

Almost like Table Mountain. Hole-in-the-Wall, some 10 km south of Coffee Bay, is probably the Wild Coast's most well-known attraction. The British ship's captain Alexander Vidal gave it its name in 1823.

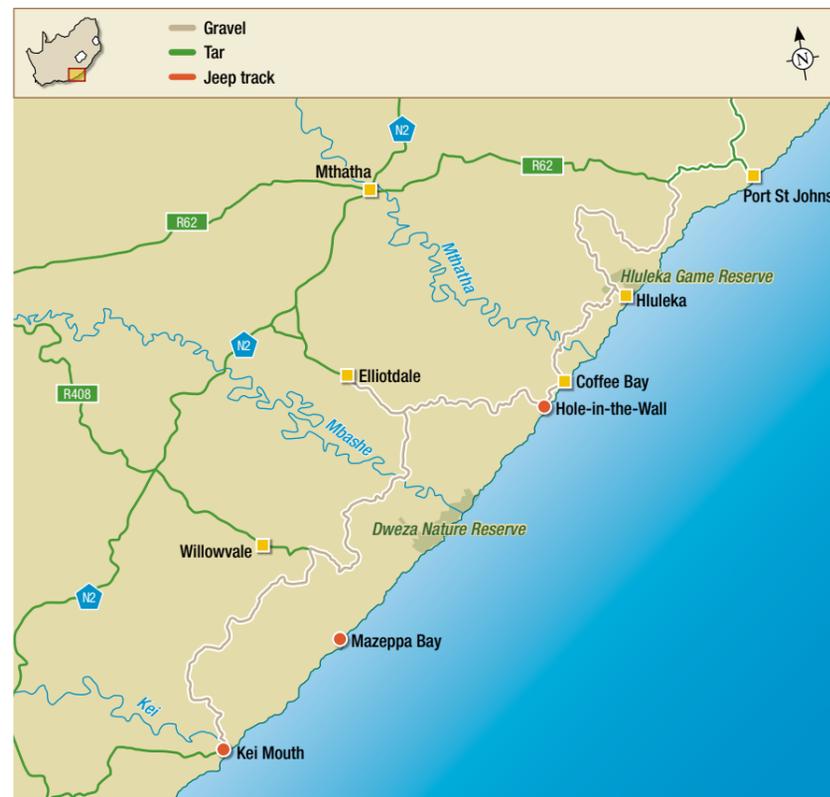
Where cattle rule the beaches

On a recent visit to the Wild Coast, **Villiers Steyn** hugged the coast from Port St Johns to Kei Mouth. To his surprise, it wasn't that difficult.

PHOTOGRAPHS: VILLIERS STEYN



Be watchful. A typical Wild Coast scene. This snaking road runs between Hole-in-the-Wall and Dweza. In the Transkei you have to watch out for cattle and people.



Youth at work. These five herdsman were among the few children who didn't beg for sweets. Even though it feels cruel, don't give in and hand out sweets.



Crowning glory. Almost every second thatched house in the Wild Coast has a car tyre and potplant right on top of the roof.

DESTINATION | WILD COAST



Moss green. One of the most beautiful views along the Wild Coast is from the airfield above Port St Johns over the Mzimvubu River. Its name means "house of the hippo".

“Only 133 bends ahead!” we read on a billboard near Lusikisiki. That’s what lies between us and Port St Johns...The R61 tar road does indeed wind its way through the endless koppies and I’m grateful I’m driving. I don’t like shaking to and fro in a vehicle.

Fortunately my girlfriend, Tabby Mitins, doesn’t look at all concerned in the Hilux’s passenger seat.

We are charmed by the Wild Coast. White, pink and sea-green thatched huts stand sprinkled over the green hills like multicoloured grains of sugar. On the top of every second thatched roof a pot plant grows in a car tyre – some of them with brand-new treads.

We see an old man “parking” two of his cattle in a double garage. One of his other cattle is already parking under a carport next to a wrecked Nissan Hardbody.

Port St Johns is our destination for the day, and the starting point of a weeklong tour of the Wild Coast.

Day 1:
Just look at all the smiley faces
Ferry Point, Port St Johns

Frip. Frip. Frip. I wake to the monotonous call of a lesser honeyguide. But he’s not alone.

