

How much action can one adventurer fit into a weekend in the Wilderness Section of Garden Route National Park? *Wild* joins the ride as Letshego Zulu zips and zooms through fynbos and forest to follow her passion. By Morgan Trimble

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TURF ADVENTURE



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Guinea fowl ring a persistent alarm and I crawl out of bed for a peek at sunrise. White blobs scroll across a pink sky over the Touw River. After some eye rubbing, the blobs become egrets in a regal procession hundreds of birds strong. But there's no time to linger over the parade. Adventurer Letshego Zulu is here to demonstrate just how much action can fit into one weekend in the Garden Route National Park. We're due for our first activity, a paddle up river.

Reading Letshego's adventure CV is an endurance exercise in itself. It's bursting with multi-day bike races and ultra-marathons such as the Cape Epic, Joberg2C, Comrades and Two Oceans. You name it, she's raced it. A veteran of *Survivor Maldives* and *Fear Factor*, Letshego's current reality is whipping Joburgers into shape with her business, Pop Up Gym, when she's not adventuring. But canoeing isn't part of her usual regime. Letshego's friend and fellow fitness fanatic Karabo Mashele,

who joins us for the weekend, confesses she hasn't canoed since school.

After a lesson in not capsizing, SANParks canoe-expert Manfred Beukes gently shoves us into the Touw River, Letshego and Karabo sharing a canoe and me on a kayak. We navigate up river, past our log cabins in Ebb and Flow Rest Camp, so named because the river rises and falls with the tides. We paddle against a brisk headwind then, as we round a bend, the river smooths into shimmering glass winding between towering forested hills.

Between exclamations of how beautiful the day is, how peaceful the river, and who in the canoe is not doing their share of paddling, Letshego and Karabo strategise about a new project, an online channel called *Let's Adventure* intended to introduce South Africans to the world of activities in their own country.

"So many people put limitations on themselves. They think 'outdoor adventure is not for me.' They don't know they can do it!" explains Letshego. "There's

Letshego Zulu and Karabo Mashele explore by canoe.

more to life than watching television and so much fun to be had outdoors. People think you need experience or expensive equipment, but most of the time, like with these canoes, you can rent what you need and get a lesson."

We wave to happy campers sipping coffee on the riverbank as Letshego explains that for many South Africans, it's traditional to go home and visit family for holidays. One Easter, when Letshego was off from varsity, she and her mother were heading to Mafikeng to her grandmother. "As we left Joburg, I saw a car with luggage piled on the roof and bikes hanging from the back. I saw cars pulling caravans and adventure trailers. These people were go-

ing on holiday. We were just going home. I wanted to go on holiday, too. Now I'm the one with the bike rack!"

We round another river bend straight into gusting wind. Conveniently, it's time to turn back for our next adventure, a Segway tour through the fynbos.

Guide Athi Botoman recognises Letshego immediately as he follows her online, and offers condolences for the loss of her husband, race car driver Gugu Zulu. Tragically, Gugu died of altitude sickness last year when he and Letshego were climbing Kilimanjaro with Trek4Mandela. Gugu was 38.

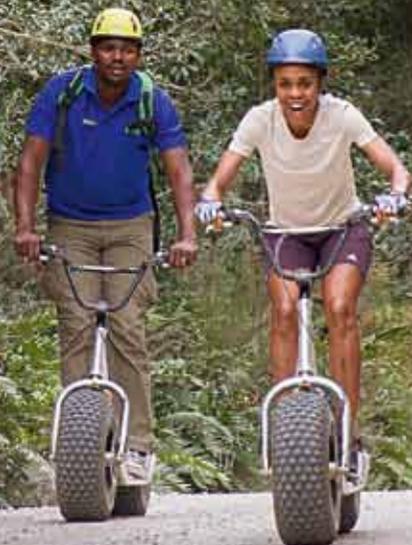
Athi shows us how to use our all-terrain Segways, set to 'tortoise mode.' We giggle ▶



Above: SANParks' Manfred Beukes pushes the canoe into the water. Below: Paddling on glassy water past wild forest.



Careening through the forest, we can't take our eyes off the twisting trail. For all we know, we whooshed past the Knysna elephants.



LET'S ROLL!
Guide Thando Siwa and Letshego show their skill on heavy-duty scooters.



