

THE GARDEN ROUTE

A Multitude of Glittering Gems

South Africa is world-renowned for her natural beauty. From her picturesque mountain ranges and lush gorges, to expansive plains of wild flowers and glistening, soft-sand beaches, she is kissed by the waters of the warm Indian Ocean on the East coast and cooler South Atlantic Ocean on the West coast. One of the country's most popular scenic escapes is the Garden Route, which runs along the N2, from Heidelberg in the Southern Cape, to Storms River on the Eastern Cape border. The best times to visit this pristine coastal region are the summer months (November to April), however the Garden Route is a favourite destination for many during the December holiday period, so if you prefer your beaches a little quieter remember to work around the school holidays.

Photos: © Courtesy of Pieth Tourism

Scintillating



Oudtshoorn

While not a coastal town, and not strictly part of the coastal Garden Route, Oudtshoorn, with its striking Kamanassie, Outeniqua and Swartberg Mountain ranges, has been a gateway to this part of the coast for centuries. Oudtshoorn is home to the Cango Caves, a natural wonder of subterranean dripstone caverns with vast halls and towering formations, which were first discovered in 1780. The Caves are situated in a limestone ridge parallel to the Swartberg Mountains and are one of South Africa's longest-running tourist attractions. The Caves proved

so popular an attraction on their discovery, that they required a full-time guide, Johnnie van Wassenaar, who was appointed in 1891. There have been continuous efforts to preserve this historical landmark since the first table of regulations were issued in respect of them in 1820, and today, bookings to visit this attraction are essential, as daily visitor numbers are limited to conserve and preserve these marvels.

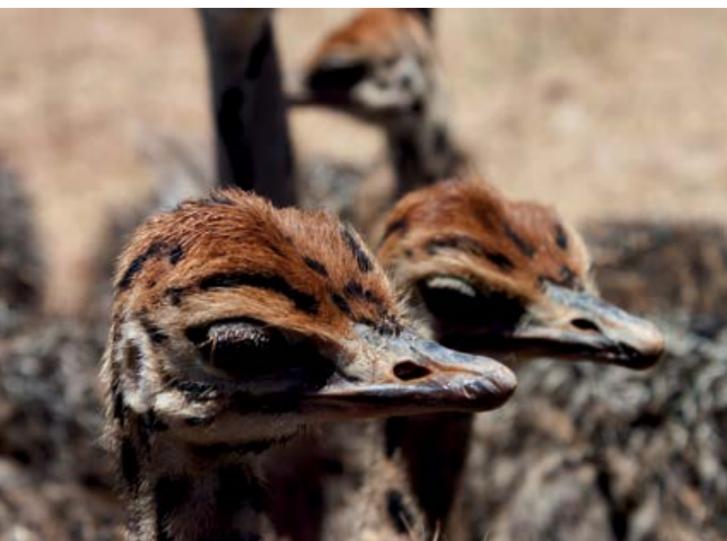
Oudtshoorn is also known for the many ostrich farms that surround the town, and regular guided tours are available through a number of farms. Mountain biking and hiking trails abound in this striking landscape, where the more sporty and adventurous enthusiasts are spoilt for choice and challenges. For lovers of the Arts, the annual Klein Karoo National Arts festival is a major drawcard to the area. Taking place in March or April each year, the festival draws 100,000 visitors who are all keen to experience a week-long celebration of dance, film, cabaret, classical music, comedy, contemporary music, open air concerts, plays, literary art & poetry.

Mossel Bay

Mossel Bay is the historical capital of the Garden Route. This is where modern human behaviour emerged more than 164,000 years ago, and where Southern Africans first met European explorers more than 500 years ago.

