

Not for creatures of habit

With its rest camps, tar roads and occasional cellphone reception, you could be fooled into thinking the Kruger is tame. Not so! Experience the park at its wildest on these five adventures.

BY ESMA MARNEWICK & ANNEMARIE VAN DER WALT



WILLEM VAN DER BERG

1 Walk with the animals

Yes, on foot – like the rhinos, zebras and secretarybirds! The best way to get to know the Kruger is to walk in the veld. You'll feel the grass against your legs and you'll rest in the shade of a tree in the middle of the day. Look around: Animals do the same thing during their lunch hour. You'll learn the lay of the land and the curve of the rivers, and sometimes you'll drink water from holes in the sand dug by elephants. You'll walk with two guides, carry everything you need on your back, and sleep under the stars.

The **Kruger Trail** is one of the wildest hiking adventures on earth. The trail runs from Pafuri in the north to Malelane in the south – 650 km! Don't worry, you don't hike it in one go... You walk the trail in six legs over three years. The trail is an exclusive experience and requires planning and commitment. A leg is completed over six days (five nights) – see the sidebar for more information.

The backpacking trails (**Mphongolo**, **Lonely Bull** and **Olifants**) are similar to a leg of the Kruger Trail, but they only take four days and three nights (from R3 100 per person).

If the thought of having a thin sheet of canvas between you and a hungry hyena makes you feel light-headed, rather consider one of the seven wilderness trails: **Bushmans** and **Wolhuter** (Berg-en-Dal), **Mathikithi** and **Sweni** (Satara), **Napi** (Pretoriuskop), **Olifants** (Letaba) and **Nyalaland** (Punda Maria). You sleep in a fenced base camp for three nights (in safari tents or huts with communal facilities). In the mornings and afternoons, trail rangers accompany you on hikes in the veld. A cook prepares your meals and the camp has hot showers and flush toilets. Rates from R10 000 for two people.

All the rest camps (except Punda Maria) offer guided morning walks. A game-viewing vehicle will drop you in the bush and you'll set off to explore for an hour or two, with a break for snacks. Morning walks start at 5 am and cost from R650 per person. Olifants also offers a shorter guided river walk (R380 per person) – it starts at 9 am.

INSIDER TIP: There's a breeding pair (or two) of Pel's fishing-owls next to the Olifants River. Tell your guide that you'd like to see them. Apparently they see the owls on four walks out of five.

HOW DOES THE KRUGER TRAIL WORK?

The trail is managed by the SANParks Honorary Rangers. Hiking groups have to bid at an auction to participate – telephonic bids are allowed. The auction to hike in 2024 will take place in October 2023. The trail is exclusive – only five groups of eight hikers each may start the trail per year.

The trail is completed in six sections, or legs, over three years. Each leg is about 100 km in distance. The auction for the first leg starts at R61 500 per group (about R7 700 per person). If your bid is successful, you'll hike two legs per year for the next three consecutive years – you'll get the dates a year in advance. Legs 2 – 6 have a fixed tariff of R61 500 per leg, which increases 10% annually.

☎ 082 929 0244

(Louis Lemmer);

🌐 thekrugertrail.com



2 Camp at Tsendze

This campsite is the closest you'll get to wild camping in the Kruger. Don't worry – it's not as wild as Mabuasehube in the Kgalagadi: The campsite is still fenced so you won't wake up to a lion licking your tent.

The 34 stands are spacious and set far apart, with big apple-leaf, leadwood and mopane trees in-between. Generators are not allowed and the campsite is not connected to the power grid. Solar panels keep the lights on and gas geysers supply hot water to the two ablution blocks.

The campsite doesn't have a swimming pool and there's no busy reception office or restaurant with milkshakes – for that, you'll have to drive 7 km to Mopani.

No, Tsendze is the kind of place where you open and close the entrance gate to the campsite yourself...

Despite how wild it is, you still get first-class service. Rodgers Hobyane and Elina Mona have been the camp caretakers since Tsendze opened in 2007. They walk through the campsite every evening to make sure everything is running smoothly. They also know where the resident African scops-owls and African barred owlets nest, and they'll point them out to guests.

"We have guests year-round and some of them stay for 30 nights. We've had guests stay for 50 nights!" says Elina.

INSIDER TIP: Unlike other campsites in the Kruger, you can book a specific stand at Tsendze. If you want shade, ask for stand number 6. Big groups can ask for number 27 or 28. If you're after privacy, numbers 3, 4 and 26 are good. Rates from R410 per night for two people, plus R104 per extra person; max six people per stand.



3 Braai in the bush

The fire is burning already as you enter the boma and a long table is set with candles and a white tablecloth. Someone offers you a drink and a damp cloth to wipe your face. You've just returned from a two-hour game drive on back roads around Crocodile Bridge and now you're being treated to a bush braai!

While the other park visitors are stuck in the rest camp, you can relax deep in the bush near the Gezantfombi Dam. Who knows what animal might smell the meat sizzling on the coals?

After you've feasted, listen to African scops-owls and frogs calling while you try to make space for coffee, malva pudding and roasted marshmallows. Around 10 pm, when other guests are already in bed, you'll head back to the rest camp, scanning the veld with a spotlight as you drive, looking for glowing eyes in the bush...

How does it work? Crocodile Bridge doesn't have a restaurant so Royal Safaris caters this bush braai. You don't have to stay in the rest camp to attend – Royal Safaris also transports guests from Marloth Park outside the park.

The rest camps that have restaurants also offer bush braais. You need to be a group of at least four people and book a month in advance. Contact the rest camp directly.

Cost: Royal Safaris bush braai is POA – it depends on the size of the group. ☎ 072 591 5100; 🌐 royalsafaris.co.za
SANParks bush braai: R848 per person; no children under 12.



KRUGER PARK



4 Look for birds in Makuleke

If birding is something that keeps your happiness meter in the green, the Makuleke Concession in the north of the park should be your next stop.

The concession has two luxury lodges and lodge guests are the only people allowed on its roads, but if you want a taste of the concession, take a slow drive along the tar road to the Pafuri gate (open to all visitors), which cuts across the Luvuvhu River. You might see one of the area's specials, like racket-tailed roller.

If you're not a lodge guest, there's another way to explore Makuleke. EcoTraining offers a seven-day Birding in the Bush course in the concession and all birding enthusiasts are welcome. Some species to tick off your list include Böhm's spintail, mottled spintail, lemon-breasted canary, black-throated wattle-eye, Dickinson's kestrel, Meves's starling, tropical boubou and the enigmatic Pel's fishing-owl.

The course also gives you access to some of the park's most exclusive landscapes, like Lanner Gorge, a 150m-deep ravine. Our group saw Verreaux's eagles here, and a small squadron of black storks. According to the guides, the storks used to breed here and there's hope they'll do so again.

It's hard to beat a morning coffee in the Limpopo riverbed surrounded by birdsong. This is where big game hunter and smuggler Bvekenya Barnard roamed in the early 1900s. Ask the guides to show you the small memorial to him, on the route to the fever tree forest.

BirdLife South Africa offers shorter three-night outings to Makuleke in co-operation with EcoTraining. These outings are usually arranged by different birding clubs, so keep an eye on the website for details. You'll stay in a twin-sleeper en suite safari tent.

When? BirdLife South Africa – 19 to 22 May 2023; EcoTraining's Birding in the Bush course – 30 September to 6 October 2023.

Cost: BirdLife South Africa R6097 per person sharing for three days; EcoTraining R14050 per person sharing for seven days. Three meals and two drives/guided walks per day included.

Contact: ☎ 013 752 2532; 🌐 birdlife.org.za; 🌐 ecