

## Alexandria Trail 2-day Hike

The following is my account of the Alexandria Trail, in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

A two-day, one-night hike covering about 35 kilometers. 20km on day 1, 15km on day two.

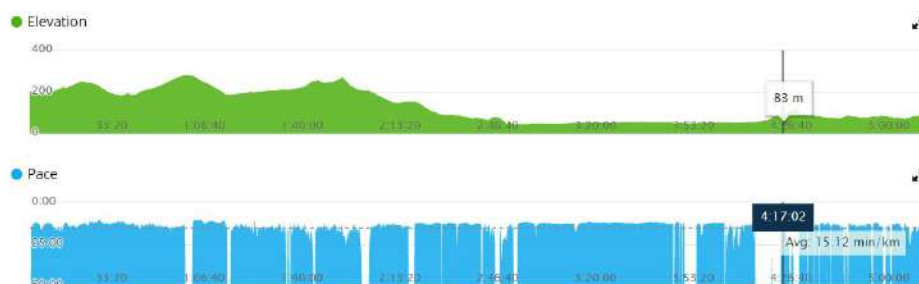
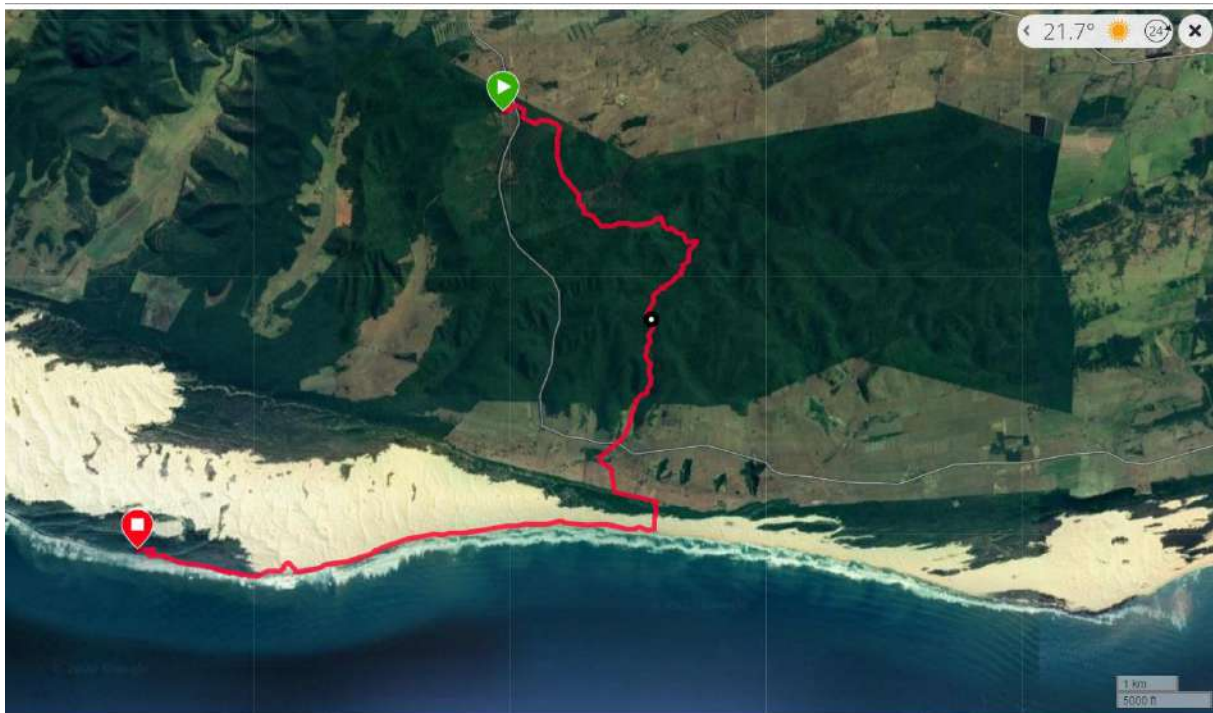
We did the trail over 11 and 12 January 2020.

This was only my second camping experience. Though, thanks to some great friendships, I have been fortunate enough to go on many day-hikes in and around Grahamstown.

