

Cycle Down South

FIONA MCINTOSH checks out a new mountain-bike tour in the Overberg that traverses a little-known section of Agulhas National Park

PICTURES FIONA MCINTOSH, ANDREW WONNACOTT, MATTHEW HOLT

“Great, always wanted to go to Cape Point,” said our visiting British friend ‘Studs’

when we told him we would be cycling to the southern tip of Africa. We agreed Cape Point was well worth a visit but not this trip since, as (all locals know) the Indian and Atlantic oceans actually meet at Cape Agulhas.

We’d just fetched our old college friend, Studs Holcombe – his nickname allegedly refers to sporting exploits – from the airport, and were dismayed to see that his once athletic frame supported a generous boep.

“I’m afraid I didn’t have time for training,” he said, as he squeezed into the car and we set off for Stanford, the start of our three-day, 130km mountain-bike tour to Cape Agulhas. “But I’m sure I’ll be able to keep up. What’s the rest of the group like?”

The question was soon answered. The other members of our party were lithe and fit. Andrew Wonnacott had completed the epic Freedom Challenge MTB Race Across South Africa, while Dylan de la Hunt was not only a mountain-biking fiend but had recently returned from the Mongol Derby, an endurance race on horseback across Mongolia.

Sean Privett, the trail developer who was to ride with us, is one of only ten people to have ever finished the Freedom Challenge Extreme Triathlon (check it out, it’s insane – www.freedomchallenge.org.za) and, having completed the Cape Town Cycle Tour, the Two Oceans Marathon and the Berg River Canoe Marathon in the quickest combined time in two consecutive years, had been crowned Peninsula Ironman in 2010 and 2011. Suffice to say we were in the company of elite athletes.

Studs took all this in his stride. After a fairly relaxed afternoon riding from Stanford along the back roads to Sean’s farm, Witkrans, in the Walker Bay Conservancy, we showered and regrouped at the farmhouse for a briefing. “Don’t mind if I do.” Studs grinned as he tucked into the welcoming

Taking a break in Agulhas National Park.

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The next morning we feasted again on Michelle's home cooking before handing our overnight bags to Billy Robertson, our support driver. Then, armed with maps, a pre-loaded GPS tracker and a description of the route, we hopped onto our bikes and climbed up from Witkrans on well-crafted single track through the fynbos of Flower Valley, to a ridge with commanding views across to the ocean and back to where we'd come from.

A steep, rocky descent and another

challenging climb took us to a dam on a hilltop above Farm 215 where we rendezvoused with Billy and enjoyed a welcome stop, before continuing on an undulating track through the pristine reserve to our lunch stop at the studio of local artist Niël Jonker in Baardskeedersbos.

While Niël's son, Sebastian, created elaborate pizzas, we celebrated a strenuous morning with some Baardskeedersbos wines and a tour of the garden, which featured some interesting bronze works. Niël, it turned out, is a mountain biker himself – and is also tasked with casting the trophies for the annual Cape Epic MTB race – so was eager to hear about our tour.

After checking out the beautiful village

church, we followed gravel roads through the exquisite Waterford section of the Agulhas National Park to Wolvengat, our overnight stop.

While the rest of the group freshened up, I wandered down to the small but ambitious general store, with its eclectic selection of goods. "You'll find everything from a pin to an aeroplane propeller here," Jerry Bleeker boasted. Jerry and his wife Jenny have lived in the village for 30 years and have many a tale to tell. It was well past closing time when I finally extricated myself, having been put to an interesting test that involved running the back of a menacing-looking knife along a wooden stick on which a 'magic' propeller was mounted, to see if I had the powers to be a diviner. Which I do,



LEFT: Fuelling up for the ride with breakfast at Witkrans. BELOW LEFT: The views were stupendous, and gave us a much-needed excuse to take regular breaks. BELOW: One of the artworks at our guest house in the village of Wolvengat.



LEFT: Although we cycled hard, the tour was as much about enjoying local hospitality as it was about the ride. BELOW: Pizza chef Sebastian Jonker. BELOW LEFT: Artist Niël Jonker with one of the bronzes in his garden. BOTTOM: The beautiful little church in Baardskeedersbos.



