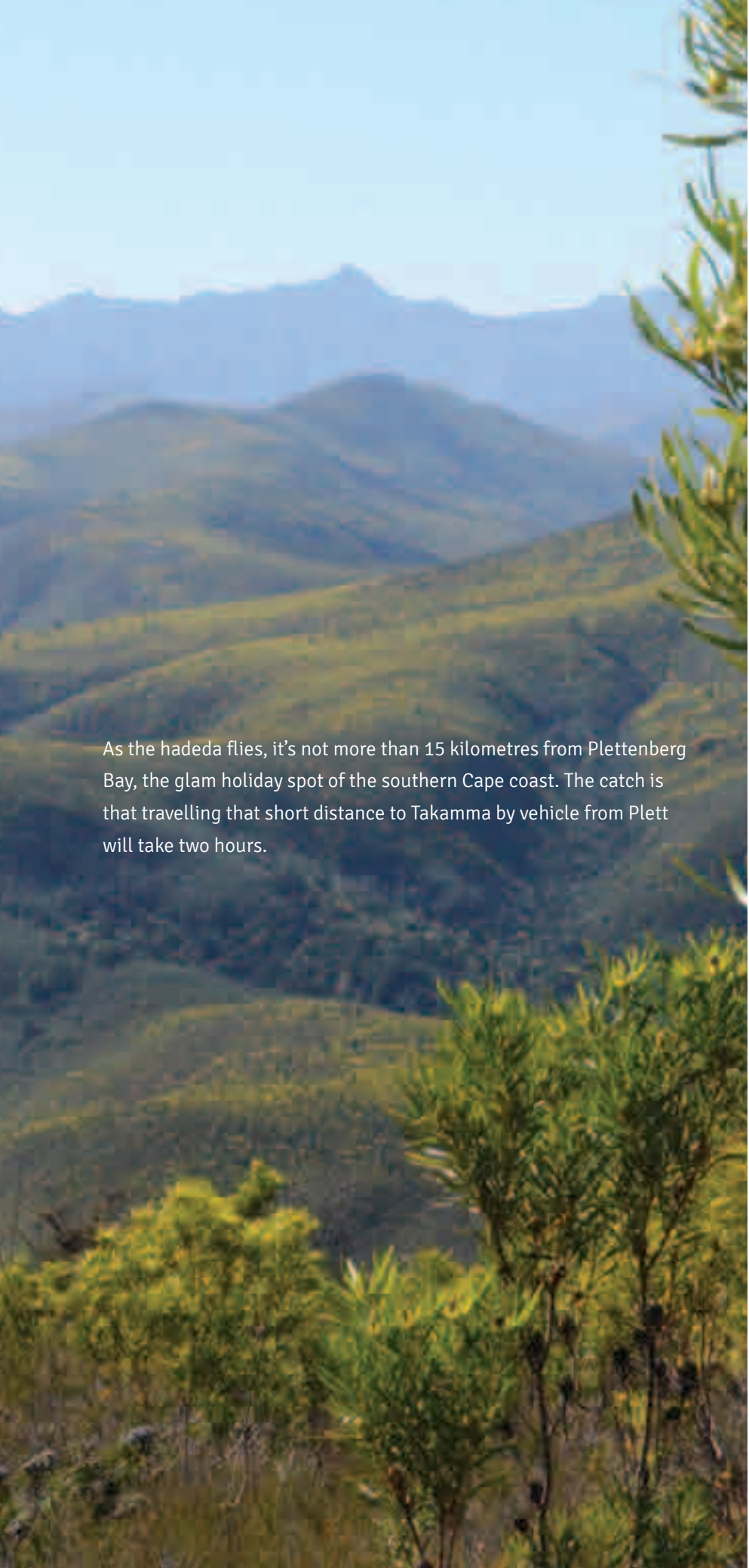




Paradise FOUND

ANGUS BEGG DISCOVERS
A GEM DESTINATION ON
THE EDEN TO ADDO HIKING TRAIL



As the hadeda flies, it's not more than 15 kilometres from Plettenberg Bay, the glam holiday spot of the southern Cape coast. The catch is that travelling that short distance to Takamma by vehicle from Plett will take two hours.