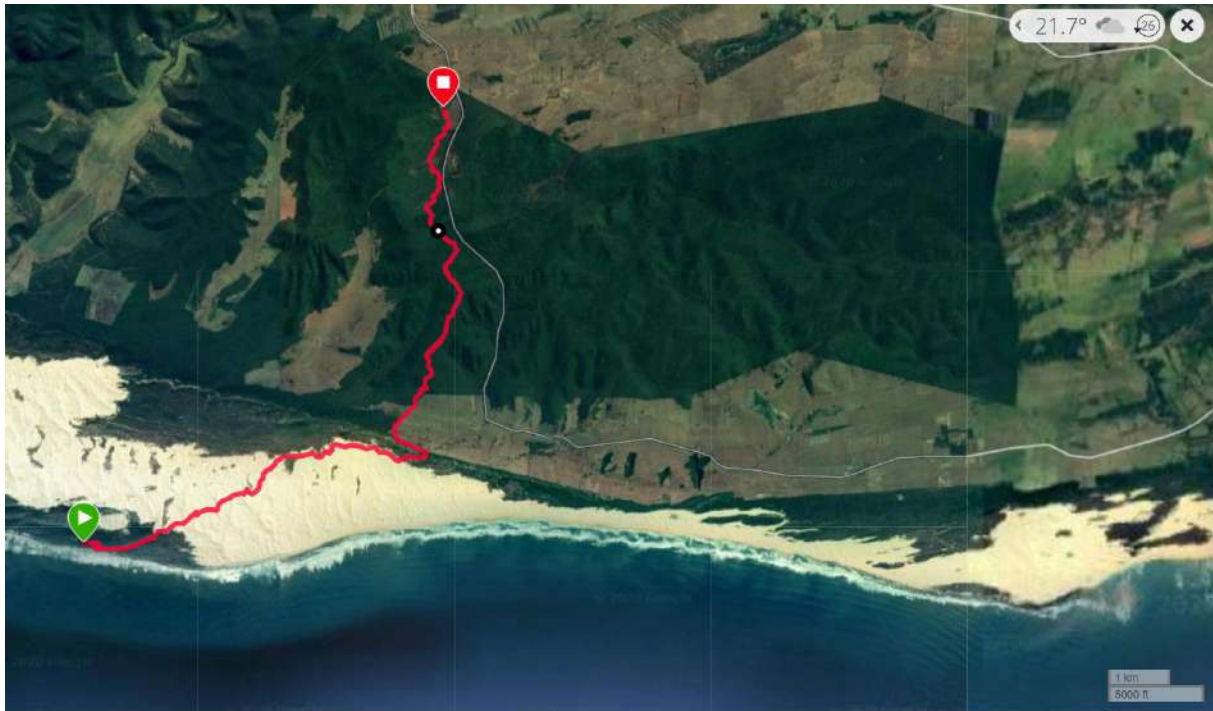
For this trip, I wrote my (rather frank) experiences by hand, and after getting home on the 12<sup>th</sup>, typed up my notes. On 20 February, I reviewed what I had written.

And finally, on 30 May, I re-read them again, corrected typos and poor grammar, and added or removed some things, depending on what I could (not) recall. I also finally added photos. So, there may be a tiny bit of artistic licence where the memory is hazy. Or I just wasn't sure what the heck I had written/had been thinking. Also, during this final review, I had a 4 year old interrupting my flow every few minutes! So I might have missed a few grammatical errors, and switched between first and third person here and there.

Massive thanks to RG for the many adventures we went on, and for suggesting and organizing this trip!



Day 1



Day 2

## Day 1 – 11 January 2020

It's 4pm and I'm lying on the wooden deck of a hut in the middle of nowhere, overlooking the glistening ocean and reflecting on my day. And kicking myself for not bringing a pencil: I can't lie down and write because the ink of the pen flows the wrong way. And sitting up is uncomfortable.

It was an early start that morning; my alarm was set for 05:00, but I woke up at 04:50 feeling pleasantly rested. Normally I am so scared of over-sleeping that I toss and turn all night. My backpack was packed, all 10kg of it.

All I needed to do was get myself fed and dressed, and I would be ready to set off.

I met up with friends and we drove in convoy to Alexandria. The original plan had been to drive in one vehicle, but I thought that if work called me at the last minute, I would at least have my own wheels and could dash off. Little did I realize that there would be absolutely no cell reception for most of the trip. Oops.

Well, it was too late now!



