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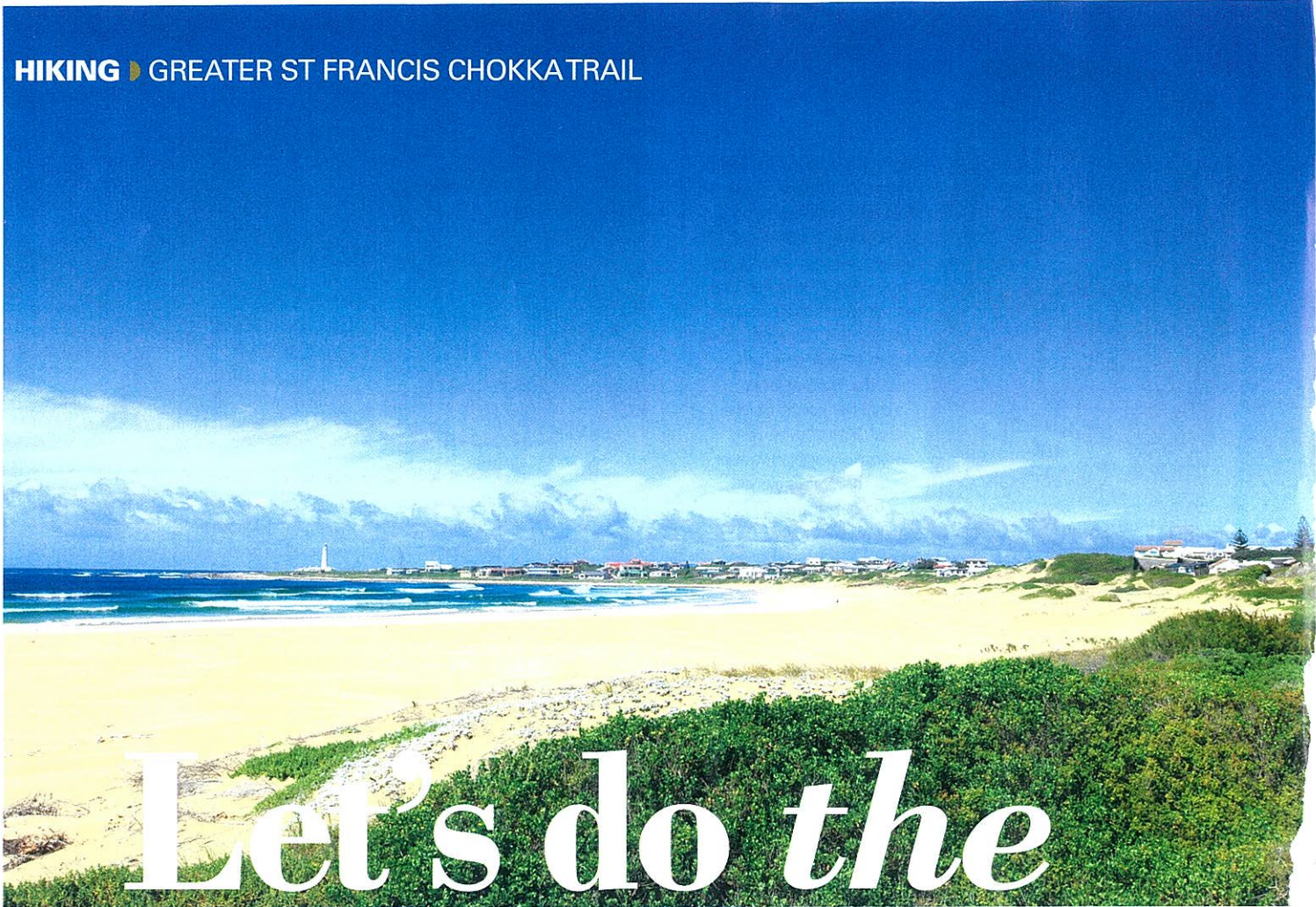
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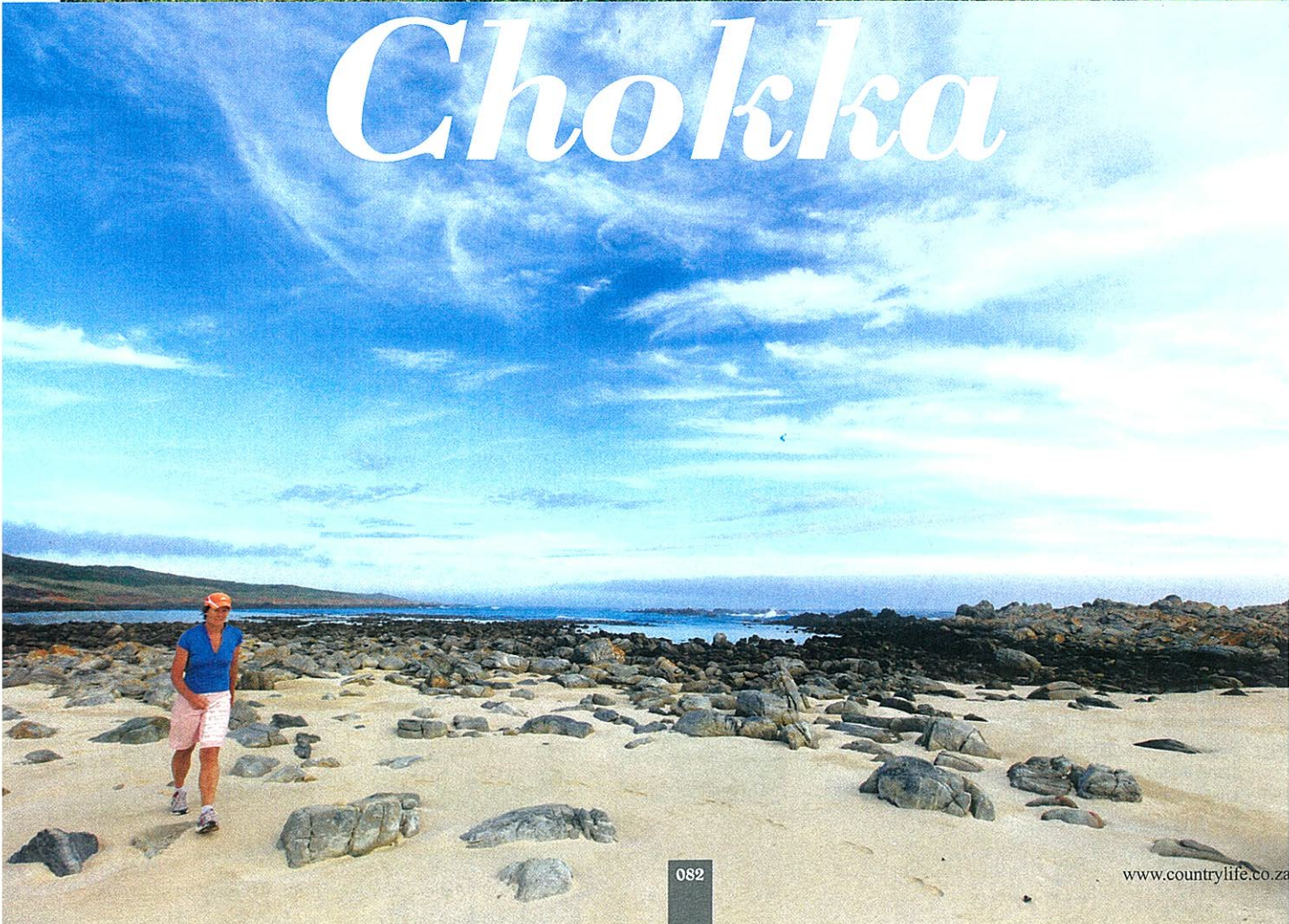


