

The Garden Route



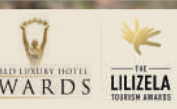
Discover the history of the Garden Route and other interesting information about this area



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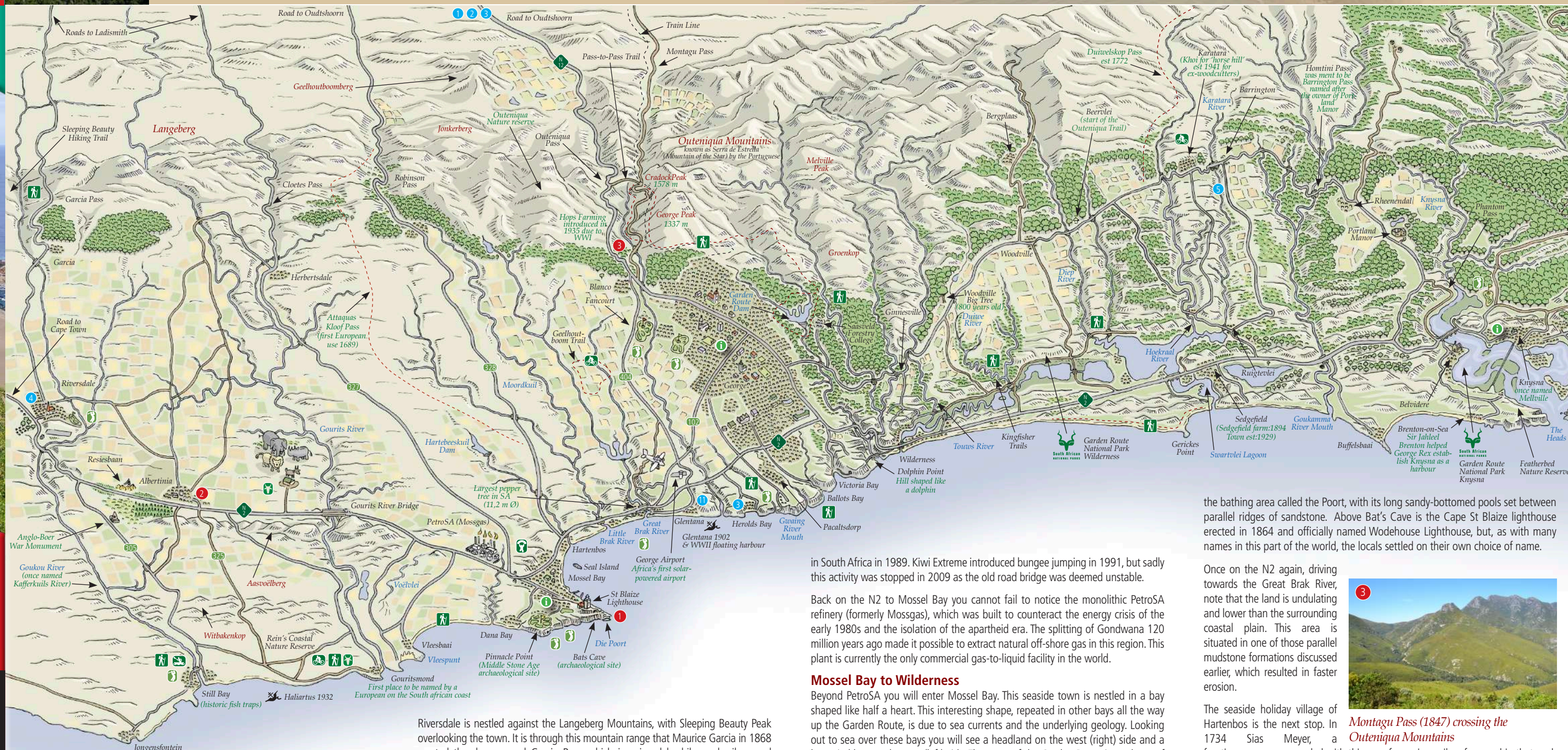
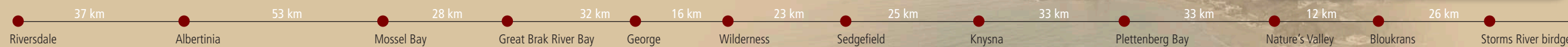
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'Enamelled meads and the most beautiful pastures still added to this scene of magnificence with which I was truly enchanted.'

Francois le Vaillant • intrepid explorer • on visiting Outeniqualand • 1781



An accidental tourist

In 1488 Bartolomeu Dias, the celebrated Portuguese explorer, was the first visitor to the Garden Route. He was on a mission to discover a sea route to the East as the old land trade route had been closed off in 1453 by the Ottoman Empire. When he realized he had unwittingly rounded the Cape, his crew refused to go any further east, but the decision was taken to land on the coast to take on supplies. They named the bay at which they landed Aguada de São Bras (today's Mossel Bay). Since that first visit to South Africa by a foreigner many others have enjoyed the friendliness and beauty of the Garden Route with happy outcomes, unlike Dias: when he met the local Khoi-na inhabitants everything went happily at first, with trinkets and gifts given, and a bit of song and dance, but for some reason a clash started, whereupon Dias killed one of the locals with his crossbow, causing the locals to flee in terror.

A route to explore

This guide takes the form of a road trip following the N2 as the main route from west to east, as this is the direction in which the history of the area unfolded, (even though the Portuguese used Mossel Bay and later Plettenberg Bay for supplies – without actually occupying the territory – before the expansion from the Cape). The Garden Route officially starts at Riversdale and ends just over 300 km away at Storms River. The dry rolling hills from Riversdale to Mossel Bay seem very different from the lush forests of the later part of the journey, but in terms of geology they share the same features. The mountains on the left are a continuous ripple of the Cape Fold Mountains (consisting of hard sandstone). These mountains were buckled, bent and folded when South America and the Falkland Plateau smashed into Africa when the continent of Gondwana was formed 180 million years ago. On the right is the Atlantic coast that by contrast was formed when Gondwana finally broke up and drifted apart 60 million years later. The land between the mountains and the sea varies in width from 45 km to a mere 5 km. (The narrower the gap, the more chance there is of forests.) This coastal plateau 200 m above the sea was once a wave-cut platform, under water when sea levels were at their highest 20 million years ago. (At its lowest the present shoreline varied between 2 km and 30 km out to sea.)

Riversdale to Mossel Bay

Riversdale is a farming town on the banks of the Goukou River, which was once known as the Kafferkuils ('native pools') River. When the early European explorers (in 1667) came across a Khoi-na kraal here, they met a powerful chief (given the name Black Captain) who later wore with great pride a copper crown given to him by the Dutch East India Company (DEIC or VOC). The first European homesteads, Zeekoegat and De Doornkraal (now a guest house), were established in 1746, and in 1838 after a church had been built, Riversdale was proclaimed a town named after Harry Rivers (Civil Commissioner of Swellendam). This delightful small town and the surrounding area have a lot to offer visitors. Within the town are a number of historical highlights and a botanical garden.



The Cape clawless otter is the third-largest otter in the world.

Riversdale is nestled against the Langeberg Mountains, with Sleeping Beauty Peak overlooking the town. It is through this mountain range that Maurice Garcia in 1868 created the deep-gorged Garcia Pass, which is enjoyed by hikers, abseilers, and hanggliders. (This pass was later improved by Thomas Bain.)

After leaving Riversdale for Mossel Bay, you will travel on an undulating road. This area, consisting of Bokkeveld Shale (mudstone), was once under water. At Resiesbaan on the left of the road evidence of mining activity can be seen in large piles of golden-coloured rocks – lime (which is made up of ancient marine life) is mined here for agricultural purposes (to counteract soil acidity). Along the sides of the road restios proliferate. These reed-like plants are sought after throughout South Africa for thatching.

On the way to Albertinia, Still Bay and Gouritsmond, two seaside holiday resorts off this section of the N2, are worth a visit. En route to Still Bay, there is a monument at Soebatsvlakte which commemorates the most southerly battle of the Anglo-Boer War in 1901. Besides beautiful beaches, a river for canoeing and hiking trails, Still Bay has some interesting Khoi-na fish traps which are hundreds of years old. Gouritsmond was one of the first places on the Garden Route to be given a European name. On first sighting land Dias named this river Rio das Vaccas ('river of herdsmen'). Over time the original Khoi-na name has stuck, like many of the names of the Garden Route.

The next town on the N2 is Albertinia (originally Fonteinelei) which was founded in 1900 and named after a predikant (Dutch Reformed minister). Fronting the N2 are shops and amenities that make it a popular rest stop. Behind this is a working town, with farming, thatching, mining and one of the largest Aloe ferox production areas in the world. You can visit an aloe factory and then pose next to the largest sculpture of an aloe in the world. This is also the home of Louis Oosthuizen, who won the British Open in 2010: it is here as a young golfer that he honed his skills on the local nine-hole course with greens made of sand and oil.

Further along, the road is flanked on the right by Aasvoëlberg, a remnant of the Cape Fold Mountains. In 1918 a large diamond found on its slopes caused much excitement. Just before the Gouritz River Bridge on the left is the entrance to the Garden Route Game Lodge, one of the first to re-introduce into the Cape the big five and other game previously present. (By 1809 the Cape buffalo had been shot out in this area.) The Gouritz River (named after the Gourikwa Khoi-na who lived on its banks) is millions of years old and was a major obstacle for early explorers. The first of the three bridges to cross this section of the river was built in 1892. What really put Gouritz on the map was the first bridge swing off these structures (in 1986) by Hilton Davies, a rock climber from Cape Town. His friends Andy de Klerk and Neil Terry, who had base-jumped off the bridge, decided that the change in the wind meant it would be a bad idea for Hilton to jump, so instead he jumped off the bridge using his climbing ropes. His mad act was followed by a few climbers and friends from Cape Town: this saw the start of the first commercial bridge swing (known as the King Swing)



Die Poort and Cape St Blaize in Mossel Bay.

in South Africa in 1989. Kiwi Extreme introduced bungee jumping in 1991, but sadly this activity was stopped in 2009 as the old road bridge was deemed unstable.

