

Hike

SA'S

TOUGHEST HIKE

28

On the Bavians
Camino trail.



Whether on foot or horseback, the Baviaans Camino will test your mettle, but getting lost in the splendid grandeur of the secluded Baviaanskloof and the Kouga Mountain is worth it, writes **Danielle McDonald**.

The Camino de Santiago conjures up images of the European countryside with its quaint villages and delicious food, and for many this epic hike is a journey of self-discovery.

But you don't need to travel all the way to Europe to experience a Camino: the local Baviaans Camino, a magnificent but gruelling hike for even the fittest slackpacker, will put you through your paces. And while the route may not have its roots in pilgrimages like the original Camino in Spain, you'll have to dig deep to find the strength to complete it. It will test your body, endurance, mental aptitude and sense of humour.

Covering 95 km over four days, it's a challenging trek over the incredible Baviaanskloof and Kouga Mountains. To experience the mountainous heart of the Baviaanskloof and spectacular grandeur of the untouched Kouga Mountain range is an unrivalled experience. The area is completely secluded, and you can lose yourself in your surroundings as the whole hike takes place on private land or a nature reserve. The only people you're likely to encounter are the farmers whose land you cross or whose houses you stay in.

Honestly, I don't know if anyone could survive this hike with a backpack. Luckily, hikers only wear light daypacks for snacks and water. Gear and food are portered, and you can expect catered meals and tea breaks at pretty viewpoints – chairs, rooibos and biscuits all set up for your arrival, and then on with the trail.

And you have the brilliant option to do the whole route on horseback or share a horse between two people. The horses are the definition of well trained, and even beginner riders will have a wonderful time on these strong, fit *boerperde*. My hiking partner and I opted to share a horse – the best of both worlds. →

DAY 1

18 KM

The trail kicks off in the Baviaans region of the Karoo. Hikers and riders meet for dinner at the Willow Historical Guest House the night before. The first full hiking day begins at the edge of the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve. Our day started with a ferocious ascent: a 4 km climb with an elevation of 400 m to Telkom Tower, which offers sweeping views to all sides. More than a century ago, this road was built and used by farmers to transport their wares to Steytlerville. In due time, the road fell into disuse, and up until 2016 it was only used by Telkom to service one of their towers in the area. Today, it's only hikers and horse riders who use this road.

Once on top of the Baviaanskloof Mountain, I found myself looking at striking contrasts: the vast emptiness of the Karoo to the north and an unimpeded view over the Kouga Mountain Range to the south – our playground for the next three days. No civilisation in sight.

We continued meandering through fynbos and renosterbos and ended up on a rocky road to our home for the evening – a farmhouse on Joachimskraal – where we fed the horses, put up our feet, opened a cold beer, ate delicious potjiekos . . . and I patted myself on the back for having survived day one.

This hike is tough but offers epic views.



You'll stay at various farms throughout the hike.



24 KM

As the sun rose (and with the smell of moerkoffie in the air) we dragged our bodies out of bed. We entered the Kouga Mountain Range on the second day. Again, the likelihood of seeing anyone who's not part of your hiking group is almost nil. All I heard was the clomp of hooves and the crunch of hiking boots while we travelled from Succulent Karoo to Nama Karoo. Wild plum, ghwarrie, num-num, shepherd's tree and botterboom stand proud between hundreds of small spekboom cuttings, which were reintroduced as part of a global fight against climate change and air pollution.

The evening's accommodation was an outpost on a honeybush tea farm converted into a typical hikers' hut. With the horses fed in the camp, we all cosied up next to the fire and sipped on Old Brown Sherry to help fight off the cold and the sounds of whoever in this group was the loud sleeper.

DAY 2



The horses are the very definition of well trained.

DAY 3

23 KM

I was astounded by the 3 m tall red aloes and giant cycads that line the mountain face. I tried to breathe in the solitude of the mountains and appreciate that there are still places left in the world that are this untouched.

On this day, hikers must rely on sheer willpower to get through the steep climbs. I relied on my horse, whom I had claimed full-time by then. We ascended one of the highest hills in the Kouga Mountain range, and once again, I was impressed by the fitness of these horses.

After lunch we headed down to the Nooitgedacht farming community, where we were slowly reintroduced to civilisation. First, we were greeted by Tannie Eunice Nortje, who had set up a honeybush tea tasting stall for us next to the road. The sugar boost from her flavoured ice tea kicked in just before we tackled the last few kilometres of the day to the campsite. The whole Nooitgedacht clan pulled in for a braai, and they completely over catered, but we were hungry pilgrims and at that stage no one cared about carbs anymore. Tired but happy, we sat next to a fire with our feet up and our tummies full, and with a glass of wine in hand, we watched the full moon rise.



Lunchtime

DAY 4

30 KM

By the last day, I moved to the rhythm of my horse's gait. I imagined myself looking like the cartoon cowboy Lucky Luke, but no one noticed. We started the day riding all along the Ragels River before we passed through the Moordenaarskloof Pass. (What a Wild West name!)

We covered a few more hills over the Zuuranys Mountains to Nguniland just outside Kareedouw. When we reached the end of the Baviaans Camino, I realised that I would think back to the majesty of these mountains for many years to come. I hope that this local Camino will continue to enchant all those who take its path – here, where few others have ever set foot or hoof. →

Hike



You can hike the Camino or do it on horseback – or even share a horse between two people.

GOOD TO KNOW

DURATION: You'll stay five nights and hike for four days.

DISTANCE: Approximately 95 km with a total elevation of about 3 000 m.

ROUTE: A north-south traverse of the Baviaanskloof Mountain and Kouga Mountain Range.

TERRAIN: Old and unused farm roads and some footpaths, which can get rocky.

DIFFICULTY: Tough but epic! Some have called it South Africa's toughest hike, and I can attest to that. You're going to conquer two mountain ranges, so I would advise you to train beforehand. And if you choose to do it on horseback, you need to know what it's like to sit in a saddle for eight hours a day.

GROUP SIZE: Up to 14, of which six can be on horseback

DATES: Set dates between March and October. The trail is popular,

and bookings open 12 months in advance.

ACCOMMODATION: A guesthouse, farmhouses, an outpost and one night in tents. In true Camino spirit, all facilities are shared.

2021 RATE: R9 650 per person, which includes five nights' accommodation, three meals per day, aid stations, luggage transfer and a full support crew with guides.

HORSE RIDERS: An additional R4 000 towards transport, horse feed and other related expenses. You don't need to be an expert rider to do the Baviaans Camino on horseback. Hercules van Huyssteen, one of the crew, will show everyone before the hike starts how to tack up and care for their horses, and throughout the hike, he'll also check on the horses and riders. But riders are fully responsible for horses, which means feedings twice a day, giving water

late at night, grooming and tacking up. Caring for your horse is part of the journey. Riders also need to be fit for walking in case they need to walk their horses in-hand.

CATERING: Hot breakfast, packed lunch, snack pack and supper included. Coffee station and honesty bar available.

GEAR: Hiking and riding gear (helmets can be supplied), a day backpack, hiking poles, water bottles, towels, sleeping bags, pillow, rain jacket, buffs and gloves. Be prepared for unexpected extreme heat or severe cold.

FOR INFORMATION ON THE TRAIL, contact Esti Stewart on 073 825 0835 or chokkatrail@gmail.com. To enquire about the horses, call Hercules on 082 925 9301. Or visit baviaanscamino.com.