



The view from the Haven Hotel's pub is a sight for sore eyes – an elevated outlook that spans coastal bush, surf, and the mysteries of the weather.

**A**LTHOUGH it is politically questionable to hark back to older versions of the “beloved country” – and especially to cry for their passing – one may still celebrate the discovery of some rare and special piece of the past, something straight out of childhood.

By sheer accident, I recently discovered such a thing. Its name is The Haven Hotel, and it is situated on the old “Transkei” Wild Coast, nestled on a hill in the Cwebe Dwesa coastal reserve. The Haven, “paradise of the Wild Coast”, as a 1960s black-and-white picture in the hotel's corridor proclaims, overlooks a spread of deep-hued coastal bush that buttresses a champagne romp of Indian Ocean sea.

Remember the glistening, leonine Natal beaches of childhood? Those dazzling Indian Ocean alcoves of coastal bush fringing the steep dunes? Lagoons snaking up densely green valleys and impi-hills?

Amazingly, I found this at a time when the rest of me was flat-out. Finished. Out for the count. Maybe there is a god, a god of extremities. For here, suddenly, were wheeling blue skies, black outcrops of Gothic sea rock, crunching surf, and softest sea air like a balm in the warm winter sunshine of the Indian-Ocean littoral. No wonder our ancestors, all of them, killed each other for this land.

Up from the sea-sprayed, barely footprinted beach, and across a golf-course lawn speckled with mole-hills, The Haven Hotel looms, staring beneficently down upon its bounty. The hotel consists of a central TV lounge, bar, diningroom and reception area, with two adjacent outreaches, like outspread arms, of old-fashioned rondavel guest suites. It has a majestic view of its own land's end, the Wild Coast, as unpopulated as I've ever seen it, stretching for miles in both directions like a setting for a 17th-century shipwreck.

The Haven is virtually the same structure as that which has stood since the rustic hotel was built in the 1930s. Ask any Wild Coast aficionado – especially Natalians – about The Haven and they will nod as if recalling a weathered old relative.

It's also something they would prefer to keep close to their chests, like a family heirloom. You sometimes encounter these old Natal types on Saturday evenings in the

Haven's big, comfy TV lounge, when the rugby's likely to be on. They're staunch Sharks supporters and they don't like the Bulls and the Stormers, or the Lions for that matter.

Nonetheless, staying at The Haven feels like a visit to long-lost family, even if you support the wrong team, or come from the wrong side of the tracks, especially off-season, when you might be the only guests in residence barring a straggle of land surveyors, rural development consultants and weekend Natalians passing through or making a weekend fishing or birding visit.

Not only that, you can nestle in this old-new haven and get fed three meals a day for less than R600 per person per day (R470 out of season, R590 in season for the best accommodation). Just the fish eagles and narina trogons and mangrove kingfishers alone are worth that, never mind the diningroom repasts of macaroni cheese, seafood on Saturdays (including fresh oysters), braais on Sundays, ox-tail, cob, crayfish cocktail, and other variants of home cooking in a quaint old wooden-floor diningroom that reverberates as Nicole, Constance, Eunice, Luna and Mavis bring you your wine and take away your plates, or make sure the buffet is replenished. There you sit, with an elevated view of the storm-tossed, white-wine seas, and the lush coastal bush, forgetting that you ever had ambitions.

You can go horse riding on the beach and then up the coastal bush valleys, or take birding walks along the Mbashe River (“Bashee” in the old language), into what proprietor Grant Millar says is the biggest indigenous coastal forest south of St Lucia. Mostly, though, you might find yourself simply walking along the most unspoiled, unpeopled wilderness beaches you are likely to have seen for a very long time. It is Edenic, and it's there for appreciative taking.

Few other Wild Coast haunts are so untouched by human traffic. This is because the Haven is situated in a protected reserve, although, quaintly, clumps of cattle stray all the way on to the beach sometimes.

