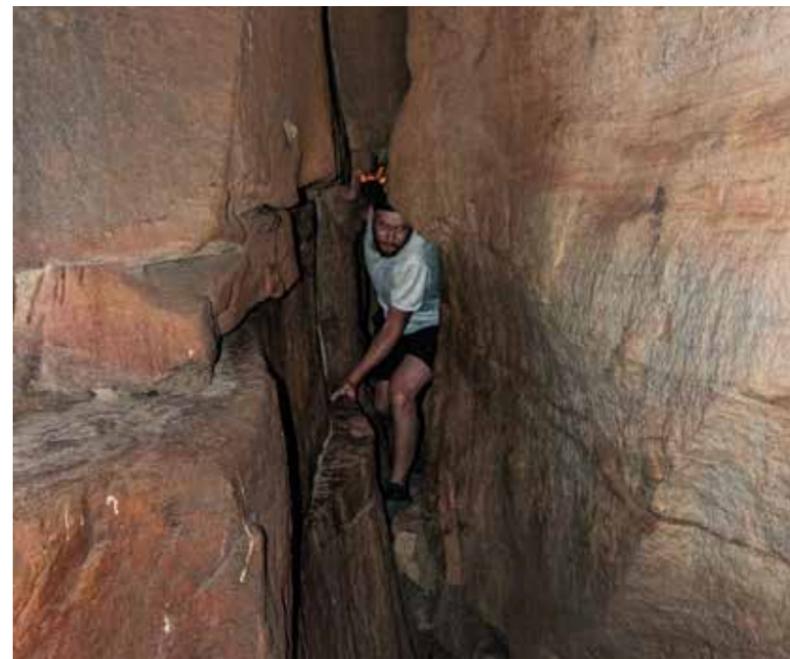




TAKE A HIKE

Climb and crawl to the Wolfberg Arch



The Wolfberg Arch via the Wolfberg Cracks is one of the Cederberg's most epic day hikes. As long as you're not claustrophobic...

WORDS & PICTURES
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The last time I spent so many hours staring at the purple backpack on my dad's shoulders was two years ago when we walked the Camino pilgrimage in Spain. Then, as now, I resented the weight of my own pack.

We could have left the tent at home and slept out in the open, but when I packed last night there was a chill in the air. So I brought the tent, along with a sleeping bag, camping mattress, gas stove, warm jacket, three bottles of water, my camera and a tripod.

I adjust the shoulder straps, wipe the sweat from my brow and let my eyes roam the rocky path as it winds up the ridge. At the top I can see the sun's first rays touching the silhouette of the Wolfberg Cracks.

Narrow or wide?

My dad Stefan and I could have lightened our packs considerably if we weren't going to camp on the mountain. A daypack with a bottle of water, a sandwich and an energy bar is all you really need to hike to the Wolfberg Cracks, even all the way to the Wolfberg Arch and back. But we wanted to sleep under the arch – and the stars. It's going to be a dark, dark night since new moon was only a day ago.

From the trailhead at Sanddrif Holiday Resort to the start of the cracks is only about 1,8 km, but you ascend 480m. It's

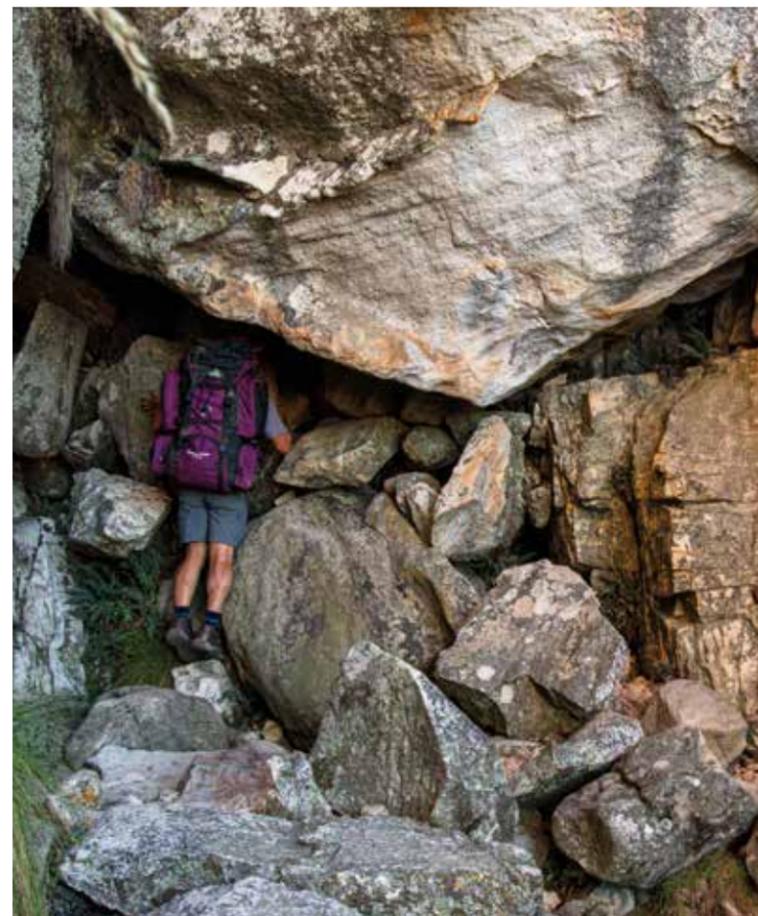
steep. We set off at a fast pace and my legs feel like jelly by the time we reach the cracks.

