

# MAZEPPA MAGIC

**A three-day, 4x4 trail is offered in the Mazeppa Bay region of the southern Transkei by Peter Kruger of Mazeppa 4x4 Trails. With Mazeppa Bay Hotel as our base, we went exploring.**

I stared into the limpid pools but all I could see was myself reflected in the tea coloured water. No cows, no Xhosa people, nothing. We were parked at Nongqwase's Pools, the site where the famous Xhosa prophetess, Nongqwase, just a girl at the time, had her vision in the water that was to change the future of the Xhosa nation. It was during the early 1800's and the settlers were moving up from the Cape trying to find suitable land for their farms. They had come into contact with the Xhosa nation who, fleeing the Zulus, had formed a colony north of the Kei River. Nongqwase had gone to the pools to draw water when she saw in the reflections, what she believed to be images of the salvation of the Xhosa people. She interpreted it that if all the Xhosa people killed their cattle the English would be swept out into the sea and perish, leaving the Xhosa nation in peace. So caught up by this notion were the Xhosa's that they followed her instructions and slaughtered their cattle to the last cow. In so doing they faced terrible starvation and were easily overcome by the English settlers, so spelling their decline as a strong nation. The spot was beautiful and quiet except for birdsong and it was difficult to imagine how the mistaken notions of a young girl could have so changed the history of a nation in this tranquil setting.

This is just one of the fascinating stories that Peter Kruger, 4x4 enthusiast and Mitsubishi instructor, raconteur and trail leader will tell you on the Mazeppa 4x4 Trail. Passionate about environmental ethics, he maintains his trails in tip-top condition. If you listen closely to his experienced instructions you will not damage your vehicle on these trails, although without due caution, it would be an easy thing to do as the going is tough in spots. When booking the trail he enquired about the vehicle I would be driving and if I had proper offroad tyres fitted, something not many operators even bother to ask you. He is also a registered tour operator and has first aid training should anything go wrong in this remote area. He carries all recovery gear as well as a puncture repair kit. Quads are provided for those wishing to drive them (but please bring your own fuel as there is none at Mazeppa) and Rhinos and Rangers are encouraged on the trail. The minimum number of vehicles he prefers to take is five, due to fuel costs, and all vehicles must have low range, diff-lock and high clearance – no all terrain vehicles on this trail – and strictly no alcohol.

Peter, apart from his deep respect of the environment also respects the local people and their culture and refuses to hand out sweets to the children that beg from the side of the road. He is also aware that his trails lead through tribal land and respect for the local people should be shown as you are literally driving in someone's back yard. His vehicle is a well-known sight and he often stops for a brief chat with a local tribesman. One of his pet projects is an old Xhosa woman whose daughters have all died of Aids, leaving her with seven orphans to look after on a government pension. For a small fee she allows him to visit her and her grandchildren with his guests and enter her home. Her face painted with ochre she grasped both our hands in hers to show we were welcome. Her simple hut and her grace at receiving us was humbling and we waved goodbye to her tiny, bent figure as we drove off.

Peter's trails starts at the Kei River Ferry and we were fortunate enough to see a vehicle being loaded onto it and ferried across to the other side. It doesn't come cheap however, and costs R45,00 to cross and a further R45,00 if you are towing a trailer. It's a monopoly as this is the only ferry on the river and the guy in charge works when he feels like it, often leaving visitors stranded for the best part of a day while he is off on a beer drink.

Another point of interest that Peter will take you to along this trail is the wreck of the Jacaranda. Situated on a stunning stretch of rocky beach the rusting hulk lies at an angle, battered by the waves and surf. The wreck occurred in 1972 and the story goes that the captain took on a lady of the night at Durban. The crew got to hear of it and wanted a piece of the fun and a fight broke out. During the ensuing scuffle someone was stabbed and it became imperative to get him to hospital. The crew must have been pretty inebriated as they saw the lights of a cottage on the shoreline and took it for East London, driving the ship hard up onto

the rocks. No one was killed and they all scrambled onto the shore and safety. What happened to the errant woman, or captain, for that matter, is anyone's guess!

There was evidence of tracks on the beach and Peter shook his head in disgust. There are many routes leading down to the wreck, which are badly degraded due to irresponsible offroad drivers that are not within Peter's control as the wreck is open to the general public. Out at sea a whale spouted a plume of salt water, and the sardine run was passing with its attendant flocks of cormorants and gannets. Schools of dolphins sported in the surf, their streamlined bodies glistening silver. It was fascinating to discover ancient strandloper shell middens situated near the wreck and one could only wonder at the quantity of seafood they must have consumed and the amount of time it had taken for them to build up to the height of several metres.

