential to make a reservation before heading for one of the reserves, even if you are planning just a day trip. Cape Nature limits the number of visitors to a reserve in order to protect the environment and lessen the impact of people on the wilderness areas.

The web site also provides information on the hiking trails, distances and the level of difficulty. Under the link - 'Resources', click on 'EduInfo' to obtain information on various topics, such as birds, fynbos and tortoises. Did you know all species of tortoises in the

Western Cape are protected by the Nature Conservation Ordinance (Ord. No. 19 of 1974) and that if you wish to keep a tortoise, you will require a permit? There is also a link to 'Envirolinks', where I was able to find an online link to the Sasol Bird e-Guide.



Equipment for hire

As I mentioned before, one does not need to own camping equipment or a caravan. There are firms and organisations that rent out this equipment. Try the following web sites to find out where you can hire the equipment you need for your trip.

www.priclo.co.za - for your caravan or trailer hiring needs.

www.campers.co.za - Campers Corner rents out motorhomes and 4x4's, which come fully equipped for two to five people. They have branches located in all the major centres. They also have links to various caravan parks on their web site.

www.driveandcamp.com - aimed at the budget traveller and run from their guest house in Hatfield Street, Cape Town, the owners hire out a complete set of camping equipment for two persons at a daily rate. This includes a tent, camp chairs, cooking utensils and all one needs for a camping trip.



Trails and campsites

Hiking, mountain biking, horse trail and even 4x4 enthusiasts, should access www.linx.co.za/info/provinces/wcapinfo.html to find information about routes and caravan campsites. Follow the links to obtain information about the various trails in the Western Cape. One can search by region and then by town.

There is a thumbnail sketch, et cetera, on each of the routes, noting special features with a contact telephone number and e-mail address. Routes that are suitable for the less able-bodied are also indicated. So if you are a novice, or not too steady on your pins, but would like to try a gentle walk that does not tax your abilities, try one of the routes recommended for the less able-bodied.

Preparation

Preparation is most important when planning an excursion. You need to know about the terrain that you will be hiking through. The right footwear for the terrain is essential. You will also need a backpack that is the right size for your frame and needs. Do you need to carry water or water purification tablets? What about if something goes wrong - did you notify family or friends of the route you will be taking and when you expect to get back home? Do you have a good basic first-aid kit and does it contain an emergency foil blanket? www.capeunionmart.co.za will be able to advise and supply much of your hiking equipment.



Mountaineering and sailing

If you have decided to stay at home this holiday, you might feel that this is the perfect opportunity to try your hand at mountain climbing or abseiling. If you value life and limb, you will need an experienced guide to show you the ropes. African Nomadic Tours & Safaris has a web site, www.usi-africa.com/4x4tours/abseiling.html, where you can find out about the various expeditions they offer - from rock climbing introductory courses, or abseiling the 112 metre descent from below the upper cable station on Table Mountain to expeditions to climb Kilimanjaro.

If you become hooked on mountain climbing you can join the Mountain Club of South Africa and join them on the various

meets that they arrange year round. New members are encouraged to attend outreach meets, so that their level of fitness can be assessed. A list of all the meets for a three month period is listed on their web site. You can access the web site at www.mcsa.org.za. I found an interesting link to the Code of Conduct for Mountaineering and Climbing on the web site. The code sets out the guidelines for safety of the individual or group, and respect for the environment. Whether you are a climber or hiker, do take note of the code.

For your mountaineering needs, such as ropes, harnesses, rock shoes, et cetera, try www.mountainmailorder.co.za.

Walks

If, like myself, you are not exactly a hiking enthusiast, do not despair. You too can spend time in the fresh air without too much effort. Click on the link 'Travel' and 'Great Outdoors' on www.iafrica.com to find 'Outdoor walks for the not-so-fit'. The 'Vinous day-tripper' link definitely has my vote. I really do not have a problem doing a Winelands cellar tour of one the wine estates and then sitting down to a delicious lunch surrounded by vineyards and the wonderful aroma of wine. If, on the other hand, you enjoy a walk in the woods, you should go to the link, 'Explore the Knysna Forest'. None of the walks are particularly strenuous and some are even wheelchair-friendly.

Birding

South Africa ranks as one of the top birding destinations in the world. It is the stopover for many migrating birds and as a result there are many places to go bird watching. Each region of the province is home to a variety of birds. One can either visit a particular bird sanctuary, or keep an eye open when on the trail. You will find the following web sites useful to help identify birds that you have sighted, or what birds to look out for in a particular area.

Select the link to the region on www.savenues.com/wildlife/south_africa_birdlife.htm to find out about the birds in that region. There are also links to particular birds, which provide specific information on that bird or group of birds.

www.aboutcapetown.com/birdwatching.htm provides information on some of the best locations for viewing birds. There are also links to two additional sites 'Bird Watch' and 'Cape Sugarbird Tours'. Bird Watch Cape

specialises in small group tours, ranging from a half-day tour to a seventeen-day tour.

Of course do not forget to access Sasol Bird e-Guide at www.birdlife.org.za/fieldguide/default.cfm for your online guide to help you identify the birds that you see.



Take to the water

If the call of the sea cannot be ignored, consider taking a boat trip for a few hours, a day or even longer.

www.slipway.co.za/schaafsma.html will supply you with contact details for yacht charters and tours. Based in Saldanha Bay Harbour, Schaafsma Charters does short trips to visit the mussel farms in the area, as well as longer charters for game fishing.

www.dyer-island-cruises.co.za/boattrip.htm offers boat-based whale watching and shark cage diving. On route to Dyer Island, considered the best place in the world to encounter the great white shark, and Geyser Rock, home to 60 000 Cape fur seals, one might spot giant petrels or Cape gannets.

If you are in the Mossel Bay area, try www.sharkafrica.co.za to arrange your encounter with the Great White Shark. Shark Africa places the emphasis squarely on education and conservation of the great white shark - a sentiment which I whole-heartedly support.

If you are keen to learn to scuba dive, try www.scuba-shack.co.za/courses.html. They offer various courses, from the complete novice to certification courses.

There is no excuse for being bored this summer holiday. There is something for everyone to do and it need not cost an arm or a leg. Get out of the city and take a stroll in the country. Visit a wine farm and walk through the vineyards. Go strawberry or cherry picking. Pack a picnic basket full of your favourite food and wine. Find a cool quiet spot and just chill. Just get away from your usual environment and unwind - you'll feel much the better for it.

Happy holidays!