



View of the Little Karoo's rolling farmlands and the Kamanassie Mountains beyond, taken from beside the pool at Oulap

THE GARDEN ROUTE AND SOUTHERN CAPE

Strictly speaking, The Garden Route stretches from around Mossel Bay to Tsitsikamma – and doesn't include the Overberg or the Little Karoo, mentioned here.

The Garden Route itself is a narrow coastal band of land. On one side it's bordered by a string of deep-blue lagoons and white sandy beaches, which separate it from the Indian Ocean. On the other side are the forested slopes of the Tsitsikamma and Outeniqua Mountains. Between the ocean and the mountains sits this aptly named 'garden' – a stunning patchwork of lush vegetation including the last of the Cape's ancient evergreen forests.

This is not an area to be rushed. Allow yourself at least four days, and preferably more, to drive into its mountains, potter around its small towns, and explore its coastline and beaches.

THE OVERBERG

East of Cape Town, in the heart of the Overberg region, lies Swellendam; it makes a perfect stop for a night or two on the way to the Garden Route. Relax by pottering around this small, sleepy town's craft studios or museum, or be energetic and drive to Bontebok National Park for spectacular hiking. A short wander from the centre of town, **The Old Mill** is a rustic, cosy and quite idiosyncratic guest house with open fires and earthy colours.

Just outside town, **Klippe Rivier** is probably the best-preserved manor house in the region. The gardens are a delight, with manicured lawns, old sweeping oaks and herb gardens. Inside, richly coloured rugs and antiques line the hallways, leading to the library, living and dining room of what feels like a stately home.

Outside, whitewashed stables have been tastefully converted into six luxurious, air-conditioned bedrooms, complete with interesting, quirky design features and strong fabrics, whilst a separate cottage offers more seclusion.

Further into the mountains, **Mardouw** is an intimate, contemporary retreat on a working olive farm. A converted Cape Georgian farmhouse, it's a lovely place to stay, with five rooms, excellent food and a very friendly team.

THE LITTLE KAROO

Jans Rautenbach retired from a career as director in South Africa's film industry over a decade ago. He and his wife, Almeri, designed and built a gem of a place, called **Oulap**: a unique house on its own hilltop with stunning views, about 55km east of Oudtshoorn.

Everything in this eclectic house has a story, and Jans makes a gracious yet ebullient raconteur. Almeri's cuisine is excellent and dinner is always a relaxed affair, with lively conversation



Southern right whale seen on a boat trip from Plettenberg Bay

accompanying a good bottle of wine. Outside is a swimming pool, while inside you will find a cellar bar, lounges and libraries of books and films.

A more conventional place, **Rosenhof Country House** is situated on the outskirts of Oudtshoorn and dates back to 1852. Its main building is a renovated homestead, complete with antique furniture and ceilings of yellowwood, which now houses a fine restaurant. Outside, around the lovely rose garden, are 14 relatively modern, stylish rooms – plus a spa and a swimming pool.

WILDERNESS

A lush, flat part of the Garden Route around the small town of Wilderness is veined by a network of river and lagoons. It's an area to enjoy the outdoors; hiking, mountain-biking, horse-riding, and canoeing are all options inland, whilst on the water fishing, surfing, and kite-surfing are popular. It's a relatively quiet spot where you'll also find good restaurants.

In an elevated spot, **Hilltop Country House** overlooks the ocean and Wilderness National Park. It's a small place with just seven rooms and a self-catering chalet. Like so many of the Cape's country houses, the main building – with the restaurant and lounge – is in a historic old building, whilst the rooms are all relatively new. All have terracotta tiles and a smart, country-cottage feel.



Suite at Phantom Forest



The beach near Nature's Valley – Tsitsikamma



The Garden Route's long sandy beaches are interspersed with many stretches of rugged coastline, like this at Knysna Heads

KNYSNA

The small town of Knysna is a popular resort, known for its wood carvings, art galleries and fresh oysters. It stands beside a huge lagoon, which attracts large flocks of migrant birds and is home to an endemic species of sea horse. It's a good base for walkers to explore the coast, and a springboard for boat trips to the lovely Featherbed Reserve.

