

Garden Route opens my eyes to

On a road trip from Cape Town to the Wild Coast, young Americans discover a country of fun and breathtaking splendour – but also one of inequality, with a difficult history that lingers. By **Anna Southwell**



Above: Coastline on the Garden Route; right: Knysna Elephant Park at feeding time; Knysna houseboats. Photos: Flickr

My first time experiencing South Africa as a US tourist was by road trip along the Garden Route – and it was a whirlwind of mini-adventures and important realisations.

On day one, I piled into a minibus with my stuffed hiking backpack along with all 14 of my American colleagues. We had just moved to Cape Town from North Carolina for four months to take up internships and to study, so we dedicated a week to exploring the country before we began working.

Ready to roll early in the morning, we kicked off the trip by visiting the *Long March to Freedom* exhibition about the Struggle era as we were leaving the city. It was eye-opening to walk among the sombre collection of bronze sculptures beneath the dominating presence of Table Mountain.

The site's guided chronological history tour set the tone that lingered for the rest of our sightseeing trip – there was much more for us to understand about the dark history of oppression and apartheid in South Africa.

Later in the morning, we hit the road on the N1 and joined the scenic R62 at Worcester. Driving on the opposite side of the road felt strange, but I was soon distracted by the views. As we passed through Ashton and Montagu, our eyes were glued to the windows, in awe of the grand mountain backdrops and expansive vineyards. The bus was quiet as we absorbed the scenery.

We stopped for lunch in rural Barrydale at a vintage diner and motel called Diesel & Crème, where I ordered their famous milkshake (claimed to be “the best milkshake in South Africa” on TripAdvisor). It lived up to the high praise.



We pulled over at various lookout points along the highway and eventually joined the N2 (Garden Route) at Heidelberg. Another few hours passed in the bus and we made it to our first stop, Knysna, by nightfall.

Stop 1: Knysna

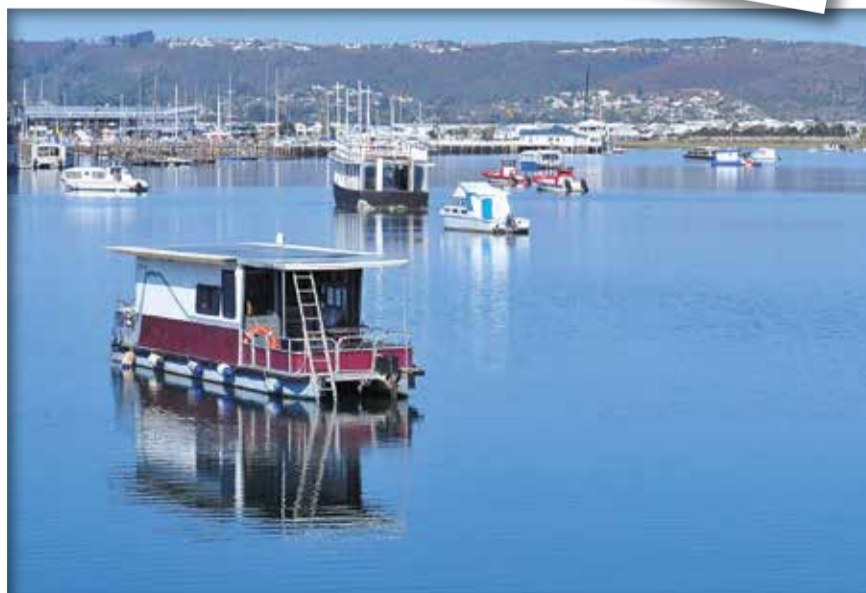
The silence of this quaint coastal town with sweeping cliffside views of the Indian Ocean was peaceful and comforting. But our afternoon became chaotic as we packed multiple sights into our single day there. I recommend staying longer.

Our first sight was the Knysna Elephant Park, where we fed elephants, touched them and walked alongside them. It was both joyful and heartbreaking as we learned about the harsh reality elephants face from Jowell Mambobo, a park ranger from Zimbabwe who has worked with elephants for 22 years.

(Tip: Knysna Elephant Park is one of the only locations in the world where you can get up close and personal with African elephants, unlike sites such as Addo Elephant Park and Kruger National Park.)

About 45 minutes outside Knysna in Plettenberg Bay, we visited Birds of Eden, the world's largest free-flight aviary and bird sanctuary. We marvelled at the birds, including parrots, scarlet ibises and flamingos.

Our third sight was the most exciting moment of our trip: Bloukrans Bridge Bungee, one of the world's highest bungee-jumping sites with a 216m drop off the tallest bridge in Africa. Though I didn't take the plunge, I opted for the “skywalk”, which allowed me to walk the net underneath the bridge and watch some of my colleagues jump off. That in itself was enough of a thrill.



SA's beauty and complexities



More up my alley, we ended the day on another fun note with zip-lining at Tsitsikamma Canopy Tours during sunset.

Stop 2: Storms River

Storms River is another idyllic town with a mountain as the backdrop, where we stayed one night at the local village inn.

We woke up early to take a short hike through the forest outside town using the AllTrails app. Afterwards, we visited what was easily the most picturesque location I've ever seen — the Storms River Mouth suspension bridge.

Stop 3: Addo

Arriving at Addo Elephant National Park, we went on an afternoon game drive. We found elephants crossing the road and drove up next to them, but, unlike in Knysna, we could not leave the vehicle without frightening them. We also spotted zebra, kudu and buffalo.

Stop 4: Makhanda

When we made it to Makhanda (previously known as Grahamstown), we switched gears from excitement to heavy contemplation.

The main site is the 1820 Settlers National Monument that sits atop the hill. The persisting celebration of colonialism and English settlement caught us off guard. Walking around the museum was eerie: it was empty, the artwork is mostly of white colonial figures, and it overlooks a town in which the majority of the population is black. This didn't sit right with us and opened our eyes to the complexities of this country.

We found the abrupt way that many South Africans address the issue of race to be jarring. We noticed that it contrasts with the more nuanced, "PC" manner in which Americans often tiptoe around the issue.

Stop 5: Bulungula, Eastern Cape

The next day was a long haul, a nine-hour drive to a remote town called Bulungula on the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape.

(Tip: Use a 4x4 on the bumpy and rocky dirt roads of this area. Using a minibus was tumultuous and added hours to the drive.)

We reached our lodge by the ocean late at night, and the stars were the brightest I had ever seen. We slept in rondavels and had no phone reception. The three-day break from



technology was a breath of fresh air.

We swam in the Indian Ocean. The locals spent time with us by the campfire every night, teaching us to play the drums and sound out greetings in isiXhosa. We spent time with children at the schools and helped them with their maths homework.

A sign of my privilege, it was startling to witness the impoverished communities in the area. Being in a place with a serious water shortage, regular load shedding and such limited infrastructure that children walk 20km to school was a first for me. I reflected deeply about how I could respectfully contribute in a manner that is positive rather than detrimental. We all agreed that we will treasure our time in Bulungula.

On our last day, we drove to King Phalo Airport and flew back to Cape Town.

This road trip showed me firsthand the many ways that South Africa is both an incredibly beautiful and incredibly complex place. And now that I am living in Cape Town, I know that I have so much more to see and learn. **DM168**

Anna Southwell is in South Africa on an internship with Daily Maverick as part of a group from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Clockwise from top: Makhanda; Bulungula; cows on the beach; learning a few beats from Lwando.

Photos: Flickr, Bulungula Lodge and Instagram

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