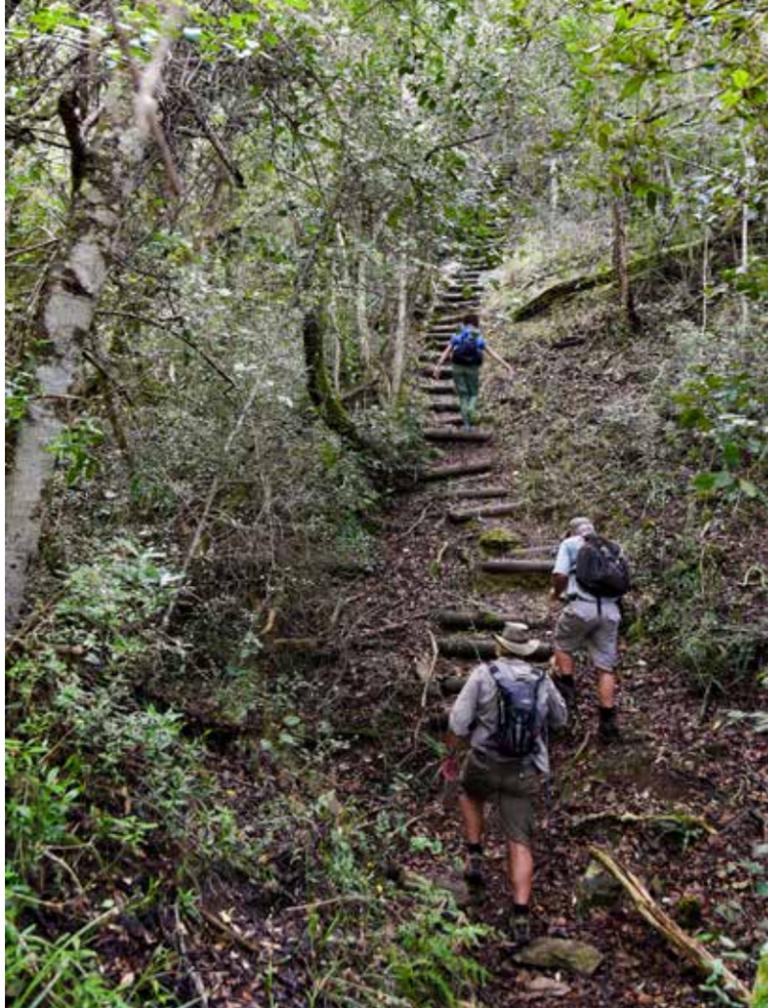


TAKE A DEAP BREATH (clockwise from top left). Take a shortcut across the sandbar that connects The Island to the Robberg peninsula. It's a steep climb up to Forest Hall where lunch waits on the first day. Watch the tree tops and listen for the "oep-oep-oep, korr-korr-korr" of the Knysna Turaco. Luck'z Mdzeke, one of the guides, looks out over Plettenberg Bay from Robberg. Tapas at Bramon is more than welcome after a full day's hiking. Our first day on the Plett Trail started at Keurbooms beach. Hardy Loubser, another guide, kicks off his *vellies* on the "Circles in the Forest" route.

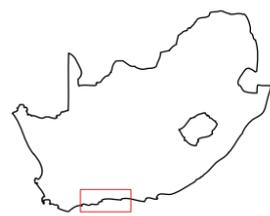


COME HIKE ALONG!

Discover the garden (and coast) of Eden

There's hardly a more beautiful place in the world than Plettenberg Bay if you've ever dreamt of becoming beachcomber or forest dweller. Explore the indigenous forests and unspoilt coast on a new *go!* slackpacking trail.

TEXT **PIERRE STEYN**
PICTURES **RONEL STEYN**



FRESH AIR (top left). This cliff path waits for you once you've set off from the main beach at Keurbooms and crossed the Matjies River, just after you've passed the Arch Rock formation.

VIEWS FOR AFRICA (bottom left). You can take a welcome breather, and admire the view, before you cross the Salt River (preferably at low tide). The hill on the other side is the last climb of the day.

