

COULD YOUR KIDS DO THIS HIKE?

In a bid to liberate his children from their contemporary comforts, David Rogers and his wife Jenni took their two boys, Liam (11) and Dane (10), on a tough, four-day hike up the Wild Coast. Words by David and Liam. Photographs by David and Dane

Swathes of beaches, tropical forests and grassy headlands are what Wild Coast walks are all about. Here Liam, Jenni and Dane stand with Jimmy Selani, who offers hikers simple village accommodation. Surprisingly, he says that very few kids do this hike.

WHY IT'S WORTH THE TRIP

- Escape winter and enjoy subtropical weather at a fraction of the price of other Indian Ocean destinations.
- Engage with local Xhosa people in their homes and support an excellent tourism venture that uplifts coastal communities.
- Walk along one of the most pristine coastlines with whales, dolphins, birds and spectacular forests and estuaries.

DAVID

Like many modern parents, we find that life is just a little too easy on our kids. When we were young, we rode our bikes to school, caught trains, hitchhiked up the coast and did other things that would be considered irresponsible today. So when we planned our winter holiday, we arranged a walking experience that would expose them to the real South Africa: a four-day walk from Coffee Bay to Umngazi, staying in local homestay accommodation along the way.

LIAM

For our holiday, I wanted to go fishing at Umngazi River Bungalows near Port St Johns. My parents had the idea that we should walk there from Coffee Bay and stay in villages on the way. I thought they were crazy.



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DAY 1

We met our guide Jimmy after breakfast at the Ocean View Hotel. It was right on the beach, and the breakfast was so good! Our dad gave us new backpacks, and we filled them with snacks (mostly Bar-Ones) and then we headed through villages with small round huts and passed lots of kids. On the way to Umtata Mouth, we saw whales jumping. It was during the Sardine Run, and we also saw dolphins and gannets. We stopped at Umtata Mouth. There were euphorbias on the hill, and I wanted to fish, but the tide was too high. We had tea and snacks and my brother drew some pictures.

We played frisbee and went over the mouth in a small, wobbly boat.

We got caught in the rain and passed the Anchorage Hotel and I badly wanted to stop. When we arrived at our hut I had a temperature and felt bad. I managed to walk to a ceremony where we saw a cow slaughtered. I ate some liver. It was cooked on top of coal covered in ash. The men and women stayed apart. We went back to the hut and I went to bed. There was also fried shad and samp and beans for dinner. I never ate because I was sick. I wanted to taste the samp and beans. Dogs barked at night and kept us awake.



DAY 2

I felt better and had some eggs and bread for breakfast. It was a hard day of walking up hills, and I managed to catch a small fish in a river mouth. We came across a deep river. My mom caught a lift on a paddle ski to stay dry. My brother and I swam. We met a boy who was being initiated. He wasn't shy. We walked and walked... it was a long day and we were so tired. Some dogs nearly attacked us, but Jimmy hit them with my fishing rod. I'm glad he didn't break it. Then we arrived at our overnight hut. Dinner was chicken, pap, beans and lovely curry potatoes and the family did a traditional dance for us. My legs felt tired and sore, and my dad had blisters. We slept like rocks.

DAY 3

More eggs for breakfast, homemade bread, which tasted sweet, and porridge (runny). We walked through Hhlluleka, which is a nature and marine reserve and I couldn't fish. We saw Knysna turacos. We stopped at a small shop for

a cold Coke. Dad said that the shop-keeper was a Rastafarian and he was listening to loud music through a very old radio. I saved the last bit of Coke for some small boys, but my mom said it's not good for their teeth. Along the cliff path we saw more dolphins, and I tried fishing but the sea was so wild I lost all my tackle.

Everywhere we went there were soccer goals on the hills. It's my best sport, but I was too tired to play, and anyway, a dog punctured our ball. After more walking we had tinned muscles on bread for lunch. The village we stayed in that night was right on the edge of the sea at a place called Mpande. I felt sick again and went to bed with a temperature of 39 degrees. I missed another good dinner of cabbage, chicken, beans and samp. (Damn – I missed samp and beans again!)

DAY 4

My last day was the hardest as I still felt bad, and it was a long way to Umngazi. We walked forever until it began to drizzle. Jimmy said Umngazi was over the next hill, but it wasn't. This made my brother angry and he stopped talking. Then we arrived. I was so happy when I saw the resort and our boat coming to fetch us!

We were in time for a massive braai, and I was feeling so much better that I ate lots. All I could think of was fishing. My Dad said that *Getaway* wanted us kids to write a story about the hike. I think it's not recommended for kids. >



ABOVE The hut at Mpande is close to the Indian Ocean. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Liam is fascinated with fish and is an avid catch-and-release angler; Dane being encouraged by his elder brother; local kids and our boys feast on palm hearts; we crossed estuaries at low tide with our packs above our heads, and rowed across larger ones. XXXXXXX need something more about stage of walk - Day 1/2 etc? (bottom pic)



FIVE THINGS I (LIAM) LEARNED FROM OUR GUIDE JIMMY

- Euphorbia juice is used for rubbing on cattle to know whom they belong to, and also for putting on ladies' nipples to wean babies. Must be because it's so bitter!
- Cow dung is used to rub on sores as a disinfectant.
- When a donkey mates with a horse it produces a mule, but I like the word honkey. So that's what I called it.
- Huts have a ring of sharp shells on the roofs, to ward off lightning and owls, which are an omen of death and bad luck.
- Ancestors are very important to the Xhosa people and they slaughter cattle to remember them.