A lesser striped swallow is using the neighbour’s fishing rod as a perch, while a few yellow-fronted canaries in a shrub watch us fearlessly. In the treetops we

occasionally see the dark body of a camera-shy samango monkey. It’s bustling in the Ferry Point campsite. Besides the birds and monkeys the seven local mutts take turns to snooze under our gazebo throughout the day.

Yesterday afternoon five of our friends and family joined us in the rain. Fortunately, the sun is shining today and everybody’s pegging up wet T-shirts and socks onto the washing line. We are hoping the rain stays away for now, because we are planning to drive from Port St Johns to the Kei River Mouth, the southernmost point of the Wild Coast, without hitting the N2 once. In other words, we want to drive gravel road all the way and keep as close to the sea as possible.

From what we’ve heard, this is easier said than done, especially when it’s wet. But those are tomorrow’s problems. For now, we relax.

After the past week’s high rainfall the seawater looks like coffee. The rivers must’ve washed thousands of tons of gravel down to the sea. We walk along the beach to a toppled tree trunk.

Later the afternoon we drive to an airfield high above Port St Johns. A herd of curious cattle is grazing adventurously close to the edge of a cliff. From this lookout you have an eagle’s view of the town, and only now do I realise how lush and forest-like the banks of the Mzimvubu River is. Ferry Point is near the mouth. We drink in the view until just before sunset.

Plan with Slingsby
Back at Ferry Point we start to plan tomorrow’s route in all earnest. If you know the Wild Coast, you’ll know it’s very easy to get lost there.

Between the N2 from Port Edward to East London and the coast lie a myriad of twisting gravel tracks, of which most connect the ocean and the tar road. On most road maps it looks impossible to drive along the coast from Port St Johns to the Kei River Mouth.

Fortunately, we use the exception to “most roadmaps”: Peter Slingsby’s map. You’ll be hard-pressed to find a more thorough map.

It looks like a cross between a *Where’s Wally?* illustration and Google Earth – colourful and overloaded with information of fuel stations, overnight accommodation, shops, clinics and more. Yellow smiley faces indicate the most scenic paths and those with the symbol of a green car can only be tackled by 4x4.

We are mostly interested in the small back roads that connect the bigger freeway-to-coast gravel roads. Slingsby gives coordinates at every fork, T-junction and crossroads. Tomorrow we want to drive all the way to Hole-in-the-Wall and pick the shortest possible route near the coast.

Needless to say, we also include as many smiley faces as possible and feed a total of 12 coordinates into our GPSs. I don’t think we’ll get lost, but the question is, will we get stuck?



Pristine. The southern entrance to the Hluleka Game Reserve. It comprises two forest reserves, Congwane Mtombo and Ndabeni Hluleka, and attracts especially birders.

This is where we stayed



Ferry Point

Where? It is within walking distance from the beach in Port St Johns, east of the Mzimvubu River

Facilities: The campsite has two comfortable stands with green grass, electricity and braais on the ground. The ablution block has two showers (with a trickle of hot water) and one toilet, as well as a basin. You can't drive your vehicle onto your stand, but you can park close by. There is a bar with cold cool drinks and beer.

Cost? Camping: R75 pppn; self-catering: R150 pppn (off-season) and R175 pppn (in season)

Book: ferrypoint@polka.co.za; www.ferrypoint.co.za

Drive Out says: It's a nice and private campsite far away from the noisy part of town.



Hole in the Wall Hotel and Holiday Village

Where? About 10 km southwest of Coffee Bay

Facilities: It has a pool, bar, restaurant (with a simple menu) and a great beach for playing and swimming. The resort is barely 15 minutes' walk from the Hole-in-the-Wall rock formation.

Cost? Camping: R60 pppn (off-season); R80 pppn (in season); A self-catering room with 6 beds and own bathroom costs R100 pppn. Other self-catering units vary from R490 per night for 2 (of season) to R2 480 per night for 10 (in season).

