

7 things to do in and around Thomas River

Words Jon Minster

1 Explore the village

Each restored building in Old Thomas River has a story to tell. Jeff Sansom knows them all and he'll happily show you around. The village library, for example, used to be a school – a few of the older members of the Thomas River farming community remember reciting their times tables there.

Jeff also has a collection of old cars, car parts and other paraphernalia, all housed in the Motor Museum. "I'm always getting phone calls from other enthusiasts looking for parts," he says. "We usually work out some exchange system." If you've been desperately searching for a 1962 Mercedes camshaft, perhaps Jeff's your man.

There's also a museum dedicated to early modes of transport, with all sorts of wagons as well as a 1929 Rugby Motorhome, which Jeff occasionally fires up. "She still runs like a dream," he assures me.

Jeff is usually in East London during the week, so it's best to visit on a weekend.

Cost: Free.

Contact: 045 843 1504;

www.oldthomasriver.co.za

2 Look at rock art

The Rock Art Centre is operated by Victor Biggs, an ex-farmer who has turned his attention to preserving this threatened heritage. His methods may not be conventional (Victor searches for new rock-art sites using a dowsing rod), but an hour spent in his company is a fascinating experience.

The inside of the centre looks like a cave, and Victor has reproduced a number of artworks on the walls. He uses these illustrations to great effect when describing the spiritual significance of rock art to the Bushmen.

Victor can also take you on an outing to a number of real rock-art sites in the vicinity. "The Eastern Cape has some of the most interesting rock art in the country," he says.

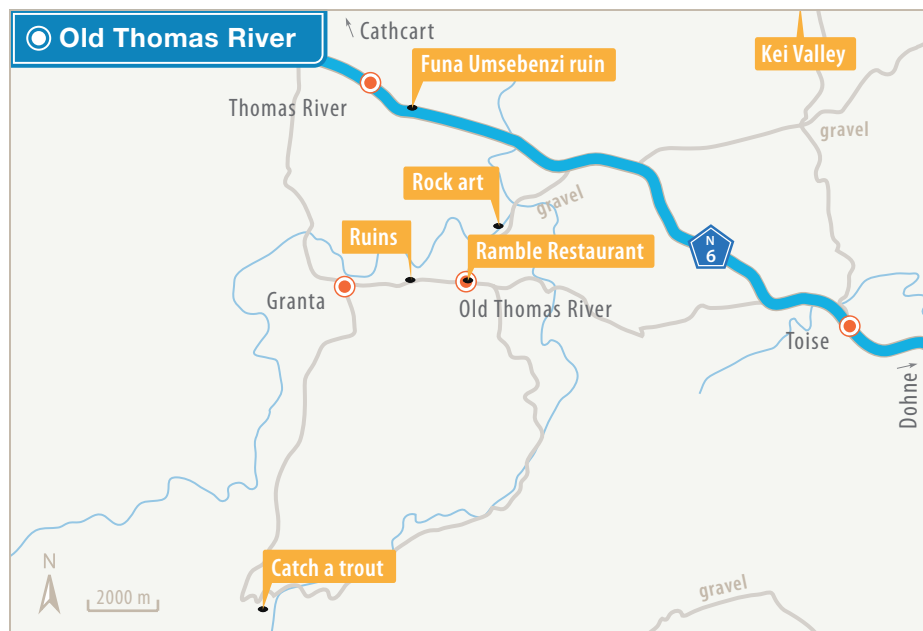
Cost: A donation will get you into the centre. An outing costs R50 per person or a minimum fee of R250.

Contact: 045 843 1369;

linvic@thomasriver.com

3 Fish for trout

If you're in the mood for a bit of fly-fishing, buy a permit at the Ramble Restaurant in the village and take a drive up to Reigate Dam, at the top of the Amatole escarpment. Even if



you're not planning to fish, the dam is worth a visit. On a clear day you can see all the way to the mountains of the southern Drakensberg.

Follow the circular dirt road out of the village in either direction and look for the signpost to the dam when you can't get any closer to the mountains. Drive through the farm gate and follow the road all the way to the top. It's rough and steep – best tackled in a bakkie with high ground clearance.

Cost: R75 a day for trout fishing, R30 a day for bass fishing.

Contact: John Potter 082 575 4923;

john@thomasriver.com

4 Cycle into the Kei Valley

About 2 km down the N6 in the direction of Stutterheim, there's a signpost that points left to the farming district of Henderson. This dirt road leads to a junction with the road to Bacela, a dead end overlooking the confluence of the Thomas and Kei rivers.

Park your car at the junction and get on your mountain bike. The scenery is incredible – you'll find yourself deep in a gorge peppered with thorn trees, where baboons bark at you from steep cliffs. It's 25 km from the junction to Bacela, so you can decide how far you want to ride. The road is washed out in places, but it's not too strenuous and you probably won't see another person on the whole route.

Cost: Free.

Contact: John Potter 082 575 4923;

john@thomasriver.com

5 Check out some ruins

Just next to the police station, about a kilometre west of the village down a signposted road, you'll find the stone base of the old water tower, where steam locomotives would stop to refill their water tanks. At the bottom of the hill, you can also marvel at the tall stone pillars that used to support the railway bridge over the river.

The most interesting ruin is an old ganger's

cottage on the hill next to the N6, about 5 km from the Old Thomas River turn-off in the direction of Cathcart. It's said that the ghost of the ganger – Jono Trowbridge, whose grave is next to the cottage – hovers next to the road, offering work to those who pass by on dark nights. The place is called Funa Umsebenzi, Xhosa for "Do you want work?"

6 Buy an owl box

Do you want to attract owls to your garden? Buck Smith, who farms on the other side of the N6, can make you an owl box.

"The type of box depends on the type of owl you want to encourage," he says. "A barn owl needs a landing strip, an eagle owl likes a penthouse with an all-round view, and a wood owl prefers a narrow box with a hole at the top. Owls are fussy: The boxes need to be coated with a special stain that is totally odourless."

Buck usually keeps a few owl boxes in stock, but it's best to phone ahead and order one. You can pick it up from his farm when you arrive.

Cost: Between R200 and R300, depending on the box.

Contact: 045 843 1312; 072 109 6334

7 Enjoy Sunday lunch

On the first Sunday of every month there's a buffet carvery at the Ramble Restaurant. It's popular with day trippers from East London, so it's important to book in advance.

Sit back in the sunshine and take your time over a bowl of hot butternut soup, followed by roast beef and pork, potatoes like your granny made them, a variety of salads and sponge pudding with cream for dessert.

For the rest of the month you can order a delicious à la carte meal. The restaurant is open for dinner from Wednesday to Saturday, and for lunch on Sunday.

Cost: R65 per person for the buffet.

Contact: 045 843 1504; michelle@oldthomasriver.com