

RUN FOR THE HILLS!

Want to escape the summer crush on the coast? Head inland to the Outeniqua Mountains – there's pinot noir to be sipped and cool forest trails waiting to be explored.

WORDS & PICTURES **JON MINSTER**



The Garden Route is booming. Word on the street is that up to 30 families are moving to the coast every month from elsewhere in South Africa. Mossel Bay, Hartenbos, Klein Brak, Groot Brak, George... There's hardly a gap between them any more, with new houses springing up on every available hillside.

It's even busier during school holidays, when everyone who isn't living there already arrives in loaded Fortuners towing Venter trailers for a week or two of fun in the sun.

The buzz is great, but it can get exhausting – and that's where the Outeniqua Mountains come into play. A few kilometres inland and it's almost like you're in a different world. Mountains loom in your windscreen and quirky farm stalls tempt you with tea and scones. You can ride your mountain bike or – if you want to disappear completely – you can hike a forest trail and have a picnic lunch under a 900-year-old yellowwood with only Knysna turacos for company.

Jump in and let's go!

Lions for breakfast

The Garden Route is not just a popular holiday destination for South Africans, it also draws thousands of international visitors annually. Catering to the demand for “wild Africa”, there are dozens of game reserves where Sven from Sweden can get a glimpse of a buffalo or a zebra. Having been spoiled by real wilderness in parks like the Kruger and the Kgalagadi, I have never seen the appeal of visiting one of these smaller reserves. But that's about to change...

“Go to Botlierskop,” says Meike Prenzel, of Avenues Guesthouse in Mossel Bay where I spent the night. Meike and her husband Martin moved to South Africa from Berlin 14 years ago, and they have their fingers on the tourism pulse in this part of the world. “We always send our guests there. It's not what you'd expect.”

I don't actually know what I was expecting, but I wasn't expecting something this big. Botlierskop Private Game Reserve is a 5 000-hectare sanctuary in the hills behind Mossel Bay, with all sorts of larney accommodation for people looking for an *Out of Africa* experience without having to venture too far into Africa. The day visitor's area is equally impressive – it feels like a cross between Skukuza and a wine farm.

Workmen are busy with maintenance when I arrive, getting everything shipshape for the

December holidays, which is obviously their busiest time. Marketing assistant Alison Nell meets me and explains what's on offer: “Our game drives are most popular,” she says. “But we also have horse rides, a restaurant, a picnic area, a spa...”

The picnic area looks appealing: private, shaded areas next to a small dam, adjacent to a sparkling swimming pool and a miniature Water World for the kids, with slides and fountains to jump through. Zebra, impala and wildebeest graze on the other side of the dam.

The morning game drive lasts three hours and departs daily at 10am. Again, my scepticism is kicked into touch as guide Devon de Villiers points the Land Cruiser into the hills. I was expecting a glorified tour of a zoo, but as soon as we've bumped our way out of the valley, the scale of the reserve becomes apparent. We do manage to find the reserve's three lions, but it takes some work and they're nearly invisible in deep shade next to a river – just like lions in the Kruger or the Kgalagadi. Likewise the elephants: They're off in the distance and happy to be there.

The real pleasure of the game drive, for me, is being able to sit on the back bench of the Cruiser with the wind in my hair and just *be*. The views from the hills are amazing – of the hazy Outeniqua Mountains and also of the coastline – and we see some incredible things, like a leopard tortoise the size of a small coffee table and two equally gigantic mongooses.

Children are welcome – they'll love all the factual snippets provided by Devon and his fellow guides. Indeed, Botlierskop is a great place to head to if you're simply looking for some down-time away from the campsite chaos at Hartenbos.

KZN in the Southern Cape

The closer you drive to the mountains behind Mossel Bay, the more it feels like you've warped the space-time continuum and somehow transported yourself to the KZN Midlands. The landscape is a similar patchwork of dairy farms and up-and-down dirt roads, often blanketed in mist. This feeling is compounded when you walk into Eight Bells Mountain Inn at the foot of Robinson Pass – a classic family hotel of the sort that KZN does so well.

