

West Coast National Park Access for Mobility Impaired Guests



West Coast National Park is located up the Atlantic West Coast of South Africa, approximately an hour's drive north of Cape Town along the R27. The park is dominated by coastal strandveld and surrounds *Langebaan Lagoon*, a RAMSAR site of global importance for migratory wading birds. The park also includes coastal islands at the mouth of Saldanha Bay, where there are important breeding locations for several sea-birds such as penguins, gannets and cormorants. The western peninsula offers visitors views and access to the Atlantic Ocean at *Tsaarsbank* and the northern section of the peninsula is known as *Postberg* and is only open to the public at certain times of year when it is flower season. The northern section of the lagoon is a multi-functional section for most water sports, the central section is restricted to sail or paddle boats and angling is forbidden, while the southern section is the Wilderness section.



Aerial shot of the Lagoon



Breeding Seabirds



Flower Season in the *Postberg* Section

Visitors to the park can enter either from the Main Gate on the R27 or through the Langebaan Gate. At both locations visitors in wheelchairs can remain in their vehicles and the park staff will process the entrance through one's vehicle window. The multi-recreational and sailing sections of the park are not that accessible. Wheelchair users will need assistance to get onto any of the piers as they have steps. Most of the accommodation and facilities of the park are in the Wilderness Area and there are accessible facilities at *Geelbek*, *Duinepos* and *Abrahamskraal*.

Geelbek Restaurant and Wedding Venue: Geelbek is a historic homestead, operated as a public private partnership. The operator runs by a superb restaurant and wedding venue and there is also an information centre here for historical and ecological information on the park. There are accessible toilets at Geelbek, although the ramp into the facility is short and thus steep and the door is difficult to open from a wheelchair because of the incline. The ramp should be extended and include a level section by the door.



Photo by Johannes van Niekerk



Geelbek is an extremely popular wedding venue. Vows can be said in Churchhaven's hundred year old church on the beach. Churchhaven is a white-washed village within the park. The little Anglican Chapel of St Peter was founded in 1901. Receptions are held at Geelbek Restaurant. The restaurant is situated on the lagoon in the Geelbek main house. This Cape Dutch building is a National Monument with beautiful views of the lagoon and the park. Geelbek's marquee can seat from 60 to 180 people. Geelbek provides an all-inclusive wedding service.



The restaurant is open to the public daily from 9am – 5pm, 7 days a week. The entire building is easily accessed in a wheelchair. The parking area is open plan and on loose gravel, but there is usually space to park on a grass verge which offers a better surface for wheelchair users to disembark. There is a paved stone pathway from the parking all the way to the main building's entrance, so access is easily achieved. The restaurant is family friendly and has a children's obstacle course. The restaurant has won many awards since it began operating and stimulates all five senses when it comes to plating up West Coast and South African cuisine, with a magnificent range of tantalizing dishes combining 300 year old recipes with trendy modern twists. Popular dishes include: several seafood dishes, snoek salad with strawberries, bobotie, our unique ostrich burgers and Cape Malay curries.

Bird Hides: Another major attraction of West Coast NP is the birdlife and there are 2 hides at Geelbek, but only one is accessible in a wheelchair. This accessible hide is about 300m from the main building along the tar access road. There is then a short distance over open ground before one reaches a considerable boardwalk. This is because of the tidal nature of the lagoon and to cross over the fringing mudflats and pans. There is a small ridge at the start of the boardwalk; but once onto the boardwalk proper the surface should not pose many problems to a wheelchair user. Chairs with small front casters may have to watch the gap between planks in a few places, but the boardwalk has significant kick-plates along both its sides for the duration of the route, so there is never a danger of falling off. Once inside the hide the front section has no benches, so a person in a chair can approach right up to the viewing slot. However the viewing slots on the sides have fixed seating benches in front of them which means these slots are not as convenient to look out of. Another access challenge is that the viewing slots have wooden covers that users of the hide are supposed to close when they leave and no-one else is in the hide. If a wheelchair user is alone this will be a little difficult, particularly where the fixed benches prevent access to the slots.



Start of the long boardwalk to the hide



The hide from the front



Flamingos are frequently present

There are other hides in the park at Seeberg, at Abrahamskraal, one in the salt marsh behind Geelbek and the second hide at Geelbek mentioned above. None of these are independently accessible in a wheelchair and some are plain inaccessible for reasons such as steps along the access route, crossing over difficult terrain or inappropriate layout inside the hide. Hopefully this situation will be addressed in future as it is not right that constructed facilities are not accessible to all visitors to the park.



Accessible Accommodation: There is a variety of accommodation options in the park, including house-boats, cottages, converted stables and chalets, but only the Abrahamskraal Cottage and a couple of the chalets at Duinepos have adaptations to accommodate guests in wheelchairs.

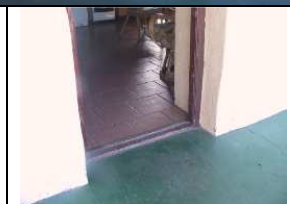
Abrahamskraal Cottage: is a historic Cape Dutch style homestead of great beauty and charm that the park has converted into guest accommodation. The park has had the foresight to make the unit accessible to guests with mobility impairment by providing an access ramp into the building and a ramp into the bathroom and providing enabling equipment with the toilet, shower and basin in one of the bathrooms. However a combination of wear-and-tear and incorrect selection or positioning of equipment means that the unit has a few challenges at present. The park management has been made aware of these and hopefully the images and info will soon be changed for the better.



