

go!

2025/2026 TRAVEL GUIDE

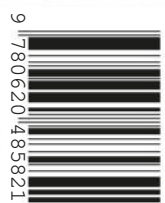
Kruger

*How to find
Shingwedzi's
leopards*

WORDS FROM THE WISE

- Kruger's head ranger
- The women keeping rhinos safe
- Super fans and photographers

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Makuleke

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banks of the Luvuvhu*

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and kudu on!*

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A photograph of Stanley Hammertone thermos bottles and mugs. In the foreground, two mugs and two bottles are placed on a dark, wet wooden surface. The mugs are orange with silver rims and handles. The bottles are also orange with silver caps and handles. All items feature the Stanley logo, which includes a winged lion and the text "STANLEY SINCE 1913". The background is a blurred savanna landscape with several elephants in a muddy watering hole under a bright sky.

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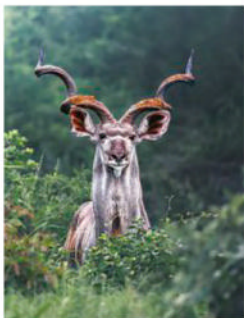
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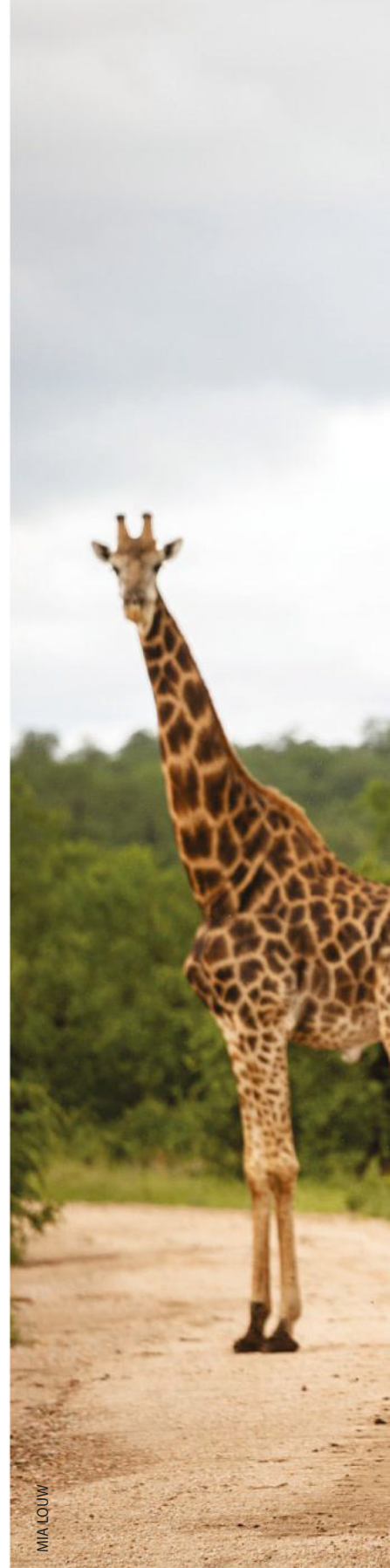
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COVER PICTURE
THINUS VAN STADEN

Kudu bull in the Kruger, S30



MIA LOUW



GIRAFFES ON THE S52 BETWEEN THE
RED ROCKS AND TSHANGA VIEWPOINT



Esma (right) and Willemien Janse van Rensburg look for birds in the fever tree forest in Makuleke Contractual Park in the far north of the Kruger.

Choose your adventure!

I visited the Kruger three times while researching this guide. I finally walked in the fever tree forest in Makuleke, between the Luvuvhu and Limpopo rivers in the far north of the park – something that has been on my wish list forever. At the same time, I saw dozens of amazing new birds. I also revisited many of my old Kruger favourites, like the Nkumbe viewpoint where you have a raptor's-eye view of the park; and Letaba, where I went looking for an African barred owlet with my kids while we waited for the braai fire to burn down to coals.

The aim of this guide is to help you have a fantastic holiday in the Kruger Park. This issue is more map-based than previous guides – we've included maps of the areas around every rest camp, and indicated where you have the best chance of seeing certain animals, plus tips from the head guide of the camp in question.

So, study the maps and choose your own adventure. You can do a quick loop in the soft light of morning or evening, or head out for the whole day with stops at picnic sites and hides.

Keep in mind that there aren't any truly awful roads in the park – or any roads that you should avoid (although some are closed in the rainy season). Also, be mindful that you have a better chance of seeing the Big Five where there's sweet grazing. Most animals are creatures of habit and return to the same area year after year.

That said, it's the wilderness, and the wilderness can be unpredictable. For example, I've seen lions on the normally dull H1-8 tar road to Pafuri, and next to the H2-2 to Pretoriuskop. On the H7 between Orpen and Satara – lauded as one of the park's best game-viewing routes – we saw nothing. None of the big cats we were promised, and no wild dogs. We did see birds, though: two bateleurs, a Wahlberg's eagle and a few white-headed and white-backed vultures circling an invisible kill.

On our final morning in the park, we drove the H9 between Letaba and the Phalaborwa gate – also not the most exciting road – and saw a young side-striped jackal in a culvert, a fast-asleep giraffe, and a pack of seven hyenas!

This is what makes the Kruger such a wonderful destination: Anything can happen, anywhere!

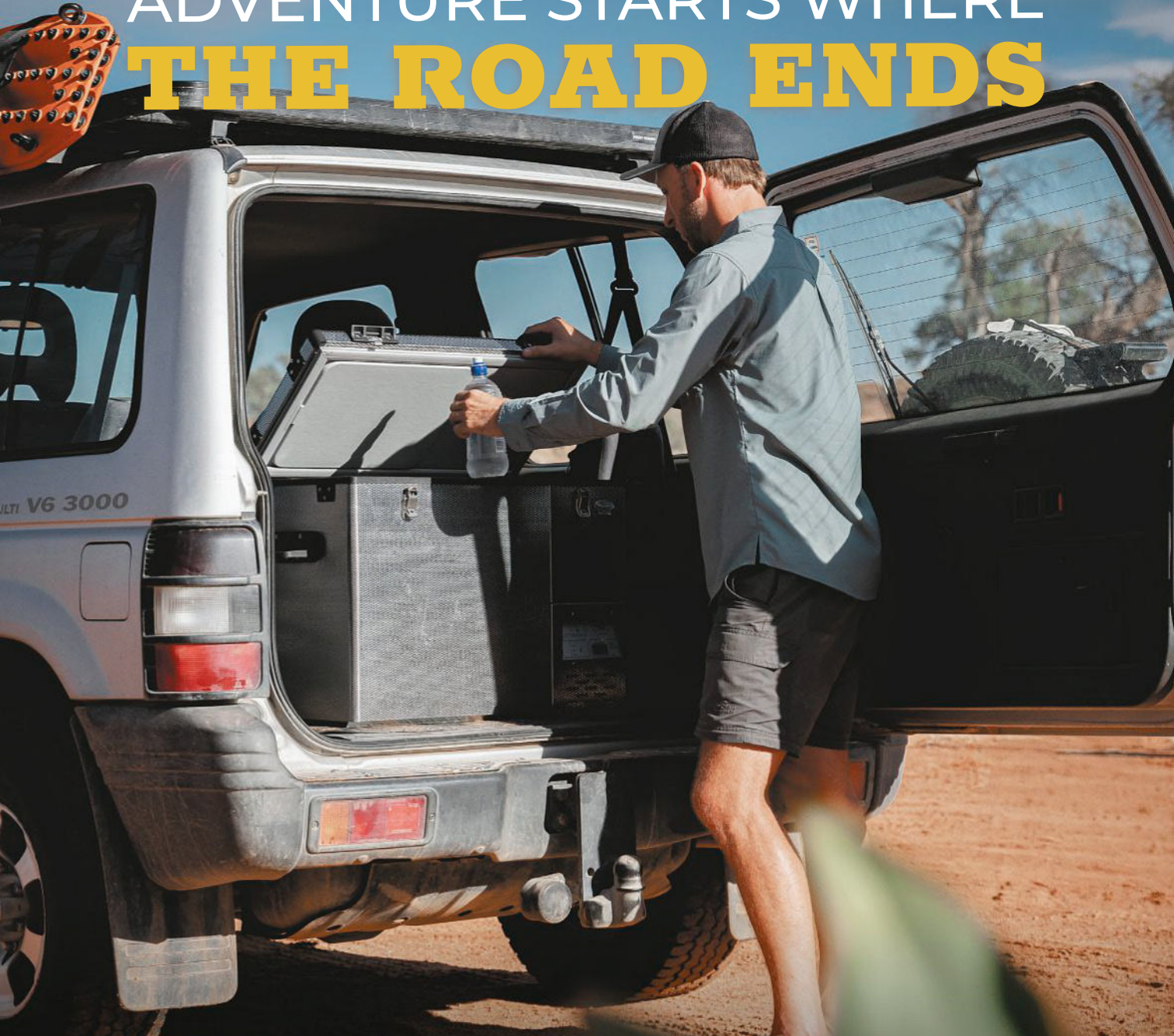
Esma ✉ esma.marnewick@weg.co.za

A huge thanks to Mia Louw, who compiled the camp guide sections for Berg-en-Dal, Malelane, Satara, Mopani, Tsendze, Shingwedzi, Sirheni, Bateleur and Shimuwini.

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CONTRIBUTORS



Almost half of the photos in this guide were taken by photojournalist **Mia Louw**. She visited Berg-en-Dal, Malelane, Satara, Mopani, Tsendze, Shingwedzi, Sirheni, Bateleur and Shimuwini.

How often do you go to the Kruger? We went five times during the past year! In August we're heading back to camp at Berg-en-Dal with family visiting from Dubai.

Why do people love the park so much? Foreign tourists often stay in five-star lodges and are ferried around in safari vehicles, but you can stay in a bungalow in Lower Sabie and look at the same leopard.

Your favourite rest camp? Tsendze campsite is amazing – there's no power, no noisy swimming pool, no shop and no restaurant. Just you and the bush. The camp caretakers, Rodgers Hobyane and Elina Mona, go out of their way to make your Tsendze experience incredible. Ask them to show you where the resident African scops-owl sleeps.

Your favourite game-drive route? Any loop with a picnic site or a hide where you can stretch your legs. From Satara, the 64 km-long route along the S100, S41 and H6 back to camp is a lekker option – stop at the N'wanetsi picnic site and the Sweni hide on the way. The grasslands open up along the S100 – you can see an elephant from kilometres away. We saw a cheetah and her cub on the S41.

Best sighting? One morning, we drove from Berg-en-Dal to the Afsaal picnic site. It was just after 5 am and we found a young female leopard near the Matjulu Bridge. She sat right next to the road – about a metre away – and ours was the only vehicle there.

Any tips? Moderate your daily driving distances because everything takes longer than you think.



Thinus van Staden from Pretoria took the cover photo – it's the kudu version of a *Men's Health* model!

How often do you visit the park? At least once a year, but the dream would be to go every month.

Where does your love of photography come from?

Photography is my therapy. It helps me be present in the moment. I've been snapping photos for years, but in December 2019, I decided to take my hobby more seriously. Over time, I got opportunities to publish my work in magazines. Having my kudu on the cover is a highlight!

Where did you take this photo? In December 2020, we spent 18 days in the park, travelling from Punda Maria to Lower Sabie. Late one afternoon, we were on the S30 from Skukuza to Lower Sabie. It had been a rainy year and the park was lush and green. We saw this kudu bull near the Gabeni waterhole. I pressed the shutter button at the exact moment he looked up. A kudu is iconic – it's the SANParks logo, after all.

Why do South Africans love the Kruger so much? It reminds us what the world looked like without humans. The landscape soothes the soul. There's also the surprise element – you never know what you'll see on any particular day. You can drive the same road over and over and have a different experience every time. Apart from photography, I enjoy birding here – it's something our whole family can do.

Your favourite rest camp? That's like asking someone to choose a favourite child! Okay, fine: Punda Maria for the birds and Lower Sabie for the animals. But every camp has its own charm.

Your favourite game-drive route? Well, the S30 – because it gave me my cover shot! I also like the S25 along the Crocodile River, the S100 near Satara, the S92 between Olifants and Balule, the Mphongolo Loop (S56) near Shingwedzi, and the S63 to Crooks' Corner. Each route has a unique habitat with its own special sightings.



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or call 021 406 4552.

go! Kruger

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF (WEG & GO): PIERRE STEYN
EDITOR GO KRUGER 2025: ESMA MARNEWICK
COPY EDITORS: MARIJCKE DODDS, MARTINETTE LOUW
ART DIRECTOR: LYNNE FRASER
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR: JON MINSTER
CARTOGRAPHER: FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK
PHOTOJOURNALIST: MIA LOUW

CORPORATE

CEO MEDIA24: RAJ LALBAHADUR
INTERIM CFO MEDIA24: NELMARIE BEYERS

PUBLISHING TEAM: MEDIA24 MEDIA

CEO: MINETTE FERREIRA
CRO: NERISA COETZEE
CFO: LANA GOLIATH
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR: EDWINA LYNERS
RISK & PRODUCTION MANAGER: JACQUES DU PLOOY

MEDIA ADVERTISING & CONTENT MARKETING

SALES DIRECTOR: BEA VAN DER VYVER bea.vandervyver@media24.com
011 877 6047
SALES MANAGER: LANI RHEEDER lani.rheeder@media24.com
SALES MANAGER: DANIE NELL danie.nell@media24.com

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGERS

CHARLENE MEYER, DANIELA DI GIOVANNI, LEONE JACOBS, NICOLETTE KANNENBERG,
RIETTE PEENS, DEBBIE VAN DER MERWE, SHARLENE SMITH, SANETHA MEINTJIES
OFFICE MANAGER: ANN DU BOIS ann.dubois@media24.com 011 713 9529

DIVERSE REVENUE

HEAD – BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND STRATEGY SUPPORT:
LISE VAN BREDÁ lise.coetsee@media24.com
EVENTS DIRECTOR: FRANCOIS MALAN francois.malan@media24.com

STUDIO

HEAD OF STUDIO: LAILA MAJIET
CREATIVE HEAD: SANDLASETHU-SIPHE YILANI
EDITOR – SPECIAL PROJECTS: GERDA ENGELBRECHT
gerda.engelbrecht@media24.com
PRODUCTION MANAGER: CHRISTINE SMITH
SENIOR MARKETING MANAGER: ANDILE NKOSI andile.nkosi@media24.com
MARKETING MANAGER: SETJHABA MAPHIKE
PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR: NAFIESA HOOSAIN

DESIGNER – ADVERTISING: ELAINE SCHOEMAN

TRANSLATOR & ADMINISTRATOR: SANETHA MEINTJIES
SHOP QUERIES: YUMNA TOFEY yumna.tofey@media24.com 021 406 4552

CIRCULATION

CATEGORY MANAGER: IAN GOVENDER ian.govender@media24.com
DEMAND PLANNING MANAGER: JANINE SNYMAN janine.snyman@onthedot.co.za

WHERE TO FIND US

CONTACT: YUMNA TOFEY yumna.tofey@media24.com 021 406 4552
CT POSTAL ADDRESS: PO Box 740, Cape Town, 8000
JHB POSTAL ADDRESS: PO Box 785266, Sandton, 2146



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go! West Coast

2025

RIEBEEK VALLEY

Olives and wine – yes, please!

CEDERBERG

Book a cosy cabin in the clouds

RICHTERSVELD

Your beginner's guide

Penguins in peril,
you can help! – p 50

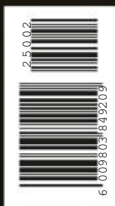
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PLAN YOUR TRIP TO THE KRUGER PARK

SATARA

STAY HERE

The Kruger Park is in the process of renovating its accommodation. This ranges from new kitchen counters and a fresh lick of paint, to brand-new bungalows and cottages. The new units are usually painted grey, with thatch-look tiles. (Don't worry, there are still reeds on the inside.) The tiles lower the fire risk of traditional thatch and they keep out bats and baboons. The park is still testing the grey colour scheme, so feel free to give feedback.

SANParks rates increase on 1 November 2025. Until then, you'll often pay the same rate for a renovated unit as for an older one. Where possible, we've mentioned the numbers of the renovated units so you can ask for one when you book. Some of the renovated units

aren't available online yet, but they can be booked using SANParks' central reservations number, or by contacting the rest camp directly. (This information was correct at the time of going to print but can change as SANParks updates their system.)

REST CAMPS

The bigger camps have a restaurant, a day visitors' area, a laundry (bring R5 coins), a filling station and a swimming pool (except Crocodile Bridge). The campsites have electricity, communal ablution facilities with showers and baths, and communal kitchens with two-plate stoves, sinks, urns and sometimes a microwave. Except for the campsites at Lower Sabie, Shingwedzi and

Crocodile Bridge, the stands aren't marked. You can't book a specific stand beforehand, except at Tsendze.

All accommodation in the rest camps is self-catering, and except for the units at Punda Maria, each unit has a braai. Despite being cleaned every day, you might question why you've paid so much for certain accommodation. Remember, you're paying to see tree squirrels, owls, bushbabies and bushbuck, not for fancy linen.

The most popular units in every camp are listed in this guide. After you've made your booking, call the rest camp and request a specific unit – there are maps of each rest camp on the website (sanparks.org).

SATELLITE CAMPS

There are five satellite camps in the Kruger: Balule near Olifants; Tsendze near Mopani; Malelane near the Malelane gate; and the two camps near Orpen – Tamboti and Maroela. The satellite camps are smaller, quieter and have fewer facilities than the bigger camps. Tsendze and Balule don't have power.

BUSHVELD CAMPS

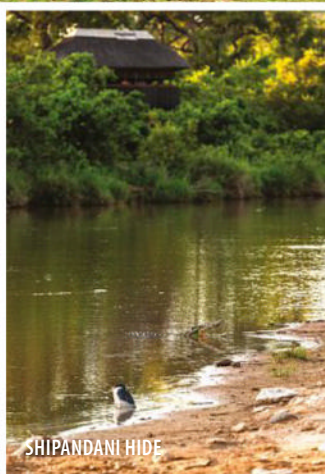
There are six exclusive bushveld camps: Bateleur, Biyamiti, Shimuwini, Sirheni, Talamati and Pafuri Border Camp. They're quiet and remote, and no day visitors are allowed. The camps often have roads and waterholes other guests can't access. The accommodation is more expensive, but about the same



NKUHLU TENTED CAMP



BERG-EN-DAL CAMPSITE



SHIPANDANI HIDE

KEY FOR THE REST CAMPS

- Fuel
- Shop
- Laundry
- Restaurant & takeaways
- Swimming pool
- Game drives
- Birding drives
- MTB rides
- Guided hikes
- Bush braai
- Activities for kids
- Open-air films
- Hiking trail in camp
- Muslim prayer facility
- Cash available.**
SANParks is moving towards a cashless system. Some rest camps are already cashless. You can still get cash at the shops, but only what's available in the cash register. Only Skukuza has an ATM.

as some of the family or guest cottages in the rest camps.

There are no more than 15 cottages per camp. Most camps have a hide. Not all the bush camps have Eskom power; sometimes solar panels or generators will supply electricity for lights, two-plate stoves, microwaves, fridges and hot water. Recharge your camera and smartphone before you come here.

If you want a swimming pool, you'll have to stay at Pafuri Border Camp or Shimuwini. The only air-conditioned units are at Bateleur; the units in the other camps have ceiling fans. There are no shops or restaurants, but you can buy firewood and ice at the reception offices.

PRIVATE TENTED CAMPS

There are three new private tented camps in the park.

Nkuhlu Tented Camp is a permanent setup next to the Nkuhlu picnic site on the Sabie River. It has seven luxury self-catering safari tents (no children under 12); rates from R5 220 per night for two people (SADC rate).

☎ 060 822 5743

🌐 nkuhlu.co.za

Kruger Untamed runs **Tshokwane River Camp** (a few kilometres north of the Tshokwane picnic site) and **Satara Plains Camp**. These tented camps are only open from 1 May to 30 September each year. Each camp has 15 luxury en suite safari tents. R11 900 per night for two

people (SADC rate) including accommodation, all meals and drinks, and two activities.

☎ 013 591 6004

🌐 krugeruntamed.com

BIRD HIDES

If you want to get as close to nature as possible, spend a night in the Shipandani hide near Mopani, or the Sable hide near the Phalaborwa gate. You may enter 30 minutes before the gates close and have to exit 30 minutes after the gates open in the morning (5 am in summer). You can only book the hide for one night and you have to be self-sufficient. Each has beds and a pit toilet.

Rates: R1 072 for two people; R413 per extra adult and R206 per child (sleeps six or nine).

PLANNING



DOWNLOAD AN APP

These apps will enrich your experience of the park – a good way to keep the kids (and adults) busy in the car.

- **Kruger Birding** by Firefinch (pictured) firefinchapp.com
- **Latest Sightings** latestsightings.com
- **Kruger Explorer** krugerexplorer.com
- **Kruger Guide** kruger.guide

Join the group “Kruger National Park - The Best Of Kruger” on Facebook, where visitors upload their photos.

TAKE NOTE

All rates are per unit/stand and we list only the lowest tariff – usually for two people. Most rates are half-price for children under 12. The more people, the higher the rate. Rates are valid until 31 October 2025. The new rates for 2025/2026 are available at sanparks.org



GOOD TO KNOW

ENTRANCE FEES. Day visitors and overnight visitors have to pay a daily conservation fee: R128 per adult; R61 per child under 12; free with a Wild card. A Wild card for a family of four costs R1 775 and gives you access to all national parks in South Africa for a year. If you're going to spend more than four days in the Kruger, it's worth buying one – they're available at all the reception offices in the park.

DAY VISITORS. Only a limited number of day visitors are allowed into the park per day. You can book your day visitor pass in advance to avoid disappointment – this service costs an extra R56 per adult and R28 per child, over and above the normal entrance fee.

BOOKINGS. The SANParks website is the best place to make your bookings because all the accommodation options are listed in detail. You can also see which units in each

rest camp are still available and you get a 5% discount if you book online. You can also book by phone or in person.
sanparks.org (click on Book Your Trip)
reservations@sanparks.org
 012 428 9111

PENSIONERS. People older than 60 get discounts on accommodation and game drives in the park, ranging from 20% to 40% depending on the season and rest camp. For example, from 14 October to 28 November, pensioners get a 40% discount at Mopani and Sirheni! (The discounts aren't valid for weekends and long weekends. You also have to book by telephone.)

MALARIA. The Kruger is a low-risk area, but it's still a good idea to use prophylactics and insect repellent. If you experience symptoms like a headache and fever, see a doctor.

WHAT DO THE CODES MEAN?

The codes for the various accommodation options can be confusing (e.g. BD4V bungalow). There aren't enough pages in this guide to explain all the codes in full, but here are two useful ones to know: V indicates that a unit has a view, or it's at the edge of the camp; Z means it's wheelchair-friendly. The number following the letter indicates how many people the unit can sleep. If you're a family of four and there are only BD3 bungalows available, book one – you can pay for an extra mattress at the reception office of most rest camps. (The system works on a first-come, first-served basis so bring your own sleeping bag and mattress just in case. It's also not available at all the rest camps, so make sure beforehand. Olifants doesn't have extra mattresses, for example.)

This is how the accommodation is classified:

EH & ES huts

These are one-room rondavels, or a row of rooms, that share communal bathroom and cooking facilities. Most of the huts have a fridge and a ceiling fan, but check when you book. There's no cutlery or crockery in the huts (except at Lower Sabie), but you can rent a box with supplies (R50 per box) at reception. The communal kitchens have two-plate stoves, sinks and an urn (remember your coffee flask). Sometimes there are microwaves as well, but don't count on it. Bring your own plug for the sink, basin or bath, just to be safe.

Rates: From R600 per night for two people.

BG & BE bungalows

These are one-room rondavels, each with a fridge and a bathroom, sharing a communal kitchen.

Rates: From R1 440 per night for two people.

BD, BA & BN bungalows

These are fully equipped one-room or two-room rondavels with a bathroom and a kitchen. The kitchen is on the stoep (sometimes enclosed).

Rates: From R1 700 per night for two people.

CTT & LST safari tents

These can be anything from a simple tent



SHIMUWINI BUSHVELD CAMP

with a fridge and braai facilities, to a luxury, kitted-out tent with a bathroom, kitchen and deck.

Rates: From R895 per night for two people.

Family & guest cottages

These fully equipped cottages have separate bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom and a living area, and they're indicated by codes that start with an F or a G. The cottages are bigger, further apart, more private – and pricier. The guest cottages have more than one bathroom.

Rates: R2 800 per night for four people.

Guesthouses

Despite being some of the most expensive SANParks accommodation, the decor in most guesthouses dates from the 1980s. You're paying for a first-class location in camp, however, and privacy. Wild Fig in Skukuza and Nshawu in Olifants have been renovated to look like lodges.

Rates: R7 600 per night for six people.

i FLY INSTEAD OF DRIVE

If your time is limited, consider flying to the park. There's an airport in Skukuza (page 77) or you can fly to the Eastgate Airport in Hoedspruit or the Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport east of the R538 between Mbombela and White River.

Prices vary depending on the season and how far in advance you book, but in general it's more affordable to fly to Kruger Mpumalanga. Return ticket via Cape Town from R2 700 to Kruger Mpumalanga and from R5 500 to Hoedspruit.



HELP! WHERE DO I START?

Planning a holiday in the Kruger can be overwhelming. It's bigger than some countries! You have to decide what's important to you. Here are the best camps for the following categories:

S41 TO S100 TURN-OFF

PREDATORS

If you want to see big cats, stay somewhere in a good grazing region and close to a river. This habitat attracts prey animals and the associated predators and scavengers.

Satara, Lower Sabie, Crocodile Bridge, Skukuza, Orpen

BIRDS

The north of the park is best for birding since it's the southern range limit for many Afrotropical birds that are common north of the Limpopo but scarce in South Africa. Summer is the best time to see birds because all the migratory species are in the area.

Punda Maria, Mopani, Shingwedzi, Letaba

TIGHT BUDGET

The most affordable accommodation in the park is camping, but not everyone likes to camp. There are several camps with affordable huts and safari tents – bring your own cutlery and crockery. You share bathrooms and kitchens.

Crocodile Bridge, Pretoriuskop, Skukuza, Tamboti, Balule, Letaba, Shingwedzi, Lower Sabie

CAMPING

The campsites at these rest camps are well maintained and have lots of stands next to the fence so you can do some game viewing from your

chair. With the exception of Tsendze, Maroela and Balule, the campsites also have every facility you can think of, like swimming pools, restaurants, laundries. . .

Shingwedzi, Letaba, Satara, Berg-en-Dal, Maroela, Tsendze, Punda Maria

PEACE AND QUIET

The Kruger is a popular holiday destination and there are always lots of visitors. The bigger rest camps are busy and privacy wasn't much of a concern when they were designed. If you want a secluded bush experience, consider staying in one of the bushveld camps, or

do a wilderness hike that accommodates a maximum of eight hikers per group. Generally, the camps in the north of the park are quieter than those in the south.

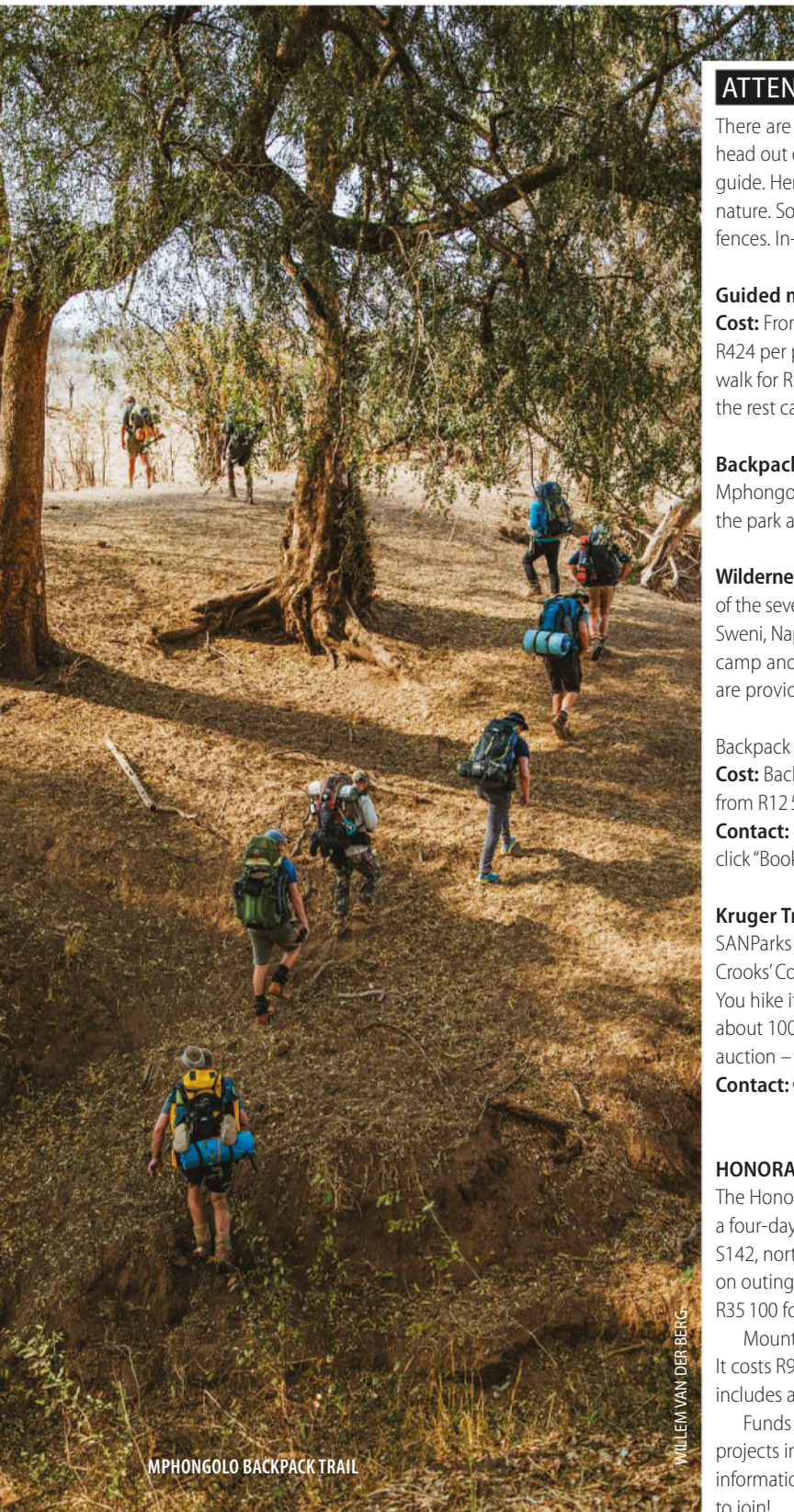
Punda Maria, Shingwedzi, Mopani, Tsendze, Orpen, Tamboti, Maroela, Balule

CHILDREN

None of the big camps is *unsuitable* for children, but the ones mentioned here have big swimming pools and splash pools for little kids, lawns, open-air movies and fun activities during the school holidays.

Letaba, Satara, Shingwedzi, Berg-en-Dal





MPHONGOLO BACKPACK TRAIL

WILLEM VAN DER BERG

ATTENTION, HIKERS!

There are several ways to explore the park on foot, but you can't head out on your own – you always have to be accompanied by a guide. Here, "hiking" means exploring the veld and learning about nature. Some of the rest camps have short hiking trails along the fences. In-camp trails are marked with this icon: 

Guided morning walk. All the rest camps offer this.

Cost: From R726 per person. Olifants offers a river walk for R424 per person and Letaba and Skukuza have an afternoon walk for R580 per person. No contact number – you book in the rest camps.

Backpack trails. There are three of these: Lonely Bull, Mphongolo and the Olifants River Trail. You camp wild in the park and you have to carry your tent and food.

Wilderness trails. If you'd prefer a little more comfort, try one of the seven wilderness trails: Bushmans, Wolhuter, Mathikithi, Sweni, Napi, Olifants and Nyalaland. You sleep in a rustic base camp and go on guided bush walks. Meals and drinks are provided.

Backpack and wilderness trails are four days and three nights long.

Cost: Backpack trails from R4018 per person; wilderness trails from R12 502 for two people.

Contact: Book via the SANParks online portal (sanparks.org) – click "Book Your Trip". Or call ☎ 012 428 9111

Kruger Trail. This is the cherry on top. It's managed by the SANParks Honorary Rangers and about 650 km in total, from Crooks' Corner in the far north to the Crocodile River in the south. You hike it in six sections over a three-year period. Each section is about 100 km long. Hikers bid for a spot on the trail at an annual auction – this year the online auction will be on 23 October.

Contact: ☎ 082 929 0244 (Louis Lemmer); thekrugertail.com

HONORARY RANGERS' ACTIVITIES

The Honorary Rangers offer several activities in the park, including a four-day stay at Nyarhi bush camp. This rustic camp is near the S142, north-west of Mopani, and two guides will accompany you on outings during your stay. You have to be self-sufficient. It costs R35 100 for up to eight people (no children under 12).

Mountain bikers will enjoy the four-day Mafunyane MTB Trail. It costs R96 000 for six people (R16 000 per person) – the rate includes all accommodation, meals and guides.

Funds raised by these activities go towards conservation projects in the park. Visit sanparksvolunteers.org for more information about the Honorary Rangers – you might decide to join!

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PLANNING

ECO ZONES

The vegetation you travel through will often determine what kind of animals you'll see. These are the main eco zones in the park.

1 Sandveld. This sandy soil, known for its floral diversity and dramatic sandstone ridges, is found only in the north of the park.

2 Woodland savannah on shale. Bushwillow woodland with thorn thickets. Look for Sharpe's grysbok, nyala and leopard.

3 Bush savannah. Depending on the soil type, mopanes occur in both stunted and tree form. Elephant and buffalo are common.

4 Open shrub savannah. Mopane-dominated landscape with shrub-sized trees. Game is generally scarce but congregates at water.

5 Mopane woodland on granite. This area has low game density because of the unpalatable sourveld grass.

6 Woodland mixed with sweet grazing. These pockets of knobthorn and marula woodland attract a variety of grazers.

7 Lebombo Mountains. Diverse habitat including hills, woodlands and pockets of riverine vegetation.

8 Olifants rugged veld. Mixed grassland, woodland and thornveld, attracting grazers and browsers.

9 Savannah grassland on basalt. Sweet grazing makes this area a hotspot for predators that hang around the herds of plains game.

10 Mixed woodland on granite. Rolling hills with thorn trees interspersed with sweet grazing.

11 Woodland and thorn thickets. Dense bush savannah with lots of game because of the proximity to the Sabie and Crocodile rivers.

12 Pretoriuskop sourveld. Granite hills with silver cluster-leaf, sicklebush, bushwillow and tall sourveld grass. Look for kudu and mountain reedbuck.