Eight Bells has been around in some incarnation since the 1800s, but it was during the 1930s that the farm became a popular spot for visitors, especially seamen from Royal Navy ships docked in Mossel Bay. This link with the navy explains the name: At sea, a bell was rung



THREE CHEERS FOR EIGHT BELLS (opposite page, top left). René Bongers is the man in charge at Eight Bells Mountain Inn. Here he is in the historic Billiard Room, with an old film projector once used to screen movies for guests. The hotel has beautiful grounds (opposite page, below) – let the kids run free while you munch scones with jam and cream.

BUCK & BEACH (opposite page, top right). Bontebok stroll along a hilltop ridge in Botlierskop Private Game Reserve, with the houses of Klein Brak in the background.

IN OTHER WORDS



Meike & Martin Prenzel
Avenues Guesthouse,
Mossel Bay

"Here's a beautiful drive if you want to escape for the day: From Mossel Bay, take the R327 to Herbertsdale, turn right over Cloete's Pass and come back over the mountains via Garcia's Pass to Riversdale, then home along the N2. You'll see plenty of wildflowers in spring."



Alison Nell
Botlierskop Private
Game Reserve

"Jakkalsvlei is a wonderful winery in a valley near Herbertsdale. Go for a tasting and stay for lunch."

KAROO TO COAST (opposite page, clockwise from top). The Mount Hope road cuts behind the Outeniquas through a quintessential Little Karoo landscape.

The Woodville Big Tree – an 850-year-old Outeniqua yellowwood – is just behind Wilderness, accessed via the Seven Passes Road. A photograph can't do the size of the tree justice.

Nico Fourie in his underground cellar at Herold Wines, with a hoard of deliciousness waiting to be labelled.

once each half hour of a four-hour watch. The phrase "eight bells" signified the end of the watch – time to rest. Peter and Jean Brown were responsible for turning it into the much-loved family hotel it is today, during their 33-year tenure from 1974 to 2007. The current owners are brothers Charles and René Bongers, with Réne in charge of day-to-day operations.

"I've upgraded the facilities as required," he tells me over tea in the gloriously old-school lounge. "But I've tried not to change the feeling. That feeling – that tradition – is what makes people keep coming back. They experienced the hotel a certain way as a child, and now they bring their own children because they know that nothing has changed."

Eight Bells is worth a visit even if you're not staying over. Sit outside in the dappled sunshine and have a toasted sandwich while the kids run around. Soak up the views and listen to the hubbub of other happy families also enjoying lunch. Before you leave, peek into the Billiard Room with its original yellowwood floor and interesting artefacts from times gone by, like a typewriter that once produced the restaurant menu, and a vintage projector that used to screen movies for guests. Imagine an era when travellers would arrive on horseback and dismount under the same 200-year-old oak tree outside for a quick pint in the Bosun's Whistle.

Tummies full? Nicely rested? Good. It's time to drive some passes.

How close is the Karoo?

Closer than you think! One of the joys of driving over Robinson Pass – besides testing your car's stability control on the sinuous bends – is watching how swiftly the pastureland gives way to dusty ostrich farms. It's almost unbelievable how different the landscape is from one side of the mountain to the other.

I pause at a viewpoint on the pass and look west into the Attaquas Kloof, where a hellish mountain-bike race passes through each January, and south towards the sea, which is invisible under a blanket of mist. The car's temperature gauge climbs as I approach Oudtshoorn, but I don't go all the way into town. Instead, I turn off about 16 km before, where a sign – "Mount Hope" – points down a lonely dirt road. This road is about 30 km long and eventually spits me out on the busy N12 just north of the Outeniqua Pass. It's a splendid, head-clearing half hour of koppies, blue sky and the occasional prickly pear. I don't see another vehicle, so the sudden truck crush on the N12

is a bit of a shock. Luckily I don't have to duke it out with the trucks for long: I turn left onto the N9 towards Uniondale, and right a little way further, to Herold and Montagu Pass.

Nico Fourie traded a life next to the Limpopo for a life below Cradock Peak – the highest point in the Outeniqua Mountains at 1578 m. Herold Wines is just behind the village of the same name and it's the least pretentious winery you're likely to visit. Much of this has to do with Nico himself, who brings a welcome dose of two-tone khaki to the business of sniffing and sipping. That's not to say his wines aren't exceptional – they are, especially his 2016 pinot noir – it's just that he doesn't take it all as seriously as some other winemakers do.

