

OCEANIC Addo

It's a national park but not as you know it. There aren't any fences, travel is by boat and you might get wet. Dale Morris checks out the marine section of Addo Elephant National Park.



THE COAST IS CLEAR
The spectacular Alexandria hiking trail traces the shores of Algoa Bay.



TOP FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

ISLAND STYLE Bird Island is home to a colony of approximately 180 000 gannets.

DAWN PATROL Thanks to their speedy intercept boat, rangers have rid the islands of poachers.

PLAYFUL Cape fur seals are inquisitive and will try to get a good look at you.



Standing on the guano-stained rocks of the aptly named Bird Island in Algoa Bay, I sucked in a lungful of salty air and watched gannets circle around a lighthouse. There were thousands of them in the sky and thousands more drifting around on the breezes, like a blizzard above the sea.

Zip, zip, zip. They dived into the water, bringing death to whatever fish lay beneath. There was a whale out there too, a humpback by the looks of it. Next to that, a pod of bottle-nose dolphins.

I had heard the waters of Algoa Bay were particularly rich. Something to do with fresh water aquifers creating the ideal conditions for planktonic blooms. Here was the evidence, flying and hunting and porpoising in front of my eyes. Close to where I stood, every bit of ground was occupied by a pair of gannets guarding their muddy nests and screeching warnings. It was deafening, but nonetheless a lovely sound, nature at its most exuberant.

Penguins lunged at my shoelaces. Waves crashed upon the rocks. Whales exhaled with a woosh. Seals barked. All this in a national park more commonly known for its elephants.

The other side of Addo

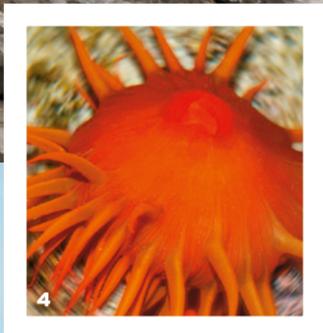
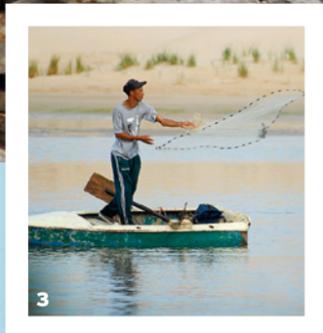
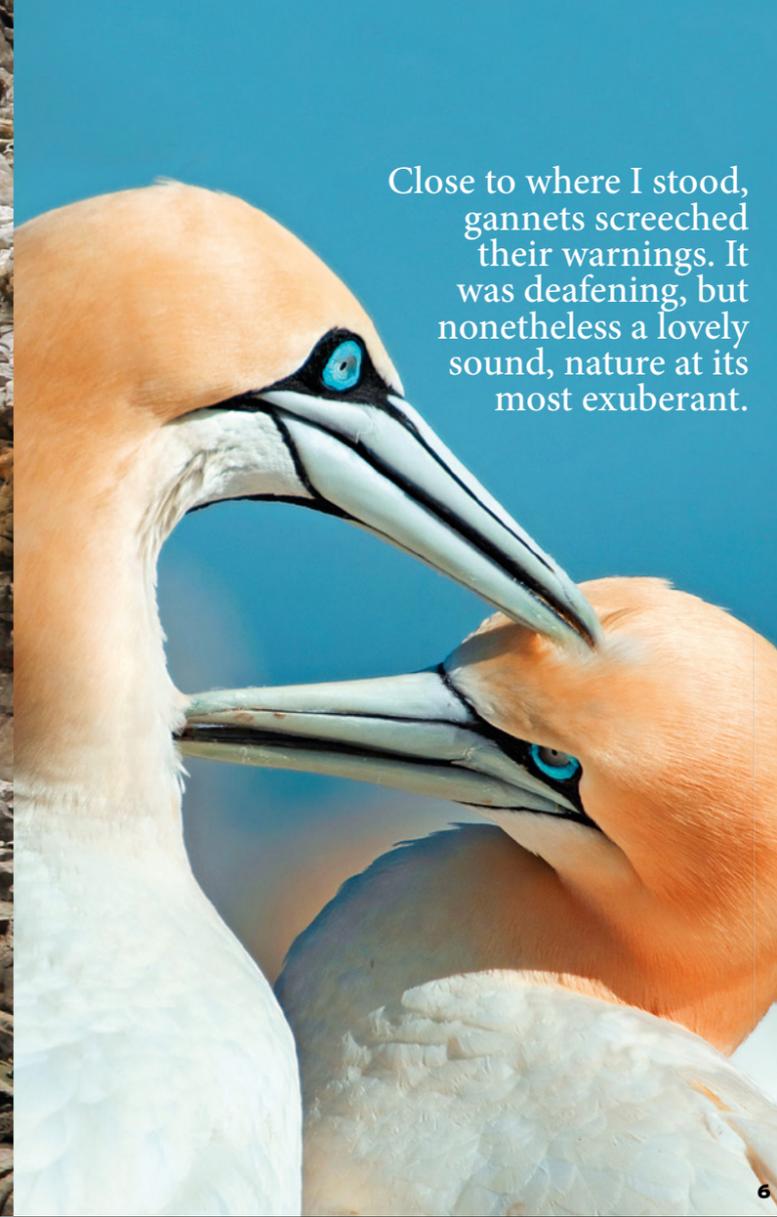
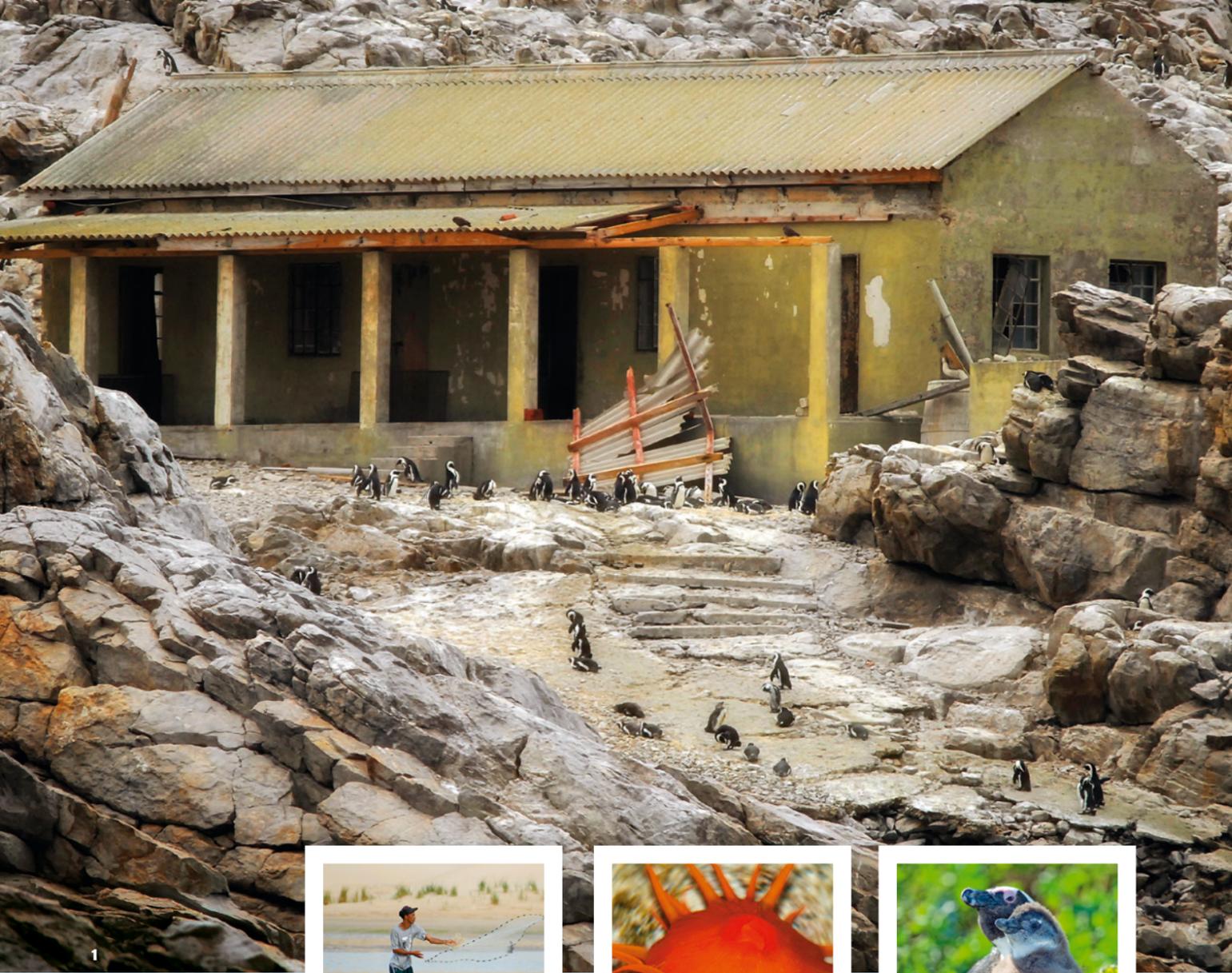
Henvik Visser, part of Addo Elephant National Park's new marine team, has been protecting the Algoa islands for the past two years. He patrols the waters in the park's intercept boat, collects data on bird populations, rescues beached whales and dolphins, and takes care of all things logistical.