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akamma is a guest-house, a campsite, an escape, surrounded by a fynbos fairyland. But, most importantly, for those intrepid explorers among us, it is a gateway to inaccessible wilderness. That's what drove David Mostert to buy the land in the first place. And cut out the road to where his large wooden cabin now stands – built by himself and his three sons.

Profoundly contrasting and quite addictive, this is one of my three top South African 'finds' of the last five years.

One of the distinguishing features of the BBC *Africa* series shown on television around the world last year was that it revealed parts of Africa never before seen. It's some claim for a continent that the developed world is only really discovering now.

Which brings me in a roundabout way to this wild piece of South Africa. One could say Plettenberg Bay is to this country what Cannes is to France – a lifestyle destination as much as anything else. So it is very much seen.

But as so often happens, it's across the road and over that hill where the real destination gems are waiting to be found. And that's pretty much where we found it.

It is unvisited wilderness, a landscape dominated by gorges and ravines cut through and separated from all familiar infrastructure by the Keurbooms River. When the river is in flood, the only road to this part of the world can't be crossed.

I came across Takamma on one of South Africa's newest hikes, the Eden to Addo. It's 'slackpacking' if you consider that your tents and clothing are transported between overnight stops. But that's as slack as it gets.

The kilometres walked aren't for tender feet, and it's cold by night. Sleeping arrangements involve sharing a two-man tent. It happens only once a year – and if you're a hiking enthusiast, you want to do this.

A major attraction for me is that this is the closest South Africa gets to that wonderful, long-established English hiking culture of 'right of way': an age-old principle of following established footpaths wherever they may take you through the country, which could even be through a farmhouse courtyard. This



could be tricky in the South African context, but after years of negotiation with landowners of similar mindset – among them farmers, forestry companies and national parks – Eden to Addo co-founders Joan Berning and Pam Booth have hit the hiking jackpot.

They have established a significant biodiversity route, aimed at reconnecting the indigenous forests of Knysna (the Garden Route National Park) with Addo Elephant National Park, some 400km to the east. It's a route that once would've been walked by the elephants and loads of other living things that have since been wiped out or removed by modernisation.

Berning wants to see elephants walking this route again, and this hike is part of an awareness and consciousness drive to make it happen. With elephants living in the greater Knysna Forest (five of them still call the forest home), and Addo offering among the most accessible wild elephant activity to be seen anywhere, it's a dream worth chasing.

Ninety minutes after being collected from George Airport, I arrived with fellow hikers at a clearing a good few bumpy dirt-road kilometres from the tar of the national road. We were late.

It was September, with spring not quite

here and the sun sinking rapidly. There was a campfire surrounded by bare legs, beanies and thick socks. All wrapped in thick puffy jackets.

I'd last been dressed like that 11 years ago. This time the inners for my socks had joined my beanie and head-lamp as left-behind-in-the-bloody-vehicle. So much for leaving – and arriving – in a rush.

The light fading, I was quickly introduced to the bloke with whom I'd be sharing a tent. Luckily, he was a nice bloke from that mammoth non-governmental organisation, the WWF. Sadly, he snored like a gruffalo.

The tents were in a row behind a mud embankment, on top of which was a plantation of exotic wattle trees, reminiscent of those long-drop toilets that were a feature of basic training in the army. It was already dark, and I couldn't see a thing.

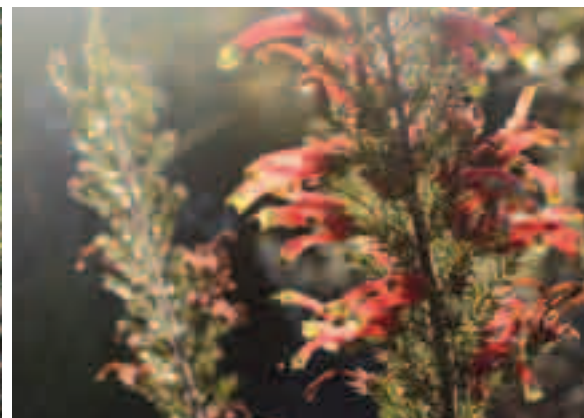
With the chill now serious, I decided I wouldn't be changing into sleeping gear. Such detail could wait for the next day, along with the shift in mindset that would accommodate this abrupt switch in daily lifestyle: like organising the tent before it gets dark, queuing to brush teeth, and deciding on whether to use the loo before breaking camp or using the shovel en route.