The world around Plettenberg Bay has always been a hikers paradise. Always is forever and that's a long, long time, but some of the first people to ever walk the earth some 160 000 years ago, did it around here. I'm at the Matjies River rock shelter, a 30 minute walk east from the main beach at Keurbooms, and I'm looking at an ancient rubbish heap that contains thousands of years of history. It's a midden, a place where the Strandlopers and their ancestors deposited their food scraps: shells, small animal and fish bones, ash, shards of pottery and bits of tools. Even today this rubbish heap is 30 m long, 15 m wide and 10 m deep, and paleontologists read it like one would a suspense thriller. The layers right at the bottom tell of a time when you wouldn't have been able to see the sea from Matjies River. The coastline was roughly 100 km to the south, but about 14 000 years ago the ice age blew out its last icy breath. Ocean levels started to rise and the original cross country hikers became beachcombers that ate mussels. You can see how their diet changed in the different layers of the midden: From white sand mussels at the bottom to black mussels to limpets to brown mussels on

top of that. Scarcely an hour ago I was in the hustle and bustle of modern Plett, enjoying a cappuccino and a croissant, and now I'm looking at a place that hasn't changed much since the Stone Age! It's this unique combination of modern convenience and unspoilt natural beauty that's attracted us to these trails. We're hiking with an outfit called Venture Beyond, and a year ago they worked with Plettenberg Bay Tourism to conceive the Plett Trail. The idea was to combine different hiking trails, both along the coast and in the indigenous forests, into a variety of multi-day hiking packages that would include expert guides, comfortable accommodation, tasty food, wine tastings and even horse riding or rowing. Now we're here on a recce to test a slackpacking route designed specifically for *go!* readers.

Our first day's hiking starts at 9 am in the parking area at Keurbooms beach, where Venture Beyond's minibus drops us and Sarah Hearn, our guide for the day. The plan is to hike roughly 14 km from Keurbooms to Nature's Valley along beaches, cliffs, through fields of fynbos and forests, and even across a river or two. Sarah checks if we've lathered ourselves with sunblock, and that we have

water in our daypacks. It's a balmy, windstill autumn day. The blue ocean lies to our right. On our left lush, green cliffs reach for the sky. Ahead there's an unblemished white beach, unmarked by footprints. This doesn't feel like work, I think to myself.

We reach the mouth of the Matjies River and Sarah shows us the tracks of a Cape clawless otter that must have crossed the river just ahead of us. Not too far away African Black Oystercatchers are scurrying around in the intertidal zone, searching for food. These near threatened birds with their blood red beaks and legs are abundant here, a good indication that the ecosystem in these parts is still healthy, Sarah says. Once an Oystercatcher has taken a mate, there's no such thing as divorce or fooling around. They mate for life, she says.

After about an hour's easy walking along the beach, we head inland, through a milkwood forest, up a hill covered in fynbos and then we're in the shade of yellowwoods, ironwoods and stinkwood trees. Our destination is Forest Hall, one of the oldest and grandest of the historic estates in the region. This is where Grahame Thomson and his sister, Julie Carlisle, the owners of Venture Beyond, have dropped

off a gourmet picnic lunch for us. Taking a nap after a self induced food coma sounds like a great idea, but we've got a full afternoon's walk through a coastal forest section of the Garden Route National Park ahead of us. This includes crossing the Salt River before the tide comes in. Nobody is keen on swimming across, so we get going. Still, the temptation to unpack at one of the many scenic viewing points on this route and spend the afternoon daydreaming, is huge. We take a lot of photographs though, wade through the Salt River with the water no higher than our ankles, climb the last hill of the day and reward ourselves with a spectacular view of Nature's Valley, where our minibus waits to take us to our accommodation for the night. Tomorrow is another day, and it will have to be huge one to top the one we've just had!

And so it is, because after an early night our guide for the day, Luck'z Mdzeke, is at our door bright and early to take us to Robberg. The whole of the Robberg peninsula is a nature reserve with three circular routes of increasing difficulty and distance. We want to hike the longest one that will take us around The Point. It's roughly 8 km and should take us about five hours, Luck'z says. The bay's beaches have been

NATURE'S VALLEY (top right). This village is at the end of the first day's hike. Before you descend to the beach, you'll first want to take in this view and take a few photographs.

BAHIA FORMOSA (below right). You can see why the early Portuguese explorers originally called this the "beautiful bay".

closed to swimmers and surfers for a few days now because of all the great white sharks that have been spotted in the area. If we're lucky, we might see a great white, or a killer whale, hunting Cape fur seals in the aquamarine water below the clifftops, Luck'z says. We're not that fortunate, but we do see a massive elephant seal bobbing around like a fat submarine amongst the frolicking seals. He's far from home - maybe his GPS malfunctioned!

Robberg is scarcely a caracul's leap far from downtown Plett (not even 8 km) but it's a wild, isolated place that will often force you to a halt so you can take in the views all around you. Luck'z is a fountain of knowledge on all the shipwrecks, the ancient geology, the vegetation, animals and the birds of the region.

We finish our hike just after noon, and reward ourselves with a decadent lunch and winetasting at Bramon, the original Plett wine estate that has won an array of gold medals for its Cap Classique sparkling wines. Peter Thorpe and his wife Caroline bought the farm in 2000. He tells us that it was covered with invasive plants, which they cleared and then planted vines. Their first harvest was in 2004 and today there are more than 20 wine estates in the region as the Cape winelands gradually migrate eastwards. Who knows, by 2050 Grahamstown might have replaced Stellenbosch as the epi-

centre of the South African wine industry!