To look at him, he more resembles a rock-club bouncer than a conservationist, what with his goatee beard, shaved head and wrap-around shades. But when your job entails arresting poachers, it probably pays to look a bit hardened. ▶

Henvik Visser



Close to where I stood, gannets screeched their warnings. It was deafening, but nonetheless a lovely sound, nature at its most exuberant.



“The seven small islands of Algoa Bay are extremely important to many types of birds, and marine organisms,” he told me as we gingerly made our way past snapping beaks and slippery bird poop.

“We offer sanctuary to around 45 per cent of Africa’s penguins. We are also home to the only breeding population of roseate terns in the country. That rock over there,” Henvik said pointing to a small outcropping being bashed by waves, “is the most easterly seal colony on the continent.”

Then he waved his hand around in a vague sweeping motion, indicating the gannets. “It’s hard to count these, but we figure there are around 180 000. That makes this the largest colony in the world.”

Henvik also explained that the rocky islands and submerged reefs of Algoa are home to one of the last (if not *the* last) viable populations of abalone in the world. (Abalone is a large marine mollusc and is considered a delicacy in some Asian countries.) The species needs to gather in large numbers before they will spawn. The good news is once that’s happened, currents out at the islands will carry their larvae off to recolonise areas previously denuded by illegal harvesting.

At between R300 and R800 a kilo when sold illegally, it’s obvious why poachers would go after abalone. Consequently, the Algoa islands have been a popular target for decades.

“Before SANParks took over the running of the islands in 2002,” Henvik told me, “the poaching gangs would pretty much work around the clock with impunity.”

Now, however, the Addo marine team have the equipment, the manpower and the legal teeth to investigate and arrest anyone they find involved in illegal activities.

“We have seen very little poaching in the past few years. Not since we got our boat,” said Henvik. Now there aren’t any poachers’ camps on the islands, bird numbers are increasing and nesting rates are up.

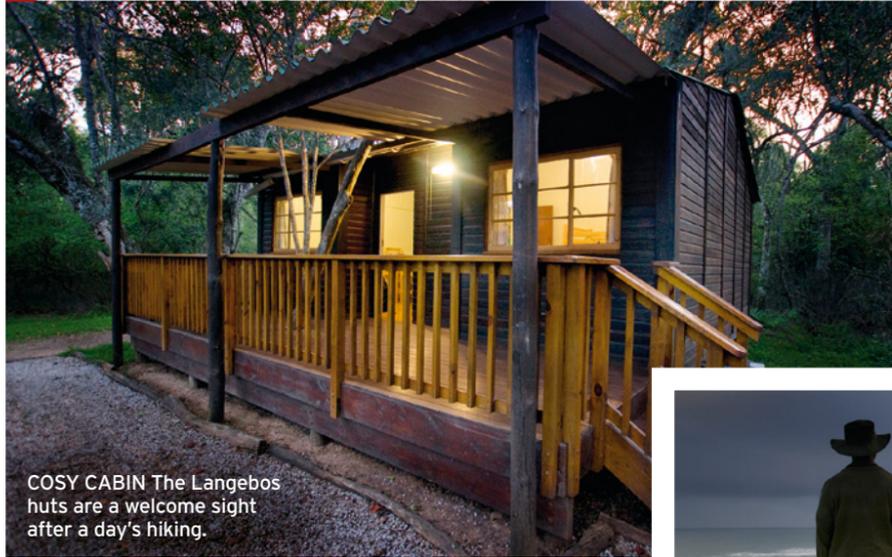
A reserve at sea

Later, when I met Anban Padayachee, the marine section manager, I discovered plans are afoot to turn much of Algoa Bay into a Marine Protected Area or MPA. “It’s going to be around 120 000 hectares in size,” Anban told me from the stoep of his ranger’s residence close to the Alexandria dune fields, a sector of Addo Elephant National Park.