I sip wine and admire the pincushions in full bloom behind the tasting room, while Nico tells me about a fire that came scarily close in 2018, and how he once saw a caracal bring down a klipspringer. He also tells me how a mistake led to one of his most popular products: "I wanted to make a chardonnay-pinot noir blend and name it after a white lamb, but the pinot skins stayed in for too long and the wine turned from white to pink. I rebranded and that wine became Schaam Schaap instead – a very embarrassed sheep! People love it and now I make it deliberately. The 2017 vintage is sold out."

Everyone loves a story, and Nico will fill your head with them as he leads you through a tasting. Stay for lunch afterwards: a toasted chicken mayo costs a measly R55, and a cheese platter that will feed the table goes for R250. Nutella and Crunchie pancake for dessert? Now we're talking!

Lazy days at Oakhurst

From Herold, I potter happily down Montagu Pass, alone with my thoughts, while the Outeniqua Pass on the other side of the valley hums with traffic. Why would you want to be there when you could be here?

On the other side of George, I disobey the Google Maps voice guiding me back to the N2 and wiggle my way through the suburbs to the Seven Passes Road – the old road between George and Knysna that rollercoasters from one valley to the next through forest and farmland. Like Montagu Pass, it's a reminder that national roads are not the only access points to the Garden Route.

My destination for the night is on this road: Oakhurst Farm behind Wilderness. Jake and Claire Crowther are at the helm;



TRAVEL GARDEN ROUTE



Candice James
Boerqi Bistro, Ruitersbos
"Try the venison pie. You'll want to order another one!"



Fanie Smuts
Harmony Distillery
"We make craft gin using honeybush grown on our farm in the Ruitersbos area. We've recently opened a restaurant and tasting room in Hartenbos – it's called Salt & Copper and it's in the Seashells building off the R102. Come and visit!"



Wilfred Oraai
Diepwalle, Garden Route National Park
"My favourite hike is the 9 km Elephant Trail. It might be longer than the other Elephant trails, but it's less hilly and takes you to some special places in the forest."

TIMELESS OAKHURST (opposite page, top.) The chapel on Oakhurst farm, built in the 1870s, still hosts regular Sunday services and is a popular wedding venue. Claire and Jake Crowther have turned the farm into a wonderful family destination. On his rounds at the dairy, Jake is ably assisted by golden retriever Bentley.

HOW TO DISAPPEAR (opposite page, bottom). There are three different day hikes at Diepwalle. Pick any of them and you'll be swallowed by the forest in a matter of metres.

the sixth-generation descendants of the original owner, Henry Dumbleton, who bought the land in 1820, unseen, while serving in the British army in India. Oakhurst is an enormous dairy farm that brims with history, from the avenue of ancient, ghostly bluegums that welcomes you as you drive in, to the whitewashed church that was built in the 1870s. You can read the story of the farm in the guest-information file in your cottage; it's basically the origin story of industry in this part of South Africa, peppered with characters seemingly drawn from the pages of a Dalene Matthee novel.

Jake is in charge of the dairy activities and Claire has turned a number of buildings on the farm into classy, comfortable self-catering cottages, including an old blacksmith's forge from the 19th century. A few years ago AfriCamps also came on board and built eight luxury safari tents next to a dam. Everything at Oakhurst is geared towards family fun: There's a pump track for riding bikes, a river trail to a waterfall, horses to ride, an archery range, dairy tours, fishing in the dam, kayaks for guests...

"You have space to breathe here," says Claire over coffee in her kitchen. "But we're also so close to the sea – it's a 15-minute drive to Wilderness. People love being able to go to the beach and experience all of that, then come back here for peace and quiet."

I get what she's saying. At sunset I light a braai on the veranda of my cottage, watching as cows are herded home and mist slowly swallows the Outeniquas again. A Cape eagle-owl calls and its mate answers from somewhere on the other side of the valley.

Elephant whispers

What would a trip to the Knysna Forest be without a visit to the final resting place of Ms Matthee herself? The author of *Fiela's Child* and *Circles in a Forest*, who brought the mythology of this special place to life, is buried at the foot of a towering Outeniqua yellowwood at Krisjan se Nek in the Garden Route National Park. There are some cars in the parking area, but their occupants are all out hiking. I'm alone at the tree and I listen as its 900-year-old branches creak against the boughs of young pretenders straining towards the light.

