

Letting go in the bushveld

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In a mad dash through KwaZulu-Natal and Swaziland Sharon Davis lets slip her city-contrived schedule when faced with some of the most exciting bushveld in the country. What is it about raw African bush that's so beautiful and exciting? Is it the colours, the intricate details, the majesty of centuries-old trees ... maybe it's the syncopated rhythm of life itself? Hard to say, but the allure sat within us in the form of excited anticipation as we slipped out of Durban, in the pre-dawn quiet.

Some would have called it mission impossible - cramming some of KwaZulu-Natal and Swaziland's top nature reserves into three days. Certainly, if we'd known our dash was going to coincide with the week locals regard as the hottest in living memory we might have opted out. But fate, or sheer bravado, saw Sandra, in full bush gear, settling comfortably in the passenger seat, chatting amiably and passing me an endless supply of home-made crunchies.

We turned off the N2 after Matubatuba following the R168 in the direction of Hlabisa and Nongoma, headed towards the Nyalazi Gate of Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve. Plantations of trees began re-replacing the flowing fields of sugar cane. In turn these gave way to lush green clusters of bush as we entered the pulsating heart of Zululand. Hluhluwe-Imfolozi is the oldest reserve in Africa, and it is best known for its tremendously successful white rhino conservation initiatives. We were hoping to see some up close, and we weren't disappointed.

HLUHLUWE-IMFOLOZI

The verdant roadside, full with summer growth, was washed in post-sunrise red as we entered the park. Hundreds of buffalo were dotted over the distant hills, no more than grey blobs on the landscape, like art from the impressionist period. Within minutes we put the brakes on our mad dash - a lone elephant swishing its tail at flies stood nonchalantly between two clumps of thorn trees. He chose to ignore us.

We strained to see what had got his attention. Grass seeds glinted in the surroundings as the first beams of sun danced through the landscape. And then we saw them - a herd of impala emerged, as if from nowhere; prancing, grazing - only vaguely cautious in our presence.

These were followed in quick succession by Burchell's zebra (unfairly called a donkey in striped pyjamas), a nyala family in a shaded thicket (ram, doe and fawn), water buffalo crossing the road, giraffe, more zebra, kudu, and a variety of birds including a yellow-throated longclaw, crowned hornbill and brown-headed parrot.

By nine o'clock, the world was warming up; and so were the sightings. A family of white rhino entered some cooling pools at the roadside, splashes of water turning their hides black in places; then they crossed the hot tar just metres behind our parked car, and wandered off, soon camouflaged by the veld.

Warm was a euphemism. It was hot. The windows go up and the air-conditioner goes on, providing much-needed relief. We headed for the Hilltop camp for a break and supplies and then set our sights on Centenary Gate, 15 km further on. From there it was on to Mkuze for a night and then to Swaziland. HLUHLUWE-IMFOLOZI INFORMATION BOX

- A daily conservation fee of R80 is payable on entrance; SADC residents pay R40. Wild Card holders enter free. Nyalazi Gate is 240 km from Durban.
- Hluhluwe-Imfolozi offers a variety of accommodation options: the luxurious Hilltop Camp, bush lodges at Muntulu and Gqoyeni, rustic bush camps at Sontuli and a safari tented camp at Mpila.
- Hilltop Camp has a well equipped shop selling a range of curios and camping supplies.
- Hluhluwe is 25 km from the main Hilltop camp and is the nearest town with a full range of services. It's only 15 km from Hilltop to the camp's Memorial Gate, heading towards Hluhluwe, but expect to take between 30 and 45 minutes because of the speed limit.
- Facilities at Hluhluwe-Imfolozi include: restaurant, coin-operated laundry, 95 octane unleaded petrol and diesel (97 octane petrol in Hluhluwe village), day and night game drives, short day walks, self guided foot and driving trails, as well as wilderness trails.
- Hluhluwe produces 90% of South Africa's Queen Pineapples. Stop at the roadside vendors or the farm stalls on the way to Hluhluwe town to buy sweet, juicy pines.
- Hluhluwe-Imfolozi is a low risk malaria area.