Excavations at Mossel Bay's Pinnacle Point Caves have revealed

Photos: © Courtesy of Oudtshoorn Tourism



While most visitors who include the Garden Route on their vacation itinerary will likely be familiar with Knysna and Plettenberg Bay, there are a number of beautiful and fascinating towns along this beautiful route which are well worth a visit.



the earliest evidence for modern human behaviour. According to research, this is probably where the small, core population that gave rise to all humans alive today first began to exhibit modern behaviour: the systematic harvesting of food from the sea, the use of complex bladelet technology, and the use of ochres for symboling. It was also here, in Mossel Bay - on the 3rd of February 1488, that the Portuguese seafarer Bartolomeu Dias and his crew first made land during their quest to find an alternate route via the as yet un-charted ocean South of Africa. During their stopover, they met with some of the local Khoi San people, a meeting which is celebrated at the Dias Museum Complex in the town. Visitors to the museum can see a life-size replica of Dias' Caravel, as well as walk through a shell museum, an aquarium, a Braille Trail and an ethno-botanical garden, home to the famous Post Office Tree, in which another Portuguese navigator, Pedro d'Ataide, left a letter to Joao da Nova.

There are a number of beautiful stone buildings in the town's old quarter, built by stonemasons who emigrated from Cornwall in the late 19th century. Some of these include The Santos Pavilion, The Ochre Barn, The Craft Art Workshop, and the offices of Mossel Bay Boating Company that ran the harbour in the early 1990s - now used as an indoor flea market.

The town attracts water sports enthusiasts keen on surfing, kite surfing and sandboarding, shipwreck diving, snorkelling, scuba diving and shark cage diving. The world famous Oystercatcher Trail is in Mossel Bay, and the area is known as one of the best places to watch whales during winter.

Photos: © Courtesy of Mossel Bay Tourism



George

Travel halfway between Port Elizabeth and Cape Town and you'll find the sixth oldest town in the country. Watched over by the Outeniqua Mountain in the north and embraced by the Indian Ocean in the south, George lies in the heart of the Garden Route, allowing visitors to easily explore the diverse and scenic Southern Cape and the Little Karoo. Visitors to the area can fly into George airport or include the town as a stopping point on a scenic road trip. The area is a favourite for ardent golfers who relish the opportunity to tee off on some of South Africa's most spectacular courses at Fancourt and Ou Baai. For the adventurous, there is paragliding, quad biking, some excellent mountain bike trails and horse riding through the Garden Route National Park. For a more sedate pace, bird watching tours are also available in the area.

For rail enthusiasts, a visit to the Outeniqua Transport / Railway Museum George is a must do activity. The museum houses 13 steam locomotives including a narrow gauge, the Emil Kessler-Johannesburg's first steam locomotive, the impressive GL Garrett, and other carriages from a bygone era, such as a coach from the Royal Train of 1947, Paul Kruger's coach and private saloons. There is also a wonderful collection of steam locomotive number plates, makers' plates, a model train room, cars and a private vintage car collection which completes the exhibit.

Wilderness

Meandering between the Kaaimans River and the Goukama Nature Reserve is Wilderness, an area known for its warm hospitality and goodwill. Here the endless golden sands call for long strolls and it is good to note that the boardwalk that winds through the reeds of the Wilderness Lagoon, and part of the Pied Kingfisher Trail, are wheelchair friendly. Visitors to Wilderness can enjoy scenic hikes through the 2,500 hectare National Park, or enjoy a relaxing day dolphin and

whale-watching in season. For those who love the thrill of adventure sports there is abseiling, bungee-jumping, hang-gliding, paragliding, horse riding, and mountain biking, kayaking, angling and boating to keep you busy. Wilderness also overlooks the Serpentine Lagoon, part of the Touw River Estuary, which has become a popular water-skiing and canoeing destination.

For a more chilled approach try a scenic drives, take in the Wilderness Lakes Art Route, or enjoy a ferry cruise. The popular "Map of Africa Viewpoint" offers fantastic view of the Kaaimans River Valley and a breathtaking view of the ocean. Dolphin Point is the perfect spot to watch dolphins playfully surfing the waves, while the Kaaimans River Bridge provides wonderful scenery for avid photographers. The much loved Outeniqua Tjoe-Choo used this bridge to cross over the ocean on its journey between George and Knysna, and there is still hope that this might happen again in the future.

