

The hike begins with a stroll on the beach

Can't get on the Otter Trail?

HERE'S PLAN B

The six-day Tsitsikamma Trail is the inland yin to the over-popular Otter's coastal yang. Morgan Trimble finds it wonderful to walk

(and it's an awesome one!)



Normally, sidewalk rage takes hold when I'm stuck behind a slow walker – those aimless amblers clogging pavements and passageways, oblivious that anyone else is trying to get anywhere. Yet, on the worn paths winding beneath shadows of behemoth trees, past prehistoric ferns and otherworldly mushrooms, amid trogons' calls and lurid flashes of turaco feathers, over caracal tracks in soft mud, I was keeping a snail's pace and loving it. I became a slow walker on the Tsitsikamma Trail.

'What's that?' nearly everyone asked. I'd explain that the Tsitsikamma is like the Otter Trail, but inland through the mountains. 'Oh, I've done the Otter!' they'd say.

It seems like everyone and their granny has hiked the Otter Trail. I guess the stunning scenery and physical challenge draw plenty of repeat customers because it's still difficult to get a booking. The Otter Trail snakes west from Storms River, climbing sheer coastal cliffs above pounding waves and tumbling down steep, river-carved gorges. It spits you out five days and 43 kilometres later on the sun-drenched beach in Nature's Valley.

This happens to be where the Tsitsikamma Trail begins before jutting inland through verdant indigenous forest and fynbos of the Tsitsikamma >

Roelf Daling shows us the ropes on a river crossing. The ropes weren't necessary on our trip, but they're helpful when more water is flowing.



LEFT Our group above Kalandar Hut (back from left) me, Dandr  Du Plooy, Wim Prinsloo, Roelf Daling and Vonica Perold (front from left) Ignus and Saskia Zietsman. **BELOW** Vonica and Roelf make their way through thick forest. **OPPOSITE** From Bloukrans Hut, the Tsitsikamma mountains stretch across the horizon; Roelf tops up with water from one of numerous forest streams.

mountains. The trail crosses many of the same rivers as the Otter, climbs numerous ridges and covers 64 kilometres over six days before reaching Storms River Bridge, near where the Otter Trail starts. Despite its 35-year existence, the Tsitsikamma remains relatively unknown and, thankfully, bookings are easy to come by. Sign me up!

But trepidation set in when, along with our confirmation, the trail managers

sent 14 documents about safety, strongly advising that hikers learn how to handle emergencies: 'Potential emergencies include ailments, illness and injuries; being lost; being stranded; flooding; dangerous river crossings and hypothermia.' Evidently, we might also face veld fire, contaminated water, lightning, fog, slippery footing, ill-fitting footwear and a snake bite. Not to worry. The documents detailed escape routes



and where you might find mobile reception. I think I was the only one in our group to read any of the documents, let alone all 14, and I was rattled.

'We'll be fine,' assured my friend Saskia, who happened to be five months' pregnant. Before setting off from our cosy cottage in Nature's Valley, I nervously checked my backpack for personal essentials plus the recommended space blanket, survival bag, spare rations, first-aid kit, route

side of the Groot River Mouth. We took advantage of the beach location for some fun in the surf and a scramble up Pig's Head for sunset on the cliff amid aloes and wildflowers. From there, we spotted a shark circling our swimming area. Shark attack – they should add that to the potential emergencies! We closed the day with a tasty braai tucking into our heaviest food and drinks.

At 15 kilometres, day two of the hike was more serious. It started with a steep



'I SLACKENED MY PACE, SPELLBOUND, WHEN WE ENTERED THE INDIGENOUS FOREST'

maps and emergency contacts. I slipped in some 'emergency' biltong and chocolate just to be safe, and then we were off. 'If a pregnant woman can hike this trail, so can I,' became my mantra.

Later, I was embarrassed by my anxiety when we arrived, barefoot, at the first hut in under 30 minutes. Kalandar Hut is hidden just behind the trees on the east

climb up the escarpment into pristine fynbos for a last view of Nature's Valley before descending into, well, nature's valleys. I slackened my pace, spellbound, when we entered the indigenous forest. You had to walk slowly to take in even a fraction of the detail. We stopped often to gape at the height of the yellow-woods; appreciate the mosses, ferns, >



LEFT The sunset adds to the picturesque view from Bloukrans Hut. **BELOW** Of all the river crossings on the trail, we got wettest at the Groot River Mouth on the way to the first hut. The water was knee-deep, but high tide could mean a swim (or a detour around the estuary). **OPPOSITE** One of many tempting forest pools along the way.

frogs and fungi; and attempt, mostly without success, to pull flitting birds from the canopy into binocular focus. My backpack didn't feel heavy until the last four kilometres when the forest path gave way to jeep track through pine

'OUR PACE SLOWED EVEN MORE TO ENJOY THE FLORA CROWDED WITH SUNBIRDS'

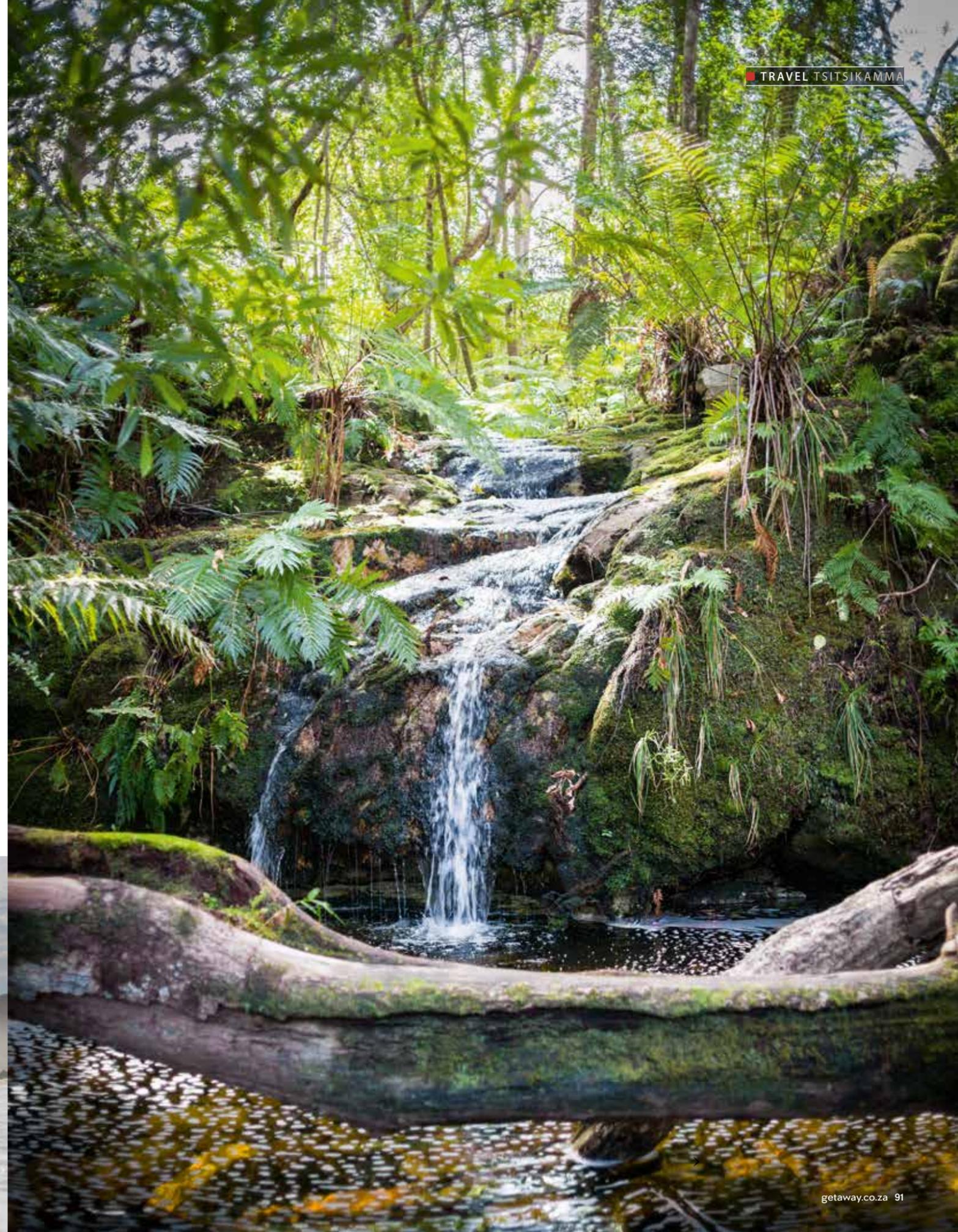
plantations. The downside of the Tsitsikamma Trail is that it traverses forestry land, and for me, the plantations dampen the wilderness experience.

