



NICE ONE, KNYSNA!

Knysna is the epicentre of the Garden Route and one of South Africa's favourite holiday hubs. Here's everything you need to know to plan a holiday of your own.

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Knysna wasn't always a holiday town. Far from it. People arrived from all over in search of riches, and frontier life was tough. Woodcutters spent months in the forest chopping down yellowwood trees, gold miners scraped South Africa's first goldfield clean, only to realise that their fortunes lay north of the Vaal River, and hunters killed elephants for ivory with reckless abandon.

A sawmill was built on Thesen Island and cargo ships braved the dangerous passage between The Heads. A railway line was laid between the forest and the town, and later extended across the lagoon and on to George.

These days it's a different story. The miners have long since departed and even the woodcutters have shut up shop now that the forests have been declared protected areas. After its boisterous early years, Knysna settled into a sedate pace befitting the seaside enclave. The sawmill on Thesen Island gave way to a larney suburb and big ships no longer entered the lagoon.

Modern Knysna offers holidaymakers a year-round escape. Between Harkerville in the east, the Goukamma River in the west and the Outeniqua Mountains in the north, natural beauty is easy to come by.

Relax on the beach, walk in the forest, swim in the lagoon or feed an elephant – Knysna has something for everyone. Here's your guide.





King Edward VII tree

EXPLORE THE FOREST

There's a tree at Diepwalle, a former forestry station, named after King Edward VII. It's a 700-year-old Outeniqua yellowwood and it was spared the woodcutters' axe when the Diepwalle forestry station was established.

These days, Diepwalle and the former mining settlement of Millwood are part of the **Garden Route National Park**. There are several hiking and cycling trails in the national park (see page 35) and you can picnic in the forest at Krisjan-se-Nek, Jubilee Creek, Ysterhoutrug and Grootdraai. Entrance fee R22 per adult; R11 per child under 12; open from 7.30 am to 5.30 pm (☎ 012 428 9111; 📍 sanparks.org). For more information, visit the SANParks office on Thesen Island.

If you're short on time, there are two small reserves closer to town. **Steenbok Nature Reserve** is on the northern shore of Leisure Island. Walk your dog (on a leash) next to the lagoon or look for some of the smaller animals found here, like seahorses and butterflies. Entrance is free (☎ 044 384 1896; 📍 steenboknaturereserve.org.za).

Pledge Nature Reserve in Bond Street feels like a forest even though you're in the middle of town. There are several walking trails past streams and bush lilies. Entrance R20 per adult; R10 per child (☎ 044 382 3712; 📍 pledgenaturereserve.org).

Every shadow might look like an elephant in the forest, but if you want to be guaranteed a sighting, drive to the **Knysna Elephant Park** at Harkerville. When Ian and Lisette Withers established the park in 1994, they had two orphaned elephants called Harry and Sally. Since then, many elephants rescued from circuses and zoos have found a home here. Most of them – including Harry – have been successfully rehabilitated and released into reserves across the country. There are usually about 15 ellies in the park, plus some zebras to keep them company.

You can meet the elephants (R275 per person) and feed them (R45 per bowl). The park also has a restaurant where you can grab a light meal, and accommodation from R870 per night (☎ 044 532 7732; 📍 knysnaelephantpark.co.za).



Knysna Elephant Park



Coney Glen

HEAD TO THE BEACH

The Indian Ocean around Knysna is not your friend. The coastline is rugged, the water is rough and the currents are strong. Many boats – and swimmers – have landed in trouble.

The closest beach for safe swimming is **Buffalo Bay** – a little town of its own west of Knysna. The main beach is within walking distance of the caravan park and there's lots to do: Kitesurfers carve loops, surfers ride the waves and you can walk east to Brenton-on-Sea.

