

# EASY ON THE EYE

Five days, 60 km. On the Garden Route Trail you will be indulged by the scenery, an expert guide who opens your eyes to the language of nature, and the comfort of travelling on your own two feet. **Words and pictures by Dale Morris**



There are almost always dolphins to be seen here, no matter what time of year.

The Garden Route lies close to George.



“SHHH. NOW WATCH what the oystercatcher does next,” whispered Mark to our little group of barefoot hikers. We were somewhere on Wilderness beach, crouched behind a barnacle encrusted rock like a bunch of sneaky voyeurs. “He will wedge that clam into the ground and then he will wait.”

And that’s exactly what the little black bird did. He twisted his quarry into the damp sand, then stood back and pretended not to be there.

“When the clam opens slightly in a bid

to rebury itself, the bird will slip his sharp beak inside and snip away the muscle holding the two shell halves together. It’s very surgical.”

And right on cue, the scene played out as Mark had described.

A walk with Mark is like that. Whatever you see or hear or smell, he will be there to offer some insight. It’s like being immersed into a BBC wildlife documentary complete with running commentary. Not exactly David Attenborough, but close!

A cheerful, well-informed, charismatic

and engaging guide can make all the difference between an excellent hike and a frustrating one. Guides should not be there simply to lead you down a path and to stop you getting lost. They should be an integral interface between you, the visitor, and an area’s secrets and treasures. A good guide can make a so-so trail good and a good trail fantastic.

Mark Dixon of Garden Route Trails is one of the good guides. As for his five-day, 60-kilometre slackpacker route? Well, scenically, it’s got to be amongst the best

in the country. There are none of the Big Five, not unless you count the Garden Route’s virtually invisible leopards, which you are not going to see, not unless you are insanely lucky. But there are lots of lovely little things along the way, most of which you wouldn’t notice if not for Mark’s keen eyes and knowledge. Expect to encounter a plethora of succulent and fynbos plants, lots of birds, insects and spiders, and beach life in abundance, as well as dolphins, whales in winter and perhaps even an otter or caracal and a cuttlefish, too. ▶

1. On the Garden Route Trail you take the time to watch crabs scuttling along the beach. 2. The black oystercatcher is a top tick. 3. Winter is prime whale-watching time.



Guide Mark Dixon opens trailists' eyes to the wonders of nature.

Mark will be there at every encounter, offering tidbits of info and stories to match. His Garden Route Trail commences in the Ebb and Flow sector of the Garden Route National Park and takes you by kayak up and down the Touws River, where otters and waterfalls prevail. It meanders along forest trails and beaches and dunes, takes you to waterways and lakes, and traverses little known corners of CapeNature's Goukamma Reserve, before ending up in Brenton on Sea, home to the scarce Brenton Blue Butterfly.

En route, you will canoe the Harkerville River, snorkel in rock pools and eat lots of Mark's homemade muffins.

**A wild and empty coast**

"Where are all the people?" I asked once the oystercatcher had flown away. "Surely we are in the heart of the popular Garden Route?"

The busy N2 highway was nearby and the tips of the dunes were festooned with opulent mansions, yet the beach was empty and all was quiet.

"The Garden Route may well be one of the world's most popular tourist destinations," Mark commented as we continued our hike along the sands, "but there are still plenty of places where people don't go. The Outeniqua Mountains, the thick forests, the vegetated dune fields and the long wide beaches. They all remain empty."

Earlier that morning, before the sun had risen, we were rudely roused from our slumber by a courting pair of fish eagles which, in turn, sent a flustering flock of guinea fowl into hysterics.

A tree full of nesting weaver birds responded in kind, followed by a trio of loud-mouthed hadedas.

I could hardly hear Mark when he came a-knocking at our doors to 'wake us up'. "It's a bit noisy," he said as we gathered for breakfast and coffee, "but it's good noise. No people. Just us and the birds."