Eventually, we arrived at Bloukrans Hut, perched on a cliff with the best view on the trail – a panorama of mountains above cascading waterfalls

bathed in pink sunset glow. With a view like this, the pines on the horizon didn't matter, but we encountered another irritation. Each camp holds 24 people. As our group cooked dinner, the three hikers we'd met the previous night unobtrusively chatted in German while playing cards. Meanwhile, eight medical students had arrived and seemed to be in competition for the title of most obnoxious. They were hiking a portion of the trail and would be with us for three nights.

Our pace slowed even more on day three, both to enjoy the flora crowded with sunbirds darting between blooming ericas and proteas and to avoid catching up to the noisy students.

The prospect of the upcoming Bloukrans River crossing triggered vivid flashbacks. Years earlier on the Otter, I thought I would lose my backpack and my life as I swam (flailed, actually) through ocean surge at the river's mouth. This time, I was relieved when we rock->





CLOCKWISE, FROM RIGHT Just before Sleepkloof Hut, we still had energy for frogging and splashing in a secluded stream; kayaking in the Nature's Valley estuary; The Big Tree. **OPPOSITE** Fern fronds are some of the numerous details to slow down for in the Tsitsikamma Forest.

hopped over the river without even wetting our socks. Honeyguides called from the forest that afternoon when we found our mid-hike supply drop at Keurbos Hut. What a treat – beers and fresh rations for a braai.

While crossing the Lottering, Elandsbos, Kleinbos and Witteklip rivers went as smoothly as the Bloukrans, the risk of getting stranded in a flood was clear. Luckily, we didn't face any emergencies, but 'character building'

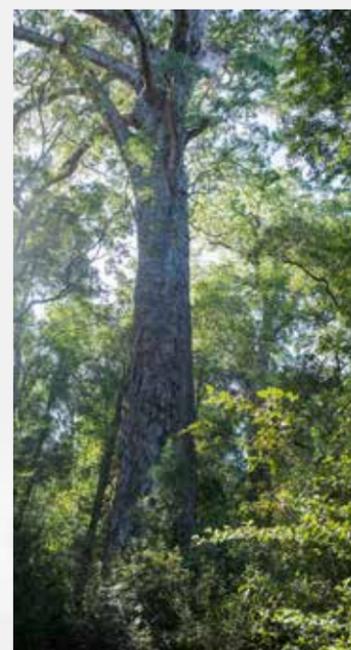
'WE ROCK-HOPPED OVER THE RIVER WITHOUT EVEN WETTING OUR SOCKS'

aptly describes the arduous slog over two saddles on the fifth day. We were headed for Sleepkloof Hut, which sounded more like a pro wrestling move to me than an idyllic mountain retreat. Struggling up the steep climb to Nademaalsnek Pass in midday heat with no shade and dwindling water supplies, I would have welcomed the sleeper hold. 'But, if a pregnant woman can do this...!' I gasped and kept climbing.

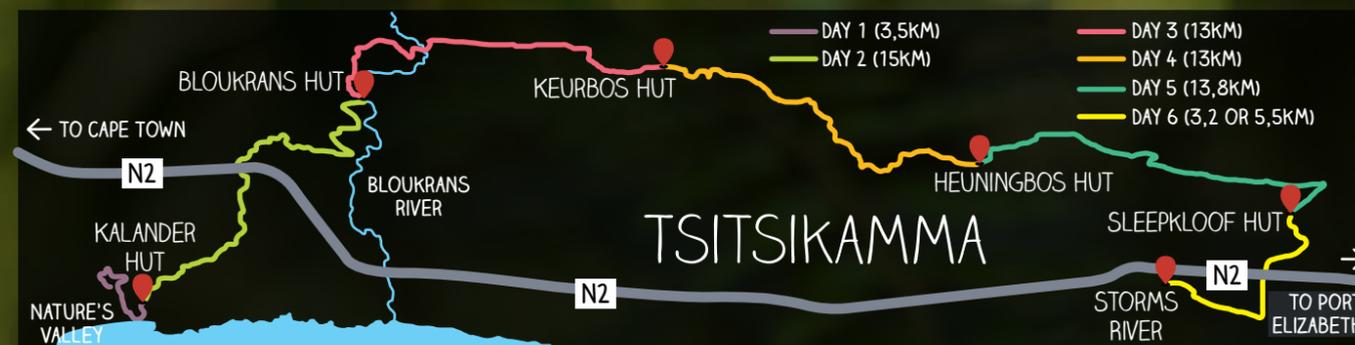
The following morning, we prolonged our walk through the remaining stretch of forest as long as possible with a detour

to admire The Big Tree. This 37-metre-tall Outeniqua yellow-wood sprouted about five centuries before Van Riebeeck hopped ashore in the Cape. That gave me some perspective: what's a six-day walk in the woods compared to 800 years of a sentinel standing in one spot?