13 Malelane Mountains. Granite hills and knobthorn sweetveld. This is a good area for wild dogs and rhino.

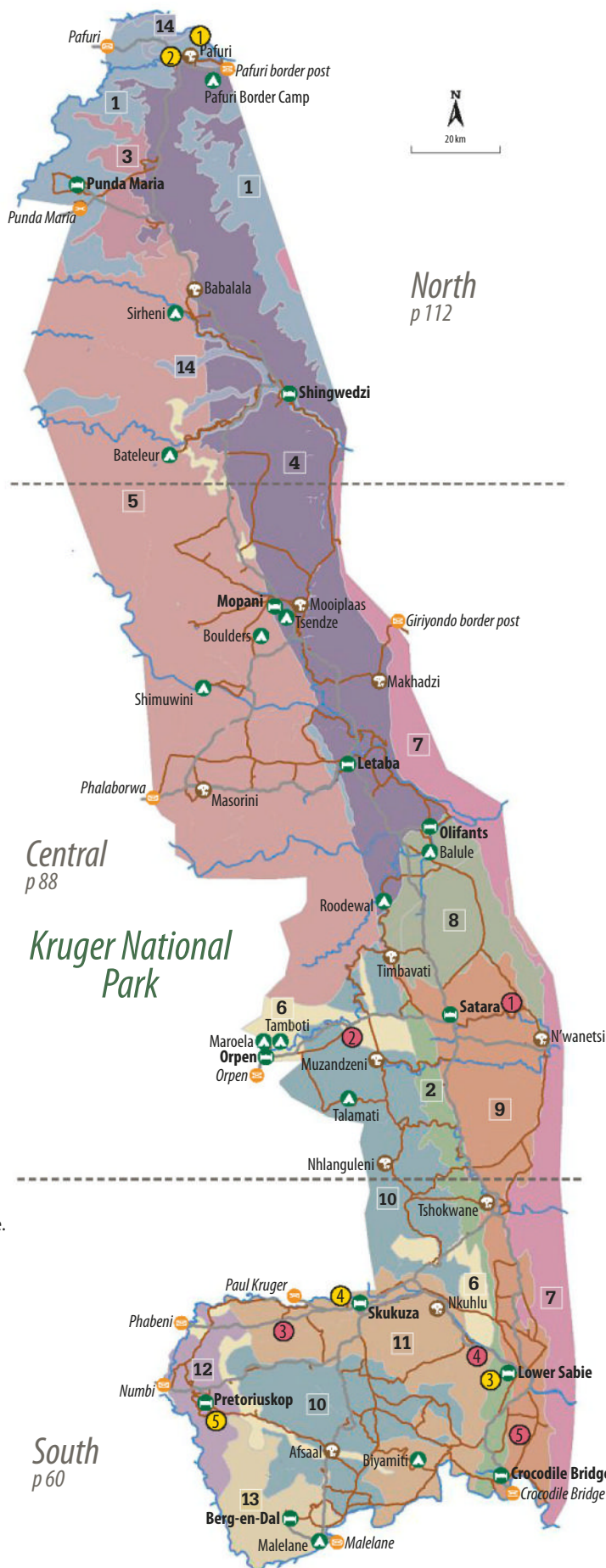
14 Riverine vegetation. Tall trees grow on the banks of all the park's major perennial rivers. It's an ideal habitat for leopard, with diverse birdlife.

TOP 5 ROADS TO LOOK FOR PREDATORS

- ① The S100 (N'wanetsi River Road) east of Satara.
- ② The H7 between Orpen and Satara.
- ③ The S1 between Skukuza and the Phabeni gate.
- ④ The Sabie River Road (H4-1) between Skukuza and Lower Sabie.
- ⑤ The S28 and H4-2 between Crocodile Bridge and Lower Sabie.

TOP 5 PLACES TO WATCH BIRDS

- ① Pafuri picnic site north-east of Punda Maria next to the S63.
- ② The bridge across the Luvuvhu River on the H1-9.
- ③ Choose between the Lower Sabie restaurant deck or Sunset dam.
- ④ Lake Panic hide near Skukuza.
- ⑤ Pretoriuskop rest camp.

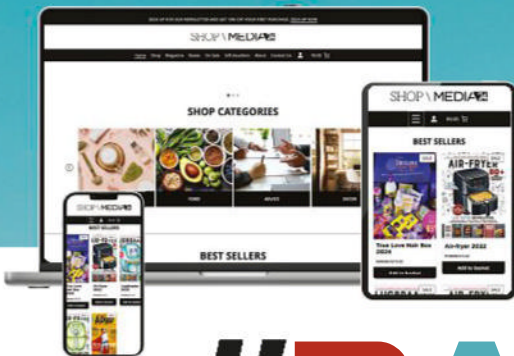


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Antics in Eden

Whether you're a beginner with a point-and-shoot camera, or a professional with a zoom lens, there's no such thing as a laid-back holiday in the Kruger.

There's simply too much to photograph!

OUCH!

Annemarie du Plessis

Early one morning at the Tshokwane picnic site, tourists told us about a porcupine carcass in a russet bushwillow tree about 4 km to the south. We drove there immediately and found a leopard with the porcupine – or what was left of it. The leopard jumped out of the tree and walked down the road. That's when I noticed the porcupine quills in its cheek – a small sacrifice for a delicious snack.

GEAR: Canon EOS 6D, Canon 70–200 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/1 600 second, aperture f4.5, ISO 1 000

 @annemarie_du_plessis







NOM NOM NOM

Annemarie du Plessis

We were driving along the S126 near Satara when we came across a herd of buffalo. While grazing, this one started making its way towards the road up a slight slope, which would give me the perfect angle. I had to wait, though! Half an hour later, the buffalo was in the exact right spot. Because I was shooting against the bright sky, I had to overexpose slightly to capture all the details on the buffalo's face.

GEAR: Canon EOS 5D, Canon

17–40 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/200 second, aperture f5.6, ISO 100

LOOK UP

Annemarie du Plessis

A lion pride was relaxing in the grass near the Girivana waterhole, west of Satara. There was a carcass of a wildebeest further into the veld. I was watching the lioness closest to the road when a goliath heron flew past overhead. When the lioness looked up, I was ready. (She must have been watching for vultures.) I used a high ISO because the sun wasn't up yet.

GEAR: Canon EOS 5D Mk IV, Canon 500 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/400 second, aperture f4.0, ISO 3 200







◀ SHAKE IT OFF

David Cox

It was early morning next to Shitlhave Dam, just north-east of Pretoriuskop rest camp. I scanned the area and noticed a pied kingfisher on a dead tree branch at the water's edge. As I lined up my camera, it took off and hovered a short distance away, looking at a target in the water. I focussed on the tree branch, since pied kingfishers normally return to where they took off from. Thankfully, my tactic paid off.

GEAR: Canon 5D Mk IV, Canon 100–400 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/2 000 second, aperture F5.6, ISO 800

▲ BAD HAIR DAY

Stu Bowie

On our end-of-year holiday, we decided to start our Kruger trip at Punda Maria. This is one of the only places to see crested guinea fowl in the park. It was quite late in the evening when I noticed two of them foraging in the undergrowth in the campsite. The light was already fading, so I was struggling for shutter speed and depth of field. This was the only decent shot out of many.

GEAR: Canon 1D Mk IV, Canon 300 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/100 second, aperture f4.5, ISO 640

 @stubowie1



CURIOUS CUB

Rian Boshoff

One of the dominant female leopards in the Shingwedzi area gave birth in 2019. I searched for her cub for more than a year. Late one afternoon in December 2020, the cub appeared from the grass next to the S56 (Mphongolo Loop). She looked me straight in the eye before settling on the riverbank. I watched her for half an hour as the sun set. Every now and then, she'd throw me a backwards glance as if to say, "Are you happy now?"

GEAR: Canon 70D, Canon 300 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/400 second, aperture f2.8, ISO 400

 @rianboshoff

Read more about Shingwedzi's leopards on p 120. – Ed



⬆️ HOLD ON!

Thinus van Staden

Early one morning, we drove east from Berg-en-Dal on the S25 along the course of the Crocodile River. It was quiet and the landscape was dry. Suddenly a hippo bull emerged, heading to the river. He started to run, but halfway along he decided he wasn't impressed with our presence. He changed direction and charged right at us! The children's screams and the motionless vehicle must have convinced him that we weren't a threat and he trotted past us. The red-billed oxpecker somehow managed to stay on the hippo's back the whole time!

GEAR: Canon R6, Canon 500 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/2 000 second; aperture f6.3, ISO 800

 @thinusvanstadenfotografie





▲ MOM, I'M BORED

Thinus van Staden

The S30, along the eastern bank of the Sabie River, is one of my favourite roads in the Kruger. We often see leopard and cheetah on this route. One overcast afternoon, we found a troop of baboons in a dead tree. They looked fairly bored... Some napped while others groomed their mates half-heartedly. I like the contrast between the listless figures and the dark, stormy clouds in the background.

GEAR: Canon 6D, Canon 100–400 mm lens

SETTINGS: Shutter speed 1/2000 second, aperture f5.6, ISO 1 600

First lady of the veld

In 2001, when she was 21 years old, **Karien Desmet** became the youngest person and first woman to ever be appointed as a section ranger in the Kruger Park.

INTERVIEWS **ESMA MARNEWICK** PICTURES **MIA LOUW**

Karien Desmet wanted to be a ranger for as long as she can remember. “It was an impossible dream that came true,” she says. “My dad Gert was a conservationist for what was then the Transvaal Provincial Administration. He transformed many old farms into reserves, including the Witvinger and Manombe nature reserves. I grew up in places like Giyani and Potgietersrus – now Mokopane – but my dad was always away somewhere on a reserve. We’d go camp there during the school holidays. We drove around in the veld with him. I shot my first impala in one of the reserves when I was in Grade 7.”

Karien studied nature conservation at Pretoria Technikon. After two years of full-time classes, she did a practical year at Skukuza in the Kruger Park. “I got a small salary and mostly took tourists on night drives,” she remembers. “I was lucky to stay on after that year as a field guide. But it wasn’t really what I wanted to do – you work with people all day as a guide, and I’m quite shy.”

And then Operation Prevail happened – a large-scale SANParks staff restructuring initiative. Karien decided, why not, and applied for a section ranger post. “There were ten positions available and hundreds

of applications,” she says. “People told me I was crazy – it was for men. There had never been a female ranger in the Kruger, let alone a section ranger. The interview was horrible. It felt like I couldn’t get a word out. Eventually, management sent out an e-mail with the names of the people who’d got the job. It was the best day of my life when I opened that e-mail and saw my name.

“Section ranger is *the* job in the Kruger. My section was Vlakeplaas – it’s very remote, to the north of Shingwedzi, but I didn’t care. I would have gone anywhere in the park.”

Trials and tribulations

“At Vlakeplaas, the regional ranger called me in and said: ‘You’re now under a magnifying glass. Everyone is watching to see if you’ll make it.’

“I had my own house and there were living quarters for the other staff. There was no power, only a generator. I worked there for four and a half years in the end. It was even better than I thought it would be.

“Of course, there was criticism. People were sceptical. They didn’t think a woman could make it. The image they had of a ranger was of a big, strong man. Not a young, skinny girl. But I threw myself into it and worked with my staff. Day

in and day out I went into the veld with them and did what they did.

“I had a really great corporal, Isaac Hlungwane – he’s now a sergeant. Although he reported to me, he was my mentor. He knew the bush and taught me so much in those first few years: how to fix windmills, track animals, fight fires...

“Each section is different, but the job description is the same. You basically manage a farm, with conservation as your mandate. Waterholes and windmills have to be maintained. You do a daily patrol. You have to know exactly where your rhinos are. There are certain hotspots where poachers are very active.

“Anything can happen on a patrol. Maybe the rangers find nothing suspicious, or maybe they come across tracks, a carcass, an animal in a snare... Law enforcement is also part of the job – we can give fines and deal with guests who arrive at the gate after closing.

“You do spend a lot of time in an office, too. You have to manage people, do admin, have meetings. And there’s the usual office politics.”

“These days, poaching is our biggest challenge by far. In the early years, most of our attention went towards conservation; poaching



KARIEN AND HER HORSE NEBUCCU

incidents were rare. But it worsened from 2008 onwards. In 2010, we started to function like a military – we had to track poachers day in and day out. Our kit was always ready.

“An anti-poaching operation is hard work – you follow the poachers all day, even if it’s hot or raining. Helicopters and dogs are used. Getting a ‘full house’ is a big success – it’s when you catch the poacher with a firearm and the axe they used to remove the rhino horn. But even if you only get the poacher, it comes with a great sense of satisfaction. You know you have made a difference – there’s one less firearm in the system; you bought time for a rhino.

“People have the wrong impression of what it takes to be a ranger – they think it’s a romantic job where you stroll around in the veld all day and work with animals. But rangers witness awful scenes. There are so many snares, especially along the western border of the park. Seeing a photo of a poached rhino cow is very different to actually standing next to the carcass, with the orphaned calf next to her, hacked with a panga. It’s terrible. You think you have to be strong physically, but you have to be just as strong mentally.

“The park struggles to find women who want to be rangers. The loneliness and gruesome scenes take their toll. And it’s difficult to have a family life.”

The life of a ranger

After four years in the Vlakteplaas section, Karien moved to Mahlangeni, which is even more remote. The Letaba and Klein-Letaba rivers come together in this section. Around the same time, Karien married a state veterinarian and their first child, Jasper, was born.

“I had a domestic worker at home, but often Jasper just had to come into the field with me. We then had our second child, and it was easier. Our third basically raised herself! I eventually moved from Mahlangeni to the Phalaborwa section to be closer to schools. The ranger post is at the Phalaborwa gate, so my kids could go to school from home. Many other park kids have to stay in the hostel in Phalaborwa.

“As a woman, you can have all the passion and willpower in the world, but where will your husband work and where will your kids go to school? It’s tough to be a mother and a ranger. You have to drive your kids around, get them to their sports matches and exams. I don’t know how I do it; I just do it.”

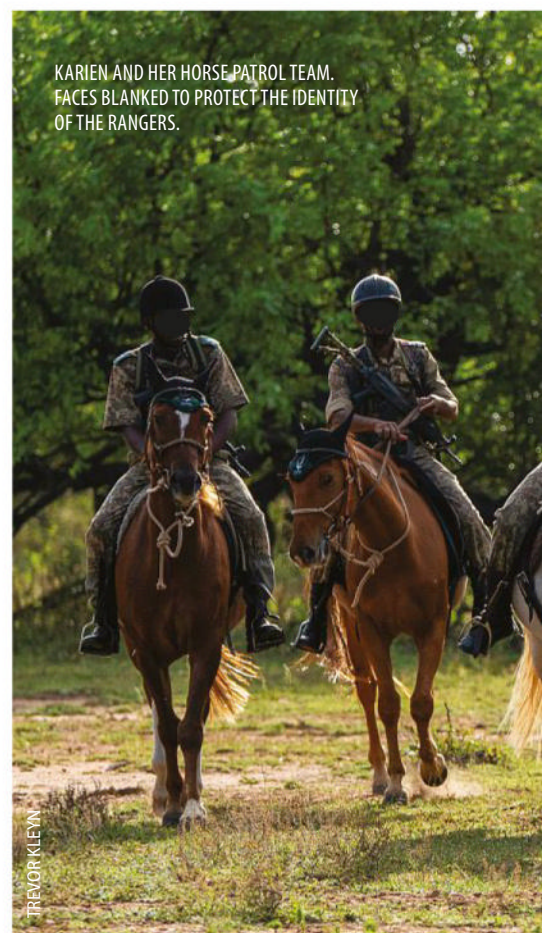
Karien’s first marriage didn’t last. She got divorced and in 2023, she married Andrew Desmet, the current section ranger in Mahlangeni. Between them, they have four kids at school, and two houses. The youngest, Isabel, is 11; Sebastian and Rachel are in Grade 8 and 11 respectively and attend Merensky Agricultural Academy in Tzaneen. Jasper is also in Grade 11 at Frans du Toit High School in Phalaborwa.

“We don’t often get to do things together as a family,” Karien laments. “If Andrew and I both take leave, there are two fewer section rangers in the region. When we do go on holiday, we usually opt for other parks: Golden Gate, Addo, Agulhas, Cape Vidal... We had our honeymoon in Cape Town. I do like to go to a mall every now and then, and I like pretty things and shoes. I have lots of shoes! Not heels, but velskoens and boots.

Despite the challenges of the job, there’s no place Karien would rather

be. “It’s wonderful to live and work in the park,” she says. “Most of the time it doesn’t even feel like work. I love nature, the trees, the animals – all the small things. By now I know the rhythm: Baby impalas are born, then the baby warthogs. Then the mopane worms arrive. The first rain. The birds return.

“There’s simply no other place like the Kruger Park. Policy and management teams might change, but the park never will.”



Cowboys in the Kruger

When you're searching for the Big Five, also keep your eyes peeled for a ranger on horseback! Karien has loved horses since childhood and started a horse patrol unit in 2017.

"Horses are amazing. You can cover more kilometres, see further and get closer to animals. And horses don't get stuck in the mud! They have a built-in GPS and can find their way home if needed. Poachers also don't expect rangers on horseback – it catches them off guard."

She turned an old vegetable garden into horse stables and trained five of her staff members. The horse unit is now eight years old and so far, no horse or rider has been attacked or injured.



Here's how the park is run:

The Kruger is divided into four regions: Nxanatseni North, Nxanatseni South, Marula North and Marula South. Each region is managed by a regional ranger.

The regions are subdivided into 22 sections, each run by a section ranger: Pafuri, Punda Maria, Vlakteplaas, Shangoni, Woodlands, Shingwedzi, Mahlangeni, Mooiplaas, Letaba, Olifants, Phalaborwa, Satara, Kingfisherspruit, Skukuza, Pretoriuskop, Houtboschrand, Tshokwane, N'wanetsi, Lower Sabie, Crocodile Bridge, Stolsnek and Malelane.

Each section ranger has a team that consists of a sergeant, a corporal and a lance corporal, plus game rangers and labourers.

Horn of duty

Cathy Dreyer has one of the toughest jobs in nature conservation: head ranger of the Kruger National Park. And one of her toughest assignments is keeping the park's rhinos safe from poachers.

On Christmas Day last year, Cathy Dreyer wasn't at home eating gammon and pulling crackers. She and her team were rescuing orphaned rhinos. On New Year's Day, they transported another one to safety. In December 2024, 21 rhinos were poached in the Kruger Park. Another 17 were killed in January 2025.

"It's hard to keep people motivated," she says. We're in her modest office in the MAJOC building (Mission Area Joint Operations Centre) next to Skukuza Airport. "Everyone is criticising us – asking why poaching hasn't stopped, why we're not doing enough. The rangers are exhausted. When someone goes on leave, there's no one to fill the gap. The team just gets smaller."

December marked a brutal reversal for the park. After years of reducing poaching, the numbers surged again. Cathy stands at the centre of the crisis. She's the Kruger's first female head ranger, appointed in 2021, and her job is to lead the park through arguably one of its darkest times.

"People think being head ranger in the Kruger is this dream job," she

says. "Flying around in helicopters, capturing game..."

She goes on to explain that it's more of an office-bound, strategic role – making sure systems are in place, managing the ranger corps (a team of 400 people) and the K9 and special operations units.

The media focusses on gruesome images of slaughtered rhinos and orphaned calves, but for Cathy, it's the emotional toll on her team that's often overlooked. "So little is documented about what 17 years of this does to the rangers," she says. "Seeing mutilated carcasses, euthanising orphans, getting into armed confrontations... One of our rangers was killed by a poacher in 2018. My job is to make sure our people are properly trained for conflict situations. The role of a ranger has changed significantly. Very few people could do what our rangers do."

For someone who always preferred animals to people, leading such a large team required a significant mind shift. "My previous roles were more hands-on," she says. "I still do conservation work, but now at a level where I can try to bring about change."

Cape Town to the Kruger

Cathy grew up in Cape Town and knew from early on that she wanted a practical, outdoor career. After studying nature conservation at the Peninsula Technikon, she began her practical year in 1998 at Addo Elephant National Park.

The park was translocating eastern black rhinos – a subspecies from East Africa – back to their home countries, after a successful breeding programme. She joined the game capture team and was assigned to "boma training". Before relocation, rhinos were acclimatised in enclosures to reduce stress during transport to destinations in Tanzania and Malawi, which could sometimes last up to 54 hours.

Working closely with renowned wildlife vet Dr Pete Morkel, Cathy learnt the fine art of habituation. "You sit with the rhinos for hours, reading aloud, letting them get used to your voice. Some become so tame that they eat from your hand. They're incredibly intelligent. They know where the food and comfort come from, but the moment you release them, all that connection is gone. And that's a good thing – we don't

want them to habituate to people.”

After Addo, Cathy moved to SANParks’ Kimberley-based veterinary wildlife services unit. “We spent eight months a year on the road, park to park,” she says.

One of the unit’s biggest assignments was moving every animal – about 2 000 of them – from the old Vaalbos National Park to the newly established Mokala National Park.

“After 13 years, I realised I had to grow up,” she says with a laugh. “I couldn’t keep living out of a tent, owning nothing... So, I took a job as conservation manager at the Great Fish River Nature Reserve.”

There, she led rhino monitoring and law enforcement and experienced her first poaching incident. “We knew every black rhino by name,” she says. “Fike, Brad, Wendy...”

In 2017, SANParks recruited her to set up a black rhino monitoring programme in the Intensive Protection Zone in the south of the Kruger. After two years, when funding ended, she resumed her role of conservation manager, this time at Addo. Just 18 months later, the Kruger came calling again – for its top ranger position.

Beating corruption

Being head ranger means more than just implementing an anti-poaching strategy. One of Cathy’s greatest challenges has been restoring trust and integrity within the ranger corps itself. In recent years, it has come to light that rangers themselves are often involved in





Most rhinos in the Kruger are now dehorned – a time-consuming but effective measure launched in 2021. By 2024, the number of rhinos poached had dropped from 200+ annually, to 88.

Dehorning involves sedating the animal and removing the horn, which regrows at about 10 cm per year. The procedure must be repeated every 12 to 18 months, making it costly and labour-intensive.

Dehorning doesn't guarantee safety either. Poachers will still kill a rhino, even for a stump. But in high-density areas, the intervention buys the park – and its rhinos – some precious time.

poaching. In 2024, two rangers were sentenced to 20 years in prison; a former regional ranger is currently on trial.

"There's a big focus on integrity management – not just polygraph testing but building a team that's resilient to corruption," Cathy says. "Syndicates place huge pressure on staff to leak information. We've seen assassinations and threats to families. When it's your own people fighting against you, it's devastating. I used to avoid people – that's why I did game capture for so long. But these last three years, I've grown very attached to the people and the cause. You carry 400 people's lives on your shoulders."

She's passionate about saving rhinos, and her team keeps her going. "When I feel demotivated, I think of Karien and her team, patrolling 20 km a day in the heat, sometimes getting charged by animals. If they can keep going, I have no excuse not to sit in this office and lobby for what they need."

Poaching tactics have changed dramatically. Early detection zones relied on signs like footprints on sandy paths; now poachers wear five pairs of socks or even nappies over their shoes – or they step on elephant dung to avoid leaving a trail.

The Kruger has invested in technology, but syndicates adapt quickly. "The worst is when there's an internal leak," Cathy says. "When poachers know our deployment strategy, or where rhinos are being moved to."

The war doesn't end at the Kruger's gates. "Mpumalanga has some of the country's highest

crime rates – armed robbery, illegal mining... The major rhino syndicates come from towns like Bushbuckridge, Hazyview and White River – all on our doorstep."

Over three million people live along the Kruger's western boundary, where unemployment hovers around 42%. "We advertised 35 ranger positions last year and got more than 10 000 CVs," Cathy says. "Most were young people with matric who have never had a job. The poaching crisis is tied to social inequality: People say, 'Solve the poaching problem,' but unless we deal with unemployment, organised crime and service delivery, the pressure on the park will never stop. This is not just a conservation issue, it's a social issue."

The park itself can only employ about 2 700 people. "We offer access to natural resources – mopane worms, marula, meat donations – but it's not enough to benefit three million people. And while we can influence what happens outside, our legal mandate ends at the park fence."

I ask Cathy about the legacy she wants to leave behind, and her answer is pragmatic. "I don't want people to miss me when I go. That would mean I failed to build strong systems and leaders. I'd love to leave the Kruger in a better place – where we're no longer dehorning rhinos, no longer losing them to poaching; with strong, motivated ranger teams that feel appreciated. But given the current situation, that's probably a bit naïve.

"So, even if the park is just a little bit better than how I found it, I'll be happy."

Source: [environment.gov.za](https://www.environment.gov.za)

From the fence line to the frontline

Tinyiko Golele grew up in a village next to the Kruger and went on to break two glass ceilings: She was the first black woman in the park's history to be appointed as a section ranger and then as a regional ranger. This is her story.

Born in Mtititi-Altein, a village near the Shingwedzi River, just a kilometre from the Kruger fence, Tinyiko Golele's connection to the landscape runs deep.

"Our life was always in the bush," she says. "We walked 4 km to school through the veld, gathered firewood and collected clay for my grandmother, who was a potter. We knew all the fruiting trees. Sometimes cattle were killed by predators and the whole village would go and see."

During holiday season, she saw park employees being transported home in trucks. "We'd help them carry their bags," she says. "That's when I told myself: One day, I'll work for that organisation."

Tinyiko began her odyssey in 2002. Today, 23 years later, she stands tall as the first black woman in the park's history to be appointed first as a section ranger and then as a regional ranger.

Her journey into the wilderness began with a National Diploma in Nature Conservation from Tshwane University of Technology. Her practical training placed her at Punda Maria, where she worked

with various units, including ranger services. "Even as a student, I would join the rangers on patrols," she recalls. "I told them I wanted to be a ranger. I kept applying, waiting for my opportunity."

After her studies, she became a field guide at Skukuza, leading tourists on game drives. By late 2003, she was working as an environmental education officer at Satara, engaging with local communities, running educational programmes and attending public meetings. "When we didn't have school groups, I joined the rangers on patrol," she says.

Those early experiences left a lasting impression. "When rangers started calling me to assist, I felt valued. I offered my services willingly, because I wanted to learn."

Building trust

In 2007, Tinyiko was appointed section ranger at Woodlands, a post north of Bateleur bushveld camp. At the time, she was in charge of a 1 140 km² area, with 22 staff. "Those were good years," she says.

As a young ranger at Woodlands, she worked alongside veterans with

decades of experience. "I was young and skinny," she laughs. "But I enjoyed learning from older rangers like corporal Carlos Ndlovu. They taught me animal behaviour, history and bush knowledge – things that no book could teach. Poaching and poisoning were not as prevalent. Patrols were peaceful – we focussed on conservation work: monitoring veld and water conditions, diseases, fixing windmills, managing erosion..."

In 2013, she was transferred to the Punda Maria section. The move came with new challenges. "Woodlands is deep in the park – we were more sheltered there. But at Punda Maria, there were more people issues. When I arrived, I quickly realised that to live in peace, you must connect with your neighbours."

Along the park's northern and western boundary, Tinyiko constantly had to deal with issues like human-wildlife conflict, cross-border movement, livestock predation and poisoning incidents. She became an active member of the local forums, where communities shared environmental concerns. Through regular meetings,

outreach and joint operations with stakeholders, including with Limpopo National Park and the National Administration for the Conservation Areas in Mozambique, she and a group of others helped dismantle an elephant poaching syndicate in 2019, bringing a wave of arrests.

Her team also worked with the Endangered Wildlife Trust to train rangers and villagers how to respond to poisoning incidents. “If you want information from a community, you must build trust,” she says. “People will speak to you – not always in the meeting, but after – because they know you’re there to listen.

“The community must understand that the park belongs to them. The rangers are only the custodians. In the end, the park is our heritage. It belongs to all South Africans.”

The weight of leadership

In 2017, when Tinyiko became the regional ranger of Nxanatseni North – overseeing multiple sections – she prioritised inclusive leadership. “I told my team: Leadership is not about one person. Every field ranger here plays a leadership role in the region.”

But leadership also brings emotional strain. “Stress can destroy a team,” she says. “As a leader, you must stay strong. It’s really painful when we lose animals. It gets to you. I used to have a soft heart, but that has changed.”

During her career, Tinyiko has seen conservation transform into a frontline battle against wildlife crime. “When I started, patrols were often about enjoying nature. You’d see buffalo swimming, elephants by the river. But now it’s about law enforcement.”

One of the most difficult parts, she says, is understanding what motivates poaching. Through a programme called Victim-Offender Dialogue, run by the Department of Correctional Services, Tinyiko engages with convicted poachers in prisons around Mpumalanga. “It’s painful but necessary,” she says. “Most poachers say they did it because of poverty. Many earn less than R3000 a month; most are recruited in shebeens. We’re now inviting ex-offenders to speak to our rangers – to explain prison life and the real cost of these crimes.”

These sessions have offered Tinyiko a measure of closure. “Otherwise, the anger just eats at you,” she says.

Life in the park

Life in the bush is not always easy, especially for women. “At Woodlands, I lived alone for years. I had my daughter with me at first, and a helper, but later on my children stayed with my in-laws outside the park. It was about a two-hour drive from Shingwedzi – I would visit them on my off days.

Tinyiko has since been appointed as regional ranger for Marula South, which means she’s based at Skukuza. Her son Ndzalo lives with her now; her daughter Rivoningo is at high school in Mbombela.”

Balancing motherhood and ranger life is no small feat – “sometimes you don’t have time or energy to play with your kids; the job demands so much of you” – but Tinyiko is a firm believer in the strength that women can bring to conservation. “Women can multi-task. They’re detail-oriented – their reports are immaculate and their audits are 99% compliant. In admin,

in fieldwork, in leadership, women excel.”

But as she gets older, she admits that physical endurance is a challenge. “In your twenties, you’re energetic. You can camp for days, run, walk for hours. In your thirties, it’s harder. In your forties, even more so.”

If you’re a young person considering a life in conservation, Tinyiko has this advice: “It’s one of the toughest careers. You need to be physically fit, committed and passionate. It is not an eight-to-five job, it’s a calling.”

She continues: “The pressure is huge. But my heart says to keep on going. I believe in God. The other day I felt overwhelmed, and a thought came to me: ‘Do not dismay, for I am with you.’ That gave me the strength to carry on, to focus and prepare my teams. This is not just one person’s job.”

THE STATISTICS

16

Currently 16 out of the 400 rangers in the park are female.

3

There are 22 section rangers in the park. Three are female.

1

Tinyiko is the only female regional ranger.





Every bird counts

So, you've been to every nook and cranny of the Kruger, from the deserted Nhlangueni picnic site to Crooks' Corner? You know everything there is to know, but do you know about Makuleke?

BY ESMA MARNEWICK

A visit to the jackal-berry forest is a highlight of this trip. And the cherry on top? If you also spot a black-throated wattle-eye.

Have you ever looked at the Pafuri section of the Kruger Park on a map and wondered what actually goes on there? For many decades, this corner of South Africa was a kind of Wild West, where tough guys hung out with the tsetse flies: big game hunters, ivory traders, illegal labour smugglers and other thugs of all description.

These days it's a popular birding destination. It might be in the far north of the Kruger (and South Africa), but it's at the southernmost edge of the so-called Afrotropical bioregion. Birds like grey-headed parrot, black-throated wattle-eye and tropical boubou – species common further north in countries like Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Botswana – are found here. Pafuri is also the furthest north that many South African birds are found.

It feels different around Pafuri – there's a “wild Africa” vibe, with wide rivers, dense riverine vegetation, baobabs and granite koppies.

Visitors to the park are usually limited to the H1-9 tar road, the Luvuvhu Bridge, the Pafuri picnic site and the viewpoint at Crooks' Corner, off the S63. How do you explore the area north of the H1-9 – the no-man's land between the tar road and the Limpopo River?

That's what I'm on my way to find out. The region between the Luvuvhu and Limpopo rivers in the Kruger is known as the Makuleke Contractual Park and there are two luxury lodges here: Return Africa's Pafuri Collection and The Outpost.

There's also one other place to stay, which is far more affordable: EcoTraining's Makuleke tented camp. (Turn to page 50 for more info about this concession area within the Kruger.) EcoTraining mainly uses their camp to run field-guide courses, but every year they team up with BirdLife South Africa to offer four-day birding trips.

The wind ruffles my hair as we drive along the H1-9 in an open game-viewing vehicle. Our group of eight birders has just been picked up at the Pafuri gate to the park. The EcoTraining Land Cruiser turns left at a no-entry sign.

Is there anything better than an unknown dirt road into the wilderness?

DAY 1

Welcome to Makuleke!

After we've unpacked and the guides have discussed the necessary household matters, we get back into the Cruisers for our first game drive.

Some of us were nervous and expected formal tutorials. “You're here to learn about birds, so we're going to go out into the veld and learn about them!” said Nathan Ingram, EcoTraining instructor and expert bird guide. “No lectures, no classes. You can stop me at any time, even for a bulbul.”

And we do just that, five minutes later, next to a lala palm on a plain. “Keep your eyes open,” he whispers. “A three-banded courser lives around here.”

You're allowed out of your vehicle in Makuleke, so we disembark and walk around quietly. Suddenly a white-and-brown bird on long legs zooms past and disappears into the shrubbery. It's a lifer for most of us – the shy courser is only found in the transition zone between mopane veld and floodplain. And it's nocturnal! (We passed through the same area often over the following few days and never saw the courser again. We were very lucky.)

We drive deeper into the bush and come across a fallen tree trunk. Nathan skirts it and comes up to another toppled tree. This time we can't find a detour and we return to the main route through dense bush.

I have no idea where we are. There's birdsong all around: grey-headed bush-shrike, cardinal woodpecker, southern boubou, emerald-spotted wood-dove, eastern nicator...

Later, the vehicles pop out next to the wide riverbed of the Limpopo. We climb out again, onto thick, coarse sand. The hills on the opposite bank belong to Zimbabwe. I can hear the distant sound of cowbells. The sun sets and the riverine forest draws a black curtain over the landscape.

After sunset we walk up the riverbank and get back into the vehicles. Nathan takes out a spotlight and sweeps it around slowly. Two eyes blink back at us from the dark. It's a fiery-necked nightjar, with a chick close by! We ooh and aah in the

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: On your first night you watch the sun set over the dry Limpopo riverbed. The green-winged pytilia looks like a toddler who got hold of lipstick. Pafuri is in a malarial area so each tent is kitted with two mosquito nets. White-crested helmet-shrikes hang out in mopane veld and can usually be found in groups of five to eight birds. A good pair of binoculars is an essential part of any Kruger trip.

Cruiser. The mom flies off and returns again to feed her baby.

"I've been a guide for 11 years and I've never seen that," Nathan says.

We don't see anything else on the drive back to the camp, except for a mopane leaf that we mistake for a chameleon. But we had two significant sightings today – no need to be greedy!

DAY 2

In search of (more) birds

Doof-doof-doof... It's not the call of a rare bird that wakes me, but a pounding drumbeat – the camp's alarm. It's 4.30 am. I groggily try to extricate myself from the mosquito net around my bed. Coffee and rusks are waiting in the dining tent.