Back on the N2 to Mossel Bay you cannot fail to notice the monolithic PetroSA refinery (formerly Mossgas), which was built to counteract the energy crisis of the early 1980s and the isolation of the apartheid era. The splitting of Gondwana 120 million years ago made it possible to extract natural off-shore gas in this region. This plant is currently the only commercial gas-to-liquid facility in the world.

Mossel Bay to Wilderness

Beyond PetroSA you will enter Mossel Bay. This seaside town is nestled in a bay shaped like half a heart. This interesting shape, repeated in other bays all the way up the Garden Route, is due to sea currents and the underlying geology. Looking out to sea over these bays you will see a headland on the west (right) side and a log-spiral bay on the east (left) side. The coast of the Garden Route is made up of repeated parallel formations (running north/south) of hard sandstone (worn-down ridges) and softer mudstone (a build-up of sediment deposits in the troughs after the folding of the sandstone). When the strong Benguela Current sweeps down the coast towards Cape Town it eats away at the softer mudstone that over millions of years has formed these bays.

Mossel Bay is a great holiday destination with one of the mildest climates in the world. It offers beautiful beaches and many other attractions and activities, but its long history glues it all together. Mossel Bay can boast of many firsts in South African history, such as the first landing of Europeans on southern African soil (at present-day Munro Bay), the first European meeting with the local population, the first shooting of a local, the first successful trade by Vasco de Gama nine years later (a bull for three bracelets), and the first form of a postal system when a sailor's boot was left hanging from a milkwood tree near the spring which served passing ships. The most famous message left here was the sad news that Dias had drowned in 1500, whereupon Joao da Nova, the Portuguese upon the beginning of the first European structure on South African soil. Mossel Bay remained one of the main watering places for the Portuguese until the beginning of the 1600s when two factors made them move their replenishment stations to Mozambique. The first was that encounters between the Khoi-na and Portuguese generally ended in conflict with loss of life, and secondly the Dutch under the VOC were becoming a stronger player along the Cape coast. It was a Dutch navigator who in 1601 renamed the place Mossel Bay because of all the mussel shells found there. At a much later date when the British officially established the town in 1848, they tried to rename it Aliwal South but the name was rejected. Before the First British Occupation of the Cape, the Dutch had built a granary and a permanent trading post (1787) to serve the ever-shifting frontier. By this stage small-scale farmers, woodcutters and explorers were pushing beyond the official Cape boundaries. The 1865 and 1900 ostrich feather booms in the Karoo made a port necessary – Mossel Bay could fulfil this need and so prospered. Today a mix of the fuel industry, tourism, light industry, fishing and farming has kept this town on the map. Before returning to the N2 visit the Maritime Museum (which has a full-scale replica of Dias's caravelle), the Post Office Tree (over 500 years old), the original spring and the old village. Towards the headland visit Bat's Cave (once home to ancient man) beyond which you can walk along one of the finest sea-cliff paths in the world. (This path runs along the nonconformity, with Table Mountain sandstone dipping diagonally into the sea and a younger formation of horizontal mustard-orange Kirkwood sandstone above. This Kirkwood stone can be seen in the masonry work on the old buildings in Mossel Bay.) Below Bat's Cave is

Largest sculpture in the world of an aloe (9 m) at Albertinia.

the bathing area called the Poort, with its long sandy-bottomed pools set between parallel ridges of sandstone. Above Bat's Cave is the Cape St Blaize lighthouse erected in 1864 and officially named Wodehouse Lighthouse, but, as with many names in this part of the world, the locals settled on their own choice of name.

Once on the N2 again, driving towards the Great Brak River, note that the land is undulating and lower than the surrounding coastal plain. This area is situated in one of those parallel mudstone formations discussed earlier, which resulted in faster erosion.

