

This weekend **Houw Hoek**



There are passionate folk who put their hearts into whatever they do on the Green Mountain Eco Route just an hour from Cape Town, be it food, wine, adventure activities or just chilling out. By Marion Whitehead.

**Follow
your heart**

The large white hearts kept appearing between the trees,

drawing us like magnets to the bottom of the garden, past a pear orchard and across a make-shift bridge. What did they mean? What were they doing fastened to poles next to a dark, glassy stream?

Beyond the last one lay a path leading up the mountain. We battled a bunch of aliens – wattles, blue gums and the odd pine – before topping out onto a plateau populated by orange-breasted sunbirds quaffing nectar from cream sugarbush flowers (*Protea repens*). The Groenland Mountain loomed above, shedding water into the Houw Hoek Valley below.

The air was cool and clear in this part of the 35 000-hectare Groenlandberg Conservancy, which is home to 87 Red Data plant species. Local farmers have created the Green Mountain Eco Route, which blends outdoor activities in great scenery, vineyards, conservation and sustainable use of the area's rich biodiversity. A network of trails skirts the mountain, enticing

hikers and mountain bikers with invigorating fresh-air fixes.

We'd started out at Wildekrans Country House, a good base for exploring the area. Owner Alison Green explained that the metal hearts at the bottom of her garden had first stood in an Overberg wheat field next to the N2 near Botrivier with a dual purpose. They were her symbolic farewell to the family farm, which had been sold, and a fun Valentine to her architect husband, Barry Gould.

Avid collectors of contemporary art, the couple has quirky sculptures lurking in their garden, waiting to surprise guests as they round a corner or glance out of the windows.

From the honeymoon suite, you can see sheep grazing beside the pear orchard. But they don't move. They're an art installation, part of a ceramic flock sculpted by Wilma Cruise, *Sheep may safely graze: the return of the Bultfontein sheep*, to commemorate the farm animals slaughtered during the

BELOW: It looks as if the Beatles are about to book into Wildekrans's garden cottage. *Abbey Road* is a quirky sculpture by Cape artist Sheena Ridley. **PREVIOUS PAGE:** *Alice* is a shy sculpture by Sheena Ridley that lives in the garden at Wildekrans.



Anglo Boer War. “The sheep arrived here in a car wearing seatbelts,” Alison chuckled.

Many people associate the area with the large Houw Hoek Inn, which has been welcoming travellers to this part of the world since 1834. Wildekrans Country House is just up the road and is a solid Cape homestead, built around 1811. It’s furnished with antiques and each of the three double bedrooms has a comfortable four-poster bed, as does the main bedroom in the self-catering cottage in the garden.

The work of renowned contemporary South African artists such as William Kentridge and Robert Hodgins hang on the walls in the cosy lounge, warmed by a log fire in winter. The house’s thick walls block out the drone of trucks on the N2 further up the valley, so you can sleep as peacefully as when Houw Hoek was a popular stop en route to the eastern outposts of the Dutch East India Company in the 18th century.

Exploring the area, I found that Alison wasn’t the only person prepared to put her heart on display. At Houw Hoek Farm Stall and Restaurant, a landmark for travellers on the N2, you’ll find rows of preserves, baked goods and local wines at cellar prices. The new owners, Juan van der Westhuizen and Frans Groenewald, are chefs who worked here early in their careers, but gave up their globe-trotting ways when they heard the place was for sale.

They’ve put their hearts into the restaurant, which offers a range of world-class dishes at next-door prices. The trout really are fresh – they’re caught in the dams on the property – and their delectable chocolate brownies make cheating on your diet worth every bulging extra calorie.

If the curves of the dual-carriage Houw Hoek Pass seem a little tame compared to the old route (which you can still hike or ride and see the scars left by ox wagons), try Van der Stel’s Pass which links Botrivier with the route from Grabouw to Villiersdorp. The dirt road along the Bot River Valley’s a favourite with cyclists and

bikers, who can’t resist stopping at Goedvertrouw to taste some wine or, if they’ve booked ahead, a delicious farm lunch cooked by the hospitable Elreda Pillmann. The diminutive, silver-haired farmer radiates good health and serves visitors on her wide veranda overlooking a rose garden – another labour of love.

There are also celebrities in the area – of the four-legged variety. The most famous is rumoured to be Stripes, the zebra which co-starred with Whoopi Goldberg and Dustin Hoffman in *Racing Stripes*, a movie about a zebra that dreamed of becoming a racehorse. When he’s not in front of the camera, it’s said that Stripes shoots the breeze with his friends and chews a little grass on the mountainside.

If you stop in at the Botrivier Hotel on a Friday evening, you’ll meet local winemakers who seem to have a different kind of red in their veins, such as Luddite’s Niels Verburg and his garrulous garagista mates.

“Winemaking’s a cheaper hobby than power boating,” grinned Barry Gould, who gets his wife and daughters involved in making Barry Gould Family Wines, using the facilities at



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Tinanda Mountain Winery nearby. Botrivier Hotel owner, Herman Gey van Pittius, expounded passionately about the tourism potential of the wine and wheat region.

In his vision, steam engines once again chug over the Houw Hoek Pass loaded with visitors and the restoration of his family’s hotel is finished. The bar and restaurant are already completed and betray his eye for detail and a love of retro décor, such as the poster in the bar of the classic Castle Oatmeal Stout muscleman.

