

THE MAGIC OF MAPUTALAND

Stretching from St Lucia village in the south to the Mozambique border in South Africa's far-flung northern KwaZulu-Natal province, Maputaland offers the visitor glimpses into the traditional lifestyles of the Tonga people. As part of The Greater St Lucia Wetland Park this region enjoys the protection of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife – the local conservation body.

The water was cool to the touch and refreshing after the sweltering drive from Durban. We slipped below the surface and were immediately transported into another world. Tiny angelfish decked out with zebra stripes flickered too and fro. Other species sporting gold, orange and electric blue skimmed just beneath our masks and on the bottom among the rocks, a deadly stonefish lurked. We were snorkelling at 'The Aquarium', situated at the mouth of the Kosi Bay estuary and so named because of its wide variety of fish species. The visibility was excellent and if one waded up the channel it was possible to float down towards the sea with the strong current.

As we drove back to our lodge for the night we passed first lake, Lake Makawulani. The Kosi Lake system is made up of four lakes: Lake Amanzamnyama which is not open to the public; third lake, Lake Nhlangwe on which the campsite is situated; second lake, Lake Mpungwini; and first lake, Lake Makawulani, site of the fascinating fish kraals. Second and third lakes, are connected by a narrow channel where hippos sometimes lurk in the reedbeds, so extreme caution must be taken when navigating these narrows. They spend most of their time in pods in the water during the day and come out at night to feed on the grasses surrounding the lakes. The most dangerous time to navigate this area is at dusk and dawn when they are moving to and from their grazing grounds. The colour of the water in third lake is a deep tea tone due to the various streams that drain into the lake being discoloured by decaying plant matter from the swamp forests. Kosi Bay also boasts substantial mangrove forests and is the only location in the country where all six mangrove tree species are found. As one nears second lake the water becomes much clearer, while the water of first lake is crystal clear. It is preferable to have your own boat if you intend fishing or exploring the lake system, as there are none for hire. Fishing is only allowed from the shore of Lake Nhlangwe and most angling takes place from boats. Record size kingfish have been caught on a number of occasions. Flyfishing is catching on in a big way and 'tag and release' is encouraged.

At Lake Makawulani there is a sharp turning to the right that heads up the side of a vegetated dune. This enables you an uninterrupted view over the crystal waters of the lake, crisscrossed with the ubiquitous fish kraals that the locals are so dependent on for sustenance. There has been much debate over the sustainability of these kraals as more and more have been constructed in recent times as the population has increased. These kraals are built in a way that guides fish into a small enclosure, the poles of which are wide enough to allow small fish to swim through, while trapping the larger ones. This subsistence fishing system has been passed down from father to son for generations and is certainly very photogenic with the clear blue waters of the sea in the background.

The camp at Kosi is situated on third lake, Lake Nhlangwe, and due to the presence of hippos and crocs swimming in its waters is not permitted. This is the spot where boats are launched for fishing trips on the lake system and although Kosi is predominantly an anglers' paradise, there are plenty of other things to do. Trained community trail guides will take you on guided walks around the lake system and enable the visitor to learn more about the local fishing methods; bird watching is excellent (Pel's fishing owls are resident in the more remote areas of the lake system and palmnut vultures are frequently seen on the beach); and if you want to travel to nearby Bhanga Nek and Black Rock, permits are available at the camp office. All roads in the area are deep sand tracks and an offroad vehicle is essential even to get to Kosi Bay Camp from the main road.

We decided on a trip to Black Rock. The surrounding countryside is coastal grassland interspersed with patches of dune, swamp and coastal forest, while as one leaves Kosi Bay, one passes one of the largest stands of naturally occurring raphia palms in South Africa. Unfortunately much of this has been cleared for

agriculture, but once into the protected area you are back in unspoilt Africa. Nearby Bhanga Nek is famous for its turtles and turtle viewing tours at night can be organised during the summer months from the camp office using local tour guides. Research on turtle numbers and nest sites, is being carried out by KZN Wildlife, incorporating the knowledge and resources of the local population. Loggerhead and leatherback turtles have returned here, their natal breeding sites, for centuries, and it is an awe inspiring sight to watch these gentle giants heaving their great weight up the beach to excavate their nest sites, tears of mucous streaming from their eyes. After a month or so the babies erupt from the sand and make their hazardous way down to the water's edge, often falling prey to the waiting ghost crabs and other predators.

