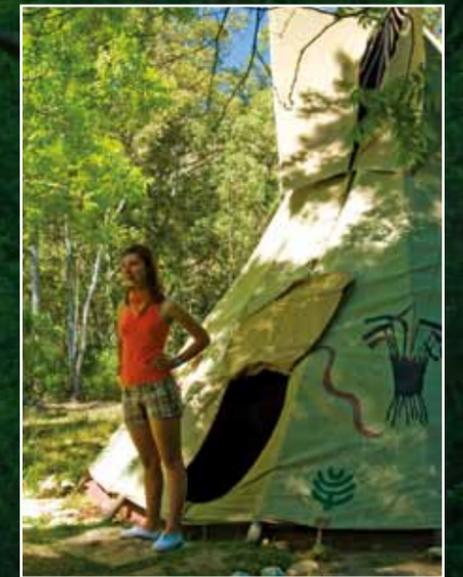




Green pearls on a river string

Today's environmentally aware farmers offer visitors more than just cuddly creatures to pet. Marion Whitehead found a farm stay with a difference in the Garden Route's Keurbooms River valley.



The Egyptian geese are more skittish than the blesbok.

The vigilant parents shepherding five goslings along the wall of the trout dam below my chalet let out an urgent warning honk as I go out onto the deck to admire the view. Frogs pick up the chorus and the blesbok go back to mowing the lawn under pecan trees freshly decked in new green leaves. Beyond them the lazy brown Keurbooms River is trying to work up some enthusiasm for its grand entrance into the sea at posh Plettenberg Bay some 60 kilometres away.



ABOVE: Horsing about in the pecan orchard at Outeniqua Trout Lodge. **RIGHT:** Alert bontebok and geese are part of the farm's security system.

The pace of life at Outeniqua Trout Lodge is the kind that would get an

approving nod from connoisseurs of the slow food movement. It's tucked into a bend of the Keurbooms River outside De Vlugt, a sleepy village on Prince Alfred's Pass which connects Knysna with the Langkloof. Young trout in the hatchery thrive in sparkling mountain water and practically tap-dance on the surface of their pool for a breakfast feeding frenzy that doesn't include growth hormones.

The lucky ones are released into dams on the farm to lure catch-and-release fishers, while the balance are sold from the farm office, either smoked or fresh. And fresh means

just that – you wait while owner Ingo Vennemann goes to scoop your order from the tank of eating-size brown or rainbow trout.

'In nature, things take time,' says Ingo. He and his wife, Naomi, are founder members of the Middle Keurbooms Conservancy, a group of landowners in the area working with nature for mutual benefit. It's an ecologically interesting region as a number of biomes meet here: renosterveld, fynbos, valley bushveld and riverine forest. It's also a vital link in the envisaged Addo to Eden wildlife corridor, allowing animals

to move between the new Garden Route National Park (Wilderness, Knysna and Tsitsikamma), Soetkraal Nature Reserve and Baviaanskloof Wilderness Area.

These farmers have diversified into tourism, giving visitors a glimpse into 'green' life on the land. At Outeniqua Trout Lodge, the dirty water from the hatchery is used to generate hydro-power before being filtered naturally through a system of dams and reed beds, then returned to the river.

Ingo says they've been off the grid for 10 years and, together with a solar panel, generate enough electricity to



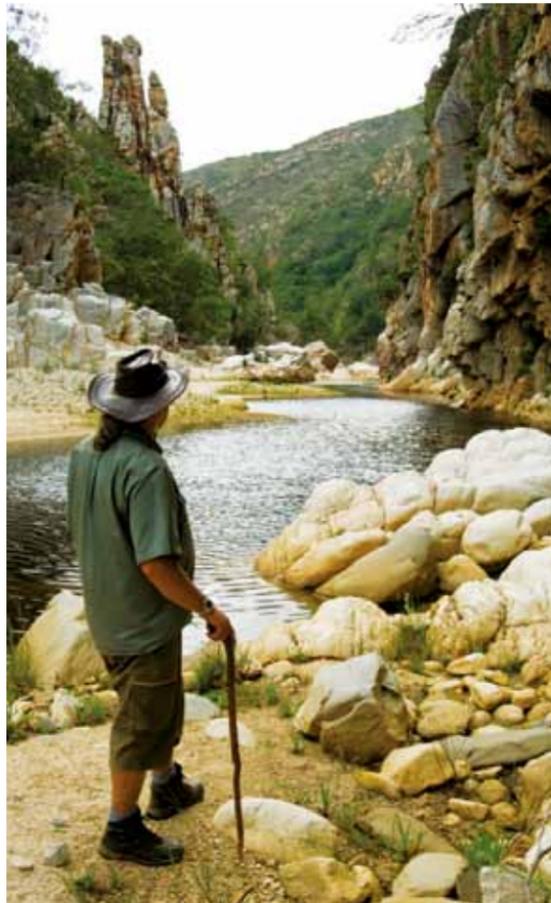
run the farm and guest accommodation of four timber chalets and four tipis. Apart from fishing, hiking, birding and mountain biking, you can go kloofing up the Kwaai River, a tributary of the Keurbooms. It's an ideal spot to lose track of time.