Off-season, you can strip down naked and swim in the way that the god of extremities intended you to swim, because you'll have horizon-to-horizon beach all to yourself, on which to get a full-body tan. I wish I didn't have to tell you all this, so protective do I feel of wilderness in a country with such congested cities, but my writing assignment forces

# A pleasure MOST RARE

Staying at The Haven feels like a return to a long-lost family, or to childhood holidays, writes **Leon de Kock**



If you're flat-out and in need of some serious recovery from the bastards who try to grind you down, back there in the land of work, then The Haven's gentle, lagoon-side beaches may be a better option than most.

Cover: Taking a canter on horseback across the Wild Coast beach fronting the Haven Hotel is just one of the pleasures on offer at this unusually welcoming, homely destination.

Photos: Leon de Kock

## Tale behind The Haven Hotel

THE HAVEN Hotel was founded in the 1930s by retired seaman Edward Reid, who clearly figured he'd found the perfect landing.

Historian Clive Dennison writes that the hotel was established to provide white Transkei residents with the opportunity for sea holidays. The hotel was unusual because it was a private establishment in the Cwebe protected forest region, roughly halfway between Coffee Bay and Mazeppa Bay, intersected by the lovely Mbashe River (the Bashee).

The hotel has a lively history. In the 1970s, owner MD Mitchell introduced a golf course and landing strip on the grounds in front of the hotel, despite his application for improvements being turned down by the old Nat government, probably because, Dennison writes, the state was about to make Transkei a bantustan.

The Republic of Transkei then duly came into being, and the puppet-state promptly decided to turn the Cwebe-Dwesa coastal forest into what they hoped would be a showcase reserve. Fences were put up, game animals imported, and, controversially, local residents excluded. The bar against locals extended to the fruits of the sea.

Major Bantu Holomisa gained control of the Transkei in a military coup in 1987. His reign became tempestuous after the assassination of

Chris Hani, a native of the Eastern Cape, and the Wild Coast area began to see attacks on white holidaymakers. Tourists promptly stopped coming to the Wild Coast and tourism suffered a heavy blow.

At the same time, drought conditions led to an invasion of the reserve and poaching of wild game became rife. A mass protest was held outside the reserve in early 1994. After getting no response to their plea to use the reserve as emergency grazing, hundreds of locals invaded the reserve, cutting down trees and, writes Dennison, ravaging the shellfish.

The army was called in and negotiations were held, leading to the Wild Coast Spatial Development Initiative, with Asian investors mooting improvements that never came off. Later, a successful land claim on the area led to the Cwebe Dwesa Land Trust receiving a restoration package of R14 million.

A condition of the award by the new government was that the land be used for conservation purposes. The Land Trust contracted various parties to run the hotel, but indifferent management led to a major decline, until Grant and Nicola Millar responded to a plea from the Land Trust in 2005.

See Clive Dennison's book, *A Brief History of the Wild Coast* (Brevitas, 2008) – Leon de Kock



A view of the Haven Hotel's various structures from one of the many hilly vantage points that make the Wild Coast so distinctive.

me to do so.

Grant Millar, his spouse Nicola and their two small children, Josie and Sofia, as well as their daschund Rambo, make up the happy-family-proprietor tableau, with a pub that sports a splendid sea-and-lighthouse view. There is a big TV in the comfortable, large lounge, with lots of comfy couches and old Leon Uris/Wilbur Smith novels, not to mention all 400 cable TV channels.

You need to spend more than ten days at a place like this. It takes you back to an old rhythm of resting captured in the word “holiday”, rather than that awful American word “vacation”, which sounds a bit like an evacuation, or an enemy. On a holiday like this, you can read a Henry James novel – you'll have the time to disentangle and savour all those sub-clauses, in *The Golden Bowl*, or *The Wings of the Dove*, which are as thick and interwoven as beach bush. There is time, on a holiday like this, to forget about time.

