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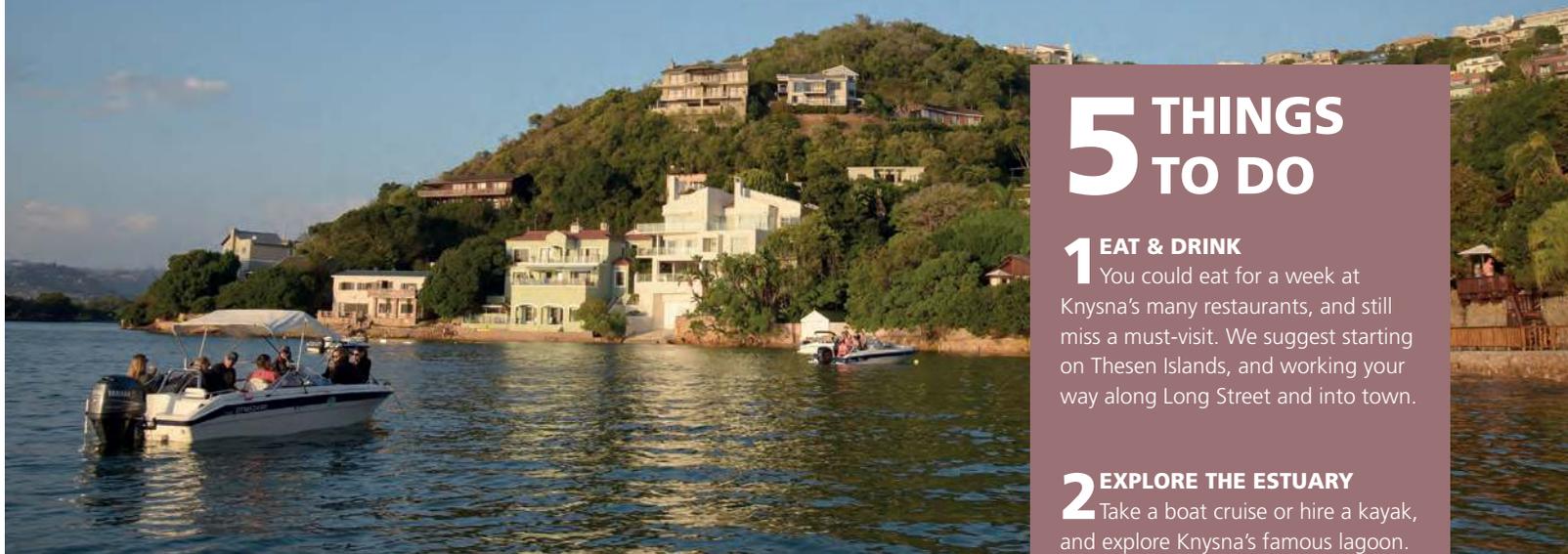
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Barely 18 months after wildfires devastated Knysna, the popular Garden Route tourist town is up and running, and welcoming guests. Given the scale of the destruction, is Knysna now still the Knysna we know? **MARK VAN DIJK** went to find out.

THE FIRE





You know Knysna. **Sitting**, as it does, in the heart of the Western Cape's beautiful – and often very touristy – Garden Route, the seaside town has developed a well-deserved reputation as a must-visit travel destination. But if you know Knysna, you also know about the devastating wildfires that swept through its surrounding forests in June 2017. You know about the 600 families who lost their homes, the seven people who lost their lives, and the hundreds of millions of rands in property damage. At the time, the Western Cape government estimated the cost to be R136 million in infrastructure damage; the damage to private property was estimated at well over R4 billion. The cost to Knysna's reputation as a lush, green, forested holiday destination was incalculable.

After all, without the forests, the holiday homes, the guest houses and the hotels, is Knysna still Knysna?

Eighteen months after those fires, I went to see for myself. Driving into town from the west – on the N2, coming from the Mossel Bay/George side, as I've done and

you've done countless times in the past – the first thing that strikes me is how little has actually changed. Knysna's Western Head is still green and unspoiled. The forests are still thick and overgrown. The traffic is still a nightmare. Crawling into town past Phantom Road Pass and over the bridge, towards our destination on Thesen Islands, I can't help thinking: How bad could those fires have been, really? Barely a year and a half later, everything seems fine. I feel awful for thinking it, but at first glance that's what it looks like.

My home for the weekend is the Turbine Boutique Hotel & Spa, a funky 5-star property in the middle of the lagoon. It's set among trendy, award-winning eateries like WHE+, île de pain and Sirocco Restaurant, among attractive art galleries and chic clothing boutiques. And it's impossible to miss.