The seaside holiday village of Hartenbos is the next stop. In 1734 Sias Meyer, a frontiersman, was rewarded with this area for saving sailors from a ship that sank close by. What put Hartenbos on the map was the establishment during the Great Depression of a getaway place for Afrikaners where they could celebrate their culture. The main attractions are the beach and river, but don't miss out on the Voortrekker exhibition at the Hartenbos Museum. It is also interesting that this is where the N2 of yesterday, the Kaapse Wagenweg ('Cape wagon road') which ran all the way from Cape Town, broke away from the N2 of today. The reason for this was that the forests from George to the end of the Garden Route were impenetrable, so the early traders and visitors cut a road over the Outeniqua Mountains, six kilometres west of the present-day Robinson Pass. The Attaquas Kloof Pass (named after a local Khoi-na group) was once an elephant trail. It took travellers to the eastern front, but with the construction of the Montagu Pass behind George (1848) and the Robinson Pass (1869) this old pass was no longer used.

Back on the N2 you leave Hartenbos and travel over the Little Brak River (considered in 1752 to be the last place on the eastern side of Africa inhabited by Christians!) and then on to the Great Brak River. The holiday towns here have both river and sea frontage. Great Brak originated from the establishment of a toll bridge (1859) that was managed by the Searle family. Unlike most tollkeepers, the Searle family put their heart and soul into this area and created enterprises from which the whole community benefited. They established a corn mill, a leather and shoe factory, a tannery and a wool-washery, but to top it all in 1924 they built a hydro-electric power station that still functions. Today when crossing the Great Brak River on a double-lane highway you climb up to the coastal plateau overlooking the sea. In the time of the Searles the old road swung up the valley. This old pass was built by Henry Fancourt White in 1840 and remained the standard route to George for many years. This pass – a gravel road, steep in places and beautiful – can be followed today. Henry also built the Montagu Pass and his son Ernest renamed his father's house – originally Blanco House – Fancourt, now a hotel and famous golf estate. (Ernest and his sister died tragically after a meal of poisonous mushrooms.)

Getting back to the N2 after climbing up the Great Brak Pass (built in 1981 to replace the single-lane pass of 1963 which can be seen just below you) the road continues towards George on a flattish plain, which from Great Brak to Wilderness is situated on a massive granite pluton. This is why this part of the coast has remained less eroded and retained its height above the sea.

Before reaching George consider a detour to Glentana via a scenic coastal road from Great Brak River that reconnects with the N2 to George. Also halfway to George off the N2 is the beautiful Herold's Bay, a favourite with George locals. When the French naturalist Francois le Vaillant explored this area in 1781 he discovered Europeans had already settled here as cattle farmers and woodcutters, with a small population of the remaining original people the Outeniqua (meaning 'a man laden with honey') Khoi-na. In 1813, under the leadership of a man known as Dikop (meaning 'stubborn'), the

The Turaco, once known as the Knysna lourie.

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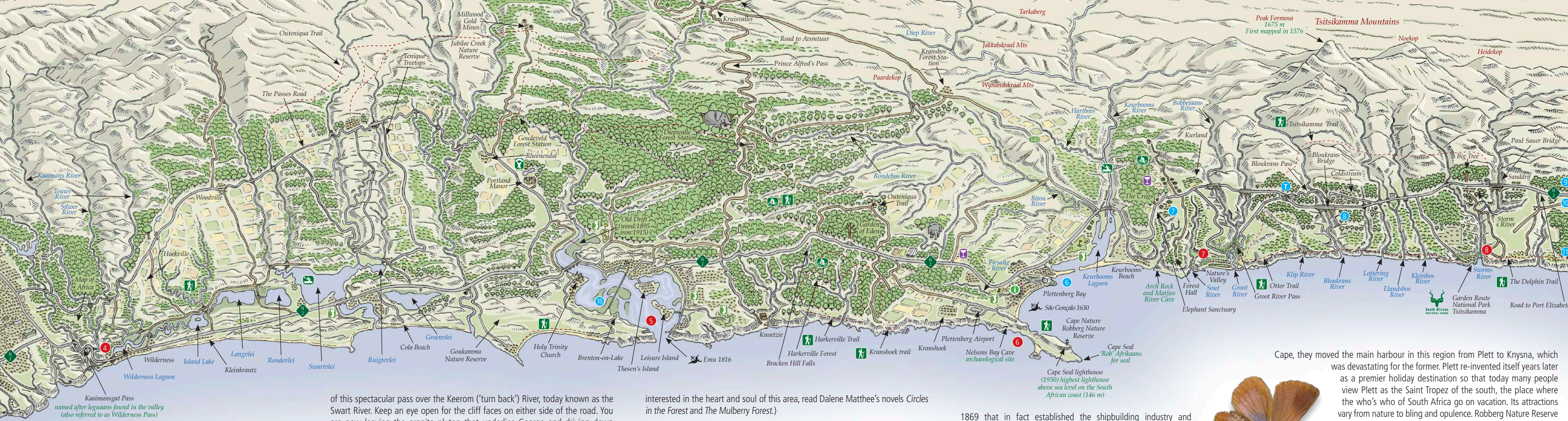
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remnants of this once proud Khoi-na clan living at Hoogekraal asked that a missionary be sent to establish a safe haven for them. Carolus Pacalt, a Moravian missionary from Suurbraak in the Overberg, answered the call and dedicated the last five years of his life to this community; his new congregation honoured him by renaming the settlement Pacaltsdorp.

