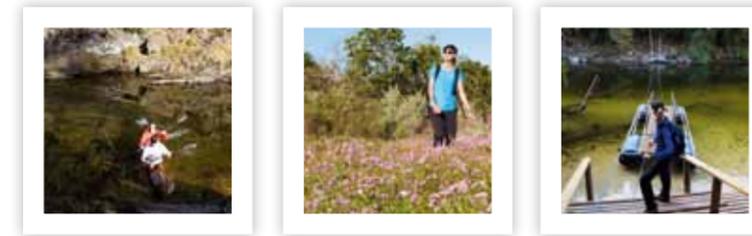


PERFECT PLAYGROUND
Wilderness is a hot spot for adventure activities.



There are several routes to explore by canoe. Hiking trails range from easy to moderate. Thanks to a pont you don't have to get your feet wet on the Half-collared Kingfisher Trail.

Rise & Shine

Energetic or idle, old or young, you'll always find something to do at the Wilderness Section of the Garden Route National Park.

By Stephen Cunliffe

HIKING BONANZA

AGROWING REPUTATION FOR OUTDOORSY ADVENTURE activities was why my wife and I found ourselves in the charming area known as the Wilderness Section of the Garden Route National Park. After a leisurely stroll along the beach the afternoon we arrived, we decided to spend the next few days systematically exploring the park's five well-maintained walking trails. With varying distances and degrees of difficulty, there is indeed a half-day hike in Wilderness to suit all.

The Brown-Hooded Kingfisher Trail is an out-and-back walk, meandering along the Duiwe River in a steep-sided valley below aloe-caked rocky crags. Inside the indigenous forest, with sunlight dripping through a dense canopy, it is hard to see the wood for the trees, but there's a short climb to a viewpoint overlooking the forest.

It was so serenely quiet atop the ridge

I found it impossible to believe we were barely a kilometre from the N2 highway. The distant bark of a baboon snapped me from my musings in the nick of time to see the red wing flash of a Knysna turaco as it abandoned its perch. The trail terminated a kilometre further up the valley at a small, secluded waterfall and icy rock pool. An idyllic spot to escape the midday heat.

By contrast the Pied Kingfisher Trail is a completely flat and shadeless 10 km circular route across the fynbos-surrounded Serpentine floodplain, along the beach and onto the boardwalk alongside the Touw River. It is well suited to an early morning jog or mountain-bike ride. The kingfisher-dominated stretch of trail along the Serpentine is a highlight.

The Cape Dune Molerat Trail is a seldom-used sandy, circular trail through fynbos and beautiful proteas that begins by climbing over the hill behind Ronde- ▶



PICTURES: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

Wilderness lies along the Garden Route.





Enjoy a break from the excitement with a quiet moment in the forest.

vlei before tracing the route of the Wolwe River into Swartvlei. We took advantage of the great picnic spot nestled in the shade of a giant red currant next to the river to enjoy a packed lunch of biltong and sandwiches. At the end of the hike, we popped into the Rondevlei bird hide to recuperate in the company of an overwhelming menagerie of herons, egrets, gulls, cormorants, ducks, grebes, teals and coots.