“Along with all CITES signatory countries, we have been mandated to protect a minimum of 20 per cent of our marine environment, a figure we have not yet reached. But when the proposed MPA is finalised, we will be much closer to attaining that goal.”

1. Almost half of Africa’s penguins live on the Algoa islands.
2. You’ll see bottlenose dolphins on a boat trip.
3. The Marine Protected Area will regulate fishing of all kinds.
4. The rich marine life includes vibrant sea anemones.
5. Penguin chicks have grey down and get their adult feathers 12 to 18 months after leaving the nest.
6. Gannet pairs work together to raise their chicks.
7. When not hunting, Cape fur seals enjoy basking in the sun.

PARK IN THE SPOTLIGHT



COSY CABIN The Langebos huts are a welcome sight after a day's hiking.



Obviously, when an authority starts to put regulations on people such as recreational, subsistence and commercial fishers (as well as poachers), there are bound to be a few surly faces. But, as Anban explained, local stakeholders will be consulted throughout the process. Eventually, when the MPA is formally gazetted, it will be zoned into various sections, some of which will allow for both recreational and commercial fishing activities.

"All of South Africa's fishing industries are in serious decline due to over harvesting," said Anban, a fanatical fisherman himself. "We need some protected areas where species can breed safely so their offspring replenish those areas which are empty or nearly empty. That is what the Algoa Bay MPA will be about. Without such places, we will soon have no fish to catch."

Damaged marine environments, if given time off from over-exploitation, seem to recover quite quickly, faster than their terrestrial counterparts do. The Addo MPA is sure to provide real benefits to the adjacent local communities, the fishing industry and the economy of South Africa on the whole.

For me the biggest reward is this space, a world of blues and whites where marine wildlife is free to dazzle and delight us. Isn't it time you came to explore? 🐾

SEE THE ISLANDS

There are plans to bring tourists to Bird Island once impact studies have been carried out. "We would not want to do anything that may jeopardise the birds and other wildlife," said Henvik Visser, section ranger. In the meantime, SANParks occasionally arranges special trips, information about which can be found on the SANParks website or in *Wild* magazine.

The St Croix group of islands, on the Port Elizabeth side of Algoa Bay, also has a penguin and seal colony. Tourists are not allowed to set foot on these islands but there are regular boat tours from PE which go close enough so you can see the inhabitants. You are very likely to spot whales and dolphins, too.

- **Cost** From R800 a person. Discounts for groups.
- **Contact** 041-378-2528, www.raggycharters.co.za



With a Wild Card you don't have to pay daily conservation fees at Addo - or any of the more than 80 parks in the programme. Turn to page 53 for more information and an application form.

Walk through a dune sea that reminds you of the Namib desert.

GETTING THERE

The coastal section of Addo lies around 70 km from Port Elizabeth. Travelling from PE, take the N2 towards Grahamstown, turn off at Motherwell and follow the signs to Addo Elephant National Park.

WEATHER

Summers are hot, winters mild. Fog and mist are common throughout the year.

ACCOMMODATION

The Langebos huts are quaint wooden cabins deep in the forest and are also used by hikers on the Alexandria hiking trail. Furnishings are basic and you need to take your own bedding and pillows. The two cabins sleep six each and share a hot water shower and toilet. R90 a person a night.

ACTIVITIES

The two-day Alexandria hiking trail is one of the best ways to experience the serene coastal regions of Addo National Park. This 36-km self-catering trail begins in the Woody Cape section and traverses shady forests before taking you down to the beach where you hike alongside the Alexandria dune fields and towering sandstone cliffs. Make sure you leave early in the morning to avoid being on the dunes when the sun is at its fiercest. The trail hosts a maximum of 12 people at a time, bookings can be made for a minimum of three.

CONTACT

Alexandria hiking trail bookings 041-468-0916/8, matyholweni@sanparks.org