

Willis's Walkabouts

2010 South African Great Walks Special

8 September - 31 October 2010: Update 21 July

Our first eight tours to southern Africa have all been great successes – at least that's what our clients have said. We've seen a lot, but we want more. Every trip we offer will include at least one walk we haven't done before. **The big addition this year is a three night walk in Kruger.**

Why use a Darwin-based firm for a South African tour?

This will be our eighth trip to South Africa. No one else offers tours like these. Transport during the trip will be primarily by rental cars but may include various forms of public transportation as well and, of course, your own feet while carrying a day or overnight pack. This will be the same kind of trip which got us a highly recommended comment in the 1998 edition of the Lonely Planet book, *Trekking in the Patagonian Andes*. That book listed 11 companies from five countries which offer treks in the region. Nine were listed without comment. One was listed as "recommended", one as "highly recommended." (*) Willis's Walkabouts was the latter. This trip will be the kind of trip which got us the excellent recommendation in South America.

The Itinerary

The following itinerary is based on flying to South Africa from Australia. People from other countries can meet the group in Cape Town or at any other point on the itinerary. The proposed starting date is listed in the itinerary at the end of these notes. The exact date may change depending on airfares. Going early allows us to miss some of the peak season crowds as well as giving us the best of the wildflowers for which the Cape region is famous. We plan to begin the trip in Cape Town and end in Johannesburg.

We have not yet booked all of the walks listed below. The itinerary remains a work in progress.

The trip is divided into several sections, any of which may be done on its own. There is no point in giving exact dates until we are able to make the relevant bookings.

Section 1: Capetown Area: 8-13 Sept

The first several days at the beginning of the trip will be spent in and near Capetown. Table Mountain offers good day walks and, weather permitting, spectacular views, a good way to begin the trip. The Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens offer a chance to become acquainted with some of the flora we will be seeing in a more natural setting later in the trip.

From Cape Town we will drive to the Cape of Good Hope where we will hire the Olifantsbos Cottage for two nights. Everyone on the 2008 trip thought this was a very special place. The one night we had there wasn't enough so we've added a day which we will use to explore more of the Cape.

Section 2: TheCedarberg: 14-19 Sep

From Olifantsbos, we drive north toward the Cedarberg for the first of our major hikes, three nights in the mountains. It's the first time we've been able to do this walk since 2003.

If time and availability permit, we may include a slight detour to one of the most amazing farm stay places I've ever seen. It's a fruit farm with a mountain backdrop and a wonderful short walking trail which takes in a couple of San (bushman) rock art sites as well as giving excellent views over the surrounding countryside. With luck, we may (as I did on my first visit) see a few Klipspringers (a small antelope) along the way. The accommodation is in an old but fully restored farmhouse.

Section 3: The Garden Route West: 20-27 Sep

We met a South African couple on one of our trail walks in 2008 who recommended that we include a walk in the Marloth Nature Reserve near Swellendam on our next trip. We've had a look at what's available and it looks like a must. The full trail is six days, but there are shorter options. See the Footprint Hiking Club Swellendam page for information. <http://www.footprint.co.za/swellendam.htm>

Not far from Swellendam is the De Hoop Nature Reserve. The five day Whale Trail there is so popular that it's already too late to book when we'll be there. Fortunately, there are a number of excellent day walks so we'll do one and spend two nights at a wonderful farm where we've stayed on three previous occasions.

Section 4: The Garden Route East: 28-30 Sep

The Harderville Trails is one of the most spectacular coastal trails in South Africa. This will be the fourth time that I've done it – that says how much I enjoy it. No need to carry a tent or sleeping mat.. We'll spend one night in a hut at the beginning of the trail and a second in another hut along the way. To see photos of the Harkerville and some of the other possibilities mentioned in section two, go to our website, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au and click on Photo Galleries in the left menu, then scroll down and click on South Africa.

The Footprint Hiking Club has a good Harkerville page, <http://www.footprint.co.za/harkerville.htm>

Section 5: To the Drakensberg: 1-8 October

We are still working on the details for this section.