While I munch a rusk, I listen. There are at least five or six distinct chirps coming from the wakening bush around us, but I can only identify two of them: grey-headed bush-shrike, and spurfowl. Nathan mentioned yesterday that there's a breeding pair of black-throated wattle-eyes in the camp. But wait, no time to ponder – everyone's getting back into the Cruiser.

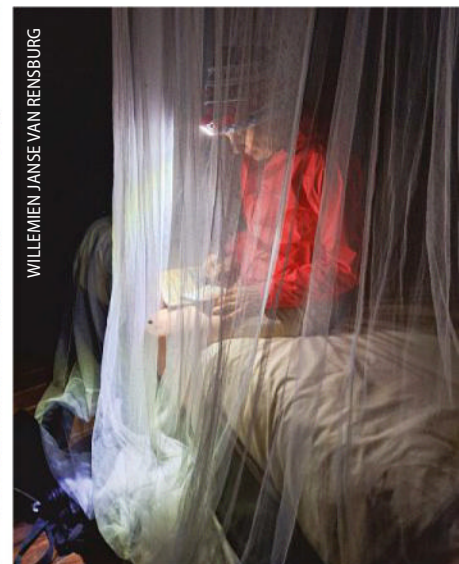
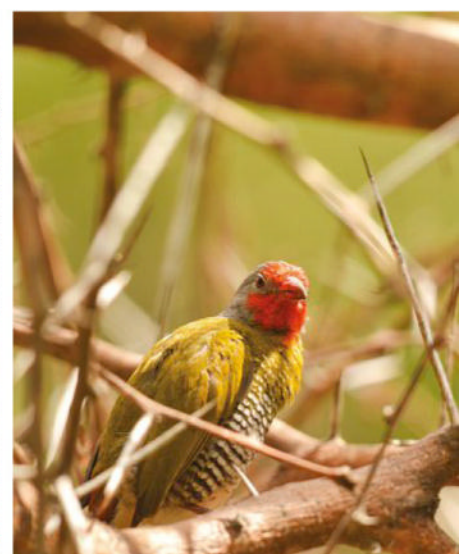
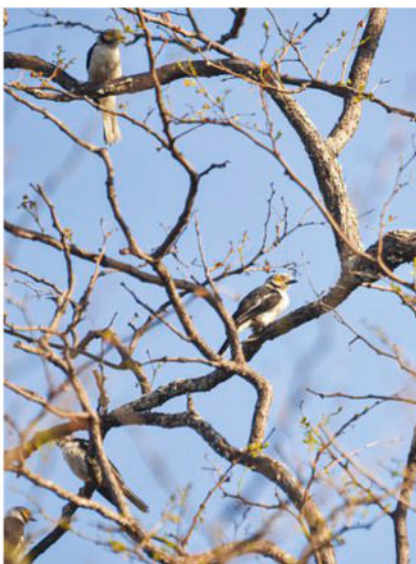
This morning we return to the H1-9. The road cuts through mopane woodland, home to more rare birds like Arnot's chat and racket-tailed roller, as well as eastern nicator and various cuckoos.

Nathan points out a "seedbank" – a fallen tree around which a small new habitat has sprung up, where pytilias and firefinches love to scratch around.

There are cement markers along the tar road that indicate kilometres. Around marker 12, cathedral mopanes – tall, adult trees – rise up on both sides of the road. Further along, near marker 8, a breeding pair of racket-tailed rollers has been sighted. Lilac-breasted and other rollers are a familiar sight in the park, but the racket-tailed roller is only found from this road north. It's a Makuleke special.

"They're active when the mopanes bloom in December and January – when the flowers attract lots of insects," Nathan explains.

We look and look, but no luck. We do see other birds, though: greater blue-eared starling, cinnamon-breasted bunting,



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: You'll almost certainly see a woodland kingfisher in summer. With a spotting scope you'll be able to make out the feathers on the bird in that faraway thorn tree. This is what Crooks' Corner looks like from the Luvuvhu riverbed. Have you ever seen crocodile spoor? The Luvuvhu Bridge is a prime birdwatching spot in the Kruger.

IN OTHER WORDS



Nathan Ingram EcoTraining instructor

It's a very special place. Come to Makuleke if you want to experience true wilderness. It's the Kruger at its best – an ancient world. Just look at the old trees. How long have they been growing here?

For me, it's enough just to be here; to walk around and see rhino tracks; to realise you're part of a bigger ecosystem. You can see pretty much anything, from rhino to cheetah to a four-toed elephant shrew. The other day, our team spotted a pangolin on the tar road. They're here. And I saw an aardvark at Jachacha Pan.

Shingwedzi is my favourite rest camp in the Kruger – it has all those big apple-leaf and fig trees next to the river, and it has the Mphongolo Loop, which is good for bird and leopard sightings.

violet-backed starling, several wood-hoopoes and a chinspot batis singing “three-blind-mice”.

Nathan turns the Cruiser around and drives to the Luvuvhu Bridge. Green-winged pytilia. Jacobin cuckoo. White-bellied sunbird. Rattling cisticola. Red-backed shrike.

At a small bridge before the main one over the Luvuvhu, someone spots something on a plain to the right of the road. I train my binoculars on a... dwarf bittern. I never would have noticed it on my own!

We meet a SANParks vehicle on the bridge and the guides say they saw a Pel's fishing-owl here three days before. In the Kruger, these extremely elusive nocturnal birds are only found here and along the Olifants River.

On the other side of the bridge, Nathan turns off at another no-entry sign and takes us to a viewpoint over the Luvuvhu River. We see a tropical boubou eating a frog, a crocodile laying eggs, a saddle-billed stork, an African woolly-necked stork, nyalas...

From the viewpoint, this road runs past an airfield and past Baobab Hill House, which was once the home of the section ranger in this area and is now part of Return Africa's Pafuri Collection.

We stop for a photo next to the tallest baobab in Makuleke (32m high) before we head back to camp for lunch.

Fights in the veld

Around 3.30pm, we set off again. Nathan pulls over – a flock of starlings is ganging up on a snake next to the road. The noise alone is enough to scare the snake off. Back at the tallest baobab, a mosque swallow is catching the last bit of sun – another lifer. Black cuckooshrike. Lifer. Southern black tit. Lifer. Nathan stops again and points into the forest to the right. There's action: a violet-backed starling and a host of other starlings are chasing after something. What?! A snake, a monitor lizard, a leopard? No idea, but it's gone.

African harrier-hawk. Fork-tailed

drongo. Green wood-hoopoe.

Ha! The landscape looks familiar – there's the Luvuvhu Bridge again. It's 6pm and dusk falls in a pink haze. A goliath heron, three African spoonbills, egrets and knob-billed ducks stand around on the riverbank. Guineafowl kick up a racket and an African fish-eagle sits on a high perch. A nightjar flaps past. Other visitors are all in the rest camps by now; we're the only ones on the bridge.

The sun sets as swallows flit across the purple sky. It's an impossible task to tell the different species apart. I sit with my back against the bridge guardrails. My brain can't absorb any more. Nature is too overwhelming!

Once it's properly dark, Nathan and guide Tsundzukani Hlongwane shine spotlights over the river. Where's that Pel's?

Eventually, we have to call it a night. “Okay guys, we tried,” Nathan says.

On the way back to camp, more eyes reflect in the dark. This time it's a female square-tailed nightjar, barely big enough to fill your hand. Her feathers blend in with the rocky road. She flies up and circles before disappearing into the night. A few metres further, we find another nightjar in the road – a male. And then another two.

The headlights of the two Cruisers cast the only beams of light for kilometres. A scrub hare darts across the road and a genet gives us one look and runs away.

At the camp, we tuck into chicken casserole. Another guest, Hannes van Heerden from Hoedspruit, sums up the day: “I haven't been this tired from just sitting in a long time!”

DAY 3

From one cathedral to the next

When we walk to the vehicles after breakfast, we can't get in because two elephants are exploring them with their trunks. We keep a safe distance and take photos of this “everyday” occurrence.

This morning we're off to the floodplain of the Limpopo River. A woodland



IN OTHER WORDS



Tsundzukani Hlongwane
EcoTraining instructor

I just love Makuleke – it's untamed. You never know what's going to be around the corner. You drive through thornveld and the next thing you're in a forest, then woodland... You might not see another vehicle all day.

One moment you're scrambling around for Makuleke specials, then you find a dwarf bittern – the first of the season. The migratory birds come from the north and this part of the Kruger is one of their first landing spots.

The other day, I was driving a guy who said he wanted to see a white-tailed mongoose. It's a nocturnal animal and he asked about it at lunchtime. But that evening, when we were driving back to camp, a white-tailed mongoose walked across the road!

I like any rest camp in the Kruger as long as it's north of Letaba. I don't want to be stuck in a traffic jam to see a leopard's ear. I'd rather see my own cheetah!

kingfisher calls and its mate answers. *Chip-cherrrrrrr*. We drive through an ancient landscape where tall palm trees sway in the breeze. A marabou stork is perched on a branch while white-backed vultures fill the rest of the seats. There must be a dead animal somewhere around here. Ugh, there's the smell – it's a buffalo carcass, a few days old.

Later, we pull over and Tsundzukani leads us into a cool, dark, jackal-berry forest. While we stare at the cathedral of branch, root and bark, Nathan directs our attention to a black-throated wattle-eye in the canopy. I struggle to find the black bird against the leaves, but then I see that unmistakable bright-red eye wattle. Lifer!

We go back to the vehicles and carry on, out of the forest and into a sunny, arid landscape. We stop at Nwambi Pan, surrounded by ana trees, for coffee and chocolate muffins. It's nearly 10 am and the day is heating up.

I spend a few minutes scanning the area with my binoculars: African spoonbill, pied avocet, black-winged stilt, yellow-billed stork, hamerkop, knob-billed duck, goliath heron, grey heron, bearded woodpecker, malachite kingfisher, broad-billed roller... Will people ever believe me?

"Let's take a moment of silence in this unbelievable place," says Tsundzukani when we stop at a fever tree forest half an hour later.

This forest is the reason I've been dreaming of a visit to Makuleke for years. There are fever trees along the S63 next to the Luvuvhu River, but here on the northern bank, you're in a proper forest. We get out and walk under the canopy – a vaulted, yellowish-green ceiling. I want to lie on my back and spend the rest of the day here, watching clouds drifting past on the other side of the veil.

I return to the Cruiser with a heavy heart. I'll probably never get the chance to come back here.

Half an hour later we reach another landmark: Crooks' Corner. All Kruger

visitors are allowed to get out here, but we get to go beyond the rail, down to the sandy riverbed. The Luvuvhu meets the Limpopo here. After good rains, both rivers will be brim-full of water, but today there's only a long pool where hippos snort in indignation.

After a lunch of tuna salad, pasta and watermelon at camp, we head to the Luvuvhu Bridge one last time. The Return Africa guides said they'd heard a young Pel's fishing-owl calling the night before. We pass the floodplain, the fever trees and the tallest baobab again, to the H1-9 and the bridge.

A retired couple is already there. They say they've been visiting the park for 10 years, and this time they've finally seen a racket-tailed roller and a pennant-winged nightjar.

We watch waterbuck drinking with the sun on their backs. Baboons sit on a tree trunk, discussing monkey business. A grey heron settles on a branch.

Nathan, Tsundzukani, Fritz Rexrodt and his son Philip try to tell the different birds apart. Is there, maybe, a rare Böhm's or mottled spinetail among the little swifts flying over the bridge? Ag, it doesn't really matter – my tick list has grown by 50 birds.

"Rhino!" Nathan calls out and we all scramble closer to see where he's pointing. The animal stands on the opposite bank, dehorned but proud. We watch quietly. Tsundzukani runs to the vehicle to get his camera so he can capture the sighting on video. "I'll send this in for the EcoTraining news page," he says. "It's my first rhino sighting in Makuleke and I've worked here for three years."

Nathan is just as excited. "I've only seen tracks in the year I've been here. What a special moment."

As the sun sets, a feeling of gratitude descends on the group. Gratitude for this moment, for this place, this bridge and this river, which feeds birds, animals and humans in so many ways.



MAKULEKE TENTED CAMP

HOW DOES IT WORK?

EcoTraining and BirdLife South Africa offer three guided birding trips per year. Each trip is four days and three nights long. Guests stay in Makuleke tented camp – it's basic but it has everything you need, including Wi-Fi. Guests leave their vehicles at the Pafuri gate and will be transported by EcoTraining staff.

Cost: R7 000 per person sharing. This rate includes three nights' accommodation in an en suite safari tent (with bedding, flush toilets and hot showers), all meals, non-alcoholic drinks and drives with two expert guides. There are fridges where you can keep your drinks cool.

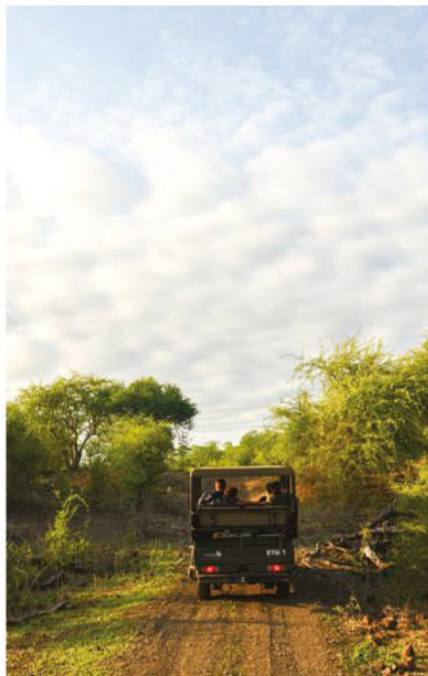
2025 remaining dates: 27 – 30 November;
4 – 7 December

Contact: 013 752 2532

enquiries@ecotraining.co.za

What else? EcoTraining offers several courses, including a seven-day birding course and a year-long professional field-guide course.

Visit ecotraining.co.za for more.



MAKULEKE IS A MUST!

Although Makuleke Contractual Park (240 km²) makes up only 1% of the total area of the Kruger Park, it's home to 80% of the park's biodiversity. At least 350 birds have been seen here, in a diverse landscape consisting of thornveld, riverine forest, floodplains grassland, river channels and seasonal pans.

The Makuleke wetland was declared a Ramsar site in 2007, which means that the area is of international importance. The seasonal pans are a key water source for migratory birds and animals.

Turn to page 125 for Makuleke Contractual Park's location.



The story of Makuleke

Long before big game hunters, transport riders, traders and fortune seekers ventured into the modern Pafuri area, it was inhabited by Tsonga- and Venda-speaking people.

An information board on the banks of the Luvuvhu River commemorates the burial site of Hosi Khamba (1777 – 1832), ruler of the Makuleke area. According to this board, Khamba was a part of the greater Vanwanati clan, which controlled the area between the Soutpansberg and the Limpopo River in the 18th century. He moved north in 1820, to the area between the Limpopo and Luvuvhu rivers, to establish his own clan. But first he had to conquer the Vanyayi people, who already lived there...

He attacked and defeated the Vanyayi in the night like a hyena, which earned him the name Hosi Phele. ("Hosi" means chief, and "Phele" means hyena in Venda.)

Back then, several trade routes between the coast and the interior cut through this region. Traders acquired goods like animal skins and ivory. It became known as Makuleke – "the place where people came to collect" – and Hosi Phele was its first chief.

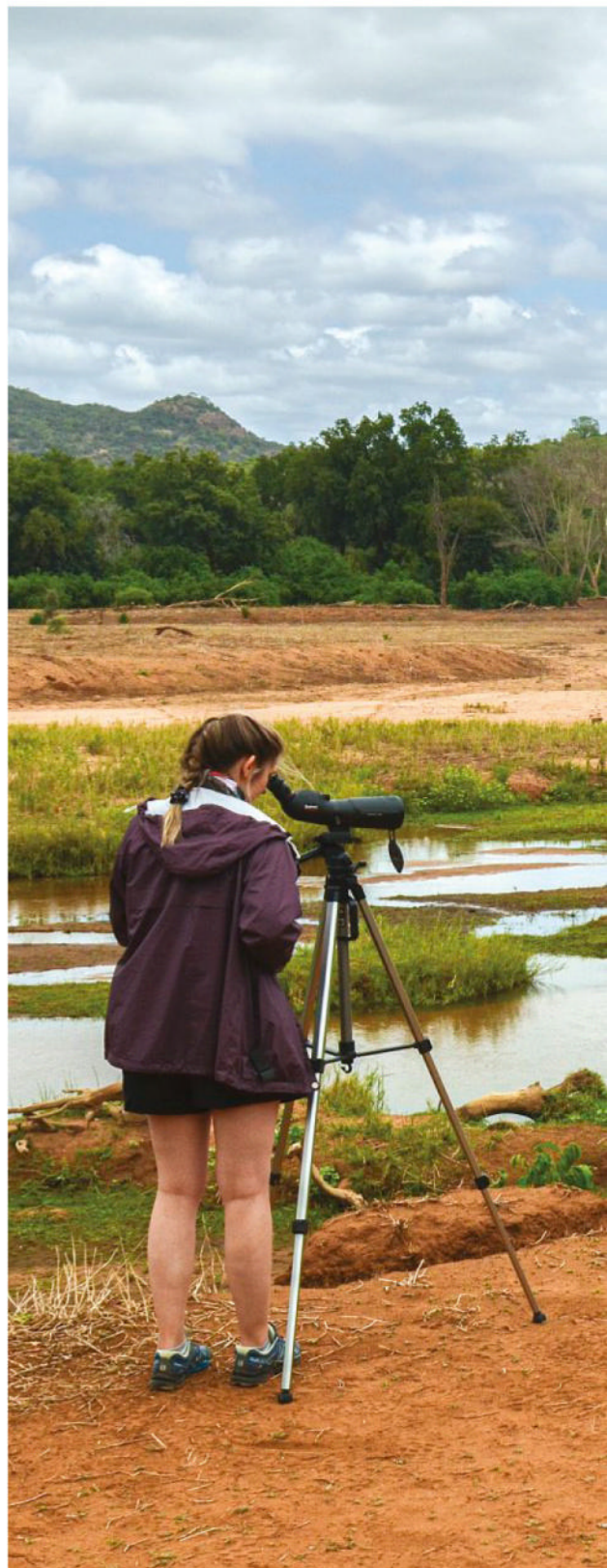
In the late 1800s, the Pafuri area – of which Makuleke is a part – was integrated into the South African Republic (ZAR). In 1933, the Pafuri Triangle was declared a provincial reserve and the Makuleke people were seen as being on the land illegally.

In 1969, about 2 000 people were forcibly removed by the apartheid government and the land was added to the Kruger National Park. The community was resettled in Ntlhaveni, about 50 km away, in a much smaller place, next to the western border of the park. Ntlhaveni later became a part of the Gazankulu homeland.

Nearly 30 years later, in 1998, the Makuleke land claim was the first to be successfully lodged against a national park in South Africa. The people decided not to return to their land, however, and agreed to let SANParks manage it for the next 20 – 50 years. The name was changed to the Makuleke Contractual Park.

There are currently three concession holders in the contractual park: Two private lodges – The Outpost and Return Africa – and EcoTraining, an organisation that trains field guides.

Some of the community members work for these concession holders. The community also receives a portion of the income generated by ecotourism projects – the money has been used to install boreholes and build community halls, a crèche and a library.



Sources: *A cameo from the Past* by U. De V. Pienaar; [academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/); [pmg.org.za](https://www.pmg.org.za/); [iiied.org](https://www.iiied.org/)



Hosi Phele's grave is next to the Luvuvhu River. Only guests of the three concession holders are allowed to visit the area.

Everyone's favourite park

You'll have to search far and wide to find someone who doesn't like the Kruger. In fact, most people don't just like the park, they *love* it! We spoke to holidaymakers who come back year after year after year.



Karin van Staden

SOMERSET WEST

My grandfather Manie owned a farm next to the Kruger Park in the 1980s – it was where Sabi Sand Private Nature Reserve is now. He loved the veld and the animals, but the farm was very basic – there were no lodges, and it was before the fences between the park and Sabi Sand were taken down. His real farm was near Harrismith in the Free State, but the bush was his passion. He always dreamt of building bungalows and a big boma, but people told him that no one would pay to go sit around a fire. He was ahead of his time the way he thought about tourism, but he had to sell the farm in the end.

I grew up in Durbanville, Cape Town. Every year when I was young, the day before the schools closed for the July holidays, our family would embark on the long drive to Harrismith. From there, we'd

travel to the Lowveld with my grandfather.

In later years, when hotels and time-share units sprung up around Hazyview, we usually booked a week at Kruger Park Lodge and a week inside the park, depending on where we could get bookings.

One year, my grandfather hired an old kombi. I remember an afternoon game drive, along the H4-1 between Lower Sabie and Skukuza... An elephant charged us, coming straight at the kombi down the road! My sister Marilize and I screamed at the top of our lungs and my grandfather had to swerve. The elephant steamed past on the tar while the kombi bashed through the bushes!

Another time, we slept outside the Numbi gate after having spent nine days in the park. Our plan was to drive around the park to Kruger Park Lodge the next day.

We had seen 92 lions in nine days! My mom Chris-Marie joked that it was a shame we hadn't seen more, because she liked a round number... Anyway, the next morning we got a call from Kruger Park Lodge to say there were protests around Hazyview and we should rather drive there through the park.

We set off. It was a gloomy morning and we saw no animals. My mom suggested we turn off on a river loop, and there we found eight lions! So, we saw 100 lions in 10 days – a record we've never managed to break.

Most years, we tried to incorporate Satara into our itinerary. One time, we befriended some farmers from the Vrede district and the oom told us how a lion had bitten their car tyre and licked their side mirrors. My dad didn't believe him until he saw a video of the incident. They were



a big group and used two-way radios to communicate. In the mornings, each family would head out in a different direction and radio the others if they saw action. The oom said we should stay behind him and if he tapped the brakes twice in quick succession, my dad should follow him.

That morning, we ended up on the S100 between two prides of lions locked in battle. The males swiped at each other with their giant paws. When they roared, it felt like our vehicle was vibrating. What an experience!

"We always stayed in bungalows or cottages. I was a student the first time we camped. We weren't campers. My parents borrowed a tent and we arrived at Satara with three mattresses, a groundsheet, a light and an extension cord. We realised we needed one of those blue adaptors and

drove around until we found a friendly face to ask if he could help us get power. We camped next to his stand, but our friendly neighbour turned out to be a terribly loud snorer! My parents and I were still wide awake in the tent at 2 am. I eventually got into the car and drove a distance away so I could sleep.

We camped in the park about three more times, until my parents said they were too old for the hassle of it. Lots of people have all the gear and they make it look fun, but camping requires a mind shift. I'd rather save up during the year because I don't want to camp.

On our second date, my husband Bernard told me he also loved the Kruger. I was so happy! Otherwise he would never have fitted into our family...

Our son Christiaan (14) was two years

Opposite page from far left: The Van Staden, Nel and Olivier families at the Crocodile Bridge day visitors' area, in 2019. Bernard and Christiaan (2) in Skukuza rest camp, 2013. Nkumbe viewpoint, June 2019. Karin's mom Chris-Marie, Oupa Manie Wessels, Karin and Ouma Ounooi Nel at the N'wanetsi picnic site, June 1988. Oupa Manie and Karin's dad André at the Nkhulu picnic site, June 1981.

Oupa Manie, Karin, her sister Marilize, Ouma Koekie Wessels and her mom Chris-Marie on their farm in the Sabi Sand area in 1983.

HOW TO SECURE YOUR KRUGER BOOKING

It takes determination and planning to get a booking for a group of people during the winter school holidays. The Van Staden family consists of six adults and four children. Here's how Karin does it:

The bookings open 11 months in advance. Work out your ideal itinerary and set a reminder on your phone for the year before, to the day. Make sure you're ready to call at 7.30 am. Karin calls from her own phone as well as her husband's, and their work phone. The agent will inform you which accommodation options are available on which days. You might have to make alternative plans, so have those Plan Bs and Cs ready, too.

At the same time, Karin e-mails her dream itinerary to a booking agent at krugerlowveld.com. The agency attempts to get all the accommodation requested.

In the end, Karin has two sets of bookings, which she loads into an Excel spreadsheet to show her family. The family then decides on the best itinerary and Karin cancels all the unnecessary bookings.

Once the accommodation is locked in, Karin enlists the krugerlowveld.com booking agent to allocate each separate family's accommodation to their own booking code, so they can make individual payments and get their own entrance permits.

Remember, things happen and there are sometimes cancellations – keep your eye on the website year-round. Karin books their flights about six to eight months in advance.



old the first time he went to the park. Our daughter Karli (11) was three. Every year, they count down the days until our next Kruger holiday.

Park holidays bring generations together. People of any age can share a love of nature. My family is very close. I think it's partly due to the hundreds of hours we've spent together in the Kruger over the years.

Malelane satellite camp is special to us – we book three of the five bungalows every year. It's a neat and scenic camp. You sometimes hear sounds from the farms, and from Marloth Park on the other side of the Crocodile River, but once the African scops-owls start to *prrrup* you forget all about it. A major benefit is the SuperSpar in Malelane, which is only a half-hour drive away.

Lower Sabie is another of our favourites. We like the EH huts with communal facilities. The kids always make friends there. Lower Sabie is centrally located – there are

so many game-drive options, plus shorter loops and an abundance of game. It's a great area to explore when you have young kids. There's almost always action on the S28. The S130 has a resident leopard and a local lion pride that often hangs out in the area. And the S25 is not too far away. Mlondozi picnic site is high on a koppie with a great view.

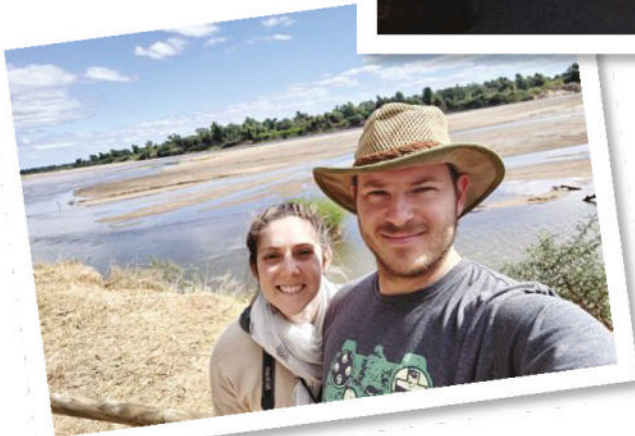
People often say: "If you've seen one impala, lion or elephant, you've seen them all – why do you want to go again?" But the park isn't just about game viewing. It's also about the silence, the tranquillity, and being together. If you look at a map of the park and see how big it is and how few roads there are, you realise how lucky you are if you see a rhino or a pride of lions.

There's excitement every morning: What will you see today? And in the evenings, you talk about all the wonderful things you and your family experienced together.

TRANSPORT YOUR VEHICLE BY TRUCK

The Van Stadens fly from Cape Town to OR Tambo, where they meet up with their vehicle, which they send to Joburg by truck with VDS OneLogix (vds@vdslogix.co.za). There's a depot about 10 km from the airport and it costs about R8 500 return. This saves them four days of driving, fuel, accommodation and meals on the road – and they get to drive their own vehicle in the park.

Others
who can't
get enough



Emma and Hannes van Heerden

HAZYVIEW

We live nearby and love a quick day drive into the park. We enter at the Numbi gate and exit at the Phabeni gate. We usually sit at Nyamundwa Dam for a while. There are often buffaloes, elephants and fish-eagles there.

If we're in the park for longer, we stay at Letaba or one of the camps further north. We like the camps without power – Tsendze is our favourite. The fewer people the better. When it's quiet, you can hear the owls and the hippos. By 9 pm in Tsendze, you can hear a pin drop – everyone is sitting quietly and listening to the veld.

Tsendze is almost always fully booked, except in January when it's too hot. So that's when we go. We take a portable Ecolux fan that can clip to surfaces – it's small but powerful. And if it's too hot, we go for a drive with the aircon at full blast.

We like to drive the Red Rocks Loop from Tsendze – it runs along the course of the Shingwedzi River beneath leadwood trees. We often see leopards. In the late afternoon, we go to the nearby Shipandani hide for sundowners. There's usually a pearl-spotted owlet there.

We once stopped at Grootvlei Dam, on the S50 towards Shingwedzi, and watched a herd of ellies splashing in the water. It's a beautiful spot in the middle of nowhere, with an abundance of herons and kingfishers. We've been to the dam multiple times and we've always been the only ones there.



KRUGER PEOPLE

Clockwise from left: Hannes relaxes in the Balule campsite. Marilyn at the swimming pool in Pretoriuskop rest camp. Emma and Hannes at Crooks' Corner.



Marilyn Hoole

MUIZENBERG

I've been to the Kruger about 15 times. The first time was 45 years ago, when I was 25 years old. It's my favourite destination – I go for the birds; the animals are a bonus.

I love the route from Biyamiti bushveld camp along the S25, next to the Crocodile River. In the north, the Mphongolo Loop is also a winner.

The bushveld camps are the best. When you stay at Biyamiti, birdcall wakes you at 4 am – it's magical. At Balule, you can sit and watch the Olifants River all day. We went on a night drive and saw a Pel's fishing-owl on the low-water bridge just before Balule. We had a perfect view of this rare owl for almost a minute before it flew off.

I'm also crazy about Punda Maria – I saw my 600th bird in the surrounding area this year: a pennant-winged nightjar!

Many people stick to the south of the park and only make it as far north as Olifants. But the north is so tranquil. And for birders like me, it's paradise. At the Pafuri picnic site, ask the caretaker Mandla Ngomane which rare birds are in the area.

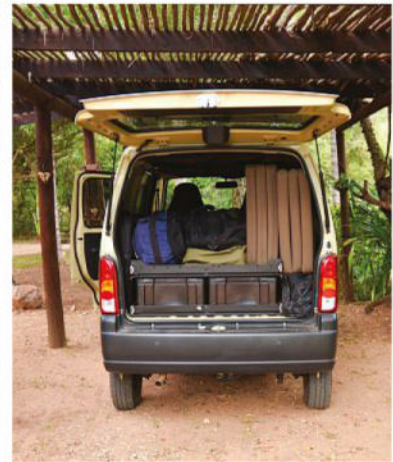
When I think of the word "holiday", I think of the Kruger.

Kitted out!

The Kruger Park is a dream destination for campers, but if you live far away, it can be a hassle to get all your gear there. Not any more – meet the cutest camping van in Africa!



S114, NEAR THE MALELANE GATE



The Kruger Park has lots of affordable accommodation options with communal facilities, but it does mean you have to bring some of your own gear from home. This complicates things if you're flying to the park – you can only wrap so many forks and knives in a shirt!

Kitted Africa offers a great solution. Their vans are fully equipped for two people and include, among other things, a tent, camping chairs, a table, towels and even a bar of soap!

Once you've pitched your tent under a silver cluster-leaf tree in Pretoriuskop and started to unpack, you'll find more nifty extras: a coffee plunger, citronella candle, camping lamp, rechargeable fan...

The gear is well organised in marked crates on sliders, which you access via the back door. You can open the camping fridge through the side door. It's such a cool setup that will plant all sorts of ideas in your head to modify your own car at home!

The hero is the van itself – a Suzuki Eeco panel van with retro touches like manual winders for the windows and a petrol cap that unlocks with a key. These little details contribute to its charm.

It has a 1.2-litre engine so you won't be competing in the Grand Prix any time soon, but the speed limit in the park is only 50 km/h so you don't need much more power. The van has high ground clearance so you can see over the grass, and it's easy to manoeuvre if you need to turn around quickly to see a cheetah. Plus, it's fuel-efficient.

When you sit in your camping chair at sunset, you'll realise that everything you need is right there.

How does it work? The van has everything that two people will need for a comfortable camping holiday in the Kruger. You don't sleep in the van – you still have to pitch a tent, but it's an OzTrail one that's easy to put up and take down, with poles that fold in like a spider's legs.

Where? Kitted Africa operates in the Mbombela area. They'll meet you with the van at any shuttle terminal in Mbombela, or at the Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport.

Cost: From R1 300 per day if you book for seven days. Minimum booking of three days.

What else? Kitted Africa also offers packages for basic huts or safari tents in the park. You won't need to pitch your tent at these, but you'll still need lots of your own gear, which is provided for in the van.

Contact: ☎ 082 820 1330

📍 kittedafrica.com

Cruise through the Kruger

A visit to the Kruger Park involves spending a lot of time in your vehicle. If that vehicle happens to be a **Ford Everest Sport**, the park feels like an ocean – and you're sailing along without a splash.

BY ESMA MARNEWICK



BALULE

“**M**om, we each have our own charger and aircon!” was the first thing my daughter, Emilie, said when we got into the Ford Everest Sport – a vehicle loaned to us for a tour of the Kruger Park.

Climbing into the Sport doesn't feel like climbing into a car. The interior is black, grey and silver; streamlined and slick. It's spacious, the seats are comfortable and the aircon is cold as soon as you turn it on – a necessity in the Kruger, where summer days can reach 40°C. No, it feels more like you're climbing into a five-star cabin on a cruise ship. Switch on the engine with the push of a button and next thing you're sailing along the park's tar and dirt roads as smoothly as an MSC ocean liner off the coast of Mozambique.

The Sport is the kind of vehicle that makes you *want* to drive, even if it's raining and you're only seeing impalas and drenched baboons. And – bonus – the fuel consumption is great for such a big vehicle: about 7,5 l/100 km on the open road.

Just a disclaimer: I do my day-to-day driving in a Nissan Livina (old, but paid off) and when we go on holiday, it's in my husband's 2013 Toyota Hilux (same thing). So I won't be offended if you think I'm too easily impressed.

There are more than enough reasons why the Sport costs over R1 million new. (The entry-level XLT version costs R924 000.) The designers have taken care of everything. Whenever I thought of something the car needed, like a handle under the window, I discovered it was already there!

The instrument panel is dominated

by a huge 30 cm touchscreen – the Imax of vehicle screens. You can follow a GPS route and see what's going on behind you when you reverse. “What's that? Back there!” someone screeches. Reverse... Another impala.

The screen also helps when you have to manoeuvre in and out of those tight parking spaces between some of the rondavels in the rest camps.

The Kruger doesn't require 4x4 driving skills, but you'd be able to do any 4x4 trail in the Sport. There are six modes (Normal, Eco, Tow, Sand, Rut and Slippery) – you only have to press a button and the vehicle knows what to do.

My husband Tobie usually drives when we're on holiday in the Kruger so I have my hands free to take photos. Of all the vehicles



I've tested on tour for work, the Everest Sport has the most legroom in the front passenger seat – just over 1 m. I normally keep the following at my feet: camera bag, zoom lens, field guides and a pair of binoculars. My 18–35 mm lens fitted snugly in the cup holder and it made changing lenses a breeze. There are also two storage compartments – one for your cellphone, tissues and a pen or two; and a bigger one for a map, bird guide and a packet of droëwors.

