



Exploring Wolfberg makes for an excellent day hike, although the route is rather tough. Go with a backpack for the weekend instead and camp out in the Cederberg wilderness. You'll probably have the whole area, plus the impossibly bright starscapes, all to yourself. **By Morgan Trimble**

THROUGH THE CRACKS



The Cederberg Wilderness Area is paradise for hiking, scrambling and climbing.

It's midday, but all I see is the glare of my friend's torch beam as he contorts back to check my progress. I'm practically stuck: my backpack, crammed with camping gear, is wedged in a narrow but towering sandstone chasm. Boulders hang overhead, defying gravity much like the snoozing bat we just stopped to admire. The rocks could crush us, but I remind myself they have been perfectly wedged between the sheer walls of the Wolfberg Cracks for ages.

We planned this overnight backpacking trip in the Cederberg Wilderness Area after seeing photos of Wolfberg Arch, a gargantuan stone archway. This epic formation can be reached by traversing a set of monumental clefts in the mountain known as the Wolfberg Cracks.

From the car park at the start of our hiking route, Wolfberg didn't seem much different from the other mountains we'd passed on our four-hour drive from Cape Town. Was Wolfberg truly home to the incredible formations from the pictures?

I remained sceptical as I huffed and

puffed up the steep ascent, weighed down by doubt, five litres of water, overnight gear and a hefty camera. We followed the well-worn path past cairns, proteas and expansive views before arriving at the intersection with Adderley Street, a deep, impressive crack in the mountain nearly as wide as its namesake in Cape Town. We navigated through a boulder-field at the mouth of this huge crack, then pushed on in search of its more enigmatic and challenging partner.

Soon we had our first taste of Wolfberg mystery when the path dead-ended at a cliff face. Roelf, the most acrobatic among our group of five, managed to haul himself, minus his backpack, over the ledge. Meanwhile, I explored the cave mouth to our left. There were two holes in the roof and I wiggled my way up the more accommodating one to another dead-end, a slight lip of rock overlooking a vast Cederberg valley. I retraced and tried the other hole, then shimmied my way through a narrow shaft to emerge, surprisingly, on the path next to Roelf.

Crawling through that rock chute was ▶



1 One of the narrow cracks making up the Wolfberg complex. 2 You need to disappear into the mountain to exit on top of it. 3 Squeezing under a chockstone – not for those with claustrophobia. 4 Taking a well-earned break from exploring the cavern.



KING OF THE MOUNTAIN
Striking a jubilant pose on top of Wolfberg Arch.

like a wormhole to another dimension. Soon we were picking our way over massive boulders and through stone archways reminiscent of a ruined city once inhabited by giants. Just as rapidly, we were squeezing through Lilliputian rock corridors where I eventually found myself wedged. My friend's torchlight helped me find my footing in the rock-strewn passage and extract myself from the cat's-tongue grip of sandstone walls. We emerged into a cavernous chasm that felt like a stone cathedral.

As we stood gaping at the view, a pair of giggling youngsters popped out of the passageway behind us, breaking the eerie silence. They were the perfect size for exploring here and it was several minutes before their parents laboured out behind them, considerably more awkwardly. Exploring Wolfberg Cracks makes for an excellent day hike. Still, it's a relatively tough route that requires dexterity and fitness. In fact, the unfit might not fit through.

Our journey onwards met a tough scramble over a chockstone, a huge

boulder blocking the path between sheer stone walls. Through teamwork and chimneying – pressing your back against one side of the crack and shuffle-stepping up the other – all hikers and backpacks prevailed.

Any claustrophobics would have turned back at the next challenge. A massive chockstone obstructed the entire path except for a tiny slit at the bottom. Without being able to see the way forward, we had to lie on our backs in the sand, shimmy head first into the hole, and worm our way between several boulders.

The crack narrowed to a V-shape a boot wide at the bottom before finally surfacing on top of the mountain amid bright afternoon sun. From here, it was a few hours' easy walking to Wolfberg Arch past countless smaller formations in what seemed like an alien sculpture garden. With no set trails, the wilderness area provides a wonderful freedom to explore, but we stuck mostly to previously used paths to avoid trampling the delicate fynbos. A few Cape rockjumpers along the way ▶

Crawling through the rock chute was like a wormhole to another dimension.

Tips for backpackers

There's no water on the mountain, so you'll have to bring all you need and ration carefully.

Because you'll carry lots of water, keep the rest of the weight minimal.

Take a camping stove to cook as fires aren't allowed.

Follow wilderness camping ethics: leave no trace.

Keep your pack small as you'll be pushing or dragging it through narrow sections of

the cracks. Rough sandstone will scrape anything attached to the outside.

Bring a GPS or map and compass. Enjoy the freedom of the wilderness, but know how to get back.

Don't forget your permits. An overnight wilderness permit from CapeNature is R120. The conservation fee is R60 (free if you have a *Wild Card*).

Spring and autumn are the best times to hike. Winter and summer can bring brutal temperatures.

made me happy I'd packed binoculars.

We eventually arrived at Wolfberg Arch, even more impressive than the photos we'd seen. As the day-hikers cleared out, I was thrilled that we wilderness campers had the whole area to ourselves despite it being a holiday weekend.

