

# KOGELBERG

## BOTANICAL WONDERLAND

Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve is more than a biodiversity hotspot for fynbos. **Roxanne Reid** discovers it's also a fun place to work up a sweat.

**LAND OF PLENTY** The biosphere comprises 70 000 ha of land and 30 000 ha of marine reserve.

COLIN PATTERSON-JONES

**I**t's a thrill to stand surrounded by more plant species than you'll find in any similar-sized area on the planet. Remarkably, I'm only about 90 minutes from Cape Town, in an unspoilt reserve of steep kloofs, pristine rivers and a rocky coastline interspersed by sandy beaches and estuaries. This is Kogelberg, the heart of the Cape Floral Kingdom, a mind-blowing trove of fynbos. Although it's a stone's throw from the buzzing seaside village of Kleinmond with its summer campers and sun-seekers, many South Africans wouldn't be able to pinpoint it on a map. ▶





**GIVE AND TAKE**  
A Southern double-collared sunbird pollinating a red-hot poker (*Kniphofia* spp.).

COLIN PATTERSON-JONES



**HOME RANGE**  
The rare *Mimetes hottentoticus* is found only near Kogelberg Peak.

COLIN PATTERSON-JONES



**DOWN BY THE RIVER**  
The Palmiet River is a popular spot for kayaking and swimming.

ARKIMAGES – SHAWN BENJAMIN



**BLOOMING BELLES**  
*Erica viscaria* flowers in the Kogelberg in spring.

COLIN PATTERSON-JONES

Perhaps that's as it should be, because historically Kogelberg's inaccessibility is what protected it from human interference. Early farmers found the area too rugged for cultivation; in 1937, it became forestry land and 50 years later it was proclaimed a nature reserve, all helping to protect its floral riches for us to marvel at today.

Kogelberg is home to around 1 800 plant species. Of these 150 are "rare and noteworthy" and 77 occur nowhere else, says conservation manager Mark Johns. Many spectacular proteas, mimetes, ericas and restios flourish here. There are also three patches of indigenous forest, much like the Knysna forests, where you'll find the last yellowwood, stinkwood and assegai trees in the Overberg.

Once we start fossicking about along the Palmiet River Trail with botanist Amida Johns, everything comes into sharper focus. "Kogelberg is a biodiversity and endemism hotspot," she explains. "Although it provides refuge for threatened or endangered species, our large, diverse plant communities and our rare and endemic plants are equally important."

A double-collared sunbird makes kissing sounds in a bush nearby and a sugarbird flaunts its long tail as Amida skips along the trail, fizzing with enthusiasm. She's a mine of information about geology, pointing out how succulent daisies grow on tillite but leucadendrons like the shale

## One of the most impressive things about the Kogelberg is its astonishing diversity of habitats.



**BEACHY**  
Stroll along the pristine sands at Kleinmond while you keep an eye out for whales.

MARINDA LOUW/ GARNET MEDIA

soils. She enthuses on about laureolums and microcephalums, assuming we are as acquainted with these yellow cone-like members of the protea family as she is. When she realises some of us are a bit lost, she's endlessly patient, even explaining the differences between grasses, sedges and restios in a hands-on way that sticks.

"Roll this sedge stem between your fingers," she instructs. "Can you feel it's triangular, not a round stem like restios and grasses?"

Another handy hint is that sedge flowers occur a short way down from the tip of the stem, whereas those of restios and grasses are right up at the tips. She cuts open a grass stem to show that it's hollow, unlike the other two, which are solid. And the dead giveaway of a restio? Brownish nodes at intervals along the stem.

The trail is fairly flat and there are wondrous views of the river, not to mention places to swim in the cool brown water. In winter, the river is wide and moves along at quite a lick over the rocks.

"In summer, the river's so puny you can hop over parts of it, but don't underestimate its power in winter," warns Amida. "Rafting some years ago, I fell out and got sucked into a 'toilet hole'. It seemed like forever before I got spat out again!"

