



RUGGED BEAUTY: Looking to sea over the estuary mouth and, right, back up the Ntafufu estuary. **WARNING:** The sign that was installed to warn bathers.

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Beautiful beaches can be treacherous for visiting tourists

DECEPTIVE: The beautiful, long stretch of shoreline at Ntafufu Beach. Pictures: SUPPLIED

Dangerous offshore conditions, which includes raging waves and rampant currents, often exist with no warnings signs for an unsuspecting public

RAY HARTLE

SA's 3,100km long coastline is an integral part of the economy. The sea is a source of livelihood and sustenance, a place of work, a mode of transportation.

It is also the country's biggest playground. Myriad travel advisories for foreigners list SA beaches as one of the top reasons to visit the country. Few locals disagree.

Arguably our best holiday memories are of long, lazy sun-drenched days at a beach, anywhere from the Northern Cape's Port Nolloth on the west coast to the Kosi River on the east coast.

SA's most idyllic coastal locations can be busy, deserted, long white-sand stretches or rocky coves, massive rolling dunes, breathtakingly sheer cliffs, a pungent mix of fynbos and seaweed, abundant life-forms straddling land and sea, with crystal-clear, placid, pools or white horses whipped up by a wind.

And beaches can have dangerous offshore conditions — raging waves and rampant currents — with little, if any, warning to an unsuspecting public.

Khululeka Retreat, a resort about 25km north of Port St Johns on the Wild Coast states in its marketing material: "Our lagoon is clean, our beaches are wide, unspoilt and great for swimming (and surfing). In season we have lifeguards from Port St Johns on our main beach. Out of season it is all yours — pure paradise."

But local communities know a different set of features about Ntafufu beach — the waves, wind and currents — which have also been closely studied by researchers.

Patrick Mziwoxolo Qwalana, 47, a member of the Port St Johns lifesaving club since 1986, and a municipal beach super-

visor whose responsibilities include lifeguarding and supervising other lifeguards, regards the Wild Coast beaches as dangerous.

He has said that Ntafufu beach, 150 metres wide, is especially dangerous, according to documents submitted to the Cape Town high court in preparation for expert evidence he was due to give.

The "irregular, uneven coastline, rocky outcrops and reefs, and the fact that the beaches are directly exposed to the ocean conditions" contribute to the stronger and less predictable currents and ocean movements on the Wild Coast.

Qwalana also believes the remote location of Ntafufu beach adds to the danger for bathers. He said it would take "a substantial amount of time for help to reach persons in distress" if no lifeguards were on duty.

"If a person gets caught in a rip tide or otherwise falls into a dangerous situation at a beach such as Ntafufu, and there are no lifeguards present, the outcome is likely to be critical, if not

fatal, because of the remoteness of the area and the time it will take for qualified help to reach the scene."

Just before the Easter weekend in April 2011, the Verheyden brothers from Belgium, Bart, 29, working as a doctor in North West, and Bavo, a food science student in Belgium, travelled along the Eastern Cape's coastal tourist route, stopping over at Khululeka Retreat (now known as Ntafufu Eco Lodge).

Their mother Caroline Danneels relates the story of the brothers' would-be adventure in crisp sentences: "They stay in a guesthouse close to Port St Johns, recommended by a friend. The beaches are said to be pure paradise, great for swimming and surfing. The weather is fine. It's April, the sea is still warm. To get to the beach by the river (that is the only way), they rent two canoes from the resort owners. They go into the sea. Bavo drowns, Bart survives."

According to a police report, the brothers were caught in a

rip current, in exactly the circumstances set out by Qwalana — a combination of the straight, exposed coastline, strong winds and sandbanks — conditions which the resort had omitted to warn them about. Nor was there any signage on the beach.

Bart had a body board as they walked through the shallow water. He pushed off with the body board and when he attempted to stand again after that, the water was too deep for him to touch the seabed, and he realised they were being drawn away from the shore very quickly.

He then gave the board to Bavo before they were hit by two large waves, and he was able to struggle to shore.

Bavo's family was devastated by his death and stunned to learn of the number of people who have died on SA beaches, including many on the Wild Coast, drownings which have been reported in the Dispatch.

Bavo's parents, academic Caroline, and father Hendrik Verheyden, a dentist, were joined

by Bart, and his siblings Cecilia and Erik, in suing the resort for emotional shock and trauma.

The family used a 2015 Supreme Court of Appeal precedent to push the resort's legal obligations to provide information and brief guests about the dangers of swimming at the beach, especially during a spring tide.

