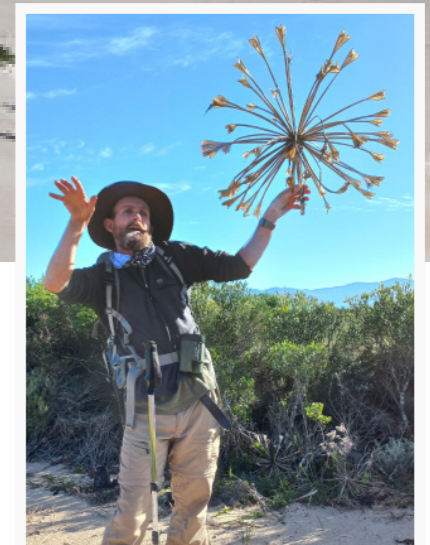
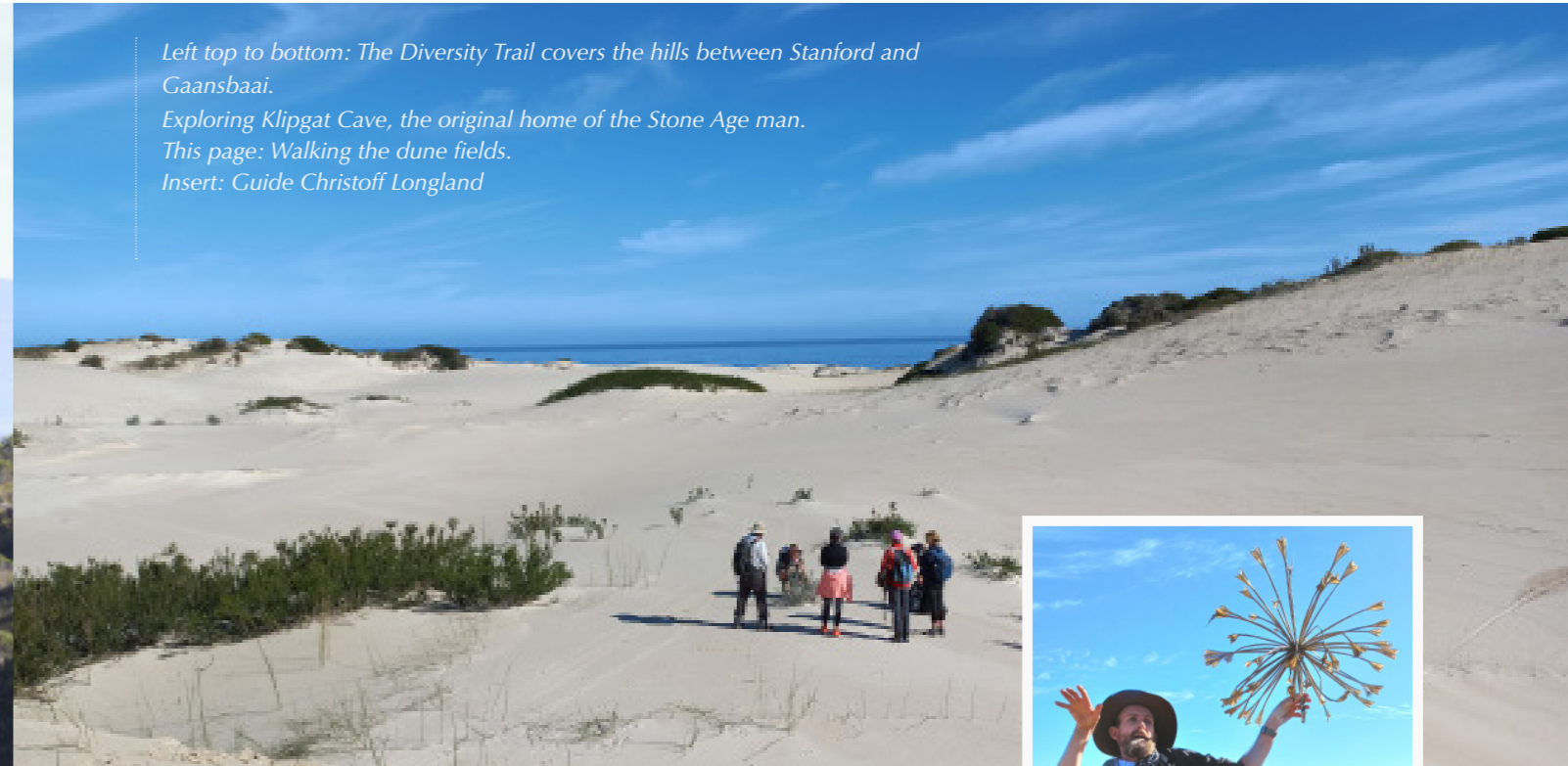