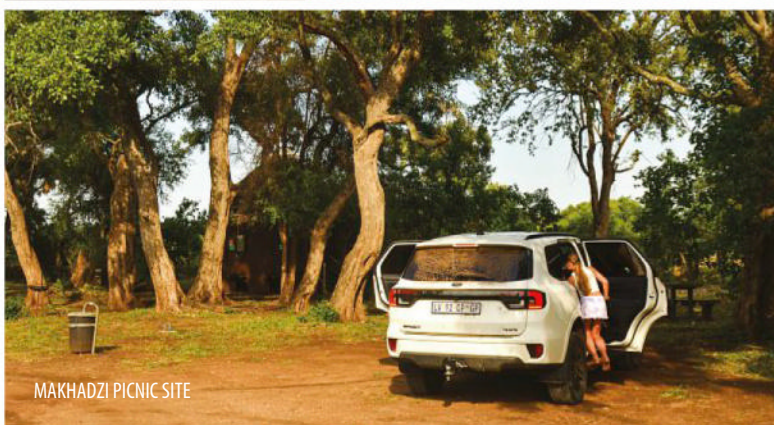
The kids even fought less in the back because they had enough space for all their stuff. This vehicle has so many features that will make your time in the park as enjoyable as possible. It stands more than 1,8 m tall, with a ground clearance of 226 mm – the extra height really helps when you're looking for animals in the tall grass in summer. Another nifty feature is the cruise control, which you can set to 50 km/h (the maximum speed allowed in the park) or slower. The big side mirrors allow you to see if a hyena has snuck across the road behind you. And there are holders for everyone's coffee cups.

The packing space with all the seats up is roomy at 260 litres, and the tailgate is power-operated so it opens and closes by itself. With the back row of seats folded down, you'll have enough space for a month-long stay in the park. Fold the second- and third-row seats down and you'll be able to keep travelling for a year.

"Come on, Esma," I hear you saying. "There must be something you didn't like about the car?" Okay, fine. If I absolutely had to find fault, I'd say that a sunroof would have been a welcome addition – to watch raptors in the sky and to allow for some extra ventilation. (The more expensive Wildtrak model does have a sunroof.) I would also be a bit worried if something went wrong with the computer system at somewhere like Crooks' Corner – very far from civilisation. But I suppose that's the story with most modern vehicles: Gone are the days of fixing problems with duct tape and galvanised wire...



OLIFANTS RIVER VIEWPOINT



MAKHADZI PICNIC SITE

FORD EVEREST SPORT

Engine:	2.0-litre, 4-cylinder, bi-turbo diesel (154 kW/500 Nm)
Fuel tank:	76.5 litres
Ground clearance:	226 mm
Transmission:	10-speed automatic
Drivetrain:	4x2 or 4x4
Luggage space:	259 – 1,818 litres
Price:	R1 029 000



CAMP GUIDE SOUTH

- 64** BERG-EN-DAL
- 70** CROCODILE BRIDGE
- 72** BIYAMITI
- 76** SKUKUZA
- 80** LOWER SABIE
- 84** PRETORIUSKOP

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1** Search for the Big Five around Crocodile Bridge.
- 2** Look a croc in the eye at the Biyamiti weir.
- 3** Wake up with the birds in Biyamiti bushveld camp.
- 4** Hang out at Sunset Dam.
- 5** Stay calm (and look for birds) at Lake Panic.
- 6** Take in the vast plains at the Nkumbe viewpoint.



HYENA ON THE H3

BERG-EN-DAL MALELANE

Berg-en-Dal to Afsaal	30 km	±1h
Berg-en-Dal to Crocodile Bridge	66 km	±2½h
Berg-en-Dal to Skukuza	64 km	±2½h

Kruger National Park

KEY

-  Rest camp/lodge
-  Hiking trail or 4x4 camp
-  Gate
-  Picnic site
-  Bird hide
-  Viewpoint (you may get out)
-  Viewpoint (stay in your car)
-  Place of interest
-  Waterhole
-  Mountain/hill/koppie
-  Muslim prayer facility
-  Town
-  Village
-  Airfield
-  Tar road
-  Dirt road
-  Our game-viewing route
-  4x4 trail (permit required)
-  Distance
-  River (perennial)
-  River (non-perennial)
-  Park border
-  Highlight

Wolhuter Trail camp 

Bushmans Trail camp 

Elephant, buffalo and zebra are often spotted near the water. The six Matjulu lions also roam between the waterhole and the rest camp. If you see them, look closely – one adult lion and one cub both walk with a limp.

Matjulu 

Malelane Mountains

 Khandzalive
840 m

Mpumalanga

Newu Dam

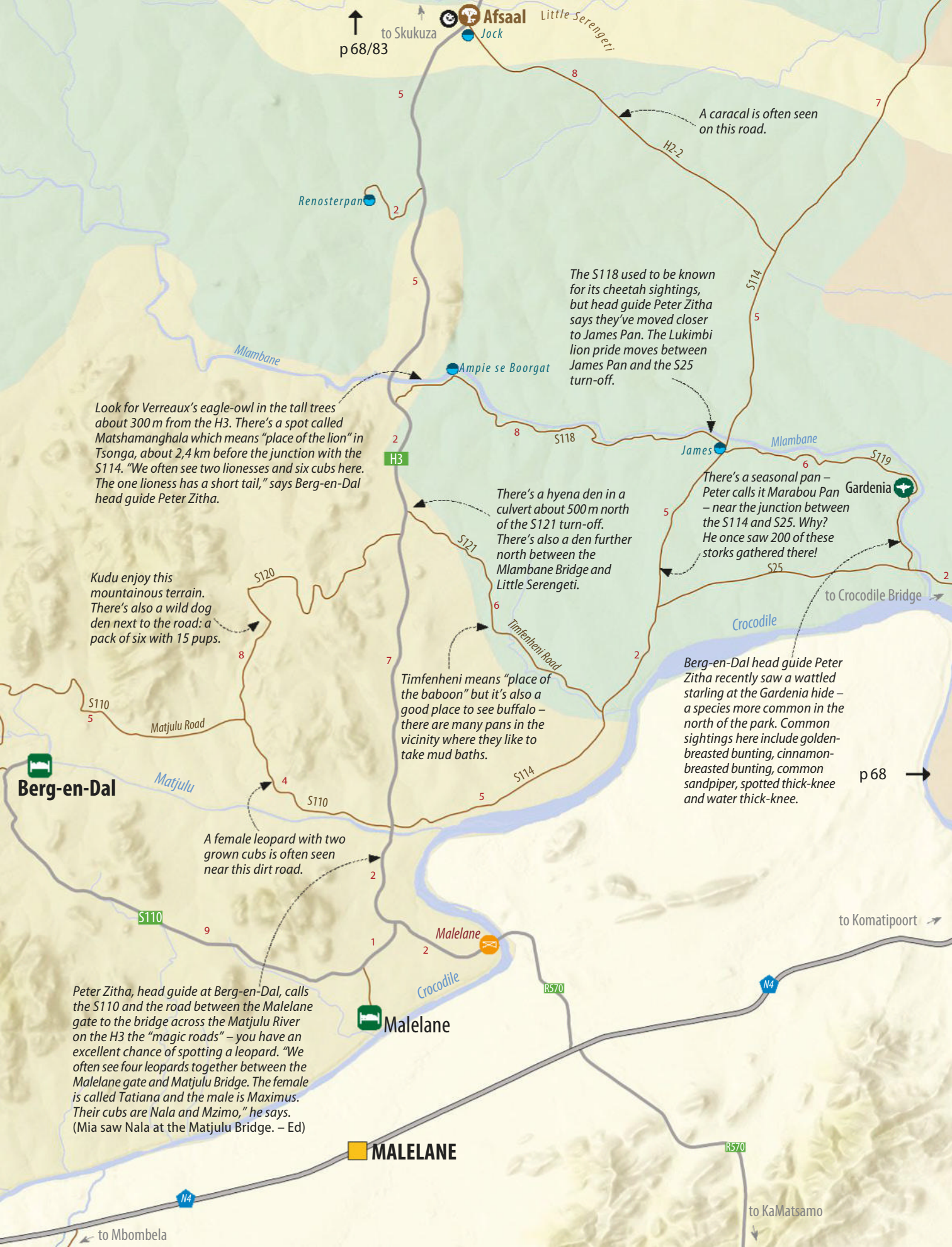
Stolsnek Dam

Nskazi

Luphisi

Nskazi

Crocodile



↑ to Skukuza
p 68/83

Afsaal
Jock

Little Serengeti

A caracal is often seen on this road.

Renosterpan

The S118 used to be known for its cheetah sightings, but head guide Peter Zitha says they've moved closer to James Pan. The Lukimbi lion pride moves between James Pan and the S25 turn-off.

Look for Verreaux's eagle-owl in the tall trees about 300 m from the H3. There's a spot called Matshamanghala which means "place of the lion" in Tsonga, about 2,4 km before the junction with the S114. "We often see two lionesses and six cubs here. The one lioness has a short tail," says Berg-en-Dal head guide Peter Zitha.

Kudu enjoy this mountainous terrain. There's also a wild dog den next to the road: a pack of six with 15 pups.

There's a hyena den in a culvert about 500 m north of the S121 turn-off. There's also a den further north between the Mlampane Bridge and Little Serengeti.

There's a seasonal pan – Peter calls it Marabou Pan – near the junction between the S114 and S25. Why? He once saw 200 of these storks gathered there!

to Crocodile Bridge

Berg-en-Dal head guide Peter Zitha recently saw a wattled starling at the Gardenia hide – a species more common in the north of the park. Common sightings here include golden-breasted bunting, cinnamon-breasted bunting, common sandpiper, spotted thick-knee and water thick-knee.

p 68

Berg-en-Dal

Timfenheni means "place of the baboon" but it's also a good place to see buffalo – there are many pans in the vicinity where they like to take mud baths.

A female leopard with two grown cubs is often seen near this dirt road.

Peter Zitha, head guide at Berg-en-Dal, calls the S110 and the road between the Malelane gate to the bridge across the Matjulu River on the H3 the "magic roads" – you have an excellent chance of spotting a leopard. "We often see four leopards together between the Malelane gate and Matjulu Bridge. The female is called Tatiana and the male is Maximus. Their cubs are Nala and Mzimo," he says. (Mia saw Nala at the Matjulu Bridge. – Ed)

Malelane

MALELANE

to Komatipoort

to KaMatsamo

to Mbombela

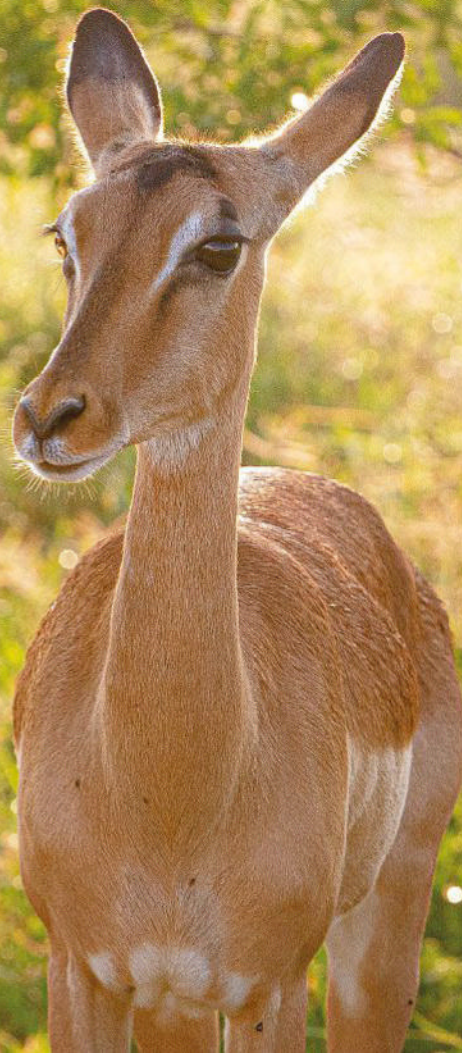
BERG-EN-DAL & MALELANE

The name Berg-en-Dal is very apt. This mountainous landscape in the south-western parts of the park is full of granite koppies that influence the vegetation found here. Russet bushwillow, silver cluster-leaf, red bushwillow, and marula trees dot the veld, with bigger trees like leadwoods along the rivers. Have you ever seen an elephant climb a mountain? Well, here you can!

Berg-en-Dal, completed in 1984, is one of the “newer” rest camps and looks different to the rest. It’s as 1980s as shoulder pads, tracksuits and legwarmers, and everything is face brick. The units are generally more private than the rows of rondavels in some of the other camps.

The kids can spend all afternoon in the big swimming pool. There’s also a shallower pool for the little ones. During school holidays, they can watch a film in the amphitheatre at night.

You’re close to the edge of the Kruger here, especially when you explore the roads along the Crocodile River, but if you forgot the pesto at home, the Spar in Malelane is only about 20 km away!



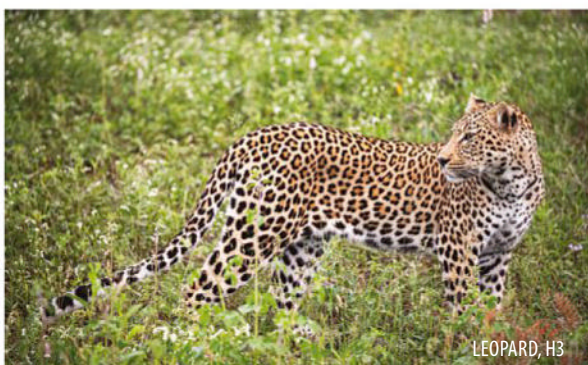
IMPALA, H3



RENOVATED FA COTTAGE (#84)



ACTION IN THE MATJULU RIVER



LEOPARD, H3

Berg-en-Dal residents

"There's a female leopard that roams close to camp, and another one with a cub between Berg-en-Dal and Matjulu. It looks like there has been an increase in leopard numbers in the area," says head guide Peter Zitha.

Matjulu Dam, on the southern border of the rest camp, is currently very shallow and full of sand after the floods of the past few years. It's not very pretty, and there are plans to repair the dam, but in the meantime you can still sit on a bench here and listen to birds like white-faced whistling duck, black-headed oriole, grey heron and fish-eagle.

Peter says if you braai at night, you should keep your eyes peeled for genet, civets, porcupines and honey badgers along the camp fence.

IN OTHER WORDS



PETER ZITHA

HEAD GUIDE: BERG-EN-DAL

19 YEARS IN KNP

ON BERG-EN-DAL: *I work in this area because I love rhino. I struggled in the north of the park – you don't often see them there.*

It's easy to find the Big Five around Berg-en-Dal. Buffalo are shy, but they usually hide along the S121. I've even seen pangolins while walking around camp. My advice to people is to also appreciate the smaller animals. Many times when you're out looking for small animals, you'll find the big ones by accident.



JOHANN MDLULI

CAMP MANAGER: BERG-EN-DAL

19 YEARS IN KNP

ON BERG-EN-DAL: *This is a comfortable camp because it's close to the N4. If you travel from Joburg and you arrive late, this is a good place to start your holiday. We get lots of migratory cuckoos in the camp in summer, like Levallant's, Klaas's, black cuckoo and Diderik cuckoo.*

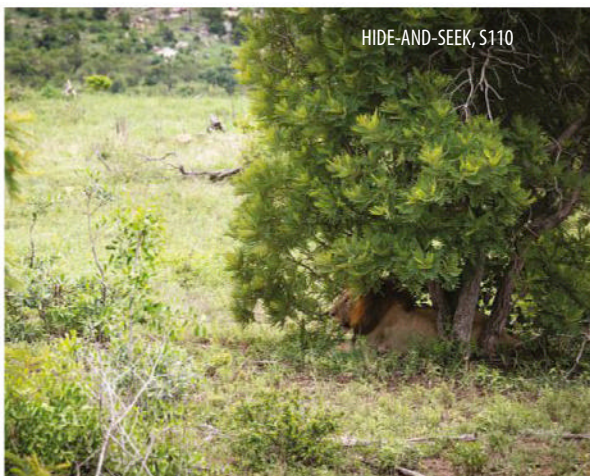
ON HIS FAVOURITE ANIMAL: *I'm always excited when there are cheetahs nearby. We normally see them on the plains between the Mlambane River and the Afsaal picnic site.*



MALELANE CAMP

Malelane residents

A pride of lion roams the camp perimeter. "Last December, they caught a waterbuck right next to the fence!" says Peter.



HIDE-AND-SEEK, S110

STAY HERE



BERG-EN-DAL REST CAMP

In Berg-en-Dal it feels like you have your own piece of the bush: The campsite and units are spread out along the Matjulu spruit and next to the dam. The stands in the campsite aren't very level, but they're big and there are lots of options along the fence.

The units along the fence have a view of the spruit. Numbers 23 to 26 have a view of the upper reaches of the dam (currently more sand than water). FA cottage number 84 was recently renovated: The face brick was painted grey, the inside is modern, and a wheelchair-friendly entrance and shower were added. The plan is to modernise one or two units per year.

Rates: Camping from R481 for two people for a stand with power, plus R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).

BA bungalow from R1 879 for two people (R2 037 for a unit next to the fence), plus R335 per extra adult and R168 per child (sleeps three).

FA family cottage from R3 526 for four people, plus R604 per extra adult and R302

per child (sleeps six).

Guesthouse from R7 634 for six people (the two guesthouses sleep six and eight respectively).

Contact: 013 735 6145/06

MALELANE SATELLITE CAMP

Johann Mdluli says guests often stay at Malelane because they can't find a spot in the rest of the park. But they end up coming back again and again, mostly because of the great view of the Crocodile River. You can also see farmland and factories in the town of Malelane...

Still, this lovely little camp has only five bungalows and 15 camping stands. The campsite is a little cramped and doesn't have much shade; the bungalows are arranged on the lawn under big trees and overlook the river. Each bungalow has a braai and a thatched boma.

Rates: Camping from R480 per night for two people, plus R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).

BG bungalow R1 719 for two people, plus R335 per extra adult and R168 per child (sleeps 3–4).

Contact: 013 735 6152



BERG-EN-DAL



BERG-EN-DAL



AFSAAL PICNIC SITE



GIRAFFE, S114

CROCODILE BRIDGE BIYAMITI LOWER SABIE

Crocodile Bridge to Lower Sabie

36 km

±1½h



Kruger National Park

Drive from Crocodile Bridge to Lower Sabie for breakfast

In Kruger terms, Lower Sabie is "just around the corner" from Crocodile Bridge – you can go look for lions along the S28 in time for brunch in the restaurant.

This tar road goes through grassland, thorn thickets and along a stretch of the Sabie River. It's yet another road where you have a good chance of seeing the Big Five. Turn off to Gezantfombi Dam on the Vurhami River just north of Crocodile Bridge and pour a coffee while you watch hippos, grey herons and crocodiles.

Drive the H4-2 tar road, H5, S108 and S25 for a scenic circular route along densely vegetated river courses lined with jackal-berry and cluster fig trees. There are several low-water bridges where hamerkops and green-backed herons like to hang out.

This road goes through dense bush – a favourite leopard habitat.

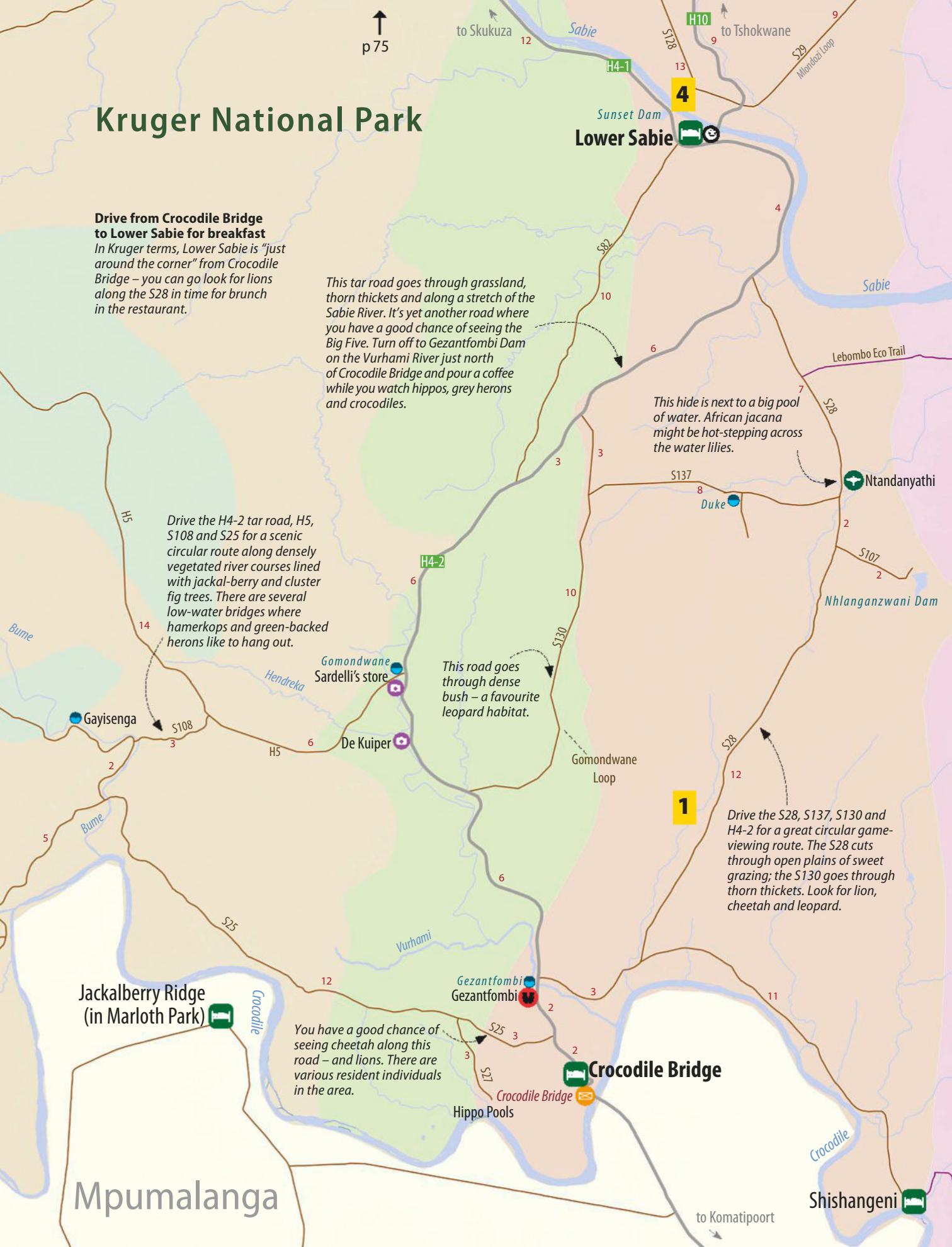
This hide is next to a big pool of water. African jacana might be hot-stepping across the water lilies.

Drive the S28, S137, S130 and H4-2 for a great circular game-viewing route. The S28 cuts through open plains of sweet grazing; the S130 goes through thorn thickets. Look for lion, cheetah and leopard.

You have a good chance of seeing cheetah along this road – and lions. There are various resident individuals in the area.

Jackalberry Ridge
(in Marloth Park)

Mpumalanga



CROCODILE BRIDGE

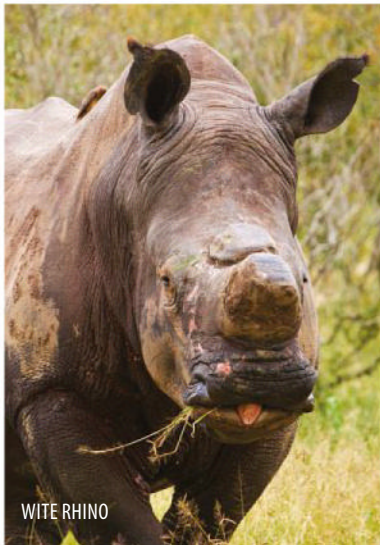
Crocodile Bridge is busy. It's close to an entrance gate so there's lots of traffic, also from the lodges outside the park.

There are plenty of vehicles, but also plenty of animals. The camp is on a basalt plain with lower-lying, sodium-rich areas that retain water. What does this mean? Vast plains with short, sweet grass and mud holes after the rainy season. This combination attracts elephants, warthogs, wildebeest, zebra and impalá. Browsers like giraffe and kudu enjoy the acacia trees.

You don't have to drive far to see action. Lions, leopards and cheetahs compete for their meals along the S28, S130, H4-2 and S25. With hyenas hot on their heels.



LION TRAFFIC JAM, H4-2



WHITE RHINO



RED-BILLED OXPECKERS, S28

i BRAAI IN THE BUSH

A braai in the rest camp is bliss, but a braai deep in the bush is on another level. A guide will pick you up at 4 pm for a game drive, then you'll head to a boma near the Gezantfombi Dam.

When you arrive, you'll be given a welcome drink and escorted to a long table, decorated with candles and solar-powered lights. There will be steak, roast chicken, boerewors, pap and sauce, mielies, braaibroodjies, salads... For dessert, there's malva pudding, koeksisters and marshmallows to roast over the fire.

Best of all? At 10 pm, long after the other guests have returned to the rest camp, you'll drive along the deserted roads and see nocturnal animals like springhares and chameleons.

Cost: Depends on the size of the group. No children under 12.

Contact: ☎ 072 591 5100

📍 royalsafaris.co.za

IN OTHER WORDS



JACOB MLANGENI

SENIOR FIELD GUIDE: CROCODILE BRIDGE

19 YEARS IN KNP

ON THE CROCODILE BRIDGE LIONS: *There are several prides between Crocodile Bridge and Lower Sabie. The hunting grounds of the Vurhami pride encompass the area around Crocodile Bridge. A lioness called Maria is well known – she wears a collar and is a good hunter. She's normally in charge of the pride, but in recent times it has split into smaller groups. There used to be a large pride with three big males called Tanker, Splitnose and Blondie, but they were killed by another pride. It seems like the new lions came from the area between the H5 and S21. The leader is not a happy lion – we call him Grumpy. People often find him close to the road. Grumpy and one of his friends are now in charge of the Vurhami pride.*

Another interesting thing about the Vurhami pride: They're known to climb trees. I couldn't believe my eyes the first time I saw a lion climbing a jackal-berry tree!

The Vurhami pride is mostly seen along the S28 and sometimes the first few kilometres of the S25. On the other side of the Hippo Pools turn-off, you'll find the Hippo Pools pride. The Gomondwane pride hangs around the S130. Grumpy killed Stompie, one of their big males. Then there's the Shishangeni pride, which roams around the turn-off to the Shishangeni Lodge.

ON LEOPARDS: *I love leopards. They're so cool and collected – and those whiskers! They can hunt in the darkest of dark. Look for them in the thickets along the S130 and H5. A day or two after good rain, you'll see leopards marking their territory on the tar roads. The rain washed everything away, so they have to start from scratch.*

ON CHEETAHS: *Cheetahs like the open plains along the S28, but they have a large territory and are sometimes seen next to the H4-2 and the first 2 km of the S25 as well. We have three big male cheetahs in the area – one of them is collared. There's also a female with a cub – they roam west of the Hippo Pools turn-off. The cheetahs move around to avoid contact with lions. If the lions are on one side, they'll move to the other. It's almost like a merry-go-round, but they have to move, otherwise the lions will kill them.*

ON WILD DOGS: *The wild dogs visit our area for a day or two, then they disappear. The best place to look for them is either side of the S130 – we think they have a den there. They also have to avoid the lions.*

ON HYENAS: *There used to be a hyena den in the culvert after the H5 turn-off, but the Gomondwane lion pride chased them off. The hyenas have moved further into the bush, but they do still visit us on the H4-2 tar road, especially during sunrise drives when they return to their new den.*

STAY HERE



CROCODILE BRIDGE CAMP

It might be busy, but Crocodile Bridge is actually quite a small camp, with eight safari tents, 20 bungalows and 20 camping stands. There's no swimming pool or restaurant, but you can grab a sandwich or a pie at the shop, and order a cappuccino.

The campsite has many stands along the fence – the three to the left of the two safari tents have the best location. A power line and a dirt road to the staff quarters detracts from the bush feel, but you forget all about that when darkness falls and the nightjars start to call.

Two of the eight safari tents (numbers 7 and 8) have a prime location next to the fence – the other six are in a semicircle near the bungalows. The tents share ablution facilities and a kitchen.

The BD bungalows are all next to the fence, overlooking a weir. (Water pumps drone all day – take note.) Number 9 is in the furthest corner and the most popular.

Rates: Camping from R481 for two people for a stand with power, R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).

Safari tent from R895 for two people. BD bungalows from R2 046 for two people, R335 per extra adult and R168

per child. (The bungalows sleep three people each.)

Contact: 📞 013 735 6012

BIYAMITI BUSHVELD CAMP

Biyamiti is the only bushveld camp with access to its own 18 km section of private road (S139), where there's a chance of seeing every member of the Big Five. There's even a viewpoint where you're allowed to get out of your vehicle. It's very popular, so book long in advance.

You're close to the Crocodile Bridge and Malelane gates – and the N4. You can do a game drive or look for birds at the Biyamiti weir in the morning and still be on time to catch your flight from Lanseria later that afternoon. Biyamiti is roughly equidistant from Crocodile Bridge, Lower Sabie, Skukuza and Berg-en-Dal – you can do a game drive in a different direction every day.

The camp is next to a dry riverbed and nine of the 15 units have a view. There are twin-sleeper cottages with open-plan kitchens, and some bigger units that sleep five. You'll find everything you need, but nothing is fancy.

Rates: From R2 091 per night for two people, plus R604 per extra adult and R302 per child in a four-sleeper cottage.

Contact: 📞 013 735 6171



BIYAMITI PRIVATE VIEWPOINT

Crocodile Bridge residents

There are bushbuck and warthogs in camp. The warthogs have been removed in the past, but they're making a comeback. They're troublemakers because they dig everywhere, even under the tents while the guests are asleep!

PLAN B

JACKALBERRY RIDGE

Marloth Park is about 20 km from the Crocodile Bridge gate. Some places here advertise themselves as "lodges", but in truth they're small units in someone's garden. That's not the case with Jackalberry Ridge – it has private safari tents in the bush. Each tent has a kitchen, braai, deck and splash pool. There's a communal swimming pool and a playground for the kids. There's also a campsite – each stand has a kitchen and private bathroom.

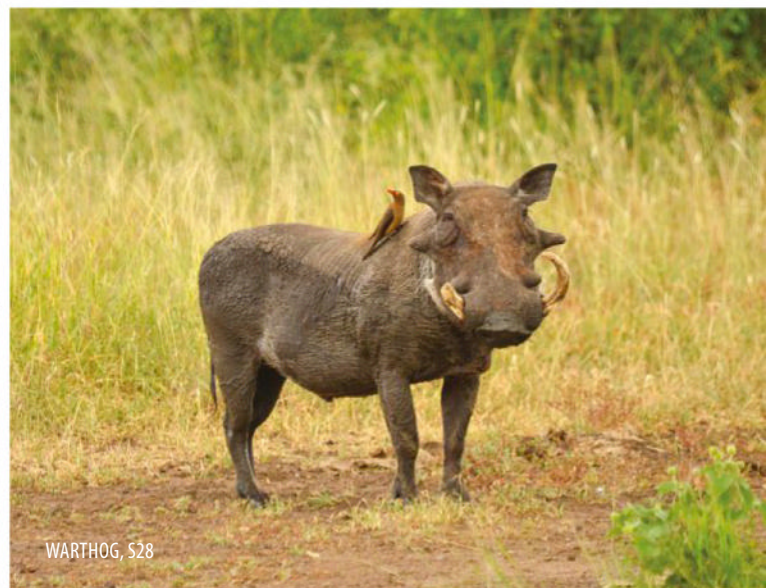
Camping R1 100 per night for four people.

Safari tent from R2 070 per night for two people (units sleep four, six or eight).

Contact: 📞 0861 010 347; 🌐 dreamresorts.co.za



BUSHBUCK, CROCODILE BRIDGE REST CAMP



WARTHOG, S28

SKUKUZA LOWER SABIE

Mpumalanga

Skukuza to Phabeni gate	40 km	±1½h
Skukuza to Pretoriuskop	49 km	±2h
Lower Sabie to Skukuza	44 km	±1¾h
Lower Sabie to Tshokwane	47 km	±2h

Take your time with the Golden Triangle

This 127 km game-viewing route links Lower Sabie, the Tshokwane picnic site and Skukuza. It will take you all day to drive, but this is Big Five country.

Have a fry-up at Tshokwane picnic site

Grab a proper coffee and a cheese-and-peppadew jaffle at this popular stop. You can also hire a braai or skottel.

Cool off at Skukuza picnic site

Day visitors can make use of the swimming pool here. Entry fee: R35 per adult; R20 per child.

Get high at Mathekenyane viewpoint

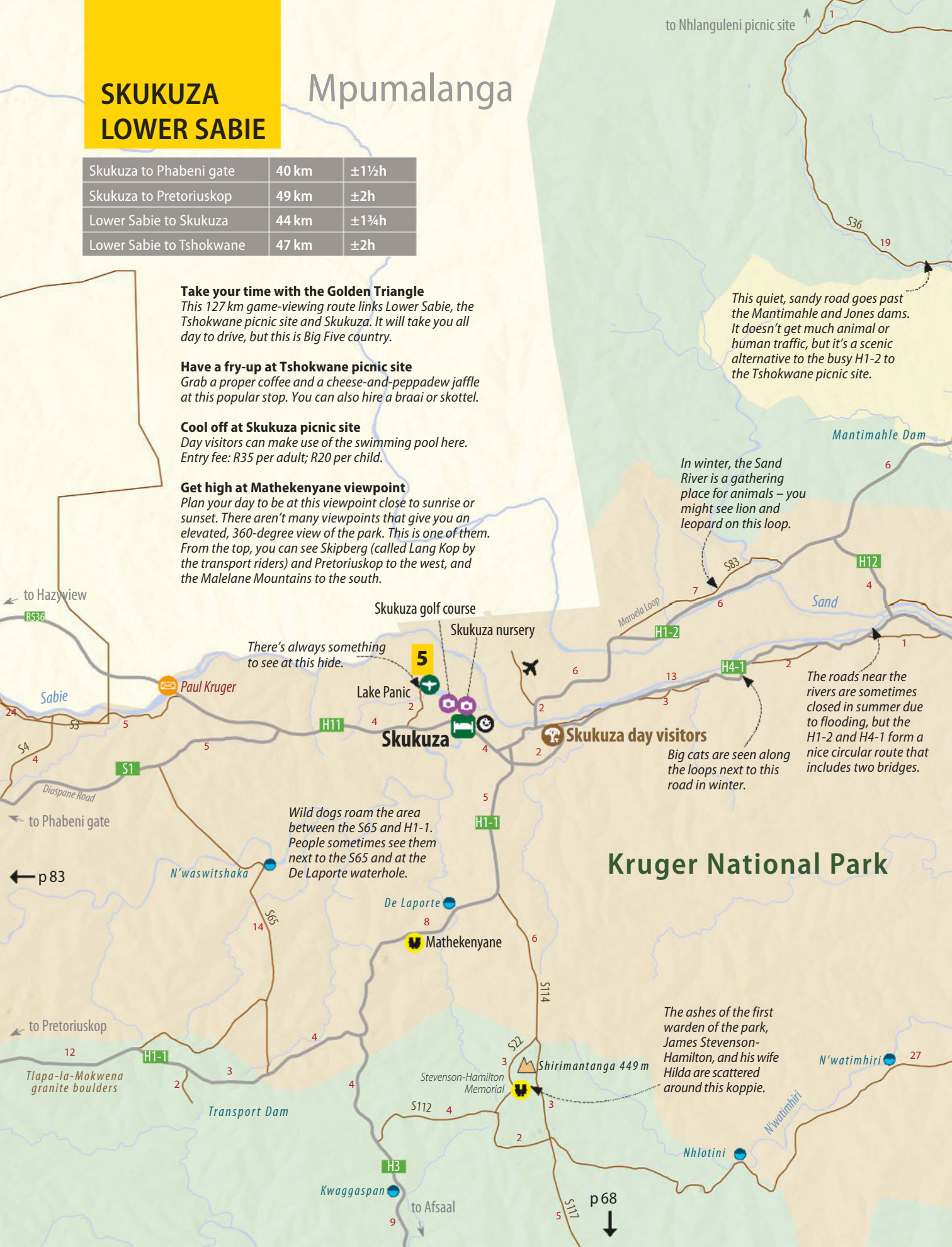
Plan your day to be at this viewpoint close to sunrise or sunset. There aren't many viewpoints that give you an elevated, 360-degree view of the park. This is one of them. From the top, you can see Skipberg (called Lang Kop by the transport riders) and Pretoriuskop to the west, and the Malelane Mountains to the south.