Letshego holds the scooter so her daughter, Lelethu, can get a feel for the adventure. Both of them are clearly in their element.

through wobbly mounts and dismounts and figure-of-eights, then graduate to 'standard mode' after navigating the ramp out of the training area. Soon, we're zip-ping along the Pied Kingfisher Trail, zooming past fynbos flowers and fleeting views of the Serpentine River and bouncing over sandy speed bumps engineered by mole rats. Herons and moorhens skulk among the reeds, perhaps waiting for a repeat performance.

Exploring by Segway is surprisingly fun and exciting. The quiet electric motor doesn't intrude on nature much and you cover ground quickly. Eventually we reach a foot bridge too narrow for Segways. Despite Athi's jokes that we cross it balanced on one wheel, we turn back.

We pick up Letshego's mother, Gomo-lemo, and young daughter, Lelethu, who have been enjoying a slower-paced morning in camp, and head towards Knysna for an appointment with Scootours. Guide Thando Siwa meets us at the entrance to Goudveld Forest, not far from the Dalene Mathee Big Tree, an 800-year-old Outeniqua Yellowwood marking the start of the Circles in the Forest Trail. We're here for adrenalin, not an amble. We pile into the Scootours van, a trailer packed with scoot-

ers in tow, and climb a steep track. Thando hands out helmets and protective gloves as we arrive at the top. Little Lelethu dons a helmet for her ride in the van with granny and watches intently, clearly an adventurer in the making.

The heavy-duty scooters are self-propelled, but it's all downhill from here. Knobby tyres gnash dirt. Towering trees blur by. Avid mountain-biker Letshego grins widely while Karabo and I clutch desperately at squealing brakes. In what feels like seconds, we're at the bottom of the 2 kilometre run, and the van takes us back up for round two, this time on single track. Careening through the forest, we can't take our eyes off the twisting trail. For all we know, we whooshed past the Knysna elephants.

There's time for one more adventure the next morning, hiking the Half Collared Kingfisher Trail. Knysna turacos flash red amid the forest canopy, and we stop to admire a lone arum lily, Letshego's favourite. We continue walking beneath an impressive tangle of life.

Letshego is breaking in new boots for her return to Kilimanjaro. She hopes to commemorate her husband with a successful climb on the one-year anniversary



Wilderness has several day walks. It's up to you whether you spend half an hour or half a day.

xx WILD SPRING 2017

PARK IN THE SPOTLIGHT ■

The colourful blooms of an aloe.



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■ PARK IN THE SPOTLIGHT

of his death. Surprised, I ask, “Hasn’t Gu-gu’s death scared you into slowing down?”

“No, when it’s your time, it’s your time. I can’t live in the past. My heart is still beating.” I get the impression that Letshego’s refusal to ease up and tireless efforts to inspire new South African adventurers is exactly what her husband would have wanted.

On the way to the airport, we reflect

on a weekend packed with adventure. Letshego and Karabo rank their favourites: Scootours, Segway, canoeing, then hiking. I laugh as my list is the exact opposite. Lelethu can’t talk yet, but I suspect her highlight was pointing and squealing at birds. Gomolemo enjoyed reading in tranquillity. Whatever your adrenalin tolerance, there’s an adventure for you in the Garden Route National Park. 🐾



Ebb and Flow’s quaint log cabins look straight out of a story book.

GET INTO ACTION

GETTING THERE The Wilderness Section of Garden Route National Park is 20 km from George.

ACCOMMODATION Ebb and Flow Rest Camp South has campsites with power points, from R255 a night for two people. Log cabins with communal kitchen are from R725 a night for two, cottages sleeping four and with your own kitchen start at R1370 a night. The northern section of the rest camp is more rustic, with campsites without power from R190 a night for two people and rondawels from R400 a night for two.

BOOKINGS SANParks Central Reservations 012-428-9111, www.sanparks.org

PADDLING Rent canoes or kayaks at the Tarentaal Day Visitor Area, Ebb and Flow South. Head up the Touw River for 45 minutes, then pull boats ashore and hike on a boardwalk through the forest. Alternatively, explore the Serpentine River and Island Lake. R60 an hour, R150 for three hours or R210 a day.

