

# Challenge the clock

For centuries Table Mountain National Park has inspired exploration, from hardcore climbing to gentle walks. Now runners and hikers can set a record or push boundaries for a personal best on an epic adventure to the top of 13 peaks. **By Morgan Trimble**

“We’ve done 22 kilometres”, reported Ashley during the single break on day one of our 13 Peaks adventure. We’d begun before sunrise from Signal Hill. As the city awoke, we spiralled up and down Lion’s Head, then hoofed it along Tafelberg Road, wheezed up Platteklip Gorge, crossed the Table Mountain Plateau, tagged Maclear’s Beacon and traipsed through Echo Valley.

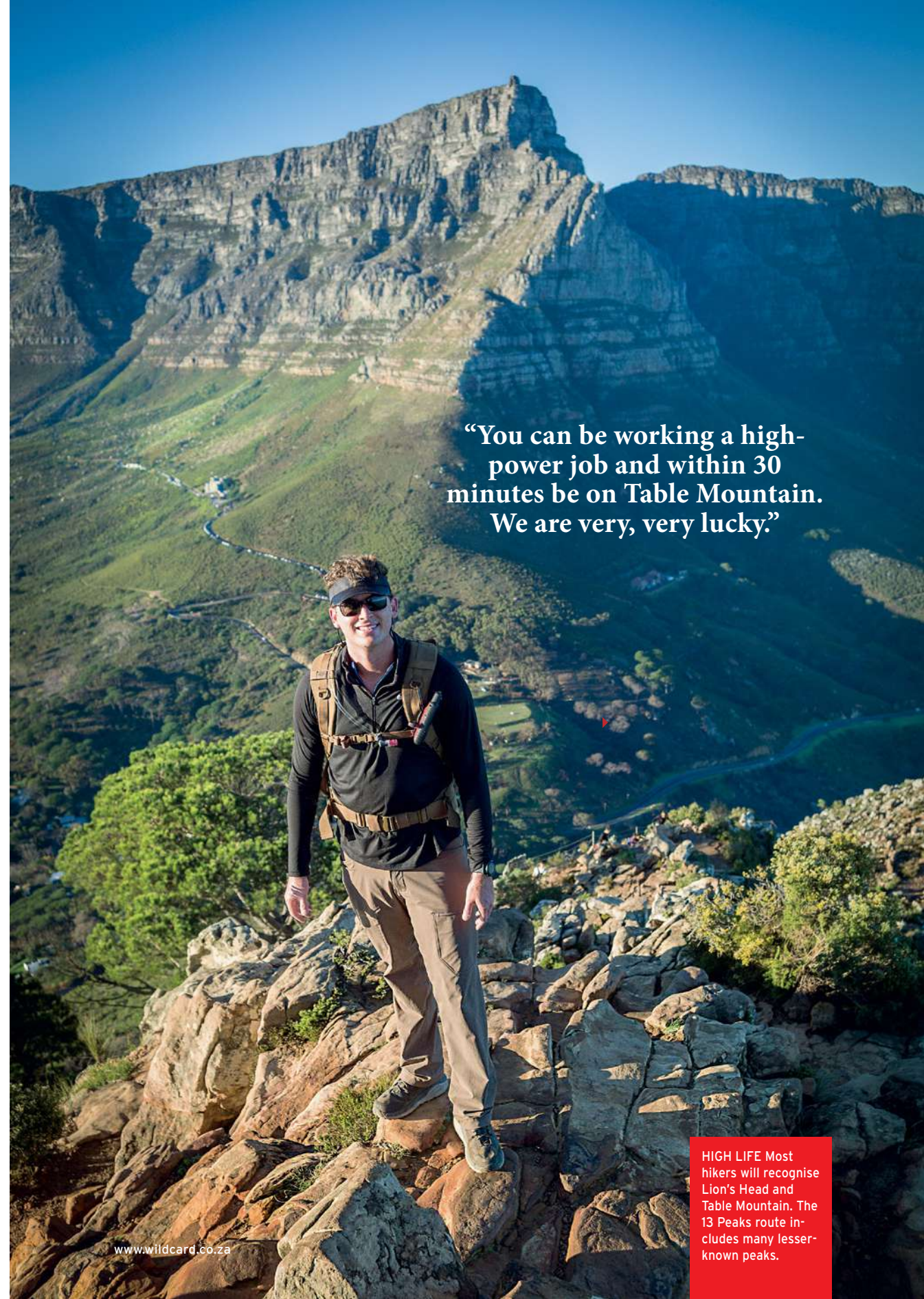
We estimated the day’s route at 25 kilometres, so covering 22 kilometres by two o’clock was good going. Except, the GPS stubbornly reported 12 kilometres remaining, with two more peaks to find, a steep descent, and precious little daylight.