MKUZE NATURE RESERVE

Eerie yellow-barked fever trees interspersed with distinctive sisal trees lined the scenic dirt road which wound its way over the Lebombo Mountains and into Mkuze Game Reserve. Although this was not a Wild Card property it made a perfect overnight stop for our route into Swaziland.

We arrived late; that, combined with a mix up over keys - the staff insisting that there was no reason to lock up 'out here in the bush' - meant it was a mad dash out to Nsumo Pan for our dusk viewing. The pan was strikingly beautiful - there's something in the nature of the fever trees in the waning light combined with the cries and calls of roosting pelicans and storks.

Racing from viewpoint to hide, trying (in vain) to make up for lost time, I tick off large spotted genet, terrapin, more nyala, vervet monkeys, and a pygmy kingfisher. The Burchell's coucal was calling with its watery-like gurgle, hippos gave belly-deep grunts from somewhere across the pan, elephants trumpeted, baboons barked and the child-like cry of the hornbills filled the darkening night air. And still I fretted over lost time.

We dashed back with just enough time to grab a bite to eat and head out to meet our guide, Angel Mabuyakhulu, for the night drive. Angel pointed out a pair of sleeping chin-spot batis in a tree and giraffe lying asleep with their heads sticking up. We caught the flash of white of a honey badger as it retreated into the bush, and more â€! Water dikkop, scrub hares, meerkat, nyala, elephant, nightjars (both European and Fiery-necked) and at least three Spotted eagle owls. The night viewing was, in a word, fantastic.

We woke at sunrise to kudu and nyala browsing around our cottage in the soft morning light, enjoyed a quiet, relaxing stroll, a leisurely breakfast and a bumpy dirt-road drive to visit the cultural centre, which consisted of a large traditional Zulu hut selling curios. But I was anxious to be on my way again. Swaziland beckoned. MKUZE INFORMATION BOX

- Mkuze is 104 km from Hilltop in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi and 380 Km from Durban.
- The entrance fee is R35 per person.
- The nearest town with a full range of services in Mkuze, which is 27 km away on gravel roads.
- The Mantuma camp has a shop selling a small range of curios and limited supplies.
- Facilities at Mukze include: self-guided foot and driving trails, guided night game drives, guided walks, swimming pool. Petrol is available as well as public phones and a basic restaurant.
- Mantuma camp offers self-catering chalets for a variety of budgets as well as accommodation in secluded safari tents for a real bush experience. There is a campsite with electricity at the park entrance and self-catering accommodation at Nhlonhlea Bush Lodge.
- Mkuze has three of the "Big Five" and has a reputation for being one of the top birding venues with more than 420 species - the guided Fig Forest walk is a must for birders.
- Mkuze is in a malaria area.

SWAZILAND BECKONS - HLANE ROYAL NATIONAL PARK

The Golela border post crossing was uneventful, as was the journey north â€ lazily following the Lebombo Mountains as they stretch and snake from Hluhluwe in the south up through Swaziland, all the way to the Limpopo Province.

Shortly after Big Bend we turned off the M8, then onto the MR16 and finally the MR3 to the Hlane Royal National Park passing alternately through sugar cane, bushveld and rural villages. Abruptly the landscape changed to a formidable scene, studded with dead hardwood trees, killed as a result of de-barking by elephant.

In friendly contrast we were greeted in warm and hospitable Swazi tradition at the entrance gate and took the opportunity of stretching our legs at the nearby Ndlovu Camp. We wandered down to the nearby pan, but in the incredible midday heat the only thing to be seen was a hippo snout â€ a tiny floating speck, belying the bulk of the beast beneath it.

We were about to head out on a 30 minute drive to Bubhesi camp, our resting place for the night, when we heard that the camp was without electricity. We waited while some calls were made to find out when the electricity would be restored. A female ostrich walked into the shade of the entrance boma as though it were her regular midday hangout to escape the worst of the sun.