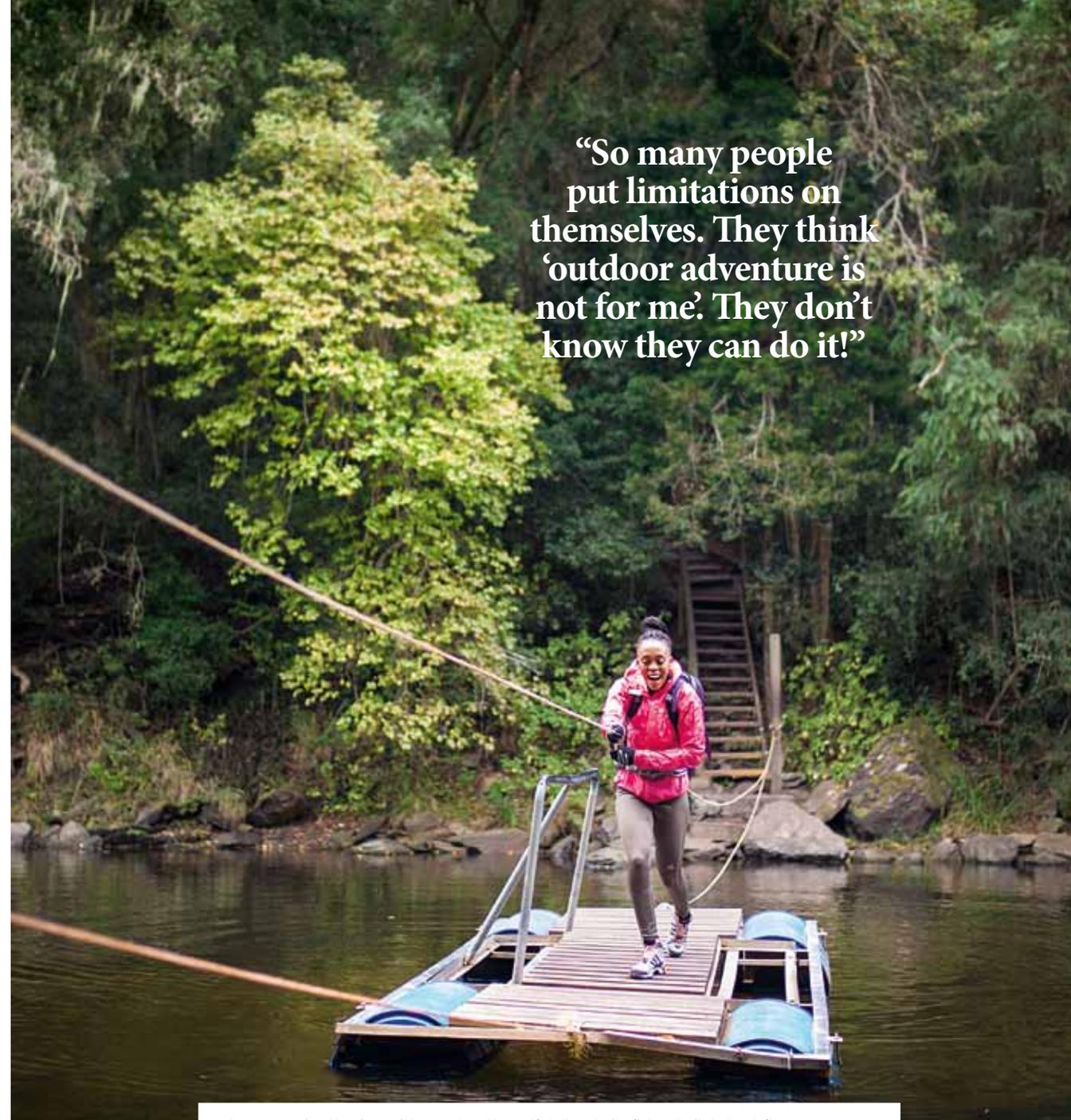
SEGWAY Take an hour-long guided trip with Segway Tours from their base at the Tarentaal Day Visitor Area, next to the canoe rentals. Children taller than 1,1 m can ride. R200 to R400 a person. www.segwayfun.co.za

DOWNHILL SCOOTERS A two-hour tour through Goudveld Forest departs from the Scootour base in Knysna. Kids over 10 get their own scooter, younger children can ride along with an adult. Closed shoes required and you must know how to ride a bike. R450 a person. www.scootours.co.za

HIKING Walk the Half Collared Kingfisher and Pied Kingfisher Trails right from camp (both three to four hours) or drive to the trailhead of the Brown Hooded Kingfisher (4,1km), Cape Dune Mole Rat (6km) or Woodville Big Tree (2,1km) trails.

BIRDING The Wilderness Section has three bird hides. Gallinule Hide looks over the Touw River while Malachite and Rondevlei Hides overlook the salt lakes, Langvlei and Rondevlei respectively.

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Above: Crossing the river with a pontoon on the Half-Collared Kingfisher Trail. Below left: A Knysna turaco. Below right: Holidays are made of moments like these.

