

South African adventure

Kia Koropp encounters cheetahs, cave paintings and daunting harbours on a voyage from the Indian to Atlantic oceans

Over the last decade my husband, John Daubeny, and I have been cruising through the Pacific, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean on board our 50ft cutter-rigged sloop, *Atea*, choosing to explore the world by boat with our two children, Braca (9) and Ayla (7).

Having just spent three years in the Indian Ocean, it was time for us to move on to new cruising grounds and we set our sights on the Atlantic by way of South Africa. Given the 40,000 miles we've clocked already, you'd think the 1,500 we had in front of us would be another casual voyage, made easier as land would be visible all the way. We'd be watching the

baobab trees of Tanzania, the pistachio plantations of Mozambique and the thorn bushes of South Africa slip past just five miles to starboard. With no wide open stretches of water to cross, we were in for a leisurely coastal jaunt with plenty of stops en-route. Easy, right?

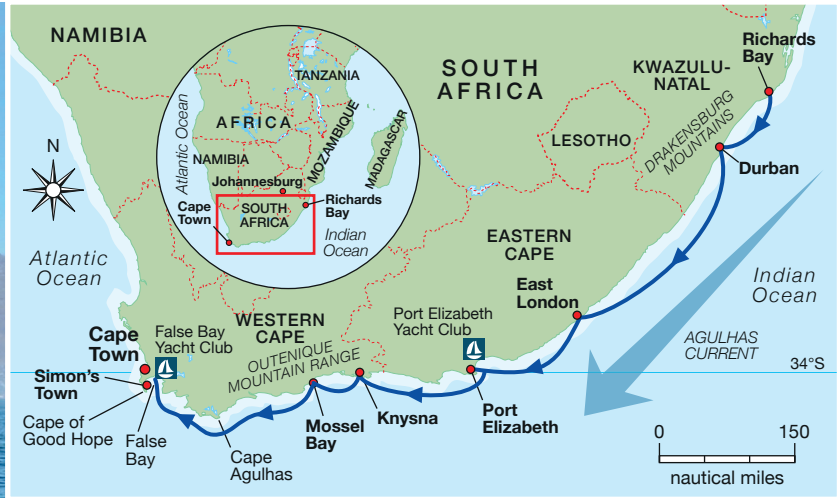
Wrong. We'd be travelling along the Wild Coast to round the Cape of Storms to reach the Skeleton Coast. These names given by ancient mariners reflected the hazards ahead of us. Africa's south coast has a high occurrence of weather anomalies and coastal hazards. With storms that build quickly and fog that rolls in – blinding the coast from view – hidden shoals and reefs become death-traps for

unsuspecting vessels.

The South African coastline is notorious for its long list of maritime disasters. There's the Graveyard of Ships where more than 2,500 vessels have been claimed by the sea, and countless more simply disappeared without a trace. If we were going to navigate *Atea* successfully through this aquatic catacomb, we needed to know what was hammering the nails into those old timber coffins.

Engine worries

There are very few natural harbours on this 1,500-mile stretch. Once you head out to sea you're committed. Usually, you wait for wind. Along the South African coast,



Walking safari at Knysna

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kia Koropp and her husband, John Daubeny, have been cruising the Pacific, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean over the past decade with their two children on board their 50ft Ganley Solution yacht, *Atea*. Starting in 2011 from their home port in Auckland, New Zealand, they have sailed *Atea* 40,000 miles to their current location of Gambia in the north Atlantic, having just completed their longest passage of 6,000 miles from Cape Town, South Africa to the Azores.



you wait for the pockets of calm between the wind.

Our greatest concern, however, was our engine. Our 1965 Lister HRW4 diesel had been serviced in Thailand three years previously and our stop-gap measures, such as priming the seawater pump at every start, would only last so long. The belts were stretched and on their final hours, but through love, luck and lube we'd kept her going. Also on our maintenance list was a broken genoa roller-fuller and a leaky hydraulic rudder ram.

Issues aside, we had to cover 1,500 nautical miles on a boat that moved at an average of six knots, within three months. The clock was ticking.

