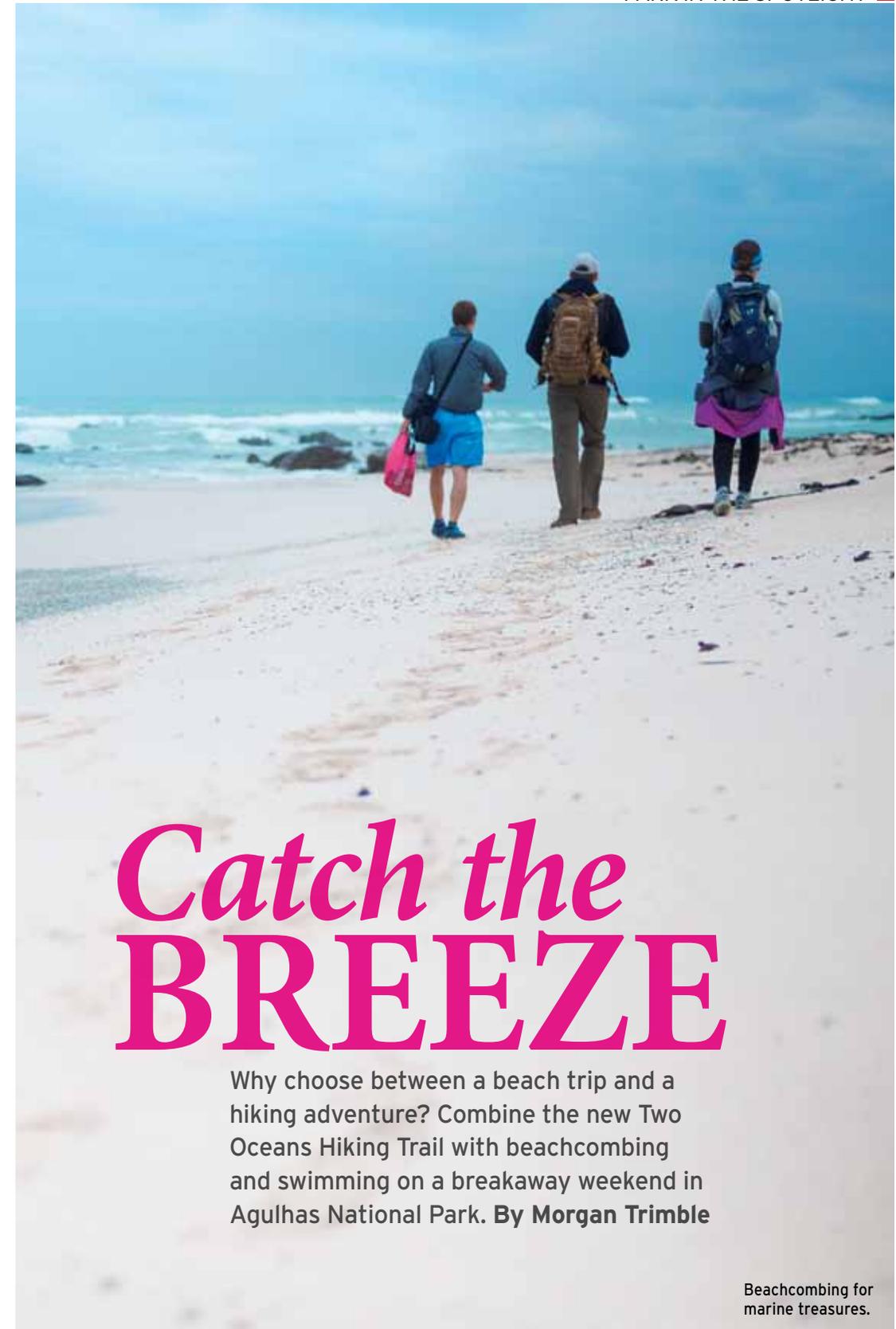


Top things to see include the Agulhas Lighthouse, endemic birds like the Agulhas long-billed lark and flowering bulbs on the plains.

The yellow flowers of tick berry (*bietou*) and bloom-laden white bristle bush (*blombos*) blanket the dunes with colour.