Book: reservations@holeinthewall.co.za; www.holeinthewall.co.za

Drive Out says: Avoid this campsite during the wet summer months, since the stands are situated on a muddy slope.



umThombe Kei River Lodge

Where? On the bank of the Kei River, about 11 km from Kei Mouth

Facilities: The stands are large, shady and situated on the grassy banks of the Kei River. It has no electricity, and when the camp is full, more than 20 people share one toilet and hot shower. Wood costs R25 per bundle. Guests may use umThombe's canoes to paddle on the river.

Cost? Camping: R70 pppn; 4 self-catering units (from R400 per night for 6 out of season to R900 per night for 6 in high season)

Book: inquiries@umthombekei.co.za; www.umthombekei.co.za

Drive Out says: Besides the tiny ablution block, this is one of the most scenic and peaceful campsites I've ever been to.

Sun seekers. Cattle are common on the beaches along the Wild Coast. These bulls are lying on the rocky beach at Hole-in-the-Wall. You can't always venture too close.

Day 2: Over hill and dale

Port St Johns to Hole-in-the-Wall (±146 km, 5½ hours)

As the crow flies, it's only 60 km from Port St Johns to Hole-in-the-Wall. Taking back roads, however, it's more than twice that distance – and don't think your progress will be swift. Here *you* make way for the sheep.

We leave the tar road 18 km from Port St Johns and head south towards Coffee Bay. Flat and straight is a foreign concept in these parts. For the next 146 km the gravel tracks wind through typical Wild Coast landscape – the one moment you're driving on the back of a hill and the next moment you cross a river in a valley. Every so often we see the sea over our left shoulder. That means we're still on the "right" track.

At one stage we miss a turnoff and end up at the edge of the coast by the entrance of the Hluleka Game Reserve. Unlike Port St Johns, the seawater out here looks as blue as that of a postcard of the Seychelles. At the edge of the hills enormous aloe stand guard over rocky plateaus, sand dunes covered in woods and schools of dolphins. It's a pity we can't just pitch camp right here.

The sunshine of the past day and a half helped considerably to dry out the

gravel road. You can see where it was a little slippery two days before, but now the surface is bone-dry. Here and there the tracks turn rocky, but not badly enough that I have to switch to 4x4. Our progress is much easier than I'd expected.

The odd Wild Coast scenes also don't stop. At one stage, we encounter a herd of boer goats resting at the edge of a cliff. The rocky steps are so narrow they have to get up with one hoof behind the other otherwise they'll lose their balance.

Five and a half hours fly past, and by 4.30 pm we stop at the Hole in the Wall Hotel and Holiday Village. Although our progress was surprisingly easily today, it would have been a completely different story in the rain. In two days our shift is longer and more desolate to boot...

Day 3-4: Mina Moo country Hole-in-the-Wall

You can't visit the Wild Coast without popping in at Hole-in-the-Wall. Although it's buzzing during the December holidays, there are still fewer people here than in Coffee Bay or Port St Johns. It has a great beach for swimming with more than enough room for a cricket, touch rugby and soccer team. Besides, you're always assured of a herd of two

or four-footed spectators. This beach belongs to the cattle.

Most of them are very tame and will allow you to walk up right next to them, but beware the cows with calves. They don't hesitate to use their horns. It takes about 15 minutes to walk from the holiday resort to the iconic hole in the wall.

It's more a tunnel through a long rock, and in real life it's much smaller than you expect. It remains a remarkable sight though, and one of South Africa's rock formations you have to see.

We spend two lazy nights here before continuing our tour to the south.

Day 5: The wildest part of the Wild Coast

Hole-in-the-Wall to umThombe Kei River Lodge (±260 km, 9½ hours)

We're up early, because today the mother of all Wild Coast shifts lies ahead. We want to drive from Hole-in-the-Wall to the Kei River Mouth, and up to now our average speed on the back roads has barely been 26 km/h.

Instead of 12 coordinates, we feed 19 into the GPS today, and the route is at least 100 km longer than our second day's shift. On top of that, it also rained a lot yesterday, so the roads will be muddy. >



Low-range not needed (now). In the dry season you don't have to fear the Wild Coast's back roads, such as this one between Port St Johns and Coffee Bay; they are quite tame.

We have to drive so far today because we couldn't find anywhere to camp between Hole-in-the-Wall and the Kei River Mouth.