Nearly 100 years after the first European had started cutting wood from below the Outeniqua Mountains, the British government, which had just won control of the Cape for the second time (1806), established the district of George (1811) to maintain control over the ever-eastward expansion of the Cape Colony. To keep the Dutch settlers happy with their new masters, resident woodcutters were given six free plots and the first *landdrost* (magistrate) was Dutch. So the old VOC post was the beginning of a small town, which has steadily grown into a city. It was named after King George III for one reason only – to extract aid through flattery. Early



Riding the thermals in Wilderness

visitors expressed a common perception when describing this hamlet under the mountain: 'more of a garden than a town, the prettiest town in the world', 'a more pleasant town I have not seen in Africa'. Besides its beauty, endless timber, fresh water and abundant wildlife, it was a peaceful and safe place to live. (In 1834 Sir John Wylde congratulated George on the fact that there had not been a single criminal case there for three years running.)

The only drawback to George was its situation in a geographic cul-de-sac, hemmed in by mountains, sea and impenetrable forests. The town was losing business from the eastern front and the Little Karoo as business was flowing over the Attaquaskloof Pass. A coastal route through Wilderness was established by means of the Kaaimansgat Pass, Governor van Plettenberg in 1778 being one of the first to venture through this gorge with wagons. This pass remained in use but at one's peril. Knysna was better served by sea or by crossing the Outeniqua Mountains and doubling back over the rough Duivelskop Pass (established by farmers in 1772). The town became obsessed with passes. First the Cradock Kloof Pass (1812) was hastily built but because of its horrid gradient it was used with reluctance. 1847 saw Fancourt White establish the beautiful Montagu Pass, which was only replaced, using modern expertise, much later. The Outeniqua Pass over the mountain was built largely during WWII and completed in 1951. This pass was started by Italian prisoners of war who were later replaced by African labourers. In 1913 another means of transport was routed over the mountain when the railway line (with seven tunnels) connected George to Outdushoorn. These passes still did not solve the problem of the coastal route with seven dangerous drifts between George and Knysna. In 1863, beginning from the Knysna side, Thomas Bain started building the Passes Road, which finally connected George to the eastern coastal region.



The Knysna Heads

More than one day is needed to see all George's attractions, which, apart from the passes, include historical churches, the George Museum, the renowned Train Museum, the Outeniqua Power Van (offering great views as it follows the railway line along the Montagu Pass), Redberry Maze (the largest permanent hedge maze in the southern hemisphere), hiking and mountain-biking trails, and for beer lovers, hops farms.

Wilderness to Knysna
After leaving George you have two options: to take the Bain's Pass Road (also called Seven Passes Road), which takes you through breathtaking wooded countryside, or to take the Kaaimansgat Pass, described by the explorer George Thompson in 1827 as '... one of the most frightful-looking spots I ever beheld.' Thanks to modern engineering, the horrors have been taken out

of this spectacular pass over the Keorum ('turn back') River, today known as the Swart River. Keep an eye open for the cliff faces on either side of the road. You are now leaving the granite pluton that underlies George and driving down through the cleaved and folded metamorphosed sediments known as the Kaaimans Group. This rock is very old and was put down about the same time as the rock you can see at Sea Point in Cape Town. Before entering Wilderness you cannot help noticing the picture-postcard cottages on the west bank of the river. During the 1940s a dentist had his practice in one of these houses – patients had to be rowed over the river to keep an appointment! From the Dolphin Viewing Point have a look at the spectacular railway bridge that spans the mouth of the river. This bridge was a big challenge when the railway line to Knysna was being constructed. In 1905 a railway line between George and Knysna was suggested, but because of the challenges involved it was only completed in 1927. The Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe train ride became one of the major attractions in this area, bringing steam train enthusiasts from around the world. A spin-off was the



Pansy Shell

gold boom began, the miners left in droves. Today there is still 'gold in them thar hills' but Monk's Store – a corrugated-iron cottage – is the only permanent structure remaining. It is a museum and tea garden from where you can walk up the trails and visit old mine shafts and graveyards, and see old mining equipment. (Take a torch to visit the Bendigo mine tunnel.) This area (26 km from the N2) also offers picnic areas, walking trails, mountain biking and lots of tree hugging!

Wilderness is predominantly a holiday destination. This is not the place to immerse yourself in history, but rather to indulge in nature and numerous outdoor pursuits, from beach activities, fishing, hang-gliding, hiking, biking, canoeing, birding and rock climbing to waterskiing. Of historical note, however, is that this was the home of 'Die Groot Krokodil' ('the big crocodile'), P.W. Botha, the finger-wagging South African president at the height of the apartheid era. It is ironic that when he died in 2006 his house (Die Anker) was sold to Sango Ntsuba, a well-known businessman.

