

MOSSEL BAY TO MARGATE BY HELICOPTER

PART TWO

by Nicola Brook



Our bedtime reading revealed we probably had two options for the next day. Get up and get cracking early otherwise stay another day! So we set the alarm for 6am and would make a decision then. The wind had died down and it was a calm night with little fairy lights twinkling along the canals.

The fishermen seemed to be up long before the alarm rang, so I immediately thought it must be a good morning. Indeed, weather wise, we woke to our best start yet. Clear blue skies and no wind meant missing breakfast and preparing for departure to get ahead of the clouds and rain moving up the coast from George. We were airborne by 7.30 am and already the clouds were gathering in the west. It was Sunday morning, so there was not much happening along the coast yet. We passed the Fish River Sun, the Mpekweni resort and then a rocky coastal stretch. We were battling to contact East London Tower and were already at Cove Rock, to be told they only open at 8 am on a Sunday morning!

Anyway, those on duty that Sunday morning were extremely friendly and helpful. I think it is the only place where they actually said "Welcome to East London". We landed in a westerly direction with 15 knots of wind, which had built up in the 45 minutes we had been flying. We were directed past the terminal building and fire station to the River Air Executive Terminal where the helipads are located. As we shut down, the clouds closed in and the first squall of rain started, so much for getting ahead of the weather. We lifted with light rain but we could see clearer weather to the east. We had another hour's

flying planned to our next destination along the Wild Coast.

Leaving East London, in partly cloudy skies, we flew past all the well known holiday resorts in this area, namely Gonubie, Cintsa West, Cintsa East, Haga Haga, Morgan's Bay and on to Kei Mouth. You might wonder what makes them well known? They are renowned as value for money accommodation and for being great family holiday locations without all the commercial trappings of say, the Garden Route. Between here and the KwaZulu Natal coast, we spotted every outdoor activity that could make up a South African playground for all ages. We saw people fishing, walking dogs, canoeing on rivers and lagoons, swimming, surfing, quad biking and playing beach volley-ball. There really is something to please everyone and anyone from adrenalin junkies to environmentalists.

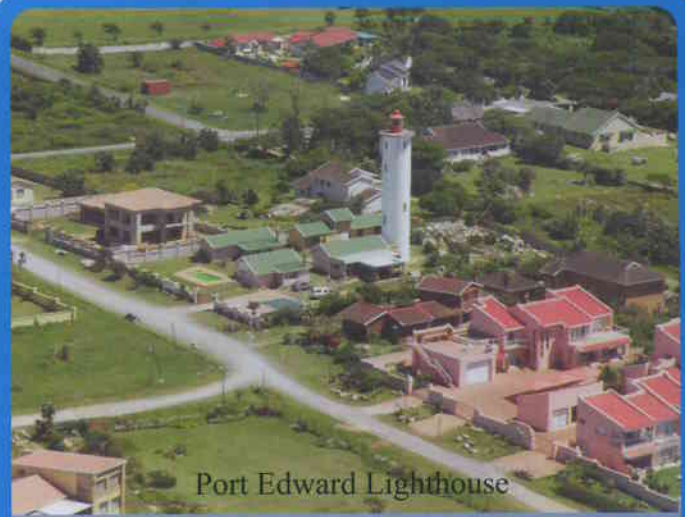
The next landmark was the Hole in the Wall, which is always a great brochure photo for the area. In spite of a number of trips to the wild coast as both a child and an adult, I had never seen this famous site. It really is impressive and awesome, but is essentially in the middle of nowhere - after the southern resorts and before the Port St John's area, travelling north. How great it was to be in a helicopter and be able to fly right around it and study the feature from all angles. One can imagine how the hole in the rock formed from both the tides and the river flow as it sits right in a small river mouth. However the size of the rocky outcrop is amazing and it is well detached from a grassy hillside. One can hike to this small village, taking 3 hours one way, from Coffee Bay.