In the mountains behind the town are the remains of the lush indigenous forests which once covered the Cape. Here are vast towering trees of unfamiliar species: yellowwoods, stinkwoods and hard pears, many now rare due to the value of their timber.

On a small peninsula near town, The **St James of Knysna** is a good hotel in a prime position overlooking Knysna Lagoon. It has two swimming pools, great views, manicured gardens and a Koi carp pond. The 15 rooms here are split between two buildings, the courtyard and the manor house, and the good restaurant features Knysna's famous oysters.

Next door, **Point Lodge** is a more economic option. It's a friendly guesthouse with just nine rooms, a lovely swimming pool and a quirky little bar with a mariner's theme.

A refreshingly different kind of hideaway, **Phantom Forest** stands amidst ancient forest in its own small nature reserve, above Knysna. Each of its 14 lovely tree suites is constructed from an innovative mix of wood, canvas and expansive glass, and everything feels as if it's an integral part of the forest. With two excellent and different restaurants as well as a wellness centre, this is one of our favourite places in the Cape.

Near Knysna, **Belvidere Manor Hotel** is a curious place, with 27 separate cottages, each with its own small kitchen, set in spacious gardens. These are all separately owned, and let out when the owners are not there. With a lovely swimming pool and good views overlooking the lagoon, this makes a great spot for families.

PLETTENBERG BAY

For some, Plettenberg Bay is the epitome of the Garden Route – with lovely beaches, lakes, mountains and rivers all within easy reach. Here you'll find the world's highest bungee-jump, a high-level canopy walk in the forest, plus great whale-watching (from boats and the shore), and the Robberg Nature Reserve, with its colony of Cape fur seals.

One of the best hotels in the heart of the Garden Route, **The Plettenberg** has a stunning sea-front location, overlooking Lookout Beach and the waters of Plettenberg Bay. It's a light, airy, stylish hotel within walking distance of the centre of the small town of Plettenberg Bay. Most of its 37 luxurious rooms are sea-facing, and its (heated) infinity swimming pool is a good place to relax.

On the outskirts of Plettenberg Bay are two more economic options – both within sight of the whales and dolphins in the bay. The nautically themed **Periwinkle Guest Lodge** overlooks Robberg Beach and has seven tastefully decorated en-suite bedrooms. These all feature local artwork and are decorated with pastel greens, blues and sand colours.

Immediately beside the Robberg Beach, **Southern Cross Beach House** has a wonderful location with sweeping ocean views. This owner-run guest house is very informal, with guests helping themselves to drinks from the honesty bar, and using the kitchen if they wish. Its five rooms are all different, but all are smartly decorated in muted modern tones, and are set plantation style around a courtyard, with wide verandas. This is a great little guest house!

Between Plettenberg and Tsitsikamma, **Hog Hollow** stands high on a hillside, overlooking a wide deck, with a swimming pool and the Tsitsikamma Mountains beyond. The lodge has many quirky corners, African touches and unique, hand-crafted artefacts – like the chandelier of candles over the dining table.

Hog Hollow's 16 cosy suites all have king-size beds, fireplaces, earthy tones and

private verandas. The staff are friendly and there's a lot of attention to detail, from the carefully chosen fabrics in earthy African colours, to small touches that make the place more comfy. This is a high-quality lodge with a lot of character, food that's both very good and imaginative, and in a location that's perfect for exploring.

TSITSIKAMMA NATIONAL PARK

Further east, the Tsitsikamma Coastal National Park is best known for its walking trails and dramatic coastal scenery. This national park is organised for people to hike around by themselves.

A wander through the forests will reveal waterfalls, ravines and beautiful flora – whilst many of the walks follow spectacular sections of the coastal footpath.

Below the forests, on a rocky promontory, the simple **Storms River Restcamp** defies the crashing waves below. This is an amazing location, and its inexpensive chalets and bungalows make the perfect base for taking yourself on a series of stunning walks around this coastal national park.

Alternatively, *Hog Hollow* (see above) makes an excellent base from which to explore Tsitsikamma National Park.



Dassie, or Rock hyrax, at Storms River



View from the restaurant at Storms River Restcamp