There are many community initiatives in the area, from small tourist campsites and lodges to mussel harvesting projects. Not all of these are sustainable however and slash-and-burn is still a major problem in the swamp forests.

The road to Black Rock is made up of a series of forking sand tracks and needs sound navigation skills to find. But once there, the views are breathtaking from the highest vegetated dunes in the world. This spot is ideal for picnicking and snorkelling and due to its remote location you will find you are probably the only people on the beach. Many years ago a hippo was sighted, disporting itself in the bay. One can only wonder where it came from and what it was doing in the salt water!

From Black Rock it is possible to drive all the way to Lake Sibaya – the largest natural fresh water lake in Southern Africa. With a surface area of 77 cubic kilometres and an average depth of 13 metres, the lake was previously connected to the sea. With the closure of the estuary, numerous marine invertebrates and vertebrates are found here and because of this phenomenon, the lake is also host to several endemic fish species found nowhere else in the world. Also home to several pods of rather aggressive hippos the plush camp at Sibaya is sited on the floodplain of the lake and commands breathtaking views across the crystal waters. It is possible to book a dhow trip across the lake and birdwatching and turtle tours are also conducted from here. The grasslands surrounding the lake are made up of ncema grass, used by the local people for thatching and weaving grass mats and baskets. You will often see the brightly dressed women collecting huge bundles of it and transporting it on their heads.

From Lake Sibaya it is a short drive to Sodwana Bay, the world-renowned diving and fishing spot. There are many reefs around Sodwana and local dive operators offer a wide range of diving opportunities. Inflatables are launched from the beach and after a short but usually bumpy ride out to one of the reefs it is time for some underwater magic. There are rays, turtles, moray eels, ragged toothed sharks, potato bass and a multitude of shimmering reef fish to admire. If you are extremely lucky you may even catch a glimpse of a coeleacanth on one of the deeper dives. Dubbed “Old Four Legs” due to its four large fins, this dinosaur of the fish world has been spotted several times in recent years and a research programme into its numbers is ongoing in the area.

Unfortunately Sodwana becomes very crowded during the holidays so it is best to book out of peak season. But Sodwana is not just about fishing and diving. A drive into the nearby Ozabeni Reserve with its coastal grasslands and host of birdlife is worth the effort. Montagu's and pallid harrier have been spotted here as have pink-throated longclaw, blackwinged plover, Ntal nightjar, red-winged pratincole and marsh owl. Turtle watching tours at night during their nesting season is also popular and the region boasts several endemic mammal species such as the Tongaland red squirrel and the samango monkey, both of which are readily seen from the KZN Wildlife chalets during the day. Other mammals that are frequently spotted in Ozabeni are common reedbeek, waterbuck, nyala, red duiker, suni, leopard, serval and side-striped jackal.

A must if you are a birdwatcher, is a visit to the nearby Muzi Swamps. Alive with waterfowl of all descriptions, this water-lily clad stretch of swamp will have you twitching for hours. It is best to enquire about obtaining a local guide from Sodwana, as it is difficult to find and an offroad vehicle is essential as the area floods during the wet season.

Travelling further south we came to Lake St Lucia with its plethora of accommodation options. This area has not been declared a World Heritage Site for nothing and a wide variety of activities are available; from fishing, to birdwatching, hiking and snorkelling. A number of rivers flow into the lake system and it is

sometimes open to the sea via a narrow channel. In recent years the mouth has silted up and combined with a long drought, the salinity of the lake increased to four times that of the sea. The wildlife was put under severe stress and plans were afoot to breach the mouth, but recent good rains have restored the lake to its normal levels and it has become the paradise that it always was.

This region is now a Big Four reserve with buffalo, elephant, black and white rhino, wild dog and leopard present on its eastern and western shores. The pristine lake boasts high concentrations of hippo and crocs and in the north, great flocks of flamingos and pelicans may be seen. Boat trips up the lake are recommended from St Lucia Village and knowledgeable local guides will give you an insight into the natural history of the area as you sip your gin and tonic. There is also a croc farm with some true giants on the road to Cape Vidal, up the eastern shore of the lake, which is well worth a visit as it has an excellent education centre.

If you want to experience the magic of Maputaland to its fullest, it is advisable to spend at least a week in the area, as there is so much to see and do.