Section 6: The Drakensberg: 9-14 October

The first four nights will be based at the Sani Pass Lodge. See <http://sanilodge.co.za/>. We will do one day trip (there are a variety of options) and the overnight walk to Gxalingwnwa Cave. See <http://sanilodge.co.za/DAhikeovernight.htm> – 2nd from top.

The final two nights will be at the Antbear Guesthouse. I've been there twice and am more than happy to go back. We'll do a day trip from there. See <http://www.antbear.com>.

Section 7: The Battlefields and on to Kruger: 15-17 October

Rorke's Drift stands famous in British history. Not so famous is the disaster the British had as nearby Isandlwana. Visiting a few historical sites added an extra dimension to previous trips so we'll do it again. It's one of the best chances we have of getting a bit of a feel for the local culture. In 2008, we included a full day tour with a local history buff. It was so good that we'll try and include it again.

We'll spend two nights at the Penny Farthing B&B and do their Battlefields tour. I've done it before and can recommend it. See www.pennyf.co.za

Section 8: Kruger: 18-23 October

We'll spend the first two nights in two of the large camps: Lower Sabie and Letaba. We then go on the new (began November 2009) Mphongolo Backpacking Trail. We've taken five of the available eight places. At the time of writing, the others were still available. See http://celtis.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/tourism/activities/mphongolo_backpack_trail.php for details.

We'll spend the final at Shimuwini, my favourite camp in the park.

Section 9: Kruger to Johannesburg: 24-31 October

We'll finish with something new followed by an old favourite, both run by Anvie Ventures. We begin with the Oom Paul's trail (two days) followed by the Olifants Gorge Trail (this will be my fourth visit).

See <http://www.anviewventures.co.za> and click on “Overnight Trails and Backpacking” on the left menu. The Footprint Hiking Club website <http://www.footprint.co.za/kingdom.htm> describes the Olifants Gorge (Kingdom) Trail. From there, we go straight to the Johannesburg airport.

The above should give you an idea of what to expect. We can't be 100% sure which trails we can include until we have confirmed the bookings to run the trip.

What does it cost?

South Africa is one of the few countries where the Australian dollar still goes a long way. Our fee is \$2150 plus an extra amount to cover our liability insurance. I cannot get a quote on this until closer to departure. Our public liability insurance requires you to have your own travel insurance. It may sound like overkill, but I have heard of a case where the Travel Insurer sued a tour operator for something that happened that they had to cover.

The \$2150 covers the guide, who also acts as organiser and cook, plus the evening meals on the walks where we do the catering. In addition, you will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, accommodation, transport, etc. The guide will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort, reliability and availability will allow.

If exchange rates stay similar, our town accommodation should cost anywhere from about A\$20 to A\$50 (US\$10 to US\$25) per night. The relatively low cost of restaurant meals and the high quality of our accommodation have been one of the more pleasant aspects of our previous trips. The prices above were twin share in what would be considered three or four star establishments in Australia.

Based on our recent expenses, a **very rough** estimate of the cost follows. With luck, we'll be able to shave a bit off the total. If the Aussie dollar collapses against the rand, it will cost more. If it gains, it should cost less. We do not expect the whole trip to cost less than \$7000 or more than \$9500. This does not include any souvenir shopping you may do. We should have a more accurate estimate closer to departure.

Return airfare	\$ 2000	Walkabouts fee	\$2150
Liability Insurance	300	Your own travel insurance	300
Breakfasts & lunches	200	Restaurant meals	500
Hire car	1000	Imfolozi guided game walk	600
Other park & camping fees	300	<u>Accommodation</u>	<u>600</u>
		Total	\$7950

What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring, the probable weather, etc. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook all the evening meals on the walks allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. You also get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses. Hiring a vehicle as part of a group costs far less than hiring it with only two or three.