Apart from a profusion of species guaranteed to get any serious plant lover's pulse racing, one of the most impressive things about the Kogelberg

is its astonishing diversity of habitats. There's everything from marine and coastal environments, rare blackwater lakelets, marshes, estuaries and rivers to mountains bordering on a narrow coastal plain. Even non-core areas of the biosphere reserve such as the Bot River lagoon and Kleinmond marshes are so important for wading birds that they're registered under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

### Natural attraction

We meet Kleinmond resident Chris Bester as he's about to tackle the Oudebosch-Leopard's Gorge trail through indigenous forest to the Harold Porter garden, with grand views over the ocean. "My favourite walk is the 24-kilometre Kogelberg Trail, which circumnavigates the Platberg," he says. "It shows how blessed this area is with an incredible wealth of nature, from mountains to beaches and the richest floral diversity in the world."

Although flora is unquestionably the main attraction, animals live here, too. There are klipspringer and grysbok, red rock rabbit and any number of baboons, dassies and hares. Verreaux's and fish eagles. An endemic freshwater crab and the endangered micro-frog. "Two weeks ago, we saw fresh leopard spoor and some evidence that it'd been munching on dassies," says Amida.

Much of Mark's job is managing the

threats to the Kogelberg. "Although fires are needed, they've been too frequent in the past decade or so. This threatens some of our plant species as they don't get a chance to set seed," he says.

"Clearing alien vegetation from the reserve is an ongoing battle, too. We're assisted through the Working for Water programme, and the community helps with regular volunteer hacks."

Despite these worries, Mark is enthusiastic about the biosphere's attractions. "Come for a weekend," he urges, "and experience the heart of the Cape flora, the land-based penguins, the botanical garden, the village of Botrivier, the wine estates ... the list goes on and on."

The Oudebosch chalets in the reserve are currently closed for a revamp, reopening in March 2010, but they'll be worth waiting for. The new chalets are being built on the same footprint as the old ones, so you'll still be able to have sundowners with an Imax view of glorious mountains.

You'll be engulfed in the deep of the night, a few frogs creating a soundtrack as a full moon glides through wisps of cloud. Perhaps the wind will come up, making a predawn raid that rattles the restios. As the sky turns pink, birds will start chattering, the spurfowl super-keen to wake you and get you hiking, mountain biking or kayaking, to get you making the most of this special place. ▶

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FYNBOS FIND *Erica masonii* flowers in summer – look for the plant on Kogelberg’s rocky slopes.



BLOOMING BEAUTIFUL Kogelberg has the highest concentration of *Mimetes* species in the Western Cape. Here the marsh pagoda (*Mimetes hirtus*) shows its blooms.

## WHAT IS A BIOSPHERE RESERVE?

A biosphere reserve is a special type of conservation area in which both the environment and people find their place, to their mutual benefit. CapeNature is justly proud of it, at least partly because it shows that people can live in harmony with nature. The reserve comprises 70 000 hectares of land and 30 000 of marine reserve, stretching from Gordon's Bay to Bot River Vlei and inland to Grabouw and the Groenland mountain.

As with all biosphere reserves, Kogelberg consists of three zones. First is a pristine but ecologically sensitive core area that includes the Kogelberg Nature Reserve. "Here conservation takes precedence and things remain essentially wild, with a high level of biological diversity," says conservation manager, Mark Johns. "We allow only low-impact activities such as hiking and birdwatching."

The second zone, or buffer, includes privately owned water-catchment areas, smallholdings and a large marine area. Though still mostly a natural area, it's less ecologically sensitive so there's room for higher impact pastimes such as horse and quad-bike trails and for sustainable use of natural products like fishing and wildflower harvesting. "Our aim is to harmonise the zones and gain co-operation from landowners in the buffer," says Mark.