# SLACKPACKING THROUGH MIDDLE EARTH

Left top to bottom: The Diversity Trail covers the hills between Stanford and Gaansbaai.  
Exploring Klippgat Cave, the original home of the Stone Age man.  
This page: Walking the dune fields.  
Insert: Guide Christoff Longland



Muse's Carrie Hampton was transported into a parallel world on the four-night slackpacking Diversity Trail in Western Cape's Walker Bay Fynbos Conservancy.

Photos Shaen Adey, Carrie Hampton

**I felt like** I'd entered Middle Earth, with damp green forests hanging with old man's beard, opening to verdant vistas of rolling hills. A little man was flitting about in the undergrowth with a long, wiry beard, weather-beaten leather hat and mischievous blue eyes, pointing out plant species I'd never seen before.

I followed this sprightly fellow over hill and dale, through woodlands and past gnarled tree trunks etched with menacing scratch marks from Cape leopards. They regularly trigger the camera traps on the same paths our small walking group was treading on the 4-day Diversity Trail slackpacking hike. Our guide is Christoff Longland, with a hobbit surname and intelligence of a High Elf – which *Lord of the Rings*

devotees know is considerably smarter than most humanoid. He has an extraordinary recall for the names and characteristics of every fynbos species and most other storied explanations of nature.

We are inland among the hills between Stanford and Gaansbaai, staying at the 5-star Bellavista Guest House, whose sensational view leads the eye over the blue pool and down 5km to the sea at Walker Bay. We begin each day's hike from Bellavista, or sometimes via a short hop in the leaky school bus to a start point. Day three takes us to the ocean by walking across a remote dune field along the top of some cliffs, then onto soft beach sand to Klippgat Cave. Stone Age Man lived here, and we stood silhouetted

in the cave mouth, as they did some 70,000 years ago. In the winter months, between June and October, this stretch of ocean offers up an added bonus to hikers, with sightings of southern right whales as they come close to shore to mate and give birth.

A different and effortless watery experience starts the Diversity Trail with a boat ride on the Kleinrivier aboard the double-decker Lady Stanford. This is after a lunch of the best wood-fired pizzas at Stanford Kitchen, where the group meets each other for the first time. It's impossible not to get enthusiastic about birding during the two-hour cruise, and if you want to add a crazily-coloured gallinule to your bird list, this is the place to do it.

So begins four glorious days on the new Diversity Trail, with Christoff surefootedly leading us through the Walker Bay Fynbos Conservancy. The scenery looks different because it's crowded with unique fynbos species, recognised by UNESCO as The Cape Floral Region, which is found only in the southwestern extremity of South Africa. By far the smallest of the six Floral Kingdoms – within an area of just 90 000 km<sup>2</sup> – it is notable for being one of the world's great centres of terrestrial biodiversity, density and number of endemic species. UNESCO describes it as, "The hottest hotspot for diversity of endemic and threatened plants, containing outstanding examples of significant ongoing ecological, biological and evolutionary processes."

Fynbos has more than three times the floral species of the Amazon, around 9,000 species, 70% of which are found nowhere else on earth. We witnessed the miracle of tiny fine-leaf (fyn-bos) plants, never seen by anyone outside this region. Christoff explains that the pink glow lighting the landscape is the tiny flowers of Erica

irregularis. Only found on about 300 hectares traversed by the Diversity Trail and Fynbos Trail. What a privilege to walk amongst it. A single blossom honey is made from it, served in season at breakfast as a special treat.

We never covered more than 10km per day, mainly due to stopping, looking, and hearing the mysteries that each plant held. Or birdwatching for orange-breasted sunbirds and Cape batis chattering in dense bush. Christoff has little gems about every sighting, like how Mousebirds feast so gluttonously on fruit that they need to sunbathe in the tops of trees to activate special enzymes in their gut. With legs apart and pressing their bellies forward, Christoff gesticulates a pose, "They look like little Buddhas." We learn that the flagship fynbos bird is the Cape Sugarbird. It's entirely dependent on Proteaceae and feeds on up to 300 flowers daily, making it a more effective pollinator than the sunbirds. Breeding males sport a 45 cm-long tail, causing a somewhat erratic and comical flight pattern, especially in high winds.

