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SAVE OUR RHINO

De Hoop Nature Reserve



Discovering the Beautiful Hope

*Words: Lisa Köhler
Photographs: Rod MacLeod*

SHAFTS OF LIGHT FROM A DRAMATIC SKY FALL ON A VAST COASTAL PLAIN BELOW. It's a fitting scene for a place that in translation means 'The Hope'. The drive from Cape Town to De Hoop Nature Reserve seems a quick three hours through the Overberg farmlands. As we enter the reserve, the swathes of ploughed soil and fields of wheat and canola give way to a landscape eons old. Following the road from the elevated entry gate the entire reserve spreads out as a wide-angled vista of Lowland fynbos and veld.





In the shafts of light, the plain is a shifting patchwork of grey brown. In the far distance a raised pale band frames the horizon. Its whiteness seems more reminiscent of snowcapped peaks than that of sand dunes. Visible to the right is the reflecting waters of the De Hoop Vlei– a declared Ramsar Site. Centre stage, a tiny group of spot lit buildings far below indicates our intended destination – De Hoop's cluster of accommodation.



Living History

Ranging from camping, self-catering to luxury lodges, De Hoop offers visitors plenty choice to suit the pocket. At the heart of the white-washed houses is the Opstal area. This historic monument dates back to the 1800s when its earliest owner, Pieter Lourens Cloete established a successful Spanish horse stud and built the original homestead. Today, the central office and restaurant adjoin the Manor House and stables converted into luxurious suites. The front facades of these historic Cape Dutch buildings open into an expansive high walled courtyard with lush lawns shaded by giant fig trees.

Appropriately, the restaurant is called 'The Fig Tree'. The food is a gourmet delight. Even though visitors have the option of self-catering, treat yourself to at least one 'Fig Tree' meal – it's a delicious addition to your De Hoop itinerary.

The buildings have been beautifully restored through the De Hoop Development Initiative – a privately driven partnership with Cape Nature. (The private partners are upgrading and managing the facilities while Cape Nature ensures the conservation of the biodiversity.) Sensitively chosen modern fittings combine with the gleaming patina of ancient yellowwood and flagstone floors to create lavish accommodation without losing any of the bygone charm.

Where in previous centuries horses and livestock grazed on the plains, today rare bontebok, eland and Cape mountain zebra roam free. De Hoop has boasting rights to healthy herds of bontebok – the most rare of all African antelope listed in the Red Data Book. The reserve can also lay claim to having the third largest herd of Cape mountain zebra in the world. It is a little surreal sitting and drinking tea on the 'stoep' of your Cape Dutch house as eland graze metres away. You feel transported back in time to some Arcadian world.

This page left top to bottom: view of the whitewashed accommodation; eland wander past the Opstal; the path through fynbos down to the beach. **Above:** historic photograph of the Manor House. **Opposite page top to bottom:** the rare African black oystercatcher; guests learning about the tidal zone on a guided walk; views of the exterior and interior of the historic Manor House; and the delicate beauty of the pristine flora at De Hoop.





Above left: The swimming beach at De Hoop.
Top right: The coastal sand-dunes of De Hoop Nature Reserve are natural look-out towers for best sightings of Southern right whales.

Left: Right whales: There are three species of right whales: the southern right whale *E. australis*, found at De Hoop, the North Atlantic right whale *E. glacialis*, and the North Pacific right whale *E. japonica*. The mouth of the right whale has a distinct arch, a V-shaped blowhole and its skin is blackish-gray. Rough patches of skin occur on its head and are white due to whale lice. Right whales can grow up to 18 m long and weigh up to 90 000 kgs. Right whales are smaller than blue whales but larger than humpbacks or grays. Right males have genitals that are larger than any other living animal.

Right whales swim with open mouths skimming the waters surface for tiny zooplankton prey. They then expel the water and trap their food in their baleen plates. Photograph © Edurivero.



Above: An inquisitive Cape Robin-Chat *Cossypha caffra* investigates; bontebok; delicious meals at The Fig Tree at the Opstal.

Southern tip of Africa

Situated at the southern tip of Africa, De Hoop is important for its unique biodiversity and has international recognition as a World Heritage Site. One reason for this status is its pristine fynbos with De Hoop holding 17% of the Cape Floristic region's 8 500 species. Many of the 1 500 species at De Hoop are endemic and 108 are rare or threatened.

