

THREE STARS IN THE BUSH

Set on the borders of Mozambique and Swaziland, KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa boasts three truly magical reserves. All different in their own way, each one will enthral the visitor with its pristine beauty and unique ecosystems.

First jewel in the crown of this northern safari route is the Tembe Elephant Park. Situated 172km from Jozini on the road to Kwangwanase and the Mozambique border, this 30 000 ha forgotten corner of northern KwaZulu-Natal was originally proclaimed to protect the last remaining patch of indigenous sand forest and its attendant wildlife. Home to over 250 elephants, many still bearing poachers bullets from the 30 year long Mozambican civil war, this park is not for the faint-hearted. The roads, or shall I say tracks, are thick sand and very narrow, negotiable only by offroad vehicle and not the place to be when confronted by an angry bull elephant.

At the entrance one is presented with a much-photostatted map that runs off the page. One can only presume, as in ancient times, 'Here be Dragons!' As one enters the reserve there are endearing signs warning the public that dung beetles have right of way. In places the dense sand forest closes in a canopy above the road and lichens drape the trees. Its position within the transition between tropical and subtropical forms ensures great diversity of vegetation species. There are two hides in the reserve and it is possible to spend many happy hours observing the comings and goings of the game. The first hide, Mahlasela, is a seasonal pan and if the pump is working water is sometimes pumped into it, attracting a large variety of wildlife such as giraffe, white and black rhino, impala, wildebeest, waterbuck, nyala, reedbuck, eland, zebra, kudu and of course the ubiquitous elephants. Twelve lions have been recently introduced into the reserve and are sighted regularly from the two hides. Sometimes after good rains, the area floods and I have seen elephants bathing and snorkelling in the brown water. This is truly an amazing sight and well worth enduring the high humidity and temperatures of a Zululand summer.

If there has not been too much rain one can drive along the edge of the Muzi Swamps. A mini Okavango delta, swathes of papyrus and submerged grassland dotted with illala palms, the fruit of which are very popular with elephants who peel off the nutritious outer skin and pith and swallow the pips whole, encouraging germination of the species in its pile of fertile dung. The Muzi Swamps are the favourite hangout of buffalo and herds may be seen in the early morning and late afternoon as they come down to wallow in the mud pools.

The other hide, known as Ponweni, is situated on a favourite crossing point for elephant across the Muzi Swamps. Hidden in a grove of trees the hide is the ideal lookout-point for birdwatching as many species such as rufous-bellied heron, wattled plover, saddle-billed stork and even the rare blue-throated sunbird have been seen here. There is also a resident pod of hippos and some very large crocs in the vicinity of the reedbeds. There are many flowering bushes around the hide, which attract numerous multicoloured butterflies, several of which are endemic to the reserve.

The rest of Tembe encompasses savanna woodland and open grassland and four viewpoints are situated at some of the pans throughout the park. There are also two picnic sites and a viewing tower, which commands spectacular vistas across the area. When we were there, we arrived just as the sun was peeking over the horizon and a light mist cloaked the forests. Golden-orb spiders webs were draped from every tree and backlit by the rising sun, shone burnished copper, bespangled with silver dewdrops in the morning light.

In order for visitors to experience the dry sand forest habitat with its secretive fauna and unique vegetation on foot, a small area has been fenced to exclude large, potentially dangerous animals. A luxury, tented bushcamp is the only accommodation available in the reserve, but day visitors are welcome, although limited to five vehicles per day to preserve the pristine nature of Tembe.

Situated some 80km from Jozini and 60km west of Tembe Elephant Park, lies the world-famous Ndumo Game Reserve. A small reserve, just 10 117ha in extent, this park boasts the largest recorded bird list per hectare in the country with an overall list of nearly 600. Many tropical species occur here at the southernmost limit of their range, these include broad-billed roller, southern-banded snake eagle, and woodland kingfisher. There are many pans and floodplains dotted about the reserve while the Usuthu River makes up the border with Mozambique. These pans attract a multitude of aquatic birds and species to be seen include black and slaty egrets, (the former makes a canopy of shade with its wings over the water to attract fish), pygmy geese, lesser jacanas, American purple gallinules and a plethora of herons and ducks. Fish eagles are common and their strident calls ring out over the water – truly the sound of Africa. There are bird-viewing hides situated at most of the pans and many happy hours can be spent enjoying the birdlife.

Several guided walks are available from the main camp and Shokwe Pan in the west, and highlights of these are the opportunity of spotting Pel's fishing owl (a great ginger giant of an owl that spends most of its time during the day in large trees that overhang the Phongolo River), African finfoot, African broadbill and palmnut vultures that frequent the vulture restaurant.