In underestimating distance, we were in excellent company. Even the 13 Peaks developer, legendary trail-

runner Ryan Sandes, got it wrong initially. The challenge started with Ryan sketching a route linking his favourite summits. “It was just a cool loop that showcases the best Table Mountain and the park has to offer,” Ryan said, and he should know. He trains in these mountains 12 to 30 hours a week. Over his 14-year career, he’s probably spent as much time exploring the park as anyone.

Ryan has won ultra trail races on seven continents and set records crossing the Fish River Canyon, Drakensberg and Himalayas. Now, he’s searching for adventure in his own backyard and wants to inspire others to do the same. “We are very, very lucky to have a big city like Cape Town so close to the mountains. You can be working a high-power job and within ▶

“You can be working a high-power job and within 30 minutes be on Table Mountain. We are very, very lucky.”

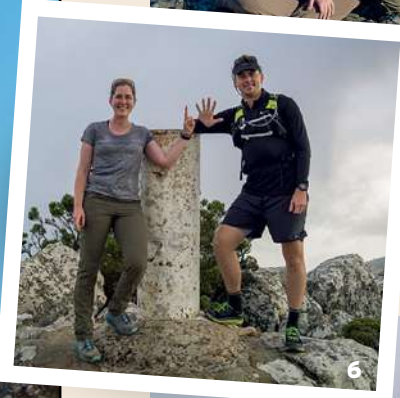
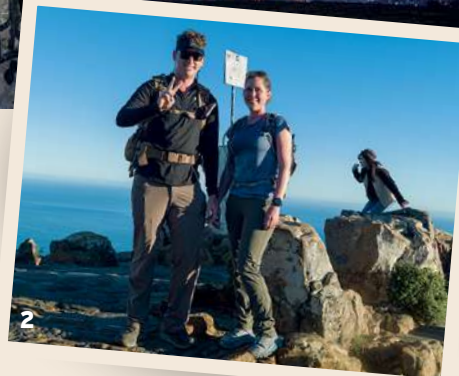


HIGH LIFE Most hikers will recognise Lion’s Head and Table Mountain. The 13 Peaks route includes many lesser-known peaks.



## 13 SELFIES

We completed the hike in five segments spread across multiple weekends. Each day brought new discoveries and challenges. Part of the trick for the multi-day category is planning accessible start and end points.



What relief to complete Judas Peak, the final target on our first day (dark green), which was the toughest section of the route.



**Top runners tackle the entire route in one push. Ryan Sandes set a record in September of 15 hours, 51 minutes.**

For more details, check out [13peaks.co.za](http://13peaks.co.za), and follow happy hikers and adventurous runners on their Instagram and Facebook accounts.



1 SIGNAL HILL

2 LION'S HEAD

3 MACLEAR'S BEACON

4 GROOTKOP

5 JUDAS PEAK

LITTLE LION'S HEAD

6

7 SUTHER PEAK

8 CHAPMAN'S PEAK

9 NOORDHOEK PEAK

11

CONSTANTIA BERG

MUIZENBERG PEAK

DEVIL'S PEAK

KLASSENKOP



30 minutes be on Table Mountain.”

To test-run the 13 Peaks, Ryan recruited a friend: “I told him it was going to be 55 kays or so. We ended up doing over 100 kays and didn’t even finish.”

The 13 Peaks challenge was then released to the public with one-day, two-day and multi-day categories. “I wanted to steer away from making it an elitist running challenge,” Ryan said. He has enjoyed the stories of ordinary people working through the challenge even more than the ultra-athletes clocking record times. “I want everyone to have their own unique experience up on the mountain. People enjoy that sense of adventure and finding out whether they can actually do it. I’m hoping it can be a stepping-stone to encourage people to get out there more.”

