

Willis's Walkabouts

2007 South African Great Walks Special

6-8 Weeks: September - November 2008

Our first six 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. This trip was originally intended to concentrate entirely on some of South Africa's most famous long distance walking trails. These trails are so popular that we cannot possibly get group bookings on all of them unless we make those booking eight months or more in advance. Time ran out on us a bit earlier than expected so we will try and combine some of these with some of the other walks we have done in the past.

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.

Many of the walks we plan to do must be booked and paid for well in advance. Fixing an exact date before we have the bookings we need to run the trip would almost certainly mean that we could not do all the walks listed below.

The trip will be 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 (3-5 days)

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. The Cape of Good Hope is worth a visit. Anyone not interested in this short section can join us a few days later. Depending on time, we may hire a cottage and spend a night at the Cape doing a long day walk there.

Section 2: The Western Cape and the Garden Route West (2-3 weeks)

If I can get a booking on the Whale Trail (see below), I'll do so and organise the rest of the section around that. If we can't get onto the Whale Trail early, we may do some short walks in the Cedarberg before heading south. If we can't get onto the Whale Trail at all, we'll do two day walks and spend the nights in a nearby bed & breakfast (we've done this before).

The Cedarberg is a mountainous area where we find more excellent wildflower displays, rugged rock formations and rock paintings. We have done a number of day walks in the area and will choose some of these based on the time we have available. From there we would move south 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, possibly the best value for money I've ever encountered in my travels.

Continuing south we might do the overnight Arangieskop Trail. This is a spectacular mountain walk with a lovely, heated cabin at the top where we spend the night. Yet another possibility of stopping in Bettys Bay where we would spend a day doing a walk in the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve. Kogelberg encompasses an incredible botanic wealth: 107 known species of Erica as well as countless other species in different genera. Kogelberg has been described as the most floristically species rich place on the planet. We will try to do the walk with the same local guide I have now used three times. Everyone previous trips thought she was excellent.

The Whale Trail, De Hoop Nature Reserve

Five days, 55 km. September is peak season for whale watching so this one books out early. We stay in cottages and can even organise for our packs to be brought from one cottage to the next. For more information see

The Cape Nature Website: <http://www.capenature.org.za/index.php?fArticleId=433>

Or a personal view from a South African (photos too):

<http://www.ecoafrika.com/Directors/RalphPina/whaletrail.htm>

And finally, the most information can be found on the Footprint Hiking Club website, the best source of information about walks in South Africa: <http://www.footprint.co.za/whale.htm>

Section 3: The Garden Route East (1½ - 2½ weeks)

If we can, we'll include the Otter Trail.

The Otter Trail, Tsitsikamma National Park

Five days, 42½ km. This is the most famous coastal trail in South Africa. The scenery is very different to that on the Whale Trail. As above, the Footprint Hiking Club website has excellent information, See <http://www.footprint.co.za/otter.htm>

Another useful site is the official South Africa National Parks site.

<http://www.sanparks.org/parks/tsitsikamma/tourism/otter.php>

Finally, another collection of photos from the trail. <http://www.wim.co.za/otter/otter2003.html>

The Otter Trail is hard to book so we may not be able to get on it at the time we want. If not, I'll substitute one of my personal favourites, the spectacular two day Harkerville coastal trail. No need to carry a tent or sleeping mat.. We would 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>

The Tsitsikamma Trail, Tsitsikamma National Park

Six days, 63.3 km. We've done this one before. It's just inland from the Otter Trail and totally different. As with the Whale Trail, you can get your pack carried between huts. If we can't book the whole trail, we should still be able to do a part of it.

The Footprint Hiking Club website has excellent information, See <http://www.footprint.co.za/tsitsikamma.htm>

Here's a page from the same person who wrote the Whale Trail page above. <http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/Trails/6676/tsitsika.htm>

Section 4: To and in the Drakensberg (1½ - 2½ weeks)

It's a long way from the end of the Garden Route to the next good walking areas. We may drive straight to King William's Town and spend the night at a B&B run by the family of the man who was one of the most important people involved in the creation of the Amatola Mountain Trail, one of South Africa's finest trails. We plan to do the days 3-5 of the walk which we have been told are the most scenic. (This will be our third hike there.) We pass through a variety of scenery and spend the three nights in huts on the trail. (Two of the huts had hot showers on our 2004 visit.)

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

Drakensberg. We may be able to include an extended walk or some day walks in the Drakensberg. We've done several different walks there, all good. Some of the main walks camp in caves. Here's a link to a list of walks. Do your own research and see if there is something which appeals to you. <http://www.drakensberg-tourism.com/drakensberg-hiking-trails.html#hiking-trails>. What we do will depend on the time available as well as the interests and abilities of the group.

Section 5: The Battlefields and a game park (approx a week)

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.

How can you go to Africa without looking at the big animals? We'll do it up close and personal, doing a walk in a game park. The most likely option is the **Emoyeni Trail, St Lucia National Park**. The five day Emoyeni Trail is one of our possible walks in a game park accompanied by armed rangers. See the Footprint site. <http://www.footprint.co.za/emoyeni.htm>

An alternative is the nearby Imfolozi walk. Imfolozi is noted for its large rhinoceros population. The three walks we've there with local guides were some of the real highlights of those trips, the only time we got close to large animals without anything but empty space between us and them. That walk is four nights and three full days. on the walk before driving through the rest of the park and continuing north.

Note. This walk is run by the park. I'll be a paying customer, the same as you.

Section 6: Kruger to the end (1-1½ weeks)

Kruger has a number of wilderness hiking trails accompanied by armed guides. If we can get in, we might try one of these. Here's a link to the official information. <http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/tourism/activities/wilderness/default.php>

Even if we can't do a walk, Kruger is worth a visit. It is the best known game park in Africa. Deservedly so. If we can't do a walk, we will spend four or five full days there, spending two or three nights in small bush camps and one or two in the larger ones. We will include at least one night drive and one early morning walk with armed guides. This will give us the chance to experience the wildlife in an intimate manner most tourists don't consider.

We plan to enter Kruger at the north end and work our way south. This allows us to keep the sun at our back, making it easier to spot the animals as well as more comfortable in the cars.

If time permits, we will finish with a final walk on the way back to Johannesburg. I found the Kingdom Trail on a private trip in 2002 and have had two groups go there since. It's a fine way to finish. See the Footprint site. <http://www.footprint.co.za/kingdom.htm>

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 enough bookings to run the trip. The sooner you get in, the more likely it is that we can run the best possible 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 \$1950 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 \$1950 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 \$6500 or more than \$8500. 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	\$1950
Liability Insurance	200	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	\$7650

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 \$1950 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.

Final Note. If you are interested in this trip and you have something else you are particularly interested in seeing, please let us know and we may be able to include it in the itinerary.