



# Somerset College

## **SOMERSET COLLEGE OUTDOOR EDUCATION: TREK**

The location of Somerset College on a 32 hectare estate in the Cape Winelands gives students a rare opportunity to explore their natural surroundings and to further their education in a unique and engaging way.

The flagship of the College Outdoor Education Programme is the Trek, which is now in its eighteenth year. This is a 27-day journey of self-discovery undertaken by all Grade 9 students in November each year, during which time they cover 360km on foot, in canoes and on bicycles. It is a remarkable journey that starts on foot from the school and ends on the beach in the De Hoop Nature Reserve.

It is not insignificant that our Grade 9 Trekkers, trek for 27 days and Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years. For each day they journey, Mandela sacrificed a year in becoming the great leader he was.

The entire Grade 9 year group is divided into single-sex groups of approximately fourteen students and each group is allocated two adults; some of whom are teachers and some past-students. Students are given the opportunity to lead their group each day, make decisions affecting the group, prepare meals, write letters to family and friends and learn camping skills, orienteering and general survival. The students are not permitted to bring cell phones or any electronic devices. It is a special time of reflection, adventure and mental, spiritual and physical growth – a true rite of passage.

It is so much more than a long hike! It is a powerful journey of self-discovery during which students learn to stretch themselves both physically and mentally, to work in teams, to cope with setbacks, to take turns in leading, to solve problems and to take responsibility for themselves and their colleagues – including cooking, washing clothes and finding their way. Coming at a crucial point in adolescence – the end of the Grade 9 year – when they are busy challenging the world around them, Trek takes them out of their comfort zone and forces them to confront their real selves. There are no cell phones, no Mom's taxi, no pizza delivery man and no school bells. Instead there is the great outdoors, the opportunity to overcome difficulties, to reflect deeply, and to take stock of their lives.

In short, it is a challenge that has changed many young lives. It is carefully planned with considerable attention to safety issues and the selection of the adults who go with each group. Many societies throughout history have established rites of passage as children engage in their teenage years. In South Africa many schools use initiation, which often has negative connotations. We don't subscribe to initiation, but we do see Trek as a rite of passage, that focuses on the positive, and out of which young people emerge stronger, fitter and healthier – and ready to tackle the senior secondary phase of school.

Trek is the only school adventure of this magnitude in South Africa, and is an outstanding educational exercise that teaches children to operate in groups, and to move towards a deep understanding of themselves within the universe.

During their time away students are involved in community service in a nearby town. This not only provides a change in their daily routine, but is also a wonderful opportunity for them to make a difference in the lives of others.

The nature of the Trek ensures that every student is tested physically, mentally and emotionally, but reaches their destination safely, with new friendships, a strength of spirit and memories of a life experience that will stay with them forever. Life skills which could never be taught in a classroom!

“This excellent programme could not be undertaken without the commitment, hard work (and courage) of our parents, staff and students and a dedicated Outdoor Education Department and a Board committed to the values inherent in a programme that seeks to enhance and deepen the educational experience of students at Somerset College,” comments Meg Fargher, the Executive Head of Somerset College.

Trek is enormous fun – and for most of the 1300 students who have had the Trek experience, it remains one of the high points of their time at Somerset College. Two short quotes from past pupils say it all:

**From a girl:** *“At first, I hated every moment of this torture and all I asked myself was why I had been sent on this one-way trip to my worst nightmare. “I would never do this at home!” Those were my favourite words. It was only on day four that I realised what this trek was all about. My eyes filled with tears and it dawned on me that I was the problem! At home I took everything and everyone for granted. After that day, as if by magic, everything got better and I wouldn’t have gone home if you had offered to drive me there. My greatest experience has been discovering myself.”*

**From a boy:** *“The Trek has taught me a lot. I have learned to think of others and to put myself in their shoes. I have also been able to understand myself better and to work out my strengths and weaknesses and where I want to go in life. I have also learned to be grateful for what I have. I could have been someone who lives under a black plastic sheet for my whole life, as we did for a day, and I have seen how fussy people are about their food when there are people out there who have nothing. I have learnt that one must not be critical all the time and one must look at the better side of others and try to understand their reasoning.”*

Not many classroom experiences will teach such powerful lessons. It’s all part of the school’s hidden curriculum. It’s what the College is about.