Challenge accepted. Our multi-day attempt meant completing the peaks in order and re-entering the route wherever we left off, starting and stopping the clock accordingly. We based our plan on tips we found online from multi-day-record-holder, Ross Dold, who finished in a blazing 13 hours, 44 minutes.

Luckily, we packed a headlamp as our first day took almost as long as Dold’s entire journey. After traversing the wonderland atop the 12 Apostles, we climbed Grootkop, which was much bigger than expected, and located Judas Peak. We descended Llandudno Corner in darkness. Hours

of clutching a trekking pole had my hands cramping at the crucial metal staples meant to assist on the cliffier bits. When we finally reached Suikerbossie after our toughest day hike ever, we had to apologize to the unsuspecting taxi driver who collected us in a pristine luxury vehicle.

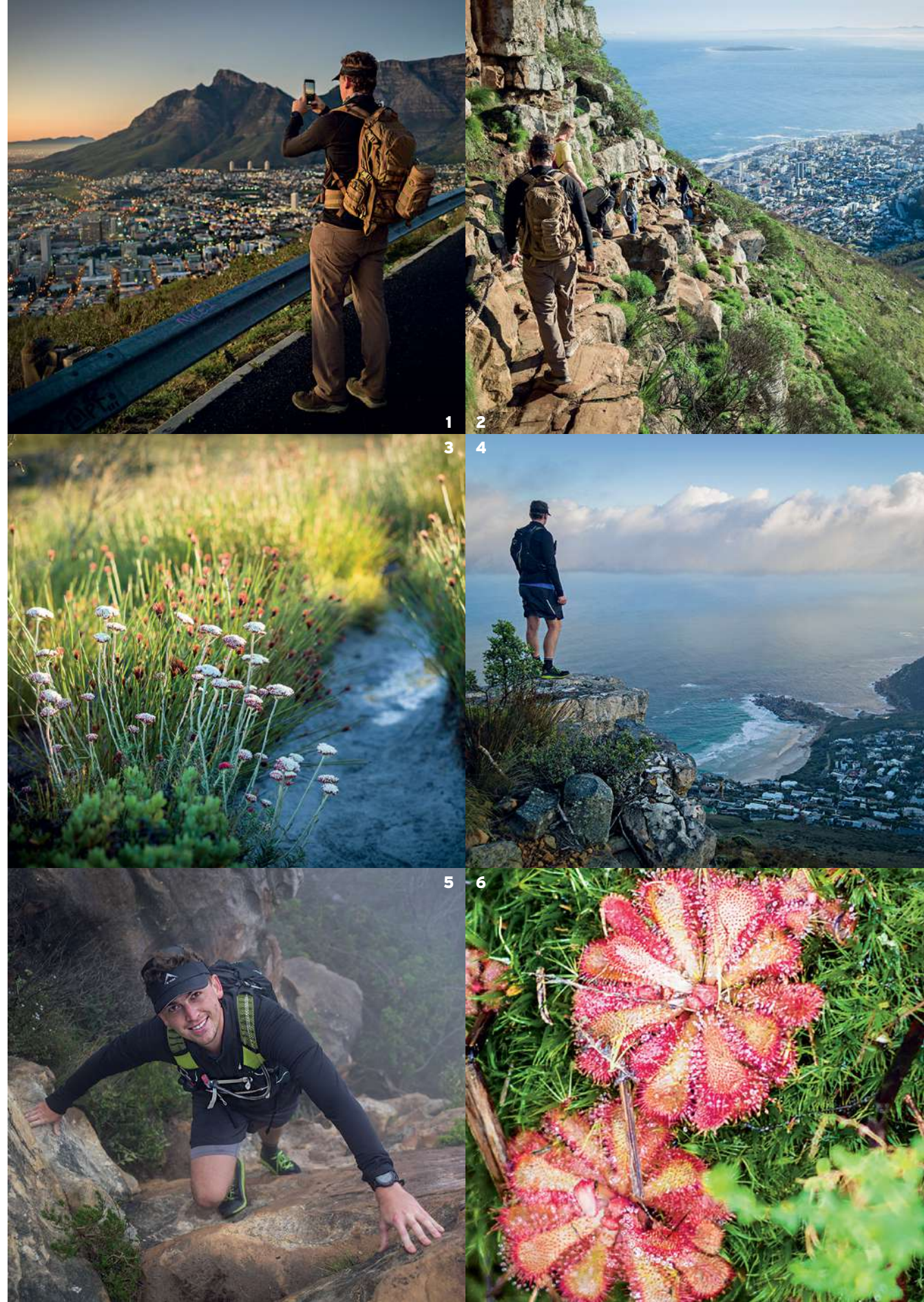
On subsequent weekends, we took it easier, summiting peaks we’d never explored. We tackled Little Lion’s Head and Suther Peak in Hout Bay with enough energy to jog some of the route. The following week we revelled in epic beauty on the hike up Chapman’s and Noordhoek Peaks.

