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Garden Route

2026 TRAVEL GUIDE

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OUTENIQUA TRAIL

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heart of the forest

Mossel Bay

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Knysna

Plan a perfect holiday
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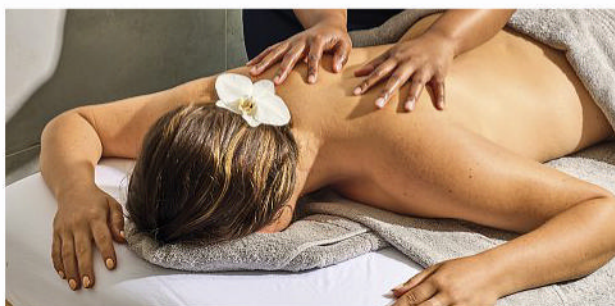


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The Knysna Forest rolls
out its green carpet!

go! **Garden Route**

2026



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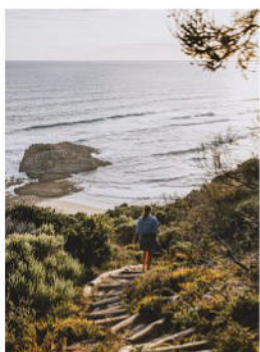
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WILLEM VAN DER BERG

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ED'S LETTER



VALMA JANSE VAN RENSBURG

There are few places left in South Africa where nature is as exuberant – and as rooted to everyday life – as it is along the Garden Route. You can catch up on the news in a beach chair, eat a roosterkoek for breakfast at a farm stall, go swim under a waterfall in the forest, and do a wine tasting on a mountain in the afternoon!

This is the first edition of our *Garden Route* guide and we're celebrating the region in all its guises. Page through and you'll see that there really is something for everyone, whether you want to fly down the Storms River Pass on your mountain bike (p 84) or float downriver in a kayak (p 90); sit next to a fire in a quiet reserve like Goukamma (p 66) or feel the



holiday pulse of Mossel Bay (p 40). One thing you'll find everywhere is a sense of abundance: the natural scenery, the hospitality and the portions of fish and chips!

We asked a few locals about their favourite destinations and activities. Hancu Louw meets the curator of the beautifully diverse botanical garden in George (p 24); Jac Kritzinger interviews the artist behind the murals in Friemersheim (p 52); and Leanne Rencken shares the best beaches and eateries in Knysna (p 14). We head to quiet swimming spots (p 96), visit guest farms for picnics and horse rides (p 116), and stay over in quirky forest cabins (p 106).

I hiked the Outeniqua Trail (p 76). One afternoon, somewhere in the Knysna Forest, I lay down on the ground and realised I was surrounded by a living sanctuary,

where a quiet miracle happens every second of every day: growth. The entire Garden Route is actually one big organism: thousands of chemical processes are slowly, patiently and continuously adding to the green mass of blades, shoots, roots and leaves. As I stared up through the canopy, it hit me: The world wasn't made and left to be – it's a story that's still being written.

And if you needed any further evidence that this is a region where nature has the final say, just look at the recent floods, which caused extensive damage. We all saw it on the news: Streams turned into roaring rivers and swept away everything in their path. Roads were gone, bridges were wrecked and communities were cut off.

But the Garden Route is also resilient. Think of how the forests have erased signs of the

woodcutters and gold miners of the past. And how the people of the region came together after the devastating fires of 2017.

Temporary damage is no reason to delay your travel plans. The Garden Route has always welcomed visitors with open arms; now it's our turn to give something back. Tourism is the lifeblood of many a town and family. Every guesthouse booking, cup of coffee and hiking permit will help to keep the wheels turning.

Besides, the trees are still standing. The waves are still rolling in. And the sun is still setting behind the Outeniquas every night. Eden is still alive.

SOPHIA

sophia@weg.co.za





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go! Garden Route

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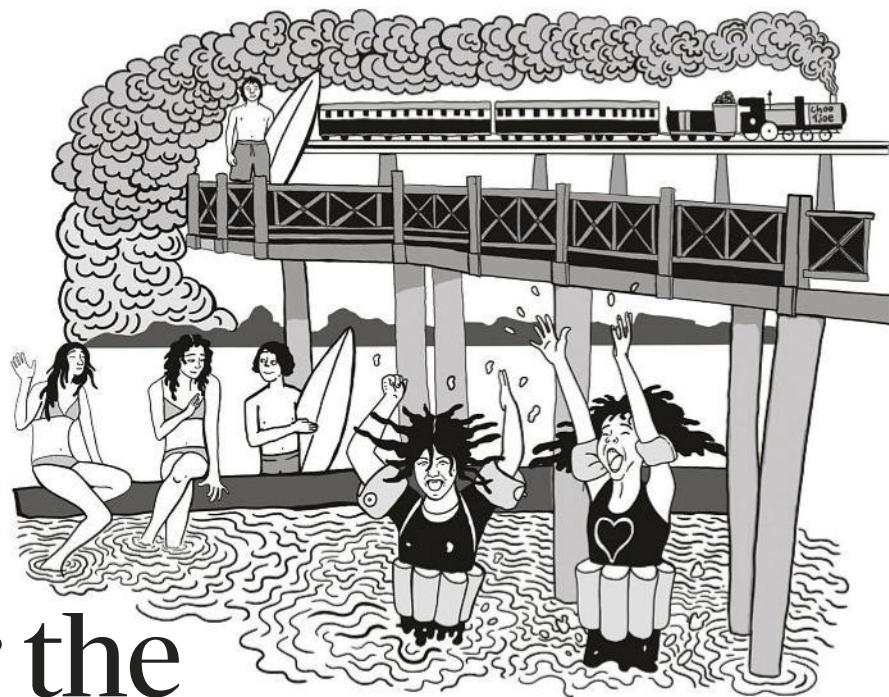


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Under the Outeniquas

When you grow up in George, as **Esma Marnewick** did, surrounded by a majesty of mountains, forests and beaches, those things burrow under your skin and make you the person you are today.

ILLUSTRATION **AIMEE LINDEQUE**

I grew up in the suburb of Bergsig in George, right next to the forest. Only one other house and an open field stood between our yard and the first trees. But we weren't allowed to play there – my parents warned us about the *bosslapers*, homeless people, who lived there. Not that my sister and I had ever seen a *bosslaper*... I imagined an Antjie Somers-like figure in tattered clothes.

While I was wary of the dangers the forest could hold, I was always intrigued by it. It was a mysterious place that surrounded the town for kilometres. No matter which direction you travelled – on the N2 to Wilderness or Mossel Bay; along the N12 over the Outeniqua Pass to Oudtshoorn – the landscape was soft and green.

Like most other suburban white kids in the 1980s, we spent our afternoons on our bicycles in the streets. Our parents seldom wondered where we were, as long as we were back home by 5 pm. It was a carefree youth in one of the most beautiful places on earth. I sometimes wonder: Would I have been the same person if I grew up somewhere else, like Joburg, or on a farm in the Great Karoo?

Despite my mom's warnings, the forest never became a major fear. There were much more pressing concerns to busy my young mind, like quicksand, rabies and volcanic eruptions. From Bergsig, we had a great view of George Peak in the Outeniqua Mountains, which looked very much like a volcano. My best friend, KaBlank, lived next door. (Her name is Karen Blank, but my sister is also Karen, so we renamed them

KaBlank and Klein Karen.) KaBlank and I would lie next to the swimming pool and stare at this fearsome mountain, planning which direction we'd run if we had to escape the lava. Of course, before we fled, we'd have to grab a few essentials – like the *Kinderbybel* and a Barbie doll.

Somewhere along the way, my parents must have corrected this misconception because by Standard 6 I had done my first overnight hiking trail to Tierkop Hut on the very same mountain.

Our hiking group was a colourful bunch: My dad and his friend, Oom Martus; my two school friends Zanne and Rethea; Rethea's brother Marthinus and one of his friends. The two boys couldn't have been older than six or seven. The little friend struggled under the weight of his big, lopsided backpack. When my dad

eventually opened the backpack to see what was going on, he saw that the boy's mother had packed only a sleeping bag and two litre-sized glass bottles of Creme Soda!

Once the contents of his backpack had been divided between the adults, we made better progress. I saw that the Outeniquas were covered in fynbos, and how they folded around our town in a protective embrace.

That hike was the first of many. Early in my high school years, two moms accompanied a group of us into the Swartberg. The next year we hiked the Outeniqua Trail. How those two tannies managed a bunch of teenagers, I'll never know. (Much later in life, I realised they weren't drinking water from that kidney-shaped pouch...)

After school, when my friends and I were at university and came home for December holidays, we hiked all the nearby trails: Harkerville, Attaquaskloof and Outeniqua again.

We spent just as much time on the beach as in the mountains. We were spoilt for choice: Victoria Bay, Herold's Bay, Leentjiesklip, Glentana, Great Brak, Hartenbos...

As kids, KaBlank's mom Gesa often took us to Vic Bay. The smallest among us (Klein Karen and KaBlank's sister, Carolientjie) played in the tidal pool in their Polyotters while KaBlank and I braved the waves for hours.

As we grew older, going to the beach became synonymous with friends, tanning and watching boys, especially the surfers who went to the English high school in George.

One hot afternoon in Vic Bay, a few of us decided to walk 2 km along the sea cliffs and railway line, across the Kaaimans River Bridge, to Wilderness. It was exciting and frightening at the same time, because the Outeniqua Choo Tjoe might steam past at any moment, and we'd have to flatten ourselves against the rock face to let it pass!

The bridge across the Kaaimans is

When I sat on that koppie and looked out over the Indian Ocean, it did indeed feel like everything had been forgiven, and that anything was possible.

210m long. There's a narrow space to walk alongside the rails, on metal plates with big gaps between them. Through these gaps, I watched waves washing into the estuary 36m below. What if we fell?

I feel nauseous just thinking about it now.

Years later, when we got our driving licences, we would go braai at Vic Bay or Herold's Bay, at night. Herold's Bay was also the home of the famous golfer, Ernie Els. He had a big, blue double-storey mansion on the rocks. And we were so excited when we saw him! I never hung out at the Herold's Bay Hotel, but some of the older kids boasted when they had run into him there.

I also went on several church camps to Herold's Bay. On the last night, the camp leaders would raise a wooden cross on the beach and light a fire. Each child would write something that was holding them back on a scrap of paper and burn it, while a portable hi-fi played "Houtkruis" by Jan de Wet. The next morning there was a short church service on the koppie west of the beach.

We can debate the effects of these rituals on the mind of a teenager, but when I sat on that koppie and looked out over the Indian Ocean, it did indeed feel like everything had been forgiven, and that anything was possible.

There are many such views around George. The N2 between the Kaaimans River and Wilderness is currently under construction, and the Dolphin Point lookout next to the railway bridge is temporarily closed. But we sometimes drove there for sundowners. And while vehicles droned by overhead, you could look down at the estuary on one side and the endless beach on the other side. And behind, above the hills, was the Knysna Forest, where Dalene Matthee's stories came to life.

On Sunday afternoons, my dad often took us for a drive in our brown Toyota Cressida. I can't remember much about these outings, only a narrow dirt road over old bridges and honey-brown streams.

Years later, when I was a travel journalist at this magazine, I realised that he'd shown us parts of the Seven Passes Road between George and Knysna. At some point during my quarter-life crisis, I went for a drive along this road and ended up at the Jubilee Creek picnic site in the Garden Route National Park. It was a weekday and deserted. I followed a path along Millwood Creek and sat down on a rock. Birds chattered around me.

While I jotted down a few thoughts in a notebook, I heard a rustle and spotted a small bird in the undergrowth about a metre away. It was brown, black and white – a Cape batis. As I watched it, I felt my swirling thoughts come to order. My worries about finding someone to marry, establishing a career, and the meaning of it all, moved to the sidelines of my brain. Around me, the forest was green and peaceful – it had existed for centuries, and everything it needed was right here.

It's been nearly 30 years since I've lived on the Garden Route, but every time I return, I feel a deep appreciation for this place where the beauty of the world is still so evident.

Thank you, Garden Route, for making me the person I am today.

An aerial photograph of the Knysna lagoon, showing the winding waterway, sandy beaches, and surrounding forested hills. Residential houses are visible on the right side of the lagoon. The foreground is filled with dense green foliage.

Where wood meets water

Knysna has hidden beaches, excellent eateries, interesting history and a relaxed vibe. Here's how to make the most of a holiday next to the lagoon.

WORDS **LEANNE RENCKEN** PICTURES **BRENDAN BALLANTINE**

VIEW FROM THE WEST HEAD



If you only have time for one outing...

Modern travel culture is obsessed with finding the “hidden gem”, with every influencer promising to deliver some tucked-away secret that supposedly contains the true soul of a destination.

While hunting for these treasures has its merits, sometimes zooming in too closely makes us entirely blind to the obvious. In Knysna, you don't need to look that hard; the lagoon is the heart of the town! And if you're only spending one day here, the trip across the water to Featherbed Nature Reserve is a delight. It's the kind of destination that simply refuses to be ruined by the weather. Lean in, let the elements mess with your perspective.

The journey begins at Featherbed's Cruise Café in the waterfront, where you collect your tickets and board. Depending on your specific ticket, and the total passenger number, you could find yourself crossing on the *Spirit of Knysna* or *Old Three Legs* – both metal barges – or on one of the double-decker, main-event vessels: the *Paddle Cruiser* or the *John Benn*, a yellowwood-panelled boat named after one of the original pilots who helped navigate people through The Heads. If you've read *Fiela's Child*, the name will be familiar.

Before the engines kick into gear, take stock of the three-dimensional postcard you've suddenly become a part of. The estuary is alive with sleek yachts, classic paddle boats, catamarans, working watercraft and even a pirate ship. As the boat starts moving deeper into the lagoon, watch cormorants

perched in stark silhouette on the wooden jetties, while gulls wheel through the wake.

Along the way, the journey transforms into a museum-worthy introduction to the town. Our Featherbed guide, Su Collins, begins to unpack the layered history of the landscape. Because you're looking at the geography while hearing her stories, you're forced to contemplate the various people who built their lives around this basin. Su explains how the indigenous Khoisan named the area *Knysna* – or “the place where wood meets water” – and contrasts that with the colonial timber traders who later risked their lives to push their way through The Heads. While there's more than one theory behind how the town was named, the version Su shares is poetic and visually appropriate.

Cruising past the man-made marina of Thesen Island, your first impression might be of a fancy enclave home to the Garden Route's rich and famous. But looking at it from the water reveals its working-class bones. You can see the original jetty, which was built from ballast rocks thrown overboard by ships that were dragged through The Heads from all corners of the world. It remains visible from the water, a stark reminder of the island's industrial past.

Named after the Norwegian merchant Arndt Leonard Thesen, for much of the 20th century, the island bustled with sawmills, workshops and shipbuilding facilities. Logs brought from the forests were processed on the island and shipped throughout the Cape Colony.



When the ferry finally docks at the base of the West Head, you step into a private nature reserve – the Featherbed excursion is basically the only way to experience it. On arrival, the instructions are clear: Grab a sturdy walking stick from the barrel to help you navigate the steep, uneven stairs and terrain ahead. You then board a farm-style truck and trailer that tackles the steep climb to the top of the headland (114m above sea level) where you take in the views before beginning the trek back down.

Standing at the edge, you're confronted on one side by a vertical sandstone cliff face that drops into the ocean. On the other side, a similar but narrower, chimney-like cliff face marks a spot that was once used by abseilers. Between June and November, during the annual migration season, this high perch forms the perfect vantage point for whale and dolphin spotting in the ocean.

Up here, the distance between



the East and West Heads feels impossibly tight; you almost want to take your thumb and forefinger and pinch it closed. To an inbound ship battered by a relentless ocean, that visible break in the coastline must have initially felt like a welcome respite, until they actually tried to make their way through. Because The Heads are simultaneously welcoming and destructive, this tiny inlet has claimed a number of ships over the centuries and remains a genuine threat to seafarers today. People need to know exactly what they're doing to navigate here.

Captain Cornelius Sinclair, one of Featherbed's boat pilots, knows The Heads intimately. When he was training and learning the nuances of the lagoon, he spent hours up here with a pair of binoculars, memorising the behaviour of the waves and the shifting tides.

"When you're between The

Heads, it feels like they're talking to you," he says. "Like they're saying, 'You can take us on if you want to...'. That's why I never play games."

These are wise words. Skippers apparently only ever make the definitive call to push through or pull back once they're physically in the space, reading the water in real time.

After a while, guests are guided down a well-maintained trail, eventually descending a series of steps into a sea cave. Standing inside its shadowed vault, you're treated to another spectacular view of the lagoon. Stepping back into the light, you take a path running flush with the lagoon's edge – a minimalist landscape of stone walls, fynbos, and rocky beaches.

The trail loops back to Featherbed HQ and a three-course buffet lunch in the shade of milkwood trees. It's delicious, and the perfect way to end the day before making your way back to town.



Where? The Cruise Café,
1 Remembrance Drive, Knysna

Opening times: Every day except Christmas Day. Tours at 8 am and 2.30 pm for the three-hour Eco Experience, and at 10 am and 11.30 am for the four-hour lunch cruise. (An excursion requires a minimum of 10 passengers.)

Cost: R1 200 per person (Eco Experience); R1 500 per person (lunch cruise). There's a special until the end of August: R800 per person for the 11.30 am lunch cruise.

Contact: ☎ 044 382 1693
📧 knysnafatherbed.com

Your guide for a longer stay

The best strategy during holiday season is to demarcate your zone. Find the view you like best and book accommodation in walking distance of fresh morning pastries or a great lunch. Knysna has excellent food and coffee.

Just a note: Winter hours and summer hours differ dramatically, and some restaurants close for an extended period during low season.

What about accommodation? Knysna has almost as many places to stay as it has trees. Your best bet is the town's tourism website: visitknysna.co.za. There are plenty of options to choose from – everything from campsites and B&Bs to self-catering cottages, boutique hotels and beach houses suitable for family groups.



EAT HERE

IN THE CBD

Freshline Fisheries

An old staple for good seafood. They've recently moved to a new, much better location. While there's no real view, the dining is casual and the lunch menu has great fresh fish options. Buy a bottle of their homemade peri-peri sauce to take away.

Where? 6 Trotter Street

Opening times: Monday to Saturday from 11.30 am to 10 pm; Sunday until 3 pm.

Contact: 044 382 3131

freshlinefisheries.co.za

The Sandwich Shack

This mid-morning hotspot is a great option for a cup of coffee, fresh pastries (try the cinnamon swirl), a quick bite and excellent sourdough.

Where? 11 Gray Street

Opening times: Monday to Friday from

7 am to 3 pm; Saturday from 8 am to noon; Sunday from 9 am to 1 pm.

Contact: 074 095 0699

sandwichshack.co.za

Buonissimo Knysna

New to town, this traditional gelateria is already incredibly popular. They offer a super selection, from Kinder Joy-, hazelnut- and pistachio-flavoured gelato to vibrant orange and lemon sorbets, and cream-stuffed cornettos. You can watch the entire process as they churn the batches on site – there are vegan options, too.

Where? Waterside Shopping Centre, corner of Waterfront Drive and Union Street.

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 6 pm.

Contact: 077 490 4097

buonissimo-gelato.co.za





THE FAR WEST

Oak Leaf

Located across the lagoon in the quiet, tree-lined neighbourhood of Belvidere. They serve breakfast, lunch and coffee treats (also with vegan and gluten-free options). Or book your seat for high tea, which features sweet and savoury treats, a glass of MCC and unlimited speciality teas and coffees (R395 per person).

Oak Leaf also doubles as a neighbourhood deli – it's a prime spot to source high-end provisions for your base camp if you decide to stay this side.

Where? 168 Duthie Drive

Opening times: Tuesday to Sunday from 9 am to 3 pm.

Contact: ☎ 066 141 5204

📍 oakleafknysna.co.za

The Bell

A famous tavern (claiming to be the smallest pub in town) located on the site of the original Belvidere farmstead. It delivers exactly what it promises: cold beer and wonderful old-world vibes. Expect grub like lamb liver with mashed potato and onion-bacon gravy, and steak-and-ale pot pie with chips.

Where? 169 Lower Duthie Drive

Opening times: Tuesday to Saturday from 11 am to 9.30 pm; Sunday and Monday until 5 pm.

Contact: ☎ 044 124 0170

📍 belvidere.co.za/bell-tavern-knysna



ON THE EAST SIDE

Maillard Baking Co.

Head into the industrial side of town to find their main baking hub and stock up on pastries and bread. If you're wandering the commercial strip of Thesen Island, look for Maillard's new dedicated focaccia snack bar, Foca, on Sawtooth Lane for a quick takeaway slice.

Where? 5 Uil Street

Opening times: Tuesday to Friday from 9 am to 6 pm; Saturday from noon to 6 pm.

Contact: 068 400 8887
@mailladbakingco on Instagram

Knysna Gin Distillery

Located alongside the main bakery in the industrial area, this creative space is great for a really well-made G&T – the menu is eclectic. You can also play pool or board games, and watch a live band.

Where? Also at 5 Uil Street

Opening times: Monday to Wednesday from 10 am to 7 pm; Thursday until 9 pm and Friday until 10 pm; Saturday from 1 pm to 10 pm; Sunday from 1 pm to 7 pm.

Contact: 081 722 2715
@knysnagin on Instagram

East Head Café

This is an epic brunch spot; the views are phenomenal in any season. If you don't get out to the West Head with Featherbed, or even if you do, this is one of the best places to experience the lagoon's moods. Once you've eaten, drive to the top of the East Head and take in the view. When you make your way back down to the bottom, be sure to check out the old lighthouse beacon.

Where? 25 George Rex Drive
Opening times: Tuesday to Sunday from

8.30 am to 3 pm. Closed on Monday. Also closed in winter for their annual holiday, so keep an eye on their website for details.

Contact: 044 384 0933
eastheadcafe.co.za

More at the Gallery

This restaurant on Leisure Isle serves everything from breakfast to dinner. But for the ultimate sunset, buy a parcel of fresh fish and chips, then walk down to the shoreline along Cearn Drive and sit on one of the benches facing The Heads. Eating your takeaway as the sun sets over the water is next level, whether you're bundled up in winter layers or soaking up the twilight warmth of a summer evening.

Where? 12 Kings Way
Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 6 pm.
Contact: 082 047 5679; "More at the Gallery" on Facebook



DO THIS

EXPLORE KNYSNA'S ROOTS

The town's museums are housed in beautiful old buildings, but unfortunately the exhibits inside are a bit dated. A far more dynamic way to experience the town's history is simply to walk around.

There are about 50 buildings that have been labelled with plaques with info about the town's history and the people associated with them, like Thesen House (with its gables featuring a Viking ship, an anchor and the flag of the Thesen Steamship Co.), Millwood House (which originally stood at the Millwood goldfields but was moved to town in sections and reconstructed) and the Old Gaol (that housed the convicts who built Prince Alfred's Pass).