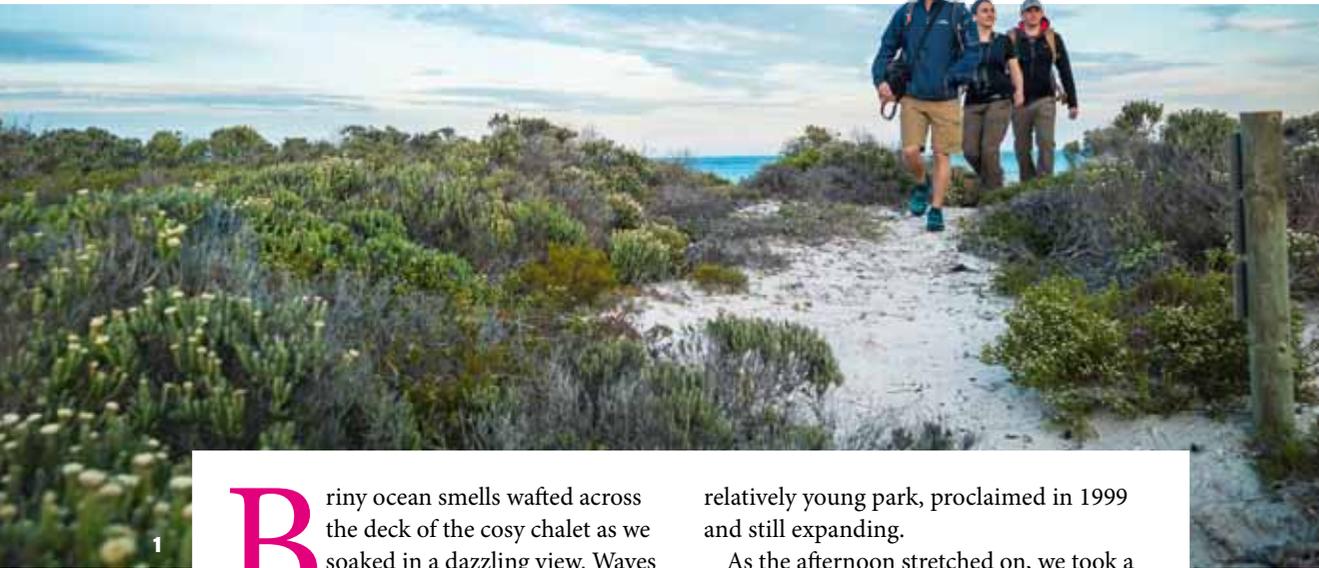
SURF AND TURF
The Two Oceans day hike winds through fynbos before dropping down to the shore.



Catch the BREEZE

Why choose between a beach trip and a hiking adventure? Combine the new Two Oceans Hiking Trail with beachcombing and swimming on a breakaway weekend in Agulhas National Park. **By Morgan Trimble**

Beachcombing for marine treasures.



Briny ocean smells wafted across the deck of the cosy chalet as we soaked in a dazzling view. Waves lapped at the beach, a sea of white bristle bush swayed in the breeze and a rock kestrel spiralled overhead, calling its mate. The rest camp of Agulhas National Park, where wood-and-thatch chalets hunker between fynbos-carpeted dunes, is the perfect backdrop for a weekend escape.

On a glorious Friday, four of us made the drive from Cape Town with enough daylight left to explore. We set out for a walk along the coast, following the sandy path from our chalet to a warm and calm lagoon where we spotted several white-fronted plovers scuttling over the sand. Don't forget to pack swimwear!

As we headed east, sand gave way to a beach of pearly white stones. Years of unrelenting surf have ground these rocks into smooth ovals. When the waves broke, the stones crashed together, sounding like a million marbles dumped on a hardwood floor.

The cacophony didn't seem to bother the black oystercatchers who were also out for a stroll. Only around 6 000 of these birds live in the wild but they're abundant here in Agulhas, a good sign that their coastal habitat is well protected in this

relatively young park, proclaimed in 1999 and still expanding.

As the afternoon stretched on, we took a short drive to the east to watch the sun set over a shipwreck. In this cove, the broken, rusty bow of the *Meisho Maru* sits wonkily on cracked fingers of rock. It's all that remains of the Japanese fishing trawler that ran aground in 1982. The ghostly facade is a handy hangout for cormorants and a reminder of the treacherous history of Cape Agulhas. This is one of the scores of wrecks documented in this graveyard of ships since the early 1600s. Keeping with the eerie theme, in the failing light we spied a spotted eagle-owl, peering at us from a perch along the road back to camp.

