

South Africa: Exploring the Wild Coast on horseback, 25–31 March 2011,

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After a full day's bus journey from Durban to East London, I am given a warm welcome by Julie-Anne, and off we go in a jeep loaded with horse feed to her farm, about an hour's drive from East London. From the very first moment, I feel at ease in Julie-Anne's company, and after so much time in the city, it's a relief to be out in the open air; I'm glad I arrived a day before the trail begins. At the remote farm, we're immediately greeted by loads of little dogs as well as four volunteers who are currently spending their working holidays there. I instantly feel at home here too, and after a short while we head off to a local pub: everyone knows everyone else, and I enjoy the rural charm, the relaxed atmosphere and the good conversations.



The next morning, I take a look around the farm in daylight: nestled gently amongst the hills, it blends into a stunningly green landscape with beautiful views. Part of Julie-Anne's large herd of horses is right on the farm, along with cattle grazing in the surrounding meadows. The lovely thing is that you can simply stroll out of the quaint, cosy farmhouse and find yourself straight away in the stables, which lead seamlessly into the paddocks. To make the most of the sunny morning, I set off with Nicky, our riding guide for the entire tour, on a lovely ride to explore the surroundings: we ride through herds of cattle, past large spider's webs and through the green hills surrounding the lodge. I'm thrilled with my horse and the McClellan saddles, and I'm enjoying the gallops along meadow paths and through the scrub. Meanwhile, the hostess herself is preparing a hearty lunch for us, during which we get to know Emma from France, the second rider on the Wild Coast Tour. Afterwards, full of anticipation, we head to Kei Mouth, where the second part of Julie-Anne's herd of around 60 horses is housed in paddocks overlooking the sea. Our horses are waiting for us, saddled and fully prepared for the tour, when we arrive. So we can set off straight away, and the three of us head towards the sea, passing through the quiet, tranquil village of Kei Mouth, where the world still seems to be in order, before boarding a ferry with the horses to cross the Kei River. What an experience! Emma and I are certainly more excited than the horses, who have

been passengers on numerous occasions and have even travelled alone as stowaways once before, when they discovered a gap in the fence of their paddock in the middle of a ride and galloped home on their own... It's certainly an amusing sight to see cars, people and horses all together on a ferry. Now we've left civilisation behind us and are enjoying our first exhilarating gallop along the beach in the glow of the afternoon sun. Fantastic! The horses, some of which are trained for endurance riding, seem to be enjoying it just as much as we are. They're forward-going, well-trained, absolutely sure-footed and reliable. What's unusual is the cattle you come across in many places along the beach, seeking the cooler air and fewer mosquitoes than in the hinterland. Apart from that, we hardly encounter a soul over the following days – just a donkey cart once, with three boys loading wood, and the odd solitary angler now and then. In this sense, the Wild Coast is truly 'wild' – relatively undeveloped and pure nature. We often turn inland, however: first we cross a stretch of land that is always lush and green, with palm trees and rich vegetation, before the landscape becomes drier the further we venture inland. Here we also pass through small clusters of round huts painted in all sorts of colours, where we come to appreciate the friendliness of the Xhosa people and enjoy the variety in the landscape. We often cross rivers which, in contrast to the dry grasslands surrounding them, appear like oases where life blossoms and thrives. Another feature of the landscape is the sand dunes we discover on part of the tour. We feel as though we've been transported to the desert; only the forest towering behind us reminds us of reality. Another ride takes us into this very forest, which evokes memories of primeval woodland and, in turn, reveals a completely different side to the Wild Coast's landscape. Another advantage of this unspoilt area is the countless sandy tracks, which we can ride along in wonderful seclusion, alternating with meadow paths and, of course, the many stretches of beach.



A typical day usually follows a more or less similar pattern: in the morning we set off around 9 o'clock and ride for a good three hours, before taking a long break to relax; then, refreshed, we swing back into the saddle in the late afternoon for a slightly shorter ride than in the morning. One morning we set off very early, as we want to ride across a river which, due to the tides, is only passable on horseback in the morning, and as a reward for getting up early we're treated to a wonderful picnic breakfast with a view over the sea.

Our first accommodation is Trennery's Hotel, a seaside resort comprising many individual units serving as rooms. The pool is perfect for cooling off, and you hardly dare help yourself to anything from the buffet, as it looks like an exhibition of artfully arranged seafood and other delicacies. What a feast! It's lovely when all the kitchen staff come out of the kitchen to form a procession through the dining room, singing cheerfully and heartily, to congratulate a couple celebrating their silver wedding anniversary.

One afternoon, we treat our horses – and ourselves – to a break and relax at the Wavecrest Hotel, where we're staying for two nights. We take a boat trip along the tropical-looking river through the mangroves, unwind by the pool and in the jacuzzis (indoor and outdoor), treat ourselves to massages, and, after a sundowner and a more than filling dinner (if you can manage all the courses), play a round of billiards before retiring to our cosy round huts with sea views, which are traditionally designed on the outside and comfortably furnished on the inside. At the Wavecrest Hotel, you can also enjoy long walks along the beach and through the dunes, as well as canoe trips. On rainy days, there's a very spacious, inviting and beautifully furnished lounge with a fireplace and a TV room.



Our final accommodation is the Cook Inn Guest House, which, just like the other two hotels, is situated on the outskirts. It provides the perfect finale to our tour. Tam, the owner, welcomes us with coffee and delicious homemade cake. We're allowed to inspect all the rooms before everyone gets to choose one: There's the Guinea Fowl Room, an African round hut, an antique-style room, the Lavender Loft and a 'Flaw & Feather' room. Each room is decorated according to its own theme, so every room is completely different. Three rooms have a kitchen and two have a second open-plan floor, so they're not really rooms any more, but flats. Each flat has its own terrace, which opens out onto a lovely garden. The main house is lovingly furnished with heirlooms and thus has a charm all of its own. The whole property, with its buildings and the pool with its adjoining raised terrace, feels like an oasis of peace and relaxation, and Tam simply spoils us like royalty. She cooks herself, and her four-course dinners are a true symphony! I've never eaten as well in South Africa as I have at the Cook Inn. Culinary artistry at its finest! You can really sense the attention to detail and that Tam puts her heart and soul into her guest house.

On the last day, we're picked up by car from the Cook Inn and driven to the Endalweni Game Reserve, just three minutes away, where the last of Julie-Anne's horses are kept. Here, an exciting ride awaits us, with wildebeest, curious giraffes following us, zebras, antelopes and other wildlife. This final ride rounds off our Wild Coast experience and adds yet another dimension to the tour, giving us four completely different days of riding and new experiences every single day.

All in all, my riding adventure on the Wild Coast was an unforgettable experience: I made some lovely friends, discovered many facets of the Wild Coast, relaxed in unique accommodation, enjoyed being cut off from the rest of the world, was treated to culinary delights and rode some fantastic horses.

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Wild Coast Horse Riding Tour: <https://www.reiterreisen.com/wcs008.htm>

