

# Coastal gems

Following on from last month's profile of the Garden Route National Park and Goukamma Nature Reserve, this month's Year in the Wild feature by Scott focuses on two very different, small reserves near Plettenberg Bay. Despite their proximity to the busy holiday town, they are among the most beautiful on South Africa's coast

Text and photography: Scott Ramsay

## **Keurbooms Nature Reserve – River of dreams**

Plettenberg Bay turns into a seriously congested place during the school holidays, and especially in summer. Crowds descend en masse from Sandton and Cape Town.

But Keurbooms River Nature Reserve, just a few kilometres north of the busy holiday town, retains its tranquility.

The Whiskey Creek canoe trail is a 7km paddle up the Keurbooms River, ending at a rustic but comfortable self-catering cabin that sleeps up to ten people.

The Keurbooms River is 85km long, with its source at Spitskop in the Outeniqua Mountains, but the little reserve of nine square kilometres protects only the last stretch of the waterway before it flows into the bay.

The magic of the canoe trail and cabin is the unexpected scenery and serenity of the gorge itself.

The trail starts near the N2 highway, but after paddling a few hundred metres up the river, you can't hear or see any trucks, cars or people, and there are no man-made

structures anywhere. The contrast is immense – how can so much beauty be so close to such a busy urban area?

As you paddle up the increasingly narrow gorge you feel like a colonial explorer discovering a secret corner of paradise, fortunately ignored by the foresters, miners and property developers.

Thick indigenous forests cover the steep sides of the gorge. Tall Outeniqua yellowwood trees are festooned with old man's beard. (The reserve was proclaimed in 1980 to protect the Afromontane forest).



Close your eyes and listen to the sounds of nature – fish eagles calling to each other, kingfishers chattering as they hover above the water, the breeze blowing in the high forest, the water lapping against your canoe, your own breath... although the squawking Egyptian geese might ruin your momentary meditation.

The further you go up the gorge, the better it gets. There are a few designated picnic sites along the way near the small white beaches

of clean river sand. The water is dark from the fynbos tannins, but sunlight glistens off the surface.

I drank straight from the river. It remains mostly clean and ecologically sound, even though about eight million litres are extracted every day for municipal use. Despite this, there are still four indigenous threatened fish species – the slender redfin, Eastern Cape redfin, Cape galaxias and Cape kurper.

After 7km you can't paddle any further

because of a series of low rapids. Here you pull your canoe out onto the bank.

From there it's about a 300m walk to the cabin, which is located on an elevated bend of the river. It was built by reserve manager Henk Niewoudt and his team, and it's got a fantastic feeling of comfortable simplicity. It's basic, but perfect for a self-catering family or group of friends, or a couple wanting to get away on their own.

There is one large sleeping area, with

several bunkbeds and canvas-covered mattresses, so remember to take your sleeping bags. If the weather is good you can sleep outside on the deck.

One night I was woken by the booming serenade of a giant eagle owl on top of the roof.

Bushpigs came snorting under the cabin to dig up roots and bulbs. You may also see blue duiker, bushbuck or Cape grysbok.

There's not much to do once you're at the cabin, except to chill out, read, sleep, eat and admire the scenery, or go for a paddle.

In summer, when it gets really hot in the gorge, walk a few metres down to the river to cool off. Because of the inaccessible terrain, and the fact that there is no other accommodation in the area, you could probably walk around naked all day.

When you paddle back down the river, continue on to the estuary at the river mouth. The lagoon is an important nursery for young ocean fish and is ranked as one of the country's 20 most important conservation areas.

