

The first river crossing was fun, the second one too. But the third one nearly killed me. By the fourth river, it was time to call in the rescue service.

This wasn't totally unexpected and let me tell you why. It's a story of rain and tides, climbs and swims.

The five-day Otter Trail rises and falls along the most beautiful and dramatic section of coast in the Eastern Cape.

When rain comes to Tsitsikamma National Park, the water immediately funnels into ravines that lead to the ocean, causing a dramatic rise in the rivers' water levels. The week before we started out, it rained. And then it rained some more. So, we were warned to expect some tricky river crossings and to take no risks.

On the first day, the result of all this rainfall was a delight to see. After a shady descent from the car park at Storms River Mouth Rest Camp, my hiking partner and I reached the coastal path, and soon the Tsitsikamma Waterfall. We found it in full flow, cascading down a ferny cliff into a pool that then gushed into the surf. (By the way, this loveliness is accessible even if you haven't booked for the Otter Trail, and is more than worth the steep hike.)

#### A RICKETY BRIDGE

A wobbly length of driftwood provided the first bridge, and we passed the sign that asks day visitors to turn back.

From here on, hiker numbers are strictly limited to 12 per day to protect this natural treasure. The first day was easy, with only a few hours to the Ngubu huts.

We paused often, taking in the ocean scene and sounds. I glanced left to find that a solitary humpback whale had surfaced less than 100m away. I tried to keep pace,



**THE CLIMB** The Otter Trail offers breathtaking scenery in exchange for substantial stamina — rain or no rain. Pictures: Hlengiwe Magagula

but it moved effortlessly away with the Agulhas current.

At the huts, we met the rest of that day's starters. With the tight controls – hike only east to west, no camping, one night at each hut – we'd be meeting the same group each evening, a friendly mix of South Africans and international visitors. During the day,



**FINE LINE** A wobbly length of driftwood provides the first bridge.

the civet that prowled the kitchen area after the rest had gone to their sleeping bags.

#### UPS AND DOWNS

The third day started with no inkling of the drama ahead. Under a blue sky, we climbed through vivid fynbos, skirted heaps of sea-battered driftwood, clambered over red-lichen rocks.

After a few hours, we were back at sea level, and facing the Elandsbos River.

Usually, this would be a paddle, but now it looked threatening, its rain-swollen waters colliding with the incoming tide. We waited for the rest of the group, and sealed the backpacks in plastic bags.

I watched the others float their packs across, wading and then swimming. I'm not the best swimmer and I'm not tall either. As my feet lost the riverbed, I felt panic rising, the current pulling me seawards. A few moments later, an arm reached around me, a hand under my chin.

How lucky was I to have Deirdré, a trained lifesaver, close to hand. The day ended at Oakhurst camp, watching a pod of dolphins play in the waves for hours.

#### A LITTLE HELP

We knew day four would bring us to the biggest watery obstacle, the Bloukrans River. After 10km of stunning views, we found ourselves looking down into a rocky gorge, the brown river surging into the surf. I was relieved there was no question of attempting a crossing, and we called the rescue number. A steep escape trail brought us into a pine plantation, and a rendezvous with the park rangers, who delivered us to the other side via the road bridge.

From Andre Camp to Nature's Valley, the last day was free of river drama. The trail led through a forest full of flowering plants and birdlife, with rocky headlands offering endless vistas of mist-clouded cliffs.

Is this Africa's finest walk? Probably. Is it an adventure? Definitely. © Hlengiwe Magagula

## Go, Go, Go!

**COST:** R1 220 per person.

**HOW TO BOOK:** Check availability and book through [sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org) or call 012 426 5111. With just 12 places per day, you need to book well in advance, although it's worth checking for last-minute cancellations.

**ONE MORE THING:** Not tough enough for you? Then join the October trail run. The record is under four hours. © Hlengiwe Magagula

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**Contact Ms. Matema Magagane for talks to groups in Soweto Tel: 082 572 8977**

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## Foot Notes

The trail is suitable for fit and experienced hikers from 12 years old (over-65s may be asked for a doctor's certificate.)

You'll find firewood at the huts, so bring some vacuum-packed meat for a braai.

Bring a dry bag for electronic items and a few heavy-duty plastic bags, big enough for your pack.

Check the tide times (Google "Bloukrans tide table") and aim for a day with low tide in the middle of the day. This gives you the best chance of an easy Bloukrans crossing without your having to walk in the dark.

The trail ends in Nature's Valley. You can follow the trail signs inland to the official end-point, but if you're desperate for a cold drink and a

burger, continue to the far end of the beach to Nature's Valley Restaurant.

For safety, check out at De Vasselot Rest Camp, where you can pick up your souvenir trail certificate.

There's a private shuttle service to facilitate transfers before or after your walk. See [ottertrailtransfers.co.za](http://ottertrailtransfers.co.za) 📞

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