Five lakes are the main feature of Wilderness (referred to as the Lake District in the '70s). Their origin makes this type of lake (which can only be seen again 1000 km up the east coast in KwaZulu-Natal) extremely rare. This landscape was formed because of soft rock, the rise and fall of the sea level over thousands of years and a strong, consistent wind. During the period when the sea level was low the coastline was much further south than it is today, leaving this area high and dry, and rivers cut wide, open valleys owing to the nature of the soft, young rock. When the sea level was at its highest, these valleys were flooded. As a result of this process having occurred a number of times, soft calcified rock (consisting of organic sea life and sand cemented together) and over time large sand dunes formed, creating landlocked lakes. Today all these lakes are fed by rivers and sea water that permeates the sand dunes. The one exception to this is Groenivlei (just past Sedgfield) which of the five is the only freshwater lake: you will note that no rivers run into this mysterious stretch of water.

There are three places worth visiting before you get to the hill overlooking the Knysna Lagoon and the end of Wilderness. The first is the town of Sedgfield, which, with its beaches and fine estuary, is predominantly a holiday destination. Back on the road you pass Groenivlei, climb over a crest into the beautiful Goukamma River Valley, then immediately after crossing the river, take a right-hand turn to the seaside resort of Buffelsbaai, the second place to visit. The third place to visit is an area above Knysna which played a large role in the development of the town. Rheenendal is reached by a road leading inland from the crest of the hill overlooking the Knysna Lagoon. In the early days the state forest was here, and hundreds of thousands of tons of timber were cut out of this part of the Garden Route. Bain built the Phantom Pass to facilitate this endeavour; later this pass became the starting point for the Seven Passes Road. Today there is enough to see here to warrant a full day's excursion. Your first stop is Portland Manor, which will give you a good idea of how the rich lived on the backs of thousands of poor woodcutters living deep within the forest. (If you are

interested in the heart and soul of this area, read Dalene Matthee's novels *Circles in the Forest* and *The Mulberry Forest*.)

Knysna was founded on the timber industry, but in 1875 a gold nugget was discovered at Millwood: this started a mini gold rush with over 600 diggers. By 1886 attention had been drawn away from Millwood Creek to the mountainside where a reef was discovered. Millwood became a town with permanent buildings and hotels and a population of 400, with another 600 miners living in the forest, but only 127 kg of gold was mined there, so it never became the El Dorado that people hoped for, and when the Witwatersrand gold boom began, the miners left in droves. Today there is still 'gold in them thar hills' but Monk's Store – a corrugated-iron cottage – is the only permanent structure remaining. It is a museum and tea garden from where you can walk up the trails and visit old mine shafts and graveyards, and see old mining equipment. (Take a torch to visit the Bendigo mine tunnel.) This area (26 km from the N2) also offers picnic areas, walking trails, mountain biking and lots of tree hugging!



The Cape Nature Robberg Nature Reserve.

Knysna to Plettenberg Bay
The Knysna Lagoon is crossed on a new causeway that has replaced the old bridge upriver near Phantom Pass. Driving along the northern bank before entering the town you will see road cuttings that tell an interesting story of when this ancient basin was formed. The lagoon was blocked off from the sea by a ridge of hard Table Mountain quartzite, which over time was breached between the Knysna Heads. Because the basin was reshaped by tide-dominant periods and river-dominant periods, we see conglomerate rock with different strata of rock that has been reworked numerous times since the Jurassic period. The roundness of the boulders and pebbles cemented into this rock formation (Enon conglomerate) indicates that they were shaped by water abrasion long before being introduced into this newer formation.

A few million years later Knysna saw the first European settlers. This was not an easy place to settle in as it was cut off from the rest of the world by mountains, sea and forests. When Le Vaillant visited this area in 1780 he noted that there were three poor woodcutters' houses. More people settled here but the late 1700s saw advance guards of the Xhosa's westward movement, resulting in the destruction of farms through burning. The first person of note to settle here was James Callander. After surveying the coast and lagoon he tried to persuade the Cape government to establish a harbour.

It was George Rex, however, who was to take Callander's stillborn idea to fruition. Rex entered the Knysna scene in 1804 after a short stay at a Batavian internment camp at Stellenbosch. Said to be of royal birth as the son of George III and Hannah Lightfoot, he was a man of many mysteries, but there is no doubt that he put Knysna on the map. He acquired most of the land there and made his homestead (Melkhoutraak, which was 2 km from the turn-off from the N2 to the Heads) a welcoming stopover for everyone from common people and explorers to top government officials. Rex started farming and developed the timber industry on a large scale. After he had won his hard-fought campaign for Knysna to be recognized as a harbour, his family piloted shipping through the Heads for a number of years. The first ship to attempt the passage through the Heads, the *Emu*, was wrecked, but ironically the *Podargus* which came to the rescue became in 1816 the first across the threshold into the Knysna Lagoon. Rex attempted to establish a local shipping industry with his 140-ton stinkwood brig, the *Knysna*, but it was the arrival of the Norwegian Thesen family in



Nature's Valley lagoon with Pig's Head in the centre and the Head on the right.