We then had an exhilarating paddle up Touws River, followed by a splash in a waterfall waterhole, before heading onto the Wilderness National Park Beach area. It was merely a short stroll east until the sounds of the road and the sights of houses atop dunes gave way to sandstone cliffs and a feeling of perfect isolation. Cormorants sat perched upon precarious sandstone ledges, while behind the breakers a pod of dolphins surfed for fun.

The 20-kilometre section of undeveloped coastline to Sedgfield, the majority of which falls under SANParks jurisdiction, feels surprisingly remote considering there is a great deal of development occurring right now on the Garden Route.

"There are a few longish stretches on this hike," said Mark later as we paused to watch a southern right whale strut his stuff out at sea, "but in essence we are not trying to cover vast distances. It's far better that we take our time to really enjoy and observe. No need to rush."

So, there we sat for 30 minutes on the slope of a dune, watching the magnificent whale conduct his explosive courtship dance, while Mark spoke about fish migrations and defence mechanisms of cephalopod [mollusc and inkfish - Ed.].

The following day, after a night in a ▶



Fascinating creatures lurk in rock pools along the coast.

1. Paddling makes up a large part of the Garden Route Trail, giving you the chance to experience the surrounds in a different way.
2. A hike among the tall indigenous trees is wonderfully calming.
3. Who can resist a dip in a waterfall waterhole?
4. A pin-tailed whydah poses on a perch.
5. Among the dappled forest light, a spotted eagle-owl considers the next move.
6. The chalets in Goukamma Nature Reserve are comfortable and roomy.



1



2



3

4



5

6





You carry only a day pack on the trail, so the walking is relatively easy.

hotel on Sedgefield beach, we walked along more dramatic coastal scenery and into the little-known Goukamma Nature Reserve. It's one of South Africa's precious gems and, although it is only 2 500 hectares in size, the marine component is quite large and extends out to sea for nearly two kilometres.

Mark, who once worked as a marine fisheries observer in the Antarctic, confesses to it being one of his favourite places.

"A great many endangered and threatened fish stocks survive, largely because of marine protected areas like this one," he told us while we pootled around in rock pools searching for octopuses and urchins. "No commercial fishing by boat is allowed and, unless you are prepared to walk long distances with your gear, it's not easy to go shore fishing here either."

There are almost no access roads to the beach along Goukamma's 18-kilometre shoreline. It's an intentional management plan to keep hordes of fishers at bay and one which has left the near shore wildlife largely intact. "It's awesome for hiking," said Mark, "you almost never encounter people."

Once again, I was struck by how isolated, untamed and untouched the Garden Route Trail felt, despite being in the heart of a busy tourist region. Our path for that day skirted the coast, but also took us into the undulating vegetated dune fields that account for much of Goukamma. There, milkwood forests cling to valley floors, while coastal fynbos and swaying grasslands cover the slopes. To the north,

the Outeniqua Mountains dominate the horizon, while the south is all about the sea and wide sandy beaches. There are almost always dolphins to be seen here, no matter what time of year.

That evening we had a fish braai at our CapeNature rondavels on the Goukamma River near the Buffalo Bay

estuary, turned in for an early night, and fell asleep to the sound of crashing surf and croaking frogs.

Day four saw us back in a kayak, only this time we were

rowing up the placid waters of the Goukamma River; a lovely stretch of water which meanders past giant sand dunes and rolling rural countryside. The birding was magnificent and we saw a variety of kingfishers, wading birds and all sorts of other feathered thingies including a spotted eagle-owl. Mark's commentary followed us with every oar stroke. The last day of the hike took us alongside the river and back onto the beach at Buffalo Bay, before heading to our final destination at Brenton.

Walking and paddling the Garden Route Trail had been very good. I had spent time looking at ants with a magnifying glass and peering at hermit crabs in rock pools. We had paddled and strode at a sedate pace. At the end of it, I felt relaxed, rather than dog tired, which is what tends to occur on multi-day hikes.

