

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN: You feel each step, but the view from the top is worth it.

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ALL ALONG THE OTTER

Epic views, stunning scenery, unspoilt coastlines, lost hiking boots and more wine gums than what you should eat in a lifetime. The Otter Trail in Tsitsikamma in the southern Cape is an unforgettable experience. →

The day before the start of our Otter hike, I spent most of my time trying to track down a Dirkie – it was integral to my packing plans. Not only would this small toothpaste-like tube of condensed milk be a source of delight and energy, but I could also use it in my morning coffee instead of milk. You need to be quite ruthless when picking and choosing what you'll bring on the Otter, and there was no way I was going to carry milk.

I was organised: Ingredients for every meal were in individually-numbered zip seal plastic bags, my Dirkie was saving me precious kilograms, my clothes and sleeping bag were in their own waterproof bag and everything was sealed in a bin liner.

But no matter how prepared you are, you'll still be blown away by the awe, marvel and fun that is the Otter.

I'm not fond of the word "awesome", and "iconic" is just as overused. But after five days of majestic views; no reception; shuffling over rocky beaches; dipping in river mouths; winding down paths hugged by thick coastal forests; climbing steep cliffs; and eagerly spotting whales, dolphins, eagles and otters – I'm left with no words that are more relevant.

This is the Otter Trail – South Africa's most iconic coastal hike.

Best shared with friends

I booked our hike a year in advance, and once that was done, getting the right hiking posse together was the next most important thing. Fun, tough and willing to

carry meat and wine were high on my ideal hiking partners quality list. Luckily, getting people to join is easy. The Otter is on almost everyone's bucket list, and as soon as I started putting out feelers, everyone wanted to join.

DAY 1

Storms River to Ngubu Hut

I hope everyone else also packed their spare socks in plastic bags, I thought as we set off with a typical Tsitsikamma storm rolling in. Rain was pouring down as we made our way over the rocky shores in howling winds. The whole day is a short 4,8 km stroll, but in no hurry and making sure of every step, it took us the better part of the afternoon.

It turns out this was a great way to start – all my "real life worries" washed away as I found myself in survival mode. Before long we made it to a popular shimmering waterfall that plunges into the ocean, and I started feeling the freedom of the trail. Soaking wet, freezing cold but with a smile that made my lips crack and my cheeks cramp, I felt invincible by the time we reached the huts. We made a massive fire to dry our wet socks and shoes and caught up with everyone on the hike.

I was grateful for my warm puffer jacket, mohair socks and, of course, my Woolies box wine.