The hotel is set in an old power plant (hence the titular turbine), and its four imposing steam towers are visible from the mainland. That industrial, functional heritage isn't just reflected in the hotel's interior; it's the central focus. Massive turbines, steel pillars and pipes dominate the décor, painted in vivid primary

5 THINGS TO DO

1 EAT & DRINK

You could eat for a week at Knysna's many restaurants, and still miss a must-visit. We suggest starting on Thesen Islands, and working your way along Long Street and into town.

2 EXPLORE THE ESTUARY

Take a boat cruise or hire a kayak, and explore Knysna's famous lagoon. Mind you don't get too close to the Heads: the waters below those sandstone cliffs churn perilously – as many ships have found to their cost.

3 UNWIND

Many local hotels offer spa treatments, and they're well worth it. The combination of massage therapy and the beautiful surroundings will do your mind and soul the power of good.

4 VISIT THE FORESTS

While Harkerville and Featherbed were damaged, Goudveld and Diepwalle were, mercifully, spared from the worst of the fires. Take a stroll out to the King Edward Big Tree, Hoekwil Big Tree and 1 000-year-old Tsitsikamma Big Tree, and breathe a sigh of relief.

5 HEAD OUT

There's so much more to the Garden Route than just the Knysna lagoon. Visit Sedgefield, pop in at Plett, and take a beach walk from Buffalo Bay toward Brenton. There's an elephant park, a wolf sanctuary, several game reserves and loads of golf courses in the surrounding area.

colours and accompanied by all sorts of instruments and contraptions set on the whitewashed walls. The site has been part of Knysna and its history for decades, ever since it was established as a power station around 1939 to service the local timber industry and provide power to Thesen Islands' harbour.

When the industry changed, the town adapted – and in 2010, after the old power station had lain dormant for a few rusty years, it was reimagined and reborn as The Turbine Hotel. Each of its 26 rooms and suites is individually styled in tribute to Knysna's heritage, while many of the interior spaces have been transformed into what feels like an informal art gallery. Knysna's history quite literally hangs on the walls here, yet there's nothing old-fashioned or outdated about The Turbine. The facilities include a spa, pool, deck, restaurant, pub and everything else you'd expect from a boutique hotel in a town geared for tourism.

And so we return to why we're here. What is the lasting impact, for tourists and visitors, of those infamous 2017 fires? Can you still take a quiet drive in the forests? Are the mountain biking routes still open? Are the restaurants still geared up for oyster season? Is the Pink Loerie Mardi Gras still on the calendar? The answer to all those questions is, of course,



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yes. And the clue, funnily enough, lies in the hotel. In the 21st Century, Thesen Islands no longer need a clunky power station sitting amongst the quiet canals, private homes and upmarket restaurants. But it does need a hotel, and that's what it now has.

Like the old power station was transformed and adapted to suit Knysna's needs, Knysna itself has worked to respond to the fires, and to rebuild and readjust its vital tourism industry. I learn this as I take a sunset cruise on the lagoon estuary, as I notice the burned trees on the Western Head's Featherbed Nature Reserve, and as I see the rebuilding work on the handful of fire-damaged properties hidden among the low-lying coastal vegetation.

The scars are still there, and they're still raw. Brenton-on-Sea is still on the mend. Many residential homes have not yet been replaced – especially up in the Concordia and White Location neighbourhoods, where tourists don't

usually go but where the locals tend to live. Up there, on the hills north of town, charred black trees stick out of freshly-resurfaced grass. The local residents wave happily as you drive past. They know the tourists are coming back.

Speak to those locals, and you hear the horror stories. You hear how the skies above the lagoon were choked with black smoke in June 2017, and how fine grey ash lingered in the air for days after the fires had cleared. You hear about how homes were lost and lives were ruined, and how NSRI rescuers plucked stranded residents off the shore as flames licked the ground behind them. But then you hear about how Knysna pulled itself together quickly, and how – barely a month after the fires – the 2017 Knysna Oyster Festival went ahead, as planned, to great success.

That's what I came to find out, and that's what I left with: the sense that the Garden Route remains thoroughly deserving of its reputation for natural beauty, and that the twisty-turny 95km stretch of N2 highway between George in the west and Plettenberg Bay in the east is still one of the most attractive pieces of coastline in the world.

There's still adventure in the forests, and in the waterways. The restaurants are as excellent as they've always been, and while some accommodation venues were utterly destroyed, many have already been rebuilt and are welcoming guests from around the world. The Oyster Festivals, marathons, Mardi Gras and mountain bike events are all in full swing.

Go see for yourself. Yes, Knysna got its fingers burned, but Knysna is still Knysna.