The first challenge occurs in the erosion of the ramp. In 2007 it was in good condition as shown on the left. However by 2011 it had eroded considerably. Its current condition is shown below left and without help it is not accessible to a wheelchair user. The veranda of the cottage has also received a make-over to include some shade and outdoor tables as shown below. The table of the left of the veranda is too close to the supporting pole to allow a wheelchair to pass, while the one on the right hand side does have sufficient space between the table and support pole so that a wheelchair user can still get to the braai (barbecue).



There is a small ridge (right) at the entrance to the cottage but it shouldn't affect anyone from entering. Once inside one enters a magnificent spacious Cape Dutch kitchen (shown from various angles below). Because of the space most of the facilities such as the fridge, stove, fireplace, sink, cupboards and dining room table are relatively accessible without having any enabling adaptations.



The fridge-freezer, geysers and stove are all gas operated. Electricity in the house is provided by solar energy. There are no points or plugs for electric equipment and guests are requested to use the lights sparingly. Tap water comes from a well-point and is safe to drink, however guests may

not be accustomed to the taste so they are welcome to provide their own drinking water.



The first bedroom chamber has a double bed. Space alongside the bed is limited, but the bed, which is a good height for transferring, can be shifted slightly to accommodate a wheelchair alongside it. The bedside tables with candle lanterns are also convenient. This bedroom has an en suite bathroom but it is very small and while there is a steep ramp, there is no space for manoeuvring and it is not the bathroom that has been adapted for use by guests in wheelchairs.

The second bedroom (shown below) has more space all round. There are two single beds, each with pull-out beds below them. These beds are lower than the double bed and perhaps not as easy to transfer between. The old antique wardrobe is fairly easy to access though and when closed holds a full length mirror that is convenient for a wheelchair user.



From this second bedroom descends the adapted ablutions. Because the cottage was an existing historic homestead it does not meet the conventional layout of an accessible bathroom and the park has made a great effort to provide access. The floor of the ablutions is considerably about a foot lower than the bedroom and although best use of the available space has been made in providing the ramp, it is quite steep and some frailer wheelchair users may require assistance to descend/ascend.



The ablution's basin is suitably accessible, with clearance below and lever taps for easy activation. The mirror is too high for a wheelchair user and is not tilted.



The rear grab rail is a little high and the grab rail on the adjacent wall is attached vertically. This may be fine for frail people to pull themselves upright, but does not help a wheelchair user transfer to and from their chair onto the toilet. This should be an easy thing to rectify. Another shortcoming is that the basin is just too far to be within reach of someone on the toilet.

The roll-in shower is the biggest shortcoming of the ablutions. The seat to transfer onto is not an adequate size to transfer onto (it is actually a foot scrubbing shelf). The rail on the adjacent wall is out of reach and thus no use to transfer or support a wheelchair user, while the one on the wall with the seat is also in the wrong place and would interfere with a person if the seat was large enough to sit on. All these elements are easily resolved and hopefully a fully functional shower will soon be available. In the meantime a dining room chair is a viable option. The shower head is shown loose in the image on the right, but it can be attached to a height adjustable sliding pole so that standing people can also use the facility and seated people can balance themselves while they shower.



Duinepos Chalets: Duinepos is a community empowerment initiative. The rest camp is within the park, but operated by local people from the periphery. There are currently 11 four-bed chalets of which 2 have been equipped with accessible ablutions.



Each chalet offers 2 bedrooms, an open plan kitchen, lounge, fire place, shower, toilet and an outdoor braai area. Other facilities include: a swimming pool and a communal braai and boma area. There is ample flat space for parking vehicles, although the pathways have been topped with loose stones, so wheelchairs with small front wheels may find movement along these paths difficult.



Inside the units are spacious, though tables and chairs may have to be shifted to allow for ease of movement for guests in wheelchairs. There is a small ridge and a welcome mat to get in the front door, but this shouldn't pose a problem to entering in a wheelchair.



The bedrooms have good space between the beds to allow for wheelchair movement. The kitchen has no clearance below the sink, but there are lever taps on its sink. There is clearance beneath a work/eating surface, which is good.



The accessible toilet has most of the requirements. The flusher is on the open side. The rear rail is well placed. The basin is within reach of a person using the toilet and is equipped with lever taps. The only downfall is that the cranked rail on the adjacent wall is positioned too high up the wall to be able to be used for support or transfer between toilet and wheelchair. The mirror above the basin should be angled so that it can be height adjusted for low people (i.e. folk in wheelchairs).



The roll-in shower is where the accessibility needs most attention. The seat for transfer is not appropriate for a person to use as the surface area is not large enough to support an adult. The taps are good and the shower head is detachable and on a height adjustable pole. The cranked grab rail needs repositioned so that a horizontal section run below the taps to allow for support and transferring.



Spring Flowers in the Postberg Section: The Postberg Section of the park is only open to the public during flower season in August and September – this section is privately owned and access is through contractual arrangement. There is also the presence of several antelope species and zebra making this the best part of the park for game viewing. Most of the viewing of the flowers is done from the confines of a motor vehicle. There are a couple of picnic sites and a viewing site overlooking the lagoon. The pathway to this latter facility becomes too narrow for passage in a wheelchair. There are toilet facilities that are spacious and can be easily accessed. However no assisting rails are present.