At lunch time, we popped out at the Storms River Petroport. Back to modern society. 'Ugh! Why are these slowpokes taking so long in the Steers queue?' I wished I'd booked the Otter Trail and walked the five days back to Nature's Valley. **G**



PLAN YOUR TRIP



GETTING THERE

We drove the N2 from Cape Town to Nature's Valley but if you are driving from Joburg, take the N1 to Colesberg, N9 to Uniondale, R339 to R340 to join the N2. Alternatively, fly to Plettenberg Bay or George and take the R102 turn-off to Nature's Valley. The hike is organised by MTO Ecotourism and begins from Nature's Valley De Vasselot Rest Camp. Leave a car at the trail's end (Storms River) or pre-organise a shuttle back to your vehicle. A list of operators is provided by MTO Ecotourism and you need to arrange the shuttle yourself. mtoecotourism.co.za

THE TSITSIKAMMA TRAIL

You have to be fit to really enjoy this 64-kilometre hike over six days. The route is graded moderate to difficult. I found the terrain gentler than the Otter's, but daily distances longer. Day one is a lovely hike through rare and tall, dry coastal forests, day two to five are challenging, with ample uphill. Day six is either a 3,2 kilometre hike to Storms River Bridge – uphill at first then gradual descent or a 5,5-kilometre hike to Storms River Village – uphill at the start then mostly level. We opted for a mid-hike supply drop, but you can forgo support entirely or splurge on slack packing (the latter is not possible for the first overnight hut). The trail is

customisable with shorter two- to six-day options. Masochists can book the Otter Trail too for an epic round trip (sanparks.org). The Tsitsikamma Trail costs R155 pppn, R800 per hut for the first five people for portage; and then R150 per additional person thereafter up to a maximum of 12 persons. (The maximum number of hikers that can make use of portage per hut per day is 12). 042-281-1712, mtoecotourism.co.za

WHEN TO GO

The hike is open throughout the year. It's busiest in December when temperatures can be oppressive, but there are swimming holes along the way. I went in September and enjoyed the spring flowers.

NEED TO KNOW

The huts on the trail are basic but decent enough. Each site has 24 bunks between a few rooms. I took a comfy sleeping bag and inflatable pillow, and earplugs helped me snooze through the snores. There's no electricity so pack a headlamp. Each camp has a lapa with tables, braais and a view. Firewood is provided (except on your first night at Kalander Hut), but bring a camping stove and supplies for washing up. Slack packing allows more luxurious eating. Otherwise, travel light. There are good toilets and a hot-water shower

bucket at all the huts. All camps have piped water from local sources and rainwater collection. Use purifying drops or tablets when refilling your water bottles, even from rainwater, as baboons play on the roof. Read the safety information at each hut. Cell phone reception is limited.

DO THIS

Kayak Nature's Valley estuary. This is a great area to explore, or have a laze on the beach for some well-earned relaxation after your hike. Kayaks can be hired for R55 per hour from Nature's Valley Rest Camp. 044-531-6700, sanparks.org
Explore the Storms River suspension bridges. There's a R45 pp conservation fee to pay at the Storms River Mouth gate.
Throw yourself off the world's highest bungee bridge at Bloukrans. R890 pp. 042-281-1458, faceadrenalin.com

EAT HERE

Nature's Valley Restaurant serves a calamari burger for R89,50 that's tough to beat. 044-531-6835

STAY HERE

Nature's Valley Properties rents out accommodation in Nature's Valley. From R900 for a cottage (sleeps 8). 082-772-2972, naturesvalleyproperties.co.za
SANParks' forest huts right on the river looked inviting. They are in the De Vasselot section of the Garden Route National Park. R490 for two sharing. 044-531-6700, sanparks.org
Tsitsikamma Village Inn in Storms River is popular. From R870 for two sharing. 042-281-171, tsitsikammavillageinn.co.za

* Prices correct at time of going to print