

RIGHT: Gondwana Private Game Reserve is home to the Big Five. FAR RIGHT: On the Pioneer Trail you also have the opportunity to admire smaller treasures, like a millipede. BELOW: The guides reveal the rich stories behind the landscape and animals during the hike.



# THE LURE OF THE LAND

What could be better than a fynbos walk? Walking among the wildflowers while keeping an eye out for big game, writes MAGRIET KRUGER.

JUST BEFORE SUNRISE, the lion's roar echoed in the still morning air. "We don't always offer our guests this particular wake-up call," chuckled lead trails guide Marc Albertyn.

That the Pioneer Walking Trail in Gondwana Private Game Reserve is unlike any other is clear from the outset. This is the only place in the Cape Floral Kingdom where you can encounter the Big Five on foot. Along with the grassy plains favoured by wildlife, the reserve is home to endangered renosterveld and fynbos, offering trailists diverse scenery where something is always in bloom. Add in the fact that the Pioneer Trail is a slackpacking hike where you stay in luxurious safari tents and enjoy sumptuous meals, and you have all the makings of a memorable breakaway.

Situated in the foothills of the Langeberg and Outeniqua mountain ranges north of Mossel Bay, Gondwana introduced the trail to bring visitors that much closer to nature. "Our Pioneer Walking Trail is based in the most isolated part of the reserve, so you feel like the only people exploring these parts. Nobody else on Gondwana gets the same experience," said Marc.

The trail runs over four days, with two full days of hiking and three nights in the reserve's elegantly appointed overnight camps. The first night is spent in Camp East Africa, where leather couches, safari chairs and carved wooden tables recall the romance of *Out of Africa*. In the sleeping tents, the earthy tones of dark wood and traditional prints

offset crisp white linen while an ample ball and claw bath promises relaxation.

From the very first step you'll find yourself knee-deep in the wonders of fynbos. On our trail, we made our way past delicate blue disas, vibrant sunshine conebushes and scarlet ericas. You may well recognise some of the plants from mountain walks, but the Gondwana guides open up another world as they explain their traditional and medicinal uses. *Kooigoed*, also known as bedding helichrysum or *imphepho*, not only provided early inhabitants a soft and fragrant way to bed down, but is also a sedative and antiseptic. There are various types of buchu on the reserve and you will get to pick out their distinctive scents, ranging from citrus to fennel.

PHOTO SUPPLIED, ALESSANDRO BONORA

Marc opened the flowerhead of a pin-cushion to offer us a taste of the white seeds inside: almost like a raw pea. "I watch the elephants to work out what is edible – they pop the whole flower in their mouth. They also love the flowers of the bearded protea, which is rich in nectar."

On Gondwana, elephants have again made their home in the Cape mountains, making these the southernmost elephants in the world. It might seem incongruous to have the giants of the Bushveld picking their way through fynbos, but Marc pointed out that these animals occurred naturally in the Western Cape before the arrival of settlers. Gondwana's elephants are the first free-roaming herd to have had calves born in this region in 200 years. "It is fascinating to see how they've adapted to this environment and learnt to utilise its resources."

The reserve's free-roaming wildlife is part of the attraction of the trail. Our first close-

up sighting was of a handsome waterbuck and his harem that allowed us to approach to within a few hundred metres. An enviable line-up of game followed. Springbok bounding across the plains, zebra with little ones, a large herd of buffalo, handsome eland and comical-looking wildebeest. The showstopper was a pair of rhino. Our guides positioned us down-wind from the lumbering beasts and took care to maintain a safe distance.

Although you can get closer to wildlife in a vehicle, this feels different. With nothing separating you from the animals, you are fully immersed in the environment. "This is why I love walking trails," said back-up guide Bertie Burger. "It is a total experience."

The first day covers some 15km across slopes of mountain fynbos, down into the valley where the sandy riverbed captures a variety of tracks and back up to the plateau. You spend night two at Camp Mozambique, where aquamarine hues create a laid-back atmosphere and the tent's flaps frame a stunning mountain view. There's enough time to reflect on the day's highlights over a gin and tonic in the tented lounge or while enjoying grilled salmon and prawn skewers for dinner.

We started the second day by walking past the spot where we had watched red hartebeest grazing while having our own breakfast. The route meanders down the slope before climbing steeply again – this hike is best enjoyed if you're a regular walker, although the frequent stops to inspect spoor and learn more about the plants offer regular opportunities to catch your breath.

The Pioneer Trail leads from east to west through Gondwana, with the vegetation changing as you make your way. This gives the sense of being on a journey, of leaving the city's pressures behind as you hike deeper into the reserve's remote parts.

Along the escarpment, the trail wends its way through a massive stand of proteas. We stopped to admire *rooibergpypie* and gladioli before following an elephant path down the slope again. I couldn't help but marvel at how these massive beasts make their way down a winding track. The path led to what Marc promised was the most beautiful spot on Gondwana.

Partway down the slope, large boulders have formed a natural alcove around a cheese-wood, its canopy creating a roof that lifts both the eye and the heart. It was a spectacular setting for our morning coffee break.

From here the hike continues down into the valley and we came across wildebeest grazing placidly below red cliffs. This area is where the reserve's newly released cheetahs have established themselves. Although we didn't catch sight of them, it is clear why they would be at home in this miniature version of the Great Rift Valley.

The day's 8km walk ends at Camp Morocco, the most intimate of the overnight stops and to my mind the most atmospheric. Low seating with scatter cushions, woven rugs and filigreed lanterns evoke the Bedouin tents of North Africa. Chef Zethu Zani is known for her aromatic lamb tagine.

The last stretch into camp is achingly beautiful. Orange watsonias, wild violets and white lobelias bloomed along the path.

"For me the beauty of Gondwana is not just what is on the reserve," Bertie said, referring to the reserve's wildlife, "but the landscape itself." That is the appeal of the Pioneer Trail: for its duration, you become a part of this land. **V**

*Pioneer Trail: R18 345 per person sharing for three nights, includes all meals, local beverages, guided walking and a game drive. Participants must be 12 years or older. [www.gondwanagr.co.za](http://www.gondwanagr.co.za)*



TOP LEFT: The overnight camps are located in remote corners of the reserve that feel completely secluded. At night, the sky is laden with stars; in the morning, you'll be woken by birdsong. BOTTOM LEFT: A bedroom tent at Camp Mozambique looks out onto mountains.