

THE COASTAL GARDEN

The Garden Route traverses the south-eastern coast of South Africa. From swimming with seals to indulgent spa treats, zip-lines to treetop living, a luxury road trip beckons



Nature's Valley on the
Garden Route, Western Cape
Province, South Africa.

WE SHOULD BE HEADING OUT TO TRACK DOWN THE BIG

Five within Botlierskop's private game reserve. Instead we're sneaking into the Bush Spa for a relaxation session to kick off our South African odyssey. This is the second time I've dragged my friend Lizzie to Africa but this time we're doing it in style. We're road-tripping from Mossel Bay to Tsitsikamma, packing our days with high-end adventures from game drives to forest walks. We share happy grins as we're whisked to the spa-tent by golf cart.

Therapists Lyrisia and Leonie smooth away our travel-wrinkles with deep tissue massages, easing the tension with soothing hands. "Have you died and gone to heaven?" questions Lyrisia as her probing fingers elicit a groan. "That noise... was that a rainstorm?" I ask as we blearily stumble away. The puddles answer. The sky has faded into a watery-blue and angry grey clouds stalk the horizon.

Avoiding the rain, we sit at the Fire Place Restaurant. Situated between the magnificent Outeniqua Mountains and the Indian Ocean in the heart of the garden route, Botlierskop is not short of spectacular views. A lush valley spreads out before us, ringed by smooth hilly outcrops, yet the coast is close at hand. Seeking proof we indulge in a veritable fish-feast of delicious grilled crab cakes, local mussels in coconut, chili and ginger, and line-caught soft-as-butter sole.

A LUSH VALLEY SPREADS OUT BEFORE US,
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THE COAST IS CLOSE AT HAND

The heavenly temper tantrum has swollen the banks of the stream, washing away our path. "Let's drive together," says our guide Tiet, dragging us away from the remnants of lunch. We clamber into the Volkswagen Tiguan that Hertz kindly handed over at George airport. It still has a new-car smell, but splashing through muddy potholes, it won't last long. Lizzie's heavy-footed braking has us lurching forward at every crossroad, but Tiet is unfazed, maintaining a steady stream of chatter until we pull into the Zorgfontein reception area.

Tiet briefs us alongside a family of three. He's keen we make it unscathed through our catwalk experience, an enthusiasm



FROM LEFT: The magnificent Mustafa, one of the lions in Botlierskop's catwalk experience; the Walking with Lions encounter is an opportunity to interact with wild young lions; Conrad Pezula sits perched on a hilltop on the outskirts of Knysna.

"IF WE RELEASED THEM, THEY'D SURVIVE IN THE WILD AND BE EXTREMELY DANGEROUS BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT AFRAID OF PEOPLE," EXPLAINS TIET NONCHALANTLY. "WOULD YOU LIKE TO TOUCH ONE?"

we share. We're going to amble with two lions, equipped with only a stick. One look at the overgrown cats affirms this won't stop any of the beasts' hunger pangs. I'm relieved when the youngest family member disregards Tiet's advice, standing too close to the animals during our first photo opportunity. He'll be first to go.

The magnificent creatures we're shadowing were raised at Botlierskop, but they're far from tame. "If we released them, they'd survive in the wild and be extremely dangerous because they are not afraid of people," explains Tiet nonchalantly. "Would you like to touch one?" He directs me towards the large male, Mustafa, while three attendants stand guard. I give his haunch a tentative pat, angling my body into a sprinter's stance, ready to bolt. Mustafa yawns, his eyes drooping shut.

Back at the lodge we feel smug as guide, Nico, informs the jeep-load of game-drive guests that we may not see lions today. We're more excited about the trio of white rhinoceros grazing in the light drizzle. They are just one of 26 species of animal here, many of which Nico identifies en route. Zebras frolic alongside ostriches whose tiny brains cause them to sprint wildly away then grind to a halt, forgetting why they started running. Wildebeest, impala, kudu and Nyala antelopes cavort, while three giraffes nibble the most succulent leaves. A large eland crashes through the undergrowth before spotting us and racing away. We bump down a rutted track to be blocked by more rhinos; a mother and son. The mother glares furiously at the vehicle, leading her youngster to the verge where he promptly tumbles to the ground for a nap.