Most of all though, I had seen that the Garden Route, with its reserves and parks and conservation areas, truly still is a wild and beautiful place. You just need to go experience it with a passionate and knowledgeable guide like Mark Dixon. 🐾

"There are still plenty of places where people don't go."

TRIP  
PLANNER

To book the Garden Route Trail, contact Mark Dixon on 082-213-5931 or book online at [www.gardenroutetrail.co.za](http://www.gardenroutetrail.co.za). Minimum four people on a trail, maximum 12. Rates depend on the number of people, ranging from R5 450 to R6 450 a person sharing. Garden Route National Park 044-302-5600 Central SANParks Reservations 012-428-9111

# LOVE THOSE HANDLES

Ancient forests with fern-ringed swimming holes. Cliff-top panoramas with hideaway beaches. For mountain bikers who stay over in the Garden Route National Park, the treats are exquisite. Words and pictures by Jacques Marais



I have a dream. I will be the first to admit it is not really a Martin Luther King kind of dream, but it is a pretty cool dream nonetheless. In this little fantasy of mine, I am pedalling along one of the many densely wooded Garden Route mountain-biking trails, ancient trees towering above me. ▶



Ensure you have the right gear: a helmet and a hydration pack.

As I careen ever deeper into the forest, ferns and heather whip past, as do patches of bright sunlight amid the emerald shadows. Dank air wind-tunnels past me, the wheels whirr on the muddy trail, cicadas drone in the undergrowth.

Suddenly, a branch snaps ahead of me, alongside the track. The dense tangle of brush shudders and parts like an organic curtain. As a forest elephant steps onto the track, it feels as if I have been time-lined back into a distant Jurassic Age.

So far, this vision has remained exactly that, a figment of what some might say is an over-active imagination or maybe wishful thinking. But then, last year on a dawn ride in Farleigh Forest above Karatara, I happened upon a mound of elephant droppings so fresh you could just about see steam whispering into the freezing morning air.

If you head out onto one of the many Garden Route MTB trails, chances are you might get lucky. The problem is, if you're a glass-half-empty type, there are so many routes to choose from. Where to start?

"Look, if you want to please the whole family on a single route, the place to go is without any doubt the Harkerville Trail," says Tony Cook of Mountain Bike Africa. "This is one of the flagship trails near Knysna and a range of riding options covers everything from easy gravel road cruises to extreme single-track along the coastal cliff-tops."

I love Harkerville, especially the more challenging Red Route with its rocky stream crossings and slippery wooden bridges, but you need to be an experienced rider if you want to tackle these. However, the 13-km Yellow Route, mostly along flattish forestry roads and tracks, is perfect

for kids or beginners, and should not take more than an hour and a half.

The 11-km Blue Route incorporates a bit of single-track, but is still rated as easy to moderate, so give this a try if you're keen to test yourself a bit. Venture onto the 14-km Green Route if you have average riding skills and if you're comfortable being on the bike for more than a couple of hours. The fynbos and indigenous forest views will make it worthwhile.

Mountain biking allows you to quickly escape into far-away corners where you can have the wilderness all to yourself.

Once you've mastered this thing called mountain biking, do yourself a favour and return to Harkerville

for its pièce de résistance, the Red Route. Breathtaking forest and ocean views, pristine single-track, testing climbs, sketchy tree roots and muddy corners. This 22-km of superb riding will keep you on your bike for hours, so come fully stoked!

Other than Harkerville, the national park offers a handful of other rides in the western part of the Garden Route. The 19-km Homtini and 22-km Petrus-se-Brand trails are a bit technical for beginner riders, but there's an easy route in the Farleigh section of the Knysna Forest.

If you're in the Wilderness section of the park, definitely try out the Wilderness Lakes MTB Route. This is an easy-to-navigate ride of up to 30 km, mostly along public roads meandering amid the waterways of this Ramsar site. A good map of the area is available from the Eden Adventures offices in the park itself. This is one of the best ways to enjoy the superb birding here upon the wonderful Wilderness Lakes.