We wanted to stay over at Bulungula Lodge north of the Xhora River Mouth, but booking a campsite there is about as easy as finding a Transkei taxi driver who obeys all the traffic rules.

Apparently, former visitors always get preference, even if you book first. By the time our application was turned down, the Dwesa Nature Reserve (the only other camping choice in this part of the Wild Coast) was already fully booked.

The first few kilometres go smoothly – the kind of smoothly that makes your Hilux slide to and fro over the road...

The mud forces us to switch to 4x4 and be more aware of our momentum and the line we select on the back roads. But, luckily, the sunshine makes life a lot easier yet again. Within half an hour a dry set of tracks start appearing in the dark-brown clay.

I'm astonished at how many smaller cars we pass on the back road. And no, not Ford Bantams and Suzuki Jimnys. Every so often we drive past a Hyundai Atos or Opel Corsa crawling over the rocks or through the mud.

Even on the worst parts we drive past these little cars, and you can't help but wonder how they got here. It looks as if you can drive anything through the Wild Coast, provided you don't drive like a



Silent waters deep in the Transkei. The Mthatha River north of Hole-in-the-Wall. This river flows into the Indian Ocean 5 km northeast of Coffee Bay.



Rest a while. The only way of getting your vehicle across the Kei River is by ferry.

cowboy and are willing to wait for the sun to come out.

And if you've wondered where the guys wash their cars, just drive to the nearest river crossing, where a vehicle or two are usually parked on the rocks with doors wide open, while a proud owner and his friends make sure everything is shiny.

Over the Kei, on a ferry

By 4 pm, eight hours after leaving Hole-in-the-Wall, we see the Kei River Mouth's roofs on the horizon.

We leave about a thousand hills behind us and cross the final one before stopping at the ferry station on the bank of the Kei. Two ferries sail to and fro between the banks simultaneously and each

has enough space for two bakkies and about eight motorbikes on the sides. We enter Kei Mouth ten minutes later.

However, we have another 11 km left before we reach the umThombe Kei River Lodge, and the final eight of that takes us almost half an hour to cover.

With its thick mud and steep, rocky slopes, the entrance track is a 4x4 course all of its own. We pitch our tents just before sunset.