Almost two hours later we arrive at the Conrad Pezula Resort & Spa in Knysna. Even exploring the sumptuous suite can't dampen our appetites, so we scrabble for clean clothes and rush to dinner. There's fine dining at Zachary's or a casual ambience at Café Z. Lizzie disdainfully eyes my thrown-together outfit, leading me to Café Z. "We have some fabulous Porcini mushrooms collected from the forest today," says the waitress as we ponder the menu. I concur, while Lizzie orders the Old Cape Smokehouse Salmon Trout. The fish is meltingly-soft and the sautéed mushrooms pack a flavour punch. A towering grilled grass-fed beef burger with aged *plaas kaas* [farm cheese] ensures no room for dessert.

Café Z was inspired by the success of executive chef Geoffrey Murray's farm-to-table menus. He's been at Pezula since the beginning, so he's had time to create perfection. "There's a real plus to being in an environment like this. The relationship I have with farmers is incredible and we grow a lot of our own stuff, which has allowed me to develop a cuisine that is local and seasonal," he explains. "Food is such an important part of travel. It's something that brings you back immediately to that experience. You want to give something unique so if [people] taste it again they'll come back to that experience." Given this, I'll be frequenting Pezula.

HERTZ'S VW IS COATED WITH MUD BY THE TIME
we pull into the parking lot at Knysna Forest in the morning to meet Judy Dixon, a dynamic go-getter who, at 72 years old, leads forest and beach walks for Garden Route Trail, her son's guiding organisation. On her 60th birthday she hiked the Inca Trail. For her 70th she swam between the Croatian islands. She's battled cancer and she's fitter than both of us.

"After that rain, there should be some fabulous fungi," she says, striding into the forest, home to an immense 800-year-old yellowwood tree. The sun-dappled undergrowth is a treasure trove of mushrooms. Bright orange lichen-fans climb a tree trunk, and yellow jelly fungi cling to dead branches like tissue-paper roses. Judy halts suddenly, rolling her tongue in an aspirated purr. "There's a Knysna Loerie," she points. Lizzie and I peer bemusedly into the leafy sky as a flash of red wings wheels overhead.

Judy finds something of interest under every leaf, from a gargantuan speckled slug inching across the path, to intricately-designed spider webs and sensitive fern buds, curled protectively inwards. Her knowledge is immense, turning our stroll into a walk of discovery. Waving farewell, we're already anticipating the Moonlight Meander after dark tonight.

"THIS IS DECADENT," SAYS LIZZIE AS WE SLINK INTO THE
Pezula Spa. Therapists waft scented candles under our noses as we select fragrances for a Pezula Colour Balancing Candle Massage. The soy-based candle releases aromatherapeutic scents throughout the revitalising massage. Post-therapy we



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A mother and son white rhinoceros pair at Botlierskop Private Game Reserve; Plettenberg Bay Lagoon; bright-orange lichen in Knysna Forest; Hunter Hotels' Tsala Treetop Lodge offers canopy-level luxury; the Knysna Loerie has distinctive crimson primary flight feathers; guide Chevago on the zip-line on a Tsitsikamma Canopy Tour; Eden Adventures offer abseiling and canoeing adventures within Wilderness National Park.



lie on bathtub-shaped waterbeds within a darkened room. With the flick of a switch we're transported back to bliss as the bed vibrates through a 15-minute massage cycle.

As the sun paints the sky pink and lilac, we join Judy at Swartvlei Beach in Sedgefield. She hauls out a picnic basket containing a selection of beach-finds she uses as teaching aids. The stars twinkle into existence as we set off, our torches flashing from side to side in search of aquatic nightlife as if following a tennis match. "Watch this," Judy says, flinging a piece of washed-up jellyfish towards the shoreline. Tiny crab-creatures erupt from the sand, scrabbling to reach the midnight feast. Judy leads us to the rock pools to discover life in the intertidal zone. Anemones in a kaleidoscope of colours wave lazily to sea stars resting on the rocks. An octopus wriggles out from under a rock-shelf and scoots into the shadows, crabs scuttling about like office workers. I'm excited when, due to Judy's earlier tutelage, I recognise the egg-pod of a shark. The shiny black bubble resembles an alien life-form, its corner threads curling like tentacles.

WILDERNESS NATIONAL PARK IS A LUSH SERIES OF RIVERS, lakes, and estuaries, set against a mountain backdrop. At the headquarters of Eden Adventures, Chris Leggatt directs us to kit-up for an abseiling adventure, man-handling us into climbing harnesses and handing out protective gloves and hard-hats.