Game viewing is also rewarding and a large network of roads has been laid out to take in most of the vegetation types of Ndumo. Animal species that occur here include hippo, nyala, bushbuck, impala, grey and red duiker, black and white rhino, giraffe and suni. If you are lucky you may also see buffalo in the more swampy areas of the park. The large population of crocodiles is a particular feature of Ndumo. Of interest in the area is the 'Fonya' drive. When the Usuthu River comes down in flood hordes of local people disregard the crocs and wade into the river, conical fish traps in hand to make the most of the catfish migration. Although this occurs outside the reserve enquire at the camp office about when it will take place.

Guided game drives are popular and take in parts of the park inaccessible to visitors in their own vehicles, such as Banzi and Nyamithi Pans; the former with its huge beds of papyrus and the latter all set about with glowing, sulphuric fever trees. There are also two picnic spots where you can relax and enjoy a barbeque. We recommend the one at Red Cliffs as it has a commanding view over the Usuthu River and one can see tiny villages on the opposite bank, which is Mozambique. For the more adventurous there is the Mtikini Track, only accessible to offroad vehicles and totally submerged in the wet season. It takes you through the riverine vegetation and floodplain of the Usuthu River and is a very scenic drive. There is also a viewing tower near the entrance gate that affords stunning vistas over the pans and river systems of Ndumo. A panoramic photograph in the roof points out all the landmarks.

The accommodation at Ndumo is comfortable without any fussy extras. The seven 2-bedded chalets are all air-conditioned and have a small kitchenette with utensils, crockery, a fridge and microwave. The units are self-catering, but if the whole camp is booked out the services of a chef are provided. Toilets and showers are in a separate ablution block. There is also a small campsite comprising eight shaded sites each equipped with electricity points and barbeque facilities. There is a swimming pool and small curio shop that sells cooldrinks and beer.

The third jewel in the crown is the Ithala Game Reserve, some 223km west of Ndumo on the road to Vryheid and near the Swaziland border. Situated on the halfway mark between Johannesburg and Durban this reserve makes the ideal stopover point to break your journey between these two points. But it is a great destination when combined with a trip to Tembe and Ndumo as the topography is so totally different. Proclaimed in 1972 and just under 30 000 ha in extent, the reserve underwent an extensive restocking programme. It was former farmland – ploughed contours can still be seen in some areas – and with the exception of lion, it is now a Big Four reserve. Cheetah are soon to be introduced as soon as the electric fencing is completed, and a pack of free-roaming African wild dog sometimes make an appearance in the reserve. The usual antelope species are all present, eland, impala, tsessebe, red hartebeest, zebra and wildebeest. The ubiquitous giraffe is synonymous with Ithala and forms part of the reserve's logo. They are to be found everywhere and are quite confiding, making for excellent photo opportunities. The reserve now boasts ninety-eight elephant, which are mainly seen on the Dakaneni Loop road near the Phongolo River during the summer months, where it is cooler and they can bathe in the river. Both black and white rhino are frequently seen and the rolling grassland makes photography of these behemoths most rewarding.

The birdlife is prolific with over 320 species recorded. Raptors are especially in evidence and the cliffs around the main camp, Ntshondwe, echo with the screams of black eagles stooping on their hyrax prey. Other species to be seen include jackal buzzard, steppe buzzard, bald ibis, bathawk, martial eagle, brown-necked parrot, Cape eagle-owl, and Cape and lappet-faced vultures. The many vleis are home to red-chested and buff-spotted flufftails as well as a wealth of the more common waterbirds.

Ithala Game Reserve is also a botanists' paradise and includes three major veld types – lowveld, tall grassveld and mountain sourveld. In addition other habitats such as cliff-faces, rivers and streams, granite boulder outcrops and narrow valleys provide places for a great variety of plants. In summer the grasslands glow with the scarlet of red-hot poker, the bright pink of the gifbol and watsonias and many daisy species shine golden in the brilliant light. Winter is the time of the aloes, crimson spears that march up the hillsides and the orange-red bauhinias that create masses of colour around Ntshondwe Camp.

For the adrenalin junkies there is a five-hour offroad route, the Bivane Trail, which takes the visitor through some boulder-strewn passes and across stony riverbeds. The track is steep and definitely for experienced drivers only and for vehicles with low range and high clearance. In places it has an uncomfortable drop of some 300 metres into the valley below. The route was once an old ox wagon track and one can only wonder at the guts those old Afrikaners and their oxen had, as they heaved and sweated their teams up those precipitous slopes and down to the Phongolo River. There is a picnic site at the bottom of the Bivane River where one can splash in the rock pools under the shade of a spreading Cape ash.