In terms of the Consumer Protection Act, a supplier of an activity or facility which is subject to any unusual risk that could result in serious injury or death, must post information warning of the danger.

The family was also concerned with some attitudes they encountered from tourism operators after the tragedy. Some said the brothers were in the wrong place at the wrong time, that Bavo's death was the will of God, tourists should inform themselves of the risks associated with their holiday destination, and that they should not go into the sea at unguarded beaches.

One stark statement was that if a resort warned a potential

guest of the danger posed by the sea, the guest might elect to go elsewhere.

The World Health Organisation recognises that being a tourist may mean an increased risk of drowning due to unfamiliarity with local sea conditions, while the International Lifesaving Organisation estimates that up to 400,000 foreign and domestic tourists die by drowning because of underestimating the dangers of the sea.

According to Caroline, many of those who drowned came from regions or countries where the sea is far away and residents have no experience of open water swimming.

The World Tourism Organisation's code of ethics requires service providers to give tourists honest and objective information.

This means that beach resorts should warn guests of the possibility of a rip current in the waters off the coast.

Dr Eckart Schumann of the Nelson Mandela University department of geoscience was an

expert witness in the claim for damages which the family brought against the resort.

"The coastline is essentially straight without features such as islands or large bays, and as such there are few areas that are protected from waves and weather emanating from these oceans," Schumann said in a report prepared ahead of the court hearing.

He also noted the movement of vast volumes of sand along the coast, contributing to the build-up of sand banks and the existence of rip currents.

University of Plymouth academic Dr Tim Scott, a specialist researcher on rip currents, has argued in a hearing into the deaths of two British women by drowning at Woody Cape, that rip currents constitute one of the most significant safety management challenges to bathers on beaches with a wide surf zone, with varying patterns of sand bars, channels and troughs.

"These strong, narrow and concentrated offshore flows of water can quickly carry un-

suspecting bathers of all swimming abilities into deeper water, where they may become exhausted and begin to panic. On lifeguarded beaches, this scenario is typically pre-empted through preventative measures or by lifeguard-assisted rescue. Too often, rip currents are a major factor in drowning deaths, near-miss drowning, injuries and trauma, and are, therefore, recognised as a serious global public hazard and health issue."

Shortly before the damages action by the family was due to be heard in court, the resort settled the claim, which was made an order of court.

Khululeka acknowledged its failure to comply with its legal duty to warn the Verheyden brothers of the potential danger of swimming at Ntafufu beach "where local knowledge is required to identify the risks" of rip currents.

However, the family has said the legal claim was never about receiving money for the death of their son. All the money paid over by Khululeka has gone into a non-profit organisation Safe Coastal Tourism, which works to ensure information on dangerous beach conditions is available to visitors.

Lifesaving SA has expressed support for the Safe Coastal Tourism programme to place suitable warning signs on all beaches on the SA coast and at all aquatic venues.

Khululeka, now Ntafufu Eco Lodge must place a sign on Ntafufu beach and on the lodge property warning of the possible presence of rip tides and the danger of swimming in the ocean in the absence of a lifeguard.

Unsurprisingly, due to remote locations, beaches often are associated with a nearby resort, camping or picnic site, and vice versa.



OVERVIEW: An overhead shot of the Ntafufu beach and estuary as well as the track taken by Dr Dr Eckart Schumann when he was examining the beach.

British coroner warns of SA's risky coast

The British coroner for Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin issued an inquest report in 2015 in relation to the deaths on December 4 2014 of Summer Leigh Robertson, 21, and Alice Rebecca Barnett, 19, who drowned while swimming off Woody Cape beach.

The two women were part of a group of volunteers deployed by Latitude Global Volunteering, an international charity based in the UK, on a 10-week healthcare programme in SA.

Five volunteers went wading in the seawater while attending a

debriefing session at a backpackers at Woody Cape, when they were caught in a rip tide. Three survived.

The bodies of Summer and Alice were recovered the next day. Coroner John Ellery submitted a special report to Latitude to prevent future deaths. He said that while Latitude had done a generic risk assessment of swimming, there was no specific risk assessment for rip currents and that they could pose a danger to anyone entering the water.

Expert opinion in the coroner's hearing by Dr Tim Scott of Plymouth

University showed "an ever present danger or risk of rip currents along this stretch of coast (and other parts in the world) and local knowledge was essential in order to identify those risks."

The risk could be to a whole stretch of beach, yet at different places and at different times, pose greater or lesser risk. "Anyone entering the water should be warned or made aware of the presence or possible presence of a rip current by whatever means are reasonable and appropriate for the location," Ellery found. — **DDC**