If you carry your exploration onto Thesen Island, that industrial history becomes even more pronounced. Take the island's mapped-out, self-guided walking route past its heritage sites. Pop into the Turbine Hotel in Sawtooth Lane for a meal or a spa day – the building is a wonderful example of adaptive design, housing a display of old machinery alongside a cross-section of a 600-year-old yellowwood tree.

While you're exploring Thesen Island, stop at the SANParks offices on Long Road – they've got live Knysna seahorses in a tank. When you see that beautiful creature in real life, you'll understand how important it is to observe the "The Sea Starts Here" signs dotted around town reminding us to protect the lagoon's precious ecosystem.

For more about the town's historical sites and exhibitions, visit 📍 knysnamuseums.co.za and 📍 openplaques.org.



ANGLING MUSEUM AT
THE OLD GAOL



MILLWOOD HOUSE



OLD GAOL MUSEUM



HIT THE BEACH

I've heard travellers level a major criticism against Knysna, claiming it has no quick access to good beaches. Myth, busted! Knysna has exceptional beaches, they just demand that you put in a bit of effort to get there.

Depending on what kind of coastal escape you want to stake out, the town's offerings are diverse. Ensure at least one of these options is in close proximity to your accommodation option.

The Beautiful: Brenton-on-Sea

Brenton is a scenic Blue Flag beach and also offers a "shortcut" along the coast to Buffelsbaai.

Where? Take the N2 west from Knysna and cross the lagoon bridge. Turn right immediately after the bridge and loop beneath it towards Brenton-on-Sea, then follow that road all the way to the beachfront parking lot.

The Calm: Leisure Isle

Just past Thesen Island lies the slow-paced sanctuary of Leisure Isle. It offers the complete holiday package, with tennis courts, a canoe club, a beautiful 5 km perimeter walk, and the lovely Steenbok Nature Reserve. Most importantly, it offers a calm lagoon beach with shallow, wave-free water that's safe for swimming – and pet-friendly.

Where? Head east out of Knysna town centre along the N2 for about 4 km, then turn right onto George Rex Drive following signs to The Heads and Leisure Isle. Drive down George Rex Drive for roughly 3,5 km and take the right turn onto the Armstrong Road causeway, which leads to Leisure Isle.

The Shaded Swim: Cove at the NSRI

Down the stairs at the East Head, adjacent to the NSRI landing, is a little cove that's perfect for snorkelling or escaping the heat on a scorching day. While it isn't strictly a sandy beach, you can wade into the water and if you are lucky enough, swim straight

past a resident octopus. It might not be the prettiest spot on the coastline, but it offers calm, protected water for a sea swim under overhanging trees.

Where? Follow George Rex Drive to the very end; park at the East Head Café. Descend the stairs adjacent to the NSRI landing.

For Romance: Coney Glen

For a completely different energy, head down to the base of the rocky cliffs at the East Head. Coney Glen Beach is small but mighty. It can be dramatic and wild, and for that reason, also quite romantic.

Where? Follow George Rex Drive towards The Heads, but then take a left up Coney Glen Drive. Follow its kinks all the way to the parking lot above the beach.

The Wild One: Noetzie Beach

At Noetzie, accessed off the N2 towards Plett, a tea-coloured river cuts across the sand and flows into the sea. Because it's not that easy to get to, this beach is typically quieter than most others in the area in season. And then, of course, there are the famous castles. They're a surreal sight to behold, especially when the sea mist rolls off the breakers and blankets the towers.

Where? About 10 km from town. Follow the N2 in an eastern direction. Take the Noetzie Road (also called Hornlee Road) turn-off to the right, just after the pedestrian bridge. The final stretch down to the beach is gravel.

Top tip If you don't feel up to navigating the dirt road to Noetzie from the N2, or tackling the steps down to the beach, arrange a picnic through Pezula Nature Retreat. Lodge guests have preference, but day visitors are also welcome. The ride from the hotel to the beach costs R250 per person and the picnic costs R125 per person for the basic option; a luxury basket for two people costs R520.

Contact: ☎ 044 302 3333; 🌐 pezulanatureretreat.com





COVE AT THE NSRI



NOETZIE BEACH

A photograph of a forest floor. In the foreground, there are many bright green ferns. In the background, several tree trunks are visible, some with light-colored bark. The ground is covered with brown leaves and small rocks.

Biodiversity beyond belief

The Garden Route is home to a multitude of ecosystems and habitats, which curator **Christiaan Viljoen** hopes to showcase at the botanical garden in George.

WORDS & PICTURES **HANCU LOUW**



PROFILE

I grew up right there, in that house,” says Christiaan Viljoen, pointing to a roof on an aerial photograph hanging on his office wall. “I often came here to walk when I was a child. There were no fences back then.”

Christiaan has been the curator of the Garden Route Botanical Garden in George since 2023. Even though he manages a team of 20 staff members and spends most of his time behind a desk, the garden is still his refuge and joy.

“I’ve loved animals since I can remember, but I didn’t have many opportunities to see wild animals. Except birds, because they’re everywhere.”

Indeed, he’s been a birder since the age of eight, but he quickly grew bored with his parents’ garden. “It was basically a lawn with two palm trees and a bottlebrush tree,” he says.

His avian interest led him into the botanical garden. “That’s when I discovered that this place is a birding paradise. Let me show you.” I follow him along the neat paths. “I walked around here with my notebook almost every afternoon and recorded what I saw. Red-chested cuckoo, Cape robin-chat, southern fiscal... I still have those notebooks.”

He stops and motions for me to be quiet. “Hear that? It’s a bar-throated apalis. Let’s call it – maybe it will come closer.”

He takes out his cellphone and plays the birdcall. The apalis answers and seconds later it appears from the forest. “That’s something you can’t really do with mammals,” he says with a smile.

The canopy is alive with other birds, like olive thrush and yellow-throated longclaw. “This is a good example of what we call a ‘bird party,’” Christiaan says. “When several species move through the forest together. They do it for safety. It’s remarkable because the different species understand each other’s alarm calls – they basically talk to each other.”

Some of Christiaan’s

encyclopaedic bird knowledge is thanks to Peter Ginn, a well-known local guide who opened his eyes to the biodiversity and rich birdlife right on his doorstep.

“When I was 12 years old, my mom took me to the George Museum to listen to a talk by Peter about the birds of the Garden Route. I remember it like yesterday. It made a huge impression on me.”

A few months later, Christiaan enrolled for a beginner’s birding course that Peter was offering, which included excursions into nearby forests and wetlands. “It was intense – three sessions a week over six weeks, but I loved it!”

His enthusiasm impressed Peter so much that Christiaan was invited to become a member of the Lakes Bird Club the following year. “I thought it was so cool to go birding with people 30 years older than me,” he says with a laugh.

Under Peter’s “wing” – and with the help of the other club members – teenage Christiaan quickly became a skilled birder. Over time, he started assisting Peter on his tours. “When he developed a hearing problem, I became his ears in the field,” he says.

Those ears are pricking again. “Hear that? It’s a Cape white-eye

– something is bothering them. There must be a domestic cat or a raptor nearby.”

Christiaan’s ability to identify birds – and especially his ability to identify calls – paved the way to what would eventually become a career. “Once, Peter got sick and asked me at the last minute to take one of his clients on tour. I was 13 years old!”

But despite his inexperience, he impressed the visitor from Namibia. “I found several of the species he wanted to see. He was especially excited about a forest canary.”

The reward for his hard work? A pair of binoculars. “I couldn’t believe it!” Christiaan says.

In his teenage years, he travelled the length and breadth of the Garden Route, from the Gourits River down the coast to Storms River and north to the Swartberg Pass and Prince Albert. Those outings exposed him to a wealth of biodiversity.

“Remember, it’s actually the Garden Route *and* the Little Karoo – the two regions go hand in hand. The habitats, plants and animals don’t follow the same strict rules that tourism regions do.”

These days, Christiaan is a de facto expert on the entire region’s biodiversity. After completing matric through home schooling, he studied nature conservation at Nelson Mandela University. He needed to complete two years of practical experience and got a job at a local nature reserve. Other jobs followed, all over the Garden Route and as far afield as the Addo Elephant National Park.

“Each place had its own charm, from the Matjiesrivier valley to

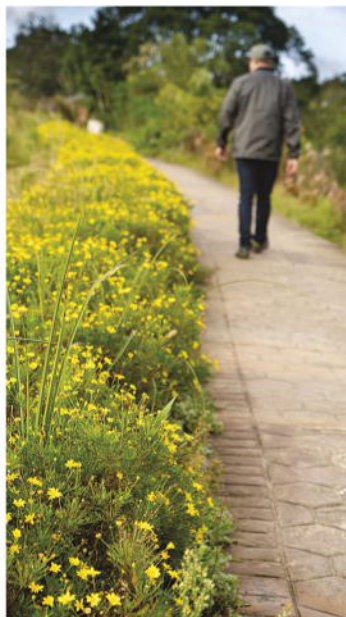
Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Christiaan examines an *aloe dawei*, one of about 100 aloe species growing in the botanical garden. The aloe collection is the only part of the garden with plants that are not indigenous to the Southern Cape. The aloes were donated by Gabriël Dednam, a private aloe collector. The garden is also home to many bird species, and reptiles like this Knysna dwarf chameleon. “This is *Protea cynaroides*, commonly known as the king protea,” Christiaan says, showing me a flower the size of a saucer.



PROFILE

BIRDING BIG DAY 2026

This year's Birding Big Day will probably take place on the first weekend in December. Check "Events" at birdlife.org.za



VISIT THE GARDEN ROUTE BOTANICAL GARDEN

The garden is a privately run enterprise and governed independently. Christiaan and his team collaborate with SANBI on research, herbarium collections, and plant conservation.

Where? 49 Caledon Street, George

Opening times: The garden is open every day from 7.30 am to 5.30 pm. The indigenous nursery is open on weekdays from 8 am to 5 pm; until 2 pm on Saturdays and closed on Sundays.

Entrance fee: R30 per adult; R15 for students and children aged 6–17; free for younger children.

More info: ☎ 044 874 1558

📍 botanicalgarden.org.za

tours along the Kariega River in the Eastern Cape. My time as a guide was very valuable and I had access to some of the most beautiful scenery the Garden Route has to offer."

Then the opportunity arose to become curator of the garden in George, where his love for birding and guiding started all those years ago. It was too good to pass up, and Christiaan and his wife Brenda returned home.

"George is actually a great base to access many of the ecosystems and habitats on the Garden Route," he says. "We're close to Mossel Bay, Oudtshoorn, Wilderness, Knysna... Each of those areas has its own unique climate, vegetation, birds and animals."

Proof of this is the whopping tally of 233 species Christiaan and three other birders recorded in 2018 during the Birding Big Day, an annual event organised by BirdLife South Africa where people across the country try to see how many species they can identify in 24 hours. Christiaan's survey was a provincial record that stood until 2022.

It's all about that proximity to different habitats, he explains. "In that one day, you can travel to the top of a mountain, along a river, down a kloof, through a forest, out to sea..."

This is something he wants visitors to the garden to experience, too. "It should be a place where people can see the variety of ecosystems found in the region, on a small scale, in the middle of suburbia."

"Let's stop here quickly,"

Christiaan says, pausing next to some pools of water. "I want to show you something. If we can

find one... We get royal ghost frogs here. They're very rare and we're privileged to have them in the garden."

Alas, we don't find a frog, but Christiaan does point out a massive, edible mushroom called chicken of the woods. "We have about 30 reptile and frog species in the garden, and more than a hundred fungi species. Our mandate is to protect, study and show visitors the fauna and flora of the Garden Route. That's why we only sell local indigenous plants in our nursery."

Development along the Garden Route is rampant, often at the expense of the local ecology. "There are new estates and malls everywhere – on the coast and in the mountains," he says. "With each new development, more natural veld is destroyed. The houses are also built so close together that there isn't much space to plant indigenous trees and shrubs."

Habitat loss is mostly affecting a biome called Garden Route Shale Fynbos, which is only found on the coastal plateau between George and the Tsitsikamma and is already critically endangered.

But Christiaan believes everyone can make a difference, even in a small way. "No matter the size of your garden, try to plant indigenous species – for biodiversity, but also to protect our natural heritage. Look, this is a good example." He points to a twig where a Knysna dwarf chameleon is basking in the sun. "The right plant attracts the right insects, which creates a space for an animal like this to thrive."

Despite the development, there are lots of special places on the Garden Route where nature

still rules. This garden is one of those places. “In October and November, all the cuckoos gather to eat caterpillars on the wild peach trees,” Christiaan says. “You should hear the racket! If you want to see coastal birds, visit the estuaries – all the river mouths from the Gourits to the Storms. You’ll see amazing waterbirds like goliath heron and sandpipers that come from as far as Russia.”

If you want to see a Eurasian oystercatcher, he recommends the Keurbooms River Mouth and the beaches around Plett. “And here in the garden, we have all three members of the Knysna trio: Knysna turaco, Knysna warbler and Knysna woodpecker.”

At the dam in the garden, Christiaan points to a few white-backed ducks, further proof of how the right environment can be a haven for indigenous plants and animals. “The ducks have been resident here for a few years now – they’re breeding, which is special.” He sounds like a proud dad as he counts the ducklings.

In total, 150 bird species have been recorded in the 16-hectare garden – a number that Christiaan believes will grow as his team continues to improve the various habitats. But the bird total is small when you consider that a thousand different plant and animal species have also been identified here. Christiaan sees the surprise on my face at that number. “It’s a lot, but it’s nothing compared to what you can see in the kloofs, rivers, forests and wetlands, all just a short drive away,” he says. “That’s what makes the Garden Route so amazing. Think of each of those ecosystems as a flowerbed in a botanical garden, changing with the seasons and home to so much.”



NARINA TROGON



GREY CUCKOOSHRIKE



KNYSNA WOODPECKER



FOREST BUZZARD

BIRDING TOURS

Christiaan offers birding tours through his guiding company, Explore Eden. With 25 years of experience as a bird guide, and a “sound” knowledge of all the Garden Route’s specials, his tours offer value for experienced birders and beginners alike. The length of the tour, and the rate, depends on your group’s requirements.

Contact: ☎ 083 703 9482

✉ christiaan.viljoen.25@gmail.com
“Explore Eden” on Facebook

CHRISTIAAN’S TOP 10

Look for these special forest birds during your time in this region:

- Blue-mantled crested flycatcher
- Forest buzzard
- Grey cuckooshrike
- Half-collared kingfisher
- Knysna turaco
- Knysna warbler
- Knysna woodpecker
- Narina trogon
- White-starred robin
- Yellow-throated woodland warbler

Harvests, history and honeybush tea

There's a lot going on in the Outeniqua Mountains between George and Oudtshoorn. Here are five fantastic things to do in the Waboomskraal valley and around the hamlet of Herold.

WORDS & PICTURES **HANCU LOUW**



1 OLD TOLL HOUSE

Step back in time

From the outside, the small stone building at the base of the historical Montagu Pass is nothing more than a curiosity next to the road. But step through the front door and it feels like you've been transported back to the days of ox-wagons and horse carts.

Inside the single room with its thick walls and small windows is a wide variety of furniture and collector's items from the previous two centuries, like a hand-wound gramophone, antique porcelain and wooden furniture.

"The toll keeper and his family lived here – the house was built using sandstone mined in the area," says museum curator Gerda Stols. "Before the current Outeniqua Pass was built, Montagu Pass was the fastest way to travel between George and the interior. According to the archives, the toll fee in 1867 was two pennies per wheel, one penny per draught animal and two pennies per horse, cow, ox or mule not pulling a wagon. After nearly seven decades in operation, in 1918, parliament discontinued all toll fees and the Toll House became a private residence."

The building was declared a national monument in 1970. Over time, vandalism and dilapidation took its toll. So, in 2008, Gerda and a group of like-minded individuals established Friends of the Toll House to preserve this unique piece of history. After restoration work completed in 2014, the Old Toll House could accept visitors again.

The exhibitions have been put together with care. There are also two restored ox-wagons and a horse cart on the premises, and a short walking path through a fynbos garden.

Afterwards, have coffee and pancakes (R60) and sit under the big yellowwood tree in the garden.

Where? About 10 km from George via the N9/N12 (Outeniqua Pass). There's a sign that indicates the turn-off to Montagu Pass and the Old Toll House.

Opening times: Saturday and Sunday from 9 am to 3 pm.

Cost: Free, but donations are welcome.

Contact: ☎ 083 772 8252; 🌐 oldtollhouse.co.za



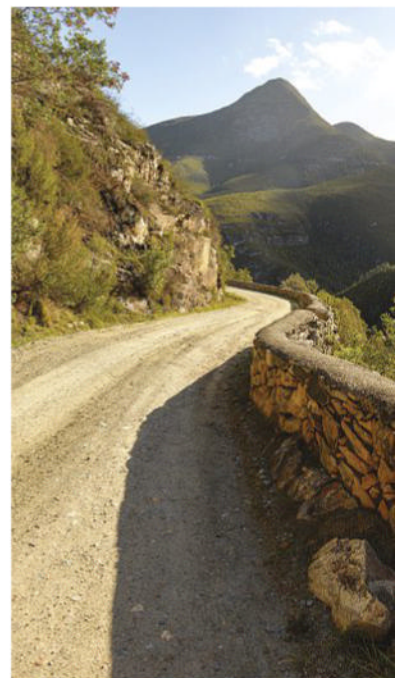
GERDA STOLS



CAN I DRIVE MONTAGU PASS?

Not at the moment. This dirt road between George and Herold is considered the oldest unaltered mountain pass in South Africa, but after years of flood damage it has been closed to traffic.

In its day, it was a wonder of engineering: Colonial secretary John Montagu asked surveyor general William Stanger and civil engineer Charles Michell to find a route through the Outeniqua Mountains along the course of the Keur River. Construction started in 1844 and the next year Henry Fancourt White, a road inspector who arrived in South Africa with the 1820 settlers as a child, took over the management of the project. The pass opened at the end of 1847.



TAKE FIVE

LIAAN DORFLING



2

HIGHLANDS LODGE Sit down at a harvest table

Highlands Lodge Mountain Retreat is hidden in the folds of the Outeniquas. This humble wooden building is surrounded by pine trees, and for a moment you might think you're somewhere in the Swiss Alps. But look again: Those are fields of fynbos and proteas on the four surrounding peaks.

Every Sunday at noon, Liaan Dorfling and his wife Elizna set a table that groans under the weight of dishes they've prepared themselves. "We use local ingredients and only what's in season. The dishes change throughout the year," says Liaan as he slices a big sourdough focaccia that took three days to make.

Today they're serving Wagyu steak cooked overnight, and a fresh green salad with strawberries and figs. Seasonal veggies with roasted hazelnuts and goat's-milk cheese, and a wild rice salad are some of the other hits on the menu.

"I want you to feel like you're a friend over for a visit to my house," Liaan says to the guests before he describes the day's dishes. With a crackling fire, happy conversation and the clink of cutlery, Te-Eet Restaurant genuinely feels like hanging out at a good friend's table.

Come early and do one of the two hiking trails on the farm before your meal. Keep an eye out for birdlife – more than 60 species have been recorded here. Or maybe the weather will be so good that you'd rather spend all day outside. Pack a basket with salads, sandwiches and drinks at the Te-Pik Café and picnic at the swimming pool, on the deck or somewhere next to a mountain stream.

Where? About 25 km from George via the N9/N12. Take the Waboomskraal turn-off on top of the mountain and follow the Highlands signs for 2,5 km.

Opening times: Harvest table feast at Te-Eet Restaurant: Sunday from noon. Booking essential. Te-Pik Café: Saturday and Sunday from 9 am to 4 pm.

Cost: Harvest table feast R342 per adult, excluding drinks and dessert; R185 per child.

Contact: ☎ 083 663 5884; 🌐 highlands-lodge.co.za







3

LA ROSA BLU CAFÉ Hang out in a flower garden

The smell of lavender almost knocks you over when you pull up to La Rosa Blu Café on the Snyman family's farm, Rosenhof. There are flowers everywhere, competing for your attention – you could easily spend an hour in the garden before you even think of stepping into the florist or the restaurant.

The restaurant is equally lush, with a cosy stoep bedecked in house plants and fresh bouquets. It's a great place for breakfast or a light lunch. Try the Blue Fig Burger with blue cheese, bacon, green figs and a balsamic reduction (R175), or the popular The Capering Cow Pasta with fresh rocket, basil pesto, pickled capers and truffle oil (R125). If you have a sweet tooth, order the Berry Me Gourmet Milkshake, a combination of ice cream and berry sorbet (R80).

Looking for flowers to take home? Pop by the florist where Dalien Snyman and her daughter Jane van Jaarsveld will make you a beautiful bouquet.

Next to the restaurant you'll also find a branch of Ludwig's Roses, where you can buy anything you might need for your rose garden at home.

Where? About 20 km from George via the N9/N12. Look for the Rosenhof sign.

Opening times: La Rosa Blu Café: Wednesday to Sunday from 9 am to 4 pm; Ludwig's Roses: Daily from 9 am to 4.30 pm.

Contact: La Rosa Blu Café: ☎ 044 886 0042; "La Rosa Blu Café" on Facebook. Ludwig's Roses Outeniqua: ☎ 078 330 5823; ✉ tumelo@ludwigsroses.co.za





BERNICE AND THEO ADAMS

4

HEROLD MEANDER Try some honeybush tea

"See that woolly centre? When that part is the size of a R5 coin, the protea is ready to be harvested," says Theo Adams.

"A long, straight stem is better," adds Theo's wife Bernice, indicating where the flower should be cut from the shrub. It's late in the afternoon and they're carefully tending to one of their protea fields.

Although most of these flowers are destined for the export market, visitors can harvest their own bouquet and learn about proteas in the process. Theo, an engineer, and Bernice, a medical doctor, bought the farm in 2015. "I wanted to farm, but in a way where I didn't have to battle nature," he says about the decision to establishing a protea and honeybush tea farm.

Their tea brand is Kaukou; the name is derived from the Khoi word for the Doring River. Theo says it means "sharp thorns".

"Honeybush grows naturally in these steep kloofs. In spring, the *bossietee* or *bergtee* as it's known colloquially,

is in bloom and ready to be harvested. Then we offer tours. People ride on a tractor wagon to the tea fields and help to cut and load the tea."

"It's hard work!" Bernice chimes in. "But it's my favourite part of the year, especially the honey-like smell of all the golden flowers."

Guests can roll up their sleeves and get to work helping with the harvest, or you can chill out on the stoep at their Moertjiesklip Farm Stall and try some honeybush tea or honeybush gin.

Where? 40 km from George. Over the Outeniqua Pass and along the Waboomskraal valley. Follow the N9/R62 towards Uniondale for 9 km, until the Herold turn-off on the right. Herold Meander is about 2 km up the road.