Accommodation in Ithala is varied. From the intimate Doornkraal campground situated on the banks of the Thalu River with cold water ablutions and a flush toilet, to three rustic bush camps; Thalu which accommodates four people; Mbizo suitable for eight; and Mhlangeni, which accommodates ten people in five two-bedded units. All the bush camps are fully equipped and a field ranger is available to take guests on bush walks. Visitors should bring all their own food and beverages and insect repellent. Torches are a must. These bush camps are ideal for small parties wishing to enjoy the privacy of a unique bush experience and are not fenced.

Ntshondwe camp has accommodation for 172 visitors in thirty-nine self-catering thatched chalets located in a stunning setting on the side of the Ntshondwe escarpment amongst towering boulders and has a spectacular view across the reserve. Hyraxes are the diurnal visitors while porcupines, bushbabies and genets are frequently seen moving about the chalets at night. Each chalet is fully equipped with crockery, fridge and stove and visitors can either choose to cook for themselves or eat at the restaurant, coffee shop or bar. Meals can be enjoyed on the deck that overlooks a waterhole right in the centre of the camp. Rhino have been seen here on the odd occasion. There is also a hide from which to birdwatch and enjoy the varied wildlife that comes down to drink. Ntshondwe Camp also boasts a swimming pool and curio shop where ice, wood and basic foodstuffs can be purchased. A six-bed luxury lodge is set a little apart from the rest of the camp between huge boulders and has its own swimming pool and resident cook. The camp also has a state-of-the-art conference centre with accommodation for fifty-six delegates in non self-catering units. This facility is popular and should be booked well in advance. It is also the ideal wedding venue and when we were there the camp was abuzz with miniature ring-bearers, best men and bridesmaids. You couldn't tie the knot in better surroundings.

All three of these reserves have their own unique character and one should allow at least three days at each one to make the most of your visit (especially as it takes approximately two and a half hours to travel from Ndumo to Ithala as some of the roads are gravel). These three gems are often little visited out of season and make a wonderful discovery point to northern KwaZulu-Natal. Visit them before someone else does!

VISITORS INFORMATION

Ndumo and Tembe Game Reserves lie within a high risk malaria area so consult your doctor before your visit. Both Ndumo and Ithala can be visited with a sedan car but Tembe requires an offroad vehicle due to the sandy nature of the roads. All three reserves are administered by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. Contact them for bookings for Ithala and Ndumo at tel: +27 33 8451000, e-mail: bookings@kznwildlife.com or visit the website at www.kznwildlife.com. For bookings for the private luxury lodge at Tembe contact tel:

+27 31 2670144 or e-mail: info@tembe.co.za or visit their website at www.tembe.co.za. They also provide pickups from the local airstrip and transfers from Durban if required. Crime is not a problem in these reserves but the usual caution should be exerted when travelling between them, as northern Zululand is an extremely poor area. The local people are usually friendly and welcome visitors. The summer months can be extremely hot and humid although this is the best time for birdwatching. Winters are mild while the nights at Ithala can be extremely cold due to its elevated position on the escarpment.

LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. The Bivane 4x4 trail in Ithala takes the visitor through some breathtaking scenery and was once an old wagon track.
2. An irascible black rhino.
3. The chalets at Ithala Game Reserve's Ntshondwe Camp are nestled in the mountains.
4. The giant crassula – one of the reasons that Ithala is popular with botanists.
5. The typical rolling hills of Ithala.
6. A white stork – a migrant from Europe stalks the hills of Ithala.
7. The tsessebe is commonly seen in the grasslands of Ithala.
8. White rhino are found at all three reserves.
9. This zebra foal was only a few days old and still very wobbly on its legs.
10. Big tusked such as this one are a common sight in Tembe Elephant Park.
11. The trees of the endangered sand forest are swathed with old man's beard.
12. These elephant bulls played for hours in the flooded Mahlasela Hide's waters.
13. Dung beetles have right of way in all the reserves.
14. Early morning from the viewing tower at Tembe.
15. The sun rises over the lake system of the Ndumo Game Reserve.
16. Crocs are numerous in the Ndumo lakes.
17. The chalets at Ndumo Game Reserve all have welcome air-conditioning.
18. The buttress root system of the sycamore figs which grow in abundance around Shokwe Pan in Ndumo.
19. The bark of the fever tree is bright yellow and powdery to the touch. This species was thought to cause malaria by early explorers.
20. A pod of hippos on Nyamithi Pan, Ndumo.
21. A stately giraffe gazes at his reflection in Nyamithi Pan, Ndumo.
22. Fever trees grow in abundance around Nyamithi Pan, Ndumo.
23. The still waters of Nyamithi Pan reflect the vegetation around it. It has the highest concentration of crocs in these placid waters than in any other lake in South Africa.
24. Game drives around Ndumo Game Reserve are very popular as the knowledgeable guides will teach you much about the area.