Grant, the proprietor, is a big, amiable, knowledgeable fellow, talk-

ative and smart, yet never overbearing, and unfailingly generous. He and Nicola are helpful to a fault, and committed to the task of developing The Haven, upon which they have a lease from the government-appointed trust which runs the reserve. The Millars operate the hotel on ecologically sound practices and principles, and they are genuinely committed to providing fair employment as well as uplifting the Eastern Cape community in which they are now rooted.

Is this a model for a country in which, perhaps yet still, we might never have to cry the lament of corrupted ideals and thwarted freedoms? At every level, from the political to the economic to the domestic, from leisure to labour, The Haven practises fair treatment and smart management within a development framework.

The employees walk around with smiles on their faces, and not just in front of the boss, either: Think about it – an old-style South African holiday with a clean conscience. Now that's rare, very rare.



The walk back from Breezy Point, a good surfing spot, to the hotel – about 5km away – is excellent for bird-spotting and aimless daydreaming.

## Travel advisory

THE HAVEN Hotel is situated roughly 260km north-east of East London (take the N2 to Mthatha), or about 120km south-east of Mthatha (“Umtata”). The route to the hotel involves about 80km of dirt road, which is best negotiated with a 4x4 vehicle, although conventional sedans are able to make the trip, too, if you can tolerate the thuds and bumps. (Detailed directions on [www.havenhotel.co.za](http://www.havenhotel.co.za))

A smart way to get there is to fly to East London and hire a car. Alternatively, drive southwards from Gauteng through KwaZulu-Natal, to Kokstad and then Mthatha.

Once there, Lloyd Gillespie's Fish River Horse Safaris has several good horses resident at The Haven, and beach-bush rides range in price from



The thatched rondavel-style rooms at The Haven are basic but finished and comfortable.

R160 to R390. The furthest ride is to Breezy Point, about 5km away. Breezy Point is a highly rated surfing spot.

The walk back from Breezy Point (or there and back, making about 10km), is superb, a real Robinson Crusoe experience, with dramatic reaches of rock-striated coastline, finely sculpted eddies and pools, primordial beach-sand, and coastal bush buzzing with bird- and wildlife.

Fishing in the Cwebe Dwesa Re-

serve is an issue, with The Haven proprietor Grant Millar currently negotiating for catch-and-release rights. You can, however, paddle up and down the Mbashe River, which cuts a glistening swathe into the rising coastal hills, or paddle across it and walk on to Mendu Point, where a whale skeleton and shipwreck invite viewing.

There is a large “golf-course” green in front of the hotel – it was once a golf course and runway, but it's now dotted with molehills. The “green” remains lovely, though, and it's still good for practising golf shots out of medium-rough. In addition, there are proper holes for the balls to fall into, and flag poles.

Birds spotted in the reserve, the list of which on the hotel's noticeboard numbers over 130 variants, include the Knysna woodpecker, the Malachite kingfisher, Narina trogon, African black oyster catcher, Cape batis, Le Vallant's cisticola, Fiscal fly-catcher, African firefinch and the Sub-

antarctic skua, among many others. The best news is the cost, which Millar keeps low because he sees himself as a conservationist and community developer rather than a mere profiteer. Rates per person per night are R470 (out of season) to R590 (in season) for sea-facing cottages, with three hearty meals a day thrown in and a comfortable bed with quality bedding in old-fashioned, thatched rondavel rooms. The hotel is old and well-worn, but the Millars have restored it to its former charm, and maintain a strong maintenance and restoration ethic.

The pub has the best view of the sea and surf you're likely to see anywhere in southern Africa, and the drinks are very cheap by big-city standards.

Go to [www.havenhotel.co.za](http://www.havenhotel.co.za) for more details, or phone 083 996 5343. For horse safaris, go to [www.horsesafaris.co.za](http://www.horsesafaris.co.za) or phone Lloyd Gillespie on 082 433 5662.