Pastoral pleasures

De Vlugt is the village where Thomas Bain, the great pass builder, stayed when he was working on this daunting

INSET TOP: Mareeán van Rooyen has fun camping in one of the tipis at Outeniqua Trout Lodge.

INSET ABOVE: Owner Ingo Venneman demonstrates how to lure trout from a dam's deep waters.



De Vlugt Tea Garden



Sitting in the shade at De Vlugt Tea Garden sampling Annelize van Rooyen's milk tart and feeding crumbs to the bantam chickens cheeping hopefully beside your table, you'll notice all the locals wave and yell, 'Hello Annelize!' as they drive past. She's the heart of this tiny settlement and her gentle humour lightens the day. Her one-room, brightly decorated farm stall is packed with jams, jellies, pickles and preserves she makes herself. Her green 'springbok eggs' are a standing joke.

road in the 1860s. He started on the Knysna side, widening old elephant tracks through the forest, then moved his camp to De Vlugt to tackle the poort, the steepest and most challenging section of the pass to Avontuur on Route 62. It's a scenic delight, with narrow mountain pools to plunge into along the lower reaches and views all the way to the sea at the top end.

Instead I drive upstream along the edge of the Keurbooms River along a valley which gradually widens to allow for farmsteads and small orchards. At Williamsburg Mountain Reserve, the most westerly member of the Middle Keurbooms Conservancy, owner Nigel Williams has created a 4x4 playground on the river bank amid the havoc created by the last flood, with axle twisters and deep sand. He puts his Hilux bakkie through a muddy ditch with 40-degree sides just for fun before we visit his bush camp further along the riverbank. Williamsburg is popular with birders, mountain bikers and 4x4 enthusiasts who have access to 32 kilometres of mountainous tracks, graded between three and five.

We pass two renovated Cape cottages and a trout dam on our way to see his herd of Ngunis. As soon as they hear his bakkie, the cattle trot over like spoilt children, expecting a treat. He

obliges and scatters feed for them. The calves take it as a signal to nurse, creating a happy, pastoral scene.

Pioneering route

Katot Meyer was lying under his Land Rover one Friday afternoon when CapeNature phoned to ask if he'd take a problem caracal on his farm. Of course he said yes. Pietersrivier Farm, back along the valley towards De Vlugt, has achieved the highest conservation status CapeNature accords privately owned property.

Another founder member of the conservancy, Katot is passionate about the environment. Chatting to him at his Rondekop Bush Camp beside a dam, I jump at the chance to drive his William Burchell oxwagon track. He believes it's the only part of the original 7200-kilometre route taken by the famous naturalist – in his specially adapted kakebeen ox wagon from 1811 to 1814 – that is open to the public.

You can hike or mountain bike the 10-kilometre circular track over the mountains, or drive it if you're an experienced group of 4x4ers.

'You've got to have a proper 4x4 to do this – low range and diff lock,' Katot shouts above the noise as we lurch up the side of the mountain over

'I have everything I want,' he declares, 'a pretty, dark-haired wife, a Land Rover, a piece of veld and my Swiss army knife'

rocky terrain at five kilometres an hour in his Land Rover Defender.

The terrain pushes vehicles to their limits and about 21 per cent get stuck. On the other side of the mountain, our wheels spin in a mud hole nicknamed 'Ironman' since one chap, who insisted he could handle anything solo, bogged down there. He had to hike out for help, leaving his wife and child with the vehicle. Fortunately, he was fit, being an Ironman champion.

'Do you do much maintenance on the road?' I yell as we tilt at an alarming angle. Katot shoots me a dirty look for suggesting altering a national treasure. 'I leave it as natural as possible,' he replies, 'but I do fix a bit of erosion here and there.'

At the halfway mark is a pioneer campsite amid a grove of tall trees in a cool kloof. Refreshment is provided by nature: clear mountain water scooped from the stream.

Saying goodbye afterwards, I note that Katot treats his Land Rover like a modern ox wagon. 'I have everything

I want,' he declares, 'a pretty, dark-haired wife, a Land Rover, a piece of veld and my Swiss army knife.'

Game for anything

The next day, I follow the river south to Keurbooms River Game Trails where the river carves an 11-kilometre S-bend through this 4000-hectare former hunting farm. As manager Hennie Homann drives me across a network of game-viewing roads, we stop to watch fat Burchell's zebras grazing on new grass shoots in a recently burnt area and pass a charcoal-making kiln, part of an innovative project to turn thickets of unwanted alien wattles into a value-added product.

Hennie reckons the two Kruger orphan elephants that were relocated to the Knysna forest and absconded from there made themselves at home on this farm, noshing large quantities of wattle before they were recaptured five years later. 'I wish they'd left them here,' he says, admitting he'd restock with elephants if he got the chance.