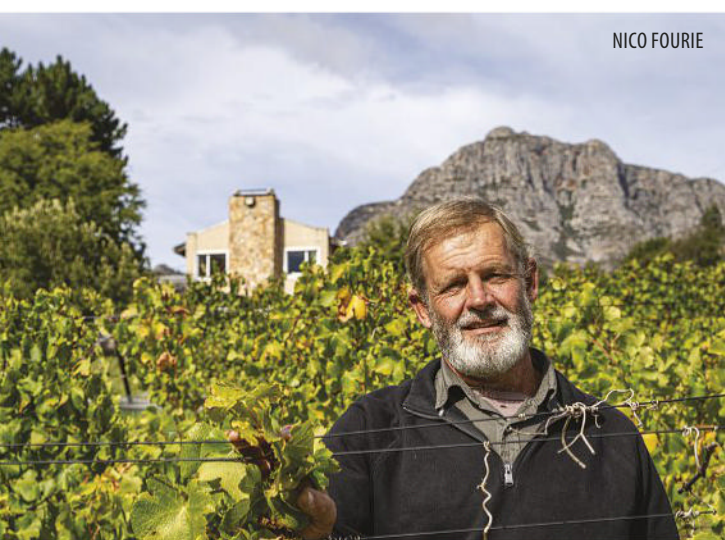
Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 4 pm.

Cost: Protea harvest tour R180 per person; honeybush harvest tour R250 per person (booking essential). Take note: The honeybush tours only take place from August to October.

Contact: ☎ 082 841 6847; 📧 kaukou.co.za

🌐 heroldmeander.co.za





NICO FOURIE

5 HEROLD WINES Meet a winemaker

Nico Fourie is a self-taught winemaker. "A friend of mine, also a winemaker, warned me: Once you've smelled your own grapes fermenting in the barrels, it's over – there's no return to normal life," he says as he guides me through the cellar.

Nico bought this farm under Cradock Peak in 2010, lured by the mountain slope where he hoped to plant vineyards, and how much sun it got.

"And, of course, the effect of the sea air that blows over the Outeniquas," Nico adds.

At 700 m above sea level, his eight hectares of vineyards are at a higher altitude than most other wine farms in the country – and they're within 15 km from the coast. "There aren't many places where you have the same combination of factors, which is why my vineyards are thriving. We also have a relatively long growing season in the valley – 210 days compared to the standard of 186 days. It plays a big role in the flavour development of the grapes."

Pinot noir fares well in these conditions and is the most popular with visitors (R350 per bottle). But Nico also cultivates white varieties like weisser riesling and sémillon. The Schaam Schaap, a dry rosé (R80) and the Laatlammietjie, a sweet rosé (R95) are the other best-sellers.

You can visit the small bistro for a wine tasting. Nico's wife Maureen serves a cheese platter and you can order a pizza hot from the oven. Or what about a tour with the winemaker himself? It takes about an hour. "During harvest or pressing season, it often takes longer because I make it interactive and get people to join in," Nico says.

In addition to the bistro, wine tasting and wine tour, you can also order a picnic basket to enjoy on the farm. There are two hiking trails (5 km and 10 km) with views of the northern slopes of the mountains.

Where? 45 km from George. Over the Outeniqua Pass and along the Waboomskraal valley. Follow the N9/R62 towards Uniondale for 9 km and turn off to Herold. Continue along the dirt road towards Montagu Pass – the turn-off to Herold Wines is about 2 km further, on the left.

Opening times: Wednesday to Saturday from 10 am to 4 pm.

Cost: Wine tour R100 per person; wine tasting (five wines) R85 per person; picnic R190 per person.

Contact: 072 833 8223; heroldwines.co.za

What else? Worried you won't be able to do everything in a day? There are two cottages (with fireplaces) on the farm where you can overnight.



Never a dull day in the bay

Mossel Bay and nearby towns are known for their beautiful beaches. But what else is there to do if you need a break from umbrellas and Tropitone? Here are some fun ideas.

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**



From the St Blaize viewpoint, you can see far
across the town and bay.



The moment you turn off the N2 above Mossel Bay, and the sea arches out blue and bright, you know: *Now you're on holiday.*

Mossel Bay – the actual bay – is punctuated by the cliffs of Cape St Blaize to the west and the Maalgate River near Herold's Bay to the east, about 50 km away. There are no less than five Blue Flag beaches along this seam of fynbos: Santos Bay, De Bakke, Little Brak River, Glentana and Hartenbos.

Stand at the Cape St Blaize Lighthouse on a clear day and you'll see all the smaller holiday towns strung out along the coast – Reebok, Tergniet, Little Brak River and Great Brak River – but Mossel Bay is the centre around which everything revolves.

This is where Bartolomeu Dias first set foot in Africa in 1488. The region also has a rich archaeological heritage. In summer, holidaymakers flock here to work on their tan and celebrate the good life. But despite the seemingly never-ending development, the town still has a warm, barefoot character.



The first leg of the St Blaize Hiking Trail from the Mossel Bay side has lovely views of the sea and the Cape St Blaize Lighthouse in the distance.



DO THIS

Linger at the lighthouse

The Cape St Blaize Lighthouse must be Mossel Bay's most iconic landmark. From the top, there's a great view of the town, the harbour and the bay. But there's more to this stately tower than scenic vistas. If you're interested in the shipping industry, it's just the place for you.

The lighthouse has been in service since 1864 and is considered one of the most strategic in the world. This is mainly due to its unique geographical location, as well as its radar that can pick up ships from as far as 500 km out at sea. On a guided tour, you'll learn more about the history of the lighthouse and its satellite and radar system.

To reach the top, you need to climb (and descend) 60 steep steps. Rest your rubbery legs at the restaurant on the bottom floor – there are breakfasts and burgers on the menu, or coffee and cake.

The place is popular with tourists throughout the year and parking is limited. Come early or you might have to stand in a queue. And if you've always wanted to play lighthouse keeper, there's accommodation available in two old houses on the premises.

Where? 2 Montagu Street

Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 4 pm.

Entrance fee: Tour R100 per adult; R60 per child under 12, including a free drink. Accommodation in the eight-sleeper house from R2 500 per night depending on the season. The old lighthouse keeper's house sleeps four: R4 000 per night year-round.

Contact: ☎ 072 138 3911; 🌐 stblaze.co.za



i Who was St Blaize?

Saint Blaize was a third-century cleric who lived in the city of Sebaste, now Sivas in Türkiye. He was martyred by the Romans for his Christian beliefs. When Bartolomeu Dias arrived in the Mossel Bay area on 3 February 1488, it was the feast day of St Blaize and he therefore named the bay *Aguada de São Brás*, which means “the watering place of St Blaize”.

Visit the museum

The impressive Bartolomeu Dias Museum Complex is a national heritage site and a must-visit if you're in town. The main drawcard is the maritime museum with a life-size replica of the caravel ship used by Dias in 1488 during his legendary 25 000 km expedition around the southern tip of Africa and back to Portugal. It was one of the faster vessels in those days and could also sail against the wind. But those winds pushed Dias so far off course that he missed Cape Point and only reached land at Mossel Bay.

You can also admire old maps, anchors and maritime navigation equipment from the 1500s, as well as porcelain and jewellery salvaged from shipwrecks off the coast.

In the adjacent Shell Museum, you can see the biggest shell collection in South Africa, with freshwater and saltwater shells from around the world. There's also an aquarium and an interesting exhibit about molluscs and pearls.

Outside the museum, check out the Post Office Tree – a milkwood where the crew of passing ships left letters in an old shoe hanging from a branch.

Where? 1 Market Street

Opening times: Monday to Friday from 9 am to 4.45 pm; weekends from 9 am to 3.45 pm.

Entrance fee: R30 per adult; R20 per pensioner; R10 per child under 18.

Contact: 044 691 1067; diasmuseum.co.za

Hike to a wreck

If you don't mind a fairly strenuous walk on the beach, you can head out to the "shipwreck" at Glentana.

The three stranded structures aren't actually from a ship – they're pieces of a metal floating dock that was being towed to Durban in 1902 by the British steamship *Baralong*. The tow ropes snapped during a storm and the dock was beached.

Low tide is the best time to do the hike. Not only is the dock more visible then, but you can also follow an easier and safer route between and over the rocks. The toughest climb is the first kilometre or so. (If you see a life buoy high up against a rock face, you'll know you're on the right track.) Then you walk mostly on the sand to the wreck. It's a beautiful but tough walk, and best to go in a group – the terrain is very remote.

Where? Glentana is about 30 km east of Mossel Bay. Park at the Meet@Sea Restaurant on the eastern end of Kus Street. From there you walk about 2,5 km east along the beach.



Walk the cliff trail

Get some fresh air on the St Blaize Hiking Trail along the cliff tops. It runs about 13 km west from The Point, below the Cape St Blaize Lighthouse, to Dana Bay.

If you start at The Point, you'll soon see a big cave above the parking area, with information boards about the people who once lived here. From there, the trail leads past suburbs, past the golf course and past Pinnacle Point, until you reach the parking area in Dana Bay.

Wear a good pair of takkies and take your camera: There are beautiful views from dizzying heights, and you can take nice photos of the lighthouse in the distance.

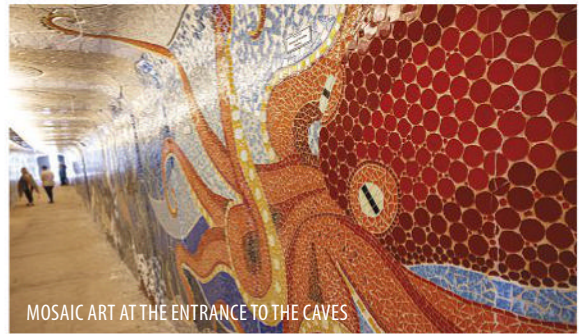
Where? The eastern trailhead is in the parking area at The Point, next to The Point Hotel and Spa in Point Road, Mossel Bay.

Contact: 044 691 2202

visitmosselbay.co.za



MOSSEL BAY



Delve into ancient history

The Point of Human Origins tour at Pinnacle Point, just west of Mossel Bay, takes you back 200 000 years to the dawn of so-called “modern humans”. Excavations in 15 different caves started in 1997 and are still underway in four of them. Visitors can see how the work is done in cave 13B.

On the tour, you’ll walk down nearly 200 steps to the cave, where you can look at primitive stone tools and arrow heads, and see where fires were made due to ash sediment on the walls. The ancient inhabitants would bury bones of animals deep at the back so the smell wouldn’t attract predators – something that also indicates they were skilled hunters.

When you sit in the mouth of the cave and look out over the sea, you can’t help but think that those OG South Africans had the ideal “beach house”. Until you learn that the ocean was actually about 3 km away in those days, with a savannah-like landscape between the cave and the coast, full of wildlife.

Where? Next to Pinnacle Point Estate. Follow Pinnacle Drive out of Mossel Bay.

Opening times: Monday to Saturday: tours at 9 am, 11 am and 3 pm. Sunday: the final tour is at 1 pm. Booking is essential; minimum two adults per tour group.

Cost: R300 per adult; R100 per child aged 7 – 14.

Contact: 079 640 0004; humanorigin.co.za



Go on a game drive

At Botlierskop Private Game Reserve outside town, you can see four of the Big Five. The reserve is only 50 km² in size, so you're basically guaranteed good sightings during the three-hour guided game drive. There aren't any leopards, but the big cat brigade is represented by lions and some cheetahs. You can also see hippos, impala, giraffe, waterbuck, bushbuck and blue wildebeest.

Botlierskop is affiliated with the African Wildlife Conservation Fund and is involved with breeding and conservation programmes. Rest assured that the money you pay for your drive will be used for a good cause.

Where? 28 km north of Mossel Bay, on the Gonnakraal Road outside Little Brak River.

Opening times: Daily game drives depart at 9 am and 1 pm. Booking is essential.

Cost: R890 per adult; R445 per child aged 3 – 11. Contact the reserve directly if you'd like to know more about their horse safaris, spa treatments and accommodation options.

Contact: 044 333 0021; botlierskop.co.za



MOSSEL BAY



EAT HERE

BLUE SHED COFFEE ROASTERY

This atmospheric coffee shop has nostalgic decor and a laid-back, diner feel. Browse the retro coffee machines, model ships, typewriters and antique furniture, then choose your beans (from places like Colombia, Nicaragua, Brazil...) to be ground while you wait.

Americano from R28; latté from R48. You can also order breakfast, a toasted sandwich, a slice of cake or a milkshake.

Where? 33 Bland Street

Opening times: Daily from 6.30 am to 6 pm.

Contact: ☎ 044 691 0037

☞ blueshedroasters.co.za

DE KLEINE LOERIE

This big farm stall just outside Little Brak River sells pies, tarts, cakes, ice cream, sandwiches, banana bread and coffee. The most popular pick is the Build a Broodjie (R30 to R48) – you can choose from fresh-baked sourdough, panini or health bread, with fillings like biltong and fig, peppered ham and mozzarella, or curried mince.

The farm stall has a spacious outside area with umbrellas on the lawns, and a jungle gym under the trees for the kids.

Where? Klipheuwel Farm Complex, R102, Little Brak River.

Opening times: Tuesday to Friday from 9 am to 3 pm; weekends from 9 am to 2 pm.

Contact: ☎ 044 868 0223

☞ loeriebakery.co.za/de-kleine-loerie

DIE BLOU KOMBUIS

This is Afrikaans singer Blackie Swart's theatre-restaurant in Little Brak River. It has an extensive menu of seafood, chicken and meat dishes, and a well-stocked wine boutique. Local artists like Anton Goosen, Mathys Roets and Jan Blohm often perform. Tickets for live music events from R200 – keep an eye on their Facebook page for upcoming shows.

Where? Corner of the R102 and Second Avenue, Little Brak River.

Opening times: Tuesday to Saturday from 11 am to 9 pm.

Contact: ☎ 079 418 8034

"Blou Kombuis Restaurant" on Facebook

DAILY BREAD

At this bakery in Great Brak River, you'll find fresh-from-the-oven sourdough and ciabatta (R47) as well as fruit tarts, chocolate cake (R23) and delicious cinnabuns (R25). They also sell good coffee, local honey and gelato.

Where? Ou Bakhuis Centre, 65 Lang Street, Great Brak River.

Opening times: Monday to Friday from 6.30 am to 5 pm;

Saturday from 6.30 am to 1 pm.

Contact: ☎ 083 258 1375

☞ dailybreadbakery.co.za

DE VETTE MOSSEL

At this laid-back restaurant on Souwesia Beach in Great Brak River, you can literally sit with your toes in the sand. It's been an institution for about 20 years, for good reason: The food is great and the place has a real beach atmosphere.

They offer a fine buffet of seafood potjie, snoek and sweet potato, calamari, crayfish, salad and pot bread. Most of the dishes are served with a mussel shell as cutlery. There's also a cocktail bar and cash bar on the premises.

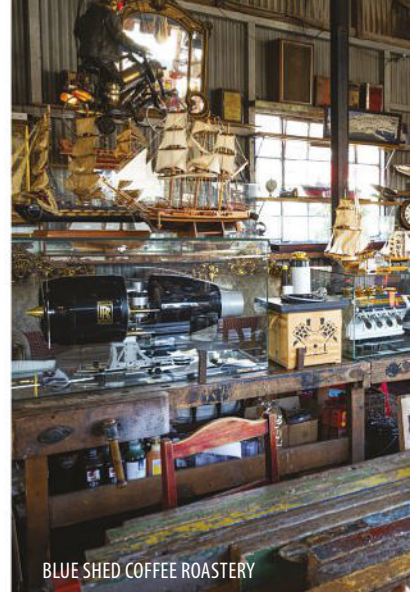
Where? About 30 km north-east of Mossel Bay. Take the R102 exit from the N2, drive past Reebok and Tergniet, and follow the signs to Souwesia.

Opening times: The restaurant is open every day during the December holidays; the rest of the year it's open on Saturdays and Sundays. Lunch is served at 12.30 pm and dinner at 7 pm. Booking is essential.

Cost: Seven-course buffet R395 per adult; R310 per high-school child; R180 per primary school child; R70 per toddler. For extra dishes like crayfish and calamari, and an updated price list, visit their website.

Contact: ☎ 079 339 0170

☞ devettemossel.co.za



BLUE SHED COFFEE ROASTERY



DIE BLOU KOMBUIS



DAILY BREAD



ICE CREAM!

The Ice Cream Shop in Mossel Bay serves delicious soft-serve and scoops in all colours and flavours, from lemon cheesecake and Oreo to good old chocolate and vanilla. From R20 per scoop or soft-serve.

Where? In the Spur building, Point Street.

Opening times: Daily from 10 am to 6 pm.

Contact: 079 513 7173; "The Ice Cream Shop Mossel Bay" on Facebook



FISH AND CHIPS

Mossel Bay has several seafood restaurants, but we reckon Fork and Train at Santos Express Train Lodge has the best fish and chips (R120 per portion). The menu also includes pizza and sushi.

Where? Munro Road, Santos Beach

Opening times: Daily from 7.30 am to 10 pm.

Contact: 044 691 1995

forkandtrain.co.za



MOSSEL BAY

IN OTHER WORDS

Isak & Lorraine Stander,
owners of Daily
Bread Bakery

"Running a bakery is busy. We wake up at 4 am to have the ovens ready at 5 am. But we love it – we wouldn't change for anything."



Christopher Jantjies, guide
at Point of Human Origins

"I love the history of the area. I enjoy teaching people about it, and learning from all the visitors who come by here."



Marius Kearney,
manager of the Cape
St Blaize Lighthouse

"I like welcoming people from all over the world. Mossel Bay has changed a lot over the last few years – it's much fancier now. The locals have even started wearing shoes!"



Prime Luthuli, guide
at Botlierskop Private
Game Reserve

"I sometimes have to pinch myself when I think that this beautiful place is my office. It's a privilege to teach others about our country's natural heritage, especially foreign tourists. I enjoy watching their reaction when we see lions."



STAY IN A TRAIN...

There are hundreds of accommodation options in the area, but if you want something different, try the Santos Express Train Lodge. The rooms are train carriages on a section of Mossel Bay's old railway line, right on the water next to Santos Beach. Two of the old wooden carriages were built in the UK in 1919 and 1921; after years of service in South Africa, they were brought here to retire in 2013.

In a standard carriage, you can choose between a compartment with a single bed, two single beds or a double bed (with sea views and a shared bathroom). In the two wooden carriages, you can either stay in the Honeymoon Caboose (romantic en suite with a sea view, private stoep and king-size bed) or the Royal Suite (spacious en suite compartment with a king-size bed, braai stoep and sea view).

The train doesn't move so you won't be lulled to sleep by the clacking of the wheels on the rails, but the sound of the nearby ocean more than makes up for it!

Where? Munro Road, Santos Beach

Rates: From R250 per person (compartment in a standard carriage) to R2 300 per night (Royal Suite). Visit the website for more information.

Contact: ☎ 044 691 1995; 🌐 santosexpress.co.za

For more accommodation options and general information: 🌐 visitmosselbay.co.za

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2 Outside under the tree



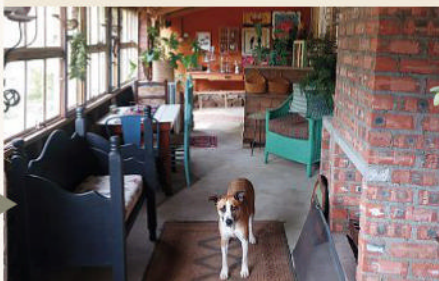
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The artist of Friemersheim

In a rural settlement inland from Mossel Bay, former set painter **Fourie Ackermann** is quietly turning houses into works of art.

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**



Never heard of Friemersheim? You're not alone. This humble mission town is hidden in the foothills

of the Outeniquas, about 20 km north of Little Brak. It's home to only about a thousand people. To get there, you have to deliberately turn off the N2 and follow a gravel road next to the Moordkuil River.

At first glance, Friemersheim seems like any other rural settlement. Cows stroll across the main road; each house has a vegetable patch and a workhorse bakkie in the driveway. But then the walls of the houses start to come to life: a bateleur looks you in the eye; a leopard peers over its shoulder; a wild dog laughs...

The man behind the murals is Fourie Ackermann. I meet him for coffee at Botlierskop – a lodge and game farm nearby.

"Look, if I see a big, blank wall somewhere, my hands start

itching to do something," he says. He's even done a mural at Botlierskop – lions, giraffes and buffalo roam along a garden wall.

Fourie is 65 years old and was born in Hoedspruit near the Kruger Park. He was interested in painting from an early age. In Pretoria, he earned a living as a set painter for the State Theatre for many years, but in 1996 he said goodbye to the theatre world and started freelancing, mostly as a painter in the local and international film industry.

In 2015, he left Gauteng and settled on a smallholding outside Friemersheim. The silence of the Garden Route was the answer to something his artistic soul had been searching for. But he couldn't sit back and enjoy his newfound peace. He still had to travel all over the world to work on film projects. Then Covid happened in 2020 and brought him more time than he'd bargained for...

"That's when I looked around

“Once I get going, there’s only one path ahead,” he says. “Sometimes I can’t even sleep. It’s as if I get carried away by the process.”

town and realised it needed a facelift. I asked for permission to paint the walls of the houses along the main road and everyone agreed. As an *inkommer*, it also brought me closer to the community. Now I’m in love with Friemersheim and its people.”

These days, “Oom Fourie” is fully at home. At first, residents were caught off guard by the sudden interest in the town, inspired by his art, but now everyone is used to the visitors who drive through and take photos. Friemersheim’s resident artist first landed in the spotlight when the Afrikaans TV programme *Kwêla* interviewed him in 2023.

Fourie orders another coffee. “In the end, it’s all about upliftment. To beautify the houses is a win-win for us all. As soon as you put a little love and colour into a place, the residents take more pride in their town.”

Over the last few years, word of Fourie’s initiative has spread so much that municipalities, renovation committees, taxpayer associations and private clients from all over have commissioned him to spruce up their towns and houses. He’s done work in Wilderness, George and Stilbaai; on farms near Great Brak; and even as far as Willowmore. Local paint companies in George and Mossel Bay have been sponsoring the paint. He can barely keep up with the requests.

“Ja-nee, I’m very busy!” he says. “Painting animals and landscapes – that’s still my thing, it comes naturally to me. But I can do anything with a paintbrush.”

One example is a striking depiction of the story of Leentjie,

the young woman after whom Leentjiesklip in Wilderness was named. She was an oyster gatherer on the coast in the 19th century. The story goes that a man broke her heart and she walked into the sea and drowned. This scene is painted on an ablution block at Wilderness Beach – a visual tribute to a piece of largely forgotten local history.

When you look at pieces like this, or Fourie’s other creations like a cheetah bathed in golden light, or cute elephant calves playing with red balloons, you realise there’s a steady hand and a sensitive soul behind them all. Fourie’s younger years, working in the theatre and film world, helped him hone a realistic style and express himself with emotion.

“*Ek bly nou maar eenmaal ’n hartsmens*,” he says. “You could say I learnt how to paint in the theatre, but I learnt how to *work* in the film industry. No one has time for nonsense there. I can still eat with one hand and paint with the other!”

Although he has mostly left the chaos of film sets behind, he’s grateful for the adventures the industry gave him. He worked as a painter in Malaysia on the set of *Anna and the King*, with Jodie Foster; he was involved in the series *Of Kings and Prophets* and worked on the set of the local Showmax thriller, *Dam*.

