



WORLD-CLASS VIEW: The new Plett Trail will include trekking down to the mouth of the Salt River. Hikers cross the river at low tide and keep going until they reach Nature's Valley

PHOTOGRAPHS: SALVELIO MEYER

Slack-pack like a pro, Plett style

THE 10-DAY PLETT TRAIL IN A NUTSHELL



WETLANDS WONDER: Emily Moon on the Bitou river



TREE-TOP TREAT: Trogon House and Forest Spa



FIVE-STAR STUNNER: Kurland Hotel in the Crags

THE full Plett Trail will include:

DAY 1:

Welcome; tea at Lairds Lodge in Harkerville; visit to Robert Leggat gallery; trail briefing; dinner and overnight at Laird's Lodge.

DAY 2:

Breakfast; transfer to Robberg for Nelson's Cave, walk and picnic lunch; transfer to Lairds Lodge via Plettenvlei wine estate; bird talk; dinner and overnight at Fynbos Ridge Country Lodge.

DAY 3:

Breakfast; Radical Raptors; Griqua museum tour; tea at Oppie Kranshoek; Riel dance performance; Cairnbrogie reserve coastal walk; picnic lunch at Garden of Eden; Diepwalle forest walk; wine tasting at Packwood estate; dinner and overnight at Packwood.

DAY 4:

Breakfast; hike to Witterdrift; picnic lunch; hike along Bitou River to Emily Moon; dinner and overnight at Emily Moon.

DAY 5:

Breakfast; birdwatching on Bitou wetland with Mike Bridgeford (end of Module 1 of the trail). Module 2 orientation; dinner and overnight at Emily Moon.

DAY 6:

Breakfast; transfer to Keurbooms; morning hike along coast to Forest Hall; picnic lunch; afternoon hike to Nature's Valley; dinner and overnight at Tranquility Lodge.

DAY 7:

Breakfast; hike from Nature's Valley to Bramon; wine tasting and lunch at Bramon; afternoon hike through indigenous forest to Trogon House. Dinner; overnight at Hog Hollow/Trogon House.

DAY 8:

Breakfast; briefing on Hog Hollow horse trail; ride to Newstead Wines. Wine tasting and lunch at Newstead; ride to Kurland; dinner and overnight at Kurland.

DAY 9:

Breakfast; hike from Kurland to Redford; lunch; visit to honey bush tea farm; wine tasting at Lodestone and Rare Earth; trail debrief; overnight at Redford House.

DAY 10:

Breakfast; vehicle collection.



UNPARALLELED: The route from Keurbooms to Forest Hall serves up interesting geology and pristine stretches of beach

If you're a keen hiker who enjoys a few little luxuries along the way, then the new Plett Trail is not to be missed, as **Louise Liebenberg** discovers

YOU might think they're a laid back bunch who spend their days guzzling home-grown bubbly, scoffing oysters and twirling their toes in the golden sands of their picture-perfect beaches.

Don't be fooled: the people of Plett make it all look so easy when in reality they are working like mad to put their little piece of paradise on the map.

And they've done it: Plettenberg Bay is the Garden Route leader in real estate, their tourism industry is a well-oiled machine and they have a Matric Rage formula that rakes in many millions every year. They've even created a perfectly legitimate wine route completely out of nothing.

Not content, Plett Tourism has spent many months partnering with high-end accommodation establishments and all manner of experts to come up with a slack-packing hiking trail they intend to position as one of the best experiences of its kind in South Africa.

Slack-packing, for those unfamiliar with the term, is a luxury form of hiking where your legs still do the walking, your horse still does the riding, but you can enjoy the full beauty of your surroundings without the hindrance of a heavy backpack.

There will be no bully beef or baked beans on the menu; no cold showers and certainly no risk of scorpions in your sleeping bag, since you won't be required to rough it at any point.

Instead, at the end of each exhilarating leg, you will be put up in up-market accommodation, treated to a fine country meal and sure to spend a restful night between best-quality sheets before embarking on the next stage of your thrilling adventure.

Members of the media – including myself and my city-slicker photographer husband, Salvelio, were given a small taste last month of the soon to be launched Plett Trail – a fully-guided slack-packing experience set to reveal the area's hidden treasures to well-to-do visitors.

The complete trail, when it is officially launched at the World Travel Market in London next year, will take place over 10 days. Our intrepid little

party of local and international media, aka the guinea pigs, only completed part of the Crags module that will form part of the extended trail.

Trail guide veteran Grahame Thomson, who has been instrumental in getting the project off the ground, describes the Plett Trail as a 10-day, nine-night exploration of "the rugged coastline and spectacular landscapes of the Bitou Valley, incorporating ancient history and cultures, diverse marine and forest ecology and birdlife, unique boutique wine estates and superb country lodges... in essence, the very best slack-packing trail in South Africa".

