

MAN TRAVEL

Take a load off



Arthur Jones
walks us
through the
newest, easiest
way to hike –
slackpacking

If 'pack donkey' and 'porter' are not part of your skill set, take heart. Slackpacking is here. 'It's basically backpacking without the schlep – a trail on which your bags are transferred from one overnight spot to the next, leaving you free to hike with just a day pack,' says Fiona McIntosh, author of over a dozen adventure books, including *Slackpacking: A Guide to South Africa's Top Leisure Trails*. 'At its most basic level, the bulk of hikers' luggage and food will be transported between overnight camps or huts so that they only need to carry water, their food for the day, essential clothing and first aid,' says Frank Dwyer, professional guide and slackpacking expert at Platteklip Tours. 'At the highest level, it's a fully guided trail with comfortable beds and hot showers,

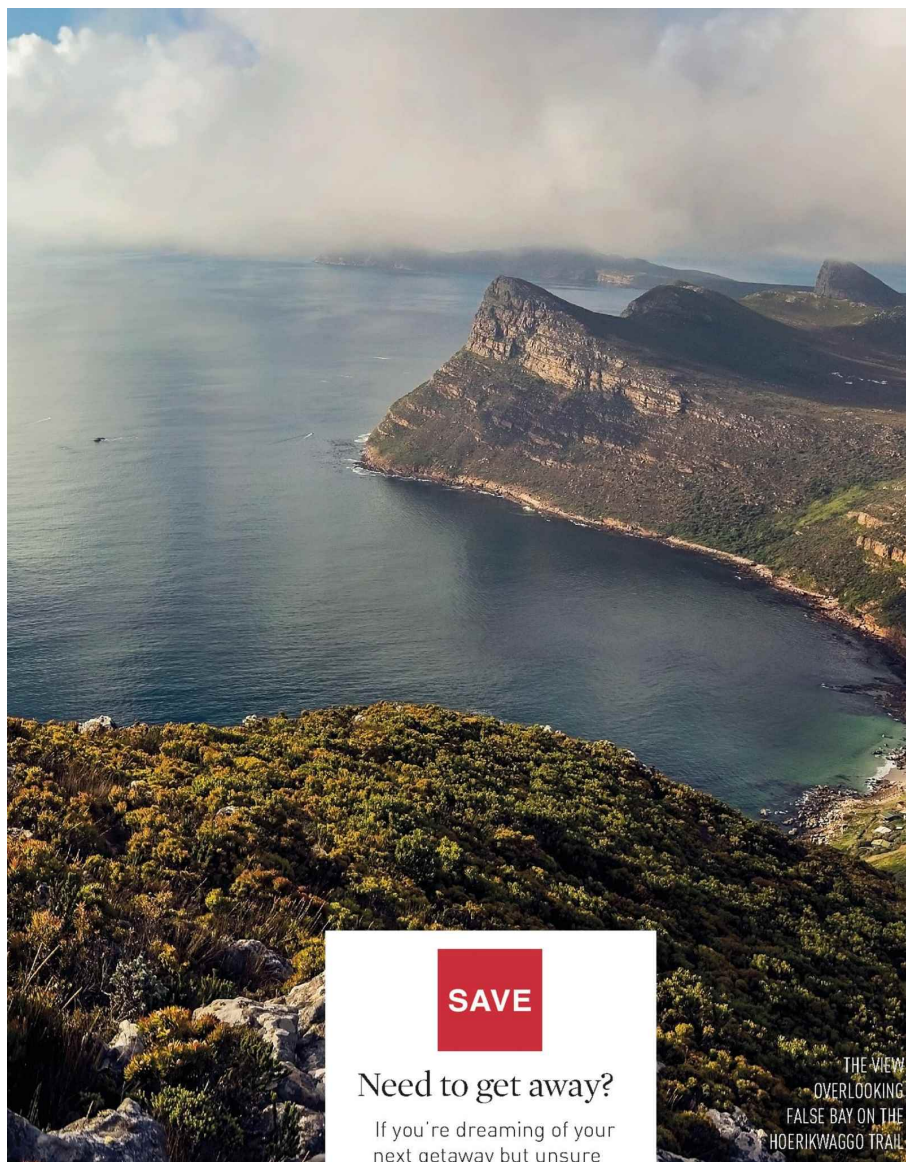
prepared meals and wine, beer and soft drinks waiting at the end of a day's hike,' says Dwyer.