“Ag, sometimes I miss it. People still call me to ask if I’m available for work. But then I say no – I feel like an *ou toppie* among all the young people on set! Things change and life moves on. I’m happy with the work I’m doing here now. It’s simpler and has more meaning.”

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: You can see examples of Fourie’s art on Friemersheim’s main road, like this elephant and giraffe, and two clashing zebras. Also keep an eye out for a cheetah and this rhino further down the road.





ARTISTS OF THE PAST

Friemersheim was established in 1869 by the Berlin Missionary Society, on a farm called Gonnakraal.

In the early 1900s, the town gained some fame thanks to a piece of furniture called the Volkwyn chair. Local brothers Hendrik, Isak, Charlie and Aser Volkwyn probably learnt how to do woodworking from the resident missionary at the time, a certain Johann Kretzen. The brothers designed a variation of the Regency chair using yellowwood and stinkwood, with a *riempie* seat and matching turned front legs and back inserts. These chairs have since become collectible antiques.



I notice his hands clasped around his coffee mug. The fingers are broad and strong, with flecks of paint under the nails. Even though the pressure of film work is no longer there, it doesn't mean he's slowed down when it comes to his current projects. Clients are often surprised by the speed with which he completes his work. His process is the same each time: No matter the scale, he first draws the outlines in pencil before he starts painting.

"Once I get going, there's only one path ahead," he says. "Sometimes I can't even sleep.

It's as if I get carried away by the process."

It's time to say goodbye, but before we go I ask one last question: Are you happy here in Friemersheim?

He looks away for a moment, then replies: "Every artist has a cross to bear, and things aren't always easy for creatives in South Africa. But I do well enough. I occasionally play with paint on canvas in my studio and my wife says I should try and sell those. But I'm happiest outside, among the people, where I feel I can make a difference. That's where I belong."



Left: Friemersheim is a peaceful settlement in the foothills of the Outeniqua Mountains.

Below left: The hippo painting on the main road was completed in 2023. The two children at the top of the frame are Fourie's granddaughters.



IN OTHER WORDS

Tommy Noonan, pensioner

"I dropped hints for ages that I had a blank wall in front of my house... Then Fourie showed up one day, saying he'd also been eyeing my wall for a while! Now I'm very proud of the elephants that decorate my place. I don't mind at all when people stop to take photos."



Omar "Lucky" Towhow, shop owner

"Oom Fourie is a man with a big heart. He has done a lot with his art to put our town on the map. The dinosaur on my wall gives my shop attitude! Every time Fourie comes to buy something, I want to give it to him for free as a thank you, but he always declines..."



Gert Trantraal, protea farm manager

"Man, Fourie knows his stuff. I have so much pride in my place! I enjoy coming home at night and being greeted by my sunbird. We're all grateful for what he has done here."

The good stuff

A farm stall is often more than just a shop. It's the region's resourcefulness bottled and preserved, full of fresh produce to tell you what's ripe in the orchards, and a family recipe rising in the oven. Make sure to stop at these five.

RAYMOND ALBERTS

Kruisaar

It's easy to underestimate this brown brick building next to the N9/N12 and keep driving. But as soon as you walk in and smell the roosterkoek on the coals, Kruisaar's warmth will envelop you like a wool blanket.

"Our speciality is roosterkoek, but if you want a traditional breakfast, we can also make that," says Emmozene Titus behind the counter.

I go sit by a fire crackling on the front stoep and look through the menu. The focus on roosterkoek is evident – there are 42 (!) different fillings, from plain farm butter to pork neck steak and prego sauce. Try the boerewors and tomato smoor (R55) or the old favourite, cheese and jam (R48).

At the fire, Raymond Alberts flips the roosterkoek by hand. "It's all in the smell and the feel," he says. "If you tap it and it sounds hollow, it's ready."

If you're not a roosterkoek fan, you can also order homemade pies, toasted sandwiches, soup or pancakes – all at *platteland* prices. And how about a bottle of ginger beer? They also have a wide range of jams, preserved goods, sauces, smoors, curried beans...

Next to the farm stall you'll find rooms filled with scarves, shawls, beanies, gloves, socks and blankets in almost every colour. "Our other focus is mohair and merino wool products," says Emmozene.

The business was started almost three decades ago by Kruisaar owner Annette Oelofse. The wool and mohair are produced in South Africa.

A shelf of ointments, soaps and *boererate* also catches my eye. Clearly, Kruisaar is more than just a shop for the locals. You walk in for a roosterkoek and leave with beautiful things and a bottle of ginger beer!

Where? About 25 km north-west of George on the N9/N12 to Oudtshoorn.

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 5 pm.

Contact: ☎ 082 466 6174; ✉ farmstall9@gmail.com

📍 mohairblanket.co.za

– Hancu Louw



FARM STALLS





The Tea Junxion

When I visited my mom in George in December last year, one of the things I'd planned was to treat her on her 85th birthday – preferably somewhere far from the holiday crowds. A short online search led me to The Tea Junxion, tucked along the historic Seven Passes Road near Wilderness. One quick phone call and our table was booked.

The drive there is part of the experience. Built in 1883 by master road engineer Thomas Bain, this original route between George and Knysna winds through indigenous forest, past smallholdings and pockets of rural life that at times feel removed from the present. Even where the road has been modernised, the sense of history and the unspoilt landscape remain. It's a drive that invites you to slow down, to notice.

By the time we arrived, we felt pretty relaxed.

After parking, a short walk took us through a nursery, where the air carried the faint scent of leaves and soil. Beyond lies the tea garden. Here, owner Florence Owen greeted us warmly. We were her last guests, and though she'd already spent hours on her feet, there was no sign of hurry in her manner. We settled at a table in a shady spot with the garden surrounding us in layers of texture and colour.

Florence's connection to the place is unmistakable. She has run a nursery and landscaping business for over two decades, and the garden reflects years of careful tending.

The menu is simple, thoughtful and rooted in quality. Plunger coffee (R35), classic teas (R30), and fresh juices (R25) are all on offer, but the herbal tea blends (R35 each) are where the character of the place emerges. Names like Revive and Restore hint at their ingredients – green rooibos with ginger and chilli, or rooibos with lemongrass, ginseng and moringa. I eventually chose locally made kombucha (R30), served cold with a lively, zingy edge.

Everything on the menu is homemade, based on Florence's own recipes. Deciding wasn't easy. In the end, I opted for scones with berry jam and cream (R60), though the carrot cake (R65) and apple crumble (R70) were also tempting. The latter's cinnamon scent almost made me reconsider. Still, the scones were excellent: warm and freshly baked, with just the right richness. Portions are generous.

Tea and coffee is served in pretty porcelain, while the plates arrive decorated with edible flowers, echoing the garden. By the time we left, it was clear that The Tea Junxion offers more than a teatime treat. It's a place where the setting and the food are inseparable, where care is evident in both the garden and the kitchen.

Where? 357 Seven Passes Road; just before the turn-off to Whites Road/Hoogte Road which takes you to Wilderness.

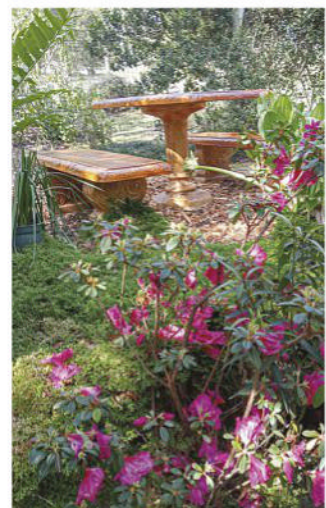
Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 4 pm, weather permitting. Closed on Mondays.

Contact: ☎ 083 581 9233; ✉ florenceowen027@gmail.com
"The Tea Junxion" on Facebook

– Marijcke Dodds



THE TEA JUNXION



THE TEA JUNXION



Natures Way

Our family is proof that you don't actually have to live on the Garden Route to claim a farm stall as your own. For as long as I can remember, Natures Way has provided for every major milestone in our lives. Because we have a friend who lives just behind the dairy, we've been longtime supporters of this farm – scooping their ridiculously good homemade ice cream and slicing into their cheese at every get-together.

The farm stall with its children's play area – complete with goats, rabbits, and guinea pigs – is visible from the main road. Depending on what time of day you arrive, you might have to wend your way through the herd of Jersey cows ambling to or from a milking session.

Supervisor Godfrey Sibanda has taken care of the shop floor for over a decade, alongside an incredibly welcoming team. He knows the score: Kids love the milkshakes; everyone else “goes crazy” for the scones.

While he isn't exaggerating, it's obvious no one can agree on a standout. A regular group of cyclists who use the farm stall as their base are loving the excellent coffee and almond croissants, but they also highly rate the chocolate cake, the carrot cake, milk tart and apple pie with thick cream. And come summer, they won't let a ride pass by without one of the legendary coffee milkshakes.

Anne and Darryl Lares took over the running of the farm, and the stall, from Anne's parents, Peter and Judy Wilson, who still live on the property. They rent land to Grow Wild, whose organic, non-GMO veggies are so flawless they almost look AI-generated.

Darryl can't pinpoint whether it's the dairy, the baked goods, the chicken or the eggs that have been bringing people back to the farm stall since it opened in 1982, but as I dip in and out of the conversations around me, it becomes clear that visitors who overnight in the area typically start and end their days at Natures Way.

Where? Follow the R102 from the N2 to Nature's Valley for 2,5 km. The entrance is on the right.

Opening times: Daily from 8.30 am to 5 pm.

Contact: ☎ 073 565 6400; 🌐 naturesway-sa.com

What else? You can also overnight here. Look online for options, like a private campsite, cottages for couples, and the Forest House, which sleeps six. Three short hiking trails in the adjacent Hebron Private Game Reserve start at the farm stall – they're popular with birders.

– Leanne Rencken



Die Plaaskind

It doesn't matter if you approach this farm stall from the sea (Knysna) or from the interior (Uniondale) – you still have to cross the Outeniqua Mountains to get to it.

It's right at the heart of Prince Alfred's Pass, in the village of De Vlucht. At 70 km, the pass is the longest public-access mountain pass in the country. It's dirt all the way and there are some sharp bends, so by the time my wife Daleen and I pull up to the farm stall on a hot afternoon in January, she feels a little carsick and can't appreciate all the praise for the roosterkoek and carrot cake written on the walls. An example: Gavin and Dalene from PE said the carrot cake is so good, "it's evil".

Owner Adri van Rooyen notices that she'll lose out on business if Daleen doesn't make a quick recovery, and gives some advice. "Go look for a small, white pebble by the river and put it under your tongue."

We have no idea why, but it works, and soon we're tucking into roosterkoek with cheese and jam – and a slice of that evil carrot cake.

It really is as good as the walls suggest! The roosterkoek is much lighter than what I'm used to, and the carrot cake icing isn't too sweet. Adri doesn't want to share all her secrets, but she says the roosterkoek dough is kneaded with olive oil to get that unique texture.

She makes the kind of food she grew up with in this valley. "We also do quiches, burgers and salads for city people who don't like to try new things," she adds.

Give the kudu pie a try ("Ongeflippenlooflik" according to the wall) and buy preserved and baked goods, clothes, art and other handmade products from the region.

Where? In De Vlucht, on the R339 between Uniondale (28 km away) and Knysna (56 km away).

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 5 pm.

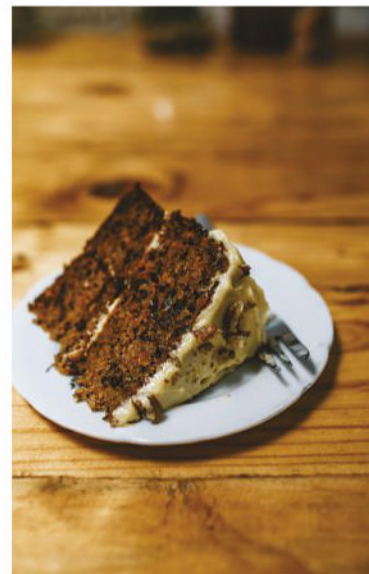
Contact: ☎ 044 050 0266; ☎ 066 439 8830

📧 theprincealfredpass.co.za

What else? If you want to prolong your stay in the valley, there are three accommodation units on the property.

– Willem van der Berg

De Vlucht was hit hard by the Garden Route floods in May. It might take some time for the road to be repaired, but when it's fixed, go and drive it. Prince Alfred's Pass is one of the most iconic back roads in the country.



FARM STALLS

Marnica's Farm Stall & Riverdeck Restaurant

This restaurant and farm stall combo spans both sides of the road to Buffelsbaai – it's not just a quick pit stop, it's a place to properly break your journey. On one side of the road, a friendly blackboard (samosas, bobotie, biltong...) invites you to Marnica's Farm Stall; on the other is the Riverdeck Restaurant on the banks of the Goukamma River.

Travellers running late can grab a quick coffee and quiche takeaway at the farm stall. Forgot gifts or dessert for the family gathering at the holiday house? No problem – they have fudge and meringues for the kids and *slaphakskeentjies* and cheese straws for the host. Everything is made on the premises and fresh milk tart is taken out of the oven every morning at 9.30 am.

But it's best not to come here in a hurry. Browse the baked and preserved goods to add to your holiday pantry, and buy skincare products, pots, enamelware and handmade Ngozi leather products – these are made by Marnica, the daughter of the owners Cynthia and Bennie Terblanche. (She now lives in Ballito.)

Across the road, at the laid-back Riverdeck, you (and your pet) can sit among the umbrellas and banana trees with your toes in the sand. You can have a draught beer and a pizza or burger. The kids can burn off their energy in the play park and bored teenagers can swim in the river while you wait for your food.

Visitors who don't like sandy feet can sit at the tables at the bar under the awning. This part of the restaurant has less of a beach bar feel – you can sip your chilled glass of wine on modern bar stools.

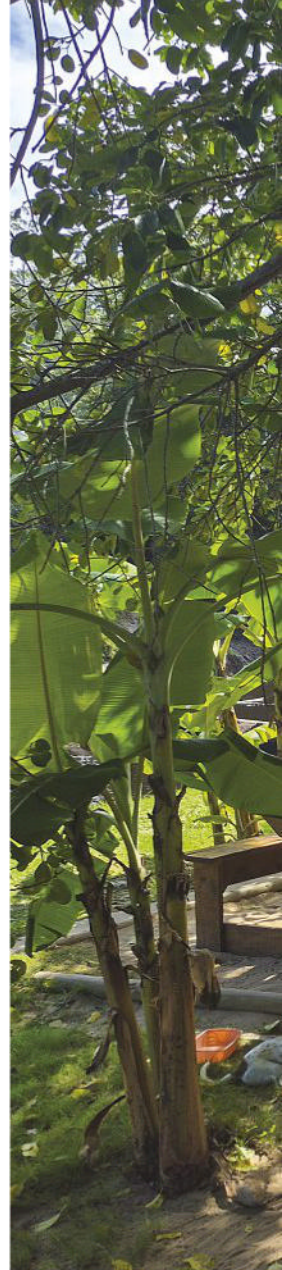
Where? Turn off to Buffelsbaai on the N2 between Sedgefield and Knysna; the farm stall is 500m down the road.

Opening times: Farm stall from 8 am to 6 pm. Riverdeck from 8 am to 7 pm in low season, and until 11 pm in peak season.

Contact: 📞 078 134 5873; 🌐 riverdeckrestaurant.co.za

What else? Riverdeck also has various accommodation options – you can camp or stay in a safari tent (backpacker vibes) or in an en suite room or self-catering cottage.

– Esma Marnewick





CYNTHIA TERBLANCHE

River and nature, distilled

Goukamma Nature Reserve is surrounded by busy holiday towns,
but when the gates close at night, it's just you and the birds.

WORDS & PICTURES **ESMA MARNEWICK**

Some of the hiking trails can only be reached via a ferry across the Goukamma River. It's a workout: You have to pull yourself over using a rope.



GOUKAMMA NATURE RESERVE

Chops sizzle on the gas braai on the deck at Mvubu Bush Lodge. Groenvlei turns pink as the sun sets. Lights blink across the hills on the other side of the vlei and along the N2.

A flock of swallows dives into the tranquil scene and rolls through the sky like a single organism. Moments later, they're gone. In the distance, a truck rumbles past, but the sound doesn't really register because the lodge is surrounded by coastal forest and a cacophony of bulbul and batis calls.

Goukamma Nature Reserve protects about 16,5 km of coastline between Sedgefield and Buffelsbaai near Knysna. The main gate is just outside Buffelsbaai; this is also where you'll find the reception office, picnic sites and most of the accommodation, on the banks of the Goukamma River. It's a fairly diverse protected area, with long empty beaches and tall, vegetated dunes.

Groenvlei Lake is also within Goukamma's borders. It's one of only a handful of freshwater lakes in South Africa that's not fed by a river and which doesn't empty into the sea. Where does the water come from? Research suggests a natural spring...

We arrived late in the afternoon and turned in at Goukamma's western gate, just outside Sedgefield. From this side, you can access Platbank Beach and Mvubu Bush Lodge next to Groenvlei. As we carried our bags down the boardwalk to the lodge, I could feel the excitement building. We pushed open the front door and all we could see was water and sky.

After we'd stashed our food supplies in the fridge, we pulled on our takkies to do the Cape

Clawless Otter Trail (6,5 km) along the lakeshore – an easy, sandy path through a coastal forest. The branches of ancient milkwood trees met above our heads. Goukamma is a top birding destination – listen out for Knysna turaco, Karoo prinia and bar-throated apalis.

Butterflies danced among the branches, which were covered in lichen and old-man's beard; and we glimpsed the mysterious vlei through reed beds.

The trail ended at a picnic table that could do with a wipe-down. We turned around and hurried back – it was getting dark but there was still so much to explore!

Back at Mvubu, I walked along the jetty and climbed down a rope ladder into the water. The bottom felt sandy rather than muddy. I swam a few strokes through the cool, green water, then turned on my back and looked towards the shore. The only sign of civilization? The thatched roof of our home for the night.

From vlei to river

Before heading back to the N2 the next morning, we go down to see Platbank Beach. There are only two people on the viewing deck; one is a guy filming the surfers. The beach has some of the highest petrified dunes in the country and thick coastal forest that unspools in both directions as far as the eye can see. Down on the sand, it's empty as can be. We have the whole place to ourselves except for a few fishermen and a couple under an umbrella.

The waves thunder onto the beach. We walk until we're alone. African oystercatchers stand on rocks covered in mussels. Goukamma also

encompasses a marine protected area (MPA) that stretches one nautical mile out to sea. Several studies have shown that the MPA initiative boosts fish stocks inside and outside the reserve – a boon for conservation and the local fishermen.

It's a 20-minute drive from the beach to the main entrance of the reserve, about 2,5 km west of Buffelsbaai. Two of the picnic sites on the banks of the Goukamma River are occupied. A plume of smoke rises from a braai fire. Egyptian geese waddle over the grass. On the opposite side of the river, coastal fynbos butts up against thickets of rooikrans. We steer our bakkie up the hill to where we'll stay for the next few days: Blacktail self-catering cottage.

That afternoon, field ranger Simphiwe Mapeyi tells me that the encroaching rooikrans – and other alien trees – is one of the main challenges in the reserve. The other is fish and oyster poaching. Thankfully there's effective co-operation between the reserve, local police and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment.

"In a small reserve like Goukamma, you do a bit of everything. You're a field ranger, law enforcer, firefighter, rescue worker and scientist," says Simphiwe.

Indeed, field guide Goitsimang Rashopola recently found a rare type of flower – a coast white freesia (*Freesia leichtlinii* subsp. *alba*).

Simphiwe says he ended up in conservation by accident. After school, he applied everywhere – the police, the army and correctional services – but had no luck. A friend sent him an advertisement for a

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The view from Blacktail cottage. Mvubu Bush Lodge is the only accommodation on the western side of the reserve. Guests can make use of a private jetty and two canoes for exploring Groenvlei. There's a viewpoint at Platbank Beach, about 5 km from Sedgefield. Cast a line from this quiet beach to catch garriick, grunter and galjoen.



GOUKAMMA NATURE RESERVE



IN OTHER WORDS

Simphiwe Mapeyi, field ranger

"A long time ago, lions, elephants and buffalo roamed this coastline. When you walk on the beach from Platbank, pay attention to the first big rocks you see. We call them The Hand. There are fossilised bones in the rocks. Further on, at Satoukop, there's a piece of rock on the beach with the fossilised imprint of a cattle hoof.

"African oystercatchers breed here, so no dogs are allowed on the beach. Leatherback turtles come to Platbank from KZN to lay their eggs in the sand.

"Oyster poaching is a big challenge. SANParks and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment give out permits to locals to harvest oysters to sell to restaurants. But it's illegal in the reserve. CapeNature's aim is to protect the environment – we want to conserve it for our children's children so they can also enjoy this place."

learnership with CapeNature, and the rest is history

"I never thought I'd manage with the snakes," he says. "As a child, I always ran away when I saw one! I'm also a good swimmer now. I learnt not to be afraid of water here in Goukamma. My dream is to pass on my passion for nature and what I've learnt from the old hands to the next generation of rangers, like Goitsi."

I say goodbye to Simphiwe with a head full of trails to hike, birds to see... and a butterfly to find. There's a R20000 reward for anyone who locates the breeding site of the critically endangered Brenton blue.

Back at the cottage, it's a bit of a struggle to get the fire going with the eco logs. (To prevent the spread of polyphagous shot-hole borer beetle, all CapeNature reserves have banned the use of firewood since 2022.) Tall shrubs obscure the view a little and I sit on the stoep table to get a higher vantage point. The day visitors' area has emptied out and the Goukamma River looks like a dark mirror. Every now and again, the tink-tink-tink alarm call of a blacksmith lapwing rings out, but otherwise all I can hear is the sea.

It's a fresh, bright morning. I walk along the course of the river to the small ferry – basically a boat you pull across the river with ropes. It's tough and I almost give up in the middle of the river, when I suddenly gain momentum. Two construction workers busy with a project in the reserve wave at me from the opposite bank. Thank you!

Most of the hiking trails in the reserve start on the opposite bank, including the 13 km Porcupine Trail that goes all the way to Groenvlei.

The plan is to do a longer walk with the family to Buffelsbaai later, so right now I choose to do a section of the shorter Bush Pig Trail (6,5 km) to get a feel for the landscape.

I walk about 500m up the first dune and see the sea on the horizon. Another 500m further, I see the rocks of Rowwehoek east of the river mouth, and the first houses of Buffelsbaai.

A few hours later, we walk along this same beach past Rowwehoek – the kids spurred on by the promise of soft-serve. A white crescent beach unfurls on the other side of the rocky point, where a lifeguard sits on his high chair, scanning the waves.

At the Buffelsbaai Waterfront Restaurant, the kids order strawberry-and-vanilla ice cream. The main beach here is busy. There are towels spread everywhere and parents rub sunscreen on their little ones. When we walk back an hour later, there's only one family on the beach at Rowwehoek. A fishing line dangles in the water and the dad is trying to put up a beach umbrella.

