

TOWN OF THE MONTH  WILDERNESS

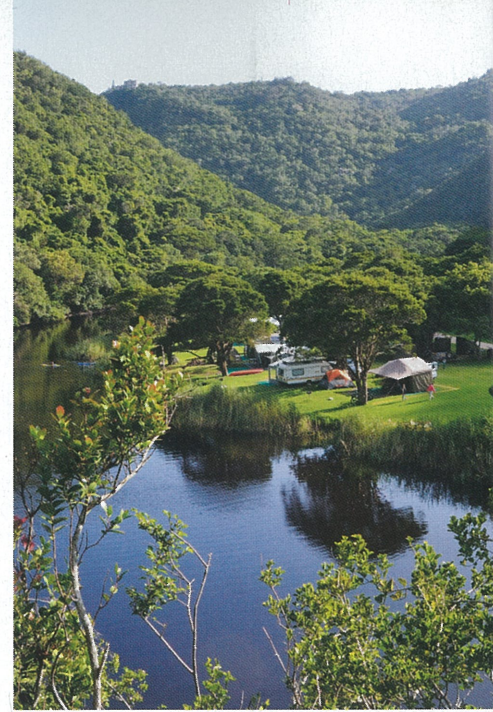


Call of The Wilderness

RON SWILLING hits the streets and forest trails of this Garden Route town and discovers more than just sea and sand



Paragliders take in one of the best views of the town and its long, golden beach from their launch point in Remskoek Road.



ABOVE LEFT: The meandering Kaaimans River Gorge forms the Map of Africa as the river wends its way towards the sea. ABOVE: The idyllic setting of Ebb-and-Flow Rest Camp on the banks of the Touw River, surrounded by coastal forest. LEFT: Retired teacher and hobby-historian Hugo Leggatt shares his wealth of knowledge about the history of Wilderness from his house on the banks of the Touw River.

At the bends fringing the honey-coloured river that winds through Kaaimans Gorge, it's not far to a spread of beach and ocean, hillsides of indigenous forest and the charming village of Wilderness.

It was called 'The Wilderness' until the 1950s, when the national road providing an easier access route to Knysna and Port Elizabeth was first constructed.

This coastal area was virtually unknown, easy access thwarted by the Kaaimans Gorge, the Outeniqua Mountains and the soft sea sand, detrimental to ox wagons, until Thomas Bain, 'the colossus of roads', arrived in the 1860s

to improve the roads in the region. He built the old George/Knysna Road, now known as the Seven Passes Road, making travel possible for horse-drawn carts. Before this, if you wanted to travel east of George, it was easier to go by horseback or foot, long-time Wilderness resident Hugo Leggatt tells me.

Hugo, a retired school teacher and hobby historian, has been researching the history of the area and documenting its many rock art sites for his upcoming book. "Every place around here has at least two stories about where the name comes from," he says. "It's the same with Wilderness. There are two stories, the romantic one and the correct one."

I beg to hear the more creative one first and Hugo good-naturedly obliges.

"A young woman who had survived the burning of her parents' farmhouse, probably in some frontier turmoil, met a young man who proposed to her," he recounts.

"She told him how she wanted to live away from everything and quoted the psalm made popular by the German composer of the time, Felix Mendelssohn: 'O for the wings of a dove, far away would I rove! In the wilderness, build me a nest, and remain there forever at rest'."

The actual story is no less romantic, I discover. George Bennett, competent horseman and son of a successful British liquor shop owner, met Henrietta Cornelia Melville in the Cape in the mid-1800s when out riding one evening. Her horse had run off with her and he managed to catch up and take it under control.

"The couple married and he took her back to England. In 1877 they decided to return to the Cape and bought a piece of remote land. When they came to look at it, which they would have done on horseback over the hills, she had one look and exclaimed, 'What a wilderness!' It became *our* Wilderness," explains Hugo.

Before the Bennetts named their farm



LEFT: The Woodville Big Tree is an 800-year-old *Outeniqua* yellowwood that is 33 metres high with a girth of 12 metres. ABOVE: Experienced birding and field guide Christiaan Viljoen from Explore Eden makes the forest come alive with his extensive knowledge and passion for the natural world.

...we stop to hear an African Goshawk's clicking notes as it flies over its territory at sunrise, the croaking territorial call of the Knysna Turaco, and several calls of a Chorister Robin-Chat as it mimics its avian friends

'The Wilderness', the area had been referred to as Touwsmond or Lower Barbierskraal. Their story took a sad turn. George Bennett died young, and his wife, son and twin daughters returned to England.

The Wilderness was cared for by the Melville family until 1905 when the farm was sold to Montagu White, Paul Kruger's counsel in the years leading up to the Anglo-Boer War (South African War), who transformed the old farmhouse into a guest farm. When Montagu died from mushroom poisoning around the time of World War I, the company was liquidated and the guest farm Wilderness (1921) Ltd was started. The site of the present-day Wilderness Hotel, it became a hotel with a shop, and the surroundings grew into a seaside village. It remained relatively isolated, however, until the construction of the national road network changed its destiny.