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it appears: the propeller spun vigorously.

After a brief wander around the De Roubaix Art Gallery and its wonderful garden, the party continued with another wine tasting under the trees at The Blackboard Bistro @ Lillywood Farm, followed by a magnificent bistro dinner prepared by Helen Manson-Kullin. The contrast between the hotch-potch general store and this sophisticated dining experience neatly encapsulated Wolvengat.

Helen, who opens the bistro on Saturdays

and for Sunday lunch (and on request), had prepared a wonderful feast of locally sourced, seasonal products, many from her garden. "I've travelled extensively in Africa and Europe, and have a passion for Indian food so that is the inspiration for our dishes," she explained as she served up a couple of her specials – roast juniper and date springbok and, for the non-meat eaters, mustard-crust cob accompanied by exotic salads and spicy vegetables. "The herbs are also grown here on the farm."

Helen arrived at our guest house the following morning with more exotic food to set us up for the ride. Day two took us on gravel roads to the 'back' Agulhas National Park entrance, Rietfontein. This was the section I'd most been looking forward to; the chance to traverse this extensive and varied park from west to east.

There are two route options, a tough inland route over the top of Soetanytsberg, (named for the abundance of sweet aniseed that grows on its slopes), then following the edge of the



ABOVE: Chilling out in Baardskeerdersbos. ABOVE RIGHT: Jerry Bleeker has lived in Wolvengat for 30 years. RIGHT: Sections of the tour take riders along quiet back roads. FAR RIGHT: Studs was the only person to get a puncture, which Dylan fixed. There's a back up vehicle if you get really stuck.



ABOVE LEFT: From Brandfontein, ride along the beach until the main rest camp, with tours timed to coincide with spring tides. ABOVE: The iconic lighthouse at Agulhas. LEFT: Cape Agulhas, the most southerly point of the African continent.



plateau before dropping down to the coast. The less-demanding, low-level route meanders along the coastal plain. We opted for the latter, taking a sandy, management track past the pretty, whitewashed Rietfontein Cottages sometimes used to overnight in by cyclists on the four-day tour.

We stopped often for the views out to sea and the rare fynbos that Sean, a fynbos ecologist, spied along the track. It was a unique opportunity to enjoy an extensive section of the park otherwise inaccessible to visitors.

At Brandfontein, roughly halfway through the park, we took to the beach. Tours are planned to coincide with the spring tide so the sand was, for the most part, hard and rideable, although there were deep banks of pebbles that forced even Andrew and Dylan off their bikes. Studs and I brought up the rear, pushing through the pebbles and the soft, sandy sections. "We'll say we were watching whales," he confided as we slipped further and further behind the group.

It was tough going and by the time we

arrived at the main rest camp and hit the tar road to the gate we were pretty sore. Worse was to come in the form of a seven-kilometre stretch of corrugated gravel road to the plaque marking the southern tip of Africa, where we joined the queue of visitors waiting to take the mandatory photo. After a quick tour of the famous Cape Agulhas Lighthouse

we continued to a restaurant in town.

"So when are we cycling to Cape Point?" asked Studs as we sat in the southernmost restaurant and pub in Africa, celebrating with cold beer until we could spot the dividing line between the Atlantic and Indian oceans. "Training's overrated." ■

Map reference G3 see inside back cover

In a Nutshell

- **Up to it:** The 3-day, 2-night, self-guided but fully supported tour is certainly not a breeze (although the distances are not that long, the varied condition of the track makes it quite challenging at times) but it's perfectly manageable by moderately fit riders. There are some reasonably technical sections but they can be avoided. A 2-day, 2-night option is offered on the same route and there's also a longer 4-day option overnighing at Witkrans, Elim and in the Agulhas National Park. Non-riders, and those needing a break from the saddle, can always ride in the back-up vehicle and meet the riders at refreshment and overnight stops.
- **Best time to ride:** The trail can be ridden year round but riding between March and November means that you enjoy cooler weather, fynbos flowers and whale sightings at the coast. Start dates are predetermined as the coastal section from Brandfontein can only be ridden at low tide.

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