Sounds good, right? I think so, and here's why: 'Besides saving your back and knees, you can cover ground quicker so you have more time for swims or stops and you can have "proper" food and drinks,' says McIntosh. This means having the luxury of a well-stocked cooler box that's taken to your overnight spot. It also means that just about everyone can do a long-distance hike – older hikers, families with kids in tow, leisure tourists and even those who are too busy to take care of the logistics or heavy lifting themselves.

'Guides can add value to the experience and if you choose the luxury option, you're guaranteed good shelter – regardless of weather conditions,' says Dwyer. Add to that a balanced meal, hot shower and proper

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bed, and it's clear why it's taking off with non-Bear Grylls types who don't want to eat out of tin or shiver in a tent during a storm.

When it comes to disadvantages, there's only one real drawback. Slackpacking is more

expensive than backpacking. Prices vary enormously between routes and are also determined by the option you choose. If you want to have a guide, catered meals and luxury accommodation at night, then that obviously ratchets up the price.

'If a trail is properly marked, you may not need a guide, although having one with knowledge of the fauna, flora, geology, history and culture of the area will obviously add to the experience,' says Dwyer.

'For most trails, the optimum group size is six people for standard rates. With guiding, catering and logistical support, you're looking at R1 200 to R2 000 per person per night for a group of six.

'But don't be misguided. Just because it's a slack-

packing route doesn't necessarily make it easier or mean that you can join the trail if you are unfit, although some trails could well be easier,' says Dwyer.

'Also, you won't have the physical challenge of carrying a full backpack and the bragging rights that come with having done the trail the traditional way – for some this is important and not to be discounted,' he says. But we're pretty sure that most people (and their joints) will be happy to forego this. 

TOP SLACKPACKING ROUTES

Frank Dwyers' picks

FYNBOS TRAIL This three-day, 26km route in Walker Bay ambles through indigenous forest with birds, lichens, tumbling waterfalls, streams and fynbos.

fynbostrail.co.za

HOERIKWAGGO TRAIL Hikers have the option to do the whole route or just a section of this five-day trail in the Table Mountain National Park. The trail is temporarily closed due to the fires that ravaged the Cape earlier this year. Visit the website for an update.

sanparks.org/parks/table_mountain/ht/

CEDERBERG HERITAGE ROUTE There are six trails under the Cederberg Heritage Route banner, all in the region of the Pakhuis Pass and Wupperthal.

cedheroute.co.za

Fiona McIntosh's picks

NUM NUM TRAIL An epic green flag route in Mpumalanga with huts in sandstone formations and old railway coach accommodation.

thenum-numtrail.co.za

WILD COAST MEANDER Breathtaking beaches, towering cliffs and curious cows. The Transkei has arguably the most untouched coastline in the country and it's normally coupled with the best weather.

wildcoastwalk.co.za

WHALE TRAIL Combining both coastal and mountain hiking, this Overberg trail offers wildlife and marine life, an incredible variety of fauna and flora and, of course, plenty of the breaching, water-spraying, barnacle-covered giants.

dehoopcollection.com/whale-trail

AMPHITHEATRE HERITAGE HIKE A World Heritage Site that shows off the towering Drakensberg mountain range and the highest waterfall in Africa, the Tugela Falls.

drakensberghikes.co.za

OYSTERCATCHER TRAIL Dolphins, seals and the famous black Oystercatcher accompany you on a route through golden beaches, seafront caves and hidden bays in the Southern Cape.

oystercatchertrail.co.za