VISITOR'S INFORMATION

It is possible to visit Lake St Lucia in a sedan car, but the more northerly sections of Maputaland definitely require an offroad vehicle, which can be hired in Durban. There is a wide variety of accommodation options available to suit all pockets, from backpackers to luxury lodges. Contact Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Tel: +27 33 8451000 or visit their website: www.kznwildlife.com, or Thonga Beach Lodge and Kosi Forest Lodge, Tel: +27 35 4747100 or visit their website: www.isibindiafrica.co.za, or Elephant Coast Booking Service, Tel: +27 35 5620353/0966 or visit their website: www.elephantcoastbookings.co.za. Maputaland is in a high risk malaria area so consult your doctor prior to visiting. The best time to visit is November to February as this is when the turtles are nesting and most of the migratory birds have reached the area. It will be hot and extremely humid but the visibility for diving is good and although this is the rainy season the roads are soft sand and so will become compacted and easier to negotiate. Dive courses are available at Sodwana and snorkelling is a must at a variety of spots along the coast, so bring a mask and flippers. Maputaland is a fairly remote location so respect the local people's customs. Remember not to drive at night as livestock and other animals are often found on the roads. This is a very poor area, and crime has become a problem in recent years so do not leave valuables in the car and beware of hi-jacking in the more populated areas of Kwangwanase and Manguzi. If you feel at all insecure about driving around this area on your own, enquire at the place you are staying to hire the services of a local guide. There are many qualified and friendly guides that will give you an insight into Maputaland that you will never forget. They also know the condition of the roads and need your support. The Tonga people of the area speak Zulu and if you try a little of their language it will go a long way in good relations.

GREETINGS IN ZULU:

Sawubona (Sa-boh-na) – Hello

Kunjane (Kun-jah-knee) – How are you?

Saphile (Sa-pee-leh) – I am well

Siyabonga (See-ya-bonga) – Thank you

Hamba Kahle (Ham-bah-gahsh-leh)– Go well/Goodbye

Sala Kahle (Sa-lah-gahsh-leh) – Stay well

LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. The local Tonga people gather the midribs of the wild date palms to make their fish traps.
2. The fish kraals of the Tonga people are constructed to let out the smaller fish whilst retaining the large ones.
3. Sunset over First Lake complete with fish kraals.
4. The fish kraals are handed down from father to son according to local tradition.
5. The local Tonga people brave hippos and crocs to inspect their catch each day.
6. A traditional Tonga village is not seen very often anymore.
7. The exterior of the KZN Wildlife lodges at Kosi Bay.
8. The mouth at Kosi Bay. Snorkelling is excellent here due to an estuarine reef.

9. It is necessary to have an off-road vehicle to visit the mouth at Kosi.
10. Snorkelling is popular all along the Maputaland coast.
11. The aptly named 'crane flower', *Strelizia nicholai*.
12. In an ongoing turtle research programme KZN Wildlife, assisted by the local communities monitor baby turtles, which are notched for future identification.
13. The launch site at Kosi Bay.
14. A boat is the best means of transport to explore the Kosi Lake system.
15. Waterlilies are abundant on all the Maputaland lakes.
16. *Raphia* palms are the preferred habitat of the palmnut vulture that feed almost exclusively off the fruit.
17. Maputaland is made up extensively of rolling coastal grassland.
18. A storm brews over some waterberry trees in the coastal grassland.
19. Boat trips on Lake Sibaya are very popular amongst birdwatchers.
20. *Ncema* grass growing around the shores of Lake Sibaya, are used for weaving and thatching.
21. Black Rock is a remote and very beautiful beach along the shores of Maputaland. If you can find it you will probably be the only people there.
22. The dunes of Maputaland are the highest vegetated dunes in the world and act as a sponge, releasing fresh water back into the inland lake systems.
23. The grasslands of Maputaland offer habitat to a wide variety of endemic plant species such as this cycad species.
24. The attractive flowers of the powder-puff tree, which grows in swamp forest throughout Maputaland.
25. The rare palmnut vulture is sometimes seen away from its *raphia* palm hangouts, on the beach scavenging debris brought in by the surf.
26. The northern reaches of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park are park of Maputaland.
27. The beaches of Cape Vidal are a fisherman's delight, but you might just as well see a family of elephants taking a stroll.
28. The endangered samango monkey is endemic to Maputaland.
29. Typical chalet accommodation at St Lucia.
30. The log cabins at Sodwana Bay are set amongst lush coastal forest and are a haven for birdwatchers.
31. Some local Tonga children – the area has the highest unemployment rate in the whole of South Africa.
32. A dive boat is launched at Sodwana Bay. This area offers some of the most breath taking diving in the world.