

RUGGED

AND RAVISHING

TAKING IN GOLDEN BEACHES, SPECTACULAR ROCK FORMATIONS, OUTSTANDING VIEWS, SEAL COLONIES AND ABUNDANT BIRDLIFE, THE CIRCULAR ROBBERG HIKING TRAIL NEAR PLETTENBERG BAY IS ARGUABLY SOUTH AFRICA'S BEST DAY HIKE

BY FIONA MCINTOSH

YOU CAN DO IT TO

► There are three, interlinked route options – the easy 2.1 km (30-minute) Gap Circuit, the moderate 5.5 km (2-hour) Witsand Circuit and the strenuous 9.2 km (4-hour) Point Circuit. The varying distances and difficulties make this a great destination for families and groups of different fitness and abilities. The route is clearly marked with a seal icon.

► Entrance is R40 for adults, R20 for children under 13 years, payable at the entrance gate. Gate times: October to April, 8 am–8 pm, May to September, 8 am–6 pm

044 533 2125, capenature.co.za/reserves/roberg-nature-reserve

► What to bring: The trail is rough, so sturdy hiking boots are recommended. Wear a hat and carry plenty of water (particularly in summer as there is no shade along the trail), a swimming costume and binoculars.

► Extending one nautical mile (1.852 km) offshore, the Robberg Marine Protected Area is home to an array of seabirds, fish and mammals. Dolphins, and between June and November, southern right whales, are often spotted.

► Robberg has some of the Garden Route's top rock- and surf angling spots, so if you fancy a spot of fishing, purchase a permit at the post office in advance.

► Late summer (February to April) brings a special treat when colourful candelabra lilies bloom in the reserve.

Three dark silhouettes pass menacingly as we gaze out from our rocky viewpoint on Plettenberg Bay's Robberg Peninsula. Their shapes are unmistakable. A trio of great white sharks is cruising the turquoise, shallow waters below us. Less than half a kilometre into the Robberg Hiking Trail, we're already blown away by the beauty and diversity of this rugged reserve.

The uneven path that we've followed from the car park takes us to a break in the rocky ridgeline known as The Gap. The rocks here – we learn from our annotated map and guide – date back more than 100 million years to the break-up of the Gondwanaland supercontinent.

It's a good place to rest a while, to take in the views of Plettenberg Bay, and to ponder the fact

that CapeNature's Robberg Nature Reserve is a very special place. Not only does it form part of the famous Cape Floral Region World Heritage Site but, owing to evidence of Stone Age inhabitation found in some of the caves, it's an important national monument too.

As we regain higher ground on the other side of The Gap, we pick up a pungent scent, the loud barking of seals revealing its origin. Stopping at a high vantage point, we watch the comings and goings of the inhabitants of the Cape fur seal colony below, which also gave the reserve its name. As the cheeky pups perform rolls and dives, I can't help worrying about their fate. It was clearly no coincidence that we had spotted the ocean's apex predators a short distance away.

WHERE TO STAY

► The only accommodation in the reserve is **Fountain Shack**, a rustic cabin that sleeps eight people (R960 off-peak, R1 600 peak pn; thereafter R150 pp pn).

021 483 0190, capenature.co.za/reserves/robberg-nature-reserve

► Right on Central Beach and with great views, **Plett Beachfront Accommodation** offers good value, spacious, chic en-suite rooms (from R390 pp pn sharing), dorm beds (from R270 pp pn) and self-catering units (from R1 400 pn for four people).

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A short walk through dense coastal thicket dotted with showy pink pig's ear succulents takes us down to the blindingly white, exposed sand dune of Witsand (from where there's an option to return to the car park by following the 5.5 km Witsand Circuit) from where we climb to an exposed section of path that follows the edge of a high cliff. Peering down at the ocean, we see another colony of seals on the wave-cut platform below, while out to sea, a distinctive V-shaped blow alerts us to the presence of a pod of giant, southern right whales.

