

WHY WE TRAVEL

SOUTH AFRICAN ROAD TRIP | TASTE OF TURKEY



A scenic view of a coastline. In the foreground, there's a dense green forest. Beyond it, a sandy beach meets the ocean. Waves are breaking on the shore. In the background, a large green hill rises from the beach. The sky is clear and blue.

This Coast Is Clear

On a visit to her former home, **Sarah Khan** recruits a friend to drive South Africa's emptiest stretch

In our claustrophobic lives it's a rare luxury to experience moments of true escape, when we trade quotidian concerns for unbridled freedom. But a road trip along South Africa's Wild Coast delivers something close to that. Along the way, I came upon a seemingly endless golden expanse at the town of Cintsa. A vast horizon of virgin sands near Port St. Johns: deserted. The ocean view from the Ocean View Hotel in Coffee Bay: all mine.

At every stop along this sweep of the Eastern Cape province, known for its scenic hikes and pristine shores, I found myself pondering the same question: would having beach after beach to myself ever get old?

I had spent four years living in Cape Town but, despite having heard the legends of the Wild Coast's windswept dunes, never made it to this 155-mile stretch on the other side of the country. Though the Eastern Cape is South Africa's third-most-populous province, the rugged Wild Coast isn't as frequently tackled by tourists as well-trammeled circuits like the Western Cape's Garden Route, KwaZulu Natal's Midlands Meander and Mpumalanga's Panorama Route. These, with ➔



their proximity to major airports, cavalcade of rustic padstals (farm stalls) plucked from Pinterest boards and well-stocked tourist offices plying travellers with maps and coupons, are obvious choices for out-of-towners. The Wild Coast is more ambitious, but it rewards those who want to get off the grid to hike and braai (barbecue) along secluded cliffs. Gas stations are infrequent and the roads pocked with potholes, but the unmarred beaches are worth a little havoc on your car's suspension.

On this return visit to South Africa, I was determined to finally take on the drive; my friend Rajnee, now on the tail end of an expat stint in the country herself, was eager to come along for one last adventure. Together we consulted maps, researched

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GETTING THERE

Fly into Durban's King Shaka International Airport and rent a car, but be prepared for a long first stretch: Port St Johns is a six-hour drive away.

WHERE TO STAY

• **Umngazi Hotel & Spa** Family-friendly resort in Port St Johns. *Doubles from AED 445 per person; umngazi.co.za*

• **Ocean View Hotel** Simple hideaway right on the beach in Coffee Bay. *Doubles from AED 338 per person; oceanview.co.za*

• **Crawfords Beach Lodge** Elegant resort in Cintsa. *Doubles from AED 523; crawfordsbeachlodge.co.za*

WHERE TO EAT

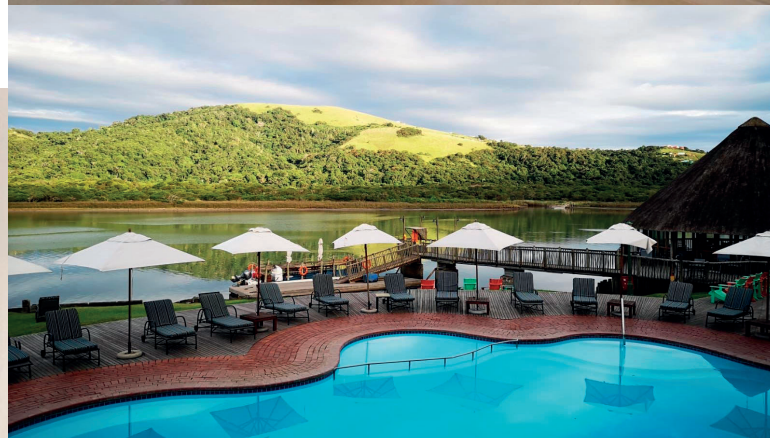
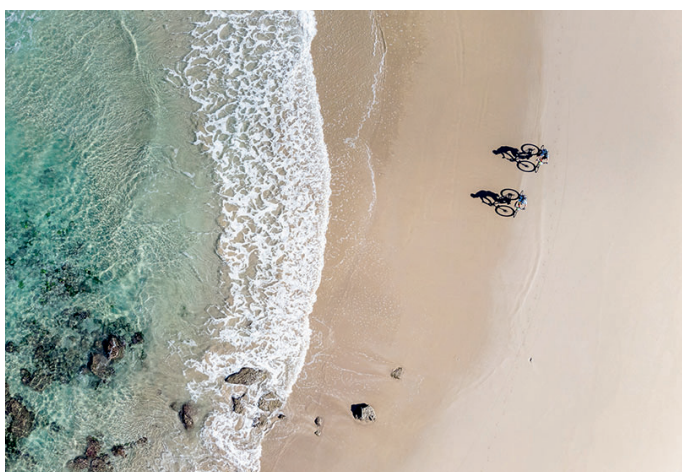
• **White Clay, Coffee Bay** Get the hake and chips and sit on a bench overlooking the water. *whiteclayresort.co.za*

