

**DE HOOP IS
A BIRDER'S PARADISE**

These are just some of the 270 birds you can spot at De Hoop Nature Reserve:

- Rufous-chested sparrowhawk
- Eurasian golden oriole
- Greater flamingo
- Shy albatross
- Great white pelican
- Verreaux's eagle
- European oystercatcher
- Whiskered tern
- Hartlaub's gull
- African grass owl
- Fiery-necked nightjar
- European bee-eater
- Amethyst sunbird
- Cinnamon-breasted bunting



Eland, the world's second largest antelope, enjoy a variety of habitats in the 35 546-hectare reserve. **OPPOSITE** A Cape weaver, one of the more common sightings in the Cape's top bird hotel.

De Hoop *springs eternal*

We all have special places to which we return over again. Pippa de Bruyn's is De Hoop Nature Reserve, which has developed and expanded in tandem with her own life.

Photographs by Teagan Cunniffe





ABOVE The endangered bontebok cantering amid succulents. This rare antelope is almost always seen from the circular drive approaching the vlei and cottages, along with zebra, eland, baboons and ostriches.

It haunts me now that I can't recall who first took me to De Hoop. I know I was just out of varsity, still long-haired, stealing surreptitious glances at a boy who didn't love me. I wasn't much into nature then, more focused on the music blaring through car speakers, nodding 'yeah' whenever Jim Morrison drawled that he was going to get his kicks before the whole shithouse went up in flames. And we were going up in flames all right – this was the late 80s – but the

shithouse seemed far from the broad expanse of water rippling with birdlife below our tented encampment. Egrets, herons, coots, cormorants, ibis, plovers – more species than my limited vocabulary. And then came the pelicans. I felt awe as I watched them crash-land into the water before coming up, bills laden with fish, while above swifts put on a spectacular display. That night I slept in my car – cursing the poxy bint in the boy's tent – and was woken in the dewy predawn by the rip and scrunch of zebra grazing around us, like some *Out of Africa* fantasy.

Quite a few years passed before I next signed the register at the De Hoop gate, a new bunch of reprobates in tow. Now 26, tresses shorn. This time we rented two cottages – basic little units strung along in a row like wallflowers at a dance, each with a large round stone firepit under a stumpy tree. At night we made bonfires and drank cheap red wine under the star-spangled sky. The artist I arrived with was never going to be a long-term thing, but it was ending sooner than I wanted. I watched him flirt with his new handler, a fresh-faced architect. When he left the fire to replenish our glasses I said 'look after him'. 'I will,' she said, and we stared into the flames. The next day, driving to De Hoop

