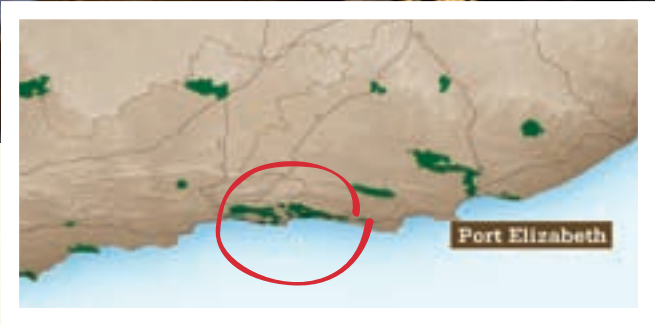


BEAUTY WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

The Garden Route includes some of the most attractive coastal and forest scenery in the country, although it's by no means pristine. For centuries humankind has exploited – and damaged – nature's bounty and today the region's national park protects the best of what's left, including several enigmatic creatures. By Scott Ramsay.



The 19th-century American conservationist and writer John Muir loved to walk in the mountains. The tall man with the long white beard would wander for days with some simple provisions and a notebook to jot down his thoughts. But he hated the word ‘hike’.

‘I don’t like either the word or the thing,’ Muir said. ‘People ought to saunter in the mountains, not hike! Do you know the origin of that word “saunter”? It’s a beautiful word. A way back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, “à la sainte terre” – to the Holy Land.

‘So they became known as *sainte-terre-ers* or saunterers. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not “hike” through them.’

After just completing the Otter Trail in Garden Route National Park, my sore legs shouted their disagreement with the word ‘saunter’. The five-day, 42-kilometre route along the coast is most definitely a hike: there’s a cumulative climb of three kilometres and trailists need to traverse several steep gorges carved out by powerful rivers, through which you may have to swim if there’s a particularly high tide.

Despite its tough reputation, the Otter Trail is an inspiring and mentally energising experience. The famous trail is

booked up more than a year in advance and nature lovers from all over the world come to walk it as a pilgrimage of sorts, one of which the austere Muir would have approved.

In fact, he would have probably considered the whole of this national park as holy. An amalgamation of the former Tsitsikamma, Knysna and Wilderness national parks, it’s another of South Africa’s most diverse protected areas, covering about 150 kilometres in a narrow band along the picturesque Southern Cape coast.

The 144 000-hectare reserve (South Africa’s fourth biggest national park) extends south from the purple-blue Outeniqua Mountains to the sea and includes eye-popping scenery: the Knysna and Harkerville indigenous forests, where 1 000-year-old yellowwood trees stand up to 50 metres tall; the Tsitsikamma coastline, comprising deep gorges, countless rock pools, waterfalls and a marine protected area; the Knysna Estuary, famous for its beautiful views and turquoise waters; and several coastal lakes with plenty of bird life near the town of Wilderness.

Protecting paradise

Garden Route National Park protects some of South Africa’s most threatened – and most beautiful – habitats, including the largest stretch of high-canopy indigenous forest in a country where less than one per cent of all land is naturally forested.

The marine protected area is the oldest in the nation, dating back to 1964, and one of the largest at roughly 66 kilometres long and about five kilometres wide. The Knysna

Estuary was ranked among the most important in the nation because of its biodiversity of fish, birds and plants.

Near the town of Wilderness, visitors can experience one of the country’s larger lake systems; three of these lakes – Rondevlei, Langvlei and Island Vlei – are Ramsar accredited, meaning they’re globally important as wetlands and bird sites.

Most visitors who speed along the N2 through the Garden Route are probably unaware of all the creatures that live within just a few kilometres of the busy national road. Bushpigs, honey badgers, porcupines, mongooses, genets, caracals and even leopards occur here. The forests shelter the smallest antelope in Africa – the blue duiker, standing just 30-centimetres high and weighing less than four kilograms – while the numerous estuaries and lakes support one of the highest concentrations of Cape clawless otters, about one for every two kilometres of coastline.

Bird life is prolific and 305 species have been recorded, including the Knysna turaco, which is commonly sighted zipping through the forest clearings, and the normally elusive Narina trogon. Fish-eagles call prodigiously, while rarer species such as crowned eagle, finfoot, grass owl and African marsh-harrier can also sometimes be seen. The lakes sustain the highest number and concentration of water bird species on the Cape’s southern and east coasts.

Then there’s the endangered Knysna seahorse, found only at Knysna and in the nearby Swartvlei and Keurbooms river estuaries. (Visit the park’s offices in Knysna to see the tiny creatures in the foyer’s fish tank.)



TOP: This stretch of attractive coastline is conserved by the park’s Tsitsikamma Marine Protected Area, the oldest in the nation. MIDDLE: The endangered African black oystercatcher finds sanctuary on the park’s beaches and rocky shorelines, while the Knysna seahorse (ABOVE) is endemic to just three estuaries in the region.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A vervet monkey lurks in the forest near Storms River; the entrance to the Knysna Estuary, an important breeding area for fish; Knysna turacos are more often heard than seen; a male bushbuck forages at Oakhurst Hut, the last camp on the Otter Trail; the Elephant Museum at Diepwalle is a great introduction to the history of the forests and the mysterious pachyderms; a malachite kingfisher perched on reeds along the Serpentine River near Ebb & Flow Rest Camp in Wilderness; *Mesembryanthemum* growing on the rocks. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Walking routes lead hikers through the indigenous forests of Knysna and Tsitsikamma.