Today the town is one of the delightful stops on the well-travelled Garden Route between George and Sedgefield. Free of large shopping malls and franchised eateries, it retains its relaxed village character, with a choice of coffee shops, a string of appealing restaurants

and a variety of shops in the village.

Caroline's Chocolate Haven, which is next to the tourism office in George Street, was set up by chocolatier Caroline Laas. Caroline, who trained at École Chocolat in Canada, uses fine Belgian chocolate, adding her dazzle to Wilderness with chocolate tastings, prearranged wine-and-chocolate pairings and a shop-cum-workroom.

Biltong and brandy truffles made with ten-year-old KVV, pyramid-shaped chai chocolates, salted caramels with added pink Himalayan salt, and rose-orange truffles in orange zest line her shelves. "Chocolate chose me," she tells me. "I wake up in the middle of the night to write down recipes."

For Caroline, it's the *mengelmoes kardoos* (assortment) of people living in Wilderness that makes it so special – and the natural setting. "We love living in nature, that's a big thing for all of us."

Nature is indeed a huge part of Wilderness. A large section of it lies within the Garden Route National Park and the lakes are a RAMSAR site, a wetland site of international importance. For outdoor enthusiasts and nature lovers, the birdlife

(more than 250 species, I'm told), the forest trails, lakes, estuaries, rivers and the SANParks Ebb-and-Flow Rest Camp, are strong drawcards.

Overnighting at the campsite, I wake at dawn to a symphony of bird calls, and make my way to meet Christiaan Viljoen from Explore Eden. A knowledgeable and passionate outdoor man who runs guided nature, waterfall and bird walks, Christiaan speaks and hears the language of the birds as if it were his own.

Just outside the gate we stop to hear an African Goshawk's clicking notes as it flies over its territory at sunrise, the croaking territorial call of the Knysna Turaco, and several calls of a Chorister Robin-chat as it mimics its avian friends and even a car alarm to impress its mate.

Later, our group takes a short drive to the beginning of the Brown-hooded Kingfisher Trail, one of several kingfisher trails, and we are enveloped in a wonderland of coastal forest.

An experienced field and safari guide, Christiaan shares his knowledge of insects and plants, pointing out rainforest brown and painted lady butterflies; water plants such as waterblommetjies; and dragonflies, in between our watching and listening to a Peregrine



LEFT: Chocolatier Caroline Laas at Caroline's Chocolate Haven with a plate of her artisan chocolates made with the finest imported Belgian chocolate – and love. ABOVE: Every Friday evening, an assortment of interesting goods attracts visitors to the weekly market at Milkwood Village. BELOW LEFT: Potter Karen Muir is one of the artists featured on the Wilderness Art Meander. BOTTOM: A collection of attractive shops, restaurants and coffee shops radiate off George Street, the main hub of the town.



Falcon, African Fish Eagle and Knysna Woodpecker as we walk.

He leads us to a riverbed with a high tree canopy that he identifies as being ideal habitat for the Narina Trogon, an elusive forest bird with distinctive red and green colouring that most birders long to see. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he accurately imitates the Trogon's call. Time stills as we wait for the bird to communicate with Christiaan. It comes to investigate, watches us for a while, and then flies off, leaving us awed.

My head is full of birds and birdcalls, and many new snippets of fascinating information, as I'm dropped off after a brief visit to the Rondevlei bird hide and I set off to explore

the surrounds. This includes two of Wilderness' lakes, Island Lake and Langevelei, and Hoekwil, a suburb on the hillside with expansive views.

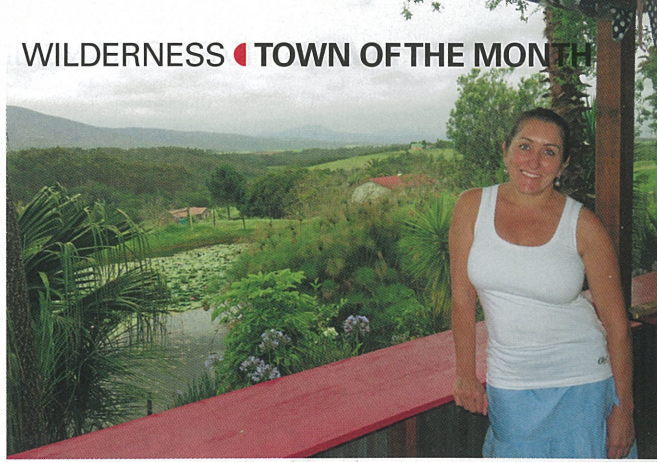
I take a drive to Wilderness' Woodville Big Tree, an 800-year-old Outeniqua yellowwood. As a small child runs towards the tree, I hear the mother call, "What wisdom is the tree sharing with you?" I listen for a while, relishing its ancient energy.

In Hoekwil, potter Karen Muir greets me at her gate. Karen, who has been a potter for 40 years, showcases her hand-built, one-off pieces and an assortment of pottery, including mischievously flamboyant plates illustrated by her friend Ann Walton.