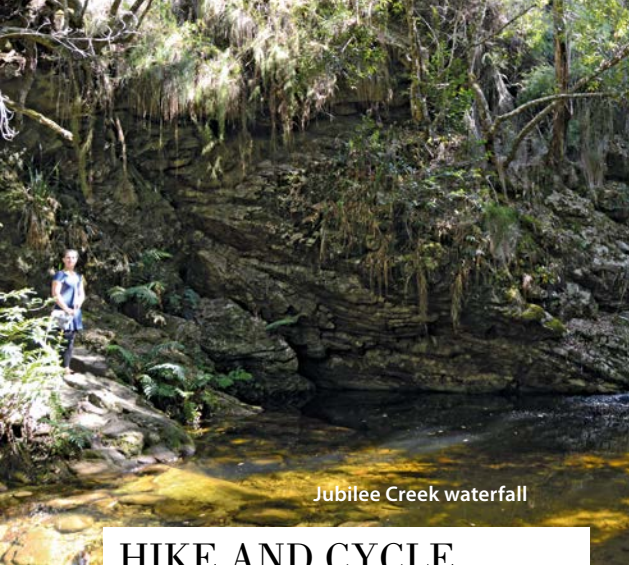
There are also beaches at **Brenton-on-Sea** and **Coney Glen**, but it's best to stay out of the water. Brenton-on-Sea is a popular fishing haunt and Coney Glen – a small beach near The Heads surrounded by forests and cliffs – is a great place to work on your tan. There's a picnic site where you can braai a chop for lunch.

You can also swim in the lagoon. Go to **Bollard Bay** on Leisure Island, where you can play in the shallows without big waves knocking you off your feet.

BONUS BEACH Take the Hornlee turn-off east of town and drive 5 km to **Noetzie**, which is known for its assortment of holiday homes built to look like castles. Park your car and walk down to the small beach at the mouth of the Noetsie River.



Bollard Bay



Jubilee Creek waterfall

HIKE AND CYCLE

Knysna is a hiking and mountain-biking paradise. Whether you want to hike in the Outeniqua Mountains or stroll along the sea, there's a trail for you.

A nice 3 km walk in the Millwood section of the Garden Route National Park goes from the **Jubilee Creek picnic site to a waterfall**. The **Circles in a Forest trail** starts at nearby Krisjan-se-Nek – it's a 9 km loop that's not too taxing. For something more strenuous, do the **Drupkelders Trail** (3,6km), which leads down a kloof to pools in a river. It starts near the Millwood gate, and the route takes you past the **old gold mines**.

There are two trails that start at Diepwalle. We can recommend the **Elephant Trails**, which has three routes – choose the one that best suits your fitness level (7 km, 8 km or 9 km). Permit R26 per adult; R13 per child.

Near the old Gouna forestry station, the **Terblans Walk** (6,5 km) is popular among birdwatchers. Permit R22 per adult; R11 per child.

In Harkerville between Knysna and Plett, you can do the 9,5 km Perdekop Hiking Trail in about four hours (R26 per adult; R13 per child), or stroll along the walkways surrounding the **Garden of Eden picnic site** (entry R16 per adult; R9 per child).

Harkerville is the best place for mountain biking. There are four circular routes ranging in distance from 12 km to 24 km, with some rewarding technical challenges for experienced riders.

Or do the **Petrus se Brand MTB Trail** (22 km), which starts at Diepwalle and ends at the Garden of Eden picnic site.

The trails in the Millwood section of the Garden Route National Park can also be done on a mountain bike. If you don't mind a few hills, ride the 19 km **Homtini Loop** which starts at the Dalene Matthee tree. (If you plan to ride in the national park, a permit costs R42 per adult and R21 per child.)

BONUS HIKING TRAIL If you'd rather walk along the beach, do the 4,5 km stretch between **Buffalo Bay and Brenton-on-Sea**.



Buffalo Bay Horserides

MORE WAYS TO EXPLORE

On the Harkerville side of Knysna, **Southern Comfort Horse Ranch** offers one-hour and two-hour horse rides in the forest. Rates from R300 per person (☎ 044 532 7885; 📧 schrranch.co.za).

Buffalo Bay Horserides is next to the RiverDeck Restaurant on the banks of the Goukamma River (☎ 073 251 3122; 📧 buffalobayhorserides.co.za). At the moment, they only offer rides in the forest (R295 per person). Beach rides are in the pipeline. They also breed miniature horses, which kids under six can ride (R120).

OUR PICK!

Explore the forests around Millwood on an off-road scooter with **Scootours**. The scooters have wide tyres and are made for gravel roads, and the route you follow on the two-hour outing is downhill all the way. Fun! (R450 per person; ☎ 079 148 3751; 📧 scootours.co.za)

Thesen Islands Holiday Livings, a real estate agency on the island, rents out **e-bikes**: R250 for half a day; R400 for a full day (☎ 044 382 1414; 📧 archan@thesenliving.co.za). Get a map of the cycling routes in town and explore without breaking a sweat. Take the paved path along the lagoon to East Head Café at The Heads – one of the most popular restaurants in town.