Only 500m further, we reach the Goukamma River Mouth again. A woman is cooling off in the water and a congregation of seabirds has gathered in the shallows. It's a very different scene to the one we just saw! And by the time we arrive back at Blacktail, the tranquillity of Goukamma has already displaced the bustle of Buffelsbaai.

At sunset, I sit on the table again and stare out over the river. I guess it depends on the kind of holiday you want, but I'm happy to know that when the gate closes at 6 pm, it will just be us, the seagulls, terns and cormorants – and that one annoyed lapwing.

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Unlike the main beach at Buffelsbaai, you'll probably have Rowwehoek – only a kilometre away – largely to yourself. The deck at Mvubu Bush Lodge offers a nice view of Groenvlei. Blacktail, Kabeljou and Stumpnose self-catering cottages in the eastern part of the reserve have all recently been renovated.



Photographers can expect to capture all sorts of birds, including African oystercatchers and a variety of gulls and terns. The birds don't seem to be disturbed by paddlers on the Goukamma River – see if you can spot an African darter on the hunt; its head will poke out above the water like a periscope.

SOPHIA VANTAAK



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How does it work? The main entrance, reception office and picnic sites for day visitors are at the Buffelsbaai gate. The other entrance is east of Sedgefield and takes you to the beach at Platbank, the starting points of the Cape Clawless Otter and Blombos trails, and Mvubu Bush Lodge. There's no office in this part of the reserve.

You can only cross the reserve on foot. To get from one side to the other in a vehicle, you have to use the N2.

Hiking trails? There are six trails, from the short Buffalo Bay Trail (4,2 km) to the tougher Blombos Trail (15 km). Most of the trails join up so you can also hike longer distances by combining some of them. For coastal fynbos, views and beaches, walk from the reception office and follow the first section of the Bush Pig Trail to Skimmelkrans and return on the Galjoen Trail. Keep an eye on the tides when walking on the beach.

Where can I swim? Groenvlei is surrounded by reed beds – the best way to see it is to stay at Mvubu Bush Lodge for a night, but you can also

access the water via a slipway next to the N2, or at Lake Pleasant Holiday Resort (lakepleasantresort.co.za). The latter is near the N2 turn-off and has a small area where you can swim – it's free, but day visitors have to arrange with the reception office.

Goukamma has braai facilities and rowboats (R100 per hour) for hire. There are various beaches in the reserve, but only Buffelsbaai has lifeguards. Be careful.

Angling? You can fish from the beach – get a permit (R58) from the post office in Knysna or Sedgefield.

Accommodation: Blacktail,

Stumpnose and Kabeljou are on the Buffelsbaai side of the reserve. Each unit sleeps four and has a braai and wood-fired hot tub. Reed screens ensure some privacy. Kabeljou has the best view. Rates from R1 470 per night for two people; plus R305 per extra person.

Otters Rest Lodge (sleeps four) and Fish Eagle Loft (sleeps two) are in one building with separate entrances. Each has a private deck with scenic views. Rates from R1 260 per night for two people; plus R410 per extra person.

There are three private timber lodges even deeper



in the reserve: Forest Lodge (sleeps four) and River Lodge (sleeps six). Both have access to the river. (The deck at Forest Lodge was unsteady when I went to have a look.) Vlei Lodge (sleeps five) is next to a vlei – its two units are connected by a deck. The main bedroom is separate from the kitchen and living area – and the loft room – so it's not ideal if you have small children. Rates from R1 325 per night for two people; plus R210 per extra person.

There's only one place to stay on the Groenvlei side of the reserve: Mvubu Bush Lodge. The house sleeps four

in two en suite bedrooms with a private jetty and two canoes. Rates from R1 335 per night for two people; plus R410 per extra person.

Niggles? You can hear traffic when you stay at Mvubu or in one of the cottages near the Buffelsbaai entrance gate, but the location and views make up for it.

Day visitor fees: R60 per adult; R40 per child.

Opening times: 7.30 am to 4 pm (reception); 8 am to 6 pm (gate times).

Contact: ☎ 087 087 3945/46 (reception); ☎ 087 087 8250 (bookings)

📧 capenature.co.za



EXPLORE THE GOUKAMMA RIVER

The river originates in the hills around Rheenendal and flows into the ocean a few kilometres west of Buffelsbaai. The accessible part of the river mostly winds through farms so don't expect a pristine wilderness experience. But the blue gum and pine trees on the riverbanks don't seem to bother the African darters, common moorhens and malachite kingfishers!

You can hire a canoe at Goukamma for R150 per day, lifejackets included. Or go for a paddle at the Riverdeck Restaurant (p 64) about 10 km upstream (R80 per person per hour), while you wait for a roosterkoek.

Blackwaters River Lodge is another kilometre or so upstream and offers paddling outings with or without a guide. It depends on the water level, but during our visit we barely had to lift a paddle and just drifted on the current. It's a fun outing, especially for younger children. You can paddle from the lodge to the mouth of the Goukamma River (about 11 km). Rates from R200 for a double canoe for an hour and a half. 📧 blackwaters.co.za

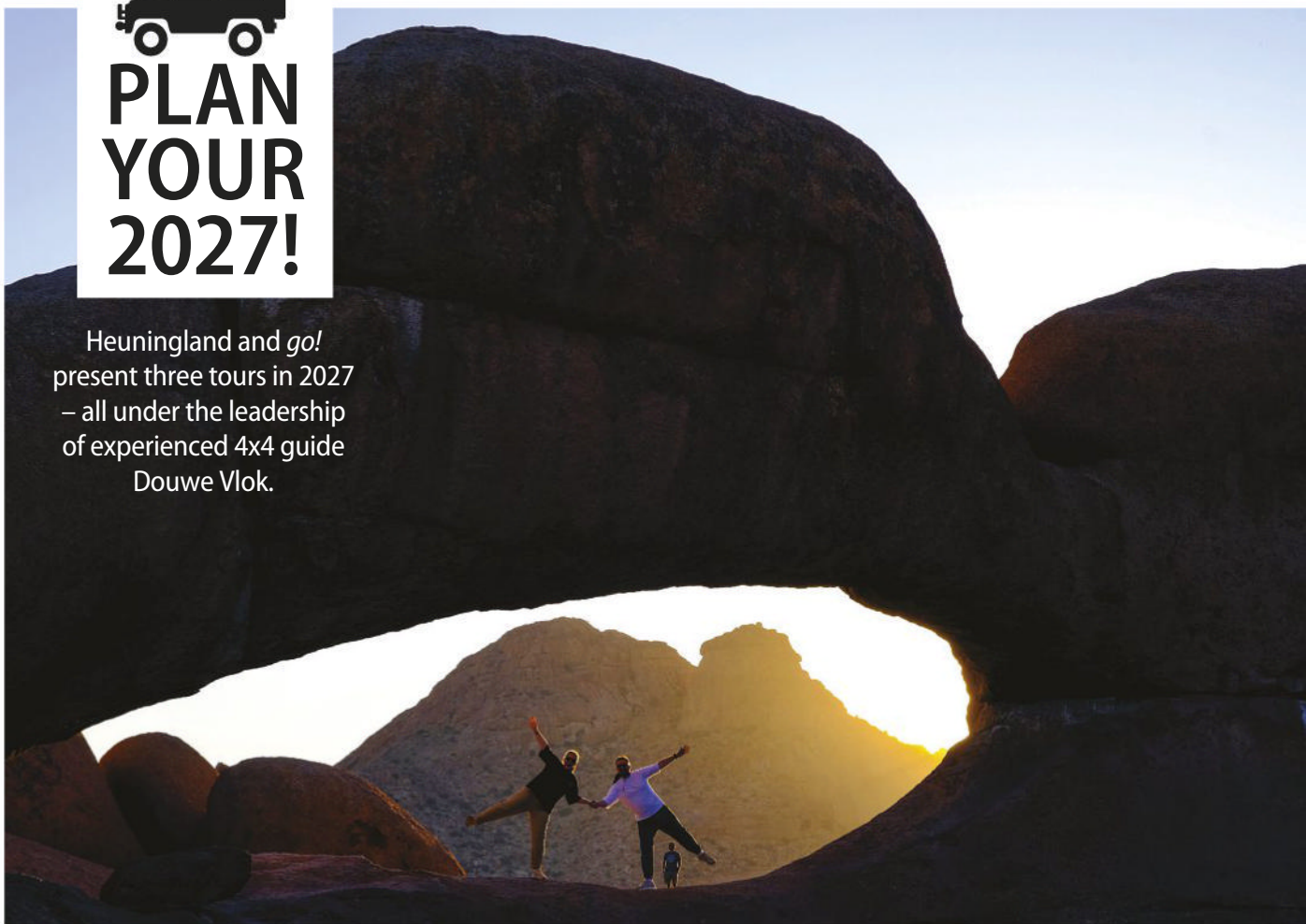
Sources: 📖 saveourseasmagazine.com

📖 brentonbluetrust.co.za



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- Self-drive tour (4x4 required), maximum 16 guests.
- Camping tour (we supply and pitch your tent), meals included.

R42 950 per person sharing

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For more information and reservations, contact Liezl Vlok at info@heuningland.com or visit heuningland.com





Cathedral of green

The astonishing thing about the Knysna Forest is not just its natural beauty, but the fact that a place like this still exists. On the Outeniqua Hiking Trail, you walk through Dalene Matthee's valleys, along paths trodden by elephants over centuries, under towering trees.

WORDS & PICTURES **SOPHIA VAN TAAK**





The year is almost done. While our families nibble Christmas leftovers, a group of friends and I drive east along the N2, away from any further holiday season obligations. Let the others have a big, loud New Year's Eve party, we're chasing another kind of celebration, a quieter one, where time slows down and the year's aches and pains will vanish in a green labyrinth.

We want to talk less and listen more. Seek nothing but be open to anything. Be reminded that nothing made by man can compete with nature's grand design.

Four days on the Outeniqua Hiking Trail... sounds like my kind of party!

DAY 1 17 KM

Millwood to Rondebossie

This is what you get for trying to be clever. We should have started on the forestry road at the Millwood Hut, the official trailhead. But no: We wanted to start our hike *in* the forest. So, we made our way to the Jubilee Creek picnic site, a little further away, and started there. It all went well for the first kilometre or two, and thankfully we didn't turn off the trail to go and see the remnants of the Millwood goldfields because now – a short distance past the turn-off to Millwood – we're slogging along in the hot sun along an overgrown road up a hill to who knows where. We've looked at the map from all angles, but we're still not sure if this road will lead us to the hut or around it. It feels like a long and unnecessary detour.

About 5 km later, the scenery starts to resemble what we came here for: The jeep track becomes a footpath, the trees close in. Now we're in the shade and going downhill. Perfect.

But you have to be careful what you wish for...

The descent gets steeper and longer. And longer. The terrain becomes so rugged that we all fall silent. Now it's

focus or fall. At the halfway mark for the day, we stumble across the Knysna River at the bottom of the kloof. I pull off my boots on the opposite bank and submerge myself fully clothed.

We rest for a long time, eat lunch and fill our bottles, thinking of what lies ahead: basically, the opposite of what we've just come down...

I won't lie: The first two or three kilometres going up from the river are awful. The hill is so steep that there are ropes and ladders to help us. Someone in an earlier group lost a bottle here. A little further along, we pick up a T-shirt. And – believe it or not – a sleeping bag! That's how tough this climb is; you can't waste energy turning around or picking up the things you dropped. I find myself losing my sense of humour along the way.

Finally, we reach the forestry road from Gouna, but it's still uphill. We trudge on through *Lelievleibos*. The day feels endless. I sit down among the ferns. They're soft enough to sleep on... But then I hear excited yells up ahead and that means one thing: Rondebossie Hut!

DAY 2 13 KM

Rondebossie to Diepwalle

Today also has a monster climb, and it's a rude one because it's before teatime! But we head out with new energy and also much earlier than we started the day before.

I'm still adjusting my backpack when we cross the Rooiels River, about a kilometre south of the hut. We leave the forest and tackle a mountain called Jonkersberg, while the path along its western slope is still in shade. We're now above the treeline and soon reach a beacon at 884 m – the highest point on the route.

In front of us are two famous sections of the Knysna Forest: *Kom-se-Bos* and *Gouna*. It's surreal to see places I've been imagining since childhood. Old Foot the elephant once hid somewhere down below; it's also where the Italian silkworm farmers meddled with Silas Miggels'

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: You'll be happy to see this swim spot in the Knysna River on Day 1. But if you continue a little bit further on the opposite bank, there's a pool big enough to swim laps in. You would not want to get lost in this dense vegetation. Buy a trail map (R24) from the SANParks office at Harkerville. The landscape varies from indigenous forest and plantations to mountain fynbos. There's plenty of shade but it can still be humid. Don't forget to look up every now and then.





Opposite page, clockwise from top left: In the afternoons at the huts, there's time to compare notes and gear with other hikers. Distance markers are sometimes high up on the tree trunks. The soundtrack of the forest is more relaxing than any spa's. Hiking up Jonkersberg on Day 2.

Below: The Diepwalle tea room team: Kaylene Geduld (second right), her children, Kayden and Kurtley, her mom, Anna-Marie, and sister, Christelene Janklaas (far left).



Eat at Diepwalle

The tea room at the Diepwalle forestry station is a highlight. The Geduld family is at the helm and they serve cheeseburgers and chips (R85), toasted sandwiches and sweet treats like carrot cake (R57) and milk tart (R45). Pack less hiking food and schedule a meal in this old forestry house full of black-and-white photographs of the woodcutters.

Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 5 pm during school holidays; rest of the year from 10 am to 3 pm.

Contact: Order your meals a few days in advance.

Kaylene Geduld
065 714 4860

peaceful life. My eyes wander further into the distance, to where the sea hems the land. Those outcrops must be the Knysna Heads, where Benjamin Komoetie wanted to work on John Benn's pilot boat. Yes, Dalene Matthee's stories created a whole generation of people fascinated with the forest. Yesterday was so tough I didn't have time to think, but today I want to immerse myself in that world.

We continue for 3 km through mountain fynbos. The sun is hot, but a forest called Vanhuyssteensbos is up ahead, said to be one of the prettiest parts of the trail.

We walk in and I hang back a bit. Everything is so green, it feels like I'm looking through an old glass bottle. I sit down under an assegai tree. Maybe a woodcutter also napped in its shade a hundred years ago? If an elephant suddenly appeared, would I be able to scramble high enough into the assegai to escape?

I scoop up a handful of soil. It smells of minerals; musty but also sweet; decaying leaves. Death in the forest is always the harbinger of new life. How many decades of leaves am I breathing in? What kind of micro-organisms live in this heap? How amazing is the network of mycelium underground, the flow of sap in the tree trunks, the invisible sighs of stomata... The miracle of life itself rustles through the canopy and no one with ears can deny it.

I catch up with my friends at Klaas se Kloof, about 2 km from Diepwalle. This is our last place to swim today and nobody is in a hurry. We're all deep under the spell of the forest.

Just before Diepwalle, we cross the R339 dirt road, which eventually leads to the Langkloof. Again, Matthee's stories come to life: This is where Fiela Komoetie walked to Knysna to go ask the magistrate about her child. Two days of walking wearing what... velskoens?

I won't ever complain on a hike again. Especially not tonight, when we sit down for early supper at the Diepwalle tea room.

DAY 3 16 KM

Diepwalle to Fisantehoek

The bacon-and-egg toasted sandwiches smell delicious... After yesterday's tea room feast, we decided to order breakfast for today and we're trying to hold out until we reach a nice spot in the forest to eat.

Today's route looks challenging, based on the distance, but it's mostly downhill. We make good progress to a spruit called Diepwalle se Loop (2 km), and decide it's time for those sandwiches.

The forest feels different here; seasoned somehow. As if the footprints of the woodcutters are just below the carpet of leaves. Around the 5,5 km mark, we reach the Petrusbrand River and then a place called Petrus Brandeiland. I pull out my map and read the evocative names again: Kleinhans se Nek, Jaffa se Draai, Nols se Kop, Dirk se Eiland... Whoever Petrus Brand was, he probably knew all these men. Up until a century ago, each "island" was inhabited by families. Fathers and sons manned the misery whip, mothers planted sweet potatoes, children roamed as free as Nina van Rooyen did. And then the forest reclaimed it all.

We walk a short distance along Petrus Brand se Pad, used by woodcutters in the 1800s to transport heavy stinkwood and ironwood logs out of the forest using teams of oxen.

Speaking of trees, they seem to be growing taller and taller. When someone near the front points out a big yellowwood, we all step off the trail to give the tree a hug. Our linked arms barely fit around the trunk.

We reach the Kleineland River around the 11 km mark – it's the last swimming spot on the trail. We know there's still a steep climb ahead, but a refreshing swim always trumps suffering.





DAY 4 12 KM

Fisantehoek to Harkerville

Last day of the year. We treat the blisters on our toes one last time. We linger a while, making coffee and eating breakfast on the stoep at Fisantehoek, waiting to see if the drizzle will clear up. Eventually we pull out our rain jackets and set off.

Unlike the previous days, there are no climbs today, but we do have to watch our step on the many wooden bridges across streams in the forest – they're slippery in the rain. The forest is petering out much too fast and civilization is coming closer.

After about 6 km, we're standing next to the N2 highway like wide-eyed steenbok. After four days in Eden, it's a terrifying sight: All the drivers look grumpy as they speed to where champagne corks will pop tonight.

We wait for the next gap in traffic, dart across, and disappear into the forest on the other side again. The Harkerville forestry station and hut are still about 6 km away. We walk as slowly as we can. I look at a mushroom for a long time. A butterfly. A fallen tree next to the path invites us to sit and photosynthesize with our surroundings for a while, as if that stump knows about the group of schoolchildren already occupying the Harkerville Hut, and the day hikers and cyclists who are slamming their boots in the parking area. Why so loud?

But come late afternoon, it's just us at the hut, and another group starting the trail the next morning. Our own ritual is down pat: We hang up our damp clothes, make tea, and read under the big yellowwood in the backyard. I look up from my book every now and then, and see smiles all around. I couldn't have asked for a happier New Year's Eve.



PAINTBRUSH LILY



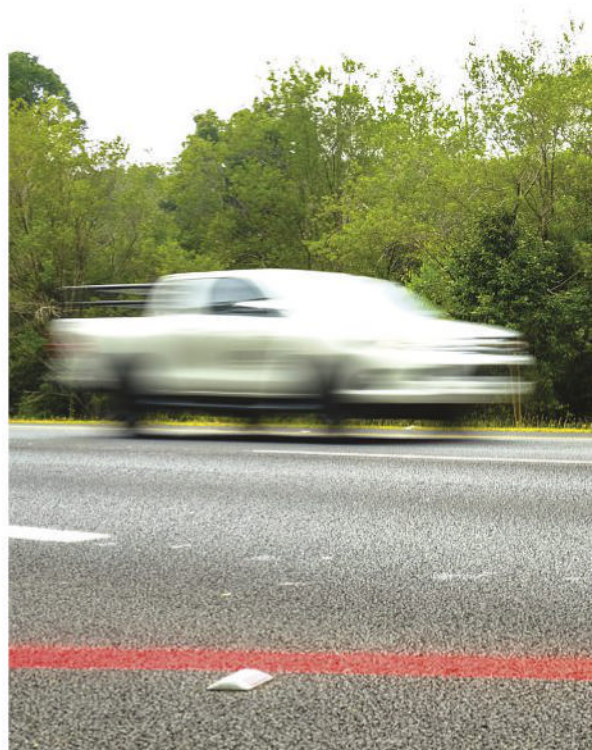
TURKEY TAIL MUSHROOMS



STAR STINKHORN



RAUCOUS TOAD



Millwood's golden years

Millwood is named after the sawmills that were built here in the 1870s by the Thesens, a Norwegian family that settled in Knysna. (The Thesen family played a major role in the local forestry industry, transporting timber to Cape Town on their schooner, the *Albatross*.)

Soon thereafter, Millwood experienced a short-lived gold rush. A certain Jack Hooper from the farm Ruigtevlei was collecting gravel for ostrich feed from the Karatara River when he found a nugget among the pebbles. A pharmacist in Knysna confirmed it was gold – 26 grams of it.

Before long, the forest was crawling with prospectors from as far afield as Australia and California. The government joined in, and in 1880 a state geologist found gold in the sawmill area. By 1886 there was a mining town at Millwood, with hotels, shops and even a few local newspapers. The next year, Jubilee Creek, one of the streams where gold was found, was named in honour of Queen Victoria's 50th year on the throne, and Millwood delivered a record production of about 18,5 kg of gold.

But it all proved to be a flash in the proverbial pan: Soon the gold dried up and the miners left for the Witwatersrand.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How does it work?

A maximum of 24 hikers per day are allowed on the trail, so unless you're in a very big group, there's a good chance you'll share the huts with other groups.

The original, 107 km Outeniqua Trail ran from the Beervlei Hut, between Hoekwil and Karatara, to the Harkerville Hut, 16 km west of Plettenberg Bay. Beervlei and the three huts thereafter – Windmeulnek, Platbos and Millwood – have been closed for maintenance for a while. The current trail is a shortened version of about 58 km, which starts at the Millwood Hut. Access roads to each hut make it possible to walk an even shorter section of the trail.

We slept at Harkerville (the end point) the night before the hike, and we left our vehicles at the SANParks office there. Bennie's Tours organised a minibus to drop us at the trailhead the next morning. This service cost R190 per person – arrange with Bennie Demongo (☎ 083 728 5181) or Ace Simani (☎ 083 590 1877).

The trail is well marked, but hikers should expect temporary detours in places, especially after fires or floods. You mostly walk in shade, but it's still humid in the forest and the terrain is tough, for example, the long descent into the Knysna River gorge on Day 1, and the climb back out. Make sure you're fit and bring a hiking

pole for extra support.

Facilities: The huts are very basic. Each one has a few rooms with bunk beds (bring your own fitted sheet, sleeping bag and inflatable pillow), a bathroom (mostly cold showers) and tables with benches on the deck where you can prepare food. The huts also have firewood and a braai grid. Only Diepwalle and Harkerville have power.

Cost: Hut accommodation R148 per person per night, plus a daily conservation fee of R52 per person (free with a Wild Card).

Contact: ☎ 012 428 9111 (SANParks bookings)
☎ 044 302 5600 (Knysna regional office)
📍 sanparks.org

Sources: 📍 knysnamuseums.co.za; 📍 theheritageportal.co.za; 📍 sanparks.org





Riders on the Storms

One of the best ways to explore the forests, mountains and coastline of the Tsitsikamma is behind the bars of a mountain bike. Here are two great options, whether you want the thrill of a race or an easy-going tour. Let's roll!

BY PIERRE STEYN

Whether you're racing the Storms River Traverse or trundling along on the Tour de Tsitsikamma with family and friends, one thing is certain: You *will* get to know the gradients on the Storms River Pass very well...