A typical plate-in-the-lap campfire dinner was followed by the ubiquitous self-conscious introductions 'to the group', and the emergence of a 78-year-old Liverpudlian Durbanite named John as the joker in the pack. We were instructed to make our lunch for the next day from the bread, peanut butter, salad and fruit spread out on the catering table.

This was then packed into the Tupperware we were supposed to have brought (note to self: read the bloody instructions next time). It was to become the routine for the next three weeks – usually before brushing teeth from a cup in the dark somewhere.

The next morning we headed into the lush, indigenous Knysna Forest – passing

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century-old woodcutters' cottages, leopard spoor and bushpig diggings along the way.

Just a few kilometres from the N2 – a road I must've driven an honest hundred times – this was all new to me. We were on a section of the renowned Outeniqua Trail. It was a Monday, it wasn't a holiday and I had a feeling we'd see no one else on the trail.

Mossy ravines became a dominant feature, and the trail involved a few long downhills – followed by the inevitable steep inclines. Everyone quickly fell into their own pace. Some concentrated on their ankles, while others marvelled at massive mushrooms, birdcalls bouncing off the leaves and spider webs anticipating happy shafts of sunlight.

A few hours in, among the ferns and immense hardwoods, we lay down and ate our lunch. A few closed their eyes.

The last few kilometres making up the 23 for the first day were a bit tough – especially if your toes weren't used to putting in the hard yards in a pair of hiking boots pulled out only for such occasions. The hard forestry road to the Diepwalle forest area camping site – the last stretch – was a long uphill.

The fire was going strong by the time we arrived. I filled a bucket with water

from the fire and set about showering myself behind a plastic camping gizmo wrapped around a tree.

I'm fussy about two things: 49 drops in my espresso, and putting my feet back down on the sand after I've washed them. But the cold was setting in, and the beer and supper were waiting. And worse than dirty, newly washed feet was the thought of feeling my way around a tent without a torch.

The next day would see us leaving the forest and the national park. It rained that night, and was still drizzling after breakfast as we made our lunch. I was looking forward to using the new 'waterproofs' that would keep my pants dry.

It was great. The rain didn't bother me, and I wasn't wet. It was just something I was walking in. We set a brisk pace, first through hip-high wet grass – which would be crap without the waterproofs – then onto a road lined by plantations. We passed a bakkie down a grassy slope which looked like it had careered off the road the night before. Turning up onto private farmland, we cut our way through wild montane grassland. The sun came out. The cold waking from that morning had been forgotten. It was suddenly very hot.

It was September spring, and the

scent was gorgeous. By the time we passed through a forestry workers' village around a few bends and over the odd hill, it was raining again. There were school-kids, box-like wooden cabins and tiny, pretty gardens.

For lunch we stopped at a farm called Bavaria. The farmer joined us in his shed, among the tractors. The lunch we had packed at breakfast was devoured.

That night our tents were pitched on the banks of the Palmiet River, a tributary of the Keurbooms. Our portable toilet was a hole in the ground with a shovel, covered by a fly screen – looking right at the river.

The water was rushing September-fresh from upstream. It was cold.

The next morning we forded the river and hiked up the steep dirt road onto hilly grassland. Without the numerous pine trees that dotted the mountainous landscape – the result of seed scattered by the wind – this would be true wilderness. This was Takamma.

I'd only done four days of the hike, and we'd already passed through three biodiversity corridors: the Robberg, Bitou Wetland and Keurbooms River. There were two more corridors and over 300km of discovery to go.

I loved what we'd done, and was already missing the next couple of weeks. ©