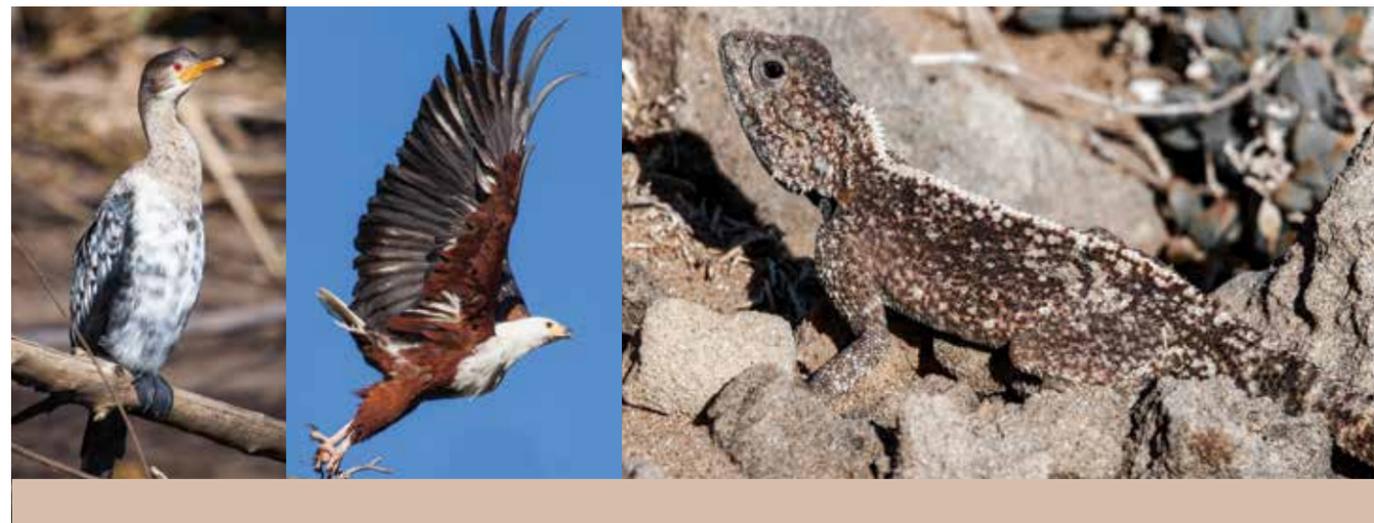
The estuary is always open to the sea and contains a renegade population of the rare, endemic Knysna seahorse, mistakenly believed to occur only in the Knysna lagoon.

The sand spit near the mouth is also part of the reserve, and is a breeding area for kelp gulls, black oystercatchers, terns (Caspian, swift and Sandwich) and the African spoonbill.

**Contact:** CapeNature ([www.capenature.co.za](http://www.capenature.co.za)).  
**Accommodation at the cabin, which can sleep up to 12 people, costs from R1300 per night, depending on how many people stay.**

### **Robberg Nature Reserve – peninsula of paradise**

I'm all alone, lying in a little cabin on the edge of a rocky coast. The doors and windows are wide open, and my ears are filled with the soothing boom of crashing waves. The air



# BEST OF THE GARDEN ROUTE

## Part 2



Almost all those on the ship were drowned.

The sense of disaster and despair for the survivors must have been immense, but the stunning beauty of their surroundings would have consoled them. The natural forests also provided the timber from which the enterprising group were able to construct two small boats on which they set sail again, in 1631.

One party decided to head back to India and, incredibly, got as far as Mozambique, where they wisely remained before going their various ways. The other boat decided to head for Portugal, but wallowed around hopelessly for days until being spotted by the Santa Ignacio de Loyalo, bound from Lisbon for the east. The 50 adventurers were taken aboard and their little boat was set adrift.

The story of the Sao Goncalo is told by Pat Storrar in her book,

is heavy with ocean spray. The stars burst through the night sky.

This is Fountain Shack in Robberg Nature Reserve. There is no electricity, no cell phone reception and certainly no TV.

As a peninsula butting out at the southern end of Plettenberg Bay, Robberg (seal mountain) is almost entirely surrounded by the temperate Indian Ocean.