There's no doubt that you are spoiled for choice in this neck of the woods when it comes to good eating (and drinking). The following day, after we've completed the "Circles in the Forest" route in the Diepwalle forest with Meagan Vermaas (she's the official Dalene Mathee guide), we stop at Totties Farm Kitchen in Rheenendal for their legendary Sunday buffet lunch. Even though the hiking path was flat and the route no more than 4 km, it still took us more than three hours and we've worked up an appetite. It's Meagan's fault: Her encyclopedic knowledge of Mathee's books, and her stories of the elephants that still roam here, the giant yellowwoods, the woodcutters and the gold miners that scratched around in these forests more than 100 years ago, could keep you spellbound for days.

As I enjoy a craft beer and a heaped plate of comfort food, I think about all I've experienced here. It's one thing to chart your own course in a beautiful place like Plett, but it's another thing to experience it with passionate guides like Sarah, Luck'z and Meagan. How else would I have known that the rapid "bidup-bidup-bidup" sound in the brush was the call of the Green-backed Camaroptera if Meagan hadn't carefully parted the leaves to show me his hide-out? Yes, the Plett Trail will see me again!

IT'S MORE THAN A HIKE (clockwise from top left). You can do more on the Plett Trail than just walk. It can include things like rowing on the Keurbooms River, a tasty meal (and craft beer) at Totties in Rheenendal after your guides have told you about some of the earth's first inhabitants that hid out at the Matjies River rock shelter, or about the giant yellowwoods in the Diepwalle forest that inspired the writer Dalene Mathee. Plett even has its own wine route, where a farm like Bramon has taken the lead with its Methode Cap Classique.



Logo here

How does it work?

This is slackpacking at its best over four days and four nights in the company of expert guides. The hiking groups are small - no more than 14 people in a group. Just bring your hiking shoes, walking stick, camera, binoculars and a daypack - we'll see to your accommodation, all your meals, your entrance fees to the nature reserves and your transport from one route to the next. We'll also pick you up and drop you off at the Plettenberg Bay airport if you arrive by plane.

There is a glamping option or you can choose to stay in a lodge. If you camp with us, it will cost R8 950 p.p. sharing (the cost for an individual is R11 635). We provide luxury tents, beds, linen and towels, and there are ablution facilities at the campsites. We'll set up camp in the Diepwalle forest for two nights, and camp next to the Keurbooms River for two nights. **The lodge option** costs R10 950 p.p. sharing (there is a supplement of 30% extra for individuals) and you'll stay in the Christiana Lodge or the Whalesong Hotel for two nights, and spend two nights in either the Formosa Bay Hotel or Bitou River Lodge.

Camp with us

Day 1 We gather at the Diepwalle camping site late in the afternoon, and enjoy supper around the campfire.

Day 2 Meagan Vermaas guides us on the "Circles in the Forest" trail, we enjoy lunch at Totties in Rheenendal and take a afternoon walk through the Diepwalle forest.

Day 3 Today we hike from Nature's Valley to Keurbooms beach. We stop halfway for lunch at Forest Hall. In the meantime our camp has transferred to Keurbooms River.

Day 4 It's another full day's hiking in coastal forests and on the beach on the beautiful Kranshoek trail just west of Plettenberg Bay.

Day 5 The Robberg peninsula is on the menu today, as well as a last picnic lunch before we say goodbye. *

Dates 27-31 October 2017; 24-28 November 2017; 2-6 March 2018

Stay in a lodge

Day 1 We meet at our hotel late in the afternoon, and enjoy supper in the restaurant.

Day 2 Our bus takes us to Nature's Valley, and we hike to Keurbooms beach. We'll stop for lunch at Forest Hall.

Day 3 We spend today hiking through coastal forest and on the beach on the beautiful Kranshoek trail between Plettenberg Bay and Knysna.

Day 4 Today we walk the "Circles in the Forest" route with Meagan Vermaas, we lunch and taste wine at Bramon and we end the day with a sunset cruise on the Keurbooms River.

Day 5 It's our last day of hiking, where we explore the Robberg peninsula in the morning. We'll enjoy a picnic lunch, and then it's time to say goodbye. *

Dates 20-24 October 2017; 17-21 November 2017; 16-20 March 2018



*The program can be adapted on the last day if you rather want to go horse riding or rowing on the Keurbooms River, but it will cost extra.

BOOK NOW!

Book your spot - call Venture Beyond at **044 533 0882**; grahame@venturebeyond.co.za
Go to venturebeyond.co.za for more information