Understanding that our situation was less than ideal and being of the mind that things never are, we shot out from Richards Bay on our transit around the South African coast with two out of three conditions satisfied: a safe weather window and a good plan. A fail-safe boat was not guaranteed.

Richards Bay

Richards Bay was the perfect base to explore South Africa's national parks and game reserves, many of them within a half hour drive from the marina. For the first time in ages, our existence wasn't defined by boats.

It was an amazing experience for all 



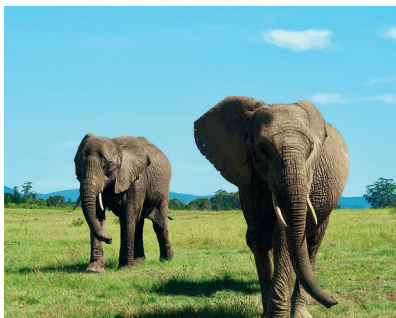
ABOVE Drakensburg mountain pass

of us; territorial rhinos, cheetah encounters, sparring giraffes and stampeding elephants. It was a novelty for the kids to see 'zoo animals' wander in mixed company free from restrictive enclosures. John enjoyed the chance to get up close to some of the world's most hostile creatures and, for me, it was a return to my childhood where Kenyan game parks were my playground. Richards Bay gave us the best of Africa in concentrate.

Durban

Durban was never our plan. It was too short a hop from Richards Bay to make a transit worthwhile, and to clear in and out of South African Immigration wasn't worth the hassle. However, sensibility has never been my strong suit. I had a good friend there and I was determined to visit.

We got a chance to see a foreign town



Addo Elephant Park is close to Port Elizabeth

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'At Durban we got a chance to see a foreign town through local eyes'

through local eyes – spending time with locals in public pubs and private clubs, pet horses, wild monkeys and even wilder dogs. And the highlight: we got to play in the Drakensburg Mountains.

Rising above the eastern edge of the Southern African plateau, 'The Drake' is the highest mountain range in South Africa, an escarpment that stretches 1,000km along KwaZulu-Natal with impressive 3,000m peaks, stunning river valleys and rugged cliffs.

In the Stone Age it was home to the indigenous San's people, who left their mark through 2,500-year-old rock paintings that remain to this day. We



Rhino in the Hluhluwe Game Park north of Durban

wandered through these caves and gazed at red and yellow stick-figures of age-old elephants and antelopes. We gaped up at Giant's Castle and Cathedral Peak, and we drove through the most intense lightning storm I've ever experienced.

As the rain swamped the dirt roads and pelted the windscreen, and thunderbolts cracked through the sky, I was grateful to be in a tin can car and not at sea with a 50ft mast.

East London

East London is a no-man's stop where foreigners are warned of the high level of violence and told not to visit under any condition. This was unfortunately not an option for us. We had a condition – and not just any condition – we had an engine-critical situation that could jeopardise the safety of ship and crew. With our stretched engine belts flopping about like over-sized sandals, we motored slowly up the river and tied stern-to-stern with a small huddle of resident boats. We tucked into a beautiful and quaint spot, that seemed far from the reputation of the town just beyond.

Unfortunately, East London was indeed not a place for outsiders, we realised as



ABOVE The temperature dropped off the African coast

we wandered through the hostile streets of this run-down town in search of good quality engine belts. We were looking for a specific needle in a high-risk haystack. But it was a hunt we had to take on, as we couldn't move *Atea* without it. Fortunately, the prize was secured and after a full day wandering around the dubious back alleys, we were in possession of two new high-quality engine belts. After our time in one of the most impoverished and violent parts of South Africa, we were very keen to get going!

Port Elizabeth

Port Elizabeth was said to offer a marina with a reputation for warmth and hospitality, so we made the PE Yacht Club our next port of call. In fact, it offered neither but served up cold beer and a good roast and that was enough to appease our cravings while we sheltered for the week. When the weather finally settled, we were looking at a much shorter weather window, with only 48-hours to progress the 160 miles to Mossel Bay before the next south-westerlies came through. By then we'd discovered where to find the Agulhas Current (see panel, right) and we would rely on it to cover the distance in time. *Atea* was showing the strain of the passage and near breaking point. The bearings in the genoa furler were too unreliable to risk putting out and



Engine belts held out long enough to motor into East London

the headsail pole was broken so we couldn't hold the jib out to balance the mainsail and assist. The rust coming through the bolts on the headstay made putting any load on the wire a risk, as a break there would cause the mast to collapse. A small leak on the steering hydraulics meant our steering could go at any time, and we had no backup.