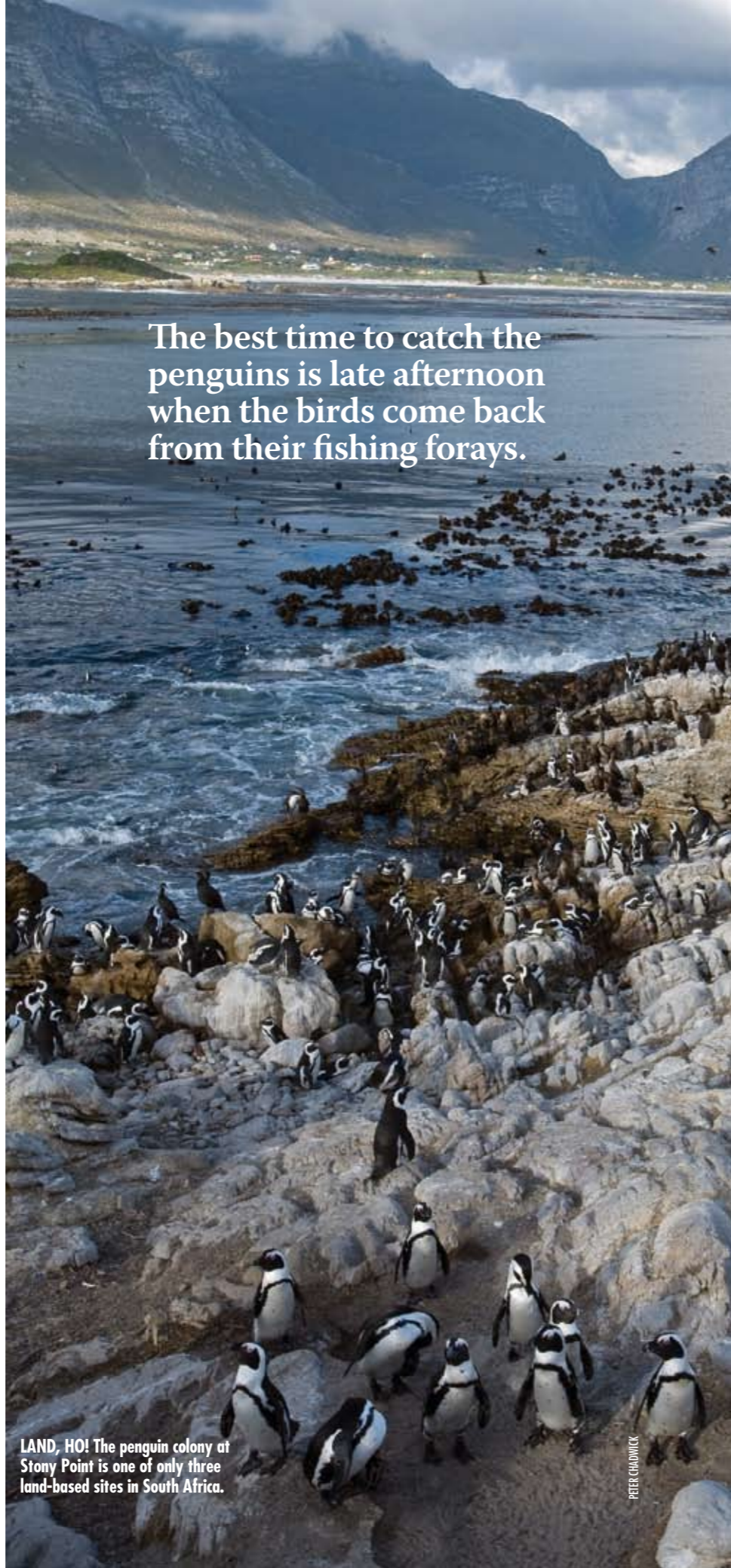
The third, least sensitive zone is the transition zone, replete with commercial pine plantations, vineyards, apple and pear orchards, farms, and the towns of Gordon's Bay, Rooiels, Pringle Bay, Betty's Bay, Kleinmond, Grabouw and Elgin.

Given that long-term conservation success in a biosphere reserve depends on people, education is important. For instance, Harold Porter National Botanical Garden at Betty's Bay runs programmes for local kids.

"We use fun, hands-on ways of teaching them about medicinal plants, forest ecology, plant adaptation and biodiversity," says environmental education officer, Eunice Jurgens. "One of our most popular is a 'senses' lesson that lets younger learners experience sights, sounds and smells, and touch nature."



Get a Wild Card and visit Kogelberg anytime without having to pay the daily conservation fee of R25. Turn to page 47 for more information.



The best time to catch the penguins is late afternoon when the birds come back from their fishing forays.

LAND, HO! The penguin colony at Stony Point is one of only three land-based sites in South Africa.

PETER CHADWICK

## TRIP PLANNER

### TRIP

ARKIMAGES - SHAWN BENJAMIN

EASY DOES IT There are several leisurely hikes through the fynbos.

**GETTING THERE** Kogelberg lies about 90 km southeast of Cape Town. Take the N2 towards Sir Lowry's Pass. Turn right onto the R44 through Gordon's Bay and along the scenic coastal road to Betty's Bay. Turn off left just before the Palmiet River bridge, about 3 km before Kleinmond, and follow the dirt road for 3 km to the Oudebosch office.