Thomson said few outsiders knew, for instance, that the Garden Route was home to a number of important archeological sites, including Nelson's Cave at Robberg, which dated back more than 160 000 years.

"The sites of Pinnacle Point, Klasies Rivier, Blombos Cave and Nelsons Cave have all yielded fossil evidence that modern Homo Sapiens inhabited the Southern Cape. It's likely the collective sites will be nominated for World Heritage status in the next five years."

At an orientation session at the enchanting Emily Moon River Lodge, where our group dined and dosed before kicking off a day-long coastal and forest walk the next morning, Thomson also told us the area was steeped in rich cultural history.

"The picturesque region of Kranshoek [near Plett] is unique in that it has one of the largest Griqua populations in South Africa."

Kranshoek was founded in the early 20th century by a group of Griqua trekkers under the leadership of the legendary Abraham le Fleur after they were displaced from their land in Kokstad. Le Fleur also founded the Griqua National Conference in 1904 and a local monument, erected in 1942, celebrates these early Griqua pioneers.

"Plett Tourism is assisting this Griqua community with the development and production of a brochure highlighting the cultural aspects of this nation and various attractions in

Kranshoek," Thomson said.

Though it was not part of our short-ened itinerary, the Plett Trail once available will include a visit to this fascinating community.

Our first day began outside Enrico's at scenic Keurboomsstand where, in next to no time, we shook off all the beach goers and had kilometre upon kilometre of pristine beach, characterised by fascinating geological formations, to ourselves.

None of us could be considered experienced hikers but everyone felt comfortable with the terrain – even my hubby in his Zara shorts and me with my wonky knee and ridiculous Woolies tackies (hiking boots are

knee-deep, crossing" we were prepped for. It was huge fun though; thank goodness for a tall, firm-footed guide in the form of Colin Wylie, of Garden Route Walks, who proved incredibly knowledgeable on marine ecology, coastal botany and the skills required to balance a massive dry-bag on your head.

We arrived at magical Trogon House, next door to Monkeyland, rather worse for wear. But soon, with some deftly prepared G&T's in hand, we were all ears as Plett bird fundi Mike Bridgeford shared with us his knowledge on the area's unbelievably diverse birdlife. Plett, it turns out, is home to 52 endemic species and 32 near-endemics, as well as various migratory and pelagic species.

Our second day was primary a riding experience, for which we were thoroughly prepared by Debbie Fernor and her staff, particularly head guide Bheki Sbenzi, of Hog Hollow Horse Trails in the Crags. We spent the morning riding out to beautiful Newstead Wines, where owner Sue Lund had an utterly marvellous lunchtime feast waiting for us.

Next we rode off to majestic Kurland Estate, where we recuperated over afternoon tea, later followed by an exceptional dinner, before heading back to Emily Moon to collect our vehicles the next morning.

Though the full 10-day Plett Trail will only be launched next April, inquiries and bookings for the Crags module of the trail open on January 1. A minimum of four people must take part.

The costs are still a work in progress, but are expected to be around R2 500 per person per night, sharing. For example, the four night/five day Crags trail will retail for approximately R9 950 per person sharing, inclusive of four nights' accommodation, all meals, transfers and professional guides. Alcohol, laundry and gratuities are not included.

They will also accept shortened versions such as a two-night Crags module, but the cost per person would increase to about R3 000 per person per night, sharing.

The Plett Trail will primarily be a winter tourism product operating from April to November.

NEED TO KNOW



PLETT Tourism is on (044) 533-4065 or visit www.pletttrails.com

For queries specific to the new slack-packing trail, contact Grahame Thomson on 082-924-8349 or e-mail: consultant@pletttrails.com

Hog Hollow Horse Trails is on 082-771-3745 or visit www.hog-hollow.com and click on Activities.

Emily Moon River Lodge is on (044) 501-2500. Visit their website at: www.emilymoon.co.za

For Trogon House and Forest Spa, e-mail: info@trogonhouse.co.za or visit www.trogonhouse.co.za

Kurland Hotel is on (044) 534-8082 or see www.kurland.co.za

Newstead Wines is on (044) 534-8331 or see www.newsteadwines.com

now on my Christmas list). Though there were some serious uphill and a bit of cliff scrambling along the way, it was a most enjoyable hike. Following a poolside picnic at Forest Hall estate we did some trekking through forest and coastal fynbos before being properly gobsmacked by an incredible cliff-top view of the Salt River Mouth.

We would first trek down to and then swim through this very river as it turned out to be a little more extreme than the "ankle, maybe

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