After a short hike, guide Steve clips us onto a safety rope, like washing on the line, while he prepares. Within minutes he beckons me forward, clipping my harness to the rig and directing me backwards over the cliff. I gingerly lower myself over the rim, a waterfall raging alongside, the spray caressing my face, washing away the trepidation. The tannin-stained water roars

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as it tumbles into the river where Chris' bright-yellow raft waits. It's over before we know it and Chris trades our harnesses for paddles, giving our canoe a hefty shove onto the river. "Ah the map," he mutters as an afterthought. "Just paddle under the bridge, past the camping ground, right by the pontoon ferry then park on the sandbank and follow the walkway to the waterfall."

The rhythmic dip of the paddles lulls us into silence, the serene river stealing our thoughts before they become words. Eddies ripple away to be lost in the reeds, blurring the flawless surface reflections. "There," says Lizzie, pointing to a spit of sand. A boardwalk leads into the shadowy forest and up an unwelcome bank of stairs. Eventually we round a corner to find cola-coloured water rushing through a series of slate-grey rock pools, a small waterfall at the centre. A moment of contemplation and we reverse direction, paddling back to dinner at Wilderness.

The Girls restaurant is an unexpected treasure. On the grounds of the Wilderness petrol station, its eclectic décor is framed with impressionistic paintings by local artist, Peter Pharoah, setting an African scene. Co-founder and chef Roxanne Blum dashes out of the kitchen to welcome us and share the restaurant's story. ■



WE SLIP INTO THE WATER
AND DRIFT AMONGST
THE WRITHING MASSES.
UNPERTURBED, THE
SEALS ROMP AROUND US,
SWIMMING CLOSE ENOUGH
TO GIVE A FIN-SLAP AS
THEY PASS



CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP: Conrad Pezula's
lush championship
golf course sits by the
hotel; South African
fur seals are curious
creatures; grilled
crab cake at the Fire
Place Restaurant at
Bottlierskop Private
Game Reserve.

"In 2001 we found a venue and opened with a chef, but he resigned just before our season. We had no idea how a kitchen worked, so I said: 'Before you go, please just tell us how to put on a grill' and I haven't left the kitchen since," Blum laughs. Humble beginnings, but she's onto a winner. "Why don't you have fun putting your plate of food together, and I'll cook it with pleasure," Blum says of the mix-and-match menu, implying the food is thrown together. The superb flavours suggest otherwise. We munch our way through Cajun-spiced calamari, dressed local wild oysters, a trio of game meat — eland, kudu and ostrich, and a mound of prawns basted with The Girls' signature tomato and chili-based sauce. And we still find room for a pecan-nut brownie.

It's late when we reach Tsala Treetop Lodge on the outskirts of Plettenburg Bay, but our yawns turn to open-mouthed wonder as we stroll the wooden walkway to our suite. An aquamarine dip-pool flows over the private deck, a warm glow spilling from the lounge window. A pot-bellied stove punctuates the living space, which leads into the cosy bedroom, full-length windows opening into the pitch-black night.

AFTER A HEARTY TSALA BREAKFAST OF KALAHARI EGGS with ostrich carpaccio and wilted spinach, and a refreshing dip in our deck-pool, we drive to the spectacular Tsitsikamma Forest, traversing bridges spanning deep gorges flanking the rugged coastline. At Stormsriver Adventures, we're harnessed again, ready to whizz through the forest on a Tsitsikamma Canopy

Tour. Guide Chevago gives a safety demonstration before we fly from one platform to another along a steel cable suspended 30 metres above the forest floor.

"Look here," Chevago says, pointing between the planks on the wooden platform. On hands and knees I peer downwards to see a lime-green chameleon balanced on a beam. As we zoom to a finish on the fastest of the ten lines, we're impressed by the engineering efficiency and the ethos of the company. Stormsriver Adventures is an accredited Fair Trade Tourism activity operator and plays a major role in job generation and poverty relief.

Our final adventure is at Plettenburg Bay, where Monica from Offshore Adventures zips us into wetsuits, leading us to a boat on the beach. We sit sweating until a tractor rams us with a jolt into the waves. At the local seal colony, hundreds of South African fur seals sprawl across the rocks, plopping sporadically into the water to join the youngsters playing.

We slip into the water and drift amongst the writhing masses. Unperturbed, the seals romp around us, swimming close enough to give a fin-slap as they pass. They twist and flip jubilantly, puppy-dog eyes pleading for us to join in. "It's time to go," says Monica apologetically, and we haul ourselves on board. We're reluctant to conclude our exploration of the garden route. Looking back, a patch of seals roll, flipping one fin out of the water in unison as if to wave a sad goodbye. ☀

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