The heat increased, we waited, sense of humours frayed. Finally a solution â€ we were to be accommodated at Ndlovu Camp.

That sorted we set about grabbing a bite to eat before our sunset drive guide, Ndumiso Nkhambule, wearing a khaki uniform and a broad smile, came to find us.

The tension fled somewhere between the gate and Ndumiso's first story. Did you know that springbok have white bellies to reflect the heat from the ground back down? I didn't! In fact, as Ndumiso continued I realised there was a wealth of knowledge and fascinating bush lore that I'd never heard before â€ dung beetles, lion, elephant â€ Ndumiso was both generous and humorous in his education of us city folk.

He braked suddenly and pointed towards an unlikely patch of grass. Well hidden was a pride of lions; a dark-maned dad, fierce-looking and scar-faced, set apart as if superior. Mum, ever mindful of her cubs, watched with piercing yellow eyes that seemed to bore through us.

After we'd had our fill of lion we continued around the various game camps to one of the most spectacular orange-red sunsets that Africa can produce. My earlier irritation had fled, replaced by the calm, large spaces that Africa brings to the soul.

Ndumiso arrived unannounced the next morning to take us on a walk! It was too good to refuse and suddenly my city-contrived schedule was gone. I was answering to a new rhythm; the rhythm of Africa, not the city, now buzzed in my veins.

The walk was immediately captivating. Ndumiso showed us the diminutive Scops Owl asleep in a tree no more than a few metres from camp. We passed white rhino at roughly 50 metres sampling the air for us. He followed a honey guide to a beehive and led us a few feet from hippos and crocs in the nearby pan.

I was lost in a new world, enchanted by nature and captivated by each precious moment. Everything was dressed in that warm red glow of morning, and the pungent but not unpleasant smell of fresh rhino dung hung about as we searched for the short-lived black dung beetle. Using the tracking skills he learnt as a child tending cows in remote areas, Ndumiso guided us; pointing here and there; nonchalantly imparting knowledge as he went. Thoughts of the road ahead had evaporated but the road had not and when Ndumiso led us back into camp I was instantly back in city mode - and it was time to dash.

HLANE ROYAL NATIONAL PARK INFORMATION BOX GETTING THERE:

- The MR8 from Golela, heading north is tarred but is currently under construction, which required two rather long gravel road detours, and a sharp lookout for potholes in other sections.
- PARK INFORMATION:
 - Entrance costs R25 a person; Wild Card Holders Free.
 - While Hlane Royal National Park is well worth a visit in its own right, it is also conveniently situated as a stop-over for longer trips to or from the Kruger National Park or Mozambique.
 - The nearest town with a full range of services is Simunye (7km).
 - The main Ndlovu camp has a shop selling a small range of curios and supplies.
 - Facilities at Hlane include an open-air restaurant, public phones, guided walks, guided day and sunset drives, as well as self-drive trails. Wilderness trails and possibly horseback trails will be available soon.
 - Camping, self-catering and catered chalets are available in the main Ndlovu camp. Bhubesi Camp has self-catering accommodation.
 - Hlane has four (lion, leopard, elephant and rhino) of the "Big Five" and very good birding.
 - Hlane also offers traditional Sibhaca Dancing around the camp fire in the evening.
 - Hlane is in a malaria area.

ESCAPE WITH LESS TRAVEL

With only a 30 minute drive remaining on our hairbrained dash back to Durban, I finally lost it completely. I tossed it that schedule that had plagued my bush break. I pulled off the road at a small turning and followed the winding, but well signposted route - the Shongweni Shuffle - through sugar cane fields, past mushroom farms, ending in a friendly local community village at the gate of the Msinsi's Shongweni Dam and Game Reserve. So close to the city centre, it's hard to imagine such a tranquil spot survives, but it does and it was just what I needed to escape the clutches of the city, if only for a few more hours.