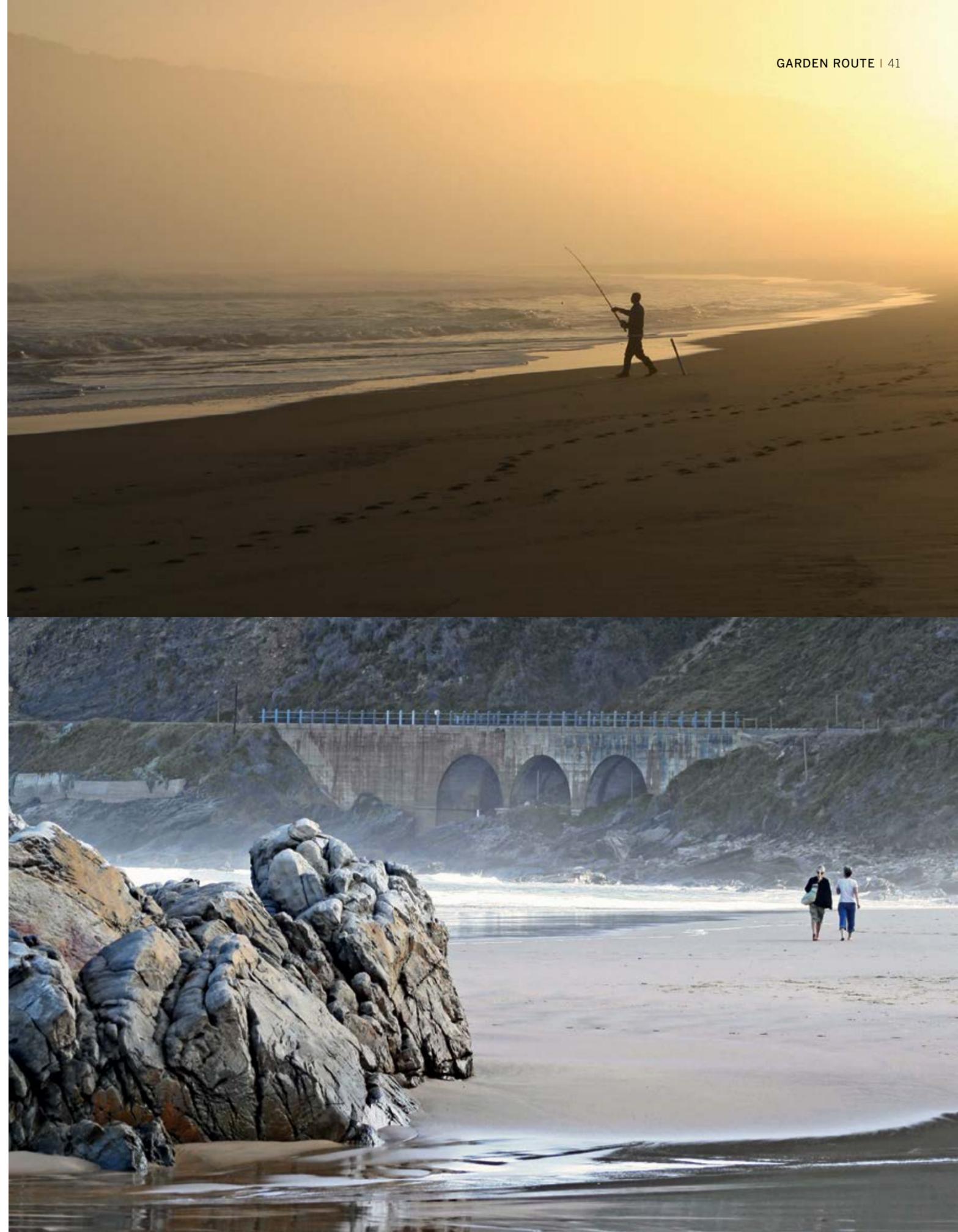
Sedgefield

Life moves at a gentler pace in Sedgefield, a stunning paradise of lakes, the ocean and sweeping nature reserves, particularly since it is now officially one of 140 Slow Towns in the world. For the roughly 15,000 people who call Sedgefield home, it's a calmer way of living, filled with community interaction and the celebration of the arts. The town is registered under the Cittaslow movement that started in Italy in 1999 as a continuation of the Slow Food movement. This means that the community celebrates the town's unique spirit and heritage, works towards a sustainable future and a healthier lifestyle, cares for the aged and engages the youth and most importantly takes time for leisure and pleasure.

Apart from its setting, Sedgefield is known for its famous weekly Wild Oats Community Farmers' Market, where many hand-made goods can be purchased. The Masithandane Mosaic Project is responsible for the artistic decoration of town landmarks, signage and outdoor



Photos: © Courtesy of Knysna Tourism. © Courtesy of Sedgefield Tourism. © Courtesy of George Tourism





furniture, and provides employment for many of the areas previously disadvantaged communities. The Slow Festival takes place each Easter and visitors can enjoy slow music, slow food, a cigar and whisky evening and relaxing activities like backgammon, boules and building sandcastles. The more energetic are catered for as well, with canoeing, angling and spear fishing, windsurfing, water-skiing, sailing, paragliding, kiteboarding and the Pedal, Paddle and Pant event for cyclists, canoeists and runners. It is a family-friendly destination, with four unspoiled beaches, plenty of hiking trails and bird hides from which to spot the plethora of avian species in the area.

Knysna

Knysna is one of the most popular destinations along the Garden Route with good reason, besides being a haven of National Park and Reserves, there is so much to do, in such a variety of landscapes that it can be hard to choose. If you enjoy getting outdoors and exploring some of the most magnificent ecosystems imaginable, then Knysna is the place for you. The Garden Route National Park which encompasses the world renowned Tsitsikamma and Wilderness sections, the Knysna Lake section, a variety of mountain catchment, Southern Cape indigenous forest and associated Fynbos areas

