# THE WORLD'S *treasures* IN OUR BACKYARD

**Iga Motylska** observes more whales than she can count and reacquaints herself with nature at De Hoop Nature Reserve, a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site, in the Western Cape.

**Photographs** by Iga Motylska, Kathryn Rossiter and De Hoop Collection





**Activities at De Hoop**
- Children's holiday programmes
- Star gazing
- Interpretative marine walk
- Guided bird and fynbos walk
- Guided mountain bike trail
- Guided eco-quad bike trails
- Cycling, walking and hiking trails
- Wine route
- Art workshops
- Whale watching (seasonal)
- Melkkamer Trail (seasonal)

**The glinting flukes of the** whales' tails emerge elegantly from the water, but soon slap the surface in a controlled and rhythmic manner. Each time the flukes rise, a half-formed arch of water outlines the trajectory of their movement, briefly suspended in the air, before raining down.

Another Southern Right whale lunges into the air. This is whale season along the 70 km coastline of De Hoop Nature Reserve, which is one of the largest marine protected areas in Africa. Meters away, yet another spyhops – the curious practice of poking its head out of the water to take a look around, and sometimes spinning so it can see in all directions. A third, which turns out to be a mother with her calf, lies still at the surface of the water, resting, with her tail hanging down. This is called logging, we learn. It's an outdoor classroom, with our knowledgeable guide, Delfrenzo, as our teacher.

Whale season in South Africa stretches from June to December and sees hundreds of Southern Right whales swim northwards to the warm waters of the Agulhas Current to calve. An aerial count estimated around 700 whales during my visit. Once the calves gain strength, the whales leave this 'nursery' and make their way westwards, where they mark out the whale trail along South Africa's south western coastlines, all the way to Namibia, to the nutrient-rich cooler waters of the Benguela Current.

We watch in awe as the live National Geographic documentary unfolds before us. Luckily, the gourmet picnic lunch that waits on the wooden table a few feet away will not get cold. Marcia, the head chef, has prepared a cheeseboard with an assortment of crackers and preserved figs, salmon wraps, a homemade baguette with a cheese filling, and a green salad with asparagus and sundried tomato.

After lunch, I dig my toes into the sand and listen to the soundtrack of the ocean and the whistled weeps of the African Black Oystercatchers. The undulating sand dunes seem to be one of two possible namesakes of De Hoop – which can mean either 'the heap' (of sea sand) or 'of hope'. I have left my book next to the proteas on my bedside table and so, instead of lying on the beach with nothing to read, I walk along the wooden footpath, atop the low cliffs to take photographs. Even when the whales aren't around, there is much to experience at this 36 000 hectare protected nature reserve within the Overberg region. It's a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site, due to the conservation efforts of the Cape Floral Protected Area and historic importance of the buildings.




It's well worth visiting for a long weekend or an entire week and park conservation fees are only R40 per person, per day. De Hoop is a three-hour drive from Cape Town, and in the springtime, the last stretch of dirt road is awash with generous brush strokes of yellow from the canola fields.

An early morning guided bird and fynbos walk will be included in your stay, if you book for at least three nights (excluding campsite bookings). The difficulty and distance covered can be adjusted according to your family's fitness level and endurance. See how many of the reserve's 260 bird species you can spot before breakfast.

I delighted in the two-hour Interpretive Marine Walk that explores the rock pools and intertidal zone at low tide. We learnt about the feeding habits of starfish, that sea urchins shield themselves from the sun with empty mussel shells and who would've thought that barnacles could be so intriguing - we also spotted a blue anemone, which waved hello.

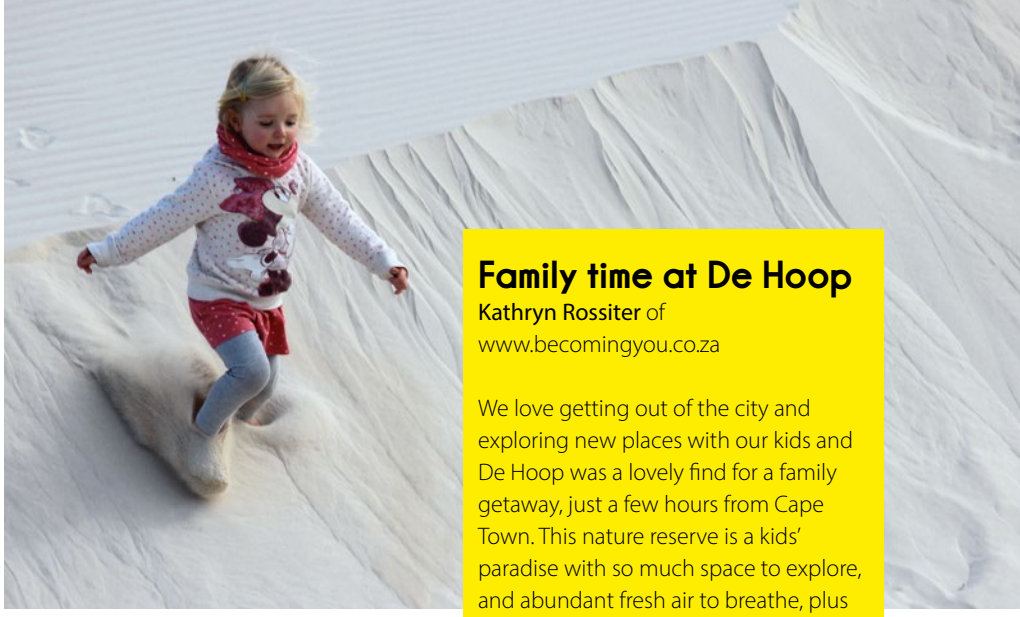
Younger children will have guaranteed thrills during the holiday programme, while those over the age of 16 can take to the