• **Tea in the Trees, Cintsa** Lovely gardens and delicious all-day breakfasts. *teainthetrees.co.za*

online and asked friends for advice before charting an itinerary: fly into Durban, the underrated eastern seaside city so often eclipsed by Cape Town's glamour and Johannesburg's vitality, then head south, stopping at coastal towns, before returning the rental car at East London Airport.

Cape Town was in the last gasps of summer when we left it, but in Durban the warm weather wasn't going anywhere soon: we drove south on the N2 under a canvas of translucent blue skies painted with thick impasto strokes of white. The ocean was a reliable companion on our left until we passed Port Edward and entered the Eastern Cape, when the route took us inland; while there are multi-day hiking trails along the coast, varying road conditions mean the best routes linking seaside towns often force you into the lush interior. Trevor Noah's soothing voice narrating the audio version of *Born a Crime*, his memoir about his South African childhood, set the mood as emerald hills rippled around us, the pastoral tableau occasionally interrupted by a stray rondavel or a tiny village. We let bakkies – pickup trucks – overtake us from time to time, but at some point, in these parts, all traffic must eventually defer to potholes. Or cattle.

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Clockwise from opposite page: Overlooking the Umngazi River; a honeymoon suite at Umngazi Hotel & Spa in Port St Johns; the hotel's pool overlooks the river; cyclists on the Wild Coast. **Previous page:** Turquoise waters and lush hills in front of the Ocean View Hotel in Coffee Bay

Six hours later, at the mouth of the Mzimvubu River where it courses into the Indian Ocean, we pulled up to our first stop: Port St Johns. The cheerful thatched-roof cottages of Umngazi River Bungalows & Spa were a welcome sight after a long day on the road. I didn't grow up visiting all-inclusive resorts, so I was uninitiated to this daily roster of trivia nights, marshmallow braais and volleyball matches designed to corral guests. Rajnee and I embraced the vacation atmosphere, coming in second place at trivia, playing pool with families and joining a rambunctious group from Johannesburg for a sunset cruise. But we also found moments of serenity away from the holidaymakers, unwinding in a spa with panoramic views of the forested slopes over the ocean. Later, we took a two-minute ferry across the river, where we rounded a sand dune that a few kids were enthusiastically hurtling themselves down, to find a beguiling beach devoid of people.

"I don't get it. Why is no one else here?" Rajnee asked, perplexed.

That question, it turns out, would become a fixture in our conversations that week. In Coffee Bay we hiked down a hillside to the Hole in the Wall, a solitary cliff just offshore through which the sea's churning torrents had carved a passage over millennia. It reminded me of Australia's 12 Apostles – but without another soul in sight. We watched as the waves tested their might against stone, each reverberation pulsing through my body.

From Coffee Bay we drove inland to Qunu, Nelson Mandela's hometown and resting place, in search of landmarks commemorating his legacy. Mandela's grave is always off limits to anyone except his family and friends, but we found the museum erected in his name also closed for upgrades. A lenient security officer let us look around, so we toured the exhibits and took in the views of the countryside by ourselves. The next morning, in Cintsá, a coastal village with dense forests that wrap around the mouth of the Cintsá River, we clambered over a bridge and splashed

through a lagoon to spend a few hours at... yet another vacant beach. I rolled out a towel and took a nap on the neglected crescent while Rajnee roamed by the water.

We did find a semblance of a crowd one night when we slipped away from our own hotel to pop by a lively hostel for hot chocolate and drinks with a group of backpackers. "I've gone from Cape Town to Gqeberha, and Gqeberha to Lusikisiki, and this is the most amazing part of the country," said Thabo, a hiker from Johannesburg who was in the midst of a 40-mile coastal trek. "All virgin forests. Nothing comes here – there's no way for trucks to come through."

Driving along the Wild Coast let Rajnee and me connect with nature in a liberating way and feel wholly present – and not just because road conditions required constant vigilance. In times when Instagram impressions rarely align with reality, this bounty of wonders delivers on its promises. So, does having beach after beach to yourself ever get old? After a week in the Wild Coast, I can confirm: it does not. 🇷🇷