

travel on tuesday

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Sandpiper Cottages, nestling in the natural fynbos at Boggomsbaai on the Garden Route. Each has a unique character, from the romantic and stylish five-star Sea Mist honeymoon cottage to the Dunen Haus, situated just above the waves in a dune setting, which comes with three double bedrooms, three bathrooms and a children's room with bunk beds.



Every cottage has a large fireplace to braai indoors, or just to sit around at night and drink a toast to this piece of paradise, after a day out hiking, sunbathing, surfing, fishing or beachcombing, exploring Seal Island and nearby game reserves, or hitting the restaurants and cultural attractions of Mossel Bay, which is 30km away.



The cottages have yellowwood and Oregon pine, with red clay tile floors and comfortable bedding. They all come as fully equipped as your own home, with TVs, CD players, microwaves, laundry facilities and hairdryers. This is the lounge of the Voorhuis, a four-star cottage of two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a small loft.

PEARL OF OYSTERCATCHER TRAIL

There are no shops in Boggomsbaai, no restaurant and no cinema. Yet it has become the ultimate holiday destination for both local and international visitors wanting to relax at one of the most beautiful spots on South Africa's famous Garden Route, writes **Winnie Graham**

THE SETTING is picture-postcard-pretty. The whitewashed fishermen's cottages on the hillside are partially obscured by coastal vegetation, with the daisy-like flowers of the bitou bushes adding a splash of yellow.

We arrive in Boggomsbaai in early afternoon, the guests of Fred Orban, a one-time Johannesburg businessman who left the city 25 years ago to settle in his own piece of paradise. As first we cannot find our way to the Sandpiper Cottages and drive along village roads lined with luxury houses. Have we come to the right place?

Then we spot the cottages, almost lost amid the greenery. Some have thatched roofs, some corrugated iron, but all are reminiscent of the Cape's fishermen cottages made famous in places such as Arniston, the fishing village at the southern tip of Africa.

In much the same way, the architecture of the Sandpiper cottages has helped put Boggomsbaai on the world tourist map. The *National Geographic Traveller* has listed the area among the "top 50 tours of a lifetime", while the BBC rates Orban's four-day Oystercatcher trail along the coast as one of "30 walks to do before you die".

In fact, Mossel Bay-born Willie Komani, the first Oystercatcher Trail guide and a man totally dedicated to the conservation of the Southern Cape coastline, was the main personality in a Julia Bradbury BBC series called *South Africa Walks*.

Now, however, we move into our Sandpiper cottage. The décor is simple and comfortable but has all the

charm of the real fisherman cottages. The master bedroom leads to an open-plan lounge, dining-room and kitchen.

The focus is on a huge fireplace, where later we will experience our first indoor braai. Now we are raring to dash off to the beach, to explore the nooks and crannies – but first we want to meet the person who put the village on the map.

Orban, who has entertained some of the world's leading personalities, among them billionaire George Soros, poet Breyten Breytenbach and personal friend Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, is an environmentalist determined to preserve the area for future generations.

He speaks with enthusiasm about water and energy saving projects he has initiated. There are no tarred roads or fences round his cottages. He uses solar energy and refuses to plant lawns or exotics. He believes the Cape fishermen cottages are historically and architecturally part of the Cape landscape.

"We've kept the surrounding coastal bush because we want to make the least possible impact on the environment," he says. "This way the creatures living here aren't disturbed."

He's right about the creatures. On our walk to the beach we twice see tortoises. Once a Cape clawless otter appears in the pathway, then streaks away. On the seashore are a host of gulls but, more exciting, a cluster of Oystercatchers, one of the most endangered birds in South Africa.

"Oddly enough, they don't eat oysters," Orban says. "They prefer mussels."



Beach lizard at Boggomsbaai



The Oystercatcher Coastal Hiking Trail is rated as one of the top slack packing trails in the world. Guides are provided to take guests on walks that include beach lunches, and they have the chance to eat wild oysters straight from the sea. Guests are returned to their cottages after a half or full day's walk.

PICTURES: WINNIE GRAHAM AND SANDPIPER COTTAGES

The Oystercatchers, in fact, feed on the rocks but lay their eggs at the edge of the ocean – hardly a safe place – where they are easily taken by predators, among them otters. We look for whales and see none in the bay. But there are seals playing in the surf.

The 3km beach is one long stretch of white sands, perfect for sunbathing. This is where families congregate to build sandcastles with children or relax with a book. We settle down to warm ourselves in the spring sunshine. Wispy clouds float overhead. This is indeed paradise – and an idle one at that.

Boggomsbaai is best known (and much loved) for its the four-day Oystercatcher Trail that draws visitors from round the world. The trail is divided into four segments, giving hikers the opportunity of enjoying

the walk at a fairly leisurely pace, then returning by vehicle to their Sandpiper cottage for a warm meal and a night's rest.

After breakfast the next day, they are returned to the spot where they were collected the previous afternoon to continue their hike.

Leon Classens, a trail guide, comes for supper one evening and builds a fire on the hearth, grilling chops and sosaties in the lounge. It's a decided novelty to see our meal prepared over an open fire indoors. The salads and rolls have come from Sandpiper's kitchen, where orders for meals can be placed in advance. I sit back to enjoy a glass of red wine in armchair comfort.

We hear something rustling in the bush. "Take a look," Leon suggests. "It's probably a grysbok and her baby. They often emerge after

sunset." He's right.

Outside the front door is the small antelope and her offspring. Startled, they move out of sight.

The birdlife, too, is prolific. In one day we spot nearly 50 different species.

There is much to keep us occupied, including tennis and squash courts, a gym, heated pool, a spa, DSTV and even a telescope to keep an eye on the whales.

And the area is certainly worth exploring.

We drive to a place nearby called Fransmanshoek, where the sea crashes against huge rocks. The name comes from a French vessel called *Le Fortune* that sank there in 1763 on its way home from Mauritius. Miraculously, all 400 passengers survived and made their way along the coast to Cape Town. I

spare a thought for them, wondering how they coped on what must have seemed an endless walk without the benefit of shelter along the way.

Then there is Mossel Bay, a 20-minute drive from Boggomsbaai. It is the home of Mosses, and more interesting, the Maritime Museum which houses a life-size replica of Bartholomew Dias's caravel, the *São Cristóvão*. The Great Age of Exploration comes to life as we study replicas of maps the Portuguese mariners left behind, all containing information of the outposts they conquered and topographical features of the places they visited.

We see the bay Vasco da Gama named *Aguada de São Bras*, now known as Cape St Blaize, in 1497. Here he stocked up on fresh water and meat and met with the local Khoi herders, the original South

Africans. Also worth seeing is the old post office tree where, from 1501, sailors left letters for their family, hopeful that a homeward-bound vessel would deliver them.

For visitors interested in history, there is much to be learned about the strandlopers who lived in the area 80 000 years ago. A good starting point is the large St Blaize cave at the Point in Mossel Bay.

After an intellectually stimulating day, it is pure pleasure to return again to our cottage – and see a striped polecat disappear into the coastal thicket.

Rates range from R300 a person in the low season (April 15 to August 31) and from R340 in high season. The five-star honeymoon cottage is more expensive. For more information call 044 699 1204, e-mail stay@sandpipersafaris.co.za or visit www.sandpiper.co.za

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