offers visitors everything from rolling landscapes, to seascapes and mountains.

With Knysna as your base you can enjoy walks and trails like the Jubilee Creek Forest Walk or the Terreblans Forest Walk, both of which have swimming holes in which to cool down during the hot summer months. The Millwood Gold Mine Trail lets you see the remains of the old mining village and museum of an industrious bygone era. If you like the feel of sand between your toes, then a popular beach walk is the Brenton-On-Sea to Buffels Bay walk, which should only be attempted when the tide is low, as there are sections on the way which are narrow. The Knysna Heads are an iconic landmark and the perfect viewpoint from which to try and spot the southern right whale who finds food and refuge here, just after the mating season when her calf is born.

Mountain biking is hugely popular here and there are numerous trails available that will satisfy, whether you are a novice or professional. Some of the trails include, the Horntini Mountain Bike Route which follows fairly easy contours in indigenous forest and plantation, the beautiful views which are seen along SAN Parks' Harkerville MTB Routes, and their Diepwalle to Harkerville MTB Route. Petrusse-Brand Cycle Route features jeep tracks, single track, logging roads and low water bridge crossings playing out through pristine indigenous forest, and small sections of fynbos and plantations. There is of course the annual Cape Argus Cycle Race that happens each year in June/July for road and MTB racers.

Photos: © Courtesy of Knysna, © Courtesy of Plett Tourism



If you prefer quietly languishing on beautiful golden sands, and swimming in warm waters, then the pristine and relatively isolated Noetzie Beach that is accessible via a steep walk down from Pezula Hotel, is sure to please. Bollard Bay on Leisure Isle is the perfect family beach, with its shallow Knysna Lagoon waters providing a safe haven for younger members of the family.