With growing confidence, we tackled the entire second half of the challenge on two consecutive 26 kilometre jaunts. Saturday, starting in Silvermine, we punched through mist to the summit of Muizenberg Peak with views forever. For Ryan, this False Bay detour is essential: “Being able to see the ocean and look down into Muizenberg, that’s something that holds very strong to my roots. The Cape Peninsula mountains are definitely my home.”

We shared the sentiment up and over Constantiaberg. The fynbos burst with flowers, illustrating how dramatically the flora changes across peaks and valleys, sun exposures and soils. We traversed a new-to-us route, linked up with the Hoerikwaggo Trail as it passed over the Vlakkenberg, and popped out at Contantia Nek for the tastiest beer and chips.

On Sunday, low cloud concealed the ▶

1 An early start from Signal Hill. 2 Lion’s Head is always busy. 3 Fynbos in bloom. 4 The view over Llandudno from Little Lion’s Head. 5 Scrambling up a misty Suther Peak. 6 Carnivorous sundews growing on Table Mountain.





city. The mountaintops looked like floating islands as we navigated towards little-known Klassenkop. We'd read that the route required crawling through a tree, so I expected to find an overgrown bush in the path. Instead, a yawning crack harbouring a lone tree separated us from the marker cairn. After a thorough debate and search for another way, we decided that risking a three-metre fall, shimmying along wet branches wasn't worth touching the cairn. We took our Klassenkop selfie a few metres from the highest point with 13 Peaks' rule number one in mind: "Don't be a chop and keep safe."

We descended Nursery Ravine, skirted the Contour Path, which deviates suspiciously from a contour, and ascended again along Newlands Ravine. On this self-esteem-grinding climb, I squinted through sweat-stinging eyes as sugarbirds and orange-breasted sunbirds swooped past. Freezing wind atop mist-shrouded Devil's Peak cut our celebration short. We crunched the kilometres back to the finish at Signal Hill and clocked our final numbers: 115 kilometres, 6 800 metres elevation gain, 37 hours, 32 minutes.

Later, I confessed to Ryan that we opted not to cross the Klassenkop crevasse.

"It's a personal journey," he said. "You missed out, like, 10 metres? It's not a big deal."

"So, we can still get badges?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, yeah, yeah," he said. And Ryan's adventure stepping-stone plan is working the way he intended. We're already plotting our two-day attempt. 🐾

## We revelled in epic beauty on the hike up Chapman's and Noordhoek Peaks.

### STAY SAFE

- Don't go alone.
- Tell someone your route and return time. Carry a tracker or use a tracking app on your phone.
- GPS is essential for the lesser known peaks.
- To familiarise yourself with the terrain, study Slingsby's *The Complete Table Mountain National Park* maps. The set of three maps are officially endorsed by SANParks and specifically recommended on the website.
- Weather is unpredictable. Prepare for rain, cold and heat.
- Pack a headlamp, food, water and first aid. Going can be slower than expected.
- Take phones, preferably on multiple carriers for a

better shot at cell service. Save Cape Town's general emergency line (021-480-7700) and Wilderness Search and Rescue (021-937-0300).

- Crime is a risk in this urban park with open borders. SANParks recommends travelling in groups, leaving valuables at home, staying alert and aware, and avoiding unpopulated, remote sections of the mountain.
- **COST** Most of Table Mountain National Park is open and free for hikers and runners. There are pay points to specific areas, including Silvermine (R32 a person). Free with a *Wild Card*. Permits are required for specific recreational activities such as dog walking, cycling, horse-riding and fishing.