There are three cracks: a wide gap with one or two places where you have to scrabble over rocks, nicknamed Adderley Street; a narrower gap with more tight squeezes, dark sections and some fairly complicated climbs; and a third route that's only for experienced mountaineers. We follow the traditional route up the narrow crack to the plateau – tomorrow we'll return down Adderley Street.

Three young baboons scamper up a cliff and their barks echo off the rock. A rope high on a rock ledge indicates the entrance to the narrow crack – and the first obstacle. To get to the ledge, you have to climb about 3 m up the rock face, or pull yourself through a dark chimney-like opening.

"These holds weren't made for short people like us," my dad mutters as he tries and fails to get a grip on the rock face. So we head to the chimney, where we have to take off our backpacks and pass them up through the opening.

Above the ledge, we climb through something that resembles a portal. The sky is a strip of blue above and rock walls tower on all sides. Three white arrows point to a crevice between the rocks and when I peek into the opening, a dark rock corridor swallows all the light. We have to go through *there*.



Opposite page: Steep uphill, narrow corridors, precarious rock ledges and chimney-like tunnels are all part of the adventure when you hike to the Wolfberg Arch (above).



Clockwise from top: If you choose the narrow crack in the Wolfberg, you'll have to squeeze through gaps and climb over rocks to reach this chamber with its rock arch. Choose the wide crack called Adderley Street on your way back to the trailhead or pack a tent if you want to overnight at the Wolfberg Arch.

Starry, starry night

Have you ever tunnelled your way through a busy dance floor, or through the crowd at the bar at Loftus during half-time? Then you know that awkward sideways shuffle. This technique gets me through the corridor, but instead of people, rock walls press against my chest and back. When I make it to the other side, my jaw drops.

I stare up at a giant rock atrium. A rock arch hangs overhead like a beam. Next to it is another arch, flatter, like a low-water bridge. Light filters through the crevices and paints the walls red, orange and gold. In this stone cathedral you can't help but rest in sacred silence.

The crack leads up a gradual incline. At first it's as wide as a school corridor but eventually it becomes so narrow that my backpack rubs against the rocks on both sides as I walk. Near the top, we have to take off our backpacks again and climb over a boulder. There's an opening the size of a car window in the rocks. My dad leopard-crawls through first. I watch the soles of his boots disappear. "I hope the doctor fastened all the screws properly when he did my back operation last year," he says.

Soon the crack spits us out in the open. I squint my eyes against the bright light. I put on sunscreen and sunglasses in preparation for the 4 km walk through the veld to the Wolfberg Arch. This is the Cederberg at its most scenic: a

light breeze carries the smell of fynbos; the sand of the path is crisp white; in the distance a klipspringer keeps a close eye, ready to bolt... But it's also very hot, so we keep a steady pace to reach the shadow of the arch as soon as possible.

At the arch, I kick off my shoes and look for a patch of shade for an afternoon nap. Later I unpack my stuff and pitch my tent. Just after sunset, I light the gas stove and watch the Milky Way rise over the arch. In the evening when I'm in the tent, the silence of the landscape lulls me to sleep.

The next morning, a hare hops through the arch while we pack up. On the way back to the cracks, we see fresh caracal tracks on top of our own from yesterday. We make good progress in the cool morning air and soon we're strolling down the wide crack, Adderley Street. Like the famous street in Cape Town, it's a wide thoroughfare with cliffs rising like skyscrapers on both sides. There are no dark corridors or small openings to crawl through and before long we're out the other side and descending to the parking area.

Back at the car, we take off our heavy packs for the last time. I dig out a fresh bottle of water from behind the car seat and look up at the cracks.

"You know, a hike like this makes me crave more," my dad says. "When can we do the Amatola?"

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Distance: It's about 5 km to the Wolfberg Cracks and back (3 – 4 hours). The Wolfberg Arch is another 3,7 km further (7,5 km return). You can walk to the arch and back in a day – set aside at least eight hours.
How to get there? Drive north along the N7. When you're 28 km north of Citrusdal, take the turn-off to CapeNature's Algeria campsite. Continue along this dirt road for 46 km to Dwarsrivier Farm and Sanddrif Holiday Resort.

Best time to hike? Year-round. Even when it's blistering hot in summer, it

will be cool in the cracks. Start early so you can walk in the shade up the steep hill to the cracks. Pack a hat and sunscreen.

Where do I park my car? There is a parking area at the trailhead. You'll get a code for the entrance gate.

Accommodation? Sanddrif Holiday Resort is close to the Wolfberg Cracks. There are 40 camping stands next to the Matjies River – rates from R320 per night for four people; R80 per extra person; max eight people. Self-catering cottages from R1 360 per night for four people;

R340 per extra person; each unit sleeps 4 – 8 people.

How fit do I need to be? Fairly fit. The first 1,8 km section is steep but not too challenging. In the wide crack, there are some rocks that will require upper body strength to climb over. If you're claustrophobic, rather skip the narrow crack and walk through the wide crack.

Water? There's no water along the route. Carry at least two litres of water per adult if you do the day hike, and three litres per adult if you're staying overnight.

Cost: Day permit for Wolfberg Cracks: R70 per adult; R40 per child under 14. Day permit for Wolfberg Cracks and Arch: R100 per adult; R60 per child. You can get these permits at Sanddrif.

If you want to overnight at the Arch, you need an overnight permit (R140 per adult) and have to pay a conservation fee (R60 per adult) at the CapeNature office at Algeria or online at capenature.co.za

Contact: Sanddrif ☎ 027 482 2825; sanddrif.co.za; CapeNature ☎ 087 087 8250; capenature.co.za