The trail wound along the windswept coastline, the sea spray forming a mist that drifted inland up the mouths of the many rivers in the area. We passed the Qolora River, which comes out at Trennery's and Seagulls Hotels. Trevor's Trails will take you up this tidal river in a small boat to enjoy lunch at a cliff face inhabited by kestrels where the river is constricted by rocks. We paused to enjoy the view as the kestrels spun overhead, their twittering calls echoing off the cliffs. The trail then wound inland and we stopped at a view site overlooking the Kobonqaba River, all set about with spiny euphorbias. These tidal rivers are effected by the sea for up to two kilometres inland. After a bumpy ride over an old mealie patch we stopped for lunch overlooking the Cebe River, our lunch pack provided by the Mazeppa Bay Hotel. Mobile camping trips can be arranged through the hotel for those wishing to spend nights out in the wilderness, but are restricted to a minimum of ten vehicles. Vernon Acton from the hotel has a back-up Samel that carries water tanks and big eating tents. It comes with a full bar service and is truly a hotel away from home.

We were disturbed to learn during the trip that it was rumoured that clandestine preparations for titanium mining in the area were afoot. Roads and railway lines were being upgraded and sand mining was already taking place. We had always thought that the titanium mining debacle was situated further north near Makambati Nature Reserve, not as far south as Mazeppa. If this takes place it will spell the end to environmental tourism in the area, and although it will provide jobs for a few local people, the magnitude of the long-term destruction will be immeasurable.

Peter turned the vehicle back to Mazeppa as it was late in the afternoon. But first he took us to Boiling Pot, a spot on the shore where the waves have formed a tunnel in the rocks and rush in to crash in great plumes of spray. He told us of a local woman that fell into all this turbulence and couldn't get out. All he had with him was a fishing gaff, so he gaffed her and pulled her ashore. Although she had a huge hole in her shoulder she was very grateful to Peter and he took her off to hospital to be stitched up. This place is very popular with fishermen as the water is deep and record size linefish have been caught here. Boiling Pot is also the area in which the rare *Euphorbia woodii* grows. A small cactus like plant that hugs the ground and has tiny yellow flowers growing from its writhing, tentacle like innards.

It was with some relief that we returned to Mazeppa Bay Hotel as it had been a long and exciting day and we were both looking forward to a cold frosty at the end of it. The hotel was originally built by Peter's father, many years ago, and we were staying in the original wattle and daub section of the building. The rooms were large and airy and we were lulled to sleep at night by the sound of the waves. It is now ably run by Vernon and Sandy Acton, who make everyone feel at home. A haven for hikers, the hotel boasts two bars, the upstairs one with a deck overlooking the bay, a TV room so you need never miss a sports match, and a billiard table and dart board in the downstairs bar. The hotel is family orientated and most people walk around barefoot. The rooms overlook lush gardens and the staff are very friendly. Caroline the waitress was most concerned because my friend didn't eat meat and Sandy organised special dishes for vegetarians. We immediately made friends with Priscilla the bar lady who takes no nonsense from either Vernon or Peter! Vernon has a good rapport with the local people and has provided them with cattle dip, built them a church and supplies potato seed for the people in the area to cultivate for him, and then buys the potatoes back for consumption at the hotel. As it is on the main hiking route along the coastline of the Transkei, the hotel is always busy and can accommodate 150 people in season. Every morning groups of hikers would congregate outside the dining room, their packs lined up for the local porters to collect. We thought this was cheating, and although slackpacking provides jobs for the local people, we felt that you

can't really call it hiking if you don't carry your own pack! I'm a firm believer that if you can't drive to a place it's not worth seeing!

We watched the moon slide up over the horizon like a big ball of orange cheese and sipped on our Irish coffees. The next morning we were up before daybreak to photograph the sunrise on the beach in front of the hotel. The sky was pastel pink and the waves reflected mauve and indigo. The sun suddenly tipped the horizon and the scene was flooded with scarlet and gold. We made our way up to the restaurant for breakfast. Peter had promised us a day of serious Grade 5 4x4ing and we didn't want to be late.

The area Peter had in mind was the Qaqa River gorge, a tumble of jagged boulders, terrifying gradients and serious roll-over points. As we descended into the gorge it grew hotter and the countryside more rugged. Along the way we were lucky enough to encounter a scene from the past. Two teams of sweating oxen were pulling sleds of tree poles for roofing along the trail. The youths had stopped as the chain holding the poles together had broken, and were busy repairing it. We stopped, the route blocked by their progress. Eventually they whipped the oxen into gear and took off across the Qaqa River. This was a rarely seen occurrence and we had been fortunate enough to witness this traditional manner of transport. We could only respect their fortitude and stamina as the route was precipitous in the extreme. Peter drove us out of the gorge to a view point overlooking the surrounding countryside. It was devoid of all signs of life but we could still hear the whistles and cracking of whips as the little party made its way up the steep slope behind us. The route looked impassable, with a great boulder halfway up that seemed to block the path. Peter edged his vehicle past it at a snails pace, careful not to roll the vehicle on the steep side slope. It was real adrenalin junkie stuff and you could see that Peter was loving every minute of it.