Atea was a wounded warhorse at 34° South and moving along the southernmost edge of Africa with nothing but the Southern Ocean to port. The boat was in a state of disrepair, and we felt exposed. The temperatures had dropped, leaving our maladjusted bodies cold and

Working the Agulhas Current

The Agulhas Current – the largest western boundary current in the world – is a narrow band of fast moving water that races along the eastern coast of Africa, pulling warm water from the Indian Ocean across the continental shelf before dropping south into the Southern Ocean. Pop into that stream and you race along the coast at whopping 10 knots.

Timed poorly, however, that same slipstream turns into violent overfalls that have ripped apart the steel frame of 500-ton ships. By knowing the established weather pattern you can catch a window of stable weather – anywhere from a 12-hour to 4-day gap – to shoot through, ensuring a safe trip around the southern tip of Africa.

shivering. Having spent our previous years cruising in the tropics, we were unprepared and under-provisioned. We had none of the required gear to make sailing a boat in 10° a cosy affair: no foul weather gear, no long underwear, no blankets or even beanies. But we had whisky and hot chocolate. For the kids, days filled with chocolate turned their hectic existence into heavenly bliss.

Knysna

Ironically, we motored over 30 miles in a rush to cover the distance from Port Elizabeth to Mossel Bay before the weather turned, then abandoned our



ABOVE Sailing the coast of South Africa
RIGHT Nearing journey's end: the entrance into False Bay



plans 25 miles short of our destination. At dawn, just as the wind arrived, we hove-to at the entrance to Knysna in order to wait five hours for slack tide. We knew that Knysna needed to be approached with care but were blissfully unaware that the entrance is classified by many as 'the most dangerous harbour entrance in the world.' It's easy to see the merit of this claim with a channel only 200 yards wide with an extended bar, strong tidal flow, cross swells, and a large rock smack dab in the middle of the channel.

After a restful morning bobbing around in flat seas waiting for the tide, we had the misfortune of experiencing how quickly the weather conditions change. Within an hour, a flat, windless day morphed into harsh 25-knot winds with building seas. By the time we turned our bows towards the Knysna Heads, waves were breaking across the entrance. Given that worse weather was on its way, we decided to time the sets and make a mad dash

through the gap.

We kicked the engine into gear and drove forward, knowing once committed there would be no turning back.

"Please don't surf!" I cried out as we felt the boat heave forward with each wave. We fought to keep her on the transit line

and stern to the waves. If we turned side-on we'd be done for. A final giant wave passed beneath us and broke like thunder only yards ahead. "This is it!" John hollered as he pushed the throttle to maximum speed, racing to get through before the next set. The burning smell of a hot engine and exhaust filled the air and we cursed Atea's spongy steering and dodgy engine belts. If our systems failed... if the boat broached... if we misjudged the set... if anything went wrong at that point we'd have ended up on the rocks.

White water foamed on the boulders just yards off our port side. With our engine roaring a deafening battle cry, we charged past the turbulent seas into the foamy calm beyond. The next set broke behind us as John eased back on the throttle. We made it! We looked at each other wild-eyed, hearts racing. It was the scariest five minutes of our lives.