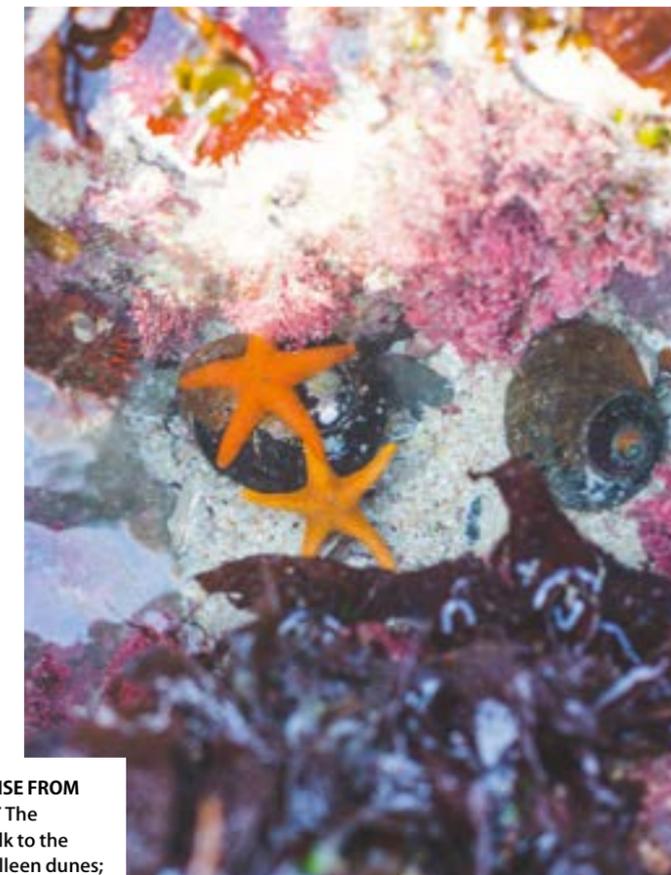
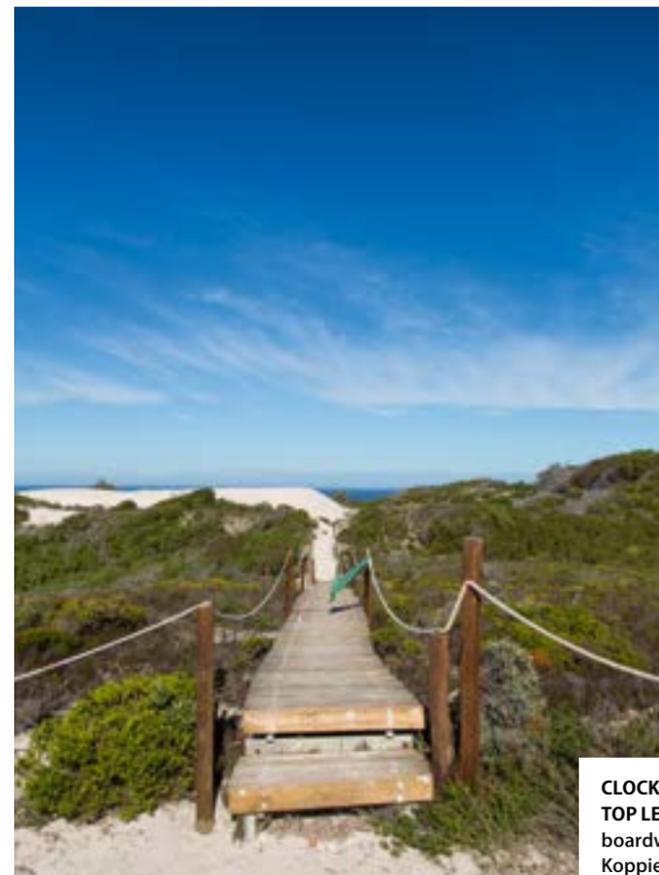
'The foreigner behind the wheel is the man I want to marry and De Hoop is part of the courtship plan'

beach, the tapestry of lime and olive greens blurring into silver, I wound my window wide open, letting the scent of hot geranium and baked soil wash over me, content.

