



The village of Kaapschehoop is named for the dreams of great wealth of early prospectors. During the gold rush the town also carried the name of Duiwelskantoor (Devil's Office).

In the clouds at Kaapschehoop

THE MIST ALWAYS SEEMS TO HANG OVER THE SMALL VILLAGE OF KAAPSCHEHOOP, WHICH SITS ON A HILL NEAR NELSPRUIT. IN THIS HAMLET THAT TIME FORGOT, YOU'LL SEE WILD HORSES GRAZING AMONG THE ALOES, DUCKS WADING IN PONDS AND PERHAPS EVEN CHILDREN IN WELLINGTONS CHASING FROGS.

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“**M**agical!” That’s the one word Vincenzia Diedericks uses to describe Kaapschehoop. After a day trip to this small town in Mpumalanga’s highlands, they bought a holiday home here. “There’s something here; it earths you. When I put down my feet here, I felt like I came home,” she tells me over lunch in the garden outside Salvador Bistro. The glass wind chimes at De-liteful Glass Works next door clink against each other in the autumn breeze. Auburn leaves fall to the ground, where they are chased by the resident pups. Our group of six, too, falls for Kaapschehoop’s allure. Perhaps it is the country air, but after a few hours we cancel our plans for the rest of the day and settle in.

The charm of the town becomes almost tangible even before we arrive. As we slowly make our way up through the pine slopes from Nelspruit towards the hilltop town, we pass yield signs showing horses on their hind legs, like an advert from America’s Wild West. As we drive in along the dirt road, a rusty road sign proclaims: “Kaapschehoop welcomes you: our place in the clouds, where children, wild horses and friends come to play.” Next to it is a sign for the Kaapschehoop road fund and yet another one reads “Holey Road, please fasten seat belts and remove dentures”. The locals, who number about 150, have a good sense of humour.

Aloe, a resident canine guide, is there to greet us and show us around. We head uphill through the lunar-like rocks covered in blooming aloes that lie scattered among the grass. The dog walks this worn path every day and patiently waits as some of us take photographs and others catch their breath.

She deviates from the main path to show us the former mining commissioner’s sandstone house, which dates back to 1884. Now we understand the significance of the town’s name. Gold was discovered here when Pilgrim’s Rest and Barberton were in their gold-rush prime. The townsfolk hoped to attain great wealth within the De Kaap Valley, but soon followed their fortunes to the Witwaterstrand reserves.

“Aloe navigates the town and we met her on our first visit,” says Vincenzia of the amiable Australian shepherd dog, who guides us for the day. “They are bred to look after cattle, so she must think of the community as cattle. Every time I arrive she checks in to see if everything is okay. She knows everyone and often sleeps over. Her owners have made peace with that. She is part of Kaapschehoop.”

Once we summit the rocky outcrop, we picnic on our padkos – peanuts, cheese curls and lemon creams – as we sit on the edge of the Highveld escarpment at 1 700m above sea level, with our feet dangling over the edge. A couple of hundred metres below is a carpet of verdant pine trees and ochre-coloured dirt roads that are unevenly carved into the earth to complement the contours of the undulating land. I can see why plans are underway to make this a protected area.

Back in town, as I page through Linda Louw’s photography book *The Wild Horses of the Kaapschehoop Escarpment*, I learn that no one really knows where the free-roaming feral horses come from, and yet everyone will tell you a different story.

The versions I heard include: they escaped from farmers in the area; they were used in the nearby gold mine in the early 1900s before escaping or being abandoned once their owners moved on; and they belonged to the British troops stationed here during the second Anglo-Boer War. Some believe they were left to their own devices when the local police station closed down.

WHAT TO DO:

Go on a tour of Adam’s Calendar or Inzalo y’Langa (the birthplace of the sun), which is believed to be the oldest man-made structure in the world. This 75 000-year-old monolithic calendar predates Stonehenge and the Pyramids at Giza. The stone circles, which were rediscovered in 2003, align with Earth’s geographic cardinal points and mark out solstices and equinoxes. Coins, swords and statues from Egypt, Greece and the Inca Empire have been discovered nearby.

- Hunt for mushrooms in the nearby pine forest with the folks from Bohemian Groove Café.
- Hike to Battery Creek Falls (as some of us did).
- Go on a horse trail with Christo from Kaapsehoop Horse Trails (breathe easy, these are tame horses).
- Brave a ghost tour that explores the town’s mining history.
- Tap your foot to live music each Sunday at the Bohemian Groove Café while drinking their home-made chocolate vodka.
- Delve into the scratch patch and antiques at Gold Dust Trading store.

WHEN TO VISIT

All year round, but especially during the Wild Horse Festival in the first week of September, to celebrate spring (Saturday, 3 September 2016).

WHERE TO STAY

There are a number of guesthouses, B&Bs and self-catering houses. We stayed half an hour away at the Southern Sun Emnotweni in Nelspruit.
www.kaapschehoopinfo.co.za

But whichever version (or combination thereof) you fancy the most, the English and Boerperd bloodlines created a hardy crossbreed of mustangs (from the Mexican Spanish word *mestengo* meaning “animal that strays”). And at 180 horses strong, they outnumber the villagers.

I happened upon a few horses grazing on someone’s lawn in the late afternoon. One scratched itself against a tree near the front porch, while another drank from the duck pond. Then it turned its attention to me. I like horses just as much as the next person, but when a feral horse eagerly starts trotting in my direction, the only thing that comes to mind is the sign out front (in big bold letters) that reads: “Warning! Wild horses – do not feed or approach!” 🐾

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