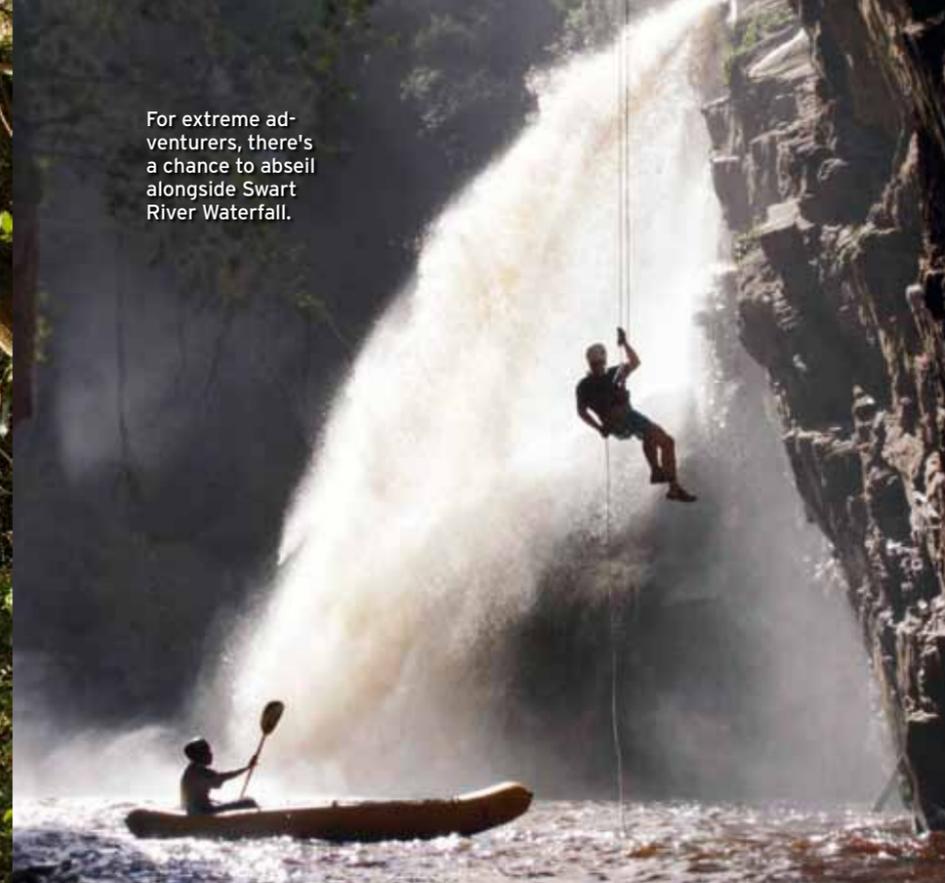
The Woodville Big Tree Circular Walk comprises a short, easy trail through thick indigenous forest. But without a doubt, the most impressive nature walk is the popular 7,2km Half-Collared and Giant Kingfisher loop trail that follows the tranquil Touw River upstream to a scenic waterfall. Making use of a newly constructed 2 km boardwalk, this shaded forest walk took us through a densely wooded valley with giant yellowwoods. The pristine terrain afforded a close encounter with a stately bushbuck ram and regular glimpses of brilliantly coloured kingfishers and turacos.

On the way back, we detoured onto the more challenging Bosduif Loop, a strenuous route straight up the mountainside that took us past a couple of spectacular lookouts. It was a sweaty uphill slog, but the panoramic vista overlooking the Touw River valley was well worth the effort to get there. Upon returning to Ebb-and-Flow Rest Camp, we were in unanimous agreement that this hike has deservedly garnered a reputation as the top Wilderness walk.



CAMPING BLISS
The lush lawns alongside the Touw River make idyllic campsites.

For extreme adventurers, there's a chance to abseil alongside Swart River Waterfall.



EDEN ADVENTURES

WILDERNESS



At Wilderness you're always near water.

PADDLING FOR ADVENTURE

After all that hiking, we decided to rest our weary legs and hire a canoe from conveniently located Eden Adventures on the outskirts of Ebb-and-Flow Rest Camp South. We stashed our valuables in waterproof buckets in the shiny yellow canoe and then effortlessly launched onto the Touw River.

Initially, we set off downstream across Wilderness Lagoon to the beach at Touw River Mouth. It was a pleasant paddle with an abundance of water birds and waders on show, as well as a relaxed large grey mongoose. But it couldn't compare with the trip upstream into a steep-sided valley of pristine indigenous forest. When rocks blocked our upstream progress, and having enjoyed the Touw River Waterfall hike so much the previous day, we temporarily abandoned the canoe and transferred to the latter half of the Giant Kingfisher Trail for a paddle-waterfall walk combo that is near impossible to beat.

For those with strong arms and a full day at their disposal, I would unreservedly recommend the rewarding paddle along the narrow, reeded channels of the snaking Serpentine to a picnic site at Island Lake. This is the longest canoe excursion available, offering an opportunity to escape the crowds, appreciate the area's prolific bird-life and immerse yourself in nature.

A host of other pulse-racing pursuits offered by Eden Adventures might also tempt more adventurous souls. Perhaps a unique, spray-drenched abseil alongside the thundering Swart River Waterfall into a bobbing boat waiting in the Kaaimans Gorge below, or kloofing during the warmer summer months? The half-day Cappuccino Canyon is ideal for first-timers, while the full-day Eden Alley kloof offers the initiated adrenalin-pumping jumps and longer swims.