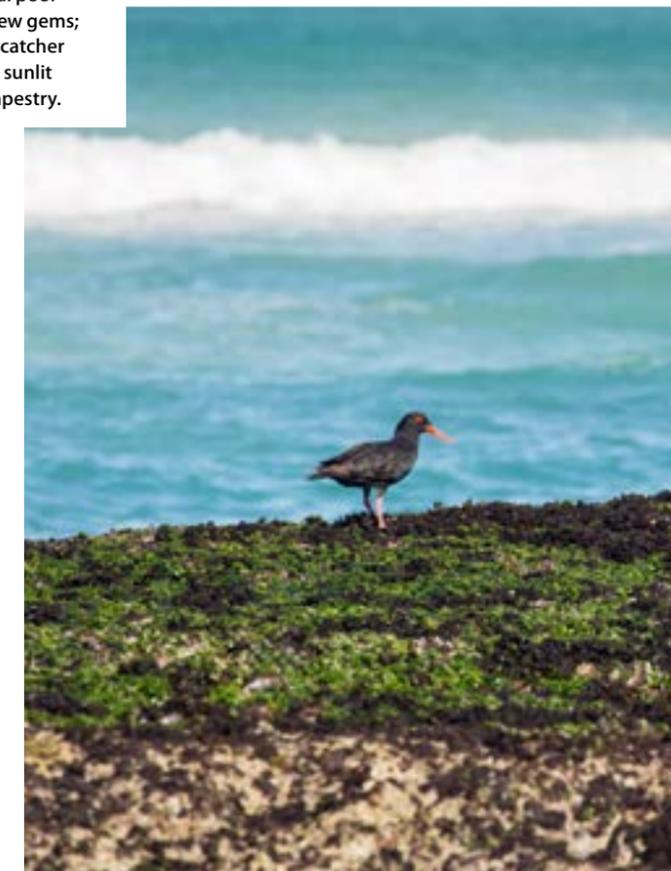
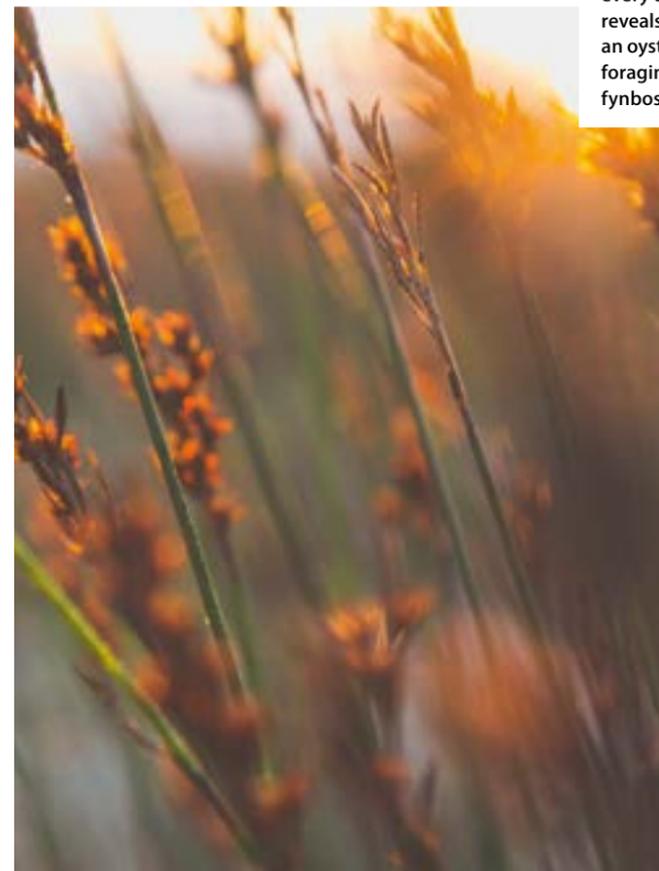
April 1995. Only one year later and I'm again careering down the dusty ribbon that winds its way to De Hoop, stones spewing in the Citi Golf's wake. The foreigner behind the wheel is the man I want to marry, and De Hoop is part of my courtship plan. A Wiltshire farmer's son, met in London, he knows little about the country of my birth. I have only 10 nights, and De Hoop is where we will spend two – one, if we don't make it before the reserve gates are locked.

We make it with minutes to spare. Elated by our rally charge to the finish, we carry our groceries into Grysbok cottage, only to discover we need cutlery, crockery, cooking equipment, bedding. We make do, thanks to the kindness of the reserve manager's wife who drops off a couple of blankets and rudimentary utensils, shaking her head with a smile. The next day we spend exploring the beach coves: like children in an Enid Blyton novel, we clamber into a sandy nook embraced by curved walls carved and pockmarked by the sea. There were alcoves into which you could place candles, or madonnas, if you were that way inclined. A beautiful sunny mid-week day; not a soul in sight. Lying naked, cocooned amidst the limestone walls, his heartbeat in time with mine, I knew De Hoop had played its part.

Six months later we are back, this time with our best man and his girlfriend. We trudge up to the highest point of the huge white sand dunes overlooking Koppie Alleen. Bathed in sun, the empty blue horizon before us, wind whipping our hair about, I am overwhelmed; on the cusp of a life I always dreamt of but never thought I deserved. With a spontaneous whoop, >



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The boardwalk to the Koppie Alleen dunes; every tidal pool reveals new gems; an oystercatcher foraging; sunlit fynbos tapestry.





‘I leap at the chance to introduce our daughter, now two, to the sheltered coves and rock pools, to see zebras...’