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** The exquisite vlei at De Hoop stretches for 17 km

**OPPOSITE TOP:** Flowers in full bloom in front of the Opstal Manor

**LEFT:** The guided eco-quad bike trail explores the flora and fauna of the reserve

**ABOVE:** Families can enjoy the Interpretative Marine Walk along the main beach



**RIGHT:** Children have heaps of fun playing on the sand dunes

**BELOW LEFT:** A gourmet picnic is served on the banks of the vlei during the Melkkamer walking trail

**BELOW RIGHT:** One can take a short boat ride across the vlei or drive your 4x4 to get to the Melkkamer Manor House

**BOTTOM:** The limestone Melkkamer Manor House is the ideal self-catering unit for large families







## Accommodation options

Just as each family is unique, so the De Hoop Collection offers a variety of accommodation options, each of which presents a different experience. Here are a few:

- Camping at R325 / site
- Two-sleeper, self-catering Camp Rondawels look out onto the vlei (R840 / rondawel) and the open-air, wrap-around showers are certainly part of the experience
- Self-catering equipped cottages (R1325 / cottage), but if mom needs a break from the kitchen, the restaurant awaits
- Opstal Manor House Suites (R950 per person per night, sharing) includes breakfast and dinner

open road during a guided eco-quad bike trail – charged on a per person, per hour basis. Although there are 1 500 plant species at De Hoop, it's best known for its pincushion proteas and other types of fynbos. The numerous cycling, walking and hiking trails throughout the reserve offer the chance of game viewing. Then, as the bird songs fade with the evening light, the night sky becomes illuminated with thousands of constellations and zodiac signs, and we begin stargazing with Delfrenzo testing our astronomy general knowledge and teaching us how to determine true south in the southern hemisphere. That night, on the owner's recommendation, I tried the fynbos-infused Gin Verdant from Inverroche Distillery in nearby Stilbaai, with delicate slices of orange zest. So delicious I proceeded to savour one each evening!

We stayed at the eight-sleeper limestone Melkkamer Manor House (R8500/night), which was built at the turn of the 20th century. Although recently refurbished, it retains the air of the English countryside with four-poster beds, antique furniture, wooden floors and rustic décor. Even though the spacious farm-style kitchen makes it the ideal self-catering unit, we opted for Marcia to cater to our appetites, while we read on the veranda overlooking the vlei. The Manor House is set apart from the rest of the reserve's facilities, on the far side of the vlei that stretches for 17 km across the reserve and requires a quick boat ride across to get back to the restaurant. Or drive around in your own 4x4.

When you go to De Hoop, please send Marcia my regards and tell her we'll be coming back for the peace and quiet, whales and her delicious clam chowder.●

## Family time at De Hoop

**Kathryn Rossiter** of www.becomingyou.co.za

We love getting out of the city and exploring new places with our kids and De Hoop was a lovely find for a family getaway, just a few hours from Cape Town. This nature reserve is a kids' paradise with so much space to explore, and abundant fresh air to breathe, plus an array of animals to see. One highlight of our time at De Hoop was our visit to the world-famous dunes where my kids had a ball climbing, leaping, running and diving, and I managed to get some lovely photos against the pristine white sand. Another highlight was seeing wildlife outside our cottage, including ostrich, baboons, bontebok and Africa's largest antelope, the eland. We enjoyed our early evening walks overlooking the beautiful vlei and the vibrant birdlife, and we saw a few shy dassies enjoying the last rays of sunshine on the rocks below the path. De Hoop might be tucked away down a dirt road at the southern tip of Africa, but it's worth the journey and we can't wait to go back to discover more of this gem with our kids.

## More information

***De Hoop Collection***

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