This quiet, sandy road goes past the Mantimahle and Jones dams. It doesn't get much animal or human traffic, but it's a scenic alternative to the busy H1-2 to the Tshokwane picnic site.

In winter, the Sand River is a gathering place for animals – you might see lion and leopard on this loop.

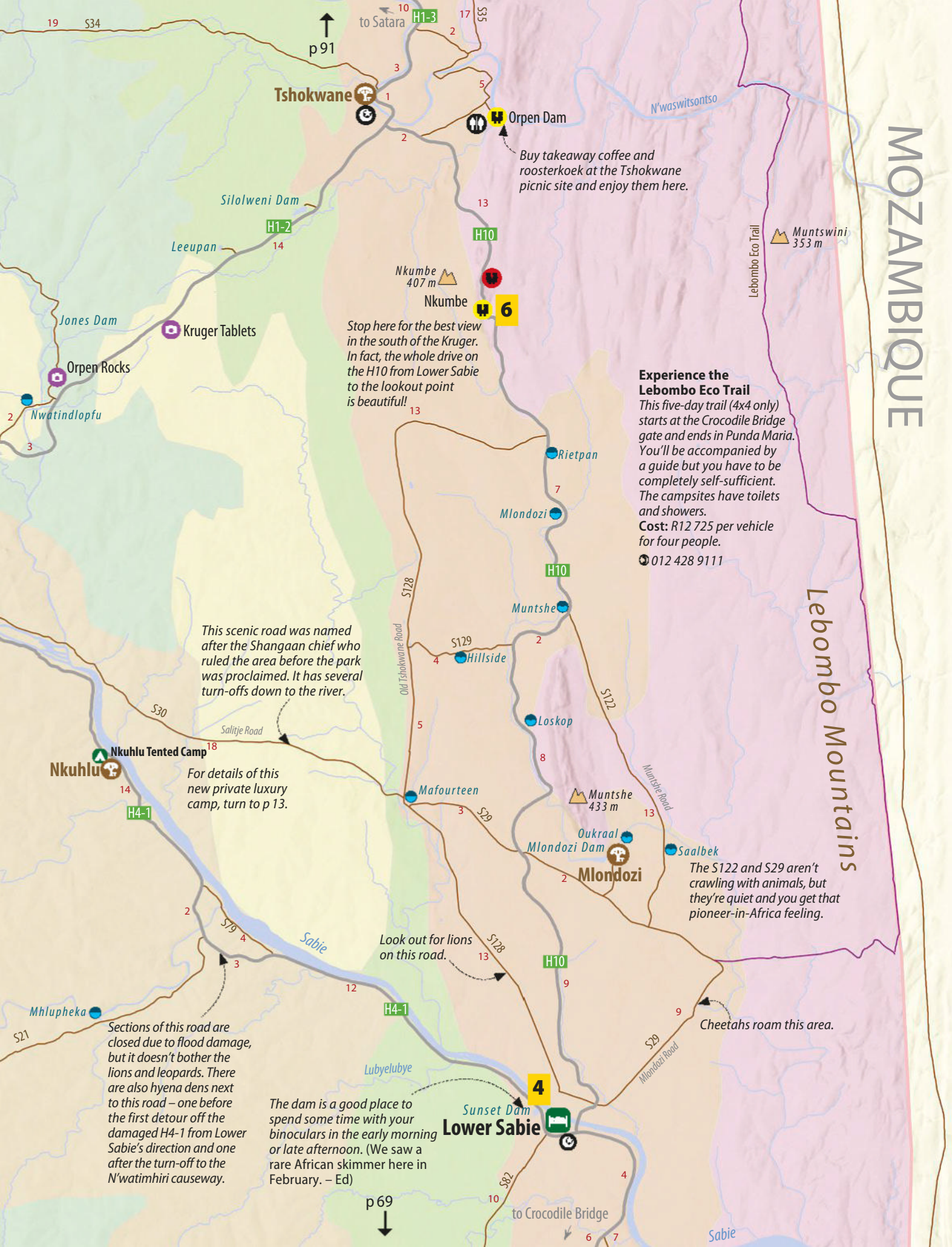
The roads near the rivers are sometimes closed in summer due to flooding, but the H1-2 and H4-1 form a nice circular route that includes two bridges.

Big cats are seen along the loops next to this road in winter.



Kruger National Park

The ashes of the first warden of the park, James Stevenson-Hamilton, and his wife Hilda are scattered around this koppie.



Tshokwane

Orpen Dam

Buy takeaway coffee and roosterkoek at the Tshokwane picnic site and enjoy them here.

Silolweni Dam

H1-2

Leeupan

Jones Dam

Kruger Tablets

Orpen Rocks

Muntswini 353 m

Lebombo Eco Trail

Experience the Lebombo Eco Trail

This five-day trail (4x4 only) starts at the Crocodile Bridge gate and ends in Punda Maria. You'll be accompanied by a guide but you have to be completely self-sufficient. The campsites have toilets and showers.

Cost: R12 725 per vehicle for four people.

☎ 012 428 9111

Stop here for the best view in the south of the Kruger. In fact, the whole drive on the H10 from Lower Sabie to the lookout point is beautiful!

Nkumbe 407 m

Nkumbe

This scenic road was named after the Shangaan chief who ruled the area before the park was proclaimed. It has several turn-offs down to the river.

For details of this new private luxury camp, turn to p 13.

Nkuhlu

H4-1

Look out for lions on this road.

Sections of this road are closed due to flood damage, but it doesn't bother the lions and leopards. There are also hyena dens next to this road – one before the first detour off the damaged H4-1 from Lower Sabie's direction and one after the turn-off to the N'watimhiri causeway.

The dam is a good place to spend some time with your binoculars in the early morning or late afternoon. (We saw a rare African skimmer here in February. – Ed)

Sunset Dam Lower Sabie

Muntshe 433 m

Mlondozi

The S122 and S29 aren't crawling with animals, but they're quiet and you get that pioneer-in-Africa feeling.

Cheetahs roam this area.

Lebombo Mountains

p 69

to Crocodile Bridge

Sabie

SKUKUZA

A leopard is curled up on a thick, textured tree branch, resting its head. The leopard's fur is covered in a pattern of dark spots and rosettes. The background is a soft-focus landscape with green foliage and a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The tree trunk is on the left, and the branch extends horizontally across the middle of the frame.

Skukuza is the busy heart of the Kruger Park. There are two hotels, several restaurants, conference facilities, an airport and a golf course. Does it bother the animals? Not at all. African green-pigeons whistle in the fig trees and baboons drink from the swimming pool at sunset.

The rest camp is in an excellent game-viewing area. In winter, you often see lion, leopard, wild dog, hyena – and smiling tourists – on the roads around camp.



i PLAY GOLF WITH THE BIG FIVE

Skukuza has a nine-hole golf course near the camp. It's not fenced, so you might share the greens with a crocodile... The course and facilities have undergone a serious revamp. There's a Pro Shop on site, and Henry's Restaurant and Bar, which serves pub food and cold beer. The restaurant is open from 7 am to 8.30 pm. There's a free shuttle service for guests staying in Skukuza who want to have dinner here. The shuttle also takes them back after the gate has closed – arrange beforehand.

Where? Turn right onto the H11 outside Skukuza and drive for 4 km. Turn right onto the S42. Follow this gravel road past the Lake Panic bird hide.

Opening times: Daily from 7 am to 8 pm. Sunday until 6 pm.

Cost: From R297 for nine holes, or R440 if you're not a member of an affiliated club.

Contact: ☎ 013 110 4660; 🌐 skukuza-golf.co.za (booking is essential)

i BUY INDIGENOUS PLANTS

Want an impala lily or baobab for your garden? Head to the Skukuza nursery next to the golf course. It's a cool, shaded spot. There's a jungle gym for the kids and you can also walk the Bee-Wise Trail, with puzzles to keep little minds busy along the way.

Opening times: Monday to Friday 7 am to 4 pm; Saturday and Sunday 8 am to 4 pm. Closed between 1 pm and 2 pm.

Contact: ☎ 013 735 0093

i FLY TO SKUKUZA

It's not cheap, but this is the quickest way to get to the Kruger. Return ticket from R4 500 per person from Joburg; R6 500 per person from Cape Town. You can hire a vehicle in Skukuza.

Contact: ☎ 013 5909 196

🌐 skukuzaairport.com



IN OTHER WORDS



PILOT NXUMALO
SENIOR FIELD GUIDE: SKUKUZA
22 YEARS IN KNP

ON LEOPARDS: *Watch your rear-view and side mirrors. I've seen leopards countless times using my mirrors. When the leopard hears your vehicle approaching, it crouches down. Once you've passed, it will come out and start walking on the road.*

ON LIONS: *Every member of a lion pride has its own job. I once came across four lions: Two were wrestling with a buffalo and two were lying in wait. When the buffalo was on the ground, one of the other lions stood up and went straight for the throat. Once the buffalo was dead, the fourth lion stood up and started opening up the carcass.*

ON HYENAS VS WILD DOGS: *I was on a morning walk when we came upon two young hyenas eating an impala. A pack of wild dogs showed up and pushed the hyenas away. A few minutes later, three big hyenas arrived and a huge fight broke out. The hyenas took over and the wild dogs watched from a distance. We were just over 10 metres from the scene. On foot!*

STAY HERE



SKUKUZA REST CAMP

The campsite is on different levels because the rest camp is on a slope next to the Sabie River. You can either camp next to the fence or near the swimming pool. The stands next to the fence have shade, but they're not all level. The stands next to the swimming pool are all level, but there's less shade and more traffic at night in peak season. Some stands have bushes nearby for privacy, so have a look around before you choose. There are two swimming pools – one in the campsite and one on the other side of the rest camp at the AM Spa.

There are 20 safari tents in the south-western corner of the rest camp, next to the campsite. These tents share ablution facilities with the campers. Some of the tents are private and next to the fence: Ask for numbers 309–314, or number 320.

Skukuza has every kind of unit imaginable. A whole bungalow section was recently renovated – you won't recognise them! They're spacious, with indoor braais, big sliding doors and generous showers. (They're BN bungalows; numbers 103–111 and 123–140.)

The LR bungalows sleep two and you'll pay more for a view of the Sabie River. Look at a map of the camp before you book: Numbers 90–96 are the most popular. The fully equipped GC guest cottages (sleeping four or six) are

further apart; some are on the riverbank.

The four guesthouses (Moni, Wild Fig, Waterkant 1 and Nyathi) all have a view of the Sabie River. Wild Fig has been revamped with a deck, fire pit and splash pool. Nyathi is currently being renovated.

Rates: Camping from R480 for two people for a stand with power, plus R116 per extra adult and R58 per child.

Safari tent with communal facilities from R892 for two people, plus R221 per extra adult and R111 per child (sleeps two or four).

BE, BG and BN bungalows from R1 797 for two people, plus R335 per extra adult and R167 per child (sleep two or three). BD bungalow from R1 964 for two people, R335 per extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps two or three). LB bungalow with a communal kitchen from R2 199 for two people; with a kitchen from R2 333 for two people, plus R603 per extra adult and R301 per child (sleeps two or three). LR bungalow next to the river from R2 746 for two people.

GC guest cottage from R3 516 for four people, plus R603 per extra adult and R301 per child (sleeps four or six).

Guesthouse from R9 130 for eight people, plus R960 per extra adult and R480 per child (sleeps eight or 12).

Contact: ☎ 013 735 4196

☎ 013 735 4265

☎ 082 802 1204



SWIMMING POOL NEAR AM SPA

SKUKUZA SAFARI LODGE

This double-storey lodge is modern, with elegant African art and decor. There are luxury self-catering units, double rooms and family rooms available.

Rate: From R4 000 per night for two people, breakfast included.

Contact: ☎ 013 329 0000; 📧 skukuzalodge.com

KRUGER SHALATI: TRAIN ON THE BRIDGE

It's a pricey stay, but a night in this "lodge" is unparalleled. You sleep in a train carriage on the old Selati Bridge – the one wall of the carriage is a big window. It feels like you're suspended in mid-air, at eye-level with a yellow-billed kite.

You can also stay in the Shalati Bridge House on the riverbank – there are five double rooms and a family suite for four. No children under 12 may sleep on the bridge, but they're allowed at the Bridge House (no children under 6). No day visitors.

Rates: Bridge House R6 500 per adult and R3 250 per child. Train on the Bridge R9 550 per person sharing. These are SADC rates and include all meals, drinks and two game drives.

Contact: ☎ 013 591 6000; 📧 krugershalati.com



MIA LOUW

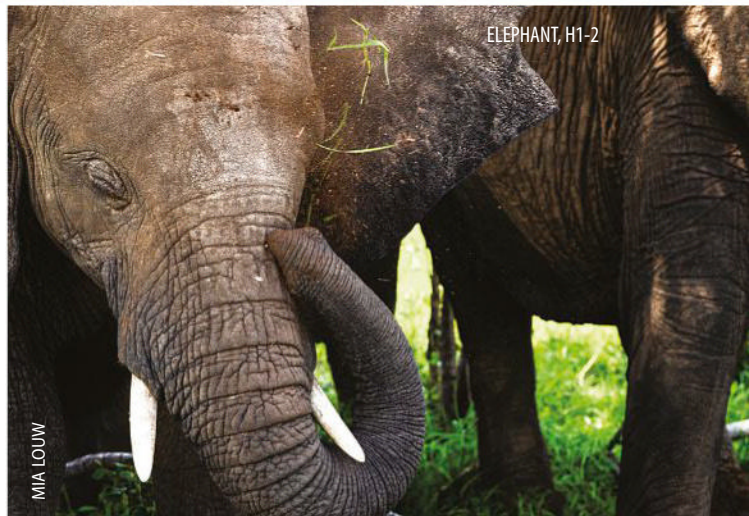
CROCODILE, H1-2



MATHEKENYANE VIEWPOINT



NEW BN BUNGALOWS



ELEPHANT, H1-2

MIA LOUW

i HUNGRY?

Skukuza has lots of restaurant options. The Cattle Baron on the banks of the Sabie River has the best view. Kruger Station (☎ krugerstation.com) looks like a railway platform and has three eateries: Round in 9 Bar, Departing Soon Café (ice cream and coffee), and 3638 Restaurant (in the last steam locomotive that travelled through the park in 1972), which is a cool, modern space with interesting things on the menu like poke bowls, marinated cucumber noodles and pizzas with warthog sausage and avocado. There are gluten-free options, too. Li'l Gricers is a playground for the kids. Right at the back of the precinct is the Kruger 360° cinema, where history films are shown.

If you're looking for something quieter, go to the Amukelekani Restaurant or Sisonke Bar at Skukuza Safari Lodge.



CATTLE BARON DECK

LOWER SABIE

Everyone loves Lower Sabie, including the multitude of herbivores that graze the surrounding savannah. The herbivores attract predators, especially big cats, and the cats draw tourists from around the world.

The Sabie River is also a big drawcard for man and animal alike. Lions come to quench their thirst, elephants bathe, hippos nark, and the people sit on the restaurant deck to watch it all.

"I've seen a lion bring down a buffalo from the deck," says camp manager Bongile Louw. "There were so many people gathered on the deck I thought it might collapse!"

Sunset Dam is only 400 m from the camp gate. Sit for a while and watch red-billed buffalo-weavers chasing off a gabar goshawk, or a crocodile cracking the shell of a terrapin.

Lower Sabie is not a rest camp – it's a pay-attention camp.

NKUMBE VIEWPOINT, H10

80 KRUGER 2025

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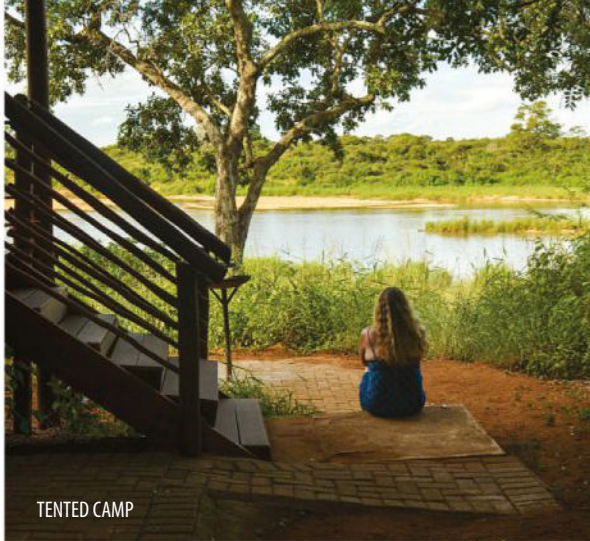
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NKUMBE VIEWPOINT, H10

80 KRUGER 2025



STAY HERE



LOWER SABIE REST CAMP

The campsite is wedged among the other buildings and has no stands next to the fence. The 34 stands are also close together, but the trees and bushes allow for some privacy. Stands 12 and 26 offer a shade-and-privacy combo; stand 7 has shade and is close to the bathroom.

Lower Sabie also has a range of affordable EH huts – some of the oldest units in the rest camp. The rooms and huts have communal bathrooms and kitchens, and the rooms have eating and cooking utensils.

The BD bungalows are spread out under tall trees close to the fence. They're also popular, especially the ones close to the river; numbers 31 and 32 have been renovated with spacious bathrooms. Number 31 is wheelchair-friendly. There are also four FU family bungalows with river views.

The tented camp has 30 tents hidden in the riverine forest to the left of the restaurant. "Numbers 6, 7, 9, 20, 22 and 23 were recently renovated," says camp manager Bongile Louw. "We had lots of problems with

baboons. The new tents have brick walls covered with canvas." (Contact the rest camp directly to find out whether the new family tent for four people with a river view is available. – Ed) Tent number 16 is in the far corner with a river view – it's the most popular.

The Keartland guesthouse is right on the river, in a quiet corner of the camp.

Rates: Camping R481 for two people for a stand with power, plus R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).

EH hut/room from R537 for one person to R895 for two people, plus R221 per extra adult and R111 per child (sleeps three or four).

Safari tents from R1 890 per night for two people, R2 259 per night for a tent with a view.

BD bungalow from R1 969 for two people, plus R336 per extra adult and R168 per child (sleeps 2 – 3).

FU family bungalow R3 355 for four people. Keartland guesthouse from R7 616 for six people, plus R962 per extra adult and R481 per child (sleeps eight).

Contact: 013 735 6056

IN OTHER WORDS



PETROS MDAKA
FIELD GUIDE: LOWER SABIE
25 YEARS IN KNP

ON THE LUBYELUBY PRIDE: *We used to have a big lion pride here, but it has changed. New males moved into the area and the pride scattered. You still see them along the H1-4 and S128 sometimes, but in smaller prides.*

ON CHEETAH AND WATERBUCK: *Once, during a morning walk with guests next to the river, we saw a waterbuck and her baby. Suddenly they ran towards us – a cheetah was running after them! They disappeared into the bush, followed by the cheetah, but then the cheetah came dashing out again with his tail up and the waterbuck hot on his heels. He was running as if a lion was chasing him!*

ON LIONS: *The lion is my favourite animal. It's so beautiful when you find a big pride with cubs. Lions don't kill for fun – it's always to do with food or eliminating competition. They patrol and protect their hunting grounds and mark their territories well. They make sure that whoever comes into their territory knows they're doing it at their own risk.*



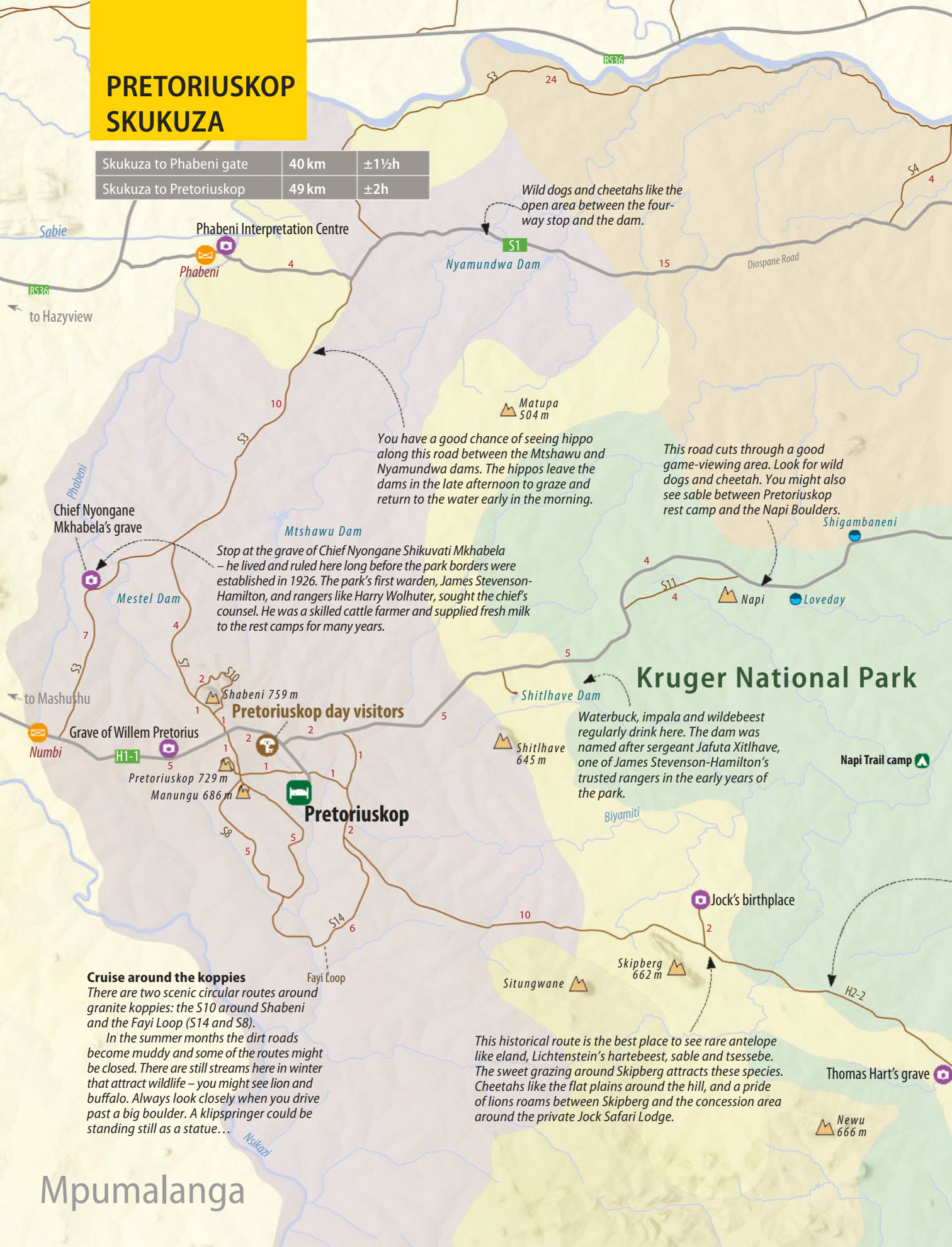
BONGILE LOUW
CAMP MANAGER:
LOWER SABIE
25 YEARS IN KNP

ON THE PARK: *The sky always looks a bit hazy in Johannesburg, but here in the park it's clear. You realise anew what a special place the park is – it's a privilege to live here.*

ON NOCTURNAL VISITORS: *One night, my two sons and I heard a loud noise at the door. My sons begged me not to open the door. I ran to the window and saw two animals fighting. I thought they were leopards, but when I switched on the light, I saw that they were civets!*

PRETORIUSKOP SKUKUZA

Skukuza to Phabeni gate	40 km	±1½h
Skukuza to Pretoriuskop	49 km	±2h



Wild dogs and cheetahs like the open area between the four-way stop and the dam.

You have a good chance of seeing hippo along this road between the Mtshawu and Nyamundwa dams. The hippos leave the dams in the late afternoon to graze and return to the water early in the morning.

This road cuts through a good game-viewing area. Look for wild dogs and cheetah. You might also see sable between Pretoriuskop rest camp and the Napi Boulders.

Stop at the grave of Chief Nyongane Shikuvati Mkhabela – he lived and ruled here long before the park borders were established in 1926. The park's first warden, James Stevenson-Hamilton, and rangers like Harry Wolhuter, sought the chief's counsel. He was a skilled cattle farmer and supplied fresh milk to the rest camps for many years.

Kruger National Park

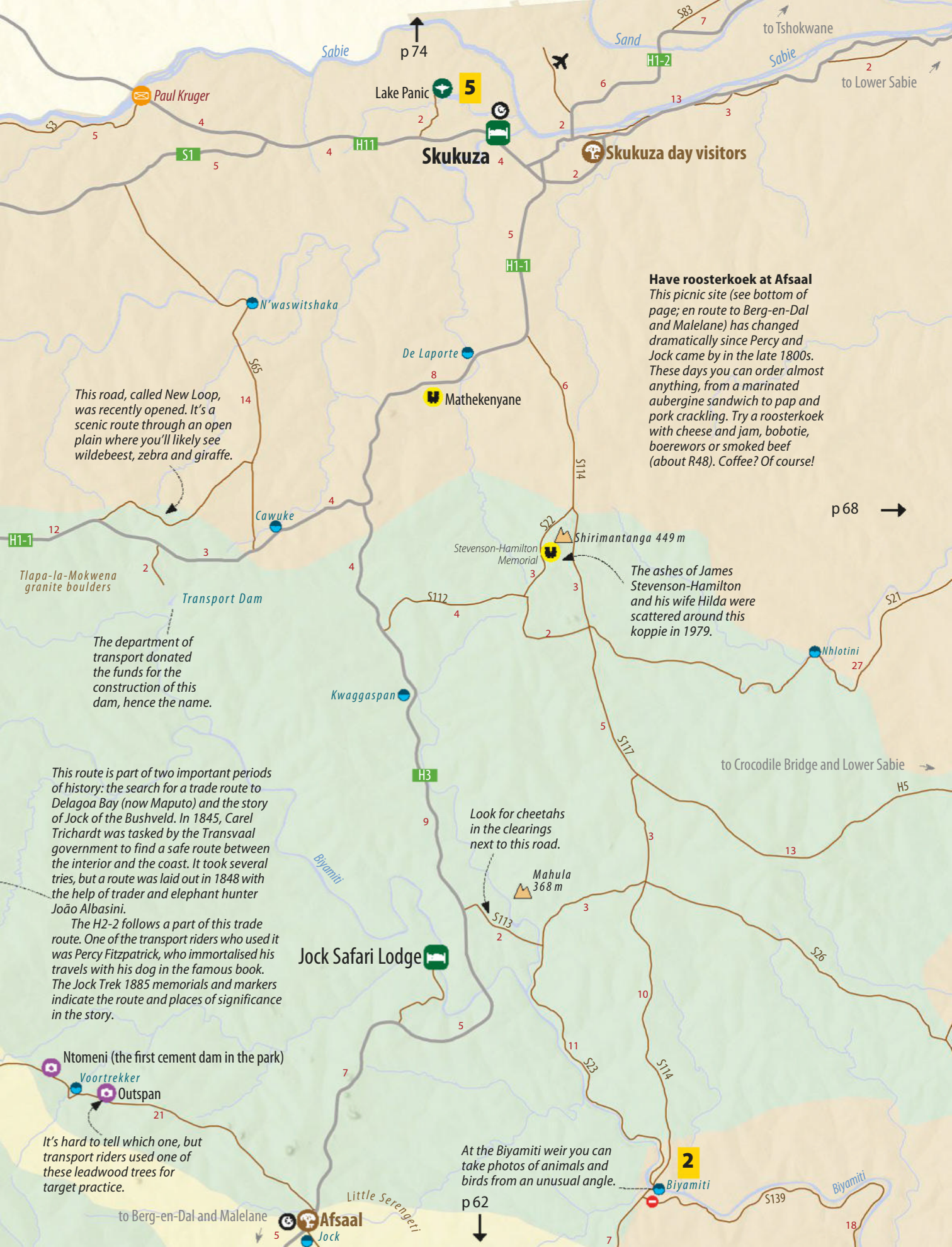
Waterbuck, impala and wildebeest regularly drink here. The dam was named after sergeant Jafuta Xitlhave, one of James Stevenson-Hamilton's trusted rangers in the early years of the park.

Cruise around the koppies

There are two scenic circular routes around granite koppies: the S10 around Shabeni and the Fayi Loop (S14 and S8).

In the summer months the dirt roads become muddy and some of the routes might be closed. There are still streams here in winter that attract wildlife – you might see lion and buffalo. Always look closely when you drive past a big boulder. A klipspringer could be standing still as a statue...

This historical route is the best place to see rare antelope like eland, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, sable and tsessebe. The sweet grazing around Skipberg attracts these species. Cheetahs like the flat plains around the hill, and a pride of lions roams between Skipberg and the concession area around the private Jock Safari Lodge.



Paul Kruger

p 74

Lake Panic

5

Skukuza

Sand

H1-2

Skukuza day visitors

to Tshokwane

to Lower Sabie

Have roosterkoek at Afsaal

This picnic site (see bottom of page; en route to Berg-en-Dal and Malelane) has changed dramatically since Percy and Jock came by in the late 1800s. These days you can order almost anything, from a marinated aubergine sandwich to pap and pork crackling. Try a roosterkoek with cheese and jam, bobotie, boerewors or smoked beef (about R48). Coffee? Of course!

p 68

This road, called New Loop, was recently opened. It's a scenic route through an open plain where you'll likely see wildebeest, zebra and giraffe.

De Laporte

Mathekenyane

S6

Cawuke

Tlapa-la-Mokwena granite boulders

Transport Dam

The department of transport donated the funds for the construction of this dam, hence the name.

This route is part of two important periods of history: the search for a trade route to Delagoa Bay (now Maputo) and the story of Jock of the Bushveld. In 1845, Carel Trichardt was tasked by the Transvaal government to find a safe route between the interior and the coast. It took several tries, but a route was laid out in 1848 with the help of trader and elephant hunter João Albasini.

The H2-2 follows a part of this trade route. One of the transport riders who used it was Percy Fitzpatrick, who immortalised his travels with his dog in the famous book. The Jock Trek 1885 memorials and markers indicate the route and places of significance in the story.

Stevenson-Hamilton Memorial

Shirimantanga 449 m

The ashes of James Stevenson-Hamilton and his wife Hilda were scattered around this koppie in 1979.

Kwaggaspan

H3

Look for cheetahs in the clearings next to this road.

Mahula 368 m

Jock Safari Lodge

Ntomeni (the first cement dam in the park)

Voortrekker

Outspan

It's hard to tell which one, but transport riders used one of these leadwood trees for target practice.

At the Biyamiti weir you can take photos of animals and birds from an unusual angle.

p 62

to Berg-en-Dal and Malelane

Little Serengeti

Afsaal

Jock

to Crocodile Bridge and Lower Sabie

2

Biyamiti

S139

18

PRETORIUSKOP

JON MINSTER



SHITLHAVE DAM



ZEBRA CROSSING, H11

You don't come to Pretoriuskop to see the Big Five in one afternoon. Grazers don't like the sourveld around the rest camp, and the vegetation is dense with big trees and tall grass.

But Pretoriuskop is the oldest camp in the park. It has a vibe. The first day visitors were allowed here in 1927, and three overnight huts were built in 1928.

The rest camp was named after a nearby hill, which was in turn named after Willem Pretorius, a member of Carel Trichardt's expedition in 1848 to find a trade route from the Eastern Transvaal to Delagoa Bay. Pretorius died of malaria during the journey and the Portuguese trader João Albasini buried him under a marula tree near the rest camp.

Transport riders used the route to move goods between the Lowveld and the coast. The H2-2, also called Voortrekker Road, follows a section of this historical trade route. This is where transport rider Percy Fitzpatrick and his dog Jock adventured together in the late 19th century.

The original Wolhuter Hut in camp, named after ranger Harry Wolhuter, was unfortunately damaged during building work, but according to duty manager Faith Mkonyeni, there are plans to repair it. In the meantime, you can book one of the two houses (109 and 110) built in 1947 for the Royal Tour, when King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose travelled around South Africa.

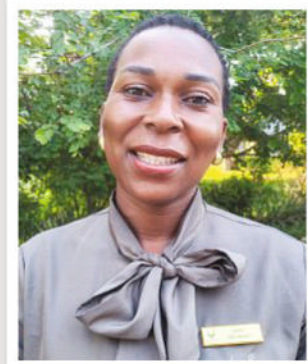
Go have a look at the small museum. It has a map of the old transport routes and a bunch of old room keys, as well as knobkieries and assegais carried by black game rangers at the time.

Have we mentioned the swimming pool? It's at the base of a big granite boulder and there's a splash pool for the kids on top of the rock. Easily the best pool in the park!

Pretoriuskop is a good place to search for rare antelope that you'll struggle to find elsewhere in the park, like sable, oribi, reedbuck, tsessebe and Lichtenstein's hartebeest. (There was a breeding camp for rare antelope here in the 1970s.)

The mountainous landscape is beautiful. Drive one of the short loops in the late afternoon and watch the sun set over a landscape that has hardly changed since Percy Fitzpatrick rolled through on his wagon.