Hire an e-bike



Millwood



VIEWPOINTS AND BACK ROADS

Knysna is good at keeping secrets. You can spend the whole day on forestry roads going from one viewpoint to the next, but you have to know where to look. West of town, from the N2, drive 3,4 km along the road to Brenton-on-Sea to get to **Margaret's viewpoint**. It overlooks Belvidere, the lagoon and Knysna in the distance. Only 1,1 km further there's another viewpoint overlooking the coastline between Brenton-on-Sea and Buffalo Bay. Bring a flask of coffee and sit on a bench while the sun rises.

There are three ways to explore The Heads on land. Park your vehicle at East Head Café and follow the footpath to the base of the Eastern Head. Or drive to the top of the Eastern Head where there's a parking area and several viewpoints overlooking the town and the ocean.

You don't even have to leave your vehicle to appreciate the scenery – just drive the back road from Knysna to Diepwalle. **Kom-se-pad** starts just north of the King Edward VII tree and winds through the forest and over Kom-se-pad Pass to the Simola golf estate (20 km). Stretch your legs halfway at the Grootdraai picnic site at the Gouna forestry station. From Simola it's 2,5 km along a tar road to the N2.

The **Seven Passes Road** between George and Knysna is also a scenic drive if you have the time. Or just drive Phantom Pass, the closest pass to Knysna along this road. Turn north off the N2 just after the bridge on the western end of town – you'll join up with the Rhenendal Road after the pass. Phantom Pass is named after a moth found in these forests.



GO OUT ON THE WATER

At **Turbine Water Club** on Thesen Island, Schalk Hildebrand will take you out on the lagoon for a sunset cruise. First you'll negotiate the canals of the suburb, then you'll skirt around Leisure Island to The Heads. From there, Schalk steers his boat along the shores of the Featherbed Nature Reserve. The reserve was given its name by sailors who arrived at this quiet lagoon after a long journey along the choppy Southern Cape Coast. Look for birds and even a blue duiker in the bushes.

Hour-long boat ride R250 per person; 90-minute sunset cruise R280 per person (☎ 072 259 7927; ✉ waterclub@turbinehotel.co.za).

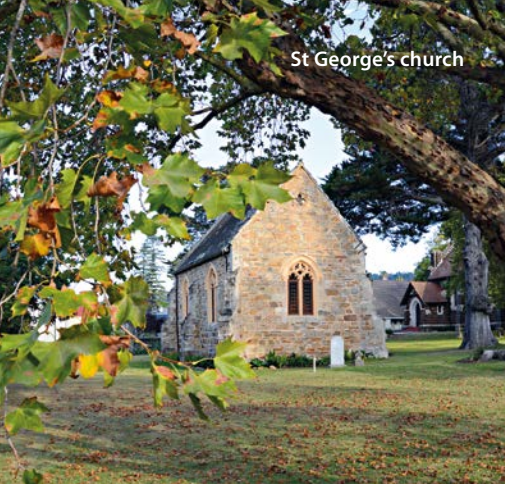
Featherbed Nature Reserve offers other excursions on the water. The *John Benn* is a floating restaurant that does 90-minute lunch and dinner cruises (R190 per person; meals excluded). Or dine on the *Paddle Cruiser*, the only paddle-driven vessel in South Africa. A two-hour evening cruise with a buffet dinner costs R500 per person.

If it's sailing you're after, head out on the *Heads Explorer* catamaran. If weather permits, you'll sail through The Heads and out into the deep. The outing takes 90 minutes and costs R375 per person. A sunset cruise takes an hour longer and costs R730 per person.

Visit the website for directions to the departure points for the various excursions (☎ 044 382 2373; ✉ knysnafeatherbed.com).

If you want to explore the lagoon under your own steam, **hire a kayak** from the SANParks office on Thesen Island (from R65 per hour). You can also paddle along the Goukamma River – hire a boat from Blackwaters River Lodge (R65 for three hours).