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HIKING ► GREATER ST FRANCIS CHOKKA TRAIL



Let's do *the* *Chokka*

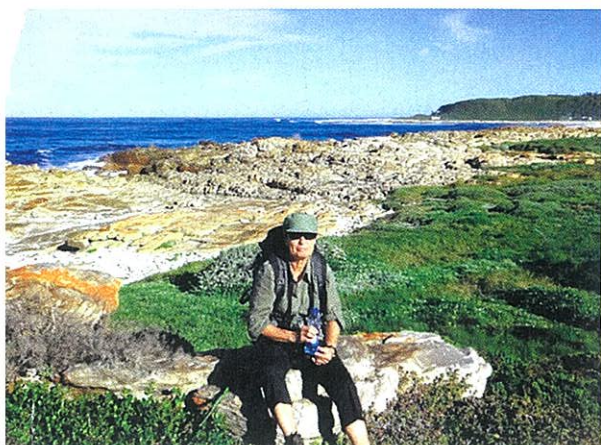




Slackpacking strandloppers, lace up your boots. A new hike in the Greater St Francis Bay Area should be on your bucket list

WORDS FIONA MCINTOSH

PICTURES SHAEN ADEY, NICK BORNMAN



his is locally caught chokka, *Loligo reynaudii*," explains Juan Schmidt, owner of On the Harbour Seafood

& Grill. "I've prepared it in three different ways; with lemon and garlic, with peri-peri and deep fried. I'm sure you've eaten squid before, but the calamari you find in most shops and restaurants is an entirely different species, *Loligo gahi*, imported from Patagonia. Here we've cooked both in exactly the same way so you can compare them."

I eye the six plates, and the rather intimidating extra dish of squid heads that Juan has thrown in for good measure. This is a first for me and I don't know where to start. As a Capie I've done my share of wine, olive, chocolate, herb and even truffle tastings, but squid sampling is a whole new kettle of fish. But, since chokka is the mainstay of fishing along the Eastern Cape coast, it's entirely appropriate.

The brainchild of Esti Stewart, local fundi on the area and the chokka, and avid slackpacker, Maggie Langlands, the four-day slackpacking trail launched at the end of last year. "My husband and I had hiked all over the country," Maggie explains, "but this is one of the most beautiful coastlines in South Africa. It's crazy not to have a slackpacking trail here. In 2013, Esti and I started walking and mapped

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Across the pristine beach at Cape St Franc towards Seal Point Lighthouse, where there is also a penguin rescue and rehabilitation centre. BELOW: The trail passes historical fish traps, where the lines of ancient rocky walls are seen at low tide. THIS PAGE TOP: Hike along paths through the dune vegetation and along rocky stretches between Oyster Bay and Thysbaai. LEFT: Chokka boats at Port St Francis, a small working harbour. BELOW LEFT: Maggie Langlands, the driving force behind the Chokka Trail. BELOW RIGHT: Otters play in the surf.

HIKING ► GREATER ST FRANCIS CHOKKA TRAIL

out a route.” And what a route it is. Showcasing the best of the Greater St Francis Bay Area, the trail takes in three picturesque fishing villages, a rugged coastline, sand dunes as far as the eye can see, a tidal river, protected fynbos, wetlands and a visit to one of South Africa’s few working small harbours.

The trail is unguided but input from local characters is key to the package. Our first host is Nick Bornman, owner of Oyster Bay Beach Lodge, high on the dunes where it overlooks Oyster Bay. A weather-beaten sea dog, Nick certainly knows the area, and his description of the route and what to look for on our ‘warm-up’ hike on the afternoon of our arrival is spot on.

After consulting the tide table, we follow a sandy path through the Strandveld for about four kilometres. “There they are,” exclaims the eager beaver in the party, who is scouting ahead. Our timing is perfect – right on low tide as planned. There in the shallows are clear, circular rock walls built by the Khoisan more than 2 000 years ago. Simple yet ingenious, the corrals trap fish on the outgoing tide.

The sun is still high so we continue along the coast, mesmerised by the remoteness and beauty of the rugged coastline. I’ve been to Jeffreys Bay and St Francis on numerous occasions but this has been a well-kept secret.

RIGHT: Hikers take a breather and study the remains at a shell midden. BELOW RIGHT: The fascinating shell midden is exposed on the Sand River.

We stop at Thyspunt and have tea as we take in the long sweep of the Thysbaai beach, and then turn back. Oyster Bay Beach Lodge already feels like home, the more so when, after a final dip, we climb to the wooden deck to find Nick in the kitchen preparing fresh fish for supper. “Did you see the otters?” he inquires. “I often see them in the shallows.” We feel cheated but vow to be up early to find them before heading out the next day.

The otters elude us, but the next day’s path through the dunes of the Sand River more than

compensates. We take it slowly, stopping to admire colourful little vygies and wind-blown features in the sand. “As long as you keep moving east through the dunes you’ll be heading in the right direction,” Nick had assured us earlier, as we wolfed down breakfast. “The prevailing westerly wind sculpts the dunes into long gradual up-slopes and steep precipitous downs. The kids will love the steep slopes but don’t be surprised if you end up eating sand should you follow suit.”

Sand River is an apt name as it’s several hours



DID YOU KNOW?

Chokka is the South African word for squid, or ink fish, which until the 1980s was caught by the fishermen of St Francis and Plettenberg Bay as bait. But a visiting Spaniard alerted the local fishermen to the fact that their ‘bait’ was a valuable delicacy, and introduced them to the export markets in Europe.