#### Tsitsikamma trails

"Until recently, mountain biking in the Knysna and Plettenberg Bay area of the Garden Route has been the only option for ▶



Above and right: Mountain biking in Knysna's forests is an activity for the whole family. Below: The fern-fringed undergrowth hides a multitude of creatures.





**MTB GURU**  
Jacques Marais' *Top MTB Trails* is the definitive guide to the top mountain-biking routes in the Western, Eastern and Northern Cape.

riders keen to explore the national park by bike," smiles Chris Sykes. A race organiser, enthusiastic rider and hotel owner in Storms River Village, Chris has been pushing hard to highlight the exceptional trails further east in the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park.

"Many of these trails cross a range of properties, including Cape Pine's forestry plantations and farms owned by local landowners, such as Misty Mountain Reserve," he explains as we pedal off from Tsitsikamma Village Inn and into the Plaatbos section of the national park. A rollicking ride blasts you down into a gorge and onto a steep ascent to the coastal cliffs overlooking Storms River mouth on the other side.

A host of signs along the way indicate that you are at a confluence of trails, with the Cape Pine plantations linking to the adjoining Misty Mountain Reserve. If the intermediate trail from Storms River Village sounds too steep for your liking, plan your ride so you start out along either the easy Yellow or Orange Route from Misty Mountain itself. All in all, you have a mind-blowing 60 km of trail on which to play, including some single-track tripping through dense indigenous forest.

Riding along a trail, especially in the Garden Route, is not necessarily about the speed and adrenalin of the sport. To me, a ride is enhanced by those moments of absolute stillness into which your bike allows you to escape. Plan some time out of the saddle on your next ride, because sometimes you need to be off the bike to get the best out of a ride. When next you bomb across a glistening creek, stop and get down on your haunches. Remain still for long enough and the secretive creatures of this magical world will begin to show themselves.

At first it may be only the croak of common river frogs but, as you wait, the symphony around you will swell with the many voices of the forest. Terrestrial bulbuls will add a timpani twitter, coucals will ululate and Knysna turacos are sure to ratchet raucously to pierce the cicada hum. Eventually you'll be surrounded by a multi-layered blanket of sound. As you allow it to roll over you, you will be able to 'see' the wilderness with your ears. And, although you may never actually bump into those elusive forest elephants, the chances are good you'll see signs of them, or dozens of other rare and fascinating creatures. 🐾

**MUST-RIDE MTB TRAILS**

Wherever you stay in the Garden Route National Park, you'll find a thrilling MTB trail close to you. For full details, visit [www.sanparks.org/parks/garden\\_route/tourism/activities/mountain\\_bikes.php](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/garden_route/tourism/activities/mountain_bikes.php)

TRAIL NAME	Harkerville MTB Trail	Farleigh MTB Trail	Misty Mountain MTB Trail
STAY OVER	Luxurious tree-top chalet from R1300 for one or two people	Diepwalle camping decks from R170 for one or two people	Storms River Mouth campsite from R290 or forest hut from R470 for one or two people
DISTANCE	12 km Green Route to 22 km-plus on the Red Route	From 8 km to 25 km	From 6 km to 60 km
DURATION	1½ to 5 hours	1½ to 4½ hours	½ to six hours
GRADING	Easy and intermediate, Red Route is difficult	Easy to intermediate	Easy to difficult
PERMIT	R35 an adult a day, R18 a child, available from kiosk at the start. Entry for a year R190, get tag from SANParks office.	R35 an adult a day, R18 a child, available from the gate. Tel 044-356-9021	R50 with your own bike, R100 gets you a permit and bike from Misty Mountain Reserve Tel 042-280-3699



Plan some time out of the saddle on your next ride, because sometimes you need to be off the bike to get the best out of an MTB experience.