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KNYSNA

Relaxation generator

A hotel built in an old power station reflects the ongoing renewal of a beautiful coast town

From the air, the approach to George Airport is one of the more attractive in the country, and the same can be said of the drive from there to Knysna via Wilderness and Sedgfield and the beautiful beaches, rivers, lakes and lagoon that accessorise those towns.

For more information, go to turbinehotel.co.za.

It's clear how far the devastating fires of 2018 extended, but all is green again now, and the relative openness of the terrain brings the profound beauty of the untouched fragments of forest and orchard and wetland into sharper focus, making you appreciate what is old and new simultaneously.

Driving into Knysna – particularly if you haven't been there for a while – the effect is similar. The once rustic coastal village shows off its layers of development as you head into town, with Thesen Island, previously the site of a huge timber processing plant and now reimagined as an accommodation, retail, dining and high-end

housing destination, probably the starkest measure of the difference between Knysna's past and present.

Factory settings

The Turbine Boutique Hotel and Spa now fills the space once occupied by a power station fuelled by the wood pulp created by the timbre industry, and the design incorporates the original boilers and generators used to generate electricity up until as recently as 2001.

The result is fascinating. It's like *Charlie & The Chocolate Factory* was edited by Condé Nast.

There are odd layers, with weird mezzanine levels designed to fit into the shell of the old station and to fit the geography of the island and the irregular shapes of the giant machines.

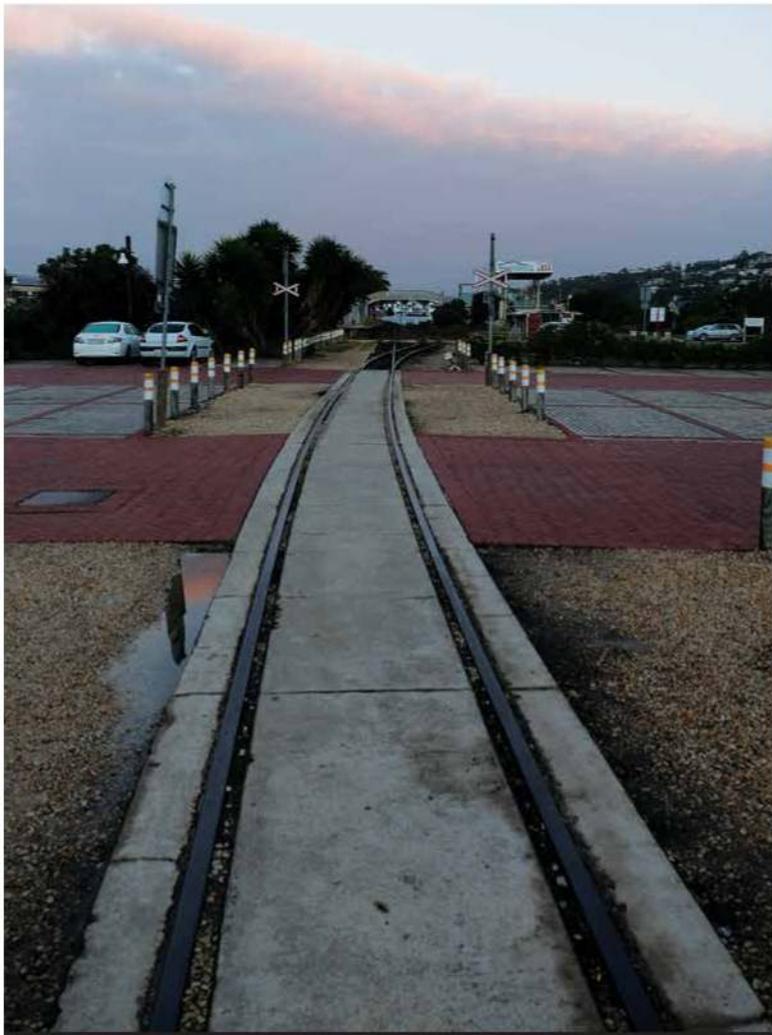
One particularly eye-catching feature is the cross-section of a gargantuan tree – one of Knysna's ancient forest giants – that was a sapling in the early 14th



Century. It's been marked with a chart that lists just a handful of the major world events – revolutions, world wars – that occurred while it was growing; an exercise that rather puts your measly life in perspective.

Most of the rooms in the establishment have different shapes and strange angles – again because of the designers working around the building's original template – and each has a name that ties into a story connected to the area's history and the creatures (if you're sensitive about your weight, perhaps see if you can avoid the 'Elephant' room) and other natural phenomena.

Two in-house restaurants – the Island Café and the Gastro Pub – offer dining options. The food is excellent and the atmosphere is conducive to relaxing and watching the world go by, particularly if you order one of their excellent mojitos, which come in a generously tall glass.



Destination Knysna

- **Ile de Pain** Fantastic bakery, with a couple of different sorts of luxurious (the right word, in this case) hot chocolates.
- **Chocolette** Boutique store selling things you will really want to eat.