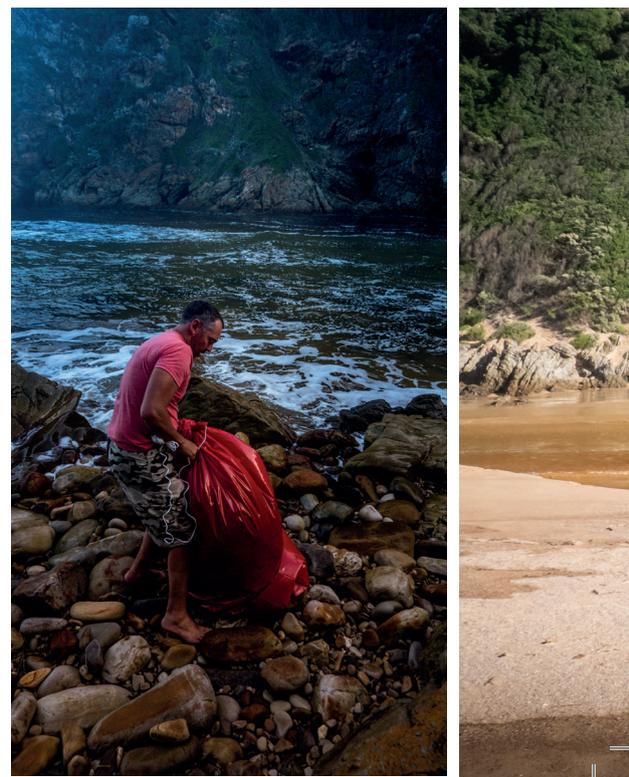
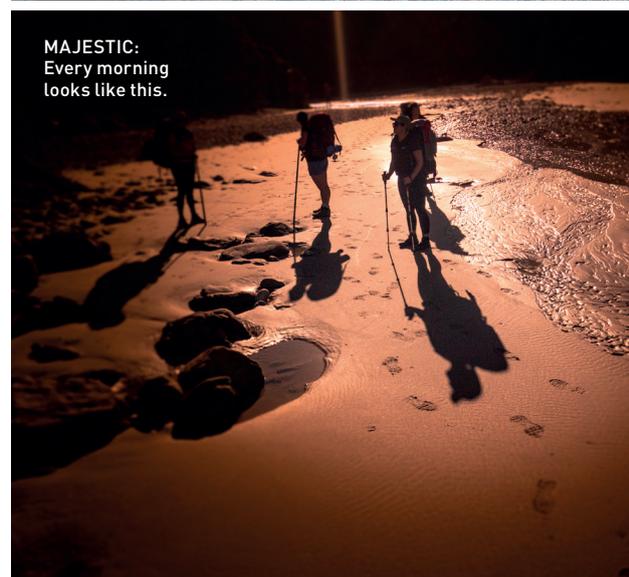
DAY 2

Ngubu Hut to Scott Hut

Every group has at least one map reader, and ours brought out the stats: The second day was only 7,9 km, and in the morning we would cross the Kleinbos



MAJESTIC: Every morning looks like this.



IT'S A HIGH: Every summit has its reward.



ROCK HOPPING:
In my element in
the elements.

TOP TIPS

1 A HIKING STICK MAKES A MASSIVE DIFFERENCE. You can buy one, but I made my own using a bamboo pole and tennis grip tape. It saved my life (and knees) many times and cost only R40.

2 AQUA SHOES ARE GREAT FOR RIVER CROSSINGS, especially for Bloukrans where there are sharp rock barnacles when you get out of the river. They're also good evening shoes.

3 YES, YOU CAN CARRY WINE AND MEAT. It's heavy, but it's worth it. Don't listen to the other reviewers.

4 WATERPROOF SURVIVAL BAGS SAVED US ON RIVER CROSSINGS. They're cheap, and the bigger size can fit two backpacks. This allows two people to cross the river simultaneously while dragging one survival bag. Available at Cape Union Mart.



River, our first freshwater obstacle. The crossing is pretty easy ... or it should be. It hasn't made any headlines in hiking guides or on travel blogs, unlike the crossing we would face on day four, so we nonchalantly plunged through. Alas, a pair of hiking boots not fastened properly came loose and, like a mermaid being released from captivity, disappeared downstream and into the roaring oceans.

It was my opportunity to come to the rescue! I had a pair of extra takkies for cold evenings, and my friend could wear them for the rest of the hike. Only problem was that they were two sizes too big. She shed a tear for her lost boots and steered herself for a couple of days of clown shoe jokes.

The appropriately named Blue Bay is an idyllic lunch stop. Misty, rocky cliffs meeting ocean swells – the coastline in this part of the country is so beautiful and untouched that just the thought of it brings up strong feelings. Or maybe it's just the memory of real physical pain. Those rocky cliffs ate away at our legs. I will forever remember the last cliff from the beach to the hut: Its treacherous fake summits; its damned endless steps.

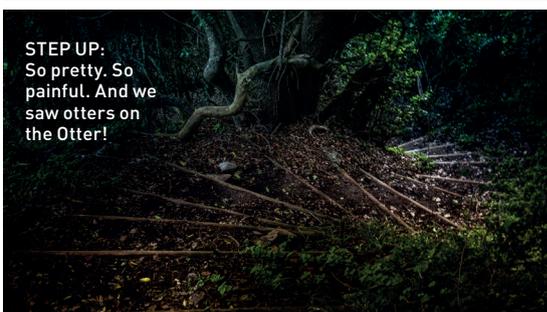
You wouldn't think it possible, but Scott Hut is even more beautiful than Ngubu. It's all too pretty. Someone pour me a gin!