This gravel mountain road – one of the most scenic in a region full of spectacular passes – winds through the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park. The Traverse is called the “traverse” for good reason. Over three days, you ride the 5 km pass up and down four times. The descent is four minutes of adrenaline, and the climb back out takes about half an hour.

The Tour de Tsitsikamma is a much more laid-back adventure – you only have to climb the pass once. And before you do, you're encouraged to stop on the low-water bridge at the bottom to take a selfie or have a drink from your bottle. Taking it slow gives you the opportunity to appreciate the climb, in a cathedral of yellowwood and stinkwood trees with the sun filtering through the canopy. If you're lucky (and you're paying attention) you might see the red-underwing flash of a Knysna turaco. The *piet-my-vrou* call of a red-chested cuckoo starts to sound like “*hou, bene, hou*” as you approach the summit.

It's the chance to cycle this special road that draws me back to Storms River year after year. But there are also lots of other trails that snake through the valleys and forests of the Tsitsikamma, all of which are worth a ride.

Here's what you need to know.





Storms River Traverse

This stage race will be held for the 16th time this year. In July or early August, Storms River Village in the Eastern Cape is turned into a mountain-bike paradise where hundreds of participants and their families gather.

Tsitsikamma Village Inn is the hub. Every stage starts and ends at this historical hotel, and this is also where cyclists can enjoy lunch and dinner and hang out around the bar. The town bills itself as the “Adventure capital of the Garden Route”, and every other accommodation establishment is also fully booked months in advance.

There are several reasons why the Traverse is so popular. The natural scenery – the forests, rugged coastline and mountains – plays a big role of course, but it’s more than that. It’s quite possibly the most accessible mountain-bike stage race in the country, because Dryland (the organiser) has embraced cyclists of all skill levels since the beginning. You don’t have to train excessively to manage the daily distances (stages vary from 50 km to 65 km); there’s nothing too technical about the routes; and e-bikes are welcome.

Unlike point-to-point, multi-day races where participants sleep in a different location every night, most of the cyclists stay in one place for three nights. This means that families can come, too. Walks in the national park and activities for kids are arranged while the cyclists are out; and in the afternoons, everyone gathers at the Village Inn. Last time I participated, we all watched the Springboks beat Australia on a big screen on the Saturday night.



ROUTE DESCRIPTION

If you’ve never done the Traverse before, Day 1 (62 km; 950 m elevation gain) will be your favourite. The group departs at 8.30 am and heads east. Almost as soon as you’re out of the village, you enter the Garden Route National Park, where you’ll pick up speed! A few minutes later and you’re at the bottom of the Storms River Pass.

Once you’ve “traversed” the pass, you ride through an MTO plantation called Blueililiesbush, still going east on good jeep tracks to the first water point (27 km), which is high on a cliff. Pause for a team photo with the Indian Ocean in the background!

This is the turn-around point for the day. From the water point, you head back to Storms River along cliff trails to a second water point (52 km). Have a sosatie or two – don’t let the braai masters at the water point work so hard for nothing. You’ll need the extra energy, too, because you have to go down and up the Storms River Pass again, from the opposite side now, before you reach the end point.

Day 2 (50 km; 820 m elevation gain) is the shortest stage. The Fast Fannies and Friedas will be done by 10 am; those who prefer to hang out at the water points will still be home before lunch. There’s no need to rush: The trails through the indigenous forests above MTO’s Lottering plantation are very scenic.

The steepest climbs of the day are right at the start, west of Storms River and north of the N2. The first water point is at the 18 km mark; soon afterwards you’ll duck beneath the highway and go south, back to the sea. By the time you reach the second water point at the 37 km mark, you can pat yourself on the back – the hardest part of the day is behind you.

It’s good to keep in mind that the Traverse takes place in winter. Still, you might experience all four seasons in a day. The last time I did the race, Day 3 (51 km; 830 m elevation gain) was a muddy affair, and it was an adventure to navigate the Storms River Pass. After the pass, the route curves east through dairy farms and beneath the N2 to the southern slopes of the Tsitsikamma Mountains. The views are spectacular, but keep your eyes on the trail!

The water points (25 km and 40 km) are stocked with fruit and other treats from the area. By the time you tackle the pass for the last time, it will feel like an old friend. And after that last little slog, a well-earned medal will be waiting for you at the finishing line.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

When? 1 – 3 August 2026.
Cyclists have to be in Storms River on 31 July to register.

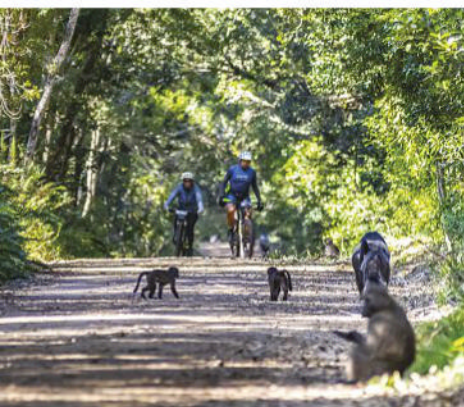
Cost: R10 200 per person (no accommodation). This includes lunch and dinner, and all snacks before and during the event. Entries limited to 300 cyclists and close on 1 July.

Contact: 044 279 1013

info@dryland.co.za

stormsrivertraverse.co.za

Visit the Traverse website for a list of accommodation options in Storms River Village, and for information about their luxury tented accommodation during the race (R5 950 per person).





Tour de Tsitsikamma

The owners of Bhejane 4x4 Adventures – John van den Bergh and Frank Carlisle – both live on the Garden Route and are keen cyclists. The Traverse is one of their favourite mountain-bike races and they participate almost every year. The race also inspired them to create the Tour de Tsitsikamma because the trails in the area are too much fun to do only once a year.

Bhejane's tour is more of a cycling adventure than a race; something you can do with family and friends. All your luggage is transported, your meals are prepared, and you stay in three different camps where the stretcher beds in your tent are decked out in white linen.

The tour takes place over three days and covers 150 km, from the town of Thornham in the Eastern Cape to Nature's Valley in the Western Cape. On the first night, cyclists meet the Bhejane team at Firefly Falls, an eco-lodge in The Craggs north of Nature's Valley. You'll have a braai in the lapa and retire to your tent. After breakfast the next morning, the group is transported to the start point with their bikes.



ROUTE DESCRIPTION

If you've done the Traverse, Day 1 (45 km; 850 m elevation gain) will bring back happy memories. From Thornham, you head to the same viewpoint overlooking the Indian Ocean before you tackle the Storms River Pass. Marilyn's 60's Diner in Storms River Village – not the Village Inn – is your next destination. The chocolate milkshake is delicious! And why not order a burger and chips? This is a tour, not a race!

From Marilyn's, the route heads north, across the N2, towards the mountains in the distance. Jeep tracks through pine plantations are interspersed with rocky single track through indigenous forest. Splashing through a series of small rivers helps to cool you down.

By early afternoon you'll arrive at your overnight stop, Tsitsikamma Mountain Bio Camp. Your glamping tent awaits, as does a hot shower. There are also power points to recharge your e-bike, and a deck on the edge of a pine plantation with a view of the Tsitsikamma Mountains. Go cool down in the deep, dark pool in the Lottering River, about a five-minute walk from the camp.

Day 2 is the longest day of the tour (65 km; 1 058 m elevation gain). You start with an hour-long gradual descent to the sea. Then the trail runs along the cliffs for kilometres. Below, you can see the Otter Trail.

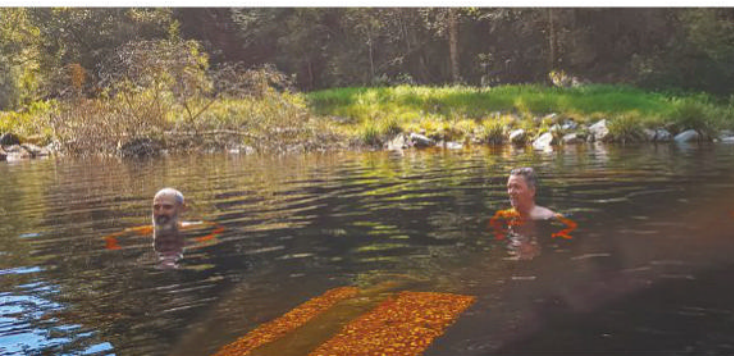
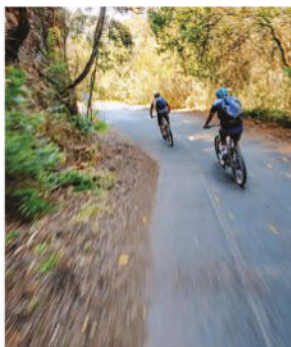
The highlight of the day is crossing the border between the Eastern Cape and Western Cape via the Bloukrans Pass. Floods and rock falls damaged this tarred pass years ago. It has never been repaired and remains closed to vehicle traffic, but cyclists are allowed to use the road.

Swim in the deep pool at the bottom of the pass before you start the long climb up. When you reach the top, you only have 5 km of easy dirt roads left to the Bloukrans Bio Camp, where your tent has a view of the sea.

Day 3 (43 km; 763 m elevation gain) is an easy, fun day – you ride along flat, fast single track through forests and plantations until you wheel down Grootrivier Pass to Nature's Valley. Enjoy a Windhoek and a toasted sandwich at Blue Rocks Café & Grill before you're transported back to Firefly Falls.

By now you're already planning when you'll do your next cycling tour in the Tsitsikamma, and who you'll invite along!

CALVIN FISHER



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

When? All weekends in September 2026; the first two weekends of October; and 26–29 November. Contact the organisers if you have a specific request, and for tour dates in 2027.

Cost: R9 000 per person sharing. This includes three nights' accommodation, three meals per day, and two expert guides. There has to be a minimum of six people and a maximum of ten people in your group.

Contact: 082 724 0442
tourdetsitsikamma.co.za

WHAT DO I NEED?

- An ordinary mountain bike or an e-bike. Sections of the routes are too rocky for gravel bikes. Other essentials include a helmet, cycling kit and tyre repair kit.
- Take a headlamp, a power bank for your cellphone (there isn't always reception, but you'll want to take photos), and your own drinks and snacks. Also pack your swimming trunks and comfortable clothes (including a warm jacket and beanie) to wear in camp in the evenings.
- The routes aren't technical, but some experience on a mountain bike won't hurt.



River dreams and forest streams

Walking trails and picnic sites can often get crowded. Why not explore on the water? From a canoe or kayak, you get a new perspective on your surroundings and you'll see different bird species. Here are three rivers to paddle.

KEURBOOMS RIVER

SOPHIA VAN TAAK



Storms River

The Tsitsikamma section of the national park is where the wild ocean meets the ancient forest; where salt spray meets birdsong. It's a dramatic, untamed landscape that hikers on the popular Otter Trail get to see up close. If you're a day visitor, don't despair: You can also enjoy the dark waters and high cliffs of the Storms River.

The excitement starts to build when the staff at Untouched Adventures hand out wetsuits, lifejackets and helmets. On days when the sea is calm, you paddle from their office along the coast to the river mouth. When the water is rough, the boats are moored in the gorge and you have to walk with your paddle for about 700 m. At the Storms River Mouth, you'll find the remnants of a cement jetty once used by fishermen. The bright red double kayakers await.

Set off up the gorge and it feels like the moss-covered rock faces are closing in with every stroke of your paddle. Excited shrieks echo over the water. When the guides lead us into a cave full of bats, there are even a few panicked screams.

It's unbelievably beautiful. Cormorants nest on outcrops among ferns; and the further we go, the darker the water becomes. Where a rock slab blocks our way, we swap the kayaks for lilos and paddle even further upstream.

When we arrive at a deep pool, the guides ask who wants to jump off the cliffs. A few brave paddlers raise their hands, including me. How did that happen?! I climb the 6 m to the jump-off point, which now feels much higher than it did when I looked at it from water level. But there's no turning back – my pride is at stake. *Geronimo!*



Where? The turn-off to the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park is about 5 km west of Storms River Village on the N2. Follow the road for 9,5 km to the parking area. Untouched Adventures is below the restaurant, at the harbour.

Cost: R995 per person. Wetsuit hire costs R130; water shoe hire costs R95. Conservation fee R82 per adult; R41 per child under 12; free with a Wild Card.

Contact: ☎ 073 130 0689 (book beforehand)

🌐 untouchedadventures.com

– Sophia van Taak



Touws River

Two of the three Kingfisher hiking trails in the Wilderness section of the Garden Route National Park start at the northern Ebb and Flow rest camp and follow the Touws River. The trails are scenic, accessible and popular.

The first section is called the Half-collared Kingfisher Trail – it's only 1,5 km long and leads to a small pont over the river. You can turn around here and walk back the way you came, or you can do the 1 km-long Bosduif Loop, which features a steep climb and takes you past a viewpoint. Or you can cross the river using the pont and do the Giant Kingfisher Trail on the opposite bank, which mostly follows boardwalks for about 2 km to river pools and a pretty waterfall.

There's another option, too: You can paddle to the start of the Giant Kingfisher in double canoes available for hire at the SANParks Tarentaal day visitors' area. It's about a 2 km paddle up the river to the pont.

Early in the morning, the world floats along with you, reflected in the river that's as smooth and dark as a cellphone screen. Kingfishers hover and you'll hear the calls of green wood-hoopoe, chorister robin-chat, scaly-throated honeyguide, blue-mantled crested flycatcher, grey cuckooshrike, olive bush-shrike and more.

You reach the mooring spot far too quickly, but the walk through the forest is just as peaceful. The croak of a Knysna turaco will sound from the canopy. Stand still for a moment and watch the bird drift from one yellowwood to the next like a green ghost.

While everything on this trail is spectacular, and reward enough for your paddling effort, the real treat is a swim in the river pools at the turnaround point. Or, if it's too cold for a full immersion, have a picnic on the rock slabs with your feet in the water.

From here, you follow the same route back to your canoe. The wind sometimes picks up in the afternoon, making the return paddle more strenuous, but you're almost guaranteed to be alone on the river while everyone else has to share the trail back to the rest camp.

Where? Follow Ebb and Flow Drive from the N2 in Wilderness. The turn-off to the Tarentaal day visitors' area is on the left after 1 km. From here, you paddle past the southern Ebb and Flow rest camp, underneath a bridge, past the smaller northern camp and around a bend in the river to the mooring spot.

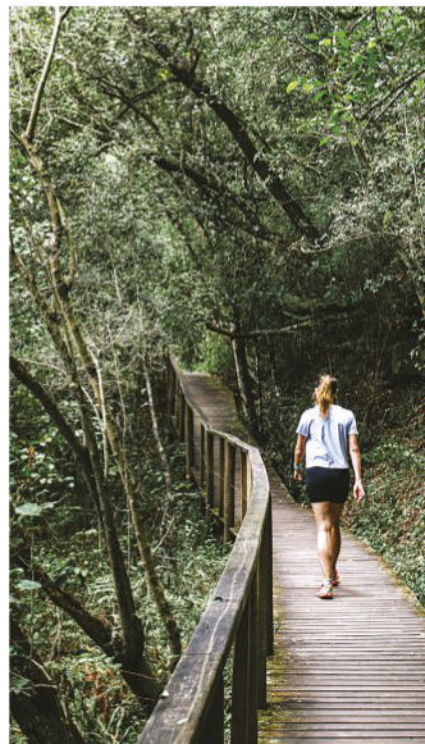
If you'd prefer to hike the entire trail, follow Waterside Road for about 3 km out of the Wilderness CBD to the bridge over the Touws River. There's a SANParks office here where you can get a permit.

Cost: Canoe hire R120 for one hour; R272 for three hours; and R376 for six hours. Paddlers and hikers must pay a conservation fee of R61 per adult and R30 per child under 12. It's free if you have a Wild Card.

Contact: 044 877 1197 (Ebb and Flow rest camp)

sanparks.org

– Willem van der Berg







Keurbooms River

The Keurbooms is a wide, meandering river. On weekends, boats zip around and people swim in front of the campsite at Plettenberg Bay Forever Resort. You're allowed to waterski on this stretch of the river, and even pull your boat or kayak onto one of the many sandbanks to braai or picnic under the trees. It's a vibe!

But the Keurbooms has an ace up its sleeve. Book the Whiskey Creek Cabin and you'll have a section of river, upstream from the crowds, all to yourself. That's because the cabin is only accessible by canoe, and the booking office only allows one group at a time.

Paddle upstream from the N2 bridge as far as the rope with buoys that marks the end of the powerboat zone. From there, it's just you and the sound of your paddle dipping into the golden water.

It's about a 7 km paddle to the cabin, which usually takes about two hours. Take your time; there's no rush. But do check the tides on the days you plan to paddle in and out – at high tide, the sea will give you a push upstream; low tide will reveal a few shallow spots where you might have to portage your canoe over the rocks. (📖tideschart.com is a good resource.)

The cabin itself is about a 500 m walk from the jetty. Pack light (CapeNature provides one 60-litre dry bag per person) and make sure the canoe is tied up securely before you set off along the path.

Whiskey Creek is basic but neat: It has bunk beds for 10 people, a bathroom with a shower and flush toilet, an outdoor kitchen, and a big deck with braai facilities. (You can buy eco logs beforehand – R60 per bag – or help yourself to firewood from the heap of felled alien trees.) Cutlery and pillows are provided – bring a sleeping bag, fitted sheet and towel. The small fridge and geyser run on solar power and the stove runs on gas.

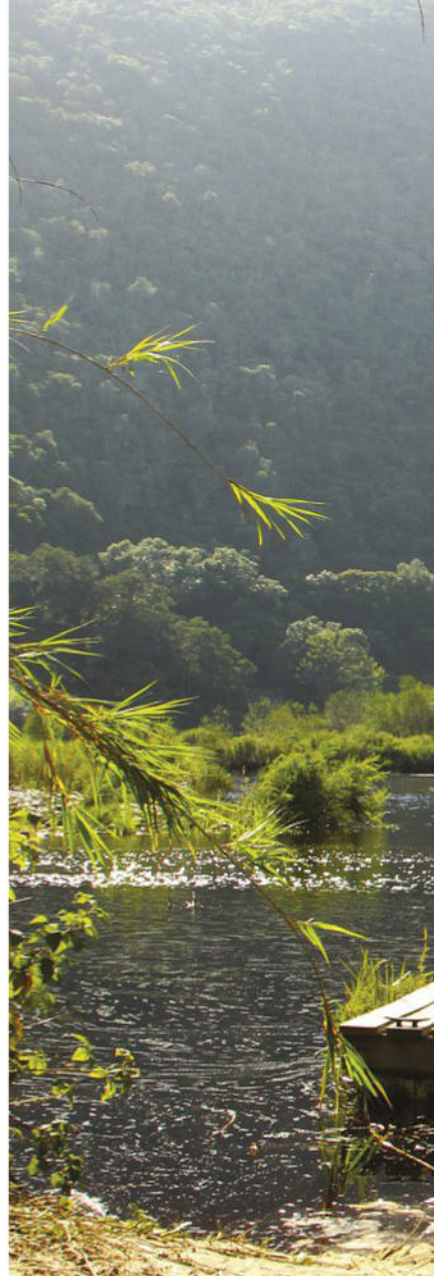
Next to the deck, stairs lead down to the river. Depending on the tide, you might have to walk over rocks for a short stretch – bring water shoes for traction and to protect your feet.

Where? The office for the Keurbooms River Nature Reserve is under the N2 bridge just east of Plettenberg Bay. Take the turn-off to the left just after you've crossed the bridge coming from the Plett side.

Cost: R1 975 per night for up to six people, plus R315 per extra person. (If you're a group of six and you want to visit during the school holidays, it will cost R3 235 per night.) You also pay a daily conservation fee of R75 per adult and R55 per child; free with a Wild Card. Day visitors who want to paddle up the river can hire a double canoe for R160.

Contact: 📞 087 087 8250
🌐 capenature.co.za

– Sophia van Taak

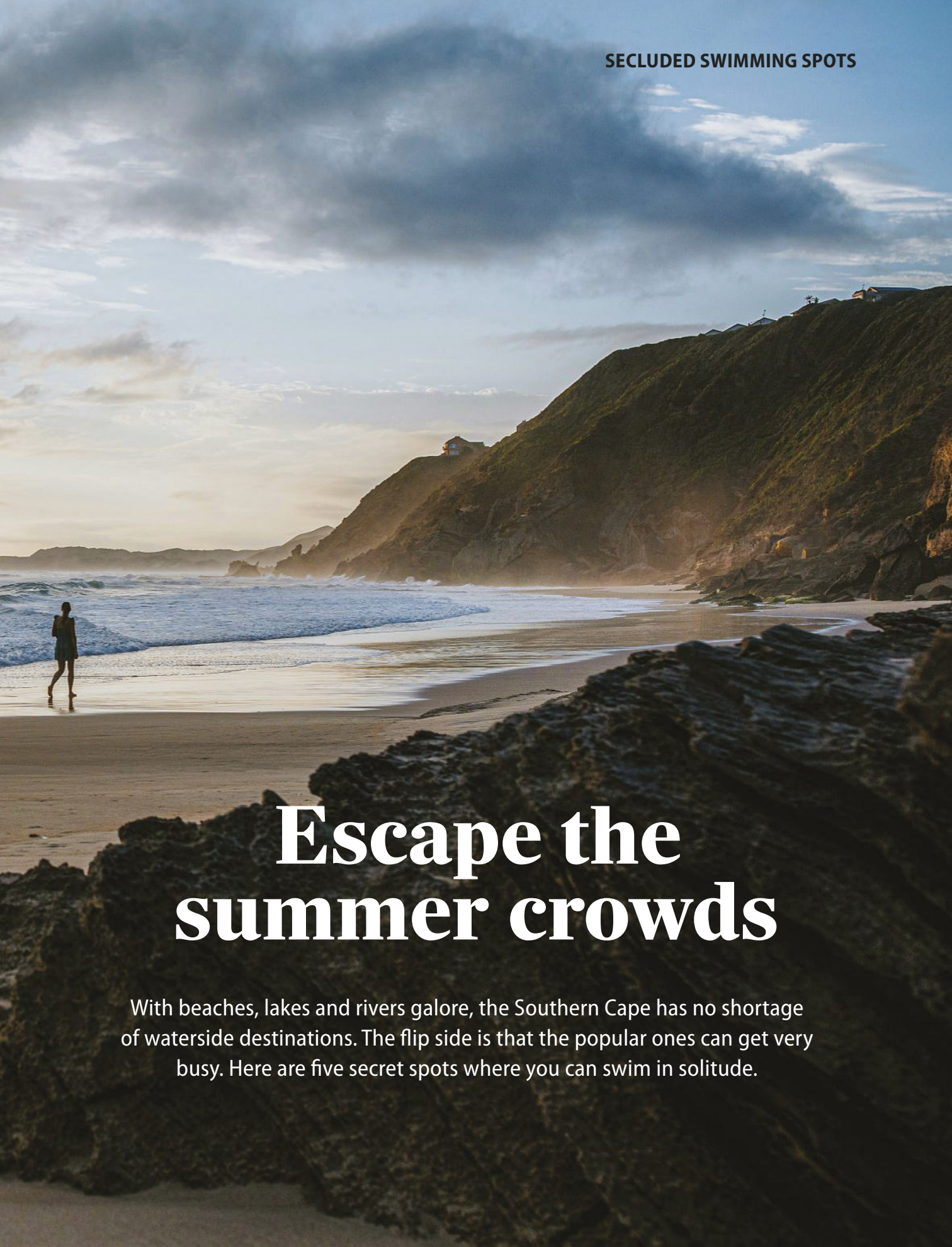






WILLEM VAN DER BERG

DIE BLOKKE, BRENTON -ON-SEA



Escape the summer crowds

With beaches, lakes and rivers galore, the Southern Cape has no shortage of waterside destinations. The flip side is that the popular ones can get very busy. Here are five secret spots where you can swim in solitude.