DAVID

Whew, I was proud of our boys on this hike! The trail is strenuous and took them right out of their comfort zones. Jimmy told us that he had led this trail more than 1000 times since 1998, and this was only the second or third trip that he has done with kids of 10 or so. It's never fun having a sick kid, and I often considered taking out escape routes from the villages. Dane, who is only 10, never faltered and kept up his brother's

spirits when he was feeling poor. It's in tough times that families really come together.

Unlike the Wild Coast Meander, which we did last year – this hike doesn't stay on the beaches much, but traverses the grassy hills dotted with villages that are so typical of that area. The days are never boring as the route includes multiple river crossings (both by boat and wading chest deep), rocky outcrops to negotiate, pockets of deep



forest and villages. But the typical day is spent heading up grassy hills, the tops of which reveal open, massive vistas of estuaries and breath-catching white beaches. It's eye candy that makes getting to the top so rewarding.

The kids learnt a lot about how most people in rural South Africa live their lives. They witnessed ceremonial cattle sacrifices and young men undergoing their initiation. They experienced and appreciated the great things about communal ways of life and also some of the less attractive aspects of poverty, including large amounts of plastic litter. It was a shock for the kids to see young boys who had drunk too much alcohol and were staggering in the paths and the widespread cultivation and smoking of marijuana.

Our guide, Jimmy, did not try to shelter them or dilute any of these experiences and presented the life of the Xhosa people. He did however say that marijuana has ruined the life of many of his tribe and that he was deeply opposed to corruption, which was also rife in the region.

The days were long, and in retrospect, we found it all too hurried. We would have liked to have stopped at every

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE We met a Xhosa man undergoing *abakwetha* – circumcision and isolation to mark his transition to manhood; we received a warm welcome at Umngazi River Bungalows; the rondavel huts we stayed in were purpose built by families for a group of 12 hikers; the final stretch to Umngazi River Bungalows.

beach and explored, fished and enjoyed it more slowly. There was the ever-urgent need to get to the next overnight village before dark and cold set in. We passed wonderful little spots like Hluleka and Presley Bay where families were enjoying their little beachside cottages and lazy days of fishing and going up and down to the beach.

Jen had done this hike solo when she was a student, fuelled, she tells me, by a packet of lemon creams and three tins of chakalaka. I have done quite a bit of hiking, and despite carrying much of our boys' gear and being on the wrong side of 45, found it strenuous but no real problem.

I must admit I had some trepidation about hiking in tribal South Africa with my precious family, but I'm glad to say that I was reminded how wonderful our country is. The hospitality was remarkable. At each hut we were greeted with tea and coffee and large hunks of freshly made bread. Shower water was heated over an open fire and then hauled up in buckets. There were flush toilets and several of the huts had electricity. The rondavels were spacious and clean and bedding was always freshly washed.

We were able to travel light – just snack lunches, changes of clothes and personal items. There were spaza shops all along the way so there was never a chance of going hungry. Light running shoes were fine as footwear.

The trail usually runs from Port St Johns to Coffee Bay over four nights. We did it in reverse in three nights and did the last one-and-a-half days in one giant walk.

Would I do it again? You betcha! 🇿



PLAN YOUR TRIP ➔



GETTING THERE

Port St Johns is about a five-hour drive from both Durban and East London. Your car will be safe in Port St Johns and transfers back from Coffee Bay can be arranged. As we did the route in reverse, we drove to Coffee Bay and got a friend to drive our car to Port St Johns for us.

WHEN TO GO

Rain is common year-round, but most prevalent in summer. We hiked in June and it was wet. The best time to hike is in April and May or September.

NEED TO KNOW

Hikes can be booked individually or in groups (maximum 22 people). The total distance is 64 kilometres and is usually done over five days (we did it in four), with a total distance of between 12 and 14 kilometres and five to six hours of walking

per day. The terrain is a mix of beach walking and hilly coastal paths.

WHAT TO BRING

- Water purifying tablets
- Snacks for lunch
- Walking sticks
- Money for spending
- Toiletries
- Swimming gear
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent (ticks and mosquitos are common)
- Hiking boots or running shoes and flip flops for the evenings

DO IT

Prices depend on the number of people in a group. An individual, guided hike costs R2520 pp for five days, including accommodation and river crossings. For a family of four it costs R7180 (R1795 pp) and for 10 or more people it costs R16700 (R1670 pp). Hikes must be booked in advance and secured with

a deposit. Shuttle rides back to Port St Johns from Coffee Bay cost R200 pp. 082-507-2256, wildcoasthikes.com

STAY HERE

Accommodation on the hike is in village huts arranged by your guide, but for a place to stay on either side we recommend the following: **Ocean View Hotel, Coffee Bay** has the best beach position in the area, and this family hotel is great value for your first night. From R750 pp DBB. 047-575-2005, oceanview.co.za **Umngazi River Bungalows, Port St Johns** is where you get to relax as kids get whipped up by staff with exciting activities that keep them happy and occupied. From R1040 pp DBB, kids from R740 pp DBB. 047-564-1115, umngazi.co.za

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