Birds are not the only thing that

waylaid us. A table set up in the vineyards with tasting glasses greeted us on the slopes of Lomond Wines on Day 4. They are one of 42 local landowners who joined the Walker Bay Fynbos Conservancy and collectively own and protect more than 24,000 hectares of endangered lowland fynbos and forest habitat. Lomond has 18 different soil forms – as opposed to three on most wine estates – occurring naturally in small pockets, with vineyards cooled by Agulhas sea breezes. The result is late-ripening intense fruit and intriguingly complex wines. Standing between two blocks of recently picked vines, we tasted two single vineyard sauvignon blancs, whose flavour profiles differed completely. The Sugarbush vintage on a clay base is more delicate with a rounder mouthfeel, while just metres away on well-drained sandier soil, the earlier-ripening Pincushion label has a crisp acidity.

More Lomond wines and another conservancy member, Giant Periwinkle Boutique Winery, are served at dinner in the high comfort of Bellavista Guest House. Unlike other



casterbridge



Left: The gorgeous King Protea.  
This page top to bottom: Exploring the fynbos.  
Getting a closer look at a seed pod.  
Waterfalls on the Diversity Trail.

slackpacking hikes through indigenous Cape flora, such as the Whale Trail and Fynbos Trail, this one offers luxury accommodation and quality cuisine at the end of a day's walking. With luck, the final gala dinner will be prepared by Michelin-starred chef Jürgen Schneider, who presides over the Cape Floral Kitchen on-site at Bellavista, which is open to the public.

The quality of experiences during the Diversity Trail is such that you'd find at the renowned Grootbos Private Nature Reserve next door. Indeed, they have acquired the Bellavista property, but the heavily upholstered traditional guest house style doesn't fit the Grootbos brand. It's therefore marketed separately as the base for the Diversity Trail, which is also conceptualised and run by Grootbos' awarded Botanist Sean Privett and his wife, Michele. They also run the Fynbos Trail, which is more rugged in nature through similar terrain and has equally impressive guiding experiences. This means that, combined with Christoff's guiding, you couldn't be in more experienced or knowledgeable hands. The itinerary also changes according to weather and fitness levels for guests' maximum enjoyment.

Sean and Christoff both stress the interconnectedness of everything and

Two-thirds of the plants here are found nowhere else in the world, and some may only have a single pollinator.



make looking at yet another plant positively enthralling. Sean explains, "Two-thirds of the plants here are found nowhere else in the world, and some may only have a single pollinator."

Information overload is inevitable, so I let the macro setting on my cellphone record visually what my brain could no longer absorb. Four days of walking, talking, dune walking, rock-hopping, and sea-dipping usually end at The Hannarie Wenholt Botanical Art Gallery on the Grootbos reserve. Here, the magnificent Florilegium is housed, defined in the dictionary as 'A lavishly illustrated book on flowers.' With 124 plant species represented in 248 artworks, the Grootbos Florilegium has become Africa's largest work of botanical art. The exquisite original watercolours line the gallery walls, culminating in the gift shop displaying an enormous display tome containing them all. The coffee-table version is available online at R2 515.

When 44 botanical artists were asked to choose three different plants to draw, unbelievably only two selected the same species. The artists,

botanists, and entomologists spent months studying specific plants, slowly capturing their secret worlds with scientific precision. The brief was to create one painting focusing on the floral detail and another vignette reflecting the pollinators, birds, butterflies, insects and the plant's relationship in nature. Botanical artist Margaret De Villiers said, "The Grootbos Florilegium has been a highlight in my life." Fellow painter Daleen Roodt commented, "This project has given a bigger purpose to the meaning and significance of my art." The creative process is well worth watching on the YouTube documentary *Discover The Untold Story of The Grootbos Florilegium*, as seen through the eyes of Grootbos founder Michael Lutzeyer and the artists.

The Diversity Trail is for true slackpackers like me, who are in it for the journey, not the distance. And appreciate a hot bath and soft bed in my own en-suite room. It's priced similarly to other trails, between R11 500 and R13 500 per person for four nights, fully inclusive, departing on the 5th morning. ●



Hippo hollow



Top to bottom: A boat ride on the Kleinrivier aboard the double-decker Lady Stanford.

The trail goes through the Walker Bay Fynbos Conservancy. Signage on the Diversity Trail. Close up view of botanical art in the Hannarie Wenholt Botanical Art Gallery, Bellavista Guest House.



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