**WEATHER** Spring and autumn are the best times for outdoor activities. In winter, expect the typical cold and wet Western Cape weather, with galeforce northwesterly winds and snow possible on high peaks. Summer is hot and dry. The southeaster often blows itself into a frenzy, creating a high risk of fire.

**ACCOMMODATION** The chalets within the reserve are currently closed for renovation until March 2010, but there are all sorts of options in villages in the region. CapeNature Bookings 0861-CAPENATURE [www.capenature.org.za](http://www.capenature.org.za), Hangklip-Kleinmond Tourism 028-271-5657 [www.ecoscape.org.za](http://www.ecoscape.org.za), Elgin Valley Tourism 021-848-9838, [www.elginvalley.co.za](http://www.elginvalley.co.za).

**USEFUL INFO** The reserve is open daily 08h00–19h00. Day permits issued until 15h30. There are no picnic or camping facilities. The only cellphone reception is a weak signal for emergencies at two points marked on the mountain-bike trail. There isn't a shop at Oudebosch, but you can pick up supplies in the surrounding villages.



Kogelberg has been part of a Unesco-recognised biosphere reserve since 1988, South Africa's first.

## 12 Activities at Kogelberg

**1 HIKING:** There are five dayhikes in the reserve, ranging from 6 km to 24 km and five easier rambles in the larger biosphere area. The 3 km Brodie Link near Pringle Bay and the 8 km Houwhoek Trail starting at the Houwhoek Inn are recommended. In summer, cool off in the Palmiet River. If you're after a challenge, tackle the Highlands overnight trail (Day 1 is 16 km, Day 2 is 21 km), camping overnight at Kleinmond Caravan Park. Hikes must be booked in advance on 0861-CAPENATURE.

**2 MOUNTAIN BIKING:** The 23 km Palmiet Trail takes about three hours, longer if you stop to swim in the river. It's moderately difficult, but not suitable for children under eight. Booking not required.

**3 KAYAKING:** There's guided tubing and rafting on the Palmiet River; enquire at the reserve office. A 15 km white-water kayaking trail is open from 1 June to 30 September, when the river is full. With rests and section repeats, it's an eight-hour affair. The river can be dangerous so don't tackle the trail unless you're a

Grade III kayaker or Cape White Water Club ([www.cwwc.co.za](http://www.cwwc.co.za)) member. Booking essential. 028-271-5138.

**4 FISHING:** To fish in the Bot River estuary, get an inland fishing licence from any CapeNature office.

**5 BIRDWATCHING:** Make the most of seashore, coastland, wetland and fynbos habitats to spot African spoonbill, Verreaux's and martial eagle, peregrine falcon, striped flufftail, oystercatcher, paradise flycatcher, orange-breasted sunbird and many other species.

**6 FINDING FYNBOS:** The best months for flowers and botanising are August to October.

**7 WHALEWATCHING:** Look out for southern right whales along the coast from July to November.

**8 WILD HORSES:** Take a walk to see the 30-odd wild horses that roam the Bot River estuary at Rooisand Nature Reserve. They're descendants of horses abandoned by a British garrison after the Anglo-Boer War. Guided outings 078-014-7559.

**9 PENGUINS:** Follow the signs in Betty's Bay to Stony Point penguin colony. The best time is late afternoon when the birds come back from their fishing forays. 028-271-8400.

**10 BOTANICAL GARDEN:** Walk around the Harold Porter National Botanical Garden at Betty's Bay, where there's 10 ha of cultivated fynbos garden and 190 ha natural fynbos. Concerts held in summer. 028-272-9311.

**11 BIOSPHERE ECO-CENTRE:** Duck into Rooiels village shop for displays of indigenous flowers, shells, snakes, insects and tracks. 028-273-8383.

**12** Other attractions in the villages within the biosphere include farmstalls, wine estates, restaurants, museums, art/potter's galleries, Elgin's open gardens in October, Kleinmond Harbour Road tourism hub, Arabella golf estate, historical Houwhoek Inn, boating, beaches, horse-riding, quad-biking and sand-boarding. Hangklip-Kleinmond Tourism 028-271-5657, Elgin Valley Tourism 021-848-9838. 🐾