On Saturday, we woke to ebullient bokmakierie song and a dazzling pink sunrise. We were ready to tackle the Two Oceans Hiking Trail, which cuts a 10,5 kilometre circular path through the fynbos. We started from the beach at the rest camp and headed inland, up and down undulating dunes. The tiny tracks of rodents, mongooses and perhaps a wildcat criss-crossed the sandy path winding through a chest-high tangle of vegetation.

With the handy trail booklet from reception and its numbered points of interest, ▶



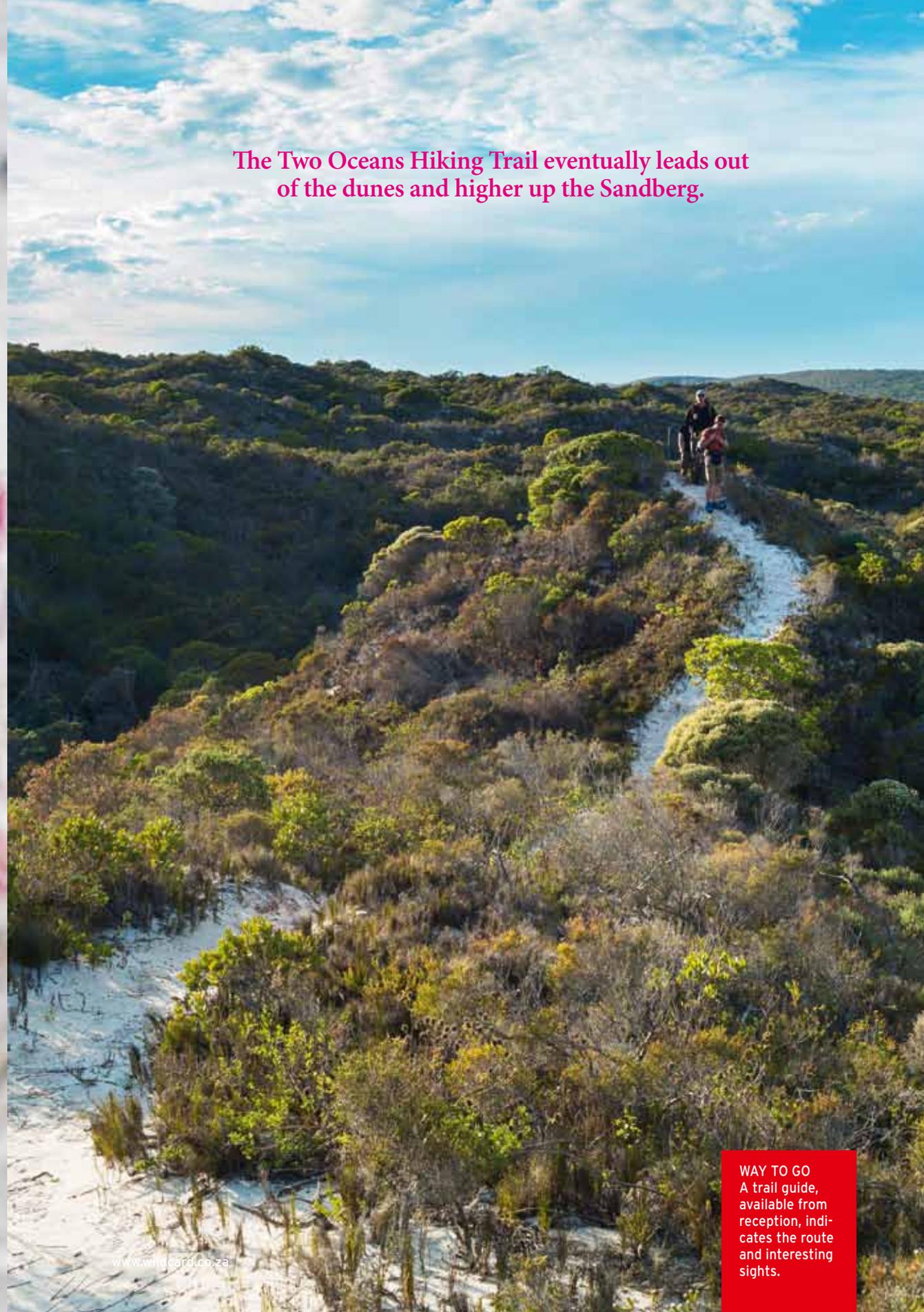
When the waves break, the stones crash together, sounding like a million marbles dumped on a hardwood floor.