Elephantoms

But perhaps most remarkable and mysterious of all are the elephants, the last unfenced, free-roaming wild ones of their kind in the country. Two-hundred years ago, several thousand elephants would have migrated through the area, but hunters destroyed almost all of them. Recent attempts to determine the population's status included a genetic study, photographic identification, surveys and sightings. 'These various studies suggest there could be between one and five elephants left,' park scientist Lizette Moolman explained.

Independent research by Lori Eggert of the Smithsonian Institute, in collaboration with Gareth Patterson, used DNA analysis of dung that suggests there are at least five elephant cows remaining. Lizette has started a project to build on the DNA research by trying to establish the reproductive potential of individual elephants using non-invasive hormone analysis. She also aims to cast light on the role elephants play as architects in the ecosystem.

Although rangers have photographed a few elephants over several decades, a visual sighting is rare, and Lizette emphasises that the elephants should be left in peace. 'Because of the evasive character of the Knysna elephants, we have shifted our monitoring and research efforts away from tracking and sightings to non-invasive techniques using dung.' Although the elephants often use the forest as a sanctuary from people, they spend a lot of their time feeding off the surrounding fynbos. 'These are African savanna elephants (*Loxodonta africana*), not forest elephants (*L. cyclotis*),' Lizette explained. 'In the past, the Western and Eastern Cape elephants could have utilised up to seven habitat types, but today the Knysna elephants are restricted to just two: forest and fynbos.'

Fixing the past

In the 1800s woodcutters flocked to the indigenous forests and chopped swathes of ancient timber to supply the British Royal Navy and the gold mines of the Highveld.

Farmers converted much of the natural habitat to agriculture, restricting the wild animals, including the elephants, to pockets of sanctuary.

After more than 100 years of exploitation, the government realised soon there'd be nothing left of the forests – or the elephants. In 1856, Captain Christopher Harison was appointed as conservator of the forests, although it took until 1920 for hunting of elephants to stop completely, and until 1939 for woodcutting to end.

In 1964, the Tsitsikamma forests and marine area were officially proclaimed a national park, the Wilderness lakes in 1983 and the Knysna estuary in 1985. In 2009, all three were amalgamated into Garden Route National Park.

Today, the park's staff face modern challenges. 'This is a very different national park,' manager Jill Bunding-Venter explained. 'Unlike Kruger or Kgalagadi, which have defined boundaries with fences, gates and rest camps, Garden Route National Park is very fragmented.'

'We operate on an open-access basis in urban and rural areas, across several municipalities. From wealthy Joburgers who come on holiday, to the poorer folk who come looking for work, from rehabilitating plantations back to fynbos, to patrolling the marine protected area for abalone poachers ... we deal with it all.'

The mission for Jill and her team, then, is just as unique. 'Most parks work for conserving animals and habitats, but we look at providing ecological services. Removing alien vegetation from the mountains to ensure fresh water supply to the towns, keeping the Knysna Estuary healthy so subsistence fishermen can survive and yachtsmen can sail in unpolluted water, conserving the chokka spawning areas so commercial fishermen in Plettenberg Bay don't go out of business – these are crucial not only to the ecosystem, but also to the local economy.'

The intensive use of the land and sea and the close proximity of urban and natural areas mean there are inevitable casualties. There are more than 100 stormwater





ABOVE: Paddling up the Storms River from the mouth near the SanParks rest camp with Untouched Adventures is a must-do activity. The gorge is deep, narrow and beautiful and it's not just the scenery that's breathtaking – sharks call these waters home and sometimes southern right whales come into the estuary to mate.

pipes that drain into the Knysna estuary from the town, for example. Last year the sewerage works sprung a leak, spilling tonnes of effluent into the estuary.

Then there's the national road. 'The N2 is a real killer,' scientific services manager Rod Randall told me. 'We lose a lot of animals, especially honey badgers, genets, otters, Cape grysbok and grass owls. They get blinded by headlights.'

Star attractions

The flip side of the coin is that the park offers some of the most easily accessible nature experiences. The suspension bridge at the Storms River Gorge in the Tsitsikamma Section is just a few kilometres from the national road and makes for a thrilling walk. The Goudveld and Diepwalle sections north of Knysna also offer walking routes through the remaining indigenous forests and there are some excellent mountain-biking routes through the Harkerville Forest between Plettenberg Bay and Knysna.

The more adventurous can go kayaking or scuba diving at the Storms River gorge with local operator Untouched Adventures. One morning, owner and guide Marthinus van der Westhuizen paddled up the river with me. The water was inky black and the cliffs were so steep the sky almost disappeared over our heads.