Coffee Bay is where we had arranged that night's accommodation, with permission to land in the hotel's sizeable car park! The Coffee Bay Hotel has a prime piece of property, which is across a road and a small, forested dune to the main beach. Their sister establishment, The Ocean View Hotel is smaller and set across the Mtata River against a hillside with direct access to the beach. The latter was fully booked and seemed more popular with holidaymakers, but the offering is much the same. As we landed to a celebrity welcome, the clouds inland looked dark and threatening but within an hour it had cleared to a warm sunny midday! (What was the met office doing to us?) One of the Managers drove us across to Ocean View for a pub lunch on their well-positioned deck. This was the first place we could actually see, smell and hear the ocean, although we had been flying for 3 days along the coast! It seemed idyllic sitting there, enjoying the view with the cliff jutting out into the sea.

This would have been the overwhelming impression had we not stepped beyond the perimeter of either hotel. This is when I am compelled to describe the good, the bad and the ugly of Coffee Bay. The good is described above in terms of location, a beautiful flat beach in a partially protected bay and lovely clean ocean water with waves rolling in. The bad is the pollution, which is everywhere else. There were packets, soft drink bottles, cans, papers and any other litter imaginable scattered in the streets and piled on odd corners. In addition to this, the locals were washing cars and clothes in the river at the small drift creating soapsuds, which were seen drifting towards the ocean. Together this totally detracts from the scenic beauty and in my opinion, threatens the tourism. The ugly is one step worse, when I stepped outside to find domestic water running in the streets and other pools of stagnant water / sewerage which were way too appealing for a taxi to go around, so he decided to drive through and splash me. Delivery of basic services in these rural areas is critical and yet an attempt had been made and failed dismally. Ablution blocks were built essentially adjacent to the river, but were later fenced off after being largely destroyed by vandals.

The next morning the sun shone through the curtains early. I hopped up to check for wind and clouds, as this was the overriding start to each day! Lo and behold a perfect morning so I decided to set off before breakfast with my camera. Once on the beach I immersed myself in the magic of the morning. The waves were breaking in straight lines, which meant plenty of surfers were in the water. The high tide had washed out the river mouth and the sun highlighted the russet brown tones of the pebbles. One surfer said he had been up since 4 am and everyone seemed to be making the most of the Monday morning. In my mind, I questioned again, to stay or to move on? The holiday mood was catchy but then again this was perfect flying weather and we had not had much of that. Moving on was the right decision as when we were later airborne and saw the beauty of the coast in these conditions, every metre looked picture perfect. The colours were vivid in the bright sunlight: turquoise ocean with arctic white breakers, the green grass on the hillsides and azure sky. Any of these scenes would make an eye-catching oil painting, puzzle, tapestry or lid of a chocolate box; it was almost too good to be true. At various intervals we saw small streams trickling down the rocky crevices and into the sea.

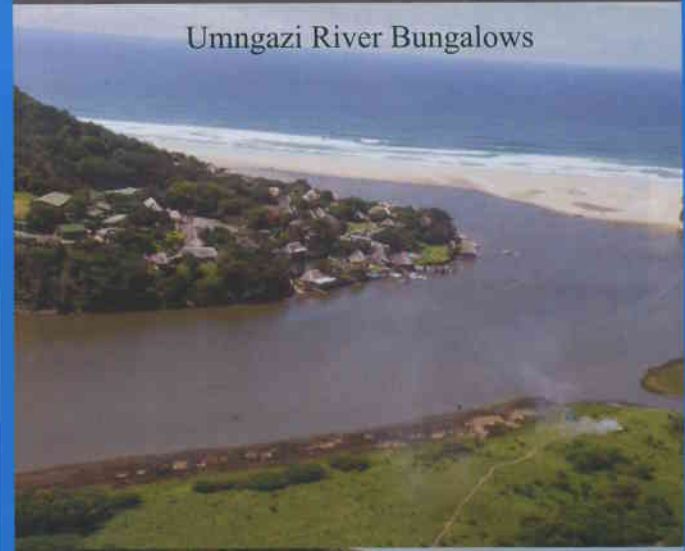
Sadly one eyesore spoilt this entire stretch. This was the mouth of the Umzimvubu River at Port St Johns. From the air a massive stretch of brown muddy water pushed out into the sea.