With its mosaic of lakes and waterways, pristine coastal forest and 18km golden beach, the Wilderness Section of the Garden Route National Park is paradise for nature enthusiasts.

PADDLE AWAY
An outing in a stable canoe is a leisurely way to get your thrills.

A host of pulse-racing pursuits might tempt more adventurous souls.

TOP VIEW
A ride in a para-trike will reward you with breathtaking vistas.



COURTESY OF FLY TIME PARAGLIDING

GETTING HIGH

Deciding I needed to end my Wilderness adventure on a high, I approached Fly Time Paragliding about a flight over the park in a tandem paraglider. The steep hills and favourable air currents create perfect paragliding conditions, with the Cloud Nine launch site above Sedgfield and Map of Africa above Wilderness deservedly acknowledged as offering some of the most consistent and scenic flying anywhere in South Africa. But, as I discovered, paragliding across the park wasn't an option as paragliders float at the mercy of the wind and air currents.

A forest cabin in the southern section.

However, there was another option.

Imported from Belgium earlier this year, the para-trike, with its relatively quiet four-stroke petrol engine, is a motorised paraglider that takes a pilot and passenger of up to 110kg. My pilot, the amiable Jörg Bueble, took me soaring past the five lakes and adjoining waterways of Wilderness before heading back up the coast to Sedgfield. Sitting with my legs dangling in midair, enjoying a bird's-eye view over the park, it was a heart-stopping finale to four magical days during which I had happily lost myself in Wilderness. 🐾



Ebb-and-Flow Camp (South) lies sandwiched between the snaking Serpentine and the Touw River.

TRIP PLANNER



Getting there The Wilderness Section of the Garden Route National Park is signposted off the N2, about 15 km from George, 410 km from Port Elizabeth and 450 km from Cape Town. The closest airport is in George, where car hire is also available.
When to visit Year round with summer school holidays being extremely popular.
Accommodation

Ebb-and-Flow Rest Camp, on the banks of the tranquil Touw River, is divided into two sections. The northern section is wilder and smaller, ideal for campers and budget travellers with its basic rondavels. The southern section has a range of accommodation from riverside campsites and caravan facilities to family cottages and forest cabins on stilts. Rooms are serviced

daily and provided with bedding, towels and soap. All units are self-catering. The nearest restaurants, shops and petrol stations are in Wilderness village, 2 km away.
Activities Forest picnics, canoeing, swimming, abseiling, kloofing, hiking, mountain biking, paragliding, birding, whale watching and dolphin spotting, as well as boating, waterskiing and fishing on Island

Lake or Swartvlei.
Eden Adventures, situated inside the Wilderness Section of the national park, offers abseiling, kloofing and canoe hire. 044-877-0179, www.eden.co.za
Paragliding costs from R550 a flight. Tandem Flight 072 199 0622, Fly Time Paragliding 072 612 8168
Don't forget binoculars, bird book, camera, walking shoes,

sunhat, sunscreen, water bottle and first aid kit.
Good to know Until the end of 2012, there's 40 per cent off all accommodation and camping at Ebb-and-Flow Camp, including weekends.
Contact Reservations 012-428-9111, www.sanparks.org Park 044-877-1197, gardenroute@sanparks.org Wilderness Tourism 044 877 0045

TWITCHER TERRITORY

Thanks to the many ecosystems found within the park, from indigenous forest to rocky shore and everything in between, Wilderness Section has become a haven for birds and birders alike. The Rondevlei Bird Hide, Malachite Hide at Bo-Langvlei and the Gallinule Hide on the outskirts of Wilderness village all offered an abundance of birdlife that I struggled to quantify.

The sight of a pair of great crested grebes performing their elaborate mating ritual eclipsed all else. The birds glided across the water like a pair of Olympic figure skaters in perfect unison, before swimming directly apart and diving out of sight, only to emerge at the same instant like a pair of well-drilled synchronised swimmers. After presenting one another with pieces of waterweed plucked from the lake floor, the male grebe puffed out his neck feathers in an elaborate avian mating ritual as impressive as any I'd seen before.

- 1 A magnificently coloured African swamphen struts its stuff.
- 2 A great crested grebe.
- 3 A malachite kingfisher dives for dinner.
- 4 An African darter shows off its gape.
- 5 A pair of white-breasted cormorants squabble over a fish.
- 6 An African darter comes up with its prize.