Gwaing River Mouth, George

Do people not know about this place, or have they forgotten about it? That's what I ponder when I get out of my vehicle at the river mouth. Aside from a few dassies basking in the sun and an egret hunting in the shallows, there are only five other souls on the white beach that spans the gap from the river to the sea.

Families with young children can spend long summer days at the Gwaing River Mouth. There's plenty of space – you can plant your umbrella on the sand next to the river, or among the boulders closer to the sea.

Several habitats overlap here, attracting birders and fishermen. Check with the latter if they want to sell their catch – there are concrete tables and braai facilities under the milkwood trees next to the river mouth. Al fresco fish lunch, anyone?

Where? About 15 km south-west of George. Take exit 431 from the N2 to Pacaltsdorp and follow Beach Road for 9 km to the parking area.

What else? There are neat public ablution facilities and a lawn if you don't want to get sand between your toes. Gwaing Caravan Park is a stone's throw up the road. The camping stands have an excellent view. Contact the municipality's Environmental Services office to make a booking: 0044 802 2900 (Celeste Africa).

– Hancu Louw

Pepsi Pools, George

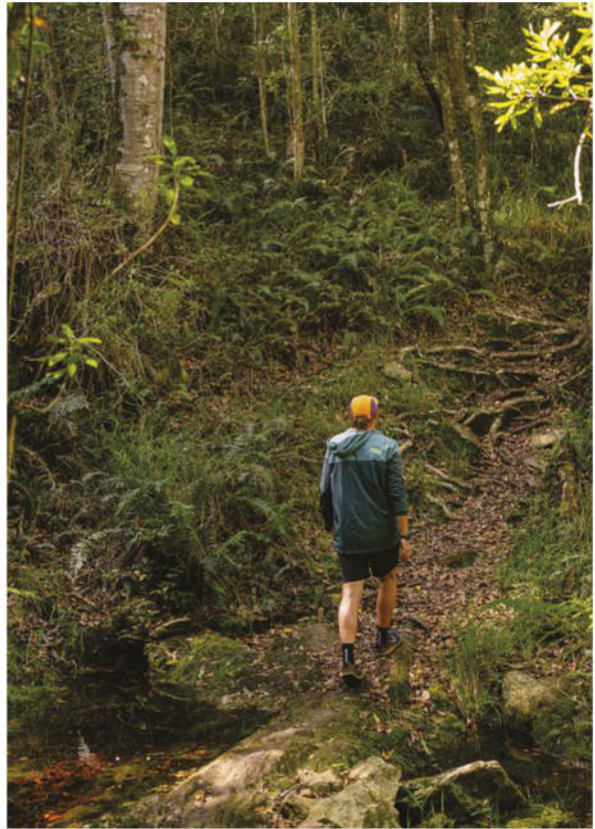
This place on the Swart River has offered relief to adventurous residents of George for decades. There's almost always a layer of foam on the cola-dark water, which is characteristic of the mountain streams along the Garden Route. There's nothing to be afraid of – the colour is due to the high tannin content, caused by bark, fruit and seeds of indigenous vegetation. It's like swimming in tea! (*Or Pepsi...* – Ed.)

The flat rocks around the pools make them the perfect place to spend a few hours. But it's not a formal picnic site, so don't expect a bench, tap or ablution facilities. And please take all your rubbish with you. Final disclaimer: The water is always freezing, even in the middle of summer!

Where? There are a few different routes to the pools. The Garden Route Botanical Garden is a popular starting point. From the parking area, follow a footpath through the neighbourhood and along a railway line to a pine plantation. The path winds up a gradual slope through patches of indigenous forest, across mountain streams and through more plantations. After about an hour and a half (around the 6 km mark) you'll hear the river nearby and see a sign pointing in the direction of the pools.

The other trail (also about 12 km there and back) starts at the wall of the Garden Route Dam. From the parking area, walk along the forestry roads next to the dam to the pools. Free digital trail maps available at georgetrails.org.za.

– Hancu Louw





Die Blokke, Brenton-on-Sea

Not everyone wants to climb down 360 steep steps to get to the beach, which makes Die Blokke a seldom-visited spot.

The name refers to the big, block-like boulders on the sand. It's a serene spot for a late afternoon swim or to watch the sun set. You can walk west from Die Blokke to two smaller, hidden-away beaches – Millionaire's Beach and Jaap se Baai. Just remember, you have to climb back up again...

Where? Park in Steenbras Street in Brenton-on-Sea. Head to the eastern end of the street – there are two entrances to Fisherman's Walk, a path along the sea cliffs. There are clear directions to Die Blokke from the path – it's about a 600 m walk to the bottom. Visit brentononseaco.za for more information.

– Willem van der Berg





Drupkelders Pools, Rheenendal

The Homtini River flows through a narrow kloof that doesn't see much sun, so the cold water will take your breath away. But these pools are some of the prettiest and cleanest you'll find – and there's a waterfall. Only 12 visitors are allowed in per day so there's a good chance you'll have the pools to yourself.

Homtini is a Khoi word that means "difficult passage", but the footpath (4,5 km there and back) to the pools is wide and fairly even. Only the final 400 m section is down a steep slope, with ropes to help you descend safely.

The Drupkelders Cave is an overhang where centuries of running water have formed stalagmites. You can see the pools from the cave, but the path over the rocks isn't as obvious. Once you find it, the reward is an icy dip in a pristine location.

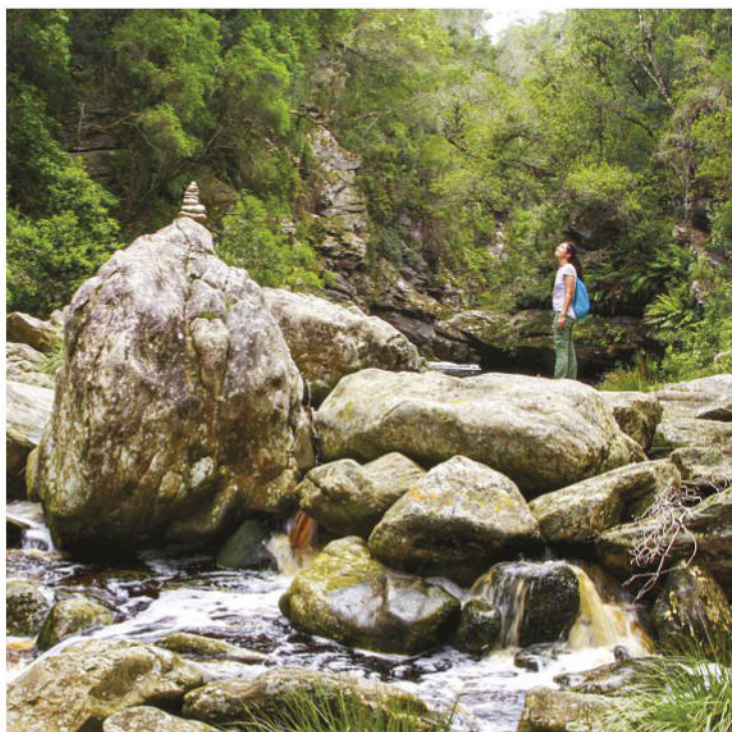
Where? Follow Bibby's Hoek Road north for 2,3 km from Rheenendal until you reach a junction. The SANParks' Goudveld office is on the right; the parking area for the hiking trail is 1,4 km further.

Cost: R61 per person; free with a Wild Card.

Contact: Book your permit beforehand at the Goudveld office:

☎ 079 204 6890 (Ntombi Dyubere)

– Sophia van Taak





Gericke's Point, Sedgefield

If you prefer calm swells and clear pools to pounding waves, there are few places as good as Gericke's Point. This rocky outcrop juts into the Indian Ocean like a protective arm. (It's also called Lion Rock – it looks a bit like a sphinx from Swartvlei Beach.)

There's a small bay on the eastern side of the point, and some rock pools on the western side. Pack your mask and snorkel.

To get to the point, you have to walk along the beach. Keep an eye on the tide because it's difficult to walk the final stretch at high tide. It's easy at low tide, though, and also better to swim in the rock pools then.

Where? Swartvlei Beach is 8 km west of Sedgefield. Follow Swartvlei Beach Road from the N2 to the parking area. From there, it's a 1,5 km walk along the beach to Gericke's Point.

What else? There are ablution facilities at Swartvlei Beach, and a caravan park (swartvleicaravanpark.co.za).

– Willem van der Berg









SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION SECTION

Stay here

Facilities • Rates • Activities • Contact details

COMPILED BY JAC KRITZINGER

An aerial photograph of a vast, dense forest with a thick canopy of green trees. In the background, a range of rugged mountains is visible under a clear sky. The title 'How to disappear completely' is overlaid in large white serif font.

How to disappear completely

Hide out in the forest and mountains at these five quirky escapes between Hoekwil and The Crag – and feel free to go a little *bos*...

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**

Growing up with the stories of Dalene Matthee, I always longed for the forests of the Garden Route. Spend a night or two in one of these cabins and you'll get the full experience.

In the morning, the warm breath of the trees hangs between the trunks. The first light sifts through the canopy like an incantation, and the forest wakes up. Everything looks newly created. Even that path you walked yesterday has a different personality in the softer light.

Animals crawl, glide and fly out in search of a bit of sun. Then they start their daily tasks: singing, sniffing, tunnelling, gnawing, burying, growing! All while the morning choir keeps building their sanctuary of sound.

Later, new smells rise from the forest floor. Pools of water reflect the light and something rustles in the canopy. Or was it just the wind? Now it's time to find a place to lie down and close your eyes.

By nightfall, more secrets emerge from the thickets. Shapes and colours fade away. Sound amplifies. In your forest cabin, you go to bed with a waterfall in your heart and you dream of green.

Until a new day begins with the call of a Knysna turaco...



GORGE VIEW, TENIQUA TREETOPS

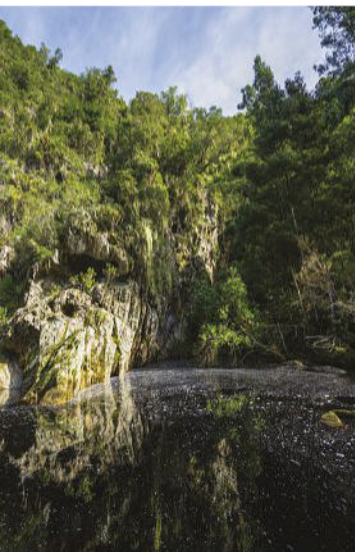


MEET THE AUTHOR

Jac Kritzinger worked in the film industry for a while before focusing on photography and writing full-time. Aside from his travel, portrait and lifestyle work behind the lens, he's also a published poet, playwright, short story writer and biographer. He lives in Hermanus with his wife and dog.

Visit jackkritzinger.com or follow him on Instagram: [@jackkritzingerphoto](https://www.instagram.com/jackkritzingerphoto)

FOREST CABINS



ANTHONY MAITLAND

SEDFIELD

Teniqua Treetops

Spend the night in a treehouse much better than any you could have dreamt up as a kid. The eight wood-and-canvas units are all raised far off the forest floor – when you look out of your window, you see the canopy.

Owner Anthony Maitland has been hard at work here since 2003. He laid a fresh-water filtration system from the Karatara River, installed solar power, and added a swimming pool, club house and cash bar (with DSTv).

The units have modern amenities and are far apart for privacy. Philosopher's Perch, The Eyrie, Moon Over Milkwood, Forest Elders and Tranquillity can all sleep four people. Loeries Nest, Gorge View and Greenbeard are for couples.

Respect for the natural landscape is the first priority – all the cleaning supplies in the units are eco-friendly and no wood fires are allowed, to reduce the wildfire risk. Each unit has a Weber braai and you can trade the bundle of firewood you brought for coal briquettes at the reception office.

The Karatara River flows through a deep kloof below, and a series of short hiking trails go down to the stream. The River Trail (from the reception office) is the most direct way to get to the water. There's a viewpoint along this route where you can rest your legs. Each trail ends at a deep, dark pool surrounded by cliffs and ancient trees. These are sacred spaces where you can fall in love with the soul of the forest.

Remember to lock your treehouse and close all the windows before you go for a hike – the vervet monkeys can be naughty.



Facilities: Wi-Fi is available at all the units. Gorge View has a wood-fired hot tub and a fireplace. No pets allowed.

What else? Ingredients for DIY meals are available: Breakfasts from R140 for two people; braai pack R310 for two people. Enquire at reception.

Where? About 20 km north of Sedgfield via the Karatara Road, which becomes Barrington Road. Teniqua Treetops is well signposted.

Rates: Loeries Nest, Moon over Milkwood and Greenbeard from R1 850; The Eyrie and Tranquillity from R2 200; Philosopher's Perch and Forest Elders from R2 948; Gorge View from R2 574. All rates per night.

Contact: ☎ 083 551 1117; 🌐 teniquatreetops.co.za

HARKERVILLE

Tilting Trees

This peaceful spot is set in eight hectares of forest halfway between Knysna and Plett. The location is great for exploring the region, and when you're done exploring, it's a lovely place to get to know the forest up close. Baboons (close doors and windows when you go out), bushbuck, porcupines, bushpigs and birds are abundant.

The place is named for the tall, leaning trees in the forest. (Listen to the trunks rubbing together when the wind picks up.) Since Lesley and Kevin Price took over the reins in 2021, they've done lots of work removing alien species like blackwood and wattle, and planting indigenous trees like yellowwood, beech and stinkwood. As a consequence of the rewilding, there are clearings in the forest where you can sit on a trunk and appreciate the smaller things, like the variety of wild mushrooms on the forest floor.

There are three units: Little Log Cabin sleeps two adults and two small children on a sleeper couch. It has a fenced garden and a deck close to the forest.

Stone Cottage sleeps two and is a few metres away. It overlooks a big lawn that borders the forest.

Family Log Cabin sleeps four – it's further away on the eastern side of the premises. It's a big, well-equipped unit with two bedrooms and two bathrooms – you can gaze into the trees from the bath. There's a front patio, a swimming pool, and a suspended net to lie on and stargaze.

All the units are laid out around Lesley and Kevin's house. You're aware of other people in the vicinity, but there's enough greenery for privacy.

Take in more of the forest on the easy hiking trail (about 2 km). You might run into porcupines Milly and Humphrey, or bushpigs Gandalf and Miranda! The Harkerville section of the Garden Route National Park is right next door, with more hiking options and mountain-bike trails. Knysna Ziplines is just up the road.



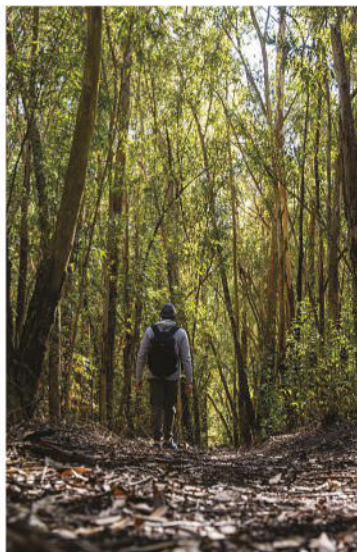
Facilities: There's Wi-Fi in all the units and each one has a Weber braai (no open fires allowed). All the kitchens have gas stoves and microwaves; the Family Log Cabin has a fireplace. Pets are welcome on request (only Little Log Cabin is fenced).

What else? Ask Lesley if it's planting season. Guests can help plant yellowwood and beech saplings in the forest.

Where? Take the Harkerville turn-off from the N2 (18 km east of Knysna; 16 km west of Plett). Tilting Trees is about 2 km further.

Rates: Little Log Cabin and Stone Cottage from R1 000 per night; Family Log Cabin from R2 015 per night.

Contact: ☎ 083 375 0237; 📍 [tiltingtrees.com](https://www.tiltingtrees.com)



FOREST CABINS

HOEKWIL

Mountain Magic

Mountain Magic is on Hoekwil Pass and as tranquil as you get. Once you've unpacked and kicked off your shoes, the magic of the Outeniqua Mountains seeps in.

Owners Leigh and Shéa Skelton are passionate nature lovers. They started bringing in container homes in 2019 after their dream of nearly 20 years – to create a mountain paradise where bushbuck, dassies and caracals feel at home – finally came true. It's a project in progress, but the units offer everything you need for a comfortable stay.

License to Chill is a two-bedroom unit that sleeps six people. It consists of two container homes connected by a deck with a view of the ocean in the distance. You can see the houses of Wilderness and the traffic on the N2 far below, but you'll hear nothing but the calls of fish-eagles and sunbirds.

The Nook, a two-bedroom unit, also consists of two container homes and sleeps four. Here, the views offer the best of both worlds: the sea on one side and green kloofs on the other.

Sweet Retreat, a container home for a couple, is a stone's throw away and faces north-west into the folds of the mountains.

No matter where you stay, hanging out on the deck is the main activity. And when you can't bear to relax any longer, stretch your legs on the short circular hiking trail around the property.



Facilities: Wi-Fi is available and all the units have wood-fired hot tubs. The kitchen has a gas stove and microwave. Mountain Magic is pet-friendly.

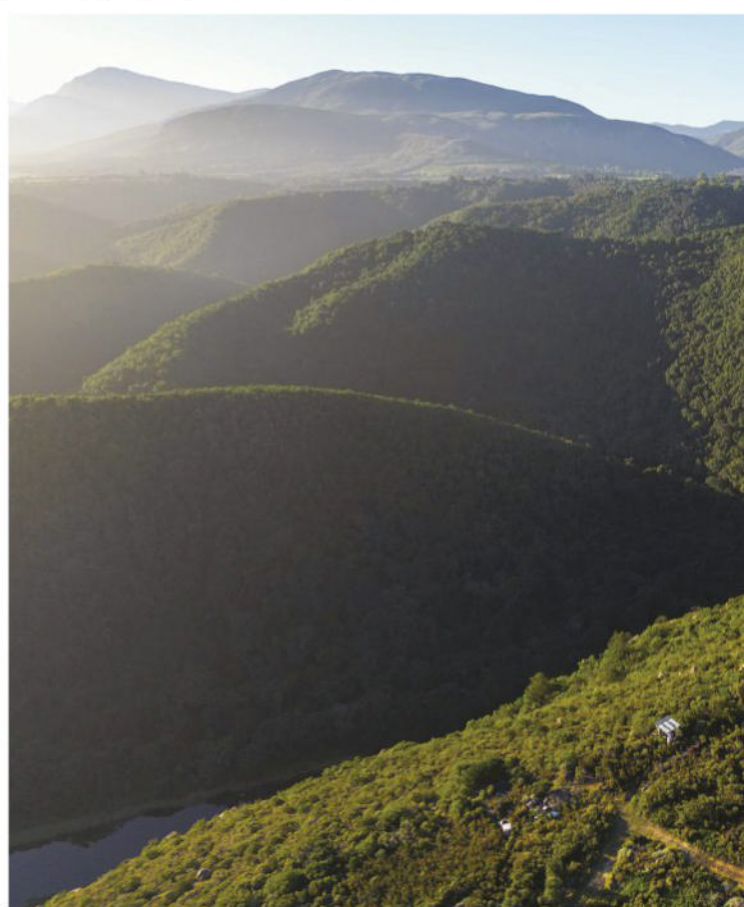
Where? About 8 km from Wilderness on the Hoekwil Pass.

Rates: License to Chill (max six people) and The Nook (max four people) from R1 280 per night for the first two adults, plus R480 per extra adult. Discounted rates for children under 18. Sweet Retreat from R1 600 per night.

Contact: 📞 071 337 9281; 🌐 mountain-magic.co.za



Watch the sunrise over the ocean and have sundowners at The Deck viewpoint in the late afternoon.





FOREST CABINS

THE CRAGS

Moonshine Cabins on Whiskey Creek

These elevated cabins have views far over the forest canopy. They're luxuriously appointed and stylishly furnished, with fireplaces to drive away the cold that rises from the forest floor in winter. Unlike many of the other places featured here, you're allowed to make a wood fire and braai outside.

The cabins are fairly close together, but the forest is so thick you barely notice your neighbours. The views are exceptional: Whiskey Creek down below, with the Tsitsikamma Mountains beyond.

Vervet (sleeps six) is spacious, with two bedrooms and a gas braai on the back deck if you don't feel like building a fire.

Treefrog sleeps five – two in the ground floor bedroom and three in the loft. There's also a gas braai.

Firefly, Sage and Moon are smaller, perfect for a couples' escape. Moon has plenty of character, with a raised king-size bed next to a window and an unobstructed view of the forest.

If you want something more traditional than a treehouse cabin, stay in Butterfly Cottage (sleeps four), which has a big lawn and a fenced garden where your children (or dog) can play safely; it's the only unit where pets are allowed.

Owners Katie and Warren Goodman also have a big home called Moonshine Farmhouse, which is available to guests when they're away travelling. The house has four bedrooms and can sleep up to 10 people.

Next to the house is a communal swimming pool, a play park for the kids, and the Moonshine Bath House – a Finnish-style sauna where you sweat out your sins before plunging into the farm dam with its lotus lilies.

Moonshine has excellent accommodation, but the real drawcard is Whiskey Creek, a tributary of the Keurbooms River. A short but steep 2 km footpath takes you into a quiet, almost surreal fairyland where you can swim in a big pool under a waterfall.



Facilities: There's Wi-Fi in all units, and a gas stove in every kitchen. The two houses have DStv. Vervet, Butterfly Cottage and Moonshine Farmhouse all have "art showers" – they look like they were designed by Antoni Gaudí and decorated with mosaic tiles.

What else? Arrange for a massage in your unit – contact reception.

Where? About 18 km north-east of Plett. Take the turn-off from the N2.

Rates: Moon, Treefrog, Sage and Firefly from R1 950. Vervet and Butterfly Cottage from R2 250. Moonshine Farmhouse from R6 500. All rates per night.

Contact: ☎ 072 200 6656; 🌐 moonshinecabins.co.za



Whiskey Creek is really special. Remember your takkies and swimming costume!



CAROL GRAY,
MANAGER



FOREST CABINS

THE CRAGS

Villa Villekula

If you're in the mood to eat, drink and be merry, this eccentric restaurant-stayover combo is a winner.