Once at the point, the trail drops steeply to the rocky shoreline and around the tip of the peninsula – a wild and rugged section of coast. The path, which is at times steep, stony and narrow, is fairly challenging and involves some boulder hopping and scrambling over magnificently weathered, lichen-covered

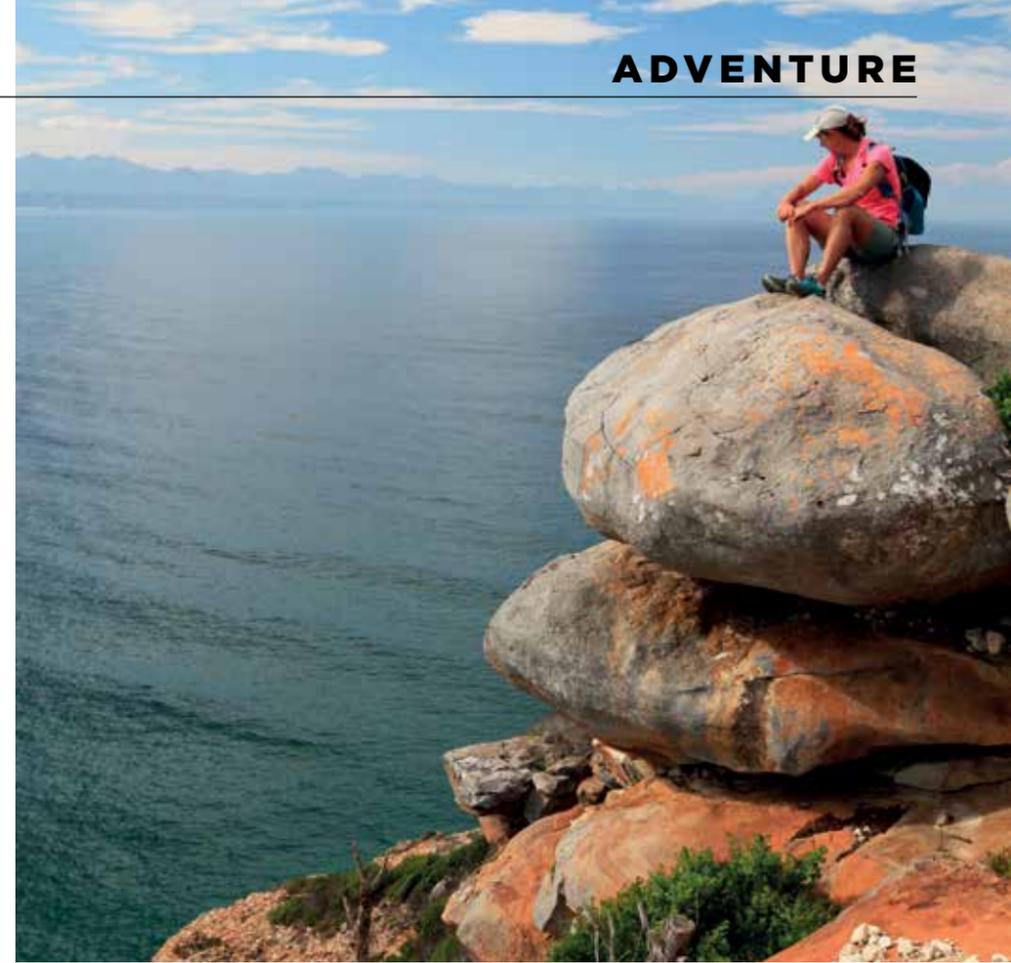


rocks. We take it slowly and carefully, grateful for the aid of rope handrails and wooden steps on the more tricky descents. The sight of the bright daisies and hardy succulents that line the pathway, the sound of crashing waves and the smell of the sea are invigorating.

Gulls, cormorants and other seabirds provide constant distraction as we pick our way to the white sands that link the peninsula to a rocky outcrop, which becomes separated from Robberg at high water. It's low tide, so we detour

to Die Eiland, a seagull nursery, circumnavigating it on a boardwalk before returning to the beach for a swim in the Indian Ocean.

It's a stiff haul back up to The Gap, but worth every bead of sweat. As we look back across the picturesque reserve from the picnic benches at the car park, we reflect that despite the fact that this is a well-known and popular walk, we encountered only four other hikers on the full trail. It really is one of the gems of the Garden Route. ✨



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