1869 that in fact established the shipbuilding industry and dominated it until steam ships took over. Many ships made it through the Heads, but many sank before it all came to an end in 1953, when Knysna lost its official status as a harbour because of the railway line.

Knysna reinvented itself as one of the premier tourist destinations in South Africa, using its rich history and its natural beauty. For those seeking leisure there is a myriad of boating activities, world class golf courses, food festivals and shopping in the town centre. For those who enjoy exploring there are thousands of acres of ancient forests (with elusive wild elephants) to walk through, mountain biking, birding, fishing, and visits to Featherbed Nature Reserve and the Heads to satisfy your needs. (Look out for the extremely rare Brenton Blue butterfly found only at Brenton-on-Sea: this butterfly was the first invertebrate in Africa to be saved by government intervention after a lot of work of dedicated conservationists, led by Dr Dave Edge. Also look out for another rarity, the Knysna sea



Brenton Blue Butterfly

horse.) Those wanting a historical fix can start at the little village of Belvidere and visit the Holy Trinity Church before taking in the other churches and historical buildings in Knysna itself, and the Knysna Fort above the Provincial Hospital; then end with a visit to the grave of George Rex, considered the founder of this town.

The journey continues from the Knysna basin by climbing onto the coastal plain, which maintains the same height till Plettenberg Bay. This is mainly a forestry area, but off this part of the N2 there are a number of places to visit. Just after Hornlee you can explore the R339 which takes you to Diepwalle (visit the Forest Legends Museum) and Prince Alfred's Pass. The large, ancient forests can be experienced on walks long and short and by mountain biking, and offer the greatest chance of seeing the elephants. Opposite the turn-off to the R339 is a road to Knoetze, a little cove beach which can only be reached by over 100 steps. Overlooking the beach some houses built to resemble medieval castles give this bay an interesting feel. Back on the N2, Brackenhill Falls and the Garden of Eden with its big tree are also worth visiting. The Harkerville Forest is a great area for hiking and mountain biking: the Harkerville Trail, with its chained traverses and ladder sections, is ranked by some experienced hikers as better – for pure exhilaration – than the more famous Otter Trail. Over 200 years ago this area was home to some of the so-called Cape Bastards (a population of ex-slaves, people of mixed blood and 'undesirables' who forged a powerful nation, and left the Cape before the Great Trek). There are many other tourist attractions along this section of the N2 before you enter Plettenberg Bay.

Plettenberg Bay to Storms River
Plett was first brought to the attention of the known world in 1488 when Dias named the bay Bahia das Alagoas (bay of lagoons); he also gave the name Pic Formosa to the highest peak (used for many years as a navigational landmark) on the Tsitsikamma mountain range. This bay was renamed a number of times in the next 150 years until Governor van Plettenberg in 1778 named it (as was his habit) after himself. It was here at the mouth of the Piesang River that the São Gonçalo was wrecked in 1630, when over 400 men drowned. After eight months the 101 survivors managed to build two wooden boats: one sailed east and ended up safely in Mozambique; the other reached Cape Town, where the sailors hitched a ride to Portugal, but ironically this ship sank just outside Lisbon, taking the lives of these earlier survivors. Plett was used as a replenishment station for many years and served as a source of timber for the Dutch from 1788. (The ruins of the old timber store can still be visited today.)

When the British took over the

Cape, they moved the main harbour in this region from Plett to Knysna, which was devastating for the former. Plett re-invented itself years later as a premier holiday destination so that today many people view Plett as the Saint Tropez of the south, the place where the who's who of South Africa go on vacation. Its attractions vary from nature to bling and opulence. Robberg Nature Reserve is a good place to start with nature. (This peninsula consists of a younger sedimentary rock called the Robberg Formation, not TM quartzite, which is unusual for this part of the world.) Hiking and views of the ocean with its marine life are drawcards, while a visit to Nelson Bay Cave, home to Stone Age man, should not be missed. Beacon Isle was important early on in Plett's history: a navigational beacon was placed here in 1772. In 1912 it became a whaling station for eight years, after which the remaining buildings were used as a fisherman's hotel. This was replaced by a new hotel in 1940, which in turn was demolished to make way for the iconic building we see today. The big attractions in Plett are its three main beaches – Robberg, Central and Lookout.