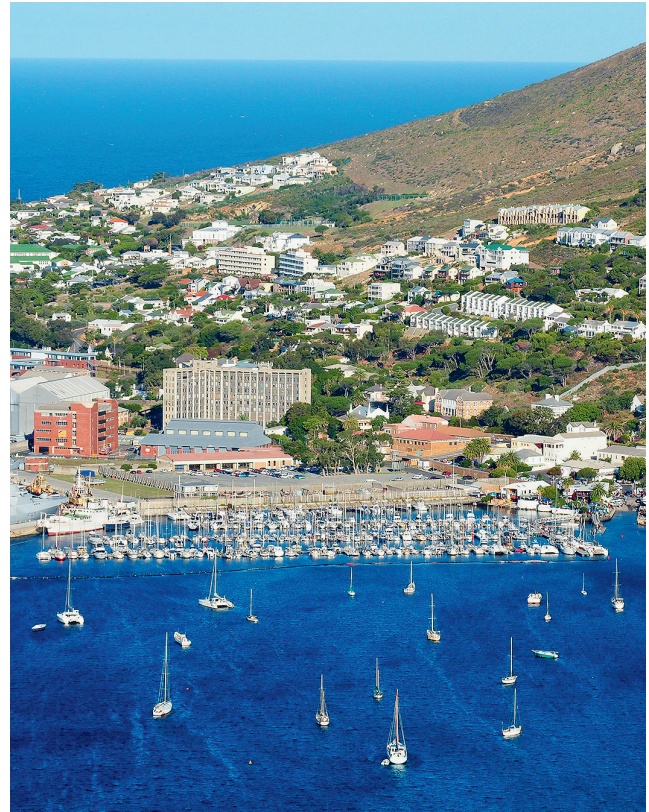
Having travelled from the distinctly poor and rural province of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, we had arrived at one of the richest provinces in the Western Cape.

The town of Knysna is situated on the country's largest estuary, National Lake, and protected by the surrounding



Transiting the fearsome entrance at Knysna Heads

'We kicked the engine into gear knowing that, once committed, there'd be no turning back'



Overhead view of False Bay Yacht Club

Outeniqua Mountain range. It is one of a collection of beautiful little villages along a modern and prosperous coastal highway, the well-known Garden Route, and a trip to the region isn't complete without a drive down this beautiful corridor.

The Garden Route winds through dramatic scenery to wine lands, nature parks, forest trails, game reserves, and into the Karoo, a semi-desert where you can watch ostriches roam the plains by the thousands.

After running about in our rental car, we settled into the quaint yacht club with our hands on pints of beer, waiting, as you do on a transit around the coast of South Africa, for the next weather window. Having passed through the Heads once, we were not going to budge until we had the Perfect Calm – when slack tide coincided with a blue cloudless sky, no wind and no swell.

Just when the club was about to offer permanent membership (we were unsure if it was because we'd paid for it through the quantity of beer consumed or because customers started regarding us as staff), we got our three out of three.

There was no weather window – conditions coming toward us weren't ideal – but if we didn't get out the gap when we could we'd be locked in again for the unforeseeable future.

The local forecast predicted winds up to 35 knots on the approach to Cape Agulhas. It would be better to battle those

conditions in the open ocean rather than on the approach to Simon's Town, where there are fearsome wind acceleration zones. Earlier in the season a fleet of highly experienced international cruisers stretched their weather window too far and were caught in hurricane force winds on their final approach into the harbour. Crew from three separate boats had to be rescued by the local lifeboat. This was not a coast to push boundaries, regardless of how many oceans you've crossed.

Approaching Cape Agulhas

As we made our way through increasingly grey and windy conditions, we maintained



Waterfall above Simon's Town was well worth the visit

a conservative sailing plan and kept *Atea* reefed down to staysail only. The sinister and low lying Cape Agulhas extended into our path, pointing a spectral finger at us from under a dark cape.

Cape Agulhas is the very southernmost point of South Africa, lying 30 miles further south than the more commonly known Cape of Good Hope, but receiving less worldwide acclaim.

While it's to the Cape of Good Hope where all international travellers head to take photos at the spot where 'the two great oceans meet', locally it is Cape Agulhas that is more feared. As the true southernmost corner of the continent, it is here that the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic meet – often enraged and hostile.

We were nostalgic as we transited from one ocean to the other in steep seas, 35 knots of wind behind us. This marked the end of our three-year Indian Ocean voyage and the beginning of our Atlantic experience.

The following morning, our weather plan having paid off, we watched the wind drop away as we motored the last 50 miles through a thick fog into False Bay.

As we entered our final stretch, the fog lifted and the sun came out, and a pod of pilot whales guided us towards our final destination. With high spirits, we pulled alongside the dock at the False Bay Yacht Club and concluded our hopscotch through the graveyard of ships with a successful transit of The Wild Coast. 