

TO THE MANOR BORN

Michelle Snaddon escapes to De Hoop Nature Reserve, near Arriston, to a sandstone manor house where kids can run wild

IT'S JUST AFTER DAWN AND A COASTAL MIST HAS DRIFTED UP FROM THE SEA OVERNIGHT, saturating the air with moisture that's slightly salty but mostly vlei-scented: a bit peaty but with the smell of ancient milkwoods. Rising slowly, the sun is burning away the mist, gradually warming up the turn-of-the-century stonework of the rather grand old Melkkamer manor house we're staying in. I'm sitting on the stoep with a steaming cup of rooibos warming my hands, surrounded by modern comforts in a setting that has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. This moment casts a spell on the rest of the weekend.

Melkkamer is a new area of the De Hoop Nature Reserve that's opened on the opposite side of the vlei. Once the centre of the original farm, it is now fairly remote and can only be reached by driving 40 minutes around the vlei on a dirt road. Once there, and despite its five-star comforts, it feels decidedly off the beaten track, yet the old Cape farmhouse buildings of the reserve are just visible on the limestone cliffs opposite with the flat tops of the distinctive Cape fig trees as landmarks – a reminder that you can slip back into civilisation should you want to enjoy a meal at the restaurant. A world-renowned Ramsar site for its breeding birds, the vlei is a protected area and one that's alive with calls and busy nesting activity.

Tell friends you're off to De Hoop for a family weekend and you'll get a quizzical look. 'Are the whales there already?' is the usual, curious response. Well no, not when we visited in autumn, but that didn't bother us in the slightest. (If it's whales you want, they loll about in the waters off Koppie Alleen with their calves from June to November.) We were longing for time out, no cellphone reception and the chance to reconnect with one another over meals outdoors in the moonlight, lazy nights in four-poster beds (lucky youngsters had four rooms to choose from) and the chance to experience life as it was in the early 1900s, when the historic Melkkamer houses were completed.

As we headed off the tar and on to the dusty farm road leading to the sea, I had a feeling the children would love the combination of farmhouse and seaside, and was planning to



take them walking on the dunes, exploring the rocky beaches with us and returning home to learn how to light paraffin lanterns or make a fire in the evening. As it turned out, all of the above were a hit, but even more so was the choice of four Victorian baths to soak in, the fascination with switching the generator on and off, and the wonderful Kenneth Maree who looked after us all and told us stories of his childhood on this farm, before it was expropriated.

Children and the sun rise at about the same time, and Kenneth was there making sure there were no baboons in their way (they love the berries of the milkwood) as my 12-year-old son, camera in hand, bent over magnificent dewdrop-laden spiderwebs in the wild fig beginning to sprawl over the lawn, and my eight-year-old daughter swarmed up the ancient milkwood tree (we're talking at least 600 years old here) with its gnarled branches that bend down to the ground to scoop little children into its arms. It was Kenneth who recreated the past and captured their imagination with his tales about York, one of the finest race horses, who was raised in the barn near the vlei (or the milking room as it later became) and won the Metropolitan Cup in 1904, and about how all the stone for the manor house came here by ox wagon, as did the Edwardian and Art Nouveau detailing and glass front door. By this time, breakfast was ready and we were soon off to explore the dunes at Koppie Alleen.

A pair of eland happily browsed on bushes on the dunes as we headed towards the beach through the fynbos. We spent hours floating cuttlefish with feathers for sails and exploring the beaches further down the coast before climbing up the dunes in the late afternoon sun to enjoy the milky flow of pristine white sand extending down the coast as far as the eye could see. Jumping like sand fleas, the children couldn't get enough of their new-found playground. They'd run up to me after each jump and ask breathlessly, 'Did you get us this time?' as I tried repeatedly to capture them on camera mid-flight.

I didn't think a protected vlei that's home to 260 species would attract much attention from my children, but they loved watching the 'pellies', and on a walk with bird guide Dalfrenzo Laing (who gained instant respect because he could tell several stories about meeting the six-metre-long cobra who has made the boathouse its home) they loved spotting the nesting crested grebes through his binoculars. Every evening, on our way back to our house, we'd spot our fish eagle pair and hope they would call out. At nightfall we were treated to regular visits by a nightjar, interrupted only by the sounds of birds landing on the water and coots calling in the distance.

If you book the entire Melkkamer area with its three historical stone houses – one rather grand and the others more reminiscent of Irish crofts – you can sleep up to 24 people. The Melkkamer Vlei House, a favourite with those who love its cosier atmosphere, is right on the water and has been beautifully restored. The quality bed linen and beautiful furnishings are offset by yellowwood ceilings and irregular stone walls. From the jetty, our grander manor house, gracious in its proportions, sits in stately repose overlooking the grassy lawn that has seen numerous croquet games, weddings and holiday gatherings since the charismatic John Henry Anderson (a sportsman known as 'Biddy' who was awarded Springbok colours for rugby and cricket) first built the house and settled here to breed race horses in 1907. It was apparently years before the lawn was cleared of stones (he used to pay his nieces and nephews to pick them up when they came to visit) and today ostriches, eland and bontebok graze peacefully, leaving new piles of dung each day, keeping the kids guessing as to who'd been to visit while we were sleeping or at the beach. Melkkamer's simplicity and privacy are the perfect ingredients for a relaxing family holiday. ①

For more information on Melkkamer and the De Hoop Collection, contact ☎ 0861 33 4667 or 028 542 1253, or visit www.dehoopcollection.co.za. Your Diners Club Card is accepted here.

Just announced: De Hoop is introducing a three-day walking trail, using the Melkkamer houses as the base, giving guests the opportunity to do part of the popular Whale Trail but also take in some of the less-explored vlei areas inland.

*Jumping
like sand
fleas, the
children
couldn't
get enough
of their
new-found
playground*