On leaving Plett you cross the Bitou River, which flows in a flat valley much too wide for the small river we see today. The conglomerate pebbled rock face (seen as you cross the bridge) tells of a more ancient and powerful river. Within seconds you will cross the Keurbooms River, in 1770 considered the border of the Outeniqua's land. What lies on the eastern bank was considered the Tsitsikamma (Khoi-na for 'bright and clear'), an area described by early explorers as more impenetrable than that around George and Knysna. It took the great fire of 1869 to open this area up, and within a month Thomas Bain had started surveying a route through to Port Elizabeth. In 1879 work was started on the road, which had to cross three major ravines. This was a formidable undertaking for its time, but the 1956 alteration to this old route, begun in the form of the single-span Paul Sauer Bridge crossing the Storms River at a height of 130 m, was also an engineering feat in its day. By 1984 three massive single-span bridges had been constructed, of which the Bloukrans is the most well known: it was the highest bridge in the world at the time at 216 m above the Bloukrans River. So finally Bain's route had been straightened out, saving 9 km, but with the loss of a scenic drive for those who don't take Bain's original road. The stretch from Keurbooms River to the turn-off to Nature's Valley has become a tourist area known as the Crag, with one of the youngest wine routes in the country and wildlife and bird centres. Zip-lining, kloofing, horse riding, hiking and polo are on

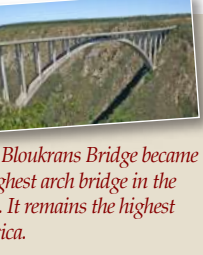


Storms River mouth on the eastern edge of the Tsitsikamma National Park.

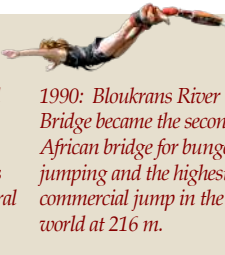
offer here. Nature's Valley, which offers the only beach and lagoon in the area, started out as a farm owned by Hendrik Barnardo (foreman of Bain's team at Great River). He went to extreme lengths to protect the trees, but one of his family was credited with shooting the last Tsitsikamma elephant in 1881. From 1941-3 he sold land to a syndicate of 10 families and to Baron Ulrich Behr, who officially named the place Nature's Valley when a township was declared in 1953.

The rest of the journey to Storms River is what the Garden Route, with its deep gorges, giant ancient trees, mountains and rugged coastline, is all about. Another stop on your journey will be at the Tsitsikamma National Park, the starting point of the famous Otter Trail, which ends at Nature's Valley. Day walks to waterfalls, deep forests, canoeing up the tight gorge, suspension bridges and an underwater dive trail are some of the main attractions. After a breathtaking journey of just over 300 km, we can understand why the likes of Francois le Vaillant, Carl Thunberg and George Thompson revelled in the exploration of the magnificent Garden Route.

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1983: Bloukrans River Bridge became the highest arch bridge in the world. It remains the highest in Africa.



1987: The combination of sanctions during apartheid and the energy crisis of the early 1980s gave birth at Mossel Bay to the Mosses refinery, which makes several liquid fuels.

1990: Bloukrans River Bridge became the second African bridge for bungee jumping and the highest commercial jump in the world at 216 m.

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120 million years ago the Garden Route coastline was formed when Gondwana started splitting apart, creating the Agulhas Sea.

100 000 years ago early Homo sapiens of the Stone Age period made this area their home, in places like Pinnacle Point, Nelson's Bay, Matjes River Caves and Blombos Cave.

20 000 years ago saw the San (Bushmen), a hunter-gatherer people, take up residence on this coast.

2 000 years ago saw the Khoi-na (Khoikhoi) with their herding way of life arrive and start dominating the area.

± 1215: The oldest yellowwood tree near Paul Sauer Bridge started growing. These trees can live for 2 000 years.

1630: The Garden Route saw its first shipwreck at Plettenberg Bay (of the São Gonçalo) when 101 Portuguese sailors were marooned for 9 months.

1804: Enigmatic George Rex, the supposedly bastard son of King George III, moved to Knysna and shaped its future.

1811: George, the sixth town in the Cape Colony, was established. This town was originally a VOC timber outpost in 1776.

1863: Thomas Bain, the renowned road engineer, started work on the Prince Alfred's Pass, the first of several of his famous passes in the Garden Route.

1867: Prince Alfred, the 2nd son of Queen Victoria, visited Knysna where he undertook an elephant hunting expedition that symbolised the decimation of these herds (from thousands before the Europeans arrived to fewer than ten today).

1869: The great fire of '69 burnt out the Garden Route from Riversdale to Uitenhage. This opened the area up for exploitation.

1886: Millwood near Rheenendal became the site of a short-lived gold rush that lasted 5 years.

1983: Bloukrans River Bridge became the highest arch bridge in the world. It remains the highest in Africa.

1987: The combination of sanctions during apartheid and the energy crisis of the early 1980s gave birth at Mossel Bay to the Mosses refinery, which makes several liquid fuels.

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