Like so many of the folk you meet in these parts, he’s followed his heart. It has led him to the Groenland Mountain, which seems to have the ability to mend not just hearts, but also the tired minds and souls of the city slickers who seek it out. ■

□ footnotes overleaf

Spring walks Set out down the Houw Hoek Valley on Saturdays at 09h00 in September and 6 October from Paul Cluver Wines with Dr Cluver as your guide. Stop for lunch at Wildekrans Country House at Houw Hoek, and then hike down the old pass to see the ox-wagon tracks, ending at Beaumont Wines at Botrivier. R200 a person includes food and wine tastings. Tel 021-844-0605, e-mail info@cluver.co.za.



What to do

- **Horse riding:** Manfred Klein of Botrivier runs children's pony camps and lessons, as well as half-day rides down the old Houw Hoek Pass (R350 a person) and vineyard rides (R120 for an hour). Tel 028-284-9422.
- **Mountain biking:** Dirtopia has two trails (8,5 km and 24 km) starting at Thandi Farm Stall (permits R15 a person). Tel 021-844-0343.
- **Quad-biking:** KamaZoo has permits from Cape Nature and uses existing tracks on its trails through farms and forests. R245 for one hour. Tel 072-537-9310.
- **Dancing** on Saturday nights at the historic Houw Hoek Inn is R125 a person, including dinner. Tel 028-284-9646.
- There are **concerts** at the Paul Cluver Forest Amphitheatre on Saturday evenings from October to March. Tel 021-844-0605, web www.cluver.com.
- Try **trout fishing** at Houw Hoek Farm Stall's dams – they'll even cook your catch for you! R50 a day includes fishing permit and kit, catches are charged at R48 a kilo. Tel 028-284-9015.
- **Wine tasting** options include Paul Cluver, Beaumont Wines, Wildekrans, Luddite and Goedvertrouw estates, and Barry Gould Family Wines at Wildekrans Country House.
- **Elgin open gardens** on the first two weekends of November include Wildekrans Country House and Goedvertrouw. Web www.elginvalley.co.za.
- Drive the scenic **Van der Stel Pass** from Botrivier to join the R321, then loop back to the N2 at Grabouw.
- **Oudebrug Art Gallery** showcases the whimsical work of talented artist and sculptor Sheena Ridley. Tel 083-589-2881.
- Watch competing teams of wine-makers **race barrels** through the streets of Botrivier on October 27.
- **Hiking:** You need to be fairly fit for the Groenlandberg Trail (22 km) or the two-day Highlands Trail (37 km), but the Houw Hoek Trail (8 km) is an easy option.

For more information, see www.greenmountain.co.za.



wjn Q: Name a South African artist whose work is displayed at Wildekrans Country House?

Getaway, in conjunction with Wildekrans Country House, is giving away two nights B&B accommodation for a couple, plus a gift of Barry Gould Family Wines, together valued at R1 560. **SMS** Getaway, Wildekrans, your name and your answer to 34704; **phone** 083-913-4705, **post** your entry

with your name, contact details and answer to Getaway/Wildekrans competition, PO Box 22, Howard Place, 7450 Cape Town or enter **on-line** at www.getawaytoafrika.com/competitions. The competition closes on 23 October 2007. See competition rules on page 239.



TOP: Dream a little in this four-poster bed at Wildekrans Country House. **ABOVE:** In November, Wildekrans is one of a number of local gardens that is open to the public.

footnotes

How to get there It's less than an hour from Cape Town (about 80 km). Take the N2 over Sir Lowry's Pass and continue past Grabouw. Turn left at the Houw Hoek Inn sign, cross the railway line, drive through the hotel parking area and turn left into a country lane. Wildekrans Country House is on the right just after the little church.

Where to stay B&B at the four-star **Wildekrans Country House** is good value at R358 a person sharing, or rent the whole house on a self-catering basis at R2 255 a night (min. three nights). Birch Cottage in the garden is self-catering and sleeps two (R385 each) or four people (R248 each). Tel 028-284-9827, e-mail info@wildekrans.co.za, or web www.wildekrans.co.za.

Houw Hoek Inn claims to have been granted the first liquor licence in the country in 1834. B&B is R335 a person sharing and the Saturday night special (dinner, dance, B&B) is R420 a person. Tel 028-284-9646, e-mail

houwhoek@iafrica.com, or web www.houwhoekinn.co.za.

Goedvertrouw on Van der Stel's Pass beyond Botrivier is a rambling, 1825 farmhouse with a generous veranda. R300 a person sharing B&B. Tel 028-284-9769.

Where to eat **Houw Hoek Farm Stall** serves great meals that are good value. The specials change, but the whole baby trout with mash and veg (R63) and roast veg and haloumi wrap (R33) are delicious. Picnic baskets from R65 a person. Tel 028-284-9015.

Botrivier Hotel is where locals gather on a Friday evening to catch up on news over a few pints and a wholesome meal with the family. Tel 028-284-9640, web www.botrivier.co.za.

Goedvertrouw serves delicious farm lunches, provided you book in advance. Tel 028-284-9769.

Thandi Farm Kitchen serves breakfast, light meals and yummy cakes on its sunny veranda overlooking the herb garden. Tel 021-844-0343. ■