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT
A heron fishes in the vlei, an internationally treasured Ramsar site; the author and her daughters in 2009; a myriad flowers whatever the season; views from Koppie Alleen of the world’s biggest whale nursery.

deBruynfamily



ABOVE Morukuru Ocean House is the most upscale offering, starting at just under R20 000 for four – and that’s in low season – but there are plenty more options at a fraction of that price, such as the Opstal Vlei Suite below.

our best man drops to roll down the dune, a twirling whirl of sand in his wake. We follow, laughing, digging the sand from our ears. Walking back along the raised boardwalk to our car I spot a gold-hued everlasting flower amid the ericas.

Feeling a little guilty, I pick one for my wedding bouquet – a plundered relic from the church that matters most to me.

Work, birth of baby girl, work, travel, work. We take our opportunities where we find them. After a heady shared sojourn in Holland Park, there is talk of moving to London. I return, ready to pack up, when a girlfriend suggests a trip to De Hoop. I leap at the chance to introduce our daughter, now two, to the sheltered coves and rock pools, to see zebras, bontebok and eland grazing on the sweet grasses near the circular drive. But once there, excitement makes way for nausea. I am unable to eat; unwilling to drink. Astride an old tree stump, I suddenly know. It is our second daughter, making her presence felt, and Africa is where we’ll want to raise her.

The next time we return it is with my in-laws, flown south to meet their new grandchild. We are booked into one of the new cottages overlooking the vlei; built by CapeNature in an attempt to woo more travellers to their unsung Ramsar gem, bedding is now supplied, the kitchen equipped. It is the first time we have lived together on neutral territory, sharing the cosy intimacy of



ABOVE The Opstal Vlei Suite has large barn doors opening onto the lawns with distant vlei views.

meeting over an unfamiliar kettle in our dressing gowns.

Seated on Koppie Alleen, we count the whales – many of them shadowed by calves – the world’s biggest whale nursery. En route back to the vlei we stop to watch baby baboons gambolling on the park-like grounds. While my husband makes a fire, our eldest clammers onto her granny’s lap. Watching her relax into her grandmother’s embrace, I wonder at the courage of mothers, the wrenching separation of lives lived on separate continents.

2004. Our third elections come and go; De Hoop is listed a World Heritage Site. A public-private partnership is on the cards, and a few years later the De Hoop Collection is launched. A dear friend hires five three-bedroom cottages to celebrate her 48th birthday. We drag the sofas out to

make an impromptu living room around a firepit hidden amid the milkwoods. We eat like kings and drink like fish, and wake up together to do it again. It is the best birthday party. Ever.

The pace of life picks up. The girls turn into teenagers, with social calendars that don’t involve us. The next time I am pinching myself with pleasure at the prospect of an entire weekend in De Hoop, I am in a tiny boat crossing the vlei with four journalists, on our way to Melkkamer, the original 1907 gabled sandstone farmhouse, and part of a swathe of land expropriated by the government in 1983. Beautifully restored, Melkkamer is now the top-end choice in the varied >



ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT One of the many improvements from De Hoop Collection is the introduction of locally trained guides; magic hour casts its spell; a highlight is a guided walk to study the intertidal creatures that inhabit the myriad rock pools.

accommodation options, and comes with its own staff, including Pinkey, the naturalist.

After taking us for a stroll along the muddy banks of the vlei, Pinkey herds us into a safari vehicle and trundles us seawards to study the intertidal creatures inhabiting the myriad rock pools that line this coast. Pointing and picking, she provides a lively run-down: De Hoop has 18 limpet species, the most in the world; oystercatchers mate for life; did we know the barnacle has the longest penis for its size?

When we return to the broad veranda of our gabled homestead, we sit like old friends staring out at the vlei view. Later that night, now seated around a large bonfire, we toss our heads back and howl at the Milky Way, our voices mingling to create a single note that rises like smoke to the heavens.

January 2015. 'I could get used to this.' My mom helps herself to the platter offered by one butler; the other replenishes my glass. They have set up our chairs in the lee of the wind; tucked between the dunes under a pink-tinged sky. Nearby I can hear my youngest, now 13, laughing as she tries sandboarding.

When Morukuru Family asked if I would like to experience its new De Hoop Ocean House, I leapt at the chance and couldn't resist asking if the invitation could be extended to include my mother. Not only because the experience it offers is exceptional – a chance to live like a billionaire in an exclusive-use villa – but I am shocked to learn that my mother has never visited De Hoop Nature Reserve.