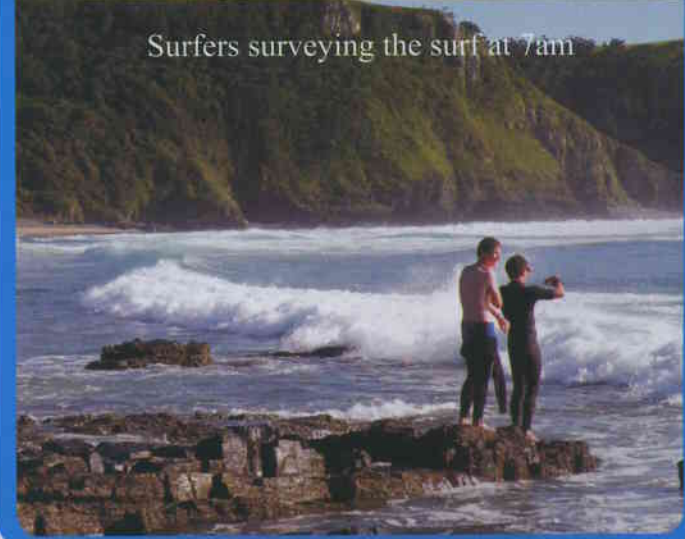
Port Edward Lighthouse



Fever Helicopter



Umngazi River Bungalows



Surfers surveying the surf at 7am



The river was carrying plenty of soil from the Transkei interior and no doubt other solids too, from upstream rural settlements. The impact of this on the estuarine ecosystem and mangrove swamps has to be enormous. Pollution in the heart of urban cities such as Durban seems inevitable, but looking at this, where there should be a quaint coastal town, was shocking and disturbing. Definitely no blue flags for those beaches, yet Port St John's second beach was idyllic in former years. You could see the shell of a now derelict Cape Hermes Hotel that had been left to the elements and vandals on what could be a prime tourist beach. Regrettably even in the early 2000's police guards were placed on the paths between the beaches to protect vulnerable tourists. From time to time there have been attacks on both locals and foreigners visiting these parts. If these issues could be resolved, there is so much potential for everyone.

All too soon the natural areas were over, with the sighting of the Wild Coast Sun. Adjacent to that was another dirty, muddy river and then we were flying in KwaZulu-Natal! There is a dramatic difference here and the coastline is basically developed all the way to Margate. The landmarks include the Port Edward lighthouse, San Lameer and Ramsgate. There are so many coastal developments here, they all blur one into another with hundreds of little red and green roofs, fortunately

not too many high rises in this area. The upside however is green gardens, golf courses, well-maintained beaches and many happy holidaymakers. The balance between development and environment will rage on yet the visual impact from the air was telling and there are no easy answers.

After an hour's flight from Coffee Bay we were all too soon on final approach for Margate Airport. This is a hive of activity, particularly during holiday season. In addition to the leisure fixed wing craft, a helicopter business operates in season with scenic tourist flights every 15 minutes! (refer photo ZSHFG) This is clever marketing from Fever Publications who run the local South Coast Fever as well as other community newspapers in KZN and Eastern Cape. They offer all sorts of coastal trips as well as one to Oribi Gorge. It was time for refuelling our helicopter at the Engen pump, not quite the One Stop on national routes, but close enough. There is a small but functional terminal building with everything a visitor might need in terms of tourist information, restaurant and car hire. They were also efficient on paperwork and payment and before long we were on our way again. Margate hosts a great air show every winter, which will be held on 27-28 June this year, so perhaps this will call for a return trip. ✈

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