Our last port of call on the Mazeppa 4x4 Trail was the Manubi Forest. Part eucalyptus plantation and part indigenous forest, this area covers twenty kilometres in radius. After getting the ranger in charge to open the gate for us we drove into a magical wonderland of twisting vines, towering yellowwoods and flickering shadows. All around us birdcalls echoed amongst the trees and small animals scuttled off into the undergrowth. Although traditional dog hunting occurs here the forest still supports a leopard or two, blue duiker, bushpig, bushbuck, duiker and samango monkey. The birdlife is prolific with populations of Cape parrot, Knysna lourie and narina trogon frequently seen. Unfortunately part of the trail is blocked by a giant yellowwood that had fallen across the road, its dying bark home to several different species of fungus. There is an ongoing battle with lantana and bugweed, but the bulk of the forest is untouched by alien invaders. We could have spent many happy hours here birdwatching and just absorbing the forest's mighty spirit, but it was the end of the road for us and time to return to Durban.

I had never been to the Transkei before and had been told of all the stunning beaches and stretches of untouched coastline, but nothing had prepared me for the great beauty and wonderful friendliness of its people. There is so much more to the area than just the coast. The rolling grassland and rugged gorges etched out through millennia by curling rivers; its fascinating plantlife and birds; the hospitality that had been shown us all combined to make it a trip of a lifetime, and one I would advise you to make before it's too late. It's just on your doorstep and you don't even have to leave the country to experience the true spirit of wilderness.

## **VISITOR'S INFORMATION**

### **HOW TO GET THERE**

From Durban, Johannesburg or Cape Town head for the N2 to Mthatha. Just outside of Butterworth is a signboard to Mazeppa, which becomes good gravel. The road becomes a bit confusing as it branches without signposts several times, but keep to the most used road and you will eventually reach Mazeppa Bay Hotel.

### **WHAT IT COSTS**

Rates vary according to the type of trail you wish to do. We did a full three day trail in a day and a half but that was because we were a single vehicle travelling on our own and Peter is such an experienced driver. Most parties take much longer to complete the trail as drivers have to be guided through obstacles one at a time. Most two day trails cost R1 600,00 including all meals and accommodation at Mazeppa Bay Hotel. It

is best to make up a party of about five vehicles to make it viable. Accommodation at the Mazeppa Bay Hotel is R365,00 per day per person per day and includes all meals. Enquire about midweek specials.

#### **CONTACT**

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#### **CAPTIONS:**

1. Lunchtime overlooking the Cebe River
2. The rare *Euphorbia woodii* is found only near the Boiling Pot
3. A grey heron on the beach
4. The Xhosa grandmother we visited welcomed us into her humble home
5. We waved goodbye to the Xhosa grandmother whose hut we had visited
6. Many strandloppers middens may be seen along the coastline
7. The wreck of the Jacaranda
8. The wreck of the Jacaranda
9. The wreck of the Jacaranda
10. The typical rocky coastline of the Transkei is excellent for fishing
11. Second River estuary
12. The lounge and upstairs bar of the Mazeppa Bay Hotel
13. The rooms at Mazeppa Bay Hotel overlook tropical gardens
14. The original wattle and daub rooms of the Hotel
15. The whole of the hotel is under thatch – this is the upstairs bar lookout deck
16. The rooms have enormous double beds and ceiling fans
17. The rooms have enormous double beds and ceiling fans
18. The whole of the hotel is under thatch – this is the upstairs bar lookout deck
19. Mazeppa Bay
20. The Grade 5 route up from the Qaqa River
21. Some of the tracks are very rocky and require low range
22. Typical Transkei coastline scenery
23. The traditional Xhosa sled drawn by oxen is a rare sight these days
24. The viewpoint at the Kobonqaba River is set about with Euporbias
25. Boiling Pot is a fisherman's heaven
26. There are many river crossings on the trail
27. Sunrise at Mazeppa Bay
28. Sunrise at Mazeppa Bay
29. Sunrise at Mazeppa Bay
30. A vehicle crosses the Kei River by ferry
31. A vehicle crosses the Kei River by ferry
32. Second River estuary
33. Nongqwase's Pools
34. Birdwatching in the Manubi Forest
35. The Qolora River up which boat trips are undertaken from Trennery's