IN OTHER WORDS

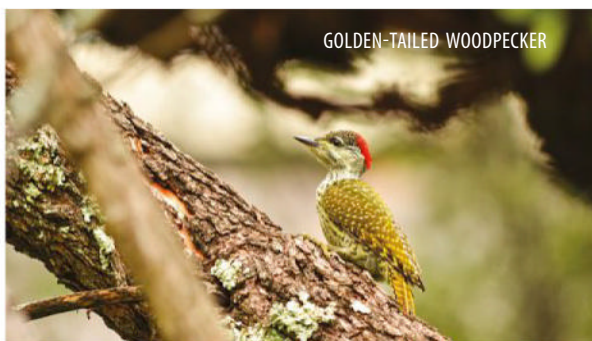
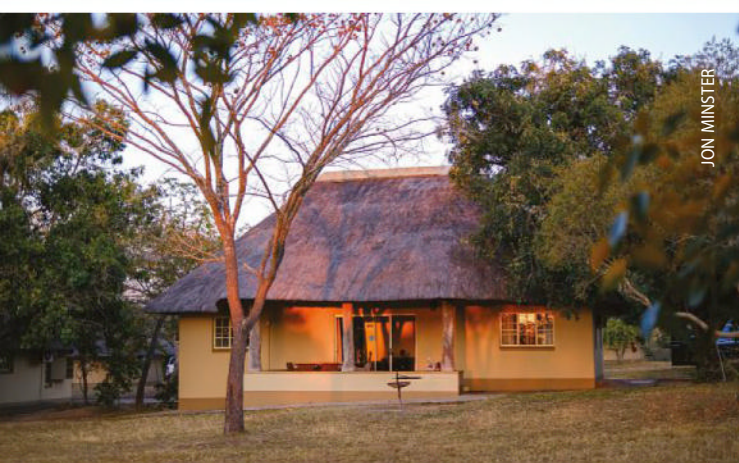


FAITH MKONYENI
DUTY MANAGER: PRETORIUSKOP
16 YEARS IN KNP

ON THE KRUGER: *I was born in KZN. My love of tourism brought me to the Kruger. This park is the most beautiful place on earth. I love to meet people from different backgrounds. I thought I'd maybe work here for four years, but now it's 16 years later!*

ON THE REST CAMP: *Pretoriuskop is the oldest rest camp in the Kruger. The ES huts (each sleeps two) are some of the most affordable in the whole park, at R603 per night. We also have a small museum, a Wimpy and a beautiful swimming pool. There's always a rainy season at Pretoriuskop. You can see – our grass won't stop growing!*

ON HER MOST DRAMATIC SIGHTING: *I was driving my son and daughter to school in Skukuza early one morning. We were on the H1-1 when an impala leapt across the road with a pack of wild dogs chasing it. The impala slipped and fell on the tar – it was heavily pregnant. The wild dogs grabbed her and while they were eating, the baby came out. They ate the baby while the mother was still alive. It was terribly sad. My daughter started crying. The wild dogs also ate the mother impala. My daughter was sad the whole day, but I said to her that these things happen. Nature has to take its course.*



Pretoriuskop residents

All the rest camps in the park are full of birds, but Pretoriuskop is special. Get your binoculars and bird guide and walk around for a morning. You should see the following species with ease: brown-headed parrot, purple-crested turaco, African green-pigeon, crested barbet and Retz's helmet-shrike.

There are owls, too: spotted eagle-owl, African scops-owl and even African grass-owl... Get your spotlight out at night and scan the tree canopies – you might be lucky.

STAY HERE



PRETORIUSKOP REST CAMP

Pretoriuskop is a spacious camp and much quieter than the other camps in the south. It's a shame the Wolhuter Hut (one of the oldest in the park) was recently damaged. Another eyesore is the half-finished spa building behind the Wimpy. Apparently the funds for the project dried up... But if you're able to overlook these things, you can have a great holiday here.

The campsite has big trees, but some stands are very close together. That said, there are one or two nice stands next to the fence, like the one to the right of the Pierre Joubert guesthouse. There are also a few stands next to the fence and away from the rest of the campsite in the north-western corner, to the left of the Doherty Bryant guesthouse.

There's accommodation to suit every budget: The basic ES huts (sleep two each) don't have fridges, but there are ceiling fans. The EB huts have fridges and are slightly pricier. The rest of the units are BG and BD bungalows that sleep two, three, four or six. BD 13 and 14 are popular because they've been renovated and have a big patio. BD 115–134 are on the outskirts of the camp, bordering a lovely lawn that goes down to the swimming pool.

The FU and FF family cottages are further apart from each other at the

northern edge of the camp (this is where the royals once stayed). There's a new luxury GC guest cottage that stands separately, almost like a guesthouse. The two actual guesthouses, Doherty Bryant and Pierre Joubert, are against the fence and more private.

Rates: Camping from R480 for two people for a stand with a power point, plus R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).

ES hut from R603 for two people. EB hut from R893 for two people, plus R221 per extra adult and R111 per child (sleeps two, three, five or six people).

BG bungalow from R1 741 for two people, plus R335 per extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps two or four). BD bungalow from R1 964 for two people.

FU and FF family cottages from R3 516 for four people, plus R603 per extra adult and R301 per child (sleep six people).

GC guest cottage R3 516 for two people, R370 per extra adult (sleeps four) – can only be booked via telephone.

Doherty Bryant R7 424 for six people, R960 per extra adult and R480 per child (sleeps nine). Pierre Joubert R9 119 for eight people, R960 per extra adult and R480 per child (sleeps 16).

Contact: 013 735 5128/32



DIRT ROAD TO SHITLHAVE DAM

BRUSH UP ON HISTORY

The Phabeni Interpretation Centre, just before the Phabeni gate, consists of the Albasini Ruins, the graves of Nkayinkayi Samuel Mavundla and his mother Mothasi, and an open-air museum where you'll learn new things about the Kruger Park.

It's a significant site for a variety of reasons. At first, the site was known as Magashula's Kraal, named after the chief at the time. In 1845, however, a Portuguese trader from Delagoa Bay named João Albasini exchanged 22 head of cattle for the land, and established a trading post. Albasini only stayed here for two years before he left for Ohrigstad, where he had his eye on an 18-year-old woman called Gertina Petronella Janse van Rensburg, who later became his wife. During that time, he helped Carel Trichardt find a safe route between the Eastern Transvaal and Delagoa Bay.

Years later, after the park boundaries had been established, many local communities were moved out of the conservation area. Some families were allowed to stay until the head of their household had passed away.

Game ranger Harry Wolhuter gave seven families permission to stay in the Phabeni area – the last chieftain here, Nkayinkayi Mavundla, passed away in 2000. Many of the people who lived in the area worked in the park. They knew the bush well and were excellent trackers. Helfas Nkuna, for example, worked in the Kruger for 48 years – he was one of the first rangers employed by Stevenson-Hamilton and the right-hand man of Harry Wolhuter and his son Henry. He even survived a leopard attack!

Chief Nkayinkayi also enjoyed his fair share of action. He once faced down a pride of lions on his bicycle, unarmed, because in those years black rangers weren't allowed to carry a rifle...

IN OTHER WORDS



PAT MBASO

HEAD GUIDE: PRETORIUSKOP

20 YEARS IN KNP

ON THE KRUGER: *Some reserves guarantee the Big Five, but in the Kruger our focus is to educate. I can do a three-hour drive and maybe we don't see the Big Five, but I can share facts about the veld with the guests and they will be happy. They just enjoy being here.*

ON RETIREMENT: *I'm currently building a house about 4,5 km from the Numbi gate. The view from my plot is amazing – you can see the three koppies around Pretoriuskop. My wife works in housekeeping in the rest camp. She'll work here for a few more years after I've retired.*

ON LIONS: *The resident pride was getting bigger – I think there were more than 26. One time, they all came to drink at Shitlhave Dam. I saw them kill a buffalo, but they were fighting while they fed. The pride has now split up. They're very busy – we counted 11 carcasses in two months last year.*

ON HIS FAVOURITE ANIMAL: *I love baboons. During the day they sometimes become a bit lazy, but they're fun to watch early in the morning and late in the afternoon. The troop seems disorganised but there's actually a lot of discipline and focus. Most of the troop will be on the ground, but look into the tree canopies and you'll see at least three males right at the top, scanning around to make sure it's safe. They look after each other. If the young ones are naughty, they will get disciplined by an older baboon.*

ON ELEPHANTS: *If I had to be an animal, it would be an elephant. Then you don't have to be scared in the bush, except of humans. Human beings can be a problem in the wilderness. Animals respect and avoid each other. In general, if an elephant comes to drink or wallow in a pool, the rest give way. If a rhino or buffalo is standing in the shade under a tree and a massive elephant approaches, they'll move. Everyone complies.*

ON THE LEBOMBO ECO TRAIL: *I often guide groups on this five-day 4x4 trail from Crocodile Bridge to Punda Maria. One afternoon next to the Shingwedzi River, we came across a big herd of buffalo heading down the drainage line. Little did they know that a pride of lions was waiting. The lions killed three buffalo. The others kept going to the water – they didn't seem to care about the ones that had been killed. After they drank, they tried to wake up the carcasses, but they soon realised they had to flee. We saw the entire hunt – the planning, the killing, the feeding, the movement of the herd...*



CAMP GUIDE CENTRAL

92 ORPEN, MAROELA,
TAMBOTI & TALAMATI

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100 OLIFANTS & BALULE

103 LETABA

105 SHIMUWINI

108 MOPANI

S126 (SWENI ROAD)





HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Look for lions on the S100.
- 2 Drive along the Timbavati River.
- 3 Braai with a honey badger at Tamboti.
- 4 Drive the quiet S90 between Satara and Olifants.
- 5 Watch the sunrise over the Olifants River.
- 6 Sleep in an old-school hut in Balule.
- 7 Sit on the stoep at Shimuwini.
- 8 Camp with the owls at Tsendze.
- 9 Overnight in the Shipandani hide.
- 10 Experience the “Serengeti of Mopani”.

Limpopo

Kruger National Park

Thompson Mathebula, head guide at Orpen, says this 3 km dirt road is great for game viewing – you can see wild dogs, the area's resident white lions, and hyenas. Always drive slowly even if you're just going to buy ice and firewood in Orpen.

Be alert around the rest camp. The area between the Orpen gate and the turn-off to the S106 is known for wild dogs – and white lions. See those wildebeest, impala and warthogs? That's what they're after...

You never know what to expect on this scenic road, which leads past jackal-berry, weeping boer-bean and buffalo thorn trees. In summer, there are crèches of impala lambs everywhere, and there might be a leopard lurking in the riverine forest.

Give yourself at least half an hour to have coffee and look out over the Timbavati River and the thornveld stretching to the horizon.

The quiet dirt roads from Talamati to the Muzandzeni picnic site cut through open grassland. At the Fairfield and Modzweni waterholes, you can see animals approaching from afar. Hyenas like to sniff around the picnic site.

This picnic site has a view of the dry riverbed.

There's always something happening here. After summer rain, look for hippo ears and crocodile eyes in the water. When the dam is dry, you can see warthogs scratching around in the soil and giraffes nibbling the treetops.

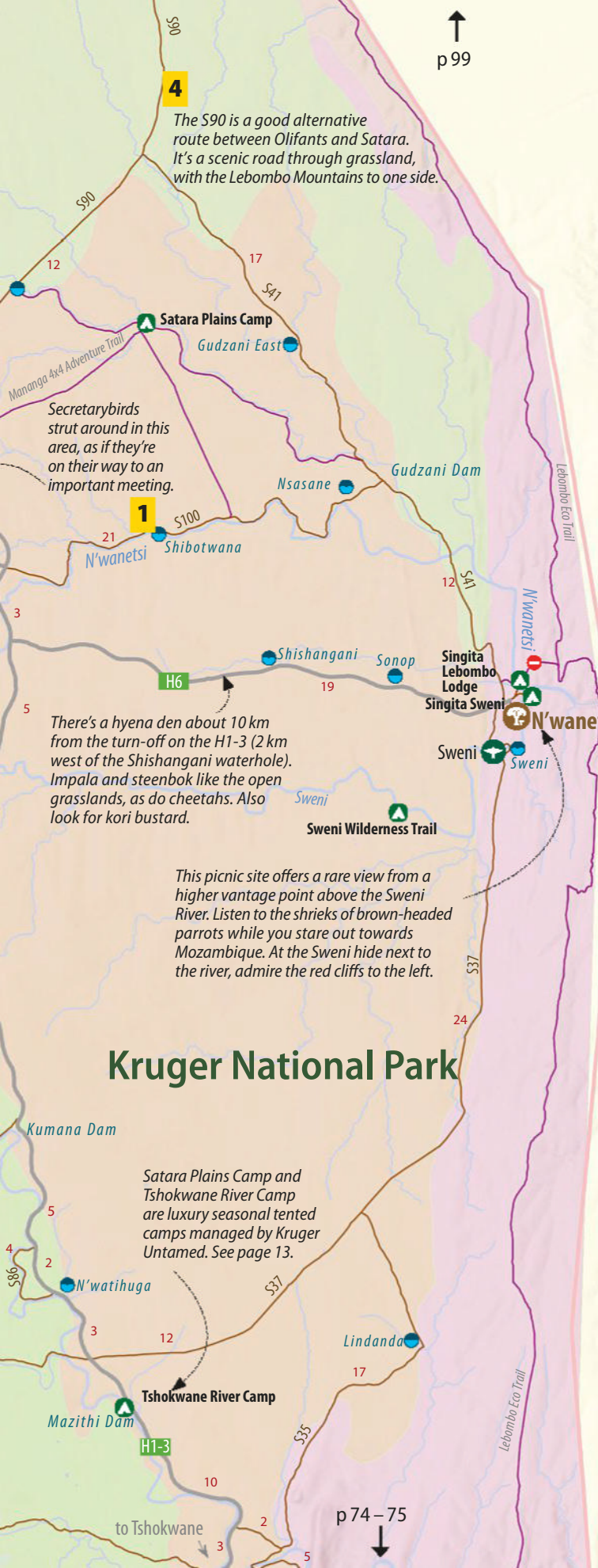
To the east of the Welverdiend waterhole, a loop turns off to a big boulder. You might luck out and find the Sweni East lion pride lazing about in the sun

The Girivana pride hunts around the waterhole of the same name.

SOUTH AFRICA

Mpumalanga





ORPEN MAROELA TAMBOTI TALAMATI SATARA

Follow the lion road

There are nine lion prides in the Satara area. Drive this route for the best chance of seeing them: S100, S41, H6, H1-3. To the right of the S100, the N'wanetsi River meanders through the landscape, and to the left is open grassland where plains game graze. This combo also attracts leopards and cheetahs.

Drive the H7 between Orpen and Satara

This tar road from Orpen to Satara is one of the five-star roads in the Kruger. It runs past old trees along the river and past open stretches of sweet grazing. Big Five, loading...

Explore the Mananga Adventure Trail

The Mananga 4x4 Adventure Trail takes you through open savannah north-east of Satara, between the S90, S41 and S100.

"Many people come here for Mananga," says Patience Mabaso, duty manager at Satara.

"It gives you a chance to explore more than just the main routes. You can park under a tree, drink coffee or read a book, and no one will bother you or rush you."

The trail is closed in the rainy season. It costs R982 per vehicle, plus a R500 deposit.

Lebombo Mountains

MOZAMBIQUE

Orpen to Satara	48 km	± 2h
Satara to Olifants	56 km	± 2¼h
Satara to Tshokwane	51 km	± 2h

ORPEN

Orpen is great if you want to see the Big Five but you also want to avoid the crowds of the south. You'll have to get up a bit earlier, or drive around a little longer, but when you do find something interesting, you'll probably only have to share the sighting with two or three other vehicles.

In terms of geology, Orpen is blessed with a diverse landscape. The H-7 tar road cuts through riverine forest, plains of sweet grazing and mixed woodland interspersed with granite koppies. The sweet grazing attracts all kinds of plains game, klipspringers hang out on the koppies, and kudu and giraffe like to feast on the leaves of the abundant red bush willow trees. In the woodland valleys, you'll also find sweet grazing. And where prey is abundant, so are the predators...

If the animals are hiding, you can always head to Satara, which is about 48 km away.

Orpen is a tranquil camp, with only 15 units. Maroela campsite has 24 stands, and Tamboti tented camp is so densely vegetated it feels like you're in the bush on your own.



i VISIT THE RABELAIS HUT

You won't take prize-winning wildlife photos along the S106, but it's a nice drive in the late afternoon if you want to be back on your patio in time for sunset.

You can also visit the small museum in the Rabelais Hut. This hut was the main entrance gate to the central part of the Kruger from 1926 to 1954. Inside, information boards tell the story of Eileen and James Orpen, and the game rangers of the surrounding Kingfisherspruit area. Eileen bought seven farms, including Kingfisherspruit, and donated them to the park to expand its western border. She remains the biggest benefactor of land to the Kruger.

Her husband James was a land surveyor and served on the Parks Board. He designed the layout of Shingwedzi rest camp, as well as several roads in the park. In 1935, he did a survey of the western border of the park – for free.

Visitors can also read about the adventures of ranger Fausto Jomasse Ngomana who was born in the Kingfisherspruit area and worked in the park for nearly 40 years.

The hut is about 8 km from Orpen rest camp.

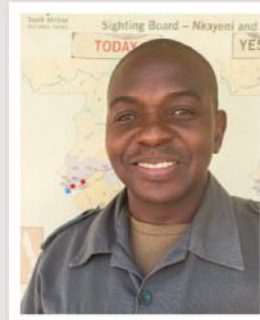
i ORPEN'S WHITE LIONS

Many people have heard of Casper, Satara's famous white lion. Now there are more of them...

In 2019, three white cubs were born to the Birmingham pride, which is often seen around Orpen. (They have their own Facebook page – facebook.com/Birminghamprideoflions – Ed.) "Of those three cubs born in 2019, only two survived – a male and female," says Thompson Mathebula, head guide at Orpen. "The female gave birth to a white cub in early 2023 and the male moved away to establish his own pride. Another white cub was born later in that year. Only one of these cubs survived."

A white cub can only be born if both parents carry the recessive gene.

IN OTHER WORDS



THOMPSON MATHEBULA
HEAD GUIDE: ORPEN
19 YEARS IN KNP

ON ORPEN: Orpen is a small, peaceful camp – it's more like a bushveld camp, but it has everything you need: a swimming pool, shop and waterhole. And there's not as much competition on the roads, like you find around Skukuza. You might hear a leopard there, but you won't be able to see it because of all the vehicles.

ON HONEY BADGERS: Honey badgers are very entertaining, especially in Tamboti tented camp. They often scamper past while guests are having a braai. People should just leave them alone – they are dangerous animals because they're not afraid of anything, not even lions. They're often killed by lions because they're so cocky. Honey badgers are immune against most venoms – they eat scorpions and snakes. When a honey badger attacks a snake and the snake bites the badger, the venom usually only takes effect after it has already killed the snake. The badger sometimes loses consciousness for up to three hours – that's when they're most vulnerable.

ON WHITE LIONS: The best time to see white lions is early in the morning. The guided morning game drive is best. When we return from the drive, the guides from lodges outside the park, who have come in for day trips, ask us where the lions are, but by then they've already moved away. You might also see wild dogs on the morning drive – they hang around in the road to hunt impala.

ON SUMMER: Summer is a great time to visit Orpen. Wildebeest and impala raise their young in the area; often together, along with the zebras. The animals stick together for safety. We also see the white lions more frequently in summer.

ON GUIDED MORNING WALKS: We often see wild dogs on foot. Unlike leopards, they don't run away. They keep their distance but remain visible, which gives guests a chance to watch and photograph them. When you walk in the veld, you see small things you'd miss on a game drive. It deepens your connection to nature and gives you a better idea of how the entire ecosystem works.

ON VULTURES: Birders should keep their eyes peeled. Orpen is close to the northernmost part of the Drakensberg escarpment and there are lots of vulture species in the area: hooded, white-backed, lappet-faced, white-headed and Cape vulture. These rare vultures breed in the mountains, but venture here to look for food.



Tamboti residents

Look for white-backed vultures in the treetops – they breed in the area. Once the sun has set, keep an eye out for raiding genets and the lone hyena that moves along the fence. Be warned: Honey badgers run amok at night. Give them space and watch the show.

WANT A MASSAGE?

The AM Spa group runs a small spa next to the fence in Talamati. You don't have to stay in camp to make use of the spa – it's open from 9 am to 5 pm. Call them (063 694 1175) or e-mail bookings@amspa.co.za and book a head massage: R400 for half an hour.

STAY HERE



ORPEN REST CAMP

This little camp only has 15 units (12 bungalows and three guest cottages) built in a semi-circle to ensure everyone has a view of the waterhole. You can watch wildebeest from the swimming pool!

Units 7, 8 and 15 are the most popular because they have the best view of the waterhole. The kitchens in units 1 to 9 were recently renovated.

Rates: BD bungalow from R1 968 for two people. Guest cottage R3 523 for four people, plus R604 per extra adult and R302 per child (max six).

Contact: 013 735 6355

MAROELA CAMPSITE

This lovely little campsite has 24 stands next to the mostly dry Timbavati River. There are lots of stands next to the fence, and the tall leadwood and bushwillow trees ensure plenty of shade. There are communal bathrooms and freezers.

Rates: From R424 for two people on a stand without power; R480 with power. Plus R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).

TAMBOTI TENTED CAMP

There are 40 safari tents at Tamboti, tucked into the riverine bush. The tents share

two kitchens and ablution facilities, so you have to walk through the bush in the dark if nature calls at night. Remember your headlamp...

There are 30 basic tents with a fridge and a deck. Tents 20 and 21 have great views; numbers 8, 9, 25 and 26 are close to the bathrooms. Some of these tents have seen better days, but SANParks is systematically redoing all of them. Numbers 1 and 3 (each sleeps four) and 15 and 16 (each sleeps two) have new canvas, decks and brick braai facilities. For now, the rates for all tents are the same, so ask for a renovated unit when you book.

The 10 luxury (fully equipped) safari tents are in the south-eastern section of the camp. Number 40 in the corner is the most popular.

Rates: Basic safari tent from R895 for two people, plus R221 per extra adult and R111 per child (sleeps two or four). Luxury safari tent from R2 069 for two people, plus R355 per extra adult and R168 per child (sleeps four).

TALAMATI BUSHVELD CAMP

Talamati might be in a quiet corner of the Kruger, but it's a great game-viewing area. There's sweet grazing in the

surrounding woodland, which attracts animals. The popular Sweni Road (S126) and the S100 are right around the corner; both are known for big cat sightings.

There's a pathway along the camp fence and two hides; the one closest to the reception office even has a spotlight for night viewing. Talamati's waterhole has water year-round – warthog, zebra and wildebeest gather in numbers in winter. Buffalo, too – sometimes herds number more than a hundred animals!

Some renovation work has been done to the units – there are new tiles and work surfaces in the kitchens, and new outdoor furniture.

Talamati often wins the Bush Camp of the Year award. Duty manager Patson Makhubele has worked here since the camp opened 34 years ago! He can tell you about many sightings along the fence...

As elsewhere in the park, the baboons and vervet monkeys aren't scared of people. Lock your food away.

Rates: From R2 080 per night for two people, R604 per extra adult and R302 per child (each sleeps four).

Contact: 013 735 6343



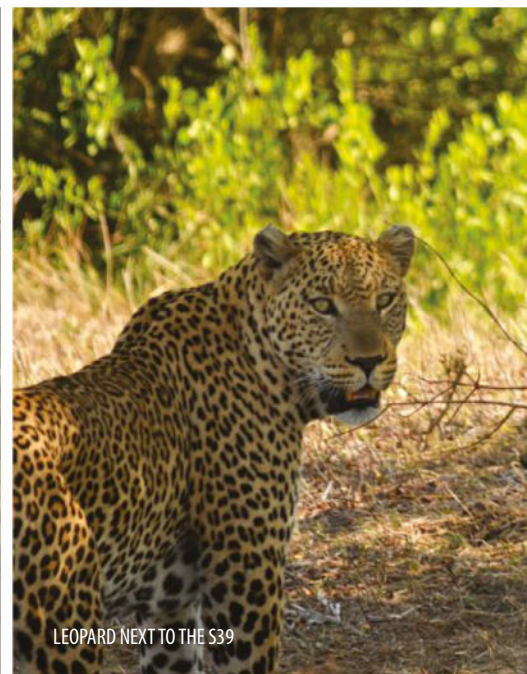
MAROELA CAMPSITE



ORPEN REST CAMP



TAMBOTI TENTED CAMP

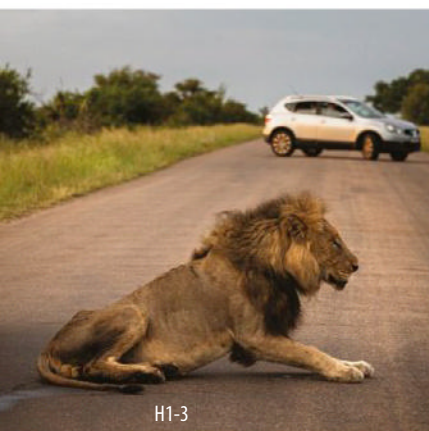


LEOPARD NEXT TO THE S39

SATARA



S100



H1-3

TIP *If there's one rest camp where you should consider a guided game drive, it's Satara. The guides know their stuff and where to find the lions. It's also interesting to learn about the different prides. Sunrise and sunset drive: R424 per adult; R212 per child.*

Satara doesn't have a low season – it's always bustling thanks to the high concentration of big cats in the area. The reception and restaurant area is always abuzz, but the rest of the spacious rest camp – the second biggest in the park – is quieter.

Why are there so many lions here? It's simple. Satara is located in an eco zone called "savannah grassland on basalt". The sweet grazing attracts lots of plains game – it's not unusual to find herds of wildebeest, impala, zebra and warthog right outside the gate, oblivious to man and predator. To the east of camp, there's an eco zone called "Olifants rugged veld", which brings the browsers like kudu and giraffe.

All these grazers and browsers lure predators and scavengers. The landscape is also relatively flat, which means that lions and leopards can see their dinner from a distance. And it makes it easier to spot animals from your vehicle or your camping chair next to the fence.

Remember that everyone is here to see big cats. Make sure you get to the gate first thing in the morning, and give everyone a chance.

Satara residents

The resident African scops-owl is back in the trees in the parking area in front of the reception office. The resident honey badger and African wildcat are also still there. Look for monitor lizards in the campsite shrubbery.

Casper the white lion and his three brothers (part of the Satara pride) roam the area, but they're not doing too well. Head guide at Satara, Eulandah Masuku, says they're 12 years old and they've endured many injuries. *(Mia saw one of the brothers at the S100 turn-off on the H1-3. He struggled to get up and walk. – Ed)*

You often see elephants from the camp fence, especially at the waterhole in front of the Stanley guesthouse. The Mavumbye pride also sometimes comes to drink here.



STAY HERE



The mostly flat campsite is next to the western fence of the rest camp – 88 stands have power; 15 don't. Many stands are right next to the fence and there are three ablution blocks. Some of the stands are close together, but shrubs and trees offer some privacy.

If you want a view, shade and privacy, try get a stand next to the fence in the north-western corner of the campsite.

Satara also has four stands for guests with mobility challenges – these are close to the fence and the ablution block.

The BG and BD

bungalows are arranged in six big circles: numbers 161 to 179 are next to the fence in the eastern section of the camp. Numbers 167, 168, 169, 178 and 179 are the most popular.

The three guesthouses – Stanley, Wells and Rudy Frankel – each have a view of the fence. Half of the units in circles A and B, plus unit D76 and the Rudy Frankel guesthouse, were renovated in 2024. The Cattle Baron restaurant got a new deck at the same time.

Rates: Camping R425 for two people (no power); R481 with power; plus R116

per extra adult and R58 per child (sleeps six).

BG bungalow R1 845 for two people. BD bungalow R2 046 for two people; R335 per extra adult and R168 per child (sleeps two or three). A bungalow next to the fence is R2 214 per night.

GC guest cottage R3 523 for four people; R604 per extra adult and R302 per child (sleeps five or six).

Guesthouse accommodation from R7 627 for six people; R962 per extra adult and R481 per child (sleeps six, nine and ten respectively).

Contact: 013 735 6306/7

IN OTHER WORDS



EULANDAH MASUKU
HEAD GUIDE: SATARA
12 YEARS IN KNP

ON HER WORK: *Park staff came to our high school to talk about conservation and I immediately knew it was what I wanted to do. I love being a guide – it's fun talking to visitors every day.*

ON HER FAVOURITE ANIMAL:
I like the giraffe because they're always so calm. We often see them along the H6.



PATIENCE MABASO
DUTY MANAGER: SATARA
25 YEARS IN KNP

ON SATARA: *Satara is the second biggest camp in the park, but it was designed well so it doesn't feel crowded. All the units are laid out in circles. We call Satara 'Halfway House' because it's in the middle of the park.*

ON HER FAVOURITE ANIMAL: *People don't see leopards here as often as they see lions and cheetahs. That's why it's my favourite – beautiful but rare.*

OLIFANTS BALULE LETABA SHIMUWINI

Limpopo

Shimuwini

Wild dogs and leopards are often seen near Shimuwini, sometimes as close as a kilometre from the gate. In December 2024, several visitors saw a female leopard with two cubs in the road.

This road isn't known for action, but wild dogs and hyenas are sometimes seen. If you're doing an extended trip in the park, Phalaborwa is a good town to stock up on groceries.

There are hyena dens in the culverts near the S141 turn-off. Three separate lion prides also roam between Shimuwini and the Phalaborwa gate.

Every December for the last few years, a side-striped jackal has raised pups in a culvert here. It's about 500 m from the four-way stop – look for the stacked rocks to prevent people driving off the road. The guides call the side-striped jackal a "Christmas jackal".

There's a pack of wild dogs around here. They're seen from October to April, but vanish to raise their pups away from the tourist roads, says Letaba head guide John Adamson. When the pups are old enough to move around with the group, they come closer to Letaba again. They don't like dense bush and often use the tar road to get around. Early morning is the best time to look for them on the H9.

Kruger National Park

MAFUNDYANE ECO TRAIL

This four-day, 270 km 4x4 trail starts at the Phalaborwa gate and ends at Punda Maria. The trail is open between 1 March and 30 November; groups depart every Thursday. A guide accompanies you, but you have to be self-sufficient.

Cost: R8 595 per vehicle (four people)

Contact: 012 428 9111

MALOPENI ECO TRAIL

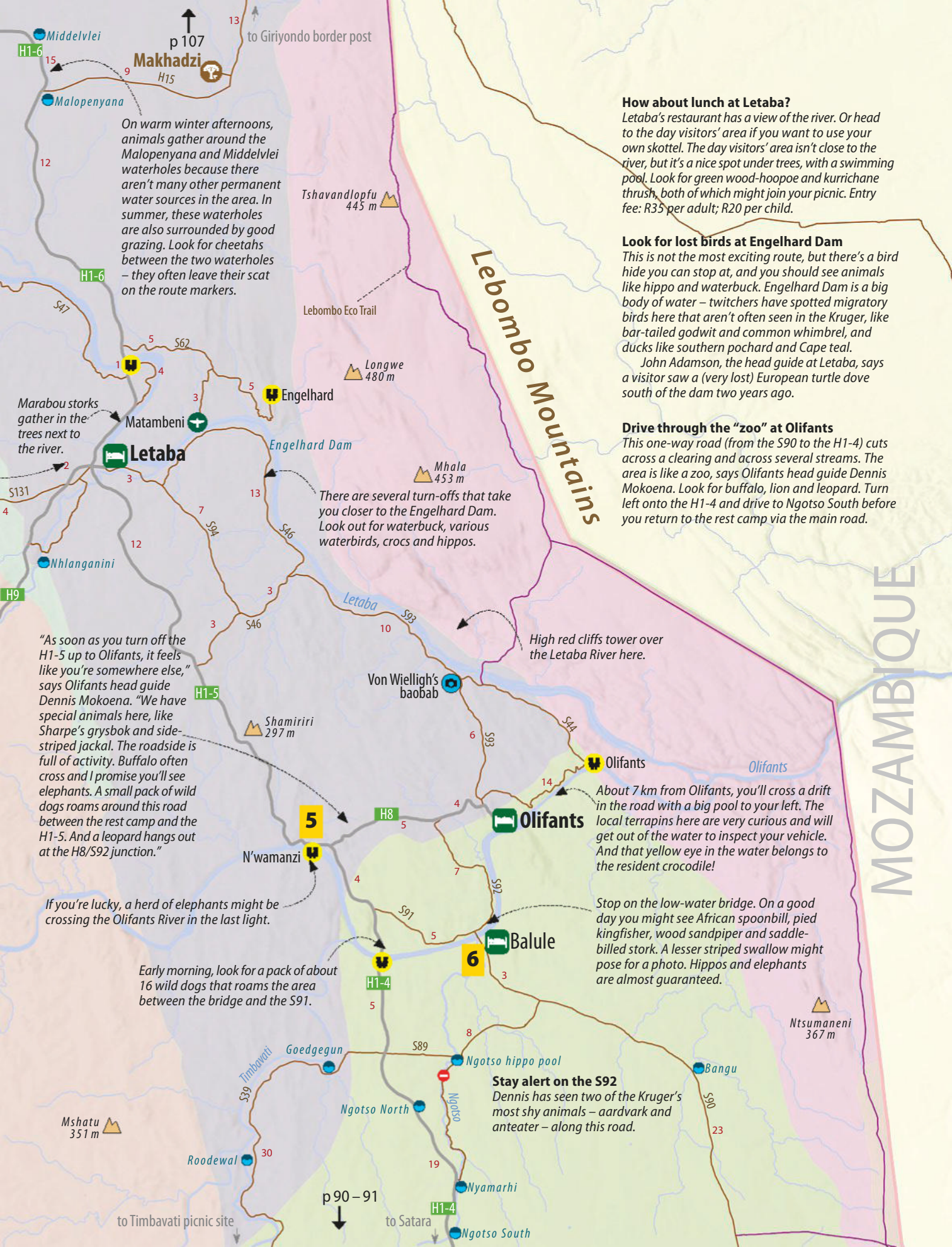
This overnight 4x4 trail starts and ends at the Phalaborwa gate. A guide accompanies you, but you have to be self-sufficient.

Cost: R1 786 per vehicle (four people)

Contact: 012 428 9111

Olifants to Satara	56 km	±2¼h
Olifants to Letaba	33 km	±1½h
Letaba to Phalaborwa gate	51 km	±2h
Letaba to Mopani	50 km	±2h

Mpumalanga



On warm winter afternoons, animals gather around the Malopenyana and Middelvlei waterholes because there aren't many other permanent water sources in the area. In summer, these waterholes are also surrounded by good grazing. Look for cheetahs between the two waterholes – they often leave their scat on the route markers.

Marabou storks gather in the trees next to the river.

"As soon as you turn off the H1-5 up to Olifants, it feels like you're somewhere else," says Olifants head guide Dennis Mokoena. "We have special animals here, like Sharpe's grysbok and side-striped jackal. The roadside is full of activity. Buffalo often cross and I promise you'll see elephants. A small pack of wild dogs roams around this road between the rest camp and the H1-5. And a leopard hangs out at the H8/S92 junction."

If you're lucky, a herd of elephants might be crossing the Olifants River in the last light.

Early morning, look for a pack of about 16 wild dogs that roams the area between the bridge and the S91.

How about lunch at Letaba?