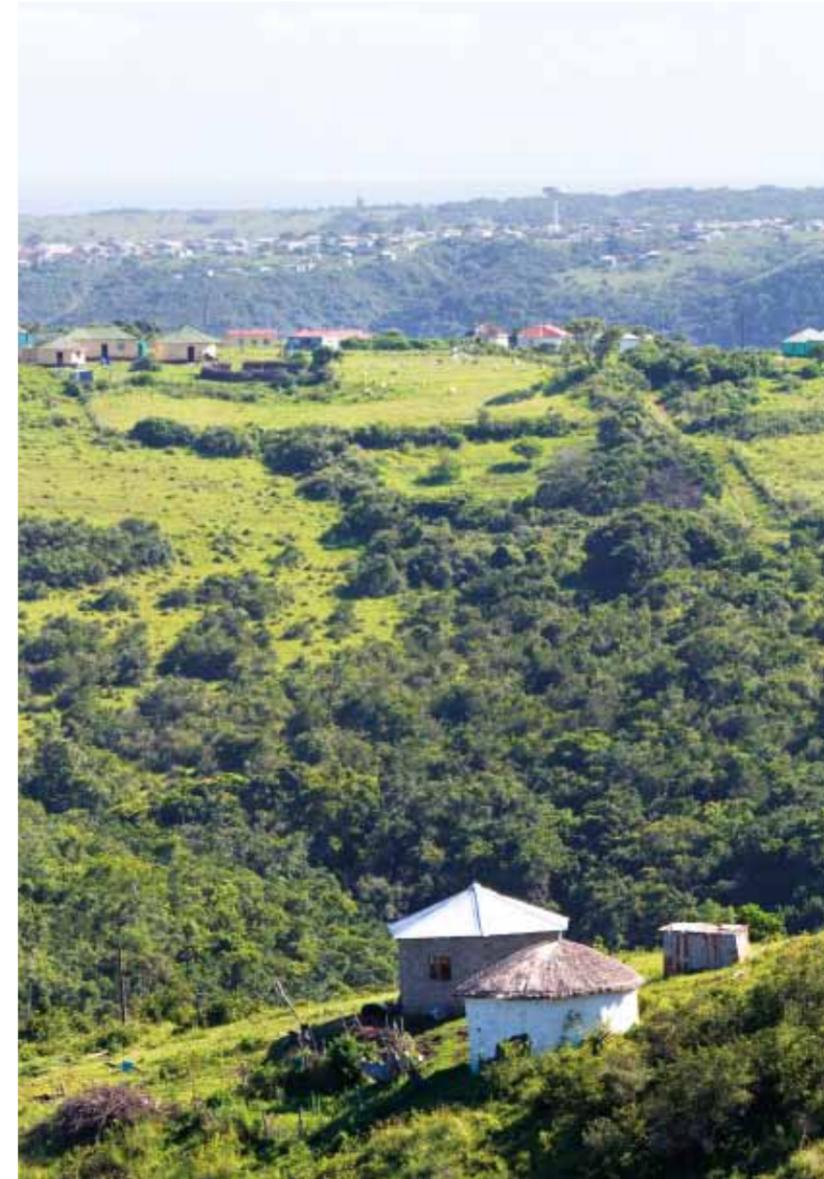
Day 6 and 7:
The soothing south

umThombe Kei River Lodge

It's never nice when a tour ends immediately after a long day on the road. That's why we decide to camp by the Kei River for two full days before heading back home. This may be the southern tip of the Wild Coast, but that doesn't mean it's any less wild. On the contrary, here at umThombe, in a tiny game reserve, I feel further removed from civilisation than any other place on the Wild Coast.

In the morning we are woken by the screech of a trumpeter hornbill gliding low over our tents to a tree on the river bank. Some campers spend the day book in hand, while others take their camp chairs down to the river. We cool off in the river and spend hours chatting by the campfire.

Although we have spent a week touring the Wild Coast, it still feels too short. This part of South Africa feels like another country – totally unfamiliar and with a unique character.



A view to die for. Money sometimes can't buy a view such as this one from the last hill before you cross the Kei River at the southernmost point of the Wild Coast.

I want to go too

What do the roads look like? The tar roads connecting the N2 with Port St Johns and Coffee Bay, are in a bad condition. There are lots of potholes and no shoulder in places. Beware minibus taxis speeding around corners.

The gravel roads definitely can't be described as "good", but they're not nearly as bad as I'd expected. Expect corrugations, rocks and potholes, as well as mud after rain. We rarely used 4x4.

On the back roads, prepare yourself to progress at about 25–30 km/h. Many farm animals and people walk in the road.

When should I go? If you're wary of mud and want to avoid the rain and heat, come during the mild winter months (May–July). Between August and April the average rainfall is about 1 000 mm. If you don't have

a 4x4, avoid the wet summer months. Book long in advance if you want to come during the December holidays.

Best map? Use a combination of Slingsby's *Wild Coast Map* and *Tracks4Africa* on a GPS. Use the map to plot a route from point A to B and then feed all the coordinates on the route, as well as the direction in which you should turn, into the GPS. If you have to turn around for some reason, there are usually enough tracks so that you can quickly detour and return to your original route. Visit www.slingsbymaps.com

Along the road. If you want information about the condition of a particular stretch of road, call the owners of the nearest campsite, resort or hotel.

How long? Stay for at least four nights.

How far is it? From Pretoria to Port St Johns via Harrismith and Kokstad: ± 900 km. From Cape

Town to Kei Mouth via Port Elizabeth and East London: ± 1 150 km. Preferably give yourself two days to cover either of these routes.

Is there fuel? All the bigger towns on the Wild Coast, such as Port St Johns, Coffee Bay, Elliotdale and Willowdale have fuel and are indicated on Slingsby's maps.

Kei River crossing: The two ferries sail daily from sunrise to sunset and cost R60/vehicle and R25/motorbike per crossing.

eSweetieees! The moment we left the tar road, children (and even a few adults) started begging for sweets. Don't succumb to the pressure. Besides the begging culture it fosters, it's life threatening. The moment you stop, the children run straight at your window from all directions, without watching the oncoming traffic.