St George's church



TRAVEL BACK IN TIME

When Robert Gray, then bishop of Cape Town, consecrated **St George's Anglican church** in 1855, he couldn't have known that 162 years later, a highway would run right next to the church grounds. The church was built on land donated by the founder of Knysna, George Rex. For decades there was speculation that Rex was the illegitimate child of King George III, but genetic testing more than a century after his death proved otherwise.

In the church cemetery, look for the graves of Knysna legends John Rex (son of George and the man who laid the cornerstone of the church) and John Benn.

Robert Gray was busy in 1855 – he also consecrated the **Holy Trinity church** at Belvidere on the other side of the lagoon. Visitors to the church can pick up a map at the door and do the Prayer Walk, which goes through the church grounds to places of meditation and prayer.

Also take a walk through the historical part of Belvidere. Leave your vehicle at the church as no cars are allowed.

The Knysna Museum in Queen Street needs a little work but it's worth a visit if you want to know more about the history of the town. The museum consists of four historical buildings on the premises, plus an old prison on the corner of Queen Street and Main Road. Entrance is free but donations are welcome.

The celebrated South African author **Dalene Matthee** based four of her novels in the Knysna Forest and there's a monument in her honour next to a giant yellowwood at the Krisjan-se-Nek picnic site.

The forest has a rich history. The Millwood Museum and Mother Holly tea garden next door are both closed for the time being, but pull over anyway and visit the **woodcutters' cemetery**. Some of the gravestones have information boards that tell the stories of the people buried here.

Also visit the **Forest Legends Museum** at Diepwalle. There are exhibitions about the life the woodcutters led, the animals found in the forest and even a skeleton of a Knysna elephant. Researchers estimate that only three elephants remain in the forest, and they're incredibly elusive.



Holy Trinity church

GIVE YOUR CREDIT CARD A WORKOUT

You could spend all day browsing the shops at the Knysna Quays – the town's answer to the V&A Waterfront – but here are some lesser-known places where you might find a good deal or score a rare find.

At the **Leeuwenbosch Dairy farm stall**, you can buy fresh milk and dairy products, plus cow-shaped mugs, milk jugs and teaspoons. There's also a small restaurant with views of the forest towards Rhenendal (044 386 0116).

If you want to take a piece of the forest home with you, visit **Timber Village** in Welbedacht Lane. Buy a wooden cheese board for R300 or a table for R30 000... Jock McConnachie and Daniel Hennessy will arrange transport for the pieces you buy if you don't have space in your car (044 382 5649; timbervillage.co.za).

Or if you prefer your trees alive and well, visit the **nurseries** selling indigenous plants at Diepwalle and in Pledge Nature Reserve.

Knysna has several markets: The **Friday Market** is held at the Montessori School in Welbedacht Lane. Expect a relaxed vibe with live music and food stalls. The market is popular so take your own camping chair and table if you want to sit for a bit.

Except for five instances, the **Harkerville Saturday Market** has been held every week for the past 17 years. Farmers sell fresh fruit and veggies and local artists and craftspeople exhibit their wares: handmade wooden products, plants, paintings, clothing and more.



Friday Market



Knysna Quays



Harkerville Saturday Market



EAT HERE

Order a chicken pie (R55) or nachos (R88) at **Mitchell's Brewery** (10 New Street), and then move on to the real reason you're here: beer. Do a tour of the oldest craft brewery in the country for R75 per person. ☎ 044 382 4685; 📍 mitchellsbrewing.com

Have lunch at **Freshline Fisheries**. The restaurant doesn't have a liquor licence so you have to bring your own alcoholic drinks. Sit with your toes in the sand while they prepare delicious seafood dishes for you to enjoy. ☎ 044 382 3131; 📍 freshlinefisheries.co.za

You can't visit Knysna and not have oysters. At **34 South** in the Knysna Quays complex, oysters start at R12 each. Not an oyster fan? The menu has lots of other options, from salads to sushi. ☎ 044 382 7331; 📍 34south.biz

The fish and chips (R40) at **Sailor Sam** (5 Main Road) comes wrapped



in wax paper that looks like newspaper for an old-school touch. ☎ 044 382 6774

The restaurant at Blackwaters River Lodge is called **Earth & Fire**. Sit on the stoep overlooking the Goukamma River while you wait for your pizza (about R85), or get a picnic basket for two (R280) and enjoy your lunch on the riverbank. ☎ 044 383 0105; 📍 blackwaters.co.za