It was out of season and the silence palpable - disturbed only by the haunting call of a moorhen, the mournful cry of a Purple gallinule and the odd swish of a zebra's tail. It's the perfect spot for canoeing and fishing, and children have no end of fun on the trampolines and jungle gyms - oddly forlorn and abandoned, waiting for the weekend and the gleeful cry of youngsters to bring them to life again.

I checked in at reception. No I didn't want a horse trail, or a canoe - I explained I simply wanted to relax and take a breath before I rushed back to work in the city next morning.

That night I slept peacefully, at the edge of the dam. Rustic camp stretcher for a bed, wooden platform for a floor, extending right to the water's edge, and a canvas tent for roof, augmented by friendly tree-cover. Although closest to the city, this was - intimately closer to nature.

SHONGWENI INFORMATION BOX

- Entrance is R20 a person in season (weekends and public holidays) and R10 out of season. Wild Cards holders free.
- A R2,50 community levy is charged per vehicle.
- Shongweni Dam is a 30 minute drive from central Durban.
- Accommodation is all self catering and includes camping, a tented camp on the water's edge and a luxury bush lodge.
- Facilities at Shongweni Dam include a children's playground, public phone, fishing, canoeing, self-guided walks and drives, game drives, wilderness trails, horse trails, picnic areas, camping and caravanning, ablution blocks with showers, baths and toilets - as well as conference facilities.
- Shongweni Dam has rhino, buffalo, giraffe, waterbuck, wildebeest, warthog and a variety of nocturnal animals and birds.
- Shongweni Dam is open to non-motorised water sports only.
- Shongweni dam is not in a malaria area.

ACCOMMODATION BOX: Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve:

Accommodation bookings can be made through KZN Wildlife (www.kznwildlife.com) Tel: 033 845 1000; Fax: 033 845

1001; e-mail: bookings@kznwildlife.com

The gate is open from 05h00 - 19h00 in summer (November to February inclusive) and from 06h00 to 18h00 in winter (March to October inclusive). Office hours are 07h00 to 19h00 with check-in from 14h00 and check-out by 10h00 on the day of departure. The Hluhluwe-Imfolozi camp numbers are Tel: 035 562 0848; Fax: 035 562 0113. Mkuze Game Reserve:

Accommodation bookings can be made through KZN Wildlife (www.kznwildlife.com) Tel: 033 845 1000; Fax: 033 845 1001; e-mail: bookings@kznwildlife.com

The gate is open from 05h00 to 19h00 in summer (October to March inclusive) and from 06h00 to 18h00 in winter (April to September inclusive). Office hours are 08h00 to 16h30 with check-in from 14h00 and check-out by 10h00 on the day of departure. The Mkuze camp numbers are Tel: 035 573 9001/4; Fax: 035 573 0031. Hlane Royal National Park:

Accommodation bookings can be made through Big Game Parks (www.biggameparks.org) Tel: 00268 528 3943/4; Fax: 00268 528 3924; e-mail: reservations@biggameparks.org

Check in from 14h00 and check out by 10h00 on the day of departure - no driving allowed in the camp after sunset. The Hlane camp number is 00268 383 8100. Shongweni Dam and Game Reserve:

Accommodation and conference bookings can be made directly to Shongweni Dam and Game Reserve (www.msinsi.co.za) Tel: 031 769 1283.

The gate is open from 05h00 to 19h00 in summer (October to March inclusive) and 06h00 to 18h00 in winter (April to September inclusive). N2 TOLL ROAD INFORMATION BOX

Expect to pay R5,50, R6,50 and R23,00 in fees respectively at the three toll stations at Tongaat, Mvoti and Mtunzini. It is worth the expense to enjoy open roads with easy travelling, without having to look out for potholes. GOLELA BORDER POST INFORMATION BOX

The Golela border post between South Africa and the Kingdom of Swaziland is open from 07h00 to 22h00. Expect to pay a compulsory R50 Swaziland road tax. And don't forget to bring a valid passport!