In a book called *Country Days*, published in 1974, Norwegian-South African author Hjalmar Thesen writes: "Like venerable old giants of a vanished age the great stinkwood and yellowwood trees stand alone, swaying and nodding their approval... And when the

people who are closest to the forest feel the rain upon their cheeks and smell the mist drifting up from the sea, they know it is nothing but the breathing of the forest and then they nod and smile to one another in the streets of the villages, and tourists looking for the sun can only wonder at their secret."

Thesen knew the secret, and Dalene Matthee certainly did. If you're one of those sun-seekers Thesen writes about, fear not: You can know the secret too, you just have to drive a few kilometres inland, pick a trail and walk until the canopy closes overhead, until the only sounds are insects in the undergrowth, your heart beating and the wind in the leaves.

I spend my last night away even deeper in the forest, at Diepwalle – an old forestry station now also part of the Garden Route National Park. It's a weeknight and I'm the only visitor. I'm busy admiring an elephant skeleton in the small museum when I hear a key turning in a lock. I nearly jump out of my skin and make a dash for the door.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know anyone was in here," says ranger Wilfred Oraai, unlocking for me again. He's a small man, wiry, with eyes that shine like sunlight on a river pool. He's worked in this part of the forest for 31 years and was instrumental in helping researchers track down Oupoot, a female elephant estimated to be about 45 years old, and confirmed as the last remaining elephant in the forest.

It's a terribly sad story, since elephants are social animals and a female on her own is neither happy nor healthy. It's also an indictment of humankind, considering that elephants once roamed here in their thousands.

Wilfred looks crestfallen when I bring up Oupoot, so I change the subject to what the forest means to him. His eyes light up again and he says without hesitation: "The forest is spirit. It's *life*. When I go into Knysna I get a headache."

Indeed, I can also feel blood pulsing in my temples as I crawl through town the next morning, on my way back home to Cape Town. I'm driving too slowly, my head still thick with mountains and forests and dirt roads where there are no taxis to cut you off. I notice a Christmas tree in a shopping mall foyer, and municipal workers frantically trying to unblock a stormwater drain. Yes, the Garden Route is gearing up for another frenzied summer season.

I console myself by thinking about Diepwalle, Oakhurst, Herold, Botlierskop. The others don't know about those places, but you do...





BOERQI BISTRO



BOERQI BISTRO



THE TEA JUNXION



HEROLD WINES

i INFO FOR DAY TRIPPERS

BOTLIERSKOP PRIVATE GAME RESERVE

Three-hour guided game drive (daily at 10 am) R530 per person. Sundowner game drive R780 per person, snacks and drinks included. Game viewing on horseback: R330 per person per hour. Book a picnic spot for R650, which includes a picnic basket for two people, a bottle of wine and access to the pool and children's play area. ☎ 044 696 6055; 🌐 botlierskop.co.za

OUTENIQUA NATURE RESERVE

If you're feeling fit and adventurous, there are some epic day hikes in the mountains. The Kouma Trail (13,8 km), for example, starts and ends on Robinson Pass and guarantees enormous views. Hiking is free. See more at 🌐 capenature.co.za

OAKHURST FARM

Day visitors can do archery (R150 per person), ride a horse (rates on request), fish in the dam (R150 per person) and go on a tour of the

dairy (R80 per adult; R40 per child). Make arrangements in advance. ☎ 084 384 1266; 🌐 oakhurst.co.za

GARDEN ROUTE NATIONAL PARK

Entrance fees vary between the different sections: R38 per adult and R19 per child in the Wilderness section, for example; R46 per adult and R23 per child in the Knysna section (free with a Wild card). Fees apply even if you just want to take a quick turn past the Woodville Big Tree near Wilderness, or the Dalene Matthee Memorial near Rheenendal. There are cycling routes and hiking trails galore. 🌐 sanparks.org

KNYSNA FOREST

One of the best ways to experience the forest is to join a half-day tour in your own vehicle with Bhejane 4x4 Adventures. The route goes through a special concession area closed to the public, and a knowledgeable guide will be in constant contact via two-way radio. R450 per adult;

R250 per child under 12 – the rate includes a tea/coffee stop in the forest and lunch at Diepwalle. Book at least two days in advance. There's a similar tour on mountain bikes. ☎ 044 535 9033; 🌐 bhejane.com

GARDEN ROUTE TRAIL PARK

A few years ago, dairy farmer Rob Dormehl built the most fantastic network of single-track mountain-biking trails on his farm in the hills behind Sedgefield. It fast became a top destination for mountain bikers, with trails to suit the whole family.