RiverDeck Restaurant on the Goukamma River offers lots of activities: Your dogs can swim in the river while your kids paddle in a canoe. There's even a spa for Ma! ☎ 078 134 5873; 📍 riverdeckrestaurant.co.za

Pull over at the **Diepwalle Tea Garden** for some of Klara Stuurman's curry vetkoek (R40) or milk tart (R20). ☎ 044 382 9762

For pub grub, visit **The Bell** at the Belvidere Manor Hotel. It's one of the smallest bars in Knysna, but their bangers and mash (R60) can compete with the best. ☎ 044 387 1055; 📍 belvidere.co.za

Have a Sunday buffet (R150) at **Totties Farm Kitchen** in Rheenendal. They're also open during the week for light meals, or coffee and cake. ☎ 044 389 0092; 📍 tottiesfarmkitchen.co.za

Sit near the wild waters of The Heads and have a burger (R92) at **East Head Café** (25 George Rex Drive). ☎ 044 384 0933; 📍 eastheadcafe.co.za

For something different, try **Bloo Bistro** at 2 Memorial Square. The party only starts after 11 pm, and the decor is a cross between a bohemian spaceship and a gypsy caravan. ☎ 082 923 1185

STAY HERE

Jembjo's Knysna Lodge

A backpacker place like Jembjo's is a comfy and affordable option if you're on a budget. It's centrally located and within walking distance of the waterfront, Thesen Island and the midtown area.

Rates: Double room from R450 per night; en suite family room R750 per night.

Where? 4 Queen Street

Contact: 044 382 2658;

📞 jembjosknysnalodge.co.za

Buffalo Bay Caravan Park

You'll need something to hold onto if the wind is pumping, but as soon as it dies down, this is one of the best camping spots along the Garden Route. It's right on the sea and walking distance from the main beach.

Rates: From R300 per night for two people.

Where? Walker Drive, Buffalo Bay

Contact: 044 383 0045;

📞 buffalobay.co.za

Diepwalle camping decks

Camp under the canopy in the Knysna Forest! Each deck has enough space for a three-person tent and is equipped with private braai facilities, an awning, power points and an eating area.

Rates: From R190 per night for two people; plus R76 per extra person.

Where? Diepwalle forestry station, Garden Route National Park

Contact: 044 302 5606;

📞 sanparks.org

Woodbourne Resort

Water and forest are abundant at this resort. There's a campsite and self-catering chalets. When you open your curtains in the morning, you might be greeted by a Knysna turaco.

Rates: Camping from R200 per night for two people.

Chalets from R500 per night for two people.

Where? George Rex Drive

Contact: 044 384 0316;

📞 woodbourne.co.za

Knysna Houseboats

Explore the Knysna Lagoon on a houseboat. You don't need a licence to pilot your floating home, you just need to attend an information session to see how the boat works and where you're allowed to go.

Rates: From R1 550 per night for two people (minimum two nights).

Where? Turbine Hotel, Thesen Island

Contact: 044 382 2802;

📞 knysnahouseboats.com

Cliffhanger Cottages

The Cliffhanger and Cliffledge cottages are at the edge of a ravine – great views guaranteed. The Hedge cottage has a view and a garden. Sip your morning coffee on the stoep and watch sunbirds flit in the fynbos.

Rates: From R730 per night for two people.

Where? The Surfboard, Rheenendal Road

Contact: 044 388 4696;

📞 cliffhangercottages.co.za

Nieu-Wherry Meadow

This pet-friendly guest farm has four rooms, each with a fenced garden. It's a good base if you want to explore the forests around Millwood for a few days.

Rates: From R600 per night for two people.

Where? From the Rheenendal Road, turn off at the Bibby's Hoek/Jubilee Creek sign. Drive 1,2 km and turn left at Leeuwenbosch Estate. The guest farm is on the right, about 500 m further.

Contact: 083 785 9338;

📞 nieu-wherry.co.za

For more accommodation options, go to 📞 visitknysna.co.za or contact the tourism office in the Knysna shopping centre in Main Road 044 382 5510



Cliffhanger Cottages



Knysna Houseboats



Woodbourne Resort