BRUCE’S BEAUTIES

St Francis Bay featured in the 1960s cult movie *The Endless Summer*. Bruce’s Beauties, the world-famous but fickle reef break that we hiked past on day three, takes its name from the photographer who put the area on the surfing map.





TOP LEFT:

Slackpackers visit the restored chokka boat, Andejacht, on day three of the trail, giving them insight into the life of a chokka fisherman.

ABOVE: The chokka tasting allows you to taste both imported Patagonian and local calamari prepared in different ways.

LEFT: Oyster Bay Beach Lodge, our accommodation on day one, at dusk.

BELOW RIGHT: The rugged coastal stretch between Mostertshoek and Cape St Francis.

Gulls, Terns and Turnstones as we walk.

The perfectly choreographed performance continues. Not to be outdone, southern right whales obligingly blow and spy-hop just off Sunset Rock, so we linger over tea before heading on to the lighthouse that is our beacon. A giant penguin marks the entrance to the 'Penguin Hilton', a SANCCOB rehabilitation centre for sick and injured birds. Wilna Wilkensen, the veterinary nurse, clucks around her patients and asks us if we can hold a severely dehydrated chick while she injects it with saline water. Then we re-join the coastal path and carry on around the bay to the Port St Francis complex for our chokka tasting.

After the wonderfully educational lunch, we waddle along the Two Harbours Walk, past the world-famous surf site Bruce's Beauties, to the Heritage Centre in St Francis Bay. From there we are transferred to the picturesque, waterfront Brisan Bed and Breakfast, stopping en route to visit a restored chokka boat. "The chokka fishermen go out for up to three weeks at a time, returning only when the storage holds are full," explains Karen Jooste of Little Venice Adventures, as we squeeze into the cramped sleeping quarters. The boat is basically a floating cooler box with berths that aren't long enough for a man to stretch out in. These fishermen live a hard life.

But not us. Our venture onto the water that evening is very civilised. Hosts Brian and Sandy Cunningham pack a cooler box with wine and

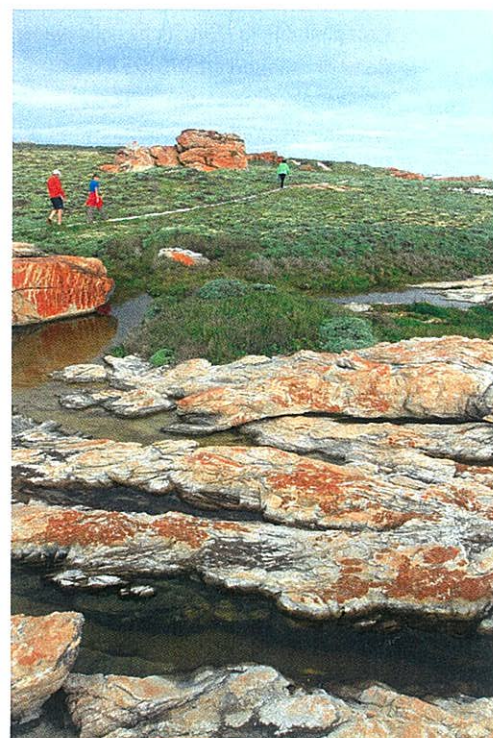
before we come across water – a stream flowing into the dune field from the farm lands on the northern side. At 18km this is the longest day, but Nick had insisted that before crossing the stream we take a short detour to the top of the highest dune, so we dutifully slog up the soft sand.

The toil is worth it for the 360° panorama of rippled dunes and dazzling green coastal vegetation, all the way to the ocean. We sit there soaking it up, before setting off for a massive Khoisan shell midden replete with flint tools and traces of ochre. A short walk then takes us to the pick-up point at the Sand River bridge, where a vehicle is waiting to transfer us to our home for the night, the very chilled Cape St Francis Resort.

What a place. We wander onto the dunes for sundowners and watch the surfers catching their last runs of the day. A seafood dinner at the

resort's Joe Fish restaurant is the perfect end to our first full day on the trail, but I'm sad to be moving on. I'd happily hole up in this idyllic beachfront spot and enjoy more of the spoils of Cape St Francis.