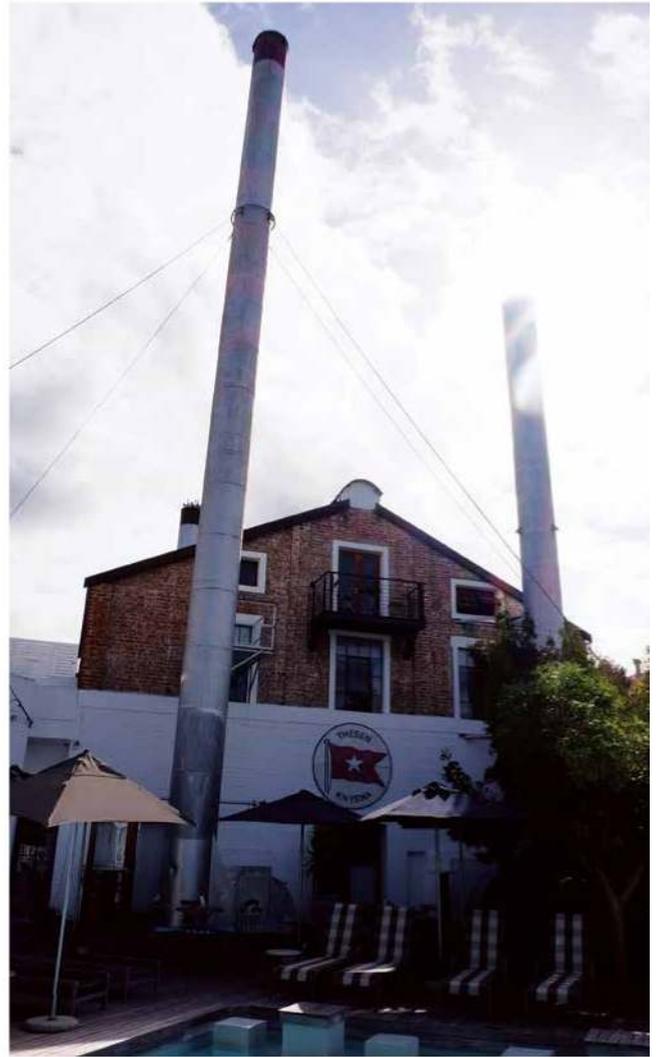
- **Knysna Oyster Festival** Slurp molluscs to your heart's content (21-30 June).
- **Knysna Literary Festival** Fascinating talks by authors in lovely venues all over town (next edition 6-8 March 2020).

Foot traffic

A long walk through and around town expands on the hoary-versus-happening theme. There are the inelegant modern structures that house administrative outlets like schools and government offices, alongside the classic beauty of Thesen House, built in 1915. Elsewhere, a meander through the suburbs shows Knysna to be like any other town in terms of the appeal of its various sectors. Here is a dilapidated backwoods Free State *dorp*, cheek by jowl with a displaced slice of extravagant Franschhoek. There is a plate on a wall detailing the historical provenance of a tiny shack, while at the heads, mansions worthy of Camps Bay overlook the area's most famous feature – the Knysna Heads.

Exploration is curtailed by rain as low clouds settle into the bowl formed by the hills around the lagoon, and soon everything is damp. The light drizzle that falls into the gaps between the buildings becomes horizontal

Exploring Knysna on foot allows for the discovery of dozens of interesting details.



Above right: if you're staying at the Turbine Hotel, aim for the distinctive chimneys when heading home.

humidity as you leave their shelter to cross the causeway back to Thesen Island.

How to get there



Airlink connects George with Cape Town and Durban. Go to page 90 for flight schedules. www.flyairlink.com

Heads-up

The Turbine Water Club is affiliated with the Turbine Hotel and offers sporting equipment and outings for guests wanting to get out a little. Given that it's possible to see most of Knysna without meeting a large hill (provided you don't head inland), cycling is an excellent option, starting with an excursion to the Heads and back.

There's a brick-paved running and cycling path off the end of the Thesen Island causeway, so you can skip the relative congestion of the CBD and emerge onto George Rex Drive, which flanks the lagoon until it terminates with the cliffs and waves of the landmark in the background.

The route is incredibly scenic – the mudbanks, channels and aquatic vegetation of the lagoon; the golf

course on the other side of the road and then, suddenly, the landscaped Bantry Bay gardens and villas that make the most of the views.

If you've been fortunate enough to visit the Heads once or more before, it's like repeating a rite of passage, taking the path along the cliff of the eastern Head, past 'The Blowhole', which, at the right point in the tide cycle explodes with spray as incoming waves hit the back of a semi-submerged cave and launch back out again. And with the town behind you and the sea in front, it's possible to fully appreciate the wildness that still remains here, despite all the development.

New growth

When you have returned to the hotel and allowed your bruised buttocks to recover – this is a necessary step to factor in for rookie cyclists – via more food, a different cocktail and a generous spa treatment, you may want



to head out on the water (you're staying on an island, after all).

A sunset cruise takes you back to the Heads, passing the new developments in the Featherbed Reserve that have sprung up since the fire – one of the catastrophe's positive outcomes.

Apparently, another was that it burned all the alien foliage in what is a nature reserve, allowing the indigenous plant life to regenerate strongly.

Some of the other endemic residents – a species of seahorse that only lives in the Knysna lagoon, for instance – are more difficult to see than the vegetation, but considering their life in such sublime real estate while sipping a glass of champagne aboard a comfortable cruise boat, perhaps you'll be the one feeling like you're ready to start afresh after your stay.

Text and photography | **Bruce Demill**