Knysna is also a golfers' paradise with the award-winning Pezula Championship Golf Course, the Simola Golf and Country Estate and Knysna Golf Club offering the opportunity for an unsurpassed golfing experience on courses that are internationally renowned for their immaculate conditions, risks and rewards.

Knysna is also known for its annual festivals like the Pick n Pay Knysna Oyster Festival, one of South Africa's most popular festivals with huge appeal for sports lovers, families and those in search of a great party. The Jaguar Simola Hillclimb began in 2009, and has grown rapidly to become one of the most popular events on the South African motorsport scene. The Knysna Literary Festival that is presented by Pam Golding Properties Knysna, celebrates and promotes our country's rich literary heritage. The event has gained in popularity over the past seven years and brings together an exclusive group of hand-picked South African authors who interact with guests in small-group workshops, presentations and events including the sell-out Delicious Word Journey - a four-course evening hosted by a select group of authors, spent appreciating some of Knysna's most delectable dishes at exclusive private real estate.

Plettenberg Bay

With 20 kilometres of picturesque coastline and pristine, unspoilt beaches Plettenberg Bay attracts beachgoers of all ages, particularly during the summer months, and over school holidays. Locals and visitors alike take to the waves for surfing, bodyboarding and skimboarding and the town plays host to the annual Wedge Bodyboard Classic, the 4th and final event before S.A champs on the SA Bodyboarding Association circuit. The event promotes bodyboarding in SA and exposes fans to the most talented individuals of the sport. Plett's Central Beach is usually the busiest beach and is the launch site for Marine Safaris, dive charters and ocean kayaking tours. Lookout Beach is now popular for long Oceanside walks, sunbathing and surfing. Central Beach, Keurbomstrand Beach and Nature's Valley beach all have wheelchair access. Nature's Valley is 25 kilometres from central Plett, nestled between two national parks and is a birdwatchers paradise. While the town's beautiful beaches are reason enough to visit, the town is also known for its night life, with numerous pubs, night-spots and fine restaurants, and during peak season becomes a veritable playground for the young at heart. During the day, energetic visitors can participate in numerous sporting activities including hiking, mountain biking, and horse riding, canoeing, sailing and rock and surf fishing.



Stormsriver / Tsitsikamma

The Tsitsikamma National Park is Africa's oldest and largest marine reserve and tourists are drawn to the area for its rugged unspoiled coastline, and magnificent forests which are home to the giant Outeniqua Yellowwood, which has survived unchanged for millennia. The region is perhaps best known for its incredibly scenic hiking trails, in particular the world-renowned Otter Trail. This five-day trail which begins at the Storms River Mouth Rest Camp and stretches westward as far as the Groot River estuary at Nature's Valley, sees

hikers traverse about 43 kilometres. It is the oldest official hiking trail in South Africa, and was inaugurated in 1968, and is named after the elusive otter found in the area in fresh water and at sea. For hikers privileged to walk this trail, it is an epic experience of magnificent scenery, with caves and rocky outcrops, and waterfalls giving way to tranquil freshwater pools and clear streams which meander through ravines with impressive rock formations. The trail winds between the forest and the exquisite coastline, where clear pools filled with a variety of marine life make for excellent snorkelling opportunities. There are many birds and animals that call the forest home and hikers may come across the African Black Oystercatcher, the Cape Clawless Otter and the Knysna Dwarf Chameleon amongst others.



A Journey of Discovery

While we've touched on a few, there are many other wonderful towns along the glittering Garden Route, like Great Brak, Herolds Bay, Victoria Bay, Keurboomstrand and St Francis Bay that all have something special to offer adventurous travellers. That's the joy of a road trip through this incredible region of South Africa, the opportunity to take your time, throw out your schedule and explore, and discover some of the finest scenery in the world. ■ Lindsay Grubb

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ONE MOMENT.
ONE EXPERIENCE.
ONE TRAVEL.



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