Next morning, as we stroll through dense coastal thicket to the sound of bird calls, I fall in love with yet another aspect of this pristine region. First a mongoose scuttles across our path, then we have several sightings of bushbuck and grey duiker – all seemingly unfazed by our boisterous behaviour. After a slow kilometre we hit the coast again and head east on a rugged track that takes us along the wild side. The waves are crashing onto the orange, lichen-covered rocks, sending up great plumes of spray that sprinkle the deep rock pools and gullies. Red-beaked African Oystercatchers flit from rock to rock and we set off huge flocks of Kelp

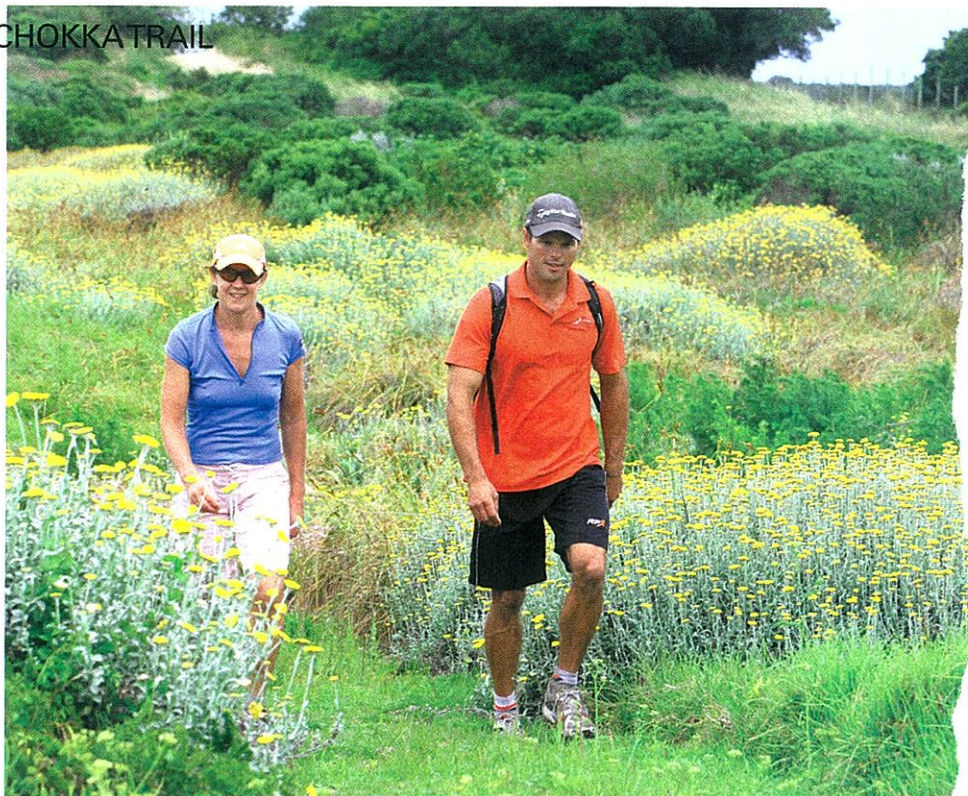


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snacks and we hop aboard their pontoon for a leisurely sunset cruise of the canals and the Kromme River, enjoying the birdlife and the tranquillity of the estuary. The contrast between the orderly waterside village, with its uniform white walls and black thatch, and the wild coastline we've hiked, impresses on us the diversity of this region.

The final day is spent meandering up the Sand River again until we are able to enter St Francis Links through a side gate from where an interpretive trail takes us through wonderful thicket to our cars. As we celebrate with lunch in the clubhouse, we are all in agreement: the fresh sea air and endless views of coastal trails make them invigorating and special. And walking unguided means you can stop where you want, stripping off and skinny-dipping when the fancy takes. Any modern-day strandloper should have this on the to-do list. ■

Map reference G5 see inside back cover



IN A NUTSHELL

Up to it? Although some of the walking is on sand, which is tiring, the trail is not overly strenuous and is suitable for hikers of all ages and moderate fitness levels. Your overnight bag is driven around for you, leaving you free to hike with only a day pack. Overnight accommodation is all of a 3- or 4-star standard and all meals are provided. Slackpacking at its very best!

When to go The trail is open year round except during the Christmas holidays.

Contact Esti Stewart, 073 825 0835, info@chokkatrail.co.za, www.chokkatrail.co.za



ABOVE: Hikers walk through a network of trails in coastal thicket at the St Francis Links golf course. LEFT: A juvenile penguin at the rehabilitation centre on the Seal Point lighthouse property.

BELOW LEFT: Along the Sand River there are soft grasses and reeds just before the trail reaches the Links. BELOW: Portrait time for Nick Bornman's dogs after some boisterous play on the sand dunes.