The drive to the start of the hike is only about an hour out of Grahamstown, and we arrived at around 07:30. We were joined by more friends, making us to a party of 7, and at 08:30 we set off, straight into the forest. Whilst shaded, the humidity was high and it wasn't long before all of us sported darkened sweat marks on our shirts where the backpack straps sat.

We wound our way along, steadily climbing up the dunes which had been over-run by vegetation. I plodded along at the back in my only little world while the rest of the group went ahead. In the past I might have rushed to keep up, but I have learnt that I am built more for distance and endurance than speed. Besides, it wasn't a race or a competition. Something I have to remind myself of often.



*Setting off!*



*Forests are good for contemplating stuff.*

When I used to live in Cape Town, one of my favourite things to experience occurred while walking up Signal Hill: I would crest a ridge, or take a turn, and the entire world would go deafeningly silent for a second. And then, like a Mexican Wave, the sounds of insects and birds and the wind in the trees, and nature, would wash over me, drowning out the sounds of the city. Which until then, I hadn't even really registered.

Sections of this hike through the forest had the same effect. And as the vegetation changed, so too did the sounds of Nature.

At around 7.7km in, as we crunched through the undergrowth, the cicadas (I think) would reach a fever pitch, and then stop all of a sudden. I couldn't stop visualizing that scene in Shrek where Fiona is singing and the bird is whistling... and then explodes. That thought brought a smile to my face.

When we exited the forest the trees stopped abruptly and we were faced with a large, green field, all but one tree had parted in this green sea. It was as if we had stepped through a curtain into another world; the open-ness creating a feeling of loneliness after the closed in, shadowy forest.

*Wide open spaces!*



From the field we followed a gravel road, and looking at the rolling green hills, I was reminded of my brief time in Te Hapu, New Zealand, almost exactly 2 years ago. Only here the hills don't plummet into the ocean. Not quite as impressive as New Zealand, but beautiful nonetheless.

We took a snack break and topped up our water bottles at the Woody Cape Nature Lodge. It was here that I realized that I had underestimated how much food to bring with. I was so concerned with food for dinner and breakfast that I hadn't thought much about food for during the hike itself.

I ate my apple very slowly, and packed my fried egg sandwich back into my bag. I would save it for later. Rested, we set off and hit the beach. It was impressive for the first kilometer. But then it dragged on. And on. And on. Whilst the walking was easy, it was mentally draining. The rocky outcrop we were aiming for just never seemed to get any closer.



*Hello, beach... the sandy/rocky outcrop on the right was elusive.*



*Finally there, looking back at where we had walked.*

After what felt like days and ten's of kilometers – but was only really about 5km – we skirted around the rocky outcrop and settled down for lunch. It was hot and there wasn't any shade, but there was a breeze and a wonderful view of the ocean. Behind where we sat was the next part of our journey; what looked like a near-vertical climb up a dune. Well, by dune I mean wall of sand.





*A break in the monotony as we near our lunch spot!*



*Our next challenge. The yellow arrows mark the path. The photos don't do the gradient justice!*

I tucked into my sandwich with gusto, and ignored the wall of sand behind me.



*Fooooood! And an ocean view!*

Fed, I felt re-energized and was the first to tackle the climb, using a rope to help haul myself up. It wasn't as bad as it looked, and at the top we were treated to a great view of dunes and ocean. Amazing how some food can change one's perspective. Had I attempted that before eating (which is what I wanted to do, but the rest of the group wasn't too keen), I would have been miserable. Good thing I was in the minority when it came to that decision!

Off the flat yet-firm beach, and into the dunes, my shoes steadily filled with sand. But I was grateful to be free of the monotony of the beach!



<- Going up!

v View from the top.



And down we go!

After the dunes we followed a windy (*author's note: not sure if I meant windy or winding when I wrote this... possibly both, though it was relatively straight, but breezy!*) path along the cliff-top. Every now and



then I could glimpse the roof of the hut where we would be sleeping. A final descent took us into an oppressively hot and humid section of forest, and then, we were home for the night.



I dumped my pack, the sweat on my shirt cooling me instantly, and proceeded to pour out half of the Sahara desert from my shoes, my toes grateful for the fresh air (and once I got a waft of my shoes, I





quickly put them far away from where we'd be sitting!). Not even 30 minutes after arriving I was nailed by the mozzies. Thank goodness I remembered to pack insect repellent!