Sadly, a fire in 2018 destroyed most of the network and the park was closed – temporarily at first, but such was the devastation that Rob considered closing for good. Luckily for us, he changed his mind, set to work fixing everything up and the park is planned to reopen in December 2019. Fingers crossed.

Take your mountain bike if you're going to the Garden Route these holidays – you don't want to miss this. 🌐 gardenroutetrailpark.com

WHERE TO EAT

BOERQI BISTRO

A funky farm stall and restaurant in Ruitersbos, at the foot of Robinson Pass. Try the Boerqi Dog (R75) – boerewors on a toasted roosterkoek with cheddar, onion marmalade and sundried tomato mustard. Their pizzas are great, too. ☎ 044 631 0125; 🌐 boerqibistro.com

HEROLD WINES

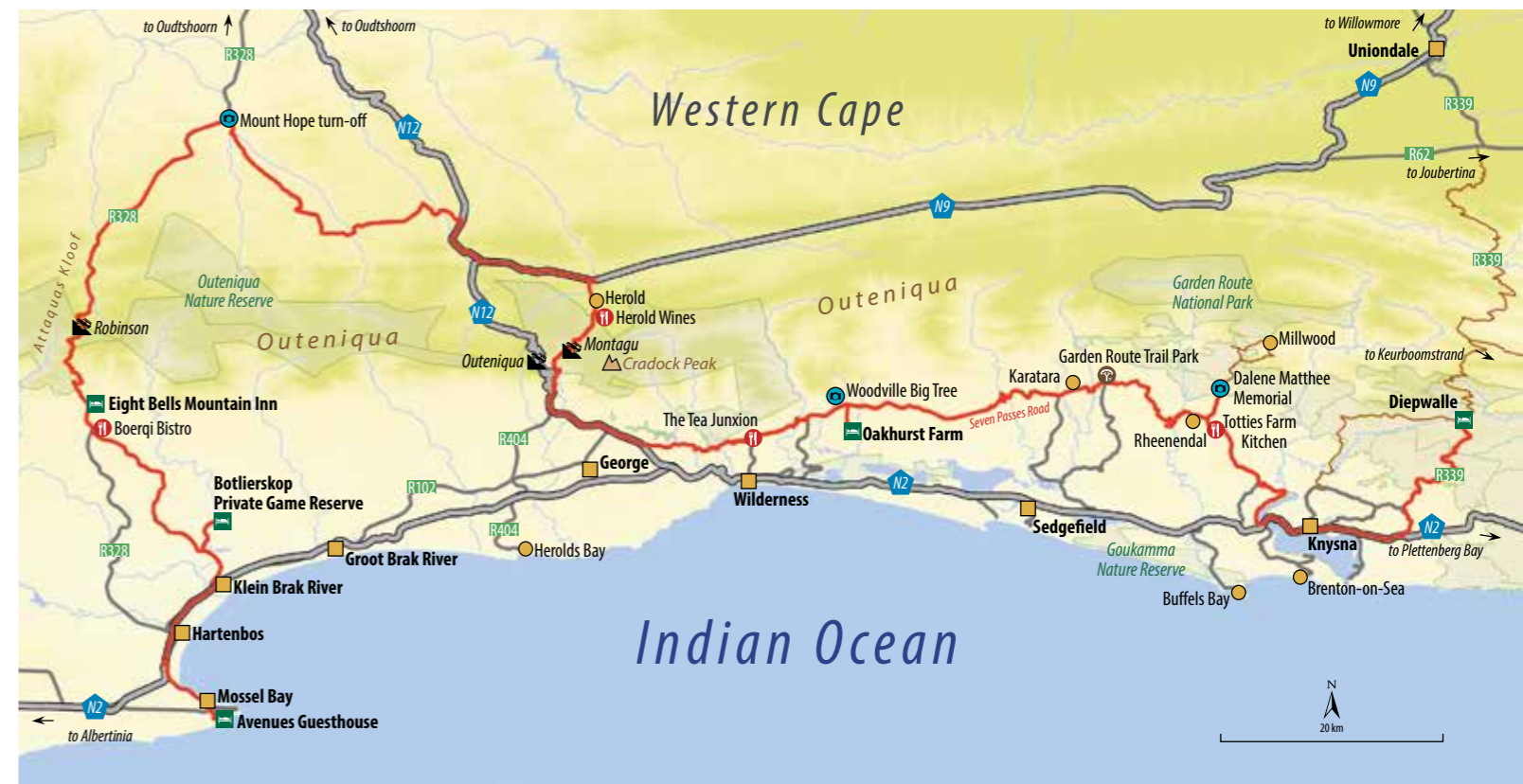
A wine tasting costs R30 per person, waived if you buy a bottle (you will). Meals are simple and delicious. Try the spinach-and-feta quiche (R65) or order a cheese platter for the table (R250), with four cheeses and all the trimmings, like ciabatta, biltong spread, olives, nuts, pesto, biscuits, ham and salami. ☎ 072 833 8223; 🌐 heroldwines.co.za

