

South Africa

Plettenberg Bay, South Africa: where locals go to play

When Cape Town's inhabitants want to escape the city, many head for Plettenberg Bay. Sandra McGregor joins the exodus.



Image 1 of 4

Plettenberg Bay's pristine beaches draw such crowds that the town's population swells to nearly four times as many during the summer Photo: Alamy

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"I'll let you in on a little secret," says the waitress as she refills our coffee. "Though Cape Town may get all the attention, this is where South Africans come to play." But frankly, judging by the number of people I see walking around Plettenberg Bay barefoot, wearing little more than bathing suits and touting picnic baskets and inflatable dolphins, it's not much of a secret. At least not in South Africa.

Located in the Western Cape along the popular Garden Route, Plettenberg Bay's pristine beaches draw such crowds that the town's population of 44,000 swells to nearly four times as many during the summer months of December and January.

Yet despite a little international recognition, few visitors from outside Africa ever make their way to this picturesque town. Fewer still ever venture beyond the beaches to explore what are some of South Africa's most commanding coastline vistas and the largest remaining tract of indigenous forest in the country.

Lack of international renown, I'm discovering, is not necessarily a bad thing. Despite the focus here on beaches, even Plett's (as the town is

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locally known) most popular ones, such as Robberg or Central, are never overcrowded outside the Christmas period; the only creatures I see competing for space are a group of house-hunting hermit crabs fighting over an empty seashell.

"Welcome to South Africa's version of Fort Lauderdale," says Russell Katzenberg as he helps us aboard his river ferry, soon to depart for a leisurely cruise of the Keurbooms River Nature Reserve. Though we are only a few minutes' drive from town, this greeting seems out of place amid a pristine river system and the surrounding verdant forest, with the only raucous behaviour coming from some nearby ducks who seem to be involved in a mating ritual.

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As we glide serenely along the river, flanked by some of South Africa's last remaining old-growth indigenous forest, Russell expertly describes the region's geology and animal life, and confirms that the Plettenberg Bay area is as much a draw for nature lovers as it is to those who come for the beaches and bars. He explains that, as a central fixture on the Garden Route (a drive renowned for its lush forests, diverse vegetation, lagoons and ocean views), the town's Fort Lauderdale vacation vibe is tempered by the hikers, eco-adventurers and adventure fans who come to explore the region's overwhelming expanse of natural beauty. Visiting the region is perhaps best described as Club Med meets Mother Nature.

Later that day, as if to confirm Plettenberg Bay's standing as an ecotourism hot spot, I meet a group of amateur ornithologists only too happy to list the birds they saw at the nearby Tsitsikamma National Park (the Knysna Loerie being the big prize). Another of the protected areas found in the region, the park is criss-crossed by miles of trails (including the Otter Trail, regarded as one of the best hiking trails in South Africa), rocky ravines and secluded valleys.

The birders' excitement is contagious, and I decide that some birdwatching may be in order. But I take the easy way out. A 15-minute drive from town is The Craggs.

A kind of condensed version of the region's ecological offerings, it affords those of us with only faint outdoors leanings the chance to explore the environment.

At Birds of Eden, the world's largest free-flight aviary, more than 3,000 birds fly unfettered within a massive 3.2-acre dome filled with indigenous trees and plant life. No binoculars are needed to spot hundreds of birds, from the ubiquitous ring neck doves to the rare and shy Knysna Loeries. It's beginner birding at its best.

Here, I meet a group of students on vacation from Stellenbosch University who, misjudging my sense of adventure, invite me to join them bungee jumping at the nearby Bloukrans Bridge, the highest bungee jump in the world.



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I politely pass and opt for the more subdued version of adventure offered next door: going for a walk in the company of more than 400 primates at Monkeyland Primate Sanctuary. Here, I am joined by a small group of fellow adventurers and a guide who, carrying nothing but a walking stick, leads us through a 12-acre enclosure among curious spider monkeys, bellowing gibbons and laid-back lemurs. "They're just like the visitors who come to Plett," says our guide pointing up the pathway to a group of lemurs, "they love to worship the sun."

Ahead of us are almost a dozen of the charming creatures, all vying for a share of sunbeam, eyes wide, arms raised as though in worship.

Of course, no creature quite encapsulates the taking-it-easy ethos of Plettenberg Bay as do the languorous felines found at Tenikwa Wild Cat and Wildlife Sanctuary (where visitors are allowed in the enclosures of most of the wildcats), another of the wildlife experiences to be found at The Craggs. Or if you're not a cat person, the nearby elephant attraction or snake sanctuary may suit.

The next attraction up is a more "agrarian" sort at Bramon Wine Estate, the most easterly winery in the province. After filling up on some lovely sauvignon blanc and tapas at the winery's restaurant, I have just enough energy to make plans to go for a long hike among Tsitsikamma's many gorges and exquisite rare yellowwoods. But then I think again and change my mind, deciding to hit the beach instead. My lovely new hiking boots never make it out of the box.

