

Grootrivier Pass, Plettenberg Bay, Garden Route, South Africa



Listing details

Common

Business name: Grootrivier Pass
CATEGORY:: Activities
Type: Scenic Drives



Additional information

About (Owner's description): The Grootrivier Pass - (on route R102) played a significant role in the economic development of the Cape Colony and was originally built by Thomas Bain between 1822 and 1823. Together with its sister pass, the Bloukrans Pass, they presented some highly technical problems to Bain, who had to contend with rockslides, mud, high rainfall, shale, unstable slopes and the omnipresent baboons. This pass is a perennial favourite and a joy to drive with its tortuous corners and stunning scenery amongst very old forests of the Tsitsikamma.

The Grootrivier Pass starts at the western side of the coastal plateau at an altitude of 221m ASL and roughly follows the contours of the seaward side of the Kalanderkloof (with its river mostly hidden by dense forests) for a distance of just under 4 kms as it levels out adjacent to the picturesque and sleepy holiday village of Natures Valley. This is a densely forested region where the tall Yellowwoods tower above the forest canopy and many of them are covered in "Old man's beard" a type of moss commonly found in the valley, giving the trees an eerie look.

There are two places to stop along the descent, with the second one being the better of the two. There are lovely views down the ravine with glimpses of the Grootrivier estuary in the distance. Birdsong fills the air and if you spend enough time waiting, it is not uncommon to see Bushbuck and Duikers. The road has been well maintained (unlike the adjacent Bloukrans Pass which has degraded badly and is closed to traffic), which is no doubt thanks to the fact that the

pass provides the only access to Natures Valley. At the second stop, there are some information boards. These have faded with time, but on closer inspection this short poem by J.P.Rudd can be read:

ODE TO A TREE

As I lift mine eyes
To the heavens above
For the silent wonder
That sets me free
Just to thank God
For the miracle of Gods
creation
That is a tree

Along the descent the road twists and turns down the mountain, following the ravines and buttresses and allowing a natural speed of 40 kph. This is not a road to be driven fast anyway. There is one specific hairpin turn within the first kilometer, which is extremely sharp and carries a slope of almost 1:6. The descent has a mood and ambience all of its own. Slow down, roll down your windows and allow the natural sounds of the forest to surround you. Cape Vervet monkeys and Chacma baboons are commonly seen foraging in the forests. At the foot of the pass, there is a right hand turn towards the little

village which fits compactly between the mountain side and the beach. Here one can enjoy a gentle, tranquil and unhurried life (if you can afford it!).

The world renowned, 5 day long Otter Hiking Trail ends on the beach at Natures Valley and hikers can enjoy the facilities at the rest camp and picnic area at De Vasselot Nature Reserve, which was incorporated into the Tsitsikamma National Park on 18th December, 1987 and is 2,560 Ha in extent. De Vasselot was brought out from France as a top notch forestry expert to formulate a plan to control the exploitation of the indigenous forests of the Cape.

Back in 1880 this lovely spot was chosen by Thomas Bain to temporarily house his convict labourers during the building of the pass. Bain was a clever man, being multi talented in engineering, geology, botany and accounting. On top of all that, he was a good writer and an artist. He was well ahead of his time and had the foresight that long ago, to treat and feed his convict labourers well enough to

extract loyalty and good work performance from them. Of the 29 passes that Bain constructed in his lifetime, he built almost all of them below budget. Bain was a resident of Knysna and a drive up to the Prince Alfred's Pass, (featured elsewhere on this website), will reveal a plaque erected on a gentle and pretty corner of the pass near a small stream, commemorating his invaluable contribution to South African road engineering.

The low level bridge over the Grootrivier, has an unusual look about it with farm style collapsable gates along its length on. This design was decided on after evaluating various costs and ecological considerations in terms of preserving the eco-system in the valley.

The original crossing of the river was over a drift of loosely packed stones (1882). Some years later, the drift was crossed over a concrete causeway, but the high rainfall and steep terrain, meant the causeway was more under water, than exposed. This caused many traffic hold-ups as the pass had to be closed frequently.

The current bridge was constructed on top of the concrete causeway and the safety gates on the sides allow debris from flood waters to pass over the bridge. A secondary purpose is to provide a guideline for vehicles to cross the bridge when the bridge is submerged.

There is a lovely picnic area on the eastern side of the bridge, where the charm and tranquility of the valley can be enjoyed. At the time of filming, flood damage was evident to the roadway lead-up on either side of the bridge. Flooding of the Grootrivier valley has always been this pass's greatest problem. The road was cut mainly into the shale band, which is essentially soft, crumbling rock and this means many small rockfalls occur along the pass on an ongoing basis, requiring a full time maintenance team. Falling trees, strong water flow down steep slopes and baboon activity further add to the costs of maintaining a pass of this nature.

The indigenous forests of this area boast Outeniqua yellowwoods, some over 800 years old and the forest floors are soft

underfoot, carpeted by mosses and ferns. the Afro-montane forest of the Tsitsikamma area are the most extensive areas of indigenous forests in South Africa. It is said that South Africa's forests have by far the highest tree richness of any of the worlds temperate forests.

These forests are between 3 and 7 times richer in tree species than any other forested areas in the Southern Hemisphere. This is in spite of their relatively small area of just 0.25% of the country's land area.

The second half of the Grootrivier Pass covers the eastern section of the pass starting from the low level bridge (altitude 18m ASL) over the Groot river and ending on the upper plateau at the eastern side of the valley at 151m ASL.

The one and only safe place to stop on this section is the view site near the summit, which provides panoramic views over the Steenoondrug and Natures Valley itself. This is the best of all the view sites on the pass and should not be missed. There is plenty of parking - big enough for about 20

vehicles.

The eastern ascent climbs 133 vertical meters over 2,7 kms providing a climb gradient of 1:20 which is quite comfortable for most vehicles. Whilst in the village of Nature's Valley, you can stop at the only shop for basic supplies. It also houses a pub and small restaurant. There are well marked footpaths providing access to the beach where you might be lucky enough to spot dolphins surfing the waves. The village only has a few permanent residences, with the majority of the homes being of the holiday variety.

The Natures Valley Rest Camp on the western bank of the lagoon is the starting point for several hiking trails of differing lengths and degrees of difficulty, all within the De Vasselot Nature Reserve. Canoes are also available for hire for an exploratory paddle up the beautiful Groot river. The giant yellowwood trees tower above everything else in the forests, sometimes reaching up to 40 meters. All these species are protected in South Africa and their seeds are dispersed

mainly by the Knysna
Turaco and bushpigs.

When Thomas Bain set out to build this pass in the late 1870's, the forests here were virtually unexplored and still inhabited by buffaloes and elephants. After Bain's plan was approved by the governor of the Cape, construction commenced in 1879. It took his team just a few months to build a bridle path of some 30 kilometers between the Grootrivier and Bloukrans gorges. Bain's marvellous work remained in use for many years as the main route along the coast, which would later be incorporated into the national road system.

In 1948 the pass was widened and tarred. The pass today, holds value only to the tourist and pass enthusiasts (and a smattering of residents) who visit regularly to enjoy the quiet roads with the big drops and fabulous views, whilst those more in a hurry to get to their destination travel at 120 kph crossing the gorges over modern arched single span bridges, without so much as even noticing the vistas and history far below. The

new N2 toll road which was opened in 1984, cut 9 kms of distance off the old route, but completely misses out on the real drama and wonder, that is the Grootrivier Pass. Drive this pass, whilst you still can.

Source: www.mountainpassessouthafrica.co.za

Location

Town: Plettenberg Bay
Region: Garden Route, South Africa