Note 1. Some of what you get for your money is not very visible. Bushwalking in South Africa is restricted. Permits have to be arranged well in advance all trails have strict limits. Some of our walks are in national parks run by a national authority. Some are in provincial parks. Some are in other areas. In 2001, making these bookings took anywhere from ten minutes to three weeks depending on the agency involved. All that paperwork has to be done well in advance or we won't be able to do the walks as planned.

As another example, prior to one of the long walks, you might spend a day relaxing or sightseeing while the guide goes out and hits the supermarkets, then spends an hour (or two or three) doing the final organising for the meals on the walk. If you can't see the value in services like these, you are unlikely to feel that you are getting real value for your fee.

Note 2. Prices are subject to change.

Note 3. A large majority of those who have taken part in our overseas tours are Australian so all prices are quoted in Australian dollars. We have had several people from other countries take part by making their own travel arrangements to and from the start and finish points.

Note 4. All bushwalks are subject to change due to weather conditions. If we get really foul weather at the start of a walk, we may wish to abort it, at least temporarily. If we get really foul weather later on, we may have to cut a route short.

Note 5. Most of the walking is on marked trails and most of the time we will be staying in huts. This means that this trip will be somewhat easier than most of our others. There are, however, lots of ups and downs so aerobic fitness and reasonable strength are required.

Note 6. As some of the walks have a permitted maximum of eight people, we expect to restrict our group to eight including the guide. Depending on what vehicles are available, we may consider increasing this slightly and running two groups for short sections as we did in 2003. *Vehicles have been a problem for us in the past – it was hard to get small vehicles suitable for four or five people with pack on gravel roads. An eight person minibus worked well on one trip and Toyota Condors on another. We've only managed the same vehicles on two trips so far. The car companies keep changing their offerings. Using two vehicles would allow us to do through walks as well as loops. We've won the last two times but can't guarantee that the same vehicles will be available.*

What you don't get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. **You** must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including the guide, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.

A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. A few examples may help you understand just how important this is.

Hypothermia could be a potential problem on the mountain walks. A person who becomes hypothermic is unlikely to realise it. In an extreme case, he or she may have to be physically restrained from doing something which a rational person would describe as insane.

There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you do not want to take the necessary responsibility and/or you cannot obtain the necessary equipment, it is not for you. Good physical fitness and a good mental attitude are both necessary. If you have never carried a pack on an overnight walk, have never walked off trail, have never camped in cold, windy and wet conditions, it will be harder for you to cope with the likely conditions than for a person who has had the relevant experience. Past experience has shown us that a fit, experienced 70 year old may cope better than a fitter 25 year old who does not have experience in coping with adverse conditions.

A Final Caution and a suggestion

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. Such things often fail to happen in South Africa. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off and go sightseeing or simply relax while the guide does the food shopping or tries to organise or reconfirm hiking permits, etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join him or her while (s)he does these things.

There may be occasional days between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guide slows down and relaxes a bit and catches up on the organising. Based on past experience, things will run more smoothly if the guide does this.

If you would like a better visual picture of what these walks will be like, please have a look at our South Africa web page: www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/html/africa.htm. There are many photos from previous trips and links to other pages giving more information.

Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. This will be refunded in full if five people have not booked by mid February. Final payment is due by 1 May.
2. Our cancellation fees are \$200 before before 10 February, \$900 before 1 April and the full \$2150 plus liability insurance fee after that. The different South African authorities with whom we make bookings all have their own cancellation fees. If you cancel after we have made and paid for a booking on your behalf, you will lose whatever is non-refundable as well as our cancellation fee.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance. **We need to see proof of your travel insurance before departure.** We need this because of our own insurance.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Russell Willis

* Lonely Planet quote is on pages 69 and 70 of the 1998 edition.

Draft South Africa Day by Day Draft Itinerary - Updated 21 July

8 Sept Arrive Cape Town

9-10 Sep In Cape Town. One day up Table Mountain and down the other side.

11 Sep Moving south toward Cape of Good Hope. It takes longer than you might think. I'll look for somewhere relatively near the park entry to stay.

12-13 Sep Walk at the Cape. Accom at Olifantsbos Guest House (self catering); booked.