The steep track down to the river is freshly bulldozed and tricky. Once at the bottom, we follow a hiking trail along a tributary. Emerging onto the rocky Keurbooms River bed strewn with large boulders, we come upon dramatic cliffs where the river has carved its way through a geological fault in its bid to reach the sea.

A deep, dark pool broods at its base, inviting swimmers to join the dragonflies frolicking across the water. There's a silence here that speaks of a place of great power. 'It's called Visgat,' says Hennie, bringing me back to earth with a bump.

Arriving back at my chalet at Outeniqua Trout Lodge at dusk, I'm greeted by a familiar honk. But there's just one Egyptian goose making a dash across the dam with a single gosling. The rest of the family is nowhere to be seen. Have they fallen victim to a marauding otter? Perhaps a sharp-eyed eagle? Life on the river's edge is clearly not a picnic for all. ■

□travel adviser overleaf

ABOVE: Katot Meyer likes to keep things natural at Rondekop bush camp. **ABOVE LEFT:** The restored cottages on Williamsburg Mountain Reserve are popular with birders and 4x4ers. **OPPOSITE TOP:** Hennie Homann of Keurbooms River Game Trails at Visgat. **OPPOSITE:** The house at De Vlugt where Thomas Bain lived while constructing the steepest section of Prince Alfred's Pass between Knysna and Avontuur in the 1860s.

travel adviser

Getting there

Driving to De Vlugt from Avontuur in the north is the most rewarding direction as you face the views towards the coast. From the N9, take the R62 towards Joubertina and turn onto the R339 at Avontuur. You can also drive the R339 from Knysna in the south, turning off the N2 at the sign to Prince Alfred's Pass. **Note:** the poort south of Unionsdale will be closed for repairs for much of 2010.

Where to stay

These farms are all leopard friendly and members of the Middle Keurbooms Conservancy.

\$ to **\$\$\$** Outeniqua Trout Lodge is on a bend in the river on the edge of De Vlugt and has four well-appointed timber chalets, sleeping from two to six, and cost from R620 to R960 a night. Four furnished tipis with ceramic fireplaces each sleep up to four and cost from R420 to R540 a night, depending on numbers. The tipis share a kitchen and dining area under pecan nut trees, but each has dedicated ablution facilities. Fly-fishing costs R80 a day for residents and R100 for day visitors. Tel 044-752-3140, e-mail troutlodge@iafrica.com, web www.outeniquatrout.co.za.

\$\$ Keurbooms River Game Trails is a private reserve south of De Vlugt which has three large, comfortable timber chalets each sleeping six. Two are within a big compound near the manager's house, while the third is deep inside the farm and requires a 4x4 to reach it. Chalets cost R650 a night, plus R50 a person. Tel 044-752-3690,

e-mail hennieh@webmail.co.za, web www.gametrails.co.za.

\$ to **\$\$\$** Williamsburg Mountain Reserve off the Joncksrus road has two charming Cape cottages in different sections of the farm for maximum privacy, costing R150 to R400 a person a night (ask about family discounts). The bush camp beside the river costs R60 a person a night. Catch-and-release fishing is R100 a rod a day, 4x4ing R200 a vehicle and 4x4 training R750. Tel 044-745-1013, e-mail wbrgfarm@lantic.net, web www.williamsburgfarm.net.

\$ Pietersrivier Farm in the Keurbooms River valley near De Vlugt offers simple bush camping at Rondokop around a dam where you can canoe. Expect 'rocket' showers and flush toilets screened by bushes. R75 a person to camp and R200 to R250 a vehicle to do the Burchell Oxwagon Track. Tel 044-272-5004 after dark until 21h00, fax 044-272-5114, web www.burchell4x4.co.za.

What to do

Activities on the farms include fly-fishing, bird-watching, hiking, kloofing, mountain biking, a 4x4 playground and numerous routes, game viewing, scenic drives and forest picnics. A new 100 km mountain-biking trail route through tough terrain from Williamsburg Mountain Reserve to Keurbooms River Game Trails is excellent training for extreme events. See the Middle Keurbooms Conservancy website, www.mkc.co.za, for more information about what is offered on each farm.



As a guest at one, you are welcome to many of the activities at the others.

Prince Alfred's Pass is a great scenic drive, with many picnic spots to stop at along the way and enjoy the views, mountain pools and forest. Spitskop view site offers panoramic 360-degree views of the Garden Route from the sea to mountains.

Where to eat in De Vlugt

De Vlugt Tea Garden and farm stall is the perfect spot to relax and stock up with Annelize van Rooyen's home-made goodies.

Angie's G-spot bar and restaurant beside Keurbooms River offers light meals, trout dishes and desserts. Tel 044-752-3017.

More information

A self-help information centre next to Outeniqua Trout Lodge has pamphlets on local activities.

Read *Prince Alfred's Pass* by Ilse Meyer, available from local museums and information offices.

ABOVE: The zebras at Keurbooms River Game Trails have grown fat on green shoots after a burn. **LEFT:** The comfortable chalets at Outeniqua Trout Lodge are perched beside a trout dam or on a hillside with views of the De Vlugt valley.