Essentials

Getting there

British Airways (0844 493 0787; www.britishairways.com) and South African Airways (0027 11 978 5313; www.flysaa.com) have direct flights from London to Cape Town from around £700. From the airport you can rent a car (reserve in advance; visit www.southafrica.to for a list of rental companies and contact numbers).

From Cape Town, it's approximately a six-hour drive to Plettenberg Bay. Alternatively, SAA also offers connecting flights to George (the nearest airport to Plettenberg Bay, which is about an hour's drive) from Cape Town or Johannesburg.

Packages

As this is a popular resort town, many packages are available for both Plettenberg Bay and the Garden Route; for a comprehensive list, visit www.go2africa.com/south-africa/plettenberg-bay/tours.

Getting around

The best way to get around Plett itself is on foot. However, renting a car is the easiest way to visit the surrounding region and beaches. For something a little different, renting a kayak is a rewarding way to explore the bay – and possibly get the chance to paddle alongside dolphins; visit www.plettenbergbayinfo.co.za/plett/kayak.html for details.

The inside track

The Otter Trail is regarded by many as South Africa's best hike. The trail takes five days and four nights. Paths take you along both the coastline and through old growth forest. The numbers of hikers allowed on the trail is limited so reservations are mandatory and are known to book up over a year in advance. However, for those less hardy hikers, a one-day hike is available. For information and to make reservations, visit www.sanparks.org.

The Plettenberg Bay region keeps adventure sports enthusiasts very busy. Try the world's highest recorded bungee jump (0027 42 281 1458; www.faceadrenalin.com); ride a zip line above waterfalls (042 280 3770; www.tsitsikammaadventure.co.za); or go skydiving (082 905 7440; www.skydiveplett.com).

What to bring home

You can get great deals on local, handmade crafts at the Plett Market on Main in central Plettenberg Bay (044 533 1630). And pick up some brut from Bramon Wine Estate, the most easterly winery in the Western Cape (044 534 8007; www.bramonwines.co.za).

The region is also home to Mitchell's, one of South Africa's most popular craft breweries. Based in Knysna, the brewery offers tours and tastings; buy some bottles to bring back and enjoy the taste of the region from home(www.mitchellsbrewery.com).

The best hotels

Milkwood Manor ££

One of the best located hotels in Plettenberg Bay, this charming, colonial-style inn is situated just steps from the beach. Wake up to the sound of the sea and enjoy a hearty breakfast while Milkwood's proprietor goes around to every table to offer tips on what to do in the region and to show off some of the treasures that have turned up on the beach such as the filigreed-like sand dollars (044 533 0420; www.milkwoodmanor.co.za; doubles from £70 per night).

Aquavit Guesthouse ££

A high-end b & b offering elegant rooms and bountiful breakfasts. The solicitous hosts ensure an enjoyable stay, as do the pool and fine views of both the ocean and the nearby Tsitsikamma mountains (044 533 6686; www.aquavit.co.za; doubles from £100).

The Tsitsikamma Village Inn £££

A little off the beaten track (40 miles from Plettenberg Bay), this hotel offers cottage-style rooms in a secluded setting, minutes from the Tsitsikamma Nature Reserve and the world's highest bungee jump at nearby Storms River (042 281 1711; www.tsitsikammahotel.co.za; doubles from £100).

The best restaurants

Cranzgots £

A casual if occasionally boisterous place to dine; the food is dependably delicious and cheap. Two people can easily dine with wine for as little as £18 (044 533 1460).

Lemon Grass, Plettenberg Bay ££

A favourite among locals, this restaurant boasts both great food and a superb location, with an open-air dining room just steps from the beach (044 533 0420; www.milkwoodmanor.co.za).

Ile de Pain ££

Worth the 18-mile drive to the nearby town of Knysna, this French café and bakery is open for breakfast and lunch only. It's always crowded but the food is well worth the wait. With the smells of fresh croissants and baguettes filling the air you would swear you were in Paris (044 302 5707; www.iledepain.co.za).

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Patricia Vollert Butterworth

08/03/2011 08:42 AM

NO WAY DIGGER - not sure when was the last time he was in Plett! Definetly a place for everyone - you can't afford NOT TO COME! A hidden secret, filled to the brim with amazing outdoor activities for all wallets. Backpackers, camping, b&b's and self-catering places at amazing prices (espec ially during the Winter Secret Season). Lots of wild babies borne this time of year - whales, dolphin, lemur, rhino's - you name it we got it!!!

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08/02/2011 08:41 PM

Not on a wavelength with this article as in my time in SA ,I fong Plet disappointing and full of the JNB elite.main street is a tip but recommend a good malay curry at the restaurant on Lookout beach.Mossel bay for me or even Knysna but Plet.No chance

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tony15

08/02/2011 06:34 PM

I know Plett well. Don't forget to visit the Mohair Shop and Porcupine Pottery also at the Craggs. Self catering private apartments on a complex at Castleton overlooking the ocean and mountains behind. Two very good golf courses near town. Shopping in Main Street and at Market Square. You won't regret it!!

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jimdigriz

08/02/2011 05:05 PM

I love Plett. Have stayed at a lovely little place called Milkwood Manor many times over the past few years...

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Can't recommend it enough!

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