It turned out to be a really good one, too! Two-in-one: apply by rubbing on to the skin and get a sand exfoliation + keep the bugs at bay! Score!



I finally settled down with some water and a snack (after emptying out cup-of-soup powder from my bag: the container had exploded), and closed my eyes for a few minutes. The breeze cooled me as I took in the sounds of the sea, wishing that it would wash over me and clean off the sand. I bought a new sleeping bag for this trip, but I wasn't too keen on getting it filthy with sand and sweat.

We chatted, we ate, we rested, we withdrew into our own little worlds and contemplated life (or at least, I did. 20km of hiking provided a lot of time to think, and I set some goals for myself, which I reviewed whilst sat on the deck).

*Author's note: ironically, the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown a massive spanner in the works. Just when I thought I had a bit of my life figured out...*

Clouds rolled in, and I thought to myself "it's going to rain". It didn't. But the wind did change direction in the night. I remember because I woke up and thought "oh, the wind has changed direction".

And that concludes Day 1, sat in the middle of nowhere with a notebook and coffee.

20km, 5h05 moving, 7hrs total.

Some 30 000 steps.

Sometime later that evening...



*Importance of proper gear. Fortunately this thorn didn't punch through my shoes!*

I wasn't the only one annoyed by all the sand, and we took turns having a quick wash using the buckets and rain water from the massive tanks. It wasn't much, but it did wonders for my mood. I was still sweaty and sticky, but I no longer felt like I was wrapped up in sand paper. We watched the sun set, and were treated to watching dolphins frolicking in the waves, their sleek grey bodies sliding through the water effortlessly. I could watch them for hours.

Later, when it was dark, I made my way to the loo, and scanning the trees with my headlamp, was met with little lights flashing back at me. On closer inspection, I realized they were eyes. Lots of eyes. Eyes of the spiders... In the words of Ron Weasley "I don't like spiders."



*Dinner. Soya mince, pasta, bacon and mushroom pasta sauce. It doesn't look great, but it tasted good!*



## Day 2 – 12 January 2020

There is something quite magical about waking up to the sound of the ocean, the sea stretched out before your feet, and being able to look up and see sky above you.



Flashback to the previous night:

We slept on the deck, having moved the mattresses outside to escape the stifling heat of the cabin. The stars were spread out above us, the odd satellite cruising past. With nothing but the sounds of nature, the sea was a deafening roar. Far better than the sounds of the tv, or my housemate's snoring!

I fell into a restless sleep, tossing and turning, getting cold as the breeze swished by, and getting too hot when it stopped. I don't know if the material of my new sleeping bag contributed to my overheating, or if it's because I'm coming down with a cold.



Eventually I passed out solidly, and awoke feeling fairly well-rested, but with stuffy sinuses. Uh oh.

Coffee was had and I felt a little better. *Author's note: I have since been introduced to a quote that is so me: "I don't drink coffee to wake up – I wake up to drink coffee!"*

The rest of the group woke up in drips and drabs, and I eventually set about making breakfast for myself. The hot oats did me good, and I packed up and started to get anxious about getting going. My life is pretty much hurry-up-and-wait, and I am normally up and about by 6am, so to still be sitting around at 08:30 is difficult for me.



*Breakfast of champions. Tastes even better when consumed outdoors!*

But it wasn't too long after that and we were off. Day 2, here we come!

I had learned from yesterday, and managed to rig my buff to protect my neck from the sun, and hoist my pack and pants high enough so that I wouldn't get blisters on my blisters from where the waist straps had been rubbing the spot between the strap and the belt of my pants.

We trudged along the dunes, above the route we followed yesterday, and soon entered a vast area of sand, sand, and more sand. These are dunes, after all.

Fortunately it was overcast, so the heat wasn't too bad, but the lack of sun didn't diminish from the "wow factor" of the dunes. My thoughts strayed to the competitors of the Dakar Rally. And I could only imagine what it must feel like to hurtle through the thick desert sand in excess of 120km/h on a motorbike.



*You can see yesterday's path cut out the vegetation below, near the sea.*

Whilst the sand was tough-going, it was far better than yesterday's long slog across the beach: the ocean and beach are beautiful, but it was incredibly monotonous walking in a relatively straight line. At least here we were climbing and descending, and winding our way along.





