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# AN OTTER TRAIL ADVENTURE

**Bridget McNulty** and **Mark Peddle** hiked the once-in-a-lifetime Otter Trail, and brought home a backpack full of stories

Clockwise from left to right: Pristine beaches are just some of the natural assets you'll encounter along the way; a mossy wander through gently dappled forest is a highlight; ocean vistas reward hikers after a long day on foot; rustic wooden huts at each camp provide simple bunk beds, water, a toilet and a fireplace, nothing else.

There are only two responses when you tell people you're doing the Otter Trail. The first is a look that says, "Are You Crazy?" The second is an exclamation of, "Oh, I'm so jealous!" Without fail the first comes from those who haven't hiked the trail and the second from those who have. The Otter Trail is a 42.5km, five-day hike from Storm's River to Nature's Valley in the Garden Route. Although the distance isn't great, the trail is known as South Africa's most difficult because of the endless steep

ascents and descents. It's also particularly tough because you have to carry everything with you – food, bedding, cooking equipment and water for each day. Huts along the way provide bunk beds, a water source, a fireplace and a toilet. Everything else is up to you. We'd heard that it was a tough climb and we'd need our wits about us, but we didn't concern ourselves too much. I mean how hard could it be, really? Surely the fact that we're healthy, pretty fit and in our early thirties meant it would be a breeze? Well, no, not exactly.





### IF IN DOUBT, LEAVE IT OUT

Clockwise from top left: I cool my feet in the soothing river water; floral displays along the trail are a flower fanatic's dream; Nature's Valley beach, a spectacular ending; you'll need to take a gas camping stove with you – we found it easiest to take a quick-cook, high-energy carbohydrate like couscous, and ingredients that stay fresh without refrigeration, such as salami and smoked chicken.

Everyone told us the first day was easy. They lied. It was a steady three-hour climb over giant boulders with no visible path but with many opportunities to twist ankles. It also gave us a taste of the breathtaking scenery for which the Otter is famous. That night we had a chance to compare our packing techniques to the other hikers. We had taken the edict, "If in doubt, leave it out"

seriously and brought the bare minimum. Our fellow hikers had done the opposite, feasting on braai broodjies and lamb chops for supper. Somewhere in the middle is probably the sensible route. That first evening spent by the fireside with new friends, hundreds of fireflies, curious striped genet's popping past for leftovers and a whole lot of storytelling made for a magical start to this incredible trail.

### NOT THE OTTER TRAIL, THE OTTER CLIMB

It should be re-named, trust me. Our second day quickly illustrated why everyone had said the first day was so easy – it was comparative. The first half of the day was stunning, filled with lovely paths and ocean vistas. The second half was straight up and straight down, over and over again. Luckily we were mostly in cool coastal forest with occasional breaks onto the cliff tops for a 180-degree view out over the ocean. When we finally reached the camp, it was a beauty on the banks of a burbling river as it met the sea.

### WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

The challenge is to take food that is delicious, sustaining and lightweight. Here's what worked for us:

- ★ Breakfast: Crunchies with toasted seeds, nuts and berries.
- ★ Lunch: Rye bread, cheese, salami, instant soup, apples.
- ★ Dinner: Couscous with bacon and sundried tomatoes, or smoked chicken and pesto, or chorizo and pasta sauce.
- ★ Snacks: Biltong, dried mango, trail mix and biscuits.
- ★ Drinks: Water, tea with long-life milk.

### BOOKING

If you want to go on specific dates, you need to book a year ahead. If you're more flexible, it's possible to book as little as one month in advance. SANParks has an availability calendar on their website. Visit [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org).

"There are serious elevations and staggering drop-offs – if you're afraid of heights you might struggle a bit. No matter how fit you are this trail is tough"





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#### WHAT GOES DOWN MUST COME UP

Day three was the most spectacular and the most taxing with countless steep inclines and declines, and two river crossings. The vegetation changed from coastal forest to fynbos and wild flowers. It was also quite boggy, so we had to have our wits about us or sink up to our ankles in mud. At the end of the day, we were taunted with a clear view of the camp across the river, but first there was a steep descent, a river to wade and a calf-aching ascent up the other side. That night the crashing of waves lulled us into a well-deserved early night.

#### WHAT TIME IS LOW TIDE AGAIN?

The early night was essential as we needed to be on the trail by 4am, and walk 10km to the

Bloukrans River by low tide at 9am. The Bloukrans must be crossed at low tide or it's too rough and you have to take the emergency route – two hours extra uphill and downhill. Watching the sun rise over the trail was awesome. Hiking 10km straight uphill by 9am, less so. The river crossing itself, is a wade-and-swim at low tide, and an epic meeting of river and sea any other time. We crossed just in time, and thanks to the plastic 'survival' bags covering our backpacks, our stuff didn't even get wet. Magic!

#### I CAN'T BELIEVE WE DID THIS

Our last morning on the trail held an unsurprising number of steep climbs, a fynbos-and-forest walk, a beach stroll and a final river crossing. Dusted in disbelief, we feasted on burgers

and beers at the Nature's Valley local, where discarded shoes hanging from trees are testament to the exhausted hikers who wind up here.

What makes the Otter Trail such a seductive beast is that side-by-side with the muscle-aching climbs are the most extraordinary sensory experiences. Vast sweeps of luminous blue ocean, dappled forest, majestic rocks, and deep amber rivers are a feast for the eyes. An alluring bouquet of scents is created by salty ocean spray, earthy forest mulch, and warm fynbos. The chirping of hidden birds, the crash of ocean waves, and bubbling rivers make the sweetest music. If it were any less beautiful, nobody would do it, but because it holds such natural riches, people are drawn to this hike again and again.

#### WHAT WE WISH WE'D KNOWN BEFORE

★ The distance isn't reflective of how hard the trail is: 5% is flat, 20% is gently rolling, and all the rest is super-steep.

#### GOOD TO KNOW

- ★ It costs R860 per person, plus R32 per person per day park fees. Credit cards are accepted.
- ★ Don't go in midsummer as it's too hot or in midwinter when it's very wet.
- ★ Take toilet paper, a survival bag and rope for river crossings; painkillers for aches and pains and ankle and knee guards in case you twist something.

Clockwise from left: The terrain along the Otter Trail is spectacular. A single day's hiking can include clifftop paths with sweeping views out over the ocean, and fording a swift, icy river below a beautiful cascading waterfall; a welcome clifftop break to enjoy the scenery; a blazing fire feels like an incredible luxury on chilly evenings.