DAY 3

Scott Hut to Oakhurst Hut

On the third morning, I woke up wishing I'd trained more for the Otter. My legs were jelly. Sore jelly. I wasn't alone in my pain, and that's the nice thing about group hikes: I knew some of my mates were worse off, and they were already up making jokes and coffee. I was going to be fine.

Walking on a narrow path on the cliffside, we spotted a couple of otters swimming in the break. The cold front and storm →



STEP UP:
So pretty. So painful. And we saw otters on the Otter!



GOOD TO KNOW

BOOKING DETAILS

The group limit per hike is 12 people. We were a group of 12 friends, but you can join an existing group if there's space. The Otter is popular, so group hikes are often booked out a year in advance. You might be able to join another group earlier if you're one or two people. To book, contact 012 426 5111 or specialisedreservations@sanparks.org, or visit sanparks.org.

COST

It costs R1 375 per person, which includes accommodation in the dorm-style huts and firewood and excludes the R56 per day conservation fee and all food, drinks and wine gums. There is no luxury or slackpacking option, and you have to carry your own bedding (although the huts have mattresses).

AREA

The trail starts at Storms River and ends at Nature's Valley, so you'll have to shuttle cars. Before the start of the trail, some of us left cars at Storms River and others at Nature's Valley.

TRAIL

Total distance is 45 km with a total elevation gain of 2 600 m over five days. The trail is well marked, so no GPS is needed.

DIFFICULTY

It's short but don't underestimate it. Carrying bags up and down steep climbs requires you to be moderately fit.



GOOD COMPANY:
It's a must!



from the previous day had brought with it massive swell. The waves were spectacular, and when they crashed into the rocks it looked like a fireworks show. With otters!

We crossed the Lottering River in the afternoon. We strolled across at high tide and swam in the ocean. No shoes were lost. While we picnicked on the beach, some of our group couldn't resist a skinny dip. That's the magic of doing something like the Otter – it's so incredibly different from your normal life, that "normal life rules" don't apply.

DAY 4 Oakhurst Hut to Andre Hut

Day four is the most challenging day of the trail. At 13,8 km, it's the longest day, but, more importantly, it's the day of the much-blogged-about Bloukrans River Crossing. Crossing the river at low tide is the only recommended option. I can only say that I'm sure it's preferable to what we ended up doing, but we didn't have the best options. If we wanted an ideal low-tide crossing, we would have had to do some of the hike in the dark. On a day that includes chain ladders and ropes hanging off cliff faces, we took our chances with the swim.

Thinking back, it was exhilarating, but I can imagine that things can go very wrong if you're not geared (we had ropes, survival bags and aqua shoes), or if you don't have strong swimmers to help.

An hour on from the crossing lies Andre Hut. A nice name for a nice hut. It was my favourite hut of the hike: Right on the rocks, overlooking the ocean one last time.

We braaied fillet, made roosterkoek and had the last of our decanted whiskey on the reef as the sun set over the ocean. It was beautiful and perfect – as if it were a clichéd painting of a picture-perfect sunset.

Andre Hut to Nature's Valley

DAY 5

The last day went by so quickly. It's a slow stroll along a plateau that overlooks the ocean. It's the perfect end because it gives you time to process all your thoughts without worrying what the maximum allowable human dosage for wine gums is. Nature's Valley beach welcomed us for a swim.

Our Otter was done. Our legs were shot, and our tiny hearts were full. I threw away my home-made hiking pole, but the memories will stay with me forever. When people tell you about their Otter adventure, chances are you'll see a warm, sly grin that says the experience was so spectacular that they'll never be able to tell you everything. You'll just have to go see for yourself. 🏠