'There is plenty of sea life which make use of the sheltered estuary,' he told me, 'including stingrays, young ragged tooth sharks, otters, seals and fish such as grunter and cob. Even southern right whales come into the estuary to mate and give birth.'

Untouched Adventures also offers scuba diving to visitors, but you'd have to be braver than me to dive in

these dark, cold waters – especially when there are sharks around. 'You have nothing to worry about,' Marthinus laughed, 'because they're usually small, about 1,5 metres in size, and aren't a threat.

You're more likely to get your foot nibbled by an otter. 'I was scuba diving once and felt something tug on one of my fins. So I turned around and an otter was trying to pull it off my foot – he obviously thought it was a fish.'

Because these waters have been protected from exploitation since the 1960s, fish are tolerant of divers. 'They've become habituated to humans,' Marthinus explained, 'and they're territorial, so they stick around. You can get really close to them and I often see the same individual on different dives.'

Just up the road from Storms River Gorge is one of the so-called Big Trees, massive Outeniqua yellowwoods that are found in the Southern Cape forests. These are South Africa's tallest trees, towering above the forest canopy and living for more than a thousand years.

In the 1800s, foresters spent weeks at a time cutting down one of these behemoths, then transported it to Knysna where the shining wood would be sold to make inappropriately mundane items such as railway sleepers. Fortunately, the forests are now protected, although some old and diseased trees are cut down annually and auctioned to supply local furniture makers. The biggest are left alone and standing next to one of these arboreal gods is surreal; you feel so small and insignificant.

Flying high

In the west of the park, near the town of Wilderness, don't miss out on paddling up the forested Touw River

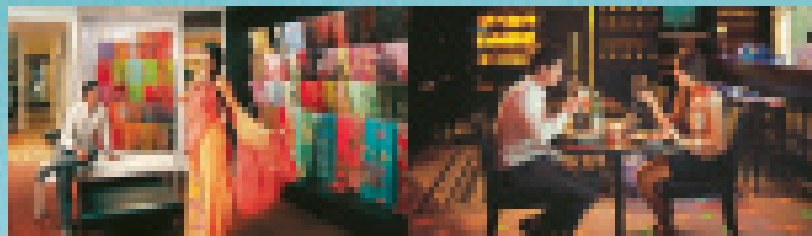


CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: Take in vistas such as this from Spitskop viewpoint, 20 kilometres north of Knysna; the rock pools and shoreline are filled with littoral life, including fish, sea urchins, anemones, alikreukel, mussels and starfish, so remember to pack goggles and a snorkel; the king protea is one of several thousand plant species to be admired here; one of several Big Trees, massive Outeniqua yellowwoods which grow close to 50 metres tall.





WHEN SHOPPING IN KUALA LUMPUR, TWO HANDS ARE NOT ENOUGH



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gorge with Eden Adventures, and birders should definitely kayak up the nearby Serpentine River to Island Lake, looking out for malachite and half-collared kingfishers perched on the reeds. But perhaps the most exhilarating of all activities in the park is tandem paragliding over the lakes and the adjacent beach.

‘Wilderness is one of the three best places in the world to paraglide,’ Mias de Klerk from Cloudbase Paragliding explained as he strapped me into the harness. ‘That’s because of the consistency of the wind and the take-off area which is really easy and safe to use.’

A little while later I was drifting high through the sky. I could see forever: the Outeniqua Mountains to my left and the four Wilderness lakes stretching to the horizon. A flock of egrets took off below us, flashes of white against the tannin-rich waters.

In the distance, I could see the forests of Knysna, where the secretive elephants still roam. Beyond that stretched the Tsitsikamma coastline where I had walked the Otter Trail a few days previously. It was an incredible view, but it also revealed the real extent of urban development. The N2 cut through the scene like a scar, and houses and buildings crowded the beaches, lakes and forests.

It seemed as if nature was under attack from humans, something which has been going on in this area for centuries. Afrikaans author Dalene Matthee wrote a famous novel, called *Kringe in die Bos*, which tells the story of how a young woodcutter confronted his society about the decimation of the Southern Cape forests and the hunting of the elephants.

Like John Muir, Matthee loved nature and would probably have considered the Garden Route worthy of the utmost reverence, a place to be considered as holy.

In her book, translated as *Circles in a Forest*, she wrote: ‘Forest law. The same law that makes the day break, that keeps the Seven-star on its course, that makes the moon obey its phases, that decides the path of the sun in winter and in summer, that sends the rain ... from the forest floor to the top of the highest tree, this law pulsates through everything like the rhythmical breathing of an almighty Being. Only man moved lawlessly into the Forest, only man appears to have the right to do as he pleases, to destroy as he pleases...’

As I descended from my flight with Mias, I was grateful that this national park was doing its best to protect what was left of this holy place. ■

➔ Travel planner overleaf

TOP RIGHT: For a different perspective of the national park, take to the skies with Cloudbase Paragliding – soaring over Wilderness Beach gives unparalleled views of the mountains, lakes and coast, but also of the urban development. **RIGHT:** Numerous rivers and streams cut deep gorges through the coastal cliffs on their journey to the Indian Ocean.