1 The Two Oceans Hiking Trail first cuts a track through dunes along the coast. 2 The white pebbles on the shore have been polished smooth by the waves. 3 Friendly greetings from environmental monitor Johlene Adams, field ranger Lesley Nchabeleng and field ranger Savimbi Louw. 4 The trail winds through tall shrubs. 5 A brunch picnic to restore reserves for the rest of the walk. 6 The rest camp is set among vibrant fynbos.



Plants growing along the shore are exposed to the elements.

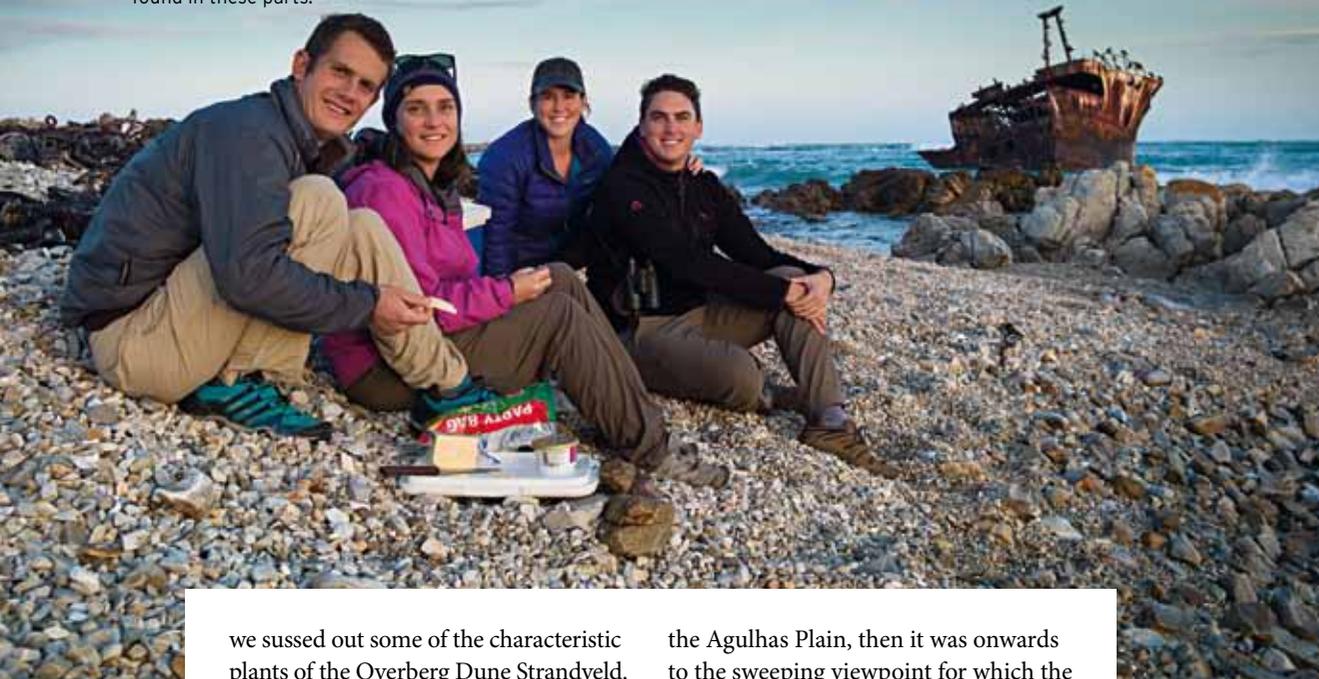


The Two Oceans Hiking Trail eventually leads out of the dunes and higher up the Sandberg.

WAY TO GO
A trail guide, available from reception, indicates the route and interesting sights.

PARK IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Selfie time in front of the *Meisho Maru*, one of the many wrecks found in these parts.



we sussed out some of the characteristic plants of the Overberg Dune Strandveld. Tick berry (bietou), covered in yellow flowers, and bloom-laden white bristle bush (*blombos*) blanketed the dunes with colour. Sea guarri, waxberry and a dizzying variety of other species contributed to an astounding diversity of hue and texture. Agulhas National Park protects some 2 000 species of plants, including many threatened endemics.

Soon we reached the 'Khoi Kitchen', a sandy outcrop littered with thousands of discarded shells. The round, knobbly, trap-door shells of *alikeukel* looked like coins from a lost treasure, spilt in the sand. Here, in the Late Stone Age, several thousand years ago, Khoi hunter-gatherers sat to process their shellfish harvest, perhaps appreciating an expansive view of beach and fynbos not too different from what we see today.

The trail eventually led out of the dunes and higher up the Sandberg. White and yellow blooms gave way to bright orange tassel heath erica. Double-collared and orange-breasted sunbirds swarmed over the low vegetation, visiting a buffet of nectar-filled flowers.

The view opened to the hinterland, to

the Agulhas Plain, then it was onwards to the sweeping viewpoint for which the Two Oceans Trail is named. To the west, the Atlantic Ocean hugged dune fields and historic farms now incorporated into the park. To the east, Struisbaai looked out over the Indian Ocean. Soetendalsvlei glittered in the north, under late morning sun. After a brunch picnic in the meagre shade of the tallest bush we could find, it was all downhill back to the beach and a well-earned cold beer in camp.

In the afternoon, we took the boardwalk to Rasperpunt and enjoyed sunset in the company of oystercatchers, swift terns and gentle waves. High tide obscured the stone walls of massive fish traps, the exact age of which remains a mystery. But other archaeological finds, such as stone tools, shellfish middens, cave shelters, hearths and pottery, hint at humanity's long relationship with this coast.

On Sunday morning, we found evidence of more recent impact. One of our group, who researches marine plastic pollution, had told us about a new exercise trend called 'plogging' (from Swedish *plocka upp*) where you

pick up rubbish while you jog. We skipped the jogging but took a plastic packet on a beachcombing mission to the west along a sandy beach unfurling to the horizon. Sadly, a kilometre into our walk, our packet was already overflowing with bottles, fishing tackle, ear buds, wrappers and more. National park boundaries don't count for much on our interconnected coasts.

Beachcombing offered plenty to spark our interest, too. Amid countless shells, coral fragments, mermaid's purses and kelp we discovered a few carcasses hinting at the wonder of life below the

ocean's surface: a paper nautilus, a few shysharks, prehistoric-looking giant chiton molluscs, and most amazingly, a musselcracker fish smiling up at us with strangely human-like incisors and a mouthful of pearly molars. Next time, we'll pack snorkel gear for a better peek at the living in this rich mixing point of the two oceans.

With our fynbos hike and beach strolls, we'd only scratched the surface of Agulhas National Park's amazing eco-systems. There is much more to discover sprouting from the sand and lurking below the waves. 🐾



Agulhas National Park lies just under three hours' drive from Cape Town.



SAFETY The camp is in a fenced section of the park but the beach is public access. This makes it difficult to control entry and illegal abalone harvest. Be aware of your surroundings and call reception on 028-435-6078 with any concerns so they can dispatch rangers.



TRIP PLANNER

GETTING THERE Agulhas National Park is 220 km southeast of Cape Town. Take the N2 to Caledon, R316 to Bredasdorp and R319 to L'Agulhas.

ACCOMMODATION The rest camp has 22 chalets for self-catering, including two-bedroom and one-bedroom units (from R2119 a night for four people and R1191 for two people). Nearby Lagoon House sleeps up to eight (from R3405 a night for six, R586 for an extra adult and R293 a child). Further afield, guests can stay in historic, renovated farmhouses at Rhenosterkop (one- and two-bed cottages from R843 and R1367 a night)

and Bergplaas (guesthouse sleeps up to 10; R1715 a night for four people, R263 for an additional adult and R132 a child).

CONSERVATION FEES R41 an adult, R21 a child, valid *Wild Card* members free.

BOOKINGS SANParks Central Reservation 012-428-9111, www.sanparks.org
DAY VISITORS While as a day visitor you can't access the rest camp or Two Oceans Hiking Trail, you can visit the Cape Agulhas Lighthouse and museum (R31 for adults, R15 for children under 12), the southernmost point of Africa and the Rasperpunt hiking trail.

The rest camp's thatched chalets look out towards the ocean.