

THE GARDEN ROUTE AND SOUTHERN CAPE

Strictly speaking, the Garden Route stretches from around Mossel Bay to the Tsitsikamma National Park – and doesn't include the Overberg or the Little Karoo, which are 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, Swellendam 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.

On the edge of town, **The Old Mill** is a rustic and quite idiosyncratic little guesthouse with a popular, if slightly spartan, restaurant which serves local cuisine. There are six cottages for guests here; expect open fires, terracotta-tiled

floors and white-washed walls. Across the road, the immaculate **Rothman Manor** has six rooms of different designs and is on the retro side of trendy. Outside it has a beautifully landscaped garden and a small reserve for zebra, ostrich and springbok.

The welcoming **Schoone Oordt** is a new favourite of ours – centred around a beautifully restored Victorian house. Set in lush gardens, the ten modern rooms here have high ceilings and smart en-suite bathrooms. A short walk from the town centre, **The Hideaway** is a friendly spot with just four 'suites', all facing the long garden



Southern right whale seen on a boat trip from Plettenberg Bay

Not far from Swellendam is South Africa's smallest national park, the **Bontebok National Park**. Activities here include birdwatching, game viewing, nature trails, fishing and canoeing on the Breede River. **Lang Elsie's Kraal Rest Camp** has ten self-catering chalets with views over the Breede River, all designed to have minimal impact on the environment.



The Dutch Reformed Church in Swellendam

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

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 stone 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 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 12 modern, stylish rooms and two private suites – plus a spa and a swimming pool.



The stylish reception at Views Boutique Hotel

WILDERNESS

A lush, flat part of the Garden Route, around the small town of Wilderness, is veined by a network of rivers and lagoons. It's an area to enjoy the outdoors; hiking,

mountain biking and horseriding are all options inland, whilst on the water, canoeing, fishing, surfing, and kite surfing are popular. It's a relatively quiet spot where you'll also find good restaurants.

With direct access to the lovely Wilderness Beach, **Dune Guest Lodge** has only five rooms and is within walking distance of restaurants. By contrast, the chic **Views Boutique Hotel & Spa** has 22 large suites, all featuring floor-to-ceiling windows with views of the sea or mountains. There are two restaurants here, and a heated rooftop pool – but what sticks in the mind are the fun aquatic design elements, like the three-storey mobile of glass fish sculptures.

The **Wilderness National Park** is an area of lakes, rivers and beaches at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains. Walking trails wind through the dense forests and along the rivers allowing you the chance to spot brightly coloured Knysna louries. Activities available here are canoeing, boating, fishing, hiking, abseiling, paragliding and hang gliding. Self-catering accommodation is available at the **Ebb and Flow Rest Camp**, within the park.

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 seahorse. 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 that 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.

Close to the centre of Knysna, on Thessen Island, the **Turbine Boutique Hotel and Spa** is unique. Originally a wood-fired power station, the Turbine has been restored into a 24-bedroom hotel that opened in 2010. Many of the original boilers and turbines, and much of the station's other equipment, has been incorporated into its design.

On a small peninsula near town, the owner-run **St James of Knysna** is a luxury hotel set in three acres overlooking Knysna Lagoon. It has two swimming pools, great views, manicured gardens and a koi carp pond. The 15 rooms and suites here are split between two buildings, the courtyard and the manor house, and the à la carte restaurant offers good food and wine as well as Knysna's famous oysters.

A refreshingly different kind of hideaway, **Phantom Forest** stands in a native forest within its own small nature reserve, near

Knysna. Each of its 14 lovely tree suites is sustainably 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.

Ten kilometres west of Plettenberg Bay, **Hunters Country House** is part of the Relais & Châteaux group of hotels. Each of its 18 luxurious suites has its own private patio with views of the tranquil gardens and the Outeniqua Mountains beyond. In the same location, **Tsala Treetop Lodge** has ten suites and six villas – all with plenty of glass, stone and wood, and oozing style.

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 seafront 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 and suites are sea-facing, and its (heated) infinity swimming pool is a good place to relax.

On the outskirts of Plettenberg Bay are two more economical 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, all with sea views and balconies or patios. Each features local artwork and is decorated with sand colours.

Immediately beside Robberg Beach, the owner-run **Southern Cross Beach House** has a wonderful location with sweeping ocean views – and it is often possible to watch whales and dolphins from the veranda. The guesthouse 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 guesthouse!

Between Plettenberg Bay and Tsitsikamma, **Hog Hollow** sits on the edge of a gorge, overlooking a swimming-pool deck and the Tsitsikamma Mountains beyond. The lodge has many quirky corners, African touches and unique, handcrafted artefacts – like the chandelier of candles over the dining table. Hog Hollow's 16 cosy suites all have king-size beds, hammocks and private verandas; most have fireplaces, too. The staff are friendly and there's a lot of attention to



Grabbing a bite on the sundeck, overlooking the sea at Storm's River

detail, from the earthy tones and bright fabrics, to small touches that make the place more comfy. The nearby 'Villa' is a three-bedroomed house, with its own swimming pool, ideal for families or small groups. Hog Hollow has a lot of character, food that's very good and imaginative, and stands in a location that's perfect for exploring.

TSITSIKAMMA NATIONAL PARK

East of Plettenberg Bay, the Tsitsikamma Coastal National Park has a network of walking trails amidst dramatic coastal scenery. It appeals most strongly to those who enjoy hiking by themselves, without a guide. 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.



The poolside sundeck at Hog Hollow overlooking the Tsitsikamma Mountains



Dassie, or Rock hyrax, at Storms River