

# Horses of History in KAAPSCHE HOOP

In a small town, reminiscent of days gone by, time stands beautifully still. The silent din of nature fills the air so clean, it seems to sparkle in the morning dawn. Here, South Africa's only wild horses roam the grasslands of this once thriving mining town, serving as a haunting reminder of the underground riches the region once held.

All too often, interpretation of South Africa's infamous gold rush points to the Witwatersrand, and is used in many glossy tourism coffee table books to explain – and chronologically detail – the explosion of the megalopolis that today

incorporates Johannesburg and its surroundings. However, in doing so, many smaller, lesser known towns of immense historical value often go unnoticed, remaining the unsung heroes of the country's precious metal story.

South Africa's Mpumalanga Province is simply breathtaking. Many don't realise the topographical significance of the region. An ancient land with coastal plains that stretch inland as far as 300 kilometres, Mpumalanga also forms part of the 1000-kilometre, 180-million-year-old Drakensberg Mountain Range. Mistakenly referred to as a "KwaZulu-Natal attraction", the Drakensberg in fact stretches from the Eastern Cape through the Zulu Kingdom, the Free State, Lesotho, Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

Where these Lowveld coastal plains meet with the Drakensberg escarpment, the resulting scenery is quite simply exquisite. It is here where tourist attractions like God's Window have emerged due to the sudden and rather awe-inspiring drop in altitude resulting in some spectacular scenery. Just south of the Crocodile River, the Drakensberg escarpment juts out in the form of what was referred to upon discovery as a "Cape". At the top of this Cape, lying some 6,000 feet above sea level and about 30-kilometres from Nelspruit is a small town with its origins in Dutch settlement, simply referred to as Kaapsche Hoop.

It was by accident that gold diggers happened upon the land surrounding Kaapsche Hoop's town. Little is known about the exact date and by whom gold was actually discovered however, it is widely believed that it was found here, before gold's historical discovery in Johannesburg in 1886. The diggers called it "Duiwels Kantoor", (the "Devil's Office"), because of the sandstone boulders that jutted out of the landscape, and the stark shadows cast by the many trees in the area which together created an uneasy feeling among the first settlers. As more and more gold was discovered here, the Dutch changed the name, calling it Kaapsche Hoop (or Kaapsehoop), loosely translated as "the hope of the Cape".

When it comes to gold, South Africa's history is strikingly similar across many settlements. Discovery by few, leads



*"Look back at our struggle for freedom.  
Trace our present day's strength to its source.  
And you'll find that man's pathway to glory,  
Is strewn with the bones of a horse."  
~Anonymous*





to inundation by many. When they learned that gold was abundant in the region, thousands of people made their way to Kaapsche Hoop, travelling on horseback, the most common mode of transport at the time. From there, the town was established in 1882, which created the need for services such as postal, medicinal and food – all made easier with the use of horse-drawn cart. However, alluvial gold mining in Kaapsche Hoop soon fell into a state of decline, with thanks to more profitable reef gold finds in places like Pilgrim’s Rest (1873), Barberton (1881), and of course, the Witwatersrand. Almost overnight, diggers and town dwellers packed their belongings and left, leaving behind what they did not need – items many believe included several hundred horses. Furthermore, after the South African war in 1888, it is believed several more horses were left here by troops, and upon the conversion to the motor vehicle, horseback transportation became a thing of the past altogether. Being a remote part of the Lowveld, and

with little human activity at the time, the abandoned horses thrived in the sub-tropical region, essentially regressing back to the wild and forming numerous herds that still exist to this day. It is a mythical story that intertwines decades of legend and romantic references to the Victorian age, yet no one can be one hundred-percent certain of the exact origin of these majestic wild horses. Today, the largest population, and some of the only wild herds left in South Africa comprise an estimated 150 to 180 horses, which roam freely in a 17,000-hectare park. The breed of these horses is predominantly Boerperd and they range from small stallion groupings of three or four to established matriarchal herds numbering in their twenties. Kaapsche Hoop, a national heritage site, has been preserved beautifully, and is fast becoming a tourist attraction where people can explore the 19th century buildings or ride on horseback alongside a wild herd in their own habitat. For

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Last year, *The Wild Horses of the Kaapsehoop Escarpment* was published as a coffee table book and the first to tell the story of these wild herds of horses. Through a combination of beautiful photography and text, their history, environment and their challenges are described with the focus on the more elusive herds rarely seen by visitors. Not only is this book a tribute to the spirit of these horses but also to the horse in general, with accompanying quotes celebrating the only animal that has played such a pivotal part in human history.

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guests who stay overnight, there are several options for accommodation, many within the same historical buildings they have come to see. The community of Kaapsche Hoop is fiercely protective over the horses and their livelihood, with many involved in projects to keep disease at bay and uncoordinated interaction with humans to a bare minimum. The scars of the region’s mining past still rear up on occasion too, with horses falling through some of the abandoned, open mine shafts and pit dugouts left when the rush moved on. For the most part however, the horses are left to their own devices, much like they have been over the past 120 years, which is quite possibly the best way to ensure that their legendary status, mythical allure and irreverent beauty, as South African wild horses, lives on. ■ Kevin Taylor

*For more information on Kaapsche Hoop and the wild horse trails, visit [www.kaapsehoopinfo.co.za](http://www.kaapsehoopinfo.co.za)*