‘This vlei is considered the best bird hotel in Southern Africa’

'Do I need to pack food?' she had called to ask before we set off from our respective homes. 'No,' I answered, but said no more, wanting to surprise her. The house – reputed to have cost R30 million, with impeccable green credentials – exceeds expectations. I had been worried about bedroom allocation but the design is democratic: every bedroom enjoys the same magnificent view. We wander around half-dazed; three

generations limp with joy.

I lie down to read the obligatory welcome letter, left on our king-size bed. It's a Kahlil Gibran quote: 'The most beautiful thing in life is that our souls remain hovering over the places where we once enjoyed ourselves.' I put it down, study my surrounds. We – me, the reserve – have come a long way in the 20 years since Tom and I slept on twin beds pushed together under borrowed sheets in Grysbok cottage. But the real luxury – priceless, unquantifiable – is the same: surrounded by 35 546 hectares carpeted in coastal fynbos, a vlei that is considered the best bird hotel in Southern Africa, and a whale nursery painted in a palette to rival that of East Africa, the fine white sands flattening below the surf to create a gem-like strip of aquamarine.

On our last evening Tom and I walk down to the beach in front of the house. Low tide has revealed a sandy plunge pool beside a semi-circle of rock. With familiar intimacy we don't exchange a word, just strip down and sink into the womb-warm waters. The tanned leonine face of the man I love grinning at me, the sound of the surf pounding beyond the intertidal holes. Home. De Hoop, the hope, fulfilled. 📍

PLAN YOUR TRIP →



GETTING THERE

De Hoop Nature Reserve is a three-hour drive from Cape Town. You can find route instructions on capenature.co.za/reserves/de-hoop-nature-reserve

WHEN TO GO

I've been there most months of the year, and it's always good. Spring for the flowers, summer for swimming, winter for whales. Perhaps the worst time is peak season, when daytrippers – sometimes by the busload – ruin the privacy and seclusion I love. But with 36 000 hectares and 70 kilometres of coastline, it's always possible to escape.

DO THIS

Be sure to book a guided tour of the intertidal zone, and a quad bike ride through the fynbos.

NEED TO KNOW

With the exception of Morukuru Ocean House, the beach is not in walking distance from the reserve's accommodation.

STAY HERE

The De Hoop Collection offers a great choice: from B&B en-suite rooms and rondavels with shared ablutions, to widely differing two-, three- and four-bedroom cottages. Of the self-catering options, the two-bedroom Opstal Vlei Cottages and four-bedroom Melkkamer Vlei Cottage enjoy the best location. They're hugely popular, so book well in advance.

Campsite Rondawels are from R910 for two.

Opstal Vlei Cottages, with two bedrooms, are from R2250 (sleeps four).

Melkkamer Vlei Cottage, has four bedrooms and starts

from R3000 (sleeps eight).

Melkkamer Manor House is from R9600 (sleeps 8); DBB about R1925 pp.

Morukuru Ocean House is the place to book if money is no object – it's the best exclusive-use villa experience I have had in Africa. It costs from R19470 for four and R4015 pp thereafter (sleeps up to 10); including meals, activities, a private vehicle, guide, chef and butler. dehoopcollection.co.za/morukuru.com

INSIDER'S TIP

If you're on a budget, the five Campsite Rondawels at the Opstal are a fantastic option, albeit very close together. Each rondavel is simply furnished with double/twin beds, bar fridge, toaster and kettle, and outdoor braai with unobstructed vlei views. Ablutions are shared but

the outdoor shower, encircled with a stone wall, is brilliant.

EAT AND DRINK

There is no shop, so stock up before you leave or in Bredasdorp, which has a decent Spar, or at one of the many farm stalls en route. There is a restaurant on site which serves good wholesome fare at a reasonable price.

WHAT TO PACK

It depends on the time of year, but for October, the usual beach stuff and a few warm layers. Board games, cards, books and a frisbee.

COSTS

Entrance to De Hoop for all is R40 pp and R20 for children under 12.

*Prices correct at time of going to print