The bird list at De Hoop has more than 260 recorded species. This impressive tally represents 70% of the 369 species known in the south-western Cape. No wonder De Hoop is a major draw-card for local and international birders. Wildside met an American on her 14th trip to Africa who had expressly chosen to come to De Hoop because of its reputation for birding.

Trails along De Hoop vlei start a short distance from the Opstal. The Sout River and its tributary, the Potteberg River, feed the waters of the 18 km

long vlei. In an easy walk along the vlei a multitude of water birds are visible from coots, terns, pelicans and ducks to small waders, herons, flamingoes and egrets. However, as the vlei is a declared Ramsar Site, there is also a good chance of sighting rare species such as the little bittern or a chestnutbanded sandplover.

In the open grassland inland ostriches and blue crane are easily spotted. In the reserve's Potsberg Mountains to the north, is the last breeding colony of endangered Cape vultures in the Western Cape.

The reserve is home to many other smaller creatures as well. A common sight is angulate (rooipens) tortoises ambling across the roads. Our vehicle also yielded to a distinctly marked puff adder that was instantly camouflaged as soon as it reached the verge's undergrowth. Resident in limestone caves at the reserve's northern end is a colony of several thousand bats.

Missiles and the Conservationists

The current unspoiled landscape can be attributed in part to De Hoop's history. The evidence of human interference at De Hoop lies lightly on the environment. While the human trail dates back to the Dutch East India Company and even further back to Late Stone Age hunter-gathers, several factors have kept the reserve in its natural state.

Its geological formations of mainly coastal limestone on top of shale and sandstone ensured the area's low agricultural potential with minimal farming but perfect for indigenous wildlife to flourish. In 1956 the Department of Nature Conservation bought the farms and a year later proclaimed De Hoop a nature reserve. The department began restocking and experimenting with breeding wildlife for later sale to private landowners.

Ironically, another factor that's kept De Hoop pristine is that the region in

the 1980s was made a military missile-testing site – a sure way to discourage human encroachment. However, things have changed and today De Hoop is a favorite destination for hikers, cyclists, and bird watchers and during the winter and early summer months, whale watchers.

Beaches and breaches

The reserve is approximately 36 000 ha in size. It has a further marine reserve that was proclaimed in 1986 and stretches 5 km out to sea. The coastline's unique geology combined with the meeting of the cold Benguela and warm Agulhas currents is a magnet for marine mammals such as dolphins and 250 species of fish.

The coastline is a gentle concave arcing around the broadest part of southern Africa's continental shelf. It's for this reason that 40% of the world's southern right whales return from July each year to mate, give birth and nurture their young. De Hoop's sand dunes provide grandstand views of often 30 whales or more just beyond the breakers – it's a world-class spectacle.

De Hoop's beaches and dunes are accessed by wooden walkways through rich fynbos. What from a distance just looks like brown scrub becomes exquisite close up. Delicate flowers are scattered like confetti among a divine landscape of diverse foliage.

This approach to viewing life close-up can also be continued when you reach the beach. Among the bays of white sand and turquoise water, tours given by the reserve's guides allow visitors an opportunity to appreciate the minutia of sea-life in rock pools. On our tour the second most rare endemic coastal bird in South Africa – an African black oystercatcher, joined us.

De Hoop is a treasure trove of natural gems. From its rare fauna and flora to its beautiful beaches, it demands visitors take a few days to explore. After a delicious dinner at The Fig Tree, I settle back into the downy comfort of a four poster bed and resolve that, like the whales that return year-after-year, I'm coming back to De Hoop. **W**

FACT TRACKER

De Hoop Nature Reserve

Where: ± 260km from Cape Town. The reserve may be approached from either Bredasdorp or Swellendam. The last 57km of either route is along gravel roads.

Rates: The luxury Opstal Manor House (previously the Ou Huis) 6 people in 3 en suite bedrooms. Fully catered. The Fig Tree Restaurant serves three meals a day as well as teas and coffees. From R1300 ppn. De Hoop has a wide range of accommodation available. Cottages start from R595 ppn. Camping starts from R295. Minimum charges apply in all options.

Important to note: De Hoop is open for day visitors between 07:00 and 18:00 (Fridays 19:00). The nearest shop and fuel supply is 15km from the reserve. Firewood may be purchased at the office during office hours. No pets, firearms or fishing gear are allowed on the reserve. Picnic baskets are available for day visitors and overnight guests.

Contact: Accommodation booked through De Hoop Collection.

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Cape Nature: www.capenature.co.za