The next section hasn't been booked. It's my best idea so far. Comments welcome. The Cedarberg walk requires two vehicles and a car shuffle.

14 Sep Probably north to the Cedarberg, overnight in Citrusdal or nearby.

15-18 Sep Cedarberg walk. Bring the tent. Algeria to Wolfberg Arch & cracks. Final night in accom at Dwarsrivier or if I can book it, a touch of luxury at Kunje Farmstay (longer drive). Steep up, steep down, not too bad on top. I did the walk in 2001.

19 Sep To somewhere near Robertson. We stayed at a very nice B&B called Goedereede near Robertson in 2008 so I'll try and book it again.

- 20 Sep Short drive to Swellendam, prepare for long walk.
- 21-26 Sep Swellendam Trail. See . <http://www.footprint.co.za/swellendam.htm>. I've wanted to do this trail since two bushwalkers I met on the Otter Trail told me about it. Drive to Die Plaashuis near De Hoop Nature Reserve on the final afternoon.
- 27 Sep Coastal day walk at De Hoop. Overnight at Die Plaashuis.
- 28 Sep. Drive to Knysna. Overnight at start of Harkerville Trail. This is one of the most spectacular coastal trails in South Africa.
- 29 Sep Begin the Harkerville, overnight at hut.
- 30 Sep Finish Harkerville, overnight at Plettenberg Bay.
- 1-7 Oct *We've got a week to go a fair distance. At this point, I'd aim for no more than two nights on any one trail. I'm still looking at possibilities.*
- 8 Oct Longish drive to Guinea Fowl Roost B&B near Kokstad. I enjoyed it in 2008.
- 9 Oct To Sani Pass Lodge, Drakensberg. See <http://sanilodge.co.za/>
- 10 Oct Day trip from Sani Lodge. The day trip would be to the top of the pass into Lesotho. There is an easy option and a harder one to Hodgsons Peaks. I did this the last time. The others were content with the Sani Pass tour. There may be other options.
- 11-12 Oct One day trip plus an overnight walk. I have booked the GXALINGENWA CAVE walk. See <http://sanilodge.co.za/DAhikeovernight.htm> – 2nd from top.
- 13-14 Oct To the Antbear Guesthouse. I've been there twice and am more than happy to go back. I've now confirmed a two night booking. Lots of driving to follow so we might as well make the most of our time in the Drakensberg.
- From here down, everything but the night of 17 Oct has been booked and at least partially paid.*
- 15 Oct Leave edge of Drakensberg. Drive to Penny Farthing near Dundee. Museum or two en route. Booked. Deposit paid
- 16 Oct Battlefields tour, booked deposit paid. Overnight at Penny Farthing. See www.pennyf.co.za
- 17 Oct Penny Farthing to somewhere near Badplaas. This is gong to be a very long drive, but it gives us more time elsewhere. If you want to consider options, have a look at www.barberton.co.za – some of the guest houses look like good value.
- 18 Oct To Kruger, arrive by lunch. Drive to Lower Sabie; 2 bungalows booked
- 19 Oct Lower Sabie to Letaba ; 6 bed cottage booked – night drive from Lower Sabie or Leaba
- 20 Oct Letaba to Shingwedzi. Meet Mphongolo Backpack Trail guides at 1 pm.
- 21 Oct On trail Booked and paid in full
- 22 Oct On trail.
- 23 Oct Finish walk at Shingwedzi, drive to Shimuwini
- 24 Oct Exit park. Drive to start of Oom Pauls walk; booked, deposit paid
- 25 Oct Oom Paul's day 1
- 26 Oct Oom Paul's day 2
- 27 Oct Drive to Slagthoek (a lovely old farmhouse) & start of Kingdom Trail. Shopping en route. Booked and deposit paid.

- 28 Oct To Kingdom camp, carrying pack (no tent). Walk is moderate to easy.
- 29 Oct To Klipkraal camp, pack no tent. an amazing camp among the rocks
- 30 Oct To Slagthoek.
- 31 Oct Drive to Johannesburg airport & fly out.