Yesterday was much more tiring, mentally. Today would prove to be physically tiring.

After about 6km of sand, we entered the forest. Just in time too as the sun was starting to beat down on the dunes. The shade was pleasant, and there was even a breeze, but the humidity was still high and I found myself even more drenched in sweat than yesterday.



*Hello forest, my old friend.*

We briefly exited the trees following a snack, and empty-out-the-dunes-from-our-shoes-and-sock, break, and were met with rolling green hills. Once again, I thought back to my stay in Te Hapu, New Zealand.



*Snack spot.*



We had to make our way up one of these hills. It didn't look too bad from the base, but turned out to be one heck of a climb. For the first time on the hike, I felt the muscles in my legs getting tired. But, I pushed on, having to make the difficult choice between: getting enough air in my lungs i.e. by huffing and puffing with my mouth open; or risking giant grass hoppers flying into my open mouth...



*The photo does not do the gradient justice.*

Once when I reached the top, I clambered over a stile, and took up a post beside my friend to catch my breath. I looked back at the field and realized that a section of fence had been taken down, right next to the stile I had clambered over. Face palm. Just goes to show how tired I was. My friend had a good chuckle.

We re-entered the forest. It had a different feel to yesterday's forest section. Or maybe it was just the heat and tiredness setting in. We wound our way up, climbing, climbing, climbing. But the path was beautiful and for most of the way my only company was my thoughts, and the many insects doing whatever it is that insects do.

About 10km in, we came to a widened, grassy path. We stopped for lunch and put our feet up. Rice cakes with cheese wedges and boiled egg, and another with banana and peanut butter, went down a treat!







Despite my mild panic about not having enough food yesterday, I was quite chuffed with how my snacks and meals had turned out. And that my packing system worked quite well. Not bad for a camping newbie!

From here on, we meandered on the mostly flat or slight downhill path, surrounded by the trees, forming an archway that seemed to carry on forever.

We then had a short section in the sun, through an area that seemed like a dried-up wetland, and before I knew it, we were back at the Woody Cape SANPARKS office.

I bee lined for the benches and removed my pack, the air instantly cooling my soaked shirt, and pulled off my shoes to reveal a rather impressive "dirt tan". Whoops, sorry (not sorry) about the smell, fellow hikers. The relief my feet experienced was amazing!

We all got our breath back between many sips of water.

And just like that, we were done.

I felt a little sad at being back in the real world, with cell phone signal and people complaining. It felt like I had been away for more than just two days.

But alas, as much as I would love to disappear to a cabin in the woods, I had to accept that it was time to go home.



*You know it has been a good adventure when sport a serious sock-dirt-"tan"!*





<- Food. Pre-measured pasta, with soya mince and herbs and spices. Fruit, various bars, boiled eggs, fried egg roll, cheese "chip" things, cup-of-soup (already in a cup... which exploded), the cooking pot I borrowed, with oats, rice cakes, cheese triangle, and peanut butter. And my coffee cup (also borrowed, thanks R!) with tea and coffee.

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Water, trusty walking stick, change of underwear and shirt, travel towel, sun cream and insect repellent, "plakkies" (flip-flops), long pants (two-in-one type) and warm fleece, trusty el-cheapo hat, sleeping bag, first aid kit, blow-up pillow, several buff's, and a long sleeve shirt.



<- My pack in the foreground. Very chuffed with how I did, both in weight and volume.

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*I had the genius idea of putting my boiled eggs and cutlery in my water bottle. After we got to the start of the trail I realised the flaw in my plan: I couldn't use the bottle for drinking water on the first day. Oops. Fortunately I also had a 2l Camelbak bladder.*



#### **Things I learnt on this hike:**

- Snacks – apples are better than bananas- no skins that need to be discarded.
- Little cup of soup, and cheese “chips” as croutons works a treat.
- Ba Bar’s don’t melt like Atkins ones.
- Hat worked well, good investment. It is a cheapie I got from Pep.
- Cooking pot is great! But a pain to clean in the ridge and around the rivets – a smooth-walled one with a detachable handle is a far better idea. Beggars can’t be choosers though. My friend let me borrow his cooking pot and a coffee mug. But when I buy my own eventually, I will look for a different design.
- Noodles and soya mince = winner. Next time, leave the pasta sauce at home and rather take carrots and tomato with.