THE TEA JUNXION

Enjoy freshly baked scones with cream and jam (R50) in a shaded garden off the Seven Passes Road near George. The plants look so amazing because it's also a nursery. Win! ☎ 044 877 1158; "The Tea Junxion" on Facebook

TOTTIES FARM KITCHEN

An institution in Rheenendal, named after Florence Eleanor van Reenen who started the original general dealer in the area in 1922, servicing the staff from her husband's sawmill, and the woodcutters from the Millwood area. The decor is eclectic, there's a neat kids' playground and the menu is extensive. Try the "Bark and Shavings" breakfast (eggs, bacon, sausage, tomato, chips and toast; R58) washed down with a cappuccino (R26). ☎ 044 389 0092; 🌐 tottiesfarmkitchen.co.za



WHERE WE STAYED

AVENUES GUESTHOUSE

The perfect cross between a B&B and a backpackers, centrally located in Mossel Bay. The rooms are simply furnished but spotless, and the breakfast is delicious. There's a communal lounge for guests, and a sparkling pool. **Rates:** From R355 per person sharing, depending on the season. ☎ 044 691 1097; 🌐 avenues-guesthouse.com

EIGHT BELLS MOUNTAIN INN

Various accommodation options on a lovely property at the foot of Robinson Pass, about 35 km north of Mossel Bay. Stay in a newer wooden cabin or in one of the original rondavels dating back nearly a century, each of which has been tastefully renovated inside. The bell-shaped swimming pool is a highlight. Guests can play bowls and tennis, or go for a walk along one of the clearly marked Rooster Trails. **Rates:** From R955 per adult sharing

B&B; R410 per child aged 6 – 12; free for kids under 6. ☎ 044 631 0000; 🌐 eightbells.co.za

OAKHURST FARM COTTAGES

There are so many options! The Forge sleeps six – it's a renovated blacksmith's forge from the middle 1800s and probably the most charming option on the farm. There are also five cottages, each of which sleeps six; four units in the Schoolyard, each of which sleeps four; and eight AfriCamps tents, each of which sleeps five. All the accommodation is self-catering, but if you forgot the ProNutro at home you can order a delectable breakfast basket with farm-fresh produce that you prepare yourself. **Rates:** From R1 650 per night, depending on the choice of accommodation and the season; AfriCamps from R1 340 per night. ☎ 084 384 1266; 🌐 oakhurst.co.za



DIEPWALLE

DIEPWALLE

There are nine camping decks in the forest, each of which has a plug point, a small bar fridge and a counter top to prepare food. The facilities were tired when we visited, and cleanliness didn't seem to be a priority, but the location is unbeatable. If you don't feel like

pitching your own tent, four of the decks have permanently erected canvas dome tents, each with two beds inside (no linen). **Rates:** R230 per person normal camping; R470 per person in one of the dome tents. 🌐 sanparks.org