The property developers must have licked their lips when they saw this piece of land. But today it's a nature reserve, managed by CapeNature, and thank goodness for that.

Let's rewind 120 000 years. Stone-age hunter-gatherers and strandlopers loved this

part of the world. There is extensive evidence of their presence, marked by numerous archaeological sites, though the only one open to the public is the capacious Nelson's Cave.

In 1630 a Portuguese merchant ship, the Sao Goncalo, came into the Baia Formosa on its return journey to Europe from the east. The 400-odd crew were the first recorded "white" people to call at the area, and after making some repairs to their ship, they traded goods with the local Khoi.

About 100 of the sailors made camp on the shore but most people stayed on board, only for a huge storm to smash the vessel against the cliffs of the northern side of Robberg.

Drama at Ponta Delgada (Lowery Publishers) and is commemorated in a small display at the Plettenberg Bay municipal offices. (The town was given its name by Cape Governor Joachim van Plettenberg more than 100 years after the epic shipwreck, in 1778.)

And this is why Robberg is so magical. It is largely untouched since those times and represents the best of a long-gone era, preserved from the hordes of holidaymakers who enjoy this beautiful coastline.

The reserve and the surrounding marine protected area covers only 20 square kilometres, so you can get to know it well in one day. The best thing to do is walk the 10km



circular Point Trail. Start at the main gate, and loop around the northern edge of the peninsula, past the point, and then back along the southern side. It's one of the best day hikes in the country. The views across the bay towards the Tsitsikamma Mountains are amazing.

The marine protected area stretches for one nautical mile out to sea along the length of the coast, so from the cliffs you have a good chance of seeing rays, southern right whales and perhaps even great white sharks.

There is a large seal colony on the northern side, and you can spot them easily from the hiking trail.

The eight-sleeper Fountain Shack is located on the southern side of the peninsula, looking out over a stretch of sand that connects a large rocky island to the main peninsula.

There's no luxury here – just bunkbeds with canvas-covered mattresses, gas to cook on, an outdoor shower (no hot water) and solar-powered lights. Reserve manager Henk Niewoudt says they will soon be putting a small battery-powered fridge into the shack.

The shack was originally built and used by the local angling club, and when Robberg became a reserve in 1980 it was agreed that CapeNature would maintain it and rent it out to visitors.

It is the only place for overnight visitors to stay, so you have the whole reserve to yourself in the early mornings and late afternoons when the main public gate closes. Don't underestimate this privilege – you will feel like one of the original hunter-gatherers! **Contact:** CapeNature's Fountain Shack ([www.capenature.co.za](http://www.capenature.co.za)) can sleep up to ten people and costs from R780 per night, depending on how many people stay. **lw**



### K-Way gear review

#### Beanie

Scientists have shown that the head isn't a major source of heat loss in the human body, but based on my experiences, whenever I wear a beanie, I immediately feel warmer. Maybe it's because I have less hair than the average person! Nevertheless, on a cold night under the stars, I feel naked if I'm not wearing my K-Way beanie. In fact, I always travel with two, in case I lose one. It's one of my favourite items of gear. R199 from Cape Union Mart [www.capeunionmart.co.za](http://www.capeunionmart.co.za).



### Year in the Wild, 2013-14

Following on from his first Year in the Wild, photojournalist Scott Ramsay is travelling from July 2013 to October 2014 to some of the same parks (but in different seasons) as well as to many new parks and nature reserves in SA and the transfrontier parks in southern Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Again, his goal is to create awareness about protected areas and inspire others to travel to these natural wonderlands.

Ramsay's partners include Cape Union Mart, Ford Everest, Goodyear and K-Way, with support from WildCard, EeziAwn, Frontrunner, Globecomm, National Luna, Outdoor Photo, Safari Centre Cape Town, Tracks 4 Africa, and Vodacom.

For more information, go to [www.yearinthewild.com](http://www.yearinthewild.com).



GOODYEAR