Letaba's restaurant has a view of the river. Or head to the day visitors' area if you want to use your own skottel. The day visitors' area isn't close to the river, but it's a nice spot under trees, with a swimming pool. Look for green wood-hoopoe and kurrichane thrush, both of which might join your picnic. Entry fee: R35 per adult; R20 per child.

Look for lost birds at Engelhard Dam

This is not the most exciting route, but there's a bird hide you can stop at, and you should see animals like hippo and waterbuck. Engelhard Dam is a big body of water – twitchers have spotted migratory birds here that aren't often seen in the Kruger, like bar-tailed godwit and common whimbrel, and ducks like southern pochard and Cape teal.

John Adamson, the head guide at Letaba, says a visitor saw a (very lost) European turtle dove south of the dam two years ago.

Drive through the "zoo" at Olifants

This one-way road (from the S90 to the H1-4) cuts across a clearing and across several streams. The area is like a zoo, says Olifants head guide Dennis Mokoena. Look for buffalo, lion and leopard. Turn left onto the H1-4 and drive to Ngotso South before you return to the rest camp via the main road.

High red cliffs tower over the Letaba River here.

About 7 km from Olifants, you'll cross a drift in the road with a big pool to your left. The local terrapins here are very curious and will get out of the water to inspect your vehicle. And that yellow eye in the water belongs to the resident crocodile!

Stop on the low-water bridge. On a good day you might see African spoonbill, pied kingfisher, wood sandpiper and saddle-billed stork. A lesser striped swallow might pose for a photo. Hippos and elephants are almost guaranteed.

Stay alert on the S92

Dennis has seen two of the Kruger's most shy animals – aardvark and anteater – along this road.

MOZAMBIQUE

OLIFANTS & BALULE

The Kruger is mostly flat and there are only a handful of hilltop viewpoints where you can grasp the massive scale of the 20 000 km² park: Nkumbe near Lower Sabie, Mathekenyane Hill south of Skukuza, and the Tshanga viewpoint in the north.

That's what makes Olifants so special – the rest camp is high on a koppie next to a bend in the Olifants River. There are views galore in and around camp, and great routes to drive. Or spend all day on your stoep with your binos watching the action in the riverbed below.

LOOKOUT POINT, OLIFANTS CAMP





i HIKE ALONG THE RIVER

Besides guided morning hikes, Olifants also offers shorter guided walks along the banks of the Olifants River. You don't have to get up at dawn because the walk only starts at 9 am (in summer). Along the way, you're likely to see hippo and crocs.

Rate: R424 per person. No children under 12.

i WHAT ABOUT THE PEL'S FISHING-OWLS?

These rare birds are a huge tick for any twitcher. There are two resident pairs in the Olifants/Balule area, but they're hard to spot. The guides know where to look.

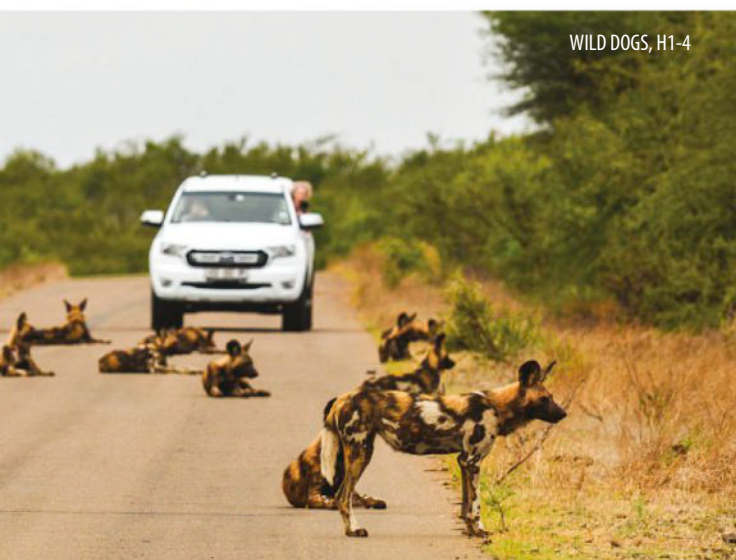
In a previous issue of this guide, we said guests should ask about the owls when booking a guided river walk. You can still ask, but it's not always possible and you're by no means guaranteed a sighting. The guides try to limit visits to the owls to one group per week and they won't take any visitors during their breeding season.

It's a privilege to see these shy creatures. If you don't see one on your walk, try your luck on a night drive – the owls are sometimes seen around the low-water bridge near Balule.

i CYCLE IN THE VELD

There are only two places in the Kruger where you can join a guided mountain-bike ride: at Olifants and at the Phalaborwa gate. The Olifants route mostly follows an old jeep track and some hippo trails through the mopane veld next to the river. There are rest stops where you can walk down to the sand to see hippos, crocs and birds. Don't expect great distance and a frantic pace – it's more about the experience of being in the Kruger outside your car. Bikes are supplied, but you can also use your own.

Rates: Rides from R971 per person (own bike); from R1 339 on a SANParks bike. Rate includes a helmet, water and snacks. No children under 16.



IN OTHER WORDS



DENNIS MOKOENA
HEAD GUIDE: OLIFANTS*
15 YEARS IN KNP

ON HIS CHILDREN: *My kids like the Kruger too much; it's the only place they've known. It's challenging to drive with them in the park. They think we can go off-road wherever we please, chase people who break the law and stop for everything!*

ON THE OLIFANTS RIVER: *No other camp has a view like Olifants – it's beautiful. The sound of the water on the rocks is like music, composed by nature. We can tell whether the river is full or not by the music we hear.*

ON THE PARK: *In the beginning, I thought I was coming to the Kruger for six months. I used to work in private reserves, where some places guarantee that you'll see the Big Five in two days – the guides drive off-road and stay in radio contact to track the animals. I prefer to find the animals by myself. The Kruger is for all of us. Anyone can pay the conservation fee and drive around. The money goes toward facilities and maintenance. I know that if I look after the park, my kids and grandkids will also enjoy it one day.*

ON SLEEPING ELEPHANTS: *A few months ago, I saw a herd of 12 elephants sleeping flat on the ground. After a few minutes, one woke up. It's wonderful how they communicate – they make a soft grrrr sound. Then they all started to move – they're so in tune with each other. Before that, I'd only ever seen one or two elephants asleep on the ground, never the whole herd at once!*

ON BEING A GUIDE: *On a game drive recently, we saw a steenbok giving birth. Wild dogs showed up and caught the mother, then the baby. I felt sad for the steenbok, but you can't show that sadness to the clients because then you're choosing sides. That's not your role as guide – you're there to show nature to your clients in all its complexity.*

**After our visit, Dennis was transferred to Mopani after 14 years as head guide at Olifants.*

BALULE



STAY HERE



OLIFANTS REST CAMP

Olifants doesn't have sprawling lawns and big trees. The rows of BG bungalows are built on terraces leading up the hill. Many of the units have a view. You can also enjoy the view from the restaurant deck or the viewpoint in the rest camp.

Olifants doesn't have a campsite. If you're a camper, pitch your tent at Balule satellite camp, about 11 km away.

The more affordable BG bungalows are in the middle of the rest camp and fairly close together. The most affordable units with a view are the NG and ND bungalows (numbers 86–99). The difference in price between a unit with a view and one without is R157 per night. Numbers 88–92 have been renovated and now have a kitchen. (*Numbers 96, 97 and 98 burnt down after a braai fire accident. Repair work is in the planning phase.* – Ed)

If you want to treat your loved ones to something special,

book one of the front-row BD or BBD bungalows (3–24). Visitors will throw punches to get into number 9 (now FQ4BBV family cottage) – it was recently renovated and sleeps four. When you sit on the patio, you'll feel like a boteleur about to take off. If you want to stay here, book at least a year in advance. Numbers 106–111 on the eastern side of the rest camp are also popular.

Two spacious guest cottages at the gate sleep four people each. The Lebombo guesthouse dates from the 1970s, but Nshawu was renovated recently and looks like a luxury lodge with a deck and a plunge pool.

Rates: BG bungalow from R1 652 for two people, plus R335 per extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps two or three). NG bungalow from R1 819 per night for two people (on the perimeter). ND bungalow R2 300 per night for two people. BD bungalow from R2 199 (on the perimeter) to R2 322 (full view) for two people, plus R335 per

extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps two or three). Guest cottage from R3 092 per night for four people. Guesthouse from R9 119 for eight people.

Contact: 013 735 6606/7

BALULE SATELLITE CAMP

History comes alive at Balule. It was originally called Olifants Camp and it was the only accommodation in the Kruger for black visitors for many years. When the current Olifants rest camp was built in 1961, old Olifants became Balule, the Tsonga name for the Olifants River.

Balule is one of the most popular satellite camps in the park – stay here to experience the Kruger atmosphere of old. It's a small camp with 15 stands and six original huts built in 1930. The basic EH hut has three beds and no windows – the air vents are covered with chicken wire. There's no power, but there's a gas geyser for hot water, and the caretakers Mabel Khoza and Vivian Hlabangwane will light

your hut's two oil lamps in the evenings. (*Ask Mabel to show you where the resident western barn owl hangs out.* – Ed)

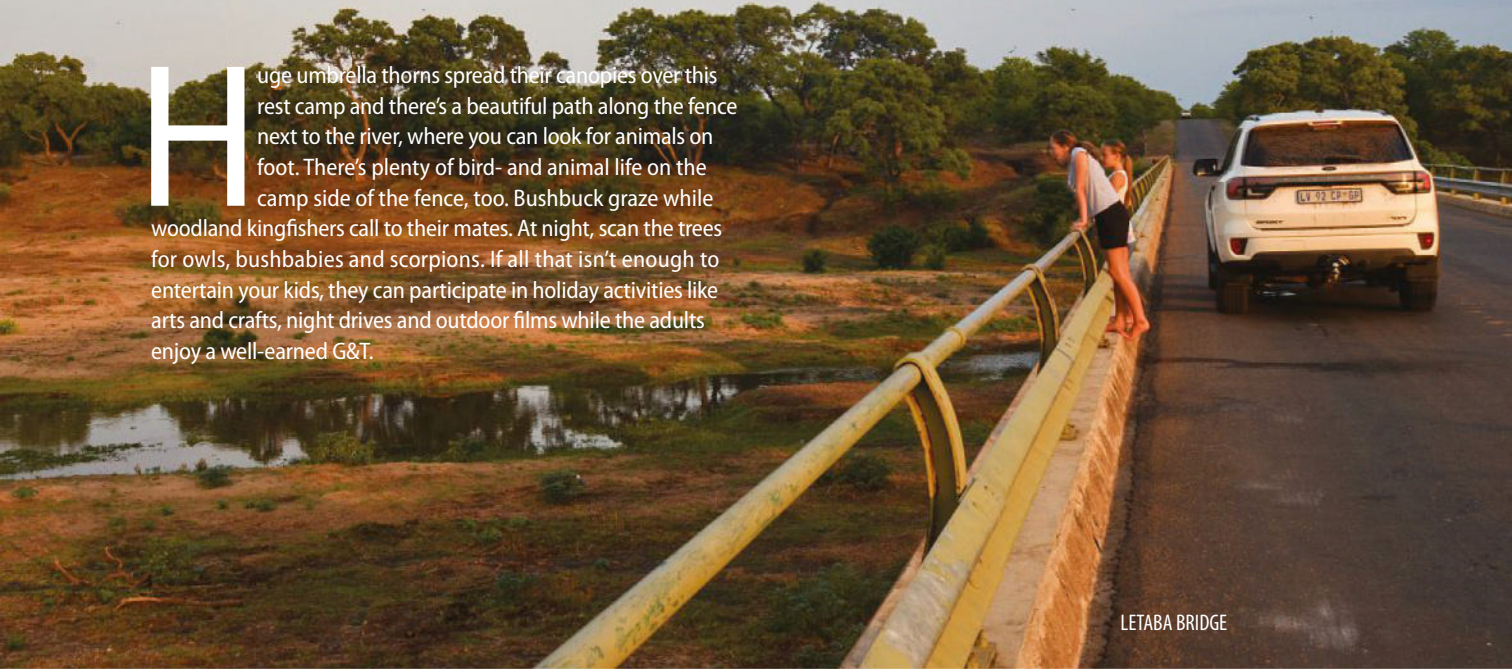
The huts share ablution and kitchen facilities (with freezers). It's basically like camping, so bring your own cutlery and crockery. Number 6 next to the fence is great. The adjacent campsite also has communal ablutions (recently renovated) and kitchen facilities (with freezers). Almost all the stands are next to the fence.

There's a hyena den near Balule and they're often seen around camp. "They have very active noses," says guide Dennis Mokoena. "They love the smell of braai meat! When they hear sounds they're not familiar with, they come and investigate."

Rates: Camping from R459 for two people for a stand with no power; R116 per extra adult and R58 per child. Huts from R716 for two people, plus R221 per extra adult and R111 per child (each sleeps three).

LETABA

Huge umbrella thorns spread their canopies over this rest camp and there's a beautiful path along the fence next to the river, where you can look for animals on foot. There's plenty of bird- and animal life on the camp side of the fence, too. Bushbuck graze while woodland kingfishers call to their mates. At night, scan the trees for owls, bushbabies and scorpions. If all that isn't enough to entertain your kids, they can participate in holiday activities like arts and crafts, night drives and outdoor films while the adults enjoy a well-earned G&T.



LETABA BRIDGE



i VISIT THE ELEPHANT HALL

This brilliant museum is a highlight of any visit to Letaba. Kids (and adults) will love the replica tusks and elephant heart on display (it can weigh up to 6 kg!), and you can learn more about the key function of elephants in the Kruger's ecosystem.

You can also see the tusks of six of the park's so-called Magnificent Seven – some of the biggest bulls ever recorded in the park. (João's tusks broke off and couldn't be found.) Shawu's left tusk is the longest in the room, measuring a whopping 317 cm! Entrance is free.

Contact: 📞 013 735 6664



Letaba residents

There are a few African scops-owls in Letaba, and an African barred owl in the campsite – the latter's call sounds like a puppy crying. After sunset, look for thick-tailed bushbabies on the telephone poles and in the big fruit trees.

IN OTHER WORDS

JOHN ADAMSON
HEAD GUIDE: LETABA
21 YEARS IN KNP



ON GAME REQUESTS: *One night, we had four foreign students on the game drive and even though they'd been in the park for a few days already, they requested to see a crocodile. Not something people usually ask for! I struggled to find one – it was in the middle of the rainy season and there weren't many open sandbanks. We stopped at the bridge over the Letaba River and the best I could do was shine the spotlight on a pair of glowing eyes in the water.*

A bit dejected, we drove back along the S95. And then, about 3 km from the rest camp, we came across a huge croc with a waterbuck calf in its jaws, with a young leopard sitting right behind it! We weren't sure which animal had caught the antelope. The leopard wasn't brave enough to steal the prey – the croc was about ten times her size. But she kept trying. We watched for 45 minutes before we had to return to camp.

It happened in February 2024. Even then, I knew it was going to be the highlight of my year.

ON LETABA: *The rest camp has lots of different units; it's really family-orientated. There are all kinds of animals in the camp, too, like bushbuck, genets, owls and honey badgers. I even saw a greater cane rat the other day. (During our stay, a thick-tailed bushbaby had a scrap with a snake in front of our safari tent. – Ed) Letaba has the best of the north and the south – you're never going to see a rare antelope like a tsessebe, eland or roan at Skukuza or Lower Sabie.*

Yes, the camp has got everything going for it, especially during the dry season when the river is a focal point of activity. There are currently a few lion prides in the area – at the Hlanganini Dam next to the H9, at the Malopenyana waterhole and near the rest camp. The other day, we saw two giraffe carcasses on the road to the Matambeni hide.

ON THE LETABA BRIDGE: *We often see a leopard on the bridge, especially when we're heading back to camp after a sunset drive. Not always the same one – different leopards. They seem to be curious about all the activity on the bridge during the day.*

Other regular visitors to the bridge include Verreaux's eagle-owls, which arrive after sunset to hunt free-tailed bats. They're sometimes joined by Wahlberg's eagles and the occasional peregrine falcon.

In summer, a big spitting cobra also hunts these bats. There are narrow slits between the concrete panels of the bridge – the cobra squeezes through the slits and pulls the bats out one by one – up to seven at a time! The snake is very shy – you'll only see it on a sunset drive or a night drive.



LETABA

STAY HERE



LETABA REST CAMP

Letaba has a brand-new shop near the restaurant – the old one burnt down. The restaurant has also been spruced up and has free Wi-Fi.

The campsite is a good option in summer because there are lots of shade trees. There are also plenty of stands next to the fence. If you like peace and quiet, choose a stand in the south-eastern corner next to the Fish Eagle guesthouse (far from the swimming pool) or in the south-western corner next to the safari tents.

There are 20 safari tents. Numbers 1 to 10 are in a circle next to the pool and they have fans and communal kitchen and ablution facilities. Numbers 4, 5, 7 and 8 are next to the fence. The rest are in a mopane forest deeper into the rest camp.

Letaba has every kind of unit imaginable, from basic EA

huts with communal facilities to BD bungalows with a kitchen, a bathroom and a view. Look at a map of the camp before you book because some of the bungalows have properly epic views – numbers 37 (sleeps two) and 64 (sleeps three) are the most popular.

The 10 fully equipped guest cottages (each sleeps six) are on the banks of the river, as are the two private guesthouses, Fish Eagle and Melville. Four of the cottages (102, 103, 107 and 108) were recently renovated.

Rates: Camping from R458 for two people for a stand with a power point, plus R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).

Safari tent from R893 for two people, R221 per extra adult and R111 per child (sleeps two or four).

EA hut from R1 083 for two people, plus R221 per extra



Shimuwini residents

There are brown-headed parrots in camp – they make a lot of noise!

adult and R111 per child (sleeps three).

BG bungalow from R1 652 for two people, plus R335 per extra adult and R168 per child (sleeps two or three).

BD bungalow from R1 819 for two people, plus R335 per extra adult and R168 per child (sleeps two or three).

Guest cottage R3 516 for four people, plus R603 per extra adult and R301 per child (sleeps six).

Guesthouse R9 119 for four people, plus R960 per extra adult and R480 per child (sleeps eight and nine).

Contact: ☎ 013 735 6636/7

SHIMUWINI BUSHVELD CAMP

Shimuwini, on the banks of the Letaba River, is one of the top five places to stay in the Kruger. There's water here year-round, and a hide on the riverbank. You can hear hippos snorting from

your bed at night. Shimuwini is one of only two bushveld camps with a swimming pool, which is essential if you visit in summer. The paving around the swimming pool and the boma was replaced at the start of the year. The private S141 road to the camp is about 15 km long (with a loop next to the river) and is great for sightings of wild dogs and leopards.

The camp has 15 cottages on a big lawn on the riverbank. Numbers 1 to 3 are set back from the water, but number 1 is private and offers a nice bush view. Number 15 is close to the river and private. Numbers 1, 3, 5, 6 and 12 were renovated last year.

Rates: From R1 976 per night for two people; R603 per extra adult and R301 per child (units sleep four, five or six).

Contact: ☎ 013 735 6683

IN OTHER WORDS



CECILIA PHOPHI

CAMP MANAGER: SHIMUWINI
19 YEARS IN KNP

ON HER FAVOURITE ANIMAL: *We often see leopards around the camp. I can relate to how calm they are, but you also can't predict their next move. . .*

ON THE KRUGER: *When I studied tourism, I quickly realised that I preferred eco-tourism and wanted to work in the park one day. I love the bushveld. I feel uncomfortable when I leave the park – the noise of the outside world is too much for me. I'm used to my life here in nature.*

p 114

S142

14

Eendrag

6

S143

10

Ntomeni 

5142

Shongololo Loop

24

Shidlayengwenya 🌐

Frazer'srus

Tropic of Capricorn

Kruger National Park

H1-6

Look for hyenas at this waterhole in the early morning – they have a den in a culvert on the same side of the road as the waterhole, says Mopani's senior field guide, Sindile Busisiwe Mlambo.

Bowkerskop

 **Bowkerskop**

Mopani 

Pioneer

9

 Shipandani

You can book this hide for your exclusive use for the night – turn to page 13 for more information. Once the other guests clear out, you'll have the night sounds of the bush overlooking the Tsendze River all to yourself.

Mooiplaas 

Birds and crocodiles gather here like someone is handing out free takeaways. You can sometimes see great egret, grey heron, black-crowned night heron and water thick-knee. Hippos often laze around in the water near the hide, and crocodiles sometimes cause a traffic jam!

Boulders

 Ngodzi
472 m

A pack of wild dogs is often seen on the tar road between Shimuwini bushveld camp and Mopani.

H14

Kaleka
396 m

p 98

to Phalaborwa gate and Shimuwini bushveld camp

Tsale

Limpopo

SOUTH AFRICA

Lebombo Mountains

MOZAMBIQUE

There are two thatched bomas at this picnic site next to Tsendze camp. The one on your right as you enter recently got a new roof and is right next to the Tsendze River – come early and mark your territory. (Uhm, unpack your coffee flask, that is...)

This waterhole is in a clearing in the mopane woodland. You can take photos of herds of zebra here in the early morning. If you're lucky, a kori bustard will join the party.

This stretch of the S50, along the course of the Nshawu River, has several waterholes in quick succession. It's the best bet for game viewing near camp. Big buffalo and elephant herds are abundant, and a pride of 16 lions roams between Nshawu number 3 and the Tihongonyeni waterhole on the S143. Birders, listen out for a sound like a cork popping from a wine bottle – it's the call of the male black-bellied bustard.

You'll sometimes find elephant and eland here. Cheetahs roam between the Mopani T-junction on the H1-6 and the Middelvlei waterhole, and there's a pride of lions between Middelvlei and the Klein-Nshawu waterhole.

Lebombo Eco Trail

Shilowa
497 m

Lebombo Mountains

Lebombo National Park

Lebombo Mountains National Park

Giriyon

0 100 km

North

Giriyondo border post

p 99

to Middelvlei waterhole and Letaba

MOPANI & TSENDZE

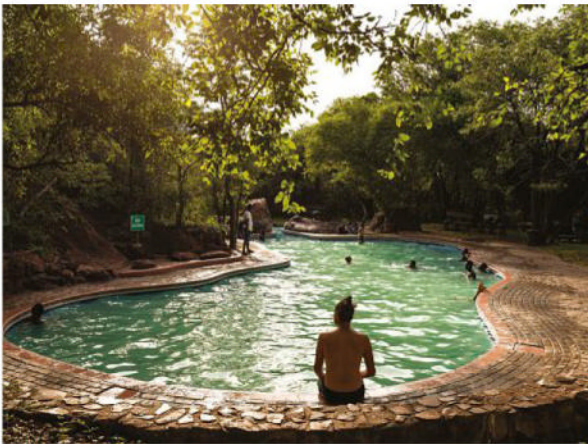


This giant baobab grows opposite the day visitors' area in Mopani rest camp.



The dominant mopane woodland in this part of the park might obscure your views a little, but there are several open grasslands in-between where you can see big herds of plains game. Mopani is one of the newer rest camps in the park – it was completed in 1991. It has more of a lodge feel; introverts will love the private units surrounded by vegetation.

The rest camp is on a koppie and some of the units have views of Pioneer Dam. From the restaurant deck, you can watch fish-eagles, every kind of egret, hippos, crocs and elephants coming down to drink.



Mopani residents

A western barn owl lives under the roof at the entrance to the reception office, and a European nightjar lives near the restaurant. When you walk through the camp at night, you might come across a thick-tailed bushbaby, the biggest of its kind. "On Facebook, visitors say they've seen a caracal in the camp; in summer Eurasian golden oriole has also been recorded," says duty manager Pieter du Plessis.

IN OTHER WORDS



SINDILE BUSISIWE MLAMBO
SENIOR FIELD GUIDE: MOPANI
11 YEARS IN THE KNP

ON MOPANI: *When I was transferred to Mopani in 2018, I had to go back to my books and study! I had worked in busier camps like Skukuza and Satara... When you leave the gate in those camps, you see a lion or leopard within the first kilometre. Here, I tell guests about the trees, the birds and the history of the park because you sometimes have to look harder for animals. We do have special animals, though: rare antelope like roan, tsessebe, Lichtenstein's hartebeest and sable.*



PIETER DU PLESSIS
DUTY MANAGER: MOPANI
56 YEARS IN THE KNP

ON MOPANI: *There are far fewer visitors in the north – it's nice and quiet here. If you see a leopard in the south, there will be 50 vehicles around the animal. Here you have the leopard to yourself for 20 minutes before a second vehicle arrives. I've started to focus on birds more these last two years. Birders come to the north because we have species you won't find in the rest of the park. The double-banded sandgrouse is one of my favourites. It has a special call: chwee-chee-chee. It's also a privilege to see a pearl-spotted owl in my garden every day.*



STAY HERE



MOPANI REST CAMP

Mopani has more of a lodge atmosphere: There's no campsite and there are no basic huts with communal facilities.

At the Kruger National Park Achievement Awards in 2024, Mopani was chosen as the best rest camp in the park. And you'll quickly see why: Almost every unit has a private location in its own bit of bushveld, where birds like long-billed crombec, blue waxbill and black-backed puffback will keep you company. Numbers 9 – 12, 43, 45, 48, 49, 51, 101 and 102 have views of Pioneer Dam.

There's a short walking trail along the edge of the dam and past the swimming pool where a water monitor might surprise you.

Mopani also has the second prettiest swimming pool in the park after the one at Pretoriuskop – it's basically in the bush!

Rates: BD bungalow R1 779 for two people, plus R334 per extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps four); R2 035 for a bungalow with a view.

FB cottage R2 035 for two people, plus R334 per extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps four). FF guest cottage R3 236 for four people, plus R600 per extra adult and R300 per child (sleeps six). R3 503 for a guest cottage with a view.

Xanatseni guesthouse from R9 085 for eight people.

Contact: ☎ 013 735 6535/6

TSENDZE CAMPSITE

Mopani might not have a campsite, but nearby Tsendze, 7 km to the south, more than makes up for it. Tsendze has a beautiful bushveld location under leadwood, mopane and apple-leaf trees, which are home to quite a few critters...

"When it's stormy and the

wind shakes the trees, the scorpions come out," says caretaker Rodgers Hobyane. (*Mia found two scorpions under her awning... – Ed*)

"And in summer, you should watch out for our long friend with no legs, the black mamba," Rodgers adds.

But the wild atmosphere is what makes Tsendze special. That, and the attention paid by Rodgers Hobyane and his fellow caretaker Elina Mona. The pair are legendary in the Kruger: They walk through camp at dusk to make sure everyone is happy and comfortable; Elina shares animal stories and Rodgers will point out the resident African scops-owl.

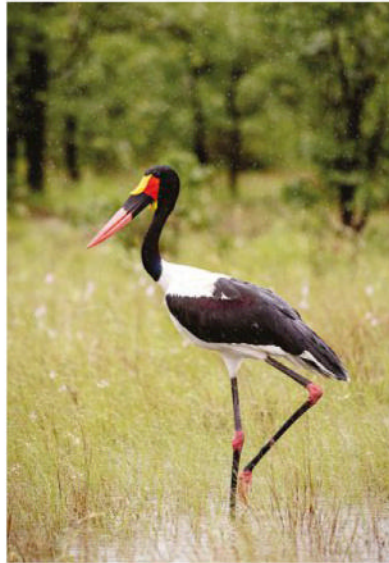
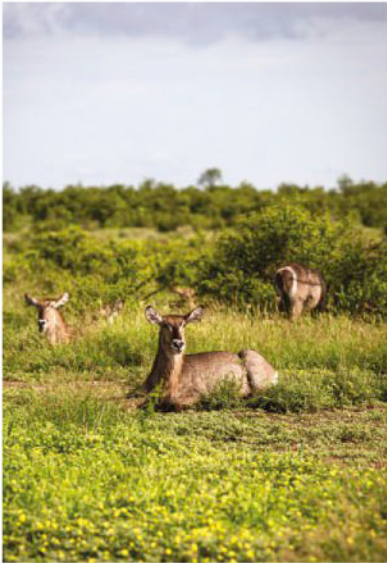
There are 34 large, level stands laid out in a figure of eight around two ablution blocks, with trees and bushes in-between to ensure privacy. Big groups can ask for stands that are close together, like numbers

27 and 28 or 14 and 15. If it's privacy you're after, numbers 3, 4, 17 or 26 are good. Stands 3 and 26 are the best – close to the fence. Rodgers says that number 3 is sometimes fully booked for months in advance. (Unlike other campsites in the Kruger, you're allocated a specific stand when you make a reservation.)

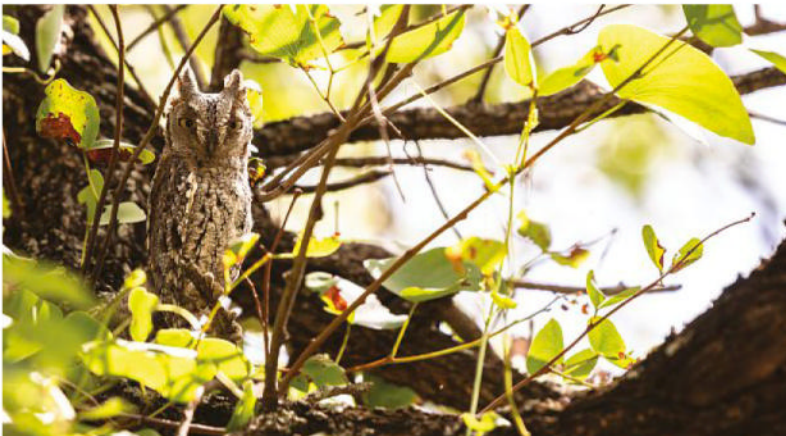
This is a place to hide from the world. There's no power, no loud generator, no cellphone reception, shops, restaurants or day visitors. Everything runs off solar or gas. The campsite doesn't have a swimming pool, but you can swim at Mopani or just have a cold shower.

If you need cellphone reception in an emergency, you might find a patch between Elina's house and stands number 21 and 22.

Rates: From R458 for two people; R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six per stand).



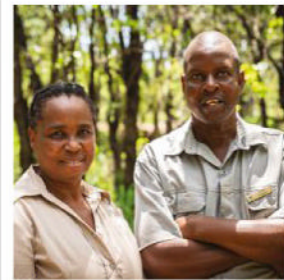
Clockwise from far left: Waterbuck rest next to the S50. A saddle-billed stork poses at Olifantsbad Pan. Tsendze is the bush at its best. Say hi to the African scops-owl while you're there.



Tsendze residents

Rodgers keeps track of the movements of the local African scops-owl. The owl surprises campers by perching in a different tree every day. It even ventured into someone's tent recently! Visitors have seen a narina trogon here in the past, but Pieter du Plessis from Mopani says it has been scarce over the last two years.

IN OTHER WORDS



ELINA MONA
CARETAKER: TSENDZE
29 YEARS IN THE KNP

ON TSENDZE: *Rodgers and I have lived and worked here since the camp was built in 2006. In the beginning, the elephants often broke through the fence because the camp was on their route to drink at the Mooiplaas picnic site. It doesn't happen any more – the elephants have learnt to walk around the camp.*

RODGERS HOBYANE
CARETAKER: TSENDZE
27 YEARS IN THE KNP

ON TSENDZE CAMPERS: *There are people who camp here for three months at a time – they love the tranquillity. Regular visitors also stop here when they're in the area to say hello to Elina and I – and to hear how Tsendze is doing.*



CAMP GUIDE NORTH

115 SHINGWEDZI

117 BATELEUR

118 SIRHENI

126 PUNDA MARIA

128 PAFURI

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1** Film the opening shot of your holiday reel at the Tshanga viewpoint.
- 2** Drive beneath ancient trees along the Shingwedzi River on the Red Rocks route (S52 and H1-6).
- 3** Watch elephants bathe in the Mphongolo River on the S56.
- 4** Disappear into the riverine forest next to the Luvuvhu River.
- 5** Visit one of the furthest corners of South Africa.
- 6** Look for racket-tailed roller and Arnot's chat in the mopane woodlands in summer.



MOZAMBIQUE

Shingweni
426 m

Parque Nacional do Limpopo

SHINGWEDZI BATELEUR SIRHENI

Shingwedzi to Mopani	63 km	±2½h
Shingwedzi to Punda Maria	74 km	±3h
Shingwedzi to Pafuri gate	111 km	±4½h

Lebombo Mountains

Head north from Shingwedzi if you want to see rare antelope like eland, tsessebe, roan and sable. On the other side of the Nkulumbeni Bridge on the H1-7, the bush opens up and you can look for ostrich, zebra, wildebeest and buffalo.

A collared male cheetah likes the area between Shingwedzi and the Boyela waterhole further north. You might also see cheetahs on the plains around the Gora waterhole.

A pride of eight lions hunts between the rest camp and the Shingwedzi Bridge. Head guide Bishop Shilowa also sometimes sees cheetahs and leopards here. A big male leopard keeps close to the bridge.

A cheetah roams the plains around the old Kanniedood Dam. (The dam wall was destroyed in the 2013 floods.)

Southern ground hornbills often walk along the S143 dirt road that winds around the rest camp. Campers see them from the inside of the fence sometimes.

Look for hyenas between the Kagole and Nkokodzi rivers. There's a den in a culvert here.

Drive along the Shingwedzi River to the Dipeni waterhole. You can see waterbirds like greater painted-snipe, black-winged stilt, black crane and saddle-billed stork. In winter you have a good chance of seeing lions – they hunt between the pools next to the river.

About dam time

Guests at Bateleur have access to two dams on private roads. The small Silwervis Dam is surrounded by thick bush that obscures your view somewhat. You might see rare antelope like eland and sable at Rooibosrant Dam.

Have coffee and rusks at the Babalala picnic site, then go look for predators and birds on the S56. The picnic site is big, with lots of trees and a thatched boma built around a cluster fig tree. Look for roan antelope and eland, which sometimes graze to the south.

The S56 (also called Mphongolo Loop) along the banks of the Shisha and Mphongolo rivers is a good option if you want to see lion, cheetah and wild dog. The riverbanks are popular with birdwatchers scanning the huge marula, nyala, jackal-berry and cluster fig trees. Head guide Bishop Shilowa has seen long-crested eagle and Dickinson's kestrel along this road.

Wild dogs have a wide range. Look for them on the popular Red Rocks Loop (S52 and H1-6). According to Bishop, visitors sometimes see the wild dogs from the benches at the Shingwedzi restaurant!

Do a morning drive to this viewpoint, about 5 km from Bateleur. It's the perfect place to see the sunrise over the Tshanga River. (If you stay in Shingwedzi, you can also make it in time for sunrise – it's about 30 km away.) Walk past the pit toilets and climb the rocks to the left for an unobstructed view.

Limpopo
RSA

Kruger National Park

Maribeyobasa
391 m

Ponda Hills
419 m

Chukamhila
409 m

Gondogondo
378 m

Nyawutsi

Hlamvu

Grootvlei

Dombo West

Olifantsbadpan

p 106

to Mopani

S142

H1-6

S144

S52

S56

S56

S56

S56

S56

S56

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S56

SHINGWEDZI

Shingwedzi is the perfect camp if you want to hide from the crowds, look for birds in peace, and see big cats in winter. Since the camp is right next to the Shingwedzi River, you can expect an abundance of animals in the vicinity.