We made camp amid a natural kraal of boulders, cooked hearty meals on our trusty camping stoves and sipped well-

earned sundowners as the arch glowed gold with the dipping sun. Later, the majestic view of the arch in front of an impossibly bright starscape, far from any light pollution, overshadowed any discomfort from the cold wind that bit at us through the night. Waking up in the wilderness with the first rays of a warming sunrise perfectly framed by the arch felt all the more magical.



Wolfberg is currently closed after a large veld fire but should reopen soon. Contact CapeNature for updates 021-483-0190 and practise your chimneying skills in the meantime.

IF YOU STILL HAVE LIFE IN YOUR LEGS

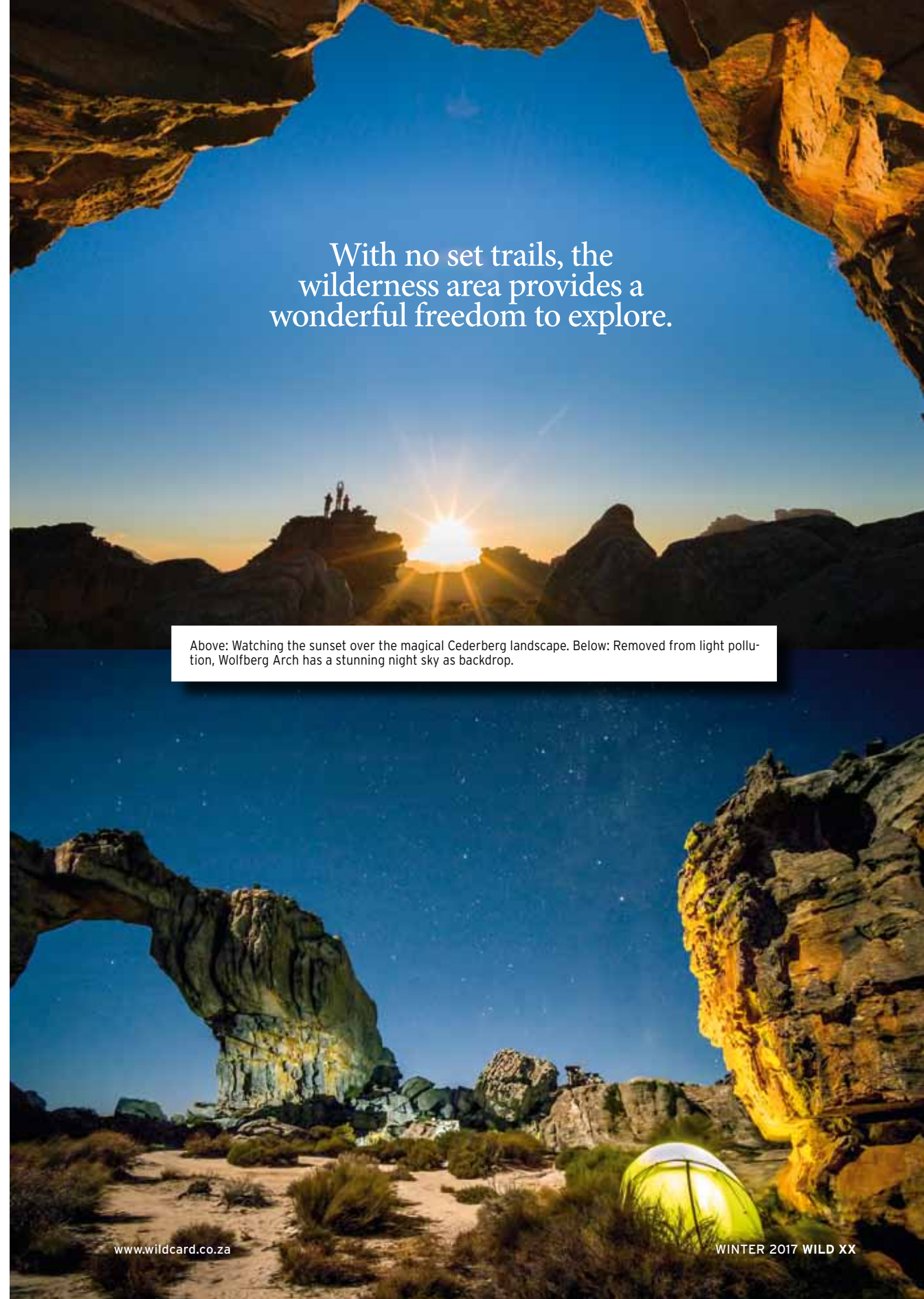
Beat the midday heat and stiff muscles with a dip in Maalgat Pool's regenerating waters at the Sanddrif Holiday Resort from where the Wolfberg hikes begin.

The hike to the Maltese Cross is a five-hour round trip, or cycle the surrounding bike trails.

For a taste of history, visit the Stadsaal Caves where rock paintings of elephants intermingle with political graffiti.

Day visitors need a permit, R40, available from Sanddrif, the Algeria reserve office or CapeNature Central Reservations on 021-483-0190.

The burnt orange shades of the rock are due to iron oxide.



With no set trails, the wilderness area provides a wonderful freedom to explore.

Above: Watching the sunset over the magical Cederberg landscape. Below: Removed from light pollution, Wolfberg Arch has a stunning night sky as backdrop.