Villa Villekula (named after Pippi Longstocking's fictional house) is a colourful eco-resort build from mostly recycled materials and powered by solar. It's basically an informal restaurant with a big stoep, four guest rooms, and a cottage.

The Green Cottage, a cosy unit for two, has its own kitchenette and bathroom and is set apart from the other accommodation options next to the restaurant kitchen.

The Retro Room, French Room, Turquoise Room and Captain's Cabin all brim with colour and character, furnished with an eclectic mix of antiques and modern pieces. There's also a shop on the premises where you can buy souvenirs like vintage crockery, second-hand clothes and books at bargain prices.

The owners, Willie and Daniela Gouws, know their stuff in the kitchen. Daniela is a trained chef and they make the most delicious dinners from Wednesdays to Sundays – buffet dishes like Karoo lamb pie, Turkish chicken pie, sauerkraut, and pork belly with apple stuffing. All the fresh produce comes from their vegetable garden. Breakfast is available every day of the week and includes homemade bread, bacon and eggs, and French toast.

The yard is home to five dogs and three donkeys, called Kara, Stefanus and Meisie – they often come for an ear scratch at your front door. Villa Villekula's exuberance might not be to everyone's taste, but it's a warm-hearted place that will get under your skin!



Facilities: All the rooms and units have Wi-Fi. The Green Cottage has a Weber braai and a smart TV. No pets.

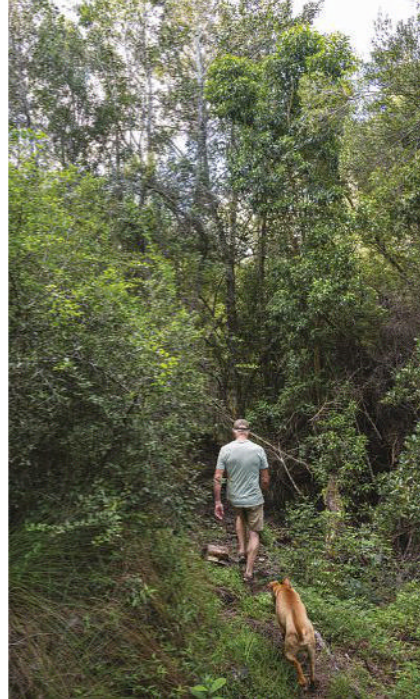
What else? Buy a copy of *Localicious* – Willie and Daniela's recipe book – if you want to make some of their treats at home.

Where? About 20 km north-east of Plett via the N2.

Rates: All accommodation from R1 250 per night. Breakfast is included; dinner costs R350 per person. The restaurant is open to the public and booking is essential.

Contact: ☎ 082 534 0360; 🌐 villavillekula.co.za





HOW MUCH, EXACTLY?

Almost all accommodation establishments on the Garden Route charge higher rates in peak season – usually December to February and during school holidays at other times of the year. Check before you book.

KEEP IN MIND

The Garden Route was hit hard by big storms in May and June. Floods and wind caused major damage and municipalities are still picking up the pieces. At the time of going to print, all the places listed here were ready for guests, but always call ahead to check your route – there might still be a fallen tree or other obstacle somewhere.

Rural retreats

A farm is a place of continual discovery. There's always something happening, and new things to learn. Here's our pick of five great guest farms away from the thronging beaches that will give you a totally different Garden Route experience. The kids will love it!

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**



Oakhurst Farm Cottages

This beautiful dairy farm has been in the Crowther family for six generations. Current owners Jake and Claire have developed the tourism side of the farm with great care.

The eleven self-catering units are all spacious, with big stoeps and living areas that flow out onto lawns.

The Forge is special – it's a 150-year-old stone house that sleeps six in two bedrooms and a loft.

There are two new four-sleeper additions: Isak's Eden and Pastures Cottage, both of which have wood-fired hot tubs.

The three Schoolyard units were once an old farm school. Each sleeps five in two bedrooms, with bunk beds for the kids. There are five Farm Cottages (four- and six-sleepers) and an AfriCamps setup with eight self-catering safari tents, each with two king-size beds and a sleeper couch. The tents have wood-fired hot tubs and two are next to a dam – ideal for birders.

You don't even need to leave the farm. There are running and mountain-bike trails, and a dam with canoes where you can fish for bass. Kids can play on the jungle gyms, learn how a dairy works and feed carrots to the two donkeys, Sakkie and Sarel. If you're an experienced horse rider, you can do a guided ride through the forest. There are also short pony rides for kids at the stables. Oakhurst even has an app that you can use to do a treasure hunt on the farm!



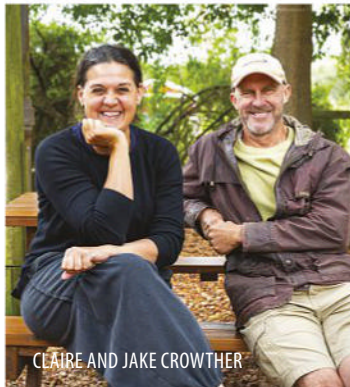
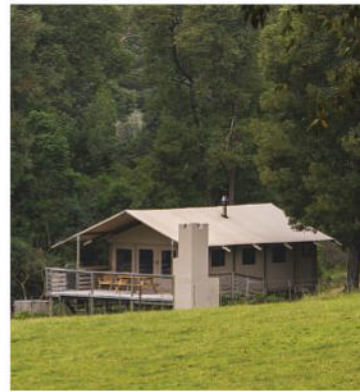
Facilities: All units have Wi-Fi and an outdoor braai.

What else? The farm shop sells meat, coffee, fresh dairy products and frozen pizza – the Crowthers light pizza ovens at night so you can cook your pizza yourself. You can also order a breakfast basket or meat for your braai.

Where? About 8 km beyond Hoekwil if you're coming from Wilderness, on the Seven Passes Road.

Rates: The Forge, Isak's Eden and Pastures Cottage from R2 490; Schoolyard units and Farm Cottages from R2 200. All rates per night. Check the website for AfriCamps rates.

Contact: Oakhurst ☎ 064 384 1266; 🌐 oakhurst.co.za
AfriCamps ☎ 021 300 5694; 🌐 africamps.com



CLAIRE AND JAKE CROWTHER



GUEST FARMS



Libertas Guest Farm

Libertas is also on the Seven Passes Road behind Wilderness, where owner Linda Potgieter farms dairy cows, macadamias “and memories”.

Years ago, she turned the old dairy on the farm into a guesthouse for six people (a double room and a children’s room with single and bunk beds). The Dairy is stylishly furnished and has a braai pit, a lawn big enough for a cricket match, and a cement dam with a deck where you can laze the day away.

Or stay in the Farmhouse, another restored old building surrounded by green pastures. The Farmhouse sleeps 10 – six adults and four children.

At Stoepstil, a more modern cottage that sleeps four, the idea is to live outside. There’s an open-air *kuier* kitchen on a deck, a wood-fired hot tub and an outdoor shower.

Then there are three renovated labourers’ cottages that sleep between two and eight people: Friesland, Ayrshire and Jersey. These are closer to the tar road but they have nice views of the mountains.

Your kids will love seeing the calves, alpacas and goats, and cyclists will be in heaven with a variety of district and farm roads to explore. The 7 km River Trail is for hikers and cyclists; Picnic Dam has kayaks and a deck with chairs and a braai; Spoonbill Dam is home to lots of interesting bird species; and you can hike all the way to the Diep River for a wild swim.



Facilities: All the units have Wi-Fi, wood-fired hot tubs, smart TVs, outdoor braais and showers (except the Farmhouse, which has a bath).

What else? Libertas works with The Wilderness Picnic Co. – they’ll deliver a picnic basket to enjoy on the farm. Visit wildernesspicnic.co.za for the different options and order from Linda.

Where? About 20 km from Wilderness on the Seven Passes Road.

Rates: The Dairy from R2 300; Farmhouse from R2 400; Stoepstil from R1 800; Friesland, Ayrshire and Jersey from R2 000. All rates per night.

Contact: 082 929 1381; libertasguestfarm.co.za





Swartvlei Guest Farm

This elegant guest farm with its avo and macadamia orchards is just north of Sedgefield. The stylish stone buildings and manicured rose gardens give the place an old-world atmosphere.

It's well-known local lore that a group of hippies lived in the dilapidated manor house in the 1960s, says current owner Mark Ruben. Thankfully, the house has since been restored and it's now a stately place with creaking yellowwood floors and antique furniture including an old telephone that's still connected to the farm's landline! There's a big kitchen, dining area and living room on the ground floor, and three double bedrooms upstairs. Guests can book the whole house or individual rooms.

There are also five cottages. Three are twin-sleepers (Captain Al, Jet Master and Bold Silvano) and two are bigger, sleeping four (War Admiral and Seattle Slew).

The buildings are all close together, which gives the place a resort feel. The clubhouse has an indoor braai, pizza oven and bar – great for a big group.

There's a swimming pool and tennis court (bring your own racket and balls) and a hiking trail of about 2 km (mountain bikes also allowed) that leads to a viewpoint on top of the cliffs next to the Diep River.

You can also go kayaking on Swartvlei, or book a boat ride with skipper Rhyno de Swardt, who will drop anchor anywhere if you want to swim. Take drinks and snacks and make it a sunset affair.



Facilities: All units have Wi-Fi, smart TVs and outdoor braais. Bold Silvano and Seattle Slew have wood-fired hot tubs. Each unit has a small, basic kitchen; there's also a communal kitchen with more facilities.

Where? About 16 km north-west of Sedgefield. Follow Rondevlei Road from the N2 for 14 km to the T-junction with the Bo-Langvlei Road. Turn right and right again onto the Wolwerivier Road. Swartvlei Guest Farm is 2,5 km further.

Rates: Captain Al and Jet Master from R1 250; Bold Silvano from R1 550; War Admiral from R1 750; Seattle Slew from R2 050; manor house rooms from R1 200. All rates per night.

Contact: ☎ 063 210 2085; 🌐 swartvleiee.co.za



The boat ride on Swartvlei Lake is great fun! Book well in advance to guarantee your spot on the deck. It takes about 2 hours and costs R250 per person for the first four people, or R750 for the entire boat (maximum eight people).



SIMONÉ HENSTOCK,
MANAGER



GUEST FARMS

Garden Route Trail House

This spacious old house on the dairy farm Dormehl is a laid-back holiday spot with wide verandas, a big outdoor braai, a fireplace, board games and a kitchen with every implement you can think of. (There's even a contraption to make pizzas over the coals.) The farmstead and dairy are far away – I didn't see another soul during my visit.

With its eclectic furniture (the TV stand is an old carpenter's workbench) and exposed rafters, the place is full of farm character. You can see the houses of Karatara in the distance from the back of the house, but from the front veranda, it's all Outeniqua Mountains.

The house has three bedrooms and two bathrooms on the ground floor, and two single beds in the loft. Managers Zelrese Eygelaar and Cecil Jones have been in the hospitality industry for years and will make sure you have everything you need, from cutlery and a Bluetooth speaker to a dog bed and water bowl for Pluto.

A scenic trail (about 2 km) leads to swimming spots in the kloof where the Karatara River originates. It's a relatively easy walk, with only the last few hundred metres going down a steep slope with ropes to assist you. There were mountain-bike trails in this section of the forest until recently, so the path sometimes splits off – hikers should follow the Trail House markers so as not to get lost.



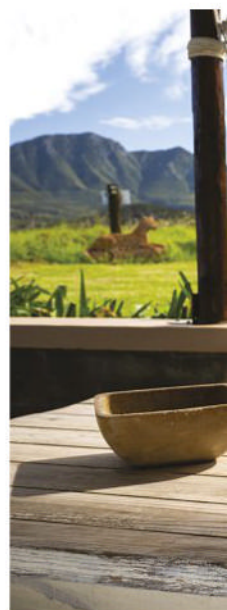
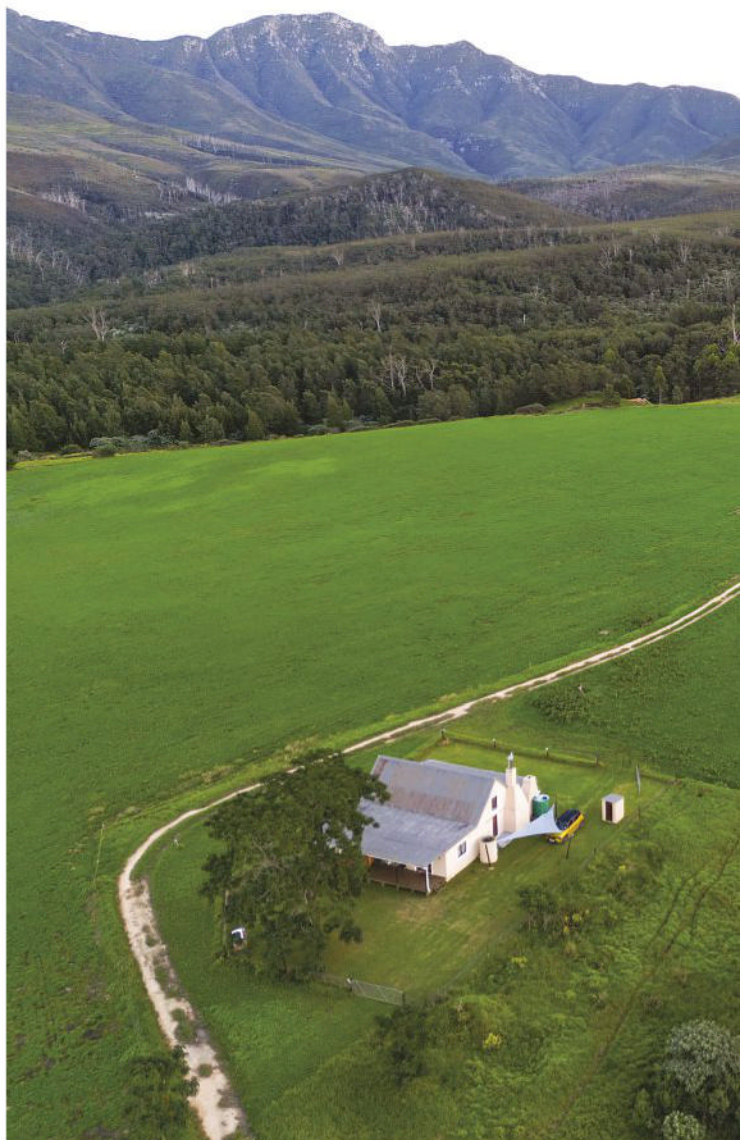
Facilities: Wi-Fi and smart TV. The outdoor braai is on the front stoep and you can use the fireplace as an indoor braai. Pets are welcome.

What else? The house runs on solar power. The power points can only be used to recharge your phone or laptop.

Where? Just north of Karatara on the Farleigh road. Google maps will lead you astray – rather follow the directions you'll receive when you book.

Rates: From R2 000 per night for the first two people, plus R300 per extra adult and R250 per child.

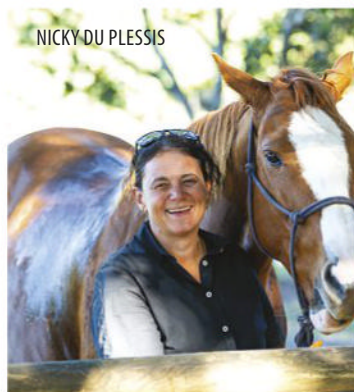
Contact: ☎ 060 975 9376; 🌐 gardenroutetrailhouse.co.za





ZELRESE EYGELAAR
AND CECIL JONES

GUEST FARMS



NICKY DU PLESSIS



HOW MUCH, EXACTLY?

Almost all accommodation establishments on the Garden Route charge higher rates in peak season – usually December to February and during school holidays at other times of the year. Check before you book.

Boschrivier Farm

This cosy spot is near the village of Wittedrift, just behind Plett. The Boschfontein River flows through the little farm, where Nicky du Plessis raises dairy cows, chickens and pigs. Nicky is also a skilled horse rider and runs a commercial stable.

Fisherman's Cottage borders the farmstead. It has one bedroom and a sleeper couch in the living area. The kitchen is well equipped and the unit has an outdoor braai on the front stoep, as well as a fireplace. It's not particularly private, but the garden provides screening. If the lime tree or avo tree is in fruit, guests can help themselves.

You're encouraged to roll up your sleeves and participate in farm life. You can help feed the cattle and collect eggs, and you'll be asked to give your leftover food to the pigs. It's fun to see how quickly they gulp down banana peels. You can also wander around the farm as you please.

The best way to explore the valley is on horseback. Nicky offers rides of about 8 km on the adjacent farm; you'll cross the Boschfontein River a few times and will see plenty of birds, from kingfishers and sunbirds to barbets and cuckoos. Nicky can also take the kids on a short ride through the paddocks.



Facilities: Wi-Fi available; pets welcome on request.

What else? Visit the Wittedrift Butchery in town, about 3 km away. Their boerewors is popular!

Where? Travelling west from Plett, take the turn-off to Avontuur/ Wittedrift and follow the dirt road for 4 km. You can also approach from the Keurbooms side – take the Wittedrift turn-off and carry on through the village to Boschrivier.

Rates: From R1 350 per night.

Contact: ☎ 083 703 6669; 🌐 boschrivier.co.za



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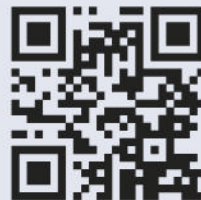
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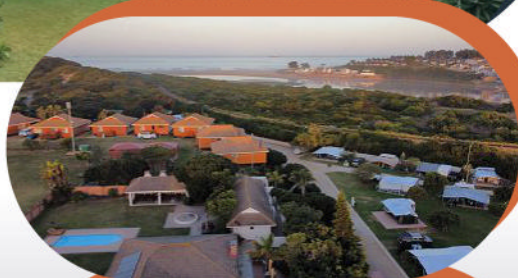
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- Luxury tents
- 12 Campsites with private ablutions
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ACTIVITIES:
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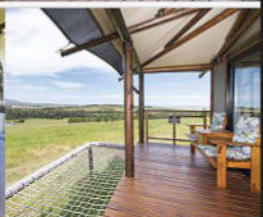
LODGE UNITS





LUXURY TENTS





SELF-CATERING UNITS



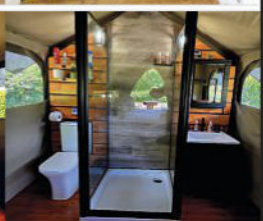


CAMPSITE



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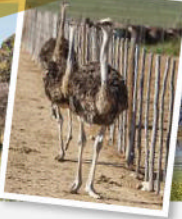
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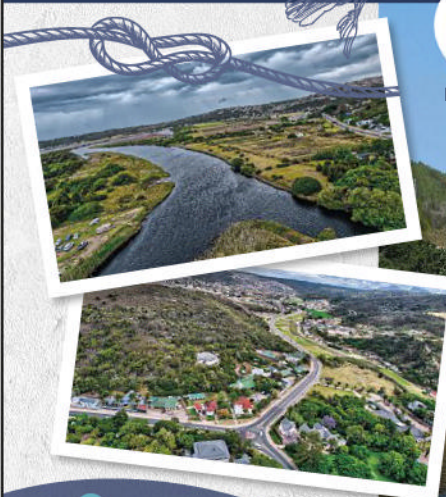
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The emerald phantom

Have you ever been walking in the forest and heard a sound like someone trying to kickstart a Vespa? Or maybe the snort of an upset pig? A monkey mocking you from the canopy?

All these strange sounds are the different calls of the Knysna turaco.

It might not have the most beautiful voice, but when it comes to looks, this bird has been blessed. Just look at that crest – not a feather out of place! The rest of its plumage is just as flamboyant, and it hasn't even lifted a wing yet to show off its crimson primary feathers. But its bright red bill and extravagant eyeshadow take the cake – very Boy George circa 1983.

The Knysna turaco is found all along the coast from Mossel Bay to northern KZN, and also in the KZN Midlands, Eswatini and north of the Soutpansberg. But most people associate it with the yellowwood forests around Knysna, where it eats the fruit and seeds of these equally iconic trees. It also feeds on the fruit of num-num, woodland waterberry, Cape ash and wild fig trees (pictured).

The turaco is agile and darts through the branches at speed. When it's not on the move it's difficult to see – its green body melts into the surroundings. It's mysterious too, and moves around quietly. When it takes flight, it's a nearly soundless glide to the next tree.

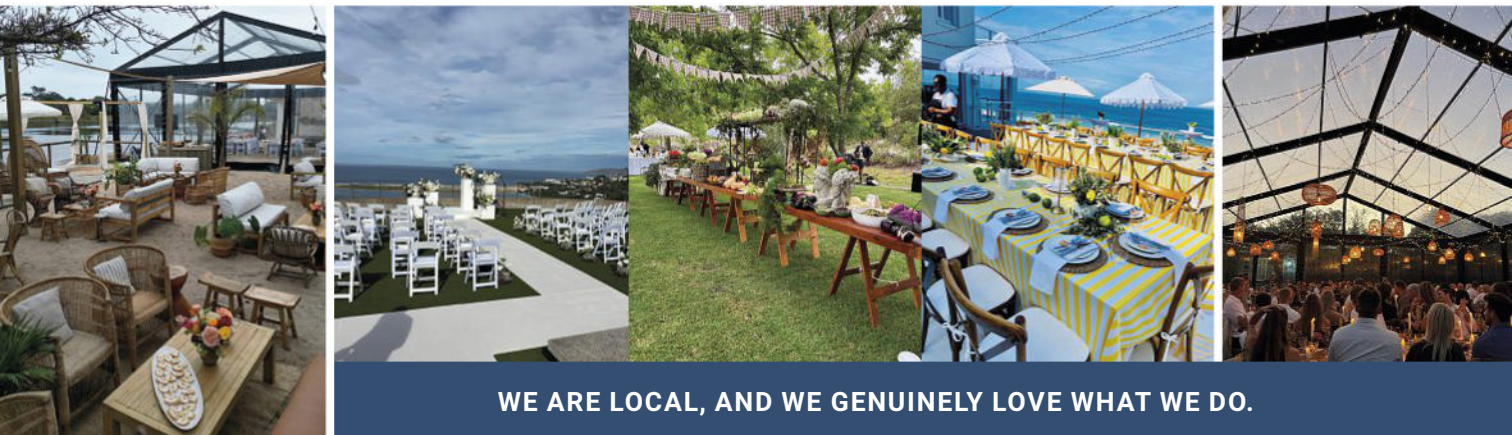
If you're lucky enough to spot one, the sighting will almost always stop you in your tracks. Because it shimmers like a gem and then it's gone, like an apparition from another world.

– Sophia van Taak



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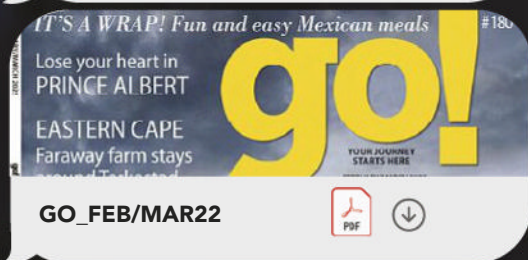
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