Even the short 2,5 km tar road between the camp and the Shingwedzi Bridge offers sightings of baboon, zebra, southern ground hornbill, marabou stork and big cats.

The trees on the riverbanks are impressive: tall mopane, jackal-berry, cluster fig, leadwood and nyala. You don't even have to leave camp – the restaurant and day visitors' area also have views of the Shingwedzi River.

MIA LOUW

SADDLE-BILLED STORK,
BOYELA WATERHOLE



IN OTHER WORDS

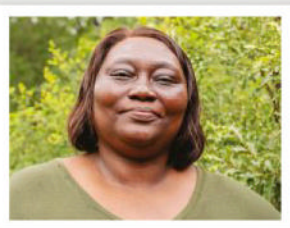


BISHOP SHILOWA
HEAD GUIDE: SHINGWEDZI
19 YEARS IN KNP

ON LIONS: *In winter, when water is scarce, you'll find plenty of animals at the waterholes – we see predators hunting almost every day. During the winter of 2024, we had four prides of lion that moved from one waterhole to the next, especially along the S50 and near the Kanniedood Dam. It was the first time I'd seen lions catching and eating crocodiles! The lions do it when the crocodiles try to steal their prey.*

ON BIRDS: *I recently saw little grebe at the Grootvlei waterhole. They eat fish and they swallow some of their own feathers to help digest the fish bones.*

ON HIS FAVOURITE ANIMAL: *One morning, I saw a honey badger digging for food next to the S56. I watched for a while and a leopard suddenly pounced! The honey badger didn't back down and chased the leopard into a tree!*



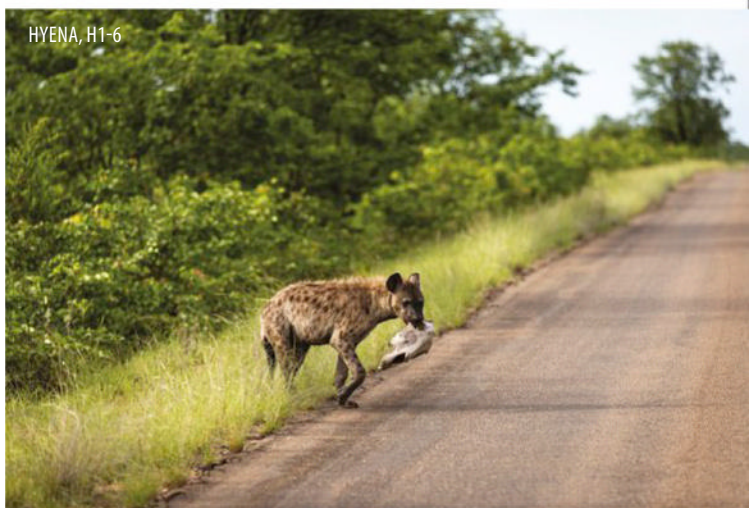
SILINDILE KHOZA
CAMP MANAGER: SHINGWEDZI
21 YEARS IN KNP

ON THE NORTH: *The north is more laidback than the south. It has fewer people and traffic jams. You can drive for ages without seeing another vehicle, and enjoy the animals on your own.*

ON HER FAVOURITE ANIMAL: *I love a leopard – we see them regularly. You can sometimes hear them at night when you walk along the fence or when you stay in the campsite.*



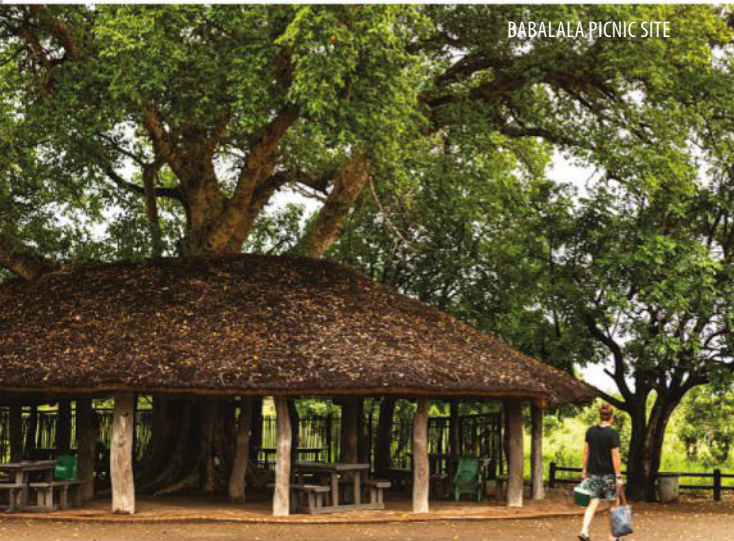
SHINGWEDZI



HYENA, H1-6

Shingwedzi residents

Visitors sometimes see pearl-spotted owl and African scops-owl. The owls move around – look for them in the canopies of the thorn trees in camp. Shingwedzi is also a good place to see Bennett's woodpecker. Don't look in the trees, look on the ground – this woodpecker likes to eat ants.



BABALALA PICNIC SITE



MARABOU STORKS, GROOTVLEI WATERHOLE, S50



BATELEUR

STAY HERE



SHINGWEDZI REST CAMP

Even though Shingwedzi has big trees in and around camp, it's very sandy.

The campsite is level, spacious and spread along the fence in the south-western corner of the camp – this is also where you'll find the swimming pool. The 26 stands right next to the fence are more expensive. You can specify whether you want a stand next to the fence or in the middle, but you can't book a specific stand. The best stands are numbers 1 and 2 under the big umbrella thorn next to the fence near the main ablution block. Number 17 is close to the swimming pool – it's next to the pool fence and the camp fence, so no one will be in front of you or next to you.

The units are arranged in two big circles, except the Rentmeester guesthouse on the riverbank.

If you're on a camping budget but you want to sleep under a roof, the EH huts in the "B" circle offer good value – you share a communal kitchen and bathroom, but have your own sheltered stoep.

The reception, restaurant and viewpoint area overlooking the river were all recently renovated – they look spic and span.

Rates: Camping R458 for two people (with power), R525 for a stand next to the fence, R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (max six).

EH hut R848 for two people, plus R221 per extra adult and R111 per child (sleeps three).

BG bungalow from R1 440 for two people. BD bungalow from R1 708 for two people, plus R335

per extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps two or three).

FF family cottage from R2 813 for four people.

Rentmeester guesthouse from R7 601 for six people; plus R960 per extra adult and R480 per child (sleeps eight).

Contact: ☎ 013 735 6806

BATELEUR BUSHVELD CAMP

Bateleur feels like an exclusive camp – it accommodates a maximum of 34 guests. It's the smallest bushveld camp in the park with only seven units; the other bushveld camps have 15.

The units are spread out along the dry bed of the Mashokwe spruit, which is hidden by thick bush. You don't have much of a view of the spruit, but you also won't see your neighbours.

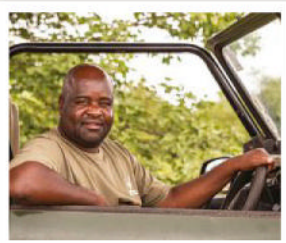
The guest cottages are well maintained – the thatched roofs are in a good condition and the walls were recently painted. Numbers 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 were renovated in 2023/4. Numbers 3, 4 and 5 are close together, but bush between them offers privacy. Number 1 is more private and further from the fence, but has its own pathway to the hide. Numbers 6 and 7 are the closest to the fence and the picnic bench overlooking the riverbed.

Bateleur is the only bushveld camp with air conditioning – the units in the other camps have ceiling fans. The sound of the AC units can sometimes disturb the peace and quiet.

Rates: R3 280 per night for up to four people, plus R600 per extra adult and R300 per child (sleep four to six).

Contact: ☎ 013 735 6843

IN OTHER WORDS



DUMISANI SYDWELL SHIRINDA
CAMP MANAGER: BATELEUR
15 YEARS IN KNP

ON SUMMERTIME IN THE KRUGER: *I spent most of the morning on the S52 entrance road checking to see whether any of our guests needed help. The S52 is a dirt road, which goes through four drifts that are in flood after the heavy rains in early January. I wanted to make sure everyone got through safely and no one got stuck.*



NKHENSANI MAKHUBELA
DUTY MANAGER: SIRHENI
20 YEARS IN KNP

ON THE LANDSCAPE: *The vegetation is special, particularly along the Mphongolo River. I love the big nyala trees that grow there – you don't find them to the south. It's also very quiet, with little traffic on the roads around the camp.*

Sirheni residents

Guests sometimes hear a Verreaux's eagle-owl from the hide closest to unit number 1 – the owl often sits in the jackal-berry trees on the opposite riverbank. If you're lucky, you might see a leopard walking in the riverbed.

SIRHENI BUSHVELD CAMP

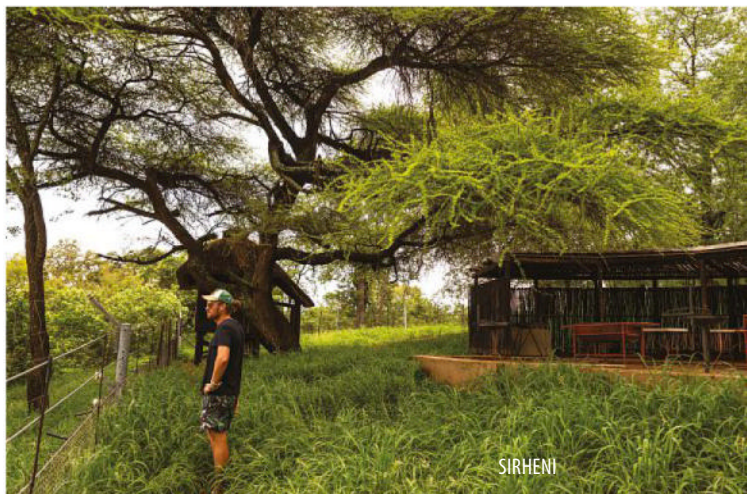
The 15 units are spread along a dry riverbed. Some units have unobstructed views of the riverbed; others give you a peek of the sand through trees and bush. You can watch birds in private because there are two hides at Sirheni. The camp is only 35 km from Shingwedzi if you need a shop or restaurant.

Units 1, 2 and 3 have river views, but they offer less privacy because there's no screening between

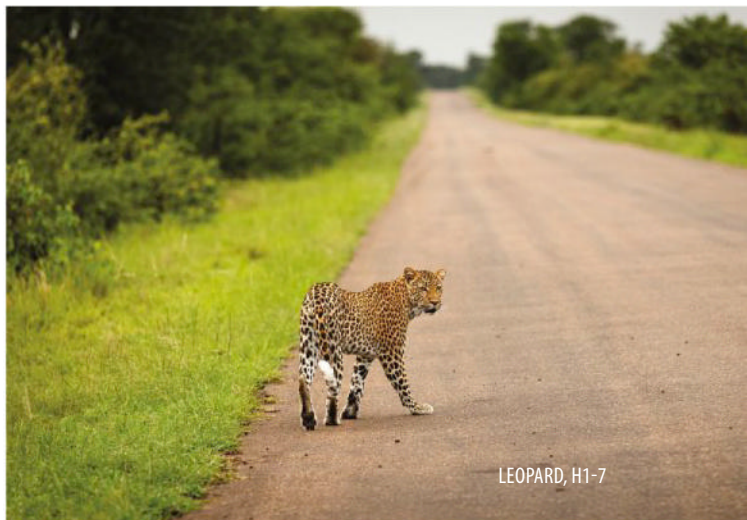
them. Number 8 is private and surrounded by bush, with a narrow view of the fence and river. Numbers 8 and 15 were renovated in 2024. The units have no power points or air conditioning, but there are ceiling fans.

Rates: Some units sleep four, others sleep six. From R1 953 per night for two people in a four-sleeper unit; R3 293 per night for four in a six-sleeper. Extra adult R603; extra child R301.

Contact: 013 735 6860



SIRHENI



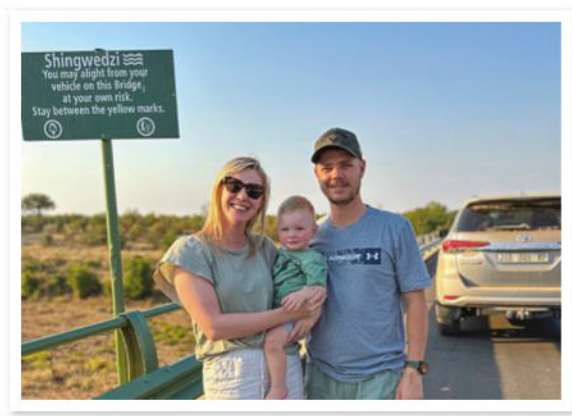
LEOPARD, H1-7



JUVENILE MARTIAL EAGLE

How to find Shingwedzi's leopards

Rian Boshoff, a financial advisor from Middelburg in Mpumalanga, has been to the Kruger Park more than a hundred times. His favourite rest camp is Shingwedzi, because that's where he can spend time with his favourite animal, the leopard.



"I was first through the Phalaborwa gate when the Kruger reopened after the Covid-19 lockdown," says Rian. "And when the rest camps reopened, I immediately pitched my tent at Tsendze!"

Rian tries to visit the park as much as he can, in between his work commitments. "I've always loved the bush and I've even done a field guide course," he says. "Our family camps at Shingwedzi for three weeks during the December holidays. Shingwedzi is the only camp where it doesn't matter whether you see animals or not. It's so beautiful, with the big trees along the riverbanks.

"From Shingwedzi, you can plan your game-viewing routes so that you always have the sun at your back – a must for

photographers. I drive east to west in the mornings and west to east in the afternoons. Besides the photography benefits, it's also much easier to pick out the colours of an animal like a lion or leopard – you don't have to keep adjusting the visor to keep the sun out of your eyes."

Rian has a passion for leopards. He has photos of more than 50 individuals and has even compiled a database for the area. "I can map family trees and I know where each leopard comes from and who its parents are. People often send me photos on social media (@rianboshoff) to identify leopards they've seen.

"Every leopard has a core territory. When I take a photo of a leopard, I always look at other photos I've taken in the area," he explains. "Some leopards I've seen so many

On the eastern side of the Red Rocks Loop (SS2) is a narrow road that takes you closer to the river – many people miss it. On this morning, I drove down the road and found fresh leopard tracks. A few hundred metres further there were drag marks, and I knew they'd been made by a leopard. She was sitting in a tree next to the road. I drove there for three days and only two vehicles came past.





RIAN'S TIPS FOR FINDING LEOPARDS

1 Use all your senses. Drive with your windows down and listen for alarm calls made by animals like vervet monkeys, baboons, impalas, tree squirrels and spurfowl. Or the bark of a kudu. The animals always look in the direction of danger.

2 If you're in leopard country in the early morning, switch off your engine for a few minutes and listen. You might hear the sawing call of a male.

3 Look for tracks along the edge of dirt roads, game trails and any routes leading to water. Dominant leopards (and lions) often mark their territory along these routes.

4 Talk to fellow Kruger enthusiasts. Your neighbour in the campsite might have seen something you missed.



times that I can recognise them straight away. Otherwise, I study the patterns on their faces. Like a fingerprint, these are unique. I start with the spots around the nose and the patterns around the eyes. I compare the patterns to photos and identify the leopards this way."

Rian has also found leopards that have moved away from Shingwedzi into other parts of the park, or vice versa. "In 2018, I came across a leopard with an impala kill under a tree about 7 km from Shingwedzi. The next day, there were three leopards in the same spot – a female with a male cub and a female cub. I watched and photographed them for the next four days. The female cub settled in the area and is still seen there today, but the male disappeared. In 2022, a photo of a male leopard near Tsendze caught my eye on the SANParks group on Facebook. It was him! I could identify him using my photos. His territory is near Tsendze now, and he's still spotted in the area.

"In 2019, I regularly saw a young male (pictured right) on the H14/Ngobeni Loop between the Phalaborwa gate and Mopani, but then I never saw him there again. When male cubs reach adulthood, they're usually driven away by the dominant male in the area.

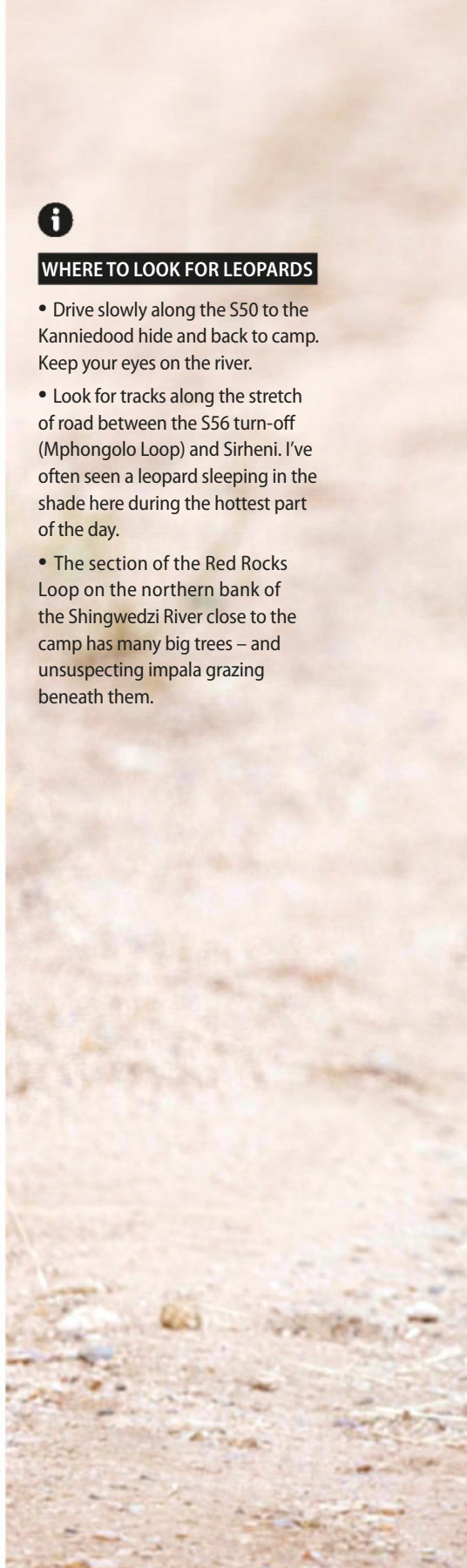
In May 2023, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw a photo of a male leopard on Facebook, which had been seen near Shingwedzi, far to the north. I saw him myself, at the low-water bridge in front of the Rentmeester guesthouse right near the camp, when I visited in March this year. The last place I saw him was 115 km from the first place I found him!"

One of Rian's pictures also features in the portfolio. See page 28.



WHERE TO LOOK FOR LEOPARDS

- Drive slowly along the S50 to the Kanniedood hide and back to camp. Keep your eyes on the river.
- Look for tracks along the stretch of road between the S56 turn-off (Mphongolo Loop) and Sirheni. I've often seen a leopard sleeping in the shade here during the hottest part of the day.
- The section of the Red Rocks Loop on the northern bank of the Shingwedzi River close to the camp has many big trees – and unsuspecting impala grazing beneath them.





PUNDA MARIA PAFURI BORDER CAMP

Punda Maria to Pafuri border camp	60 km	±1½h
Punda Maria to Pafuri gate	77 km	±3¼h
Punda Maria to Shingwedzi	74 km	±3h

In the summer months, look for racket-tailed rollers at the 8 km marker – these birds are only found in the far north of the Kruger Park. The area around the 12 km marker is one of the best places to look for another rare bird: Arnot's chat.

← to Tshipise

Masisi

Mutale

Nthakeni Bush
& River Camp

Twitch away at Pafuri picnic site

This picnic site is a birdwatching hotspot. Look for the rare black-throated wattle-eye, narina trogon, gorgeous bush-shrike and thick-billed cuckoo. Ask caretaker Mandla Ngomane to help you.

Join the action at Kloverfontein Dam

This loop offers some of the best game-viewing opportunities between the rest camp and Pafuri. The landscape is more open and you can see buffalo approaching from afar. Kloverfontein Dam is a great place to enjoy your morning coffee – you get close to the water and there is always action, like a common waxbill in the reeds, a hippo nursing in the water, or thick-knees calling. The area has been an outspan spot for many years. Hunters and smugglers, including the infamous Dirk Klover whom the dam is named after, would camp here and drive his ox wagons through the drift to reach the hunting fields in the north. Just after the dam, there's a loop that goes past an old drift built by Cecil "Bvekenya" Barnard, a big game hunter and ivory smuggler who worked in the area in the early 19th century.

Do tree spotting on the Mahonie Loop

You won't see the Big Five on this route, but the S99 has beautiful trees, plants and birds that you won't find elsewhere in the park. It winds around Dimbo Hill to the north of the rest camp, past statuesque pod mahogany, marula, baobab and large-fruited bushwillow trees. Bring your tree guide and your bird guide because there are also feathery specials like grey-headed parrot and Dickinson's kestrel in the area.

Nwatshipange
533 m

Luvuvhu

S99

Witsand

Mahonie Loop

Matukwale

Martitube

Punda Maria

H1-3

Tshamavhudzi
582 m

Thulamila
604 m

Punda Maria

SleepOver Punda
Maria gate.
See p 129

to Thohoyandou

SOUTH AFRICA
Limpopo

ZIMBABWE



Limpopo

Mabyeni
386 m

Makuleke Contractual Park

Makuleke Camp

H1-9

6

Scan the trees – a Pel's fishing-owl might be peeking out from the canopy. The owls hide in big, dense trees along the riverbanks, like Cape mahogany.

Look over the floodplain to where the Luvuvhu meets the Limpopo. In the early 1900s, this remote corner of the old Transvaal was a gathering place for big game hunters, ivory smugglers and anyone else trying to evade the long arm of the law.

Pafuri

18

Boabab Hill House

Luvuvhu Bridge

Pafuri Lodge

Pafuri

8

Limpopo

MOZAMBIQUE

Crooks' Corner

Pafuri border post

Pafuri Border Camp

to Mapai

The Outpost

Luvuvhu

Thulamela

Turn off on this road for dense vegetation and high cliffs.

After about 5 km there's a hill on your right. Böhm's spinetail is often spotted around the baobabs on the hill – these rare birds nest in the branches.

This is one of the most scenic roads in the park. It winds along the Luvuvhu River, which is lined with fever, nyala and ana trees. Warthogs, nyala and baboons are abundant. See if you can spot an African harrier-hawk scrabbling in a crack in a tree trunk.

Nyalaland Trail camp

The H1-8 is a straight road that goes through mopane woodland to Baobab Hill, historically the first outspan spot for labourers brought from Mozambique to work on the mines of the Witwatersrand.

Baobab Hill

Nkovakulu

Malivala
555 m

23

Mazanje

H1-8

Mashikiri

Baobab

Klopperfontein Dam
Klopperfontein

S67

5

S60

8

S59

7

3

6

Mandadzidzi

Elandskuil

5

H1-8

12

H13-1

Shisha

3

3

3

2

18

Magamba

H1-7

Dzundzwini
600 m

to Shingwedzi

Kruger National Park

Parque Nacional do Limpopo

Lebombo Eco Trail

p 114

PUNDA MARIA

The roads and waterholes here are much quieter than those in the south. If you come across a traffic jam, it's most likely caused by a rare bird – not a lion or leopard.

Lifers include Arnot's chat, black-throated wattle-eye, racket-tailed roller, Pel's fishing-owl, Böhm's spinetail and three-banded courser. The area around Punda Maria and Pafuri is the northernmost range of many South African bird species, and the southernmost range of species common in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia. This makes it one of the best birding spots in Africa!

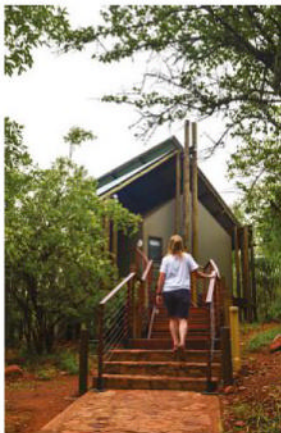
The north of the Kruger has plenty of that deep-in-the-bushveld atmosphere. When you drive along a quiet dirt road, you'll feel at peace because you know these rivers have flowed for eons and these trees have seen everything. And they'll still be here next year, and the next.





NIGHTJAR FOR A NIGHTCAP?

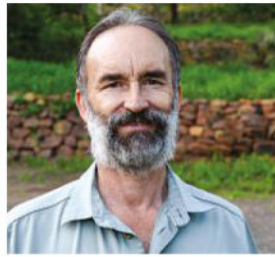
Pennant-winged nightjar, a migratory species, can be seen at Punda Maria between October and December. Book a sunset drive and tell the guide that you'd like to see the nightjars – they'll take you to their breeding site near the Mahonie Loop. The nightjars usually come out after the gates have closed.



Punda Maria residents

There are bushbuck and bushbabies in camp, as well as a flock of crested guineafowl. Apparently a Gambian giant pouched rat has sometimes been seen – at 90 cm, it's one of the biggest rodents in the world.

IN OTHER WORDS



GARTH HOLT
CAMP MANAGER: PUNDA MARIA
36 YEARS IN KNP

ON RENOVATIONS: *We're busy with renovations. Some of the units already have new thatched roofs and bathrooms, with new showers and tiles. We want to retain the history of the place, but also make the units as comfortable as possible. One of the ablution blocks in the campsite has been spruced up; the tented camp is next. One tent (pictured left) has been completed and we've received great feedback. The rest of the tents should be done by December 2026. We're also planning to redo the Pafuri Border Camp – it's our newest camp, but already 10 years old!*

The biggest challenge for SANParks is that it's mainly a conservation organisation. Tourism is a source of income, but not all the funds are put back into tourism, as would be the case with a B&B outside the park, for example. People sometimes forget that conservation, especially anti-poaching efforts, costs millions of rands.

ON THE EARLY DAYS: *The park was primitive and pristine. Only six vehicles visited the park in 1926. You could camp wherever you pleased. The first visitors were advised to bring rifles to protect themselves. The original camps were set up around existing ranger posts and had military-style tents.*

ON THE OLD DAYS: *Communication used to be primitive, too. The manager in Skukuza would type a letter, put it in an envelope and send it to Punda with a vehicle on a Tuesday or a Friday. You'd receive the letter, write a reply and send it back to Skukuza. I worked in Punda before there were phones. The only phones were in Skukuza and Pretoriuskop, and at the Paul Kruger and Phalaborwa gates. We communicated by radio – all the bookings were recorded on a plotting sheet.*

I worked at the Pafuri gate when I was young. My mother would call the Phalaborwa gate and ask them to give me a message: 'Tell Garth we love him. And we miss him!' The entire Kruger would hear that message – you can imagine how they teased me!

I had a girlfriend in Cape Town at one stage. The closest tickey box was in Tshipise, 105 km from the Pafuri gate. I would drive all the way there to call her, only to find out she wasn't home!

ON VASCO UBISI: *At the Pafuri gate, I worked with an old game ranger called Vasco Ubisi. We managed to communicate using a mix of English, Afrikaans, Shangaan and hand gestures. When he was young, Vasco and one of his fellow rangers were charged by a buffalo. Despite his own injuries, he got on his bicycle and rode 14 km to the ranger post to get help for his colleague. He hurt his back in the attack and had many other injuries over the years, so he was placed on light duty at the gate. He was an excellent tracker and frequently helped the anti-poaching team. When Vasco was there, the poachers were often caught. He couldn't read or write, but he knew everything there was to know about the veld and the animals. If you walked in the bush with him, he could tell you which animals had recently come by, how many had passed, whether they were male or female and which direction they'd gone.*

ON SNAKES: *I had to learn how to catch snakes – out of necessity. Recently, someone called to say there was a snake in the ablution block. It was a German tourist on his second visit to the park and it was his first time seeing a snake. Guess what he saw? A black mamba! Where? In the shower – with him! The snake probably entered through the thatched roof, ended up on the ground and settled in the corner of the shower. I managed to catch and release it in the bush.*

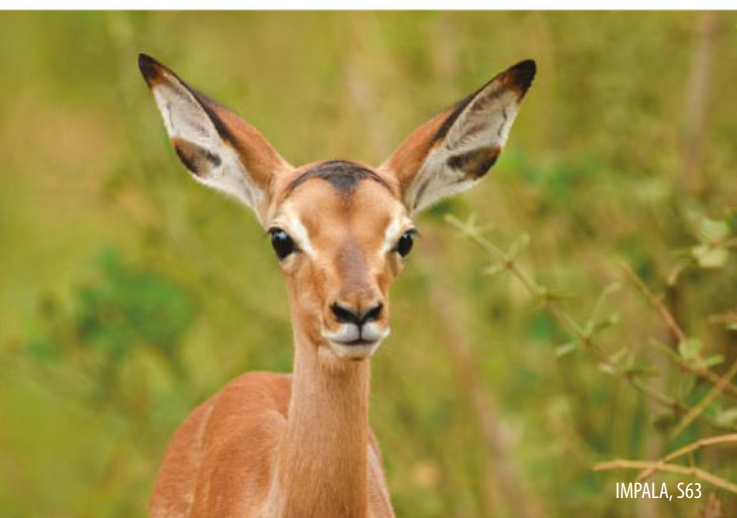


JON MINSTER

CROOKS' CORNER



BROWN-HOODED KINGFISHER, MAHONIE LOOP (S99)



IMPALA, S63

STAY HERE



PUNDA MARIA REST CAMP

The campsite is spacious, with stands next to the fence, shade trees and a swimming pool nearby. The most private stands are the two on the left as you enter the campsite. There are also two private stands on the western side of the campsite. If you want to see animals from your camping chair, choose a stand to the right of the hide – they overlook the waterhole.

Like at Shingwedzi, you can overnight in an original unit built in 1931. These renovated BG bungalows have whitewashed walls and low thatched roofs, held up by the original 90-year-old Lebombo ironwood poles. They're not very private, however, and the front row is right next to the road. They're also the only units in the park without their own braais – they share braai facilities across the road. There are four BD bungalows with their own kitchens, but if you want something more private then stay in one of two FU family bungalows past the reception office.

The seven fully equipped safari tents have the best location in the rest camp. They're on a hill in a quiet corner, with a bushveld view. Number 3 was recently renovated.

The fully equipped Russell Cottage is on a hill to the right as you enter the gate. It was once a police officer's house when there was a station here in the 1930s.

Camping from R402 for two people (no power), R116 per extra adult and R58 per child (no power). If you want power, it's R458 for two.

BG bungalow from R1 440 for two people. Safari tent from R1 674 for two people. BD bungalow from R1 786 for two people, plus R335 per extra adult and R167 per child (sleeps three). FU family bungalow from R4 186 for six people. Russell Cottage from R3 650 for four people.

Contact: ☎ 013 735 6873

PAFURI BORDER CAMP

This camp has views all the way to Mozambique! It was originally a recruitment station for TEBA (The Employment Bureau of Africa Ltd.) which regulated the movement of labourers from Mozambique and Zimbabwe to work on the mines of the Witwatersrand.

There are three self-catering houses – Doctor's House, Mockford Cottage and Mockford House – the latter two named after the last TEBA recruitment agent stationed here, Harold Mockford. He later became the first honorary ranger of the park.

The three houses are decorated in the style of the era, with Oregon pine furniture and cast-iron beds. They have big rooms and a communal swimming pool. There's no air conditioning, but it's a great overnight spot if you want to go birding next to the Luvuvhu River early in the morning.

Mockford Cottage R3 516 for four people (one en suite bedroom; two beds on the stoep). The cottage is wheelchair-friendly. Doctor's House R5 313 for six people. Mockford House R7 077 for eight people.

Contact: ☎ 013 735 6873 (Punda Maria)



PLAN B

NTHAKENI BUSH & RIVER CAMP

This camp is on the banks of the Mutale River, about 5 km from the Pafuri gate. It's incredibly well maintained and the walkways lead along the river and past giant baobabs. Be warned: You'll want to spend the entire day in camp instead of driving around!

There are two self-catering cottages, a tented camp with three safari tents, and a communal bathroom and kitchen, as well as several camping options, from a bush camp with a bucket shower to a campsite with a private kitchen, bathroom and river view.

The lodge offers great value for money. It might be outside the park, but it's only about 30 km from the Luvuvhu Bridge – closer to Pafuri than Punda Maria, which is about 50 km away.

Rates: Camping from R400 per night for two people, plus R125 per extra person (max eight per stand). Tented camp R1 950 per night for six people. Self-catering cottages from R1 300 per night for two people.

Contact: 📞 078 854 9218; 🌐 nthakeni.com

SLEEPOVER PUNDA MARIA GATE

This cheery spot about 5 km from the gate can't compete with the rest camp in the park, but it's a nice Plan B for a night or two if you can't make it to the gate in time, or if you couldn't get a booking in the Kruger. The price is also right. The en suite double rooms in shipping containers are a tight fit, but they're neat and modern, with air conditioning and a bar fridge. There's a restaurant and a garden. SleepOver has accommodation options outside many Kruger gates, including Paul Kruger, Malelane and Orpen – all in the same style.

Rate: From R880 per night for two people. There are also family rooms for two adults and two kids.

Contact: 📞 010 110 9900; 🌐 kruger.sleepover.travel



WILLEMEN JANSE VAN RENSBURG



PAFURI PICNIC SITE

JON MINSTER

IN OTHER WORDS



CAREL NKUNA

CAMP MANAGER: PAFURI BORDER CAMP

20 YEARS IN KNP

ON PAFURI BORDER CAMP: *About 40% of our guests come here to see birds. We have a spotted eagle-owl in camp – it's here for the bats. Look for the bat hawk, too, which flies around about half an hour before nightfall. Other specials include eastern nicator, shikra, and trumpeter hornbill. Sometimes there's a crowned eagle in the dead tree next to the swimming pool. Early in the morning, you can hear the nasal call of the broad-billed roller. We have two bird baths – one in front of the Doctor's House and one in front of Mockford Cottage. People have seen up to 40 species – just here!*

ON PAFURI SIGHTINGS: *Over the years, I've seen plenty of aardvarks in the area, also porcupines, honey badgers and genets. All the animals are here, you just don't see as many lions and leopards as you do in the south of the Kruger. Along the Luvuvhu River, you get lots of crocodiles and hippos. You get special birds at Crooks' Corner – it's worth sitting there for a while. I've seen lesser flamingo, black-throated wattle-eye, white-fronted plover, greater painted-snipe, collared palm-thrush, mottled spinetail and Böhm's spinetail. I've also seen three-banded courser on the S63 between the border camp and the border post, and towards the Pafuri picnic site.*



Tshokwane picnic site is a popular place to pause in the park. There's often such a crowd of people that you forget you're surrounded by wild animals.

One morning, while we were eating pies, this cheeky hyena came walking by. We immediately gave it space. It sniffed around the gas braais and then walked over to the sink to drink from the leaking tap. It looked like it was washing the dishes!

PICTURE **THINUS VAN STADEN**

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