Her studio is on the Wilderness Art Meander and is open to visitors daily. She will also take you for a walk around her luxuriant garden with a view of Island Lake and the Indian Ocean in the distance. "There are three things to do in Hoekwil: taste cheesecake at the Hoekwil Country Café, visit Karen Muir and walk down to the Big Tree," she says.

So I visit the café that advertises 'Beste koffie en koek op die Hoek' and has sold 14 000 slices of cake in a year. And then discover Skotteljons Farm Kitchen across the road, which serves home-cooked favourites like bobotie, curry tripe and vetkoek, has a fabulous view and features boeremusiek with the





ABOVE: Loreal van Rooyen at the Green Shed, a coffee roastery that serves delicious coffee, muffins, cake and salads in a freshly innovative setting. ABOVE RIGHT: Susan Gerber from Skotteljons Farm Kitchen, a restaurant-pub that offers home-cooked meals, freshly baked cakes and a refreshing country view. RIGHT: Richard van Niekerk manages the Hoekwil Country Café, a homely restaurant and café that sells about 14 000 slices of cake a year.

Donkiekar Orkes every Wednesday evening.

I make time at the end of the day to visit the Map of Africa, a viewpoint overlooking the Kaaimans River Gorge, which resembles the shape of Africa or that of a crocodile's snout, and then sit watching the paragliders on the opposite hillside float out over the sea and village.

Then I return to the Ebb-and-Flow campsite,

where I watch the last of the afternoon light play in the trees and the Knysna Turacos flit across the river.

Soon the frogs will start croaking, the wood owl will hoot and us campers will sit around small fires cherishing the peace this abundant part of the world so generously offers. ■

Map reference F4 see inside back cover



Tuck In

Restaurants range from local spots you can arrive at straight from the beach to upmarket fine dining on the Touw River. Most of the restaurants are situated in the village around George Road.

Blue Olive under a large Milkwood tree serves tapas with a South African flavour (044 877 0731). Pick up sarmies for your Wilderness adventure at **Jamwwich**, next to the Green Shed Coffee Roastery (076 525 1463).

Newly opened **Kaaimans Restaurant** has a great riverbank setting, where you can swim and hire a kayak (044 868 0038).

On the way back from the Map of Africa, stop in at the **Hoekwil Country Café and Deli** for their famous cheesecake (044 850 1037). **Skotteljons Farm Kitchen** across the road has a delightful country view and serves boerekos specials like bobotie and curry tripe. The Donkiekar Orkes plays every Wednesday evening (083 400 3265).

Sleep In

Wilderness accommodation includes boutique hotels, guest houses, backpackers and the SANParks rest camp.

A favourite for nature lovers is the **Ebb-and-Flow**

Rest Camp, surrounded by indigenous forest.

It has wooden chalets, rustic rondawels and campsites next to the river (012 428 9111 www.sanparks.org).

A bonus at **Kingfisher Country House** (044 877 1955, 082 808 4379, www.kingfish.co.za) is Sue Millard's bird table which attracts forest birds like Knysna Turacos.

Wilderness Bushcamp (044 877 1168 www.wildernessbushcamp.co.za), in indigenous bush and overlooking the ocean, offers attractive self-catering cabins.

Out and About

It's all about the natural world in Wilderness, so paddle on the river (canoes available for hire at the **Fairy Knowe Hotel** and at **Ebb-and-Flow**), watch waterbirds at the **Rondevlei Bird Hide** and explore the Wilderness section of the **Garden Route National Park** on one of the many trails (044 877 1197/0046 www.sanparks.org). For a deeper understanding of the forest, join a guided nature or birding excursion with **Explore Eden** (079 466 3873, www.exploreeden.co.za). The more adventurous can abseil, kloof and canoe with **Eden Adventures** (083 628 8547/

044 877 0179, www.eden.co.za) and paraglide with **Cloudbase** (083 628 8547) or **Wild2Fly** (083 393 3938). Horse ride on a nature trail at **Oakhurst** (044 850 1173/082 461 7669, www.oakhurst.com) or **Perdepoot** (082 646 8290). Say hello to the **Woodville Big Tree**, enjoy a chocolate tasting at **Caroline's Chocolate Haven** (083 446 7385), visit the weekly Friday evening market at **Milkwood Village** from 5-9pm, gaze at the **Map of Africa** on Remskoer Road and follow the **Wilderness Art Meander** through the centre of town up to Karen Muir's studio in Hoekwil (076 394 7665).

Property Peep

While prices at the exclusive beach area Die Duin can start at R15 million, older houses in central Wilderness range from R2.5 million to R6 million. Properties in the fast-developing Kleinkrantz area begin at R3.5 to R5 million on the beachfront. Smaller plots range from R275 000 to R1.6 million. (Contact REMAX Eden on 044 877 0042).

Wilderness Tourism Office

044 877 0045, info@george.gov.za
www.georgetourism.org.za