

WALK THE

Dolphin

The 77 m suspension bridge crossing the Storms River Mouth

DON'T FANCY A HARD SLOG UP THE OTTER TRAIL? WHAT ABOUT TRYING ONE OF SA'S PREMIER HIKING DESTINATIONS INSTEAD? THE DOLPHIN TRAIL ALSO STARTS OFF AT THE STORMS RIVER MOUTH, BUT IS A MUCH MORE RELAXED AMBLE INTO THE MAGICAL, MISTY TSITSIKAMMA FOREST

BY FIONA MCINTOSH

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he narrow suspension bridge sways violently as we stride across it, the tannin-stained waters of the river churning below us. We stop to take in the majesty of this remote spot in the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park. Bounded by the waters of the Indian Ocean and with a backdrop of verdant forest, Storm's River Mouth is one of my favourite places in the world.

For the next two days we'll be hiking along this pristine coastline on the Dolphin Trail, SA's most luxurious slackpacking trail which, like its better known sister, the Otter Trail, starts at Storms River Mouth Rest Camp. While the Otter heads west, we're going east on a magical journey through indigenous forest and along splendid coastal paths.



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WIN

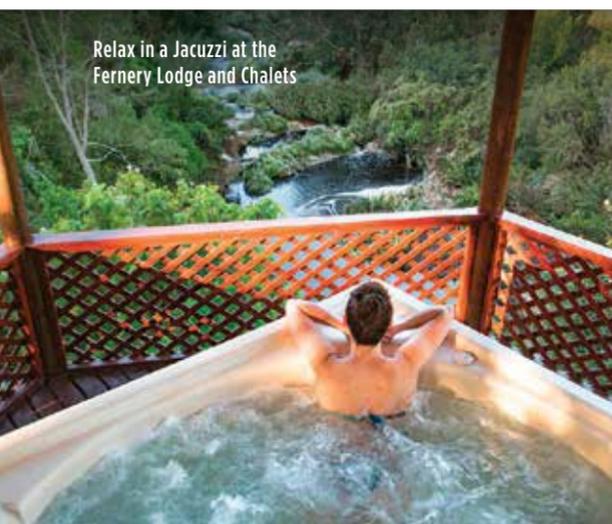
A NORTH FACE
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VALUED AT R999
DETAILS ON PAGE 55

WHAT TO PACK

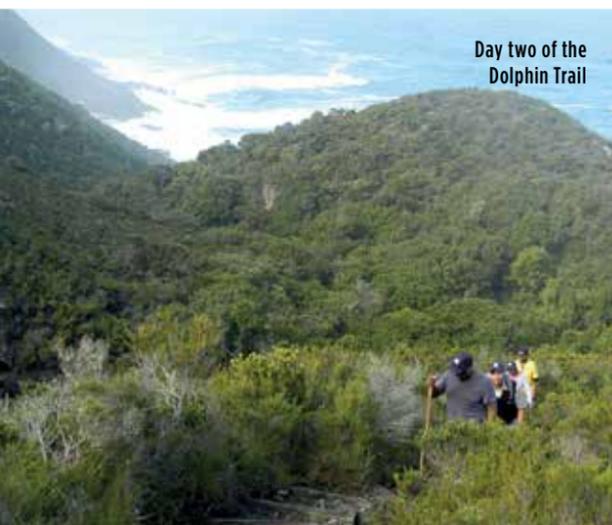
- ▶ The terrain is steep and rocky at times, so sturdy hiking boots or shoes are a must.
- ▶ If you go in summer, expect to get wet. Waterproof your daypack and carry a raincoat.
- ▶ Take binocs and field guides to the trees if you're interested in birdwatching.
- ▶ There are a couple of wonderful rock pools to explore, so consider carrying a dive mask.



The Misty Mountain Reserve Lodge and Self-Catering Chalets at the Storms River Mouth



Relax in a Jacuzzi at the Fernery Lodge and Chalets



Day two of the Dolphin Trail

YOU CAN DO IT TOO

► Often dubbed ‘the alternative Otter’, the Dolphin Trail is every bit as spectacular as South Africa’s most famous hike. But the big difference is that since your overnight bags are transferred each day, you don’t have to be a hard-core backpacker to complete it. Although there are some steep climbs and rocky sections, the daily distances are short (9.5 km and 7.5 km), so you can go at a slow pace, stopping as often as you like.

► Guided by fundis who will help you through any tricky sections and introduce you to the flora and fauna of the area, it’s perfect for inexperienced hikers. If you’ve limited time or like your creature comforts, this trail is just the ticket.

► **Bookings:** 042 280 3588, info@dolphintrail.co.za, dolphintrail.co.za.

It’s a steep climb from the beach to the lookout point at the top of the cliff – the hardest part of the whole trail our guides assure us – so we take it slowly. Once on top, we’re rewarded with incredible views back over the Tsitsikamma National Park, and an unexpected refreshment stop. As we tuck into tasty snacks, our eagle-eyed guide points out dolphins surfing in the waves. Revived, we follow the narrow trail along the cliff edge, enjoying the views and sweet-smelling fynbos, before a long descent through indigenous forest to a shady dell of lush ferns. A Knysna turaco (loerie) flutters away as we continue to a big rock pool where we swim and laze in the sun.

A wonderful section through jagged rocks where we’re showered with the spray of the sea ends with another long, steady climb back up to the plateau. The views are incredible and we stop often to admire the rocks – big, rugged, orange teeth jutting out of the sea – and the ever-changing perspectives of this wild coastline. Then, it’s a short walk through the plantation to Misty Mountain Reserve where we’re shown to our beautiful chalets: A relaxing Jacuzzi bath and a terrace from which we can take in the views and the birds, are perfect chill spots.

In the morning, it’s another steep path back down to the coast. The narrow track weaves

through rocky gullies and grassy flats with occasional scrambles between big slabs of grey stone, where the sedimentary rock layers had been folded up into nearly vertical planes. We stop to admire little clumps of colourful flowers and keep our eyes peeled around Otter’s Alley for signs of Cape clawless otters that often frequent this section of coast. Another swim in a natural rock pool sets us up for our final climb, then we suddenly pop out into a clearing where lunch awaits – a huge buffet of fresh bread, cheese, ham and muffins all spread out on a trestle table.

A gentle meander through the forest brings us to the end of the trail at The Fernery. After welcome drinks and a toast to a magnificent trail, we retire to our beautiful chalets along the river to freshen up for our final, gourmet dinner. We’re in no rush to depart, so we indulge in a sumptuous breakfast before boarding a 4x4 for the trip back via the old Storms River Pass to our cars. Although we’ve only walked for two days, it seems as if we’ve had a much longer escape. I feel thoroughly spoilt, rejuvenated and determined to return. It’s hard to leave this beautiful place. ✨



The spectacular view from the Fernery Lodge and Chalets



A self-catering chalet at Misty Mountain Reserve

PHOTOGRAPHY: AFRICA MEDIA ONLINE, ISTOCKPHOTO, COURTESY IMAGES

FAST FACTS

- The Dolphin Trail is the result of a partnership between the SANParks and two private-sector partners, The Fernery Lodge & Chalets and Misty Mountain Reserve.
- Highlights include outstanding coastal scenery and landforms; wonderful rock pools; sightings of whales and dolphins; indigenous forest and ferns; brightly coloured fungi and beautiful forest birds such as Knysna turacos (loeries).
- **Tips:** The mild climate of the Tsitsikamma means that the trail can be walked year-round. The winter months are cool and particularly pleasant for hiking.
- The night before the trail starts is spent in the stunning chalets in the Storms River Rest Camp. It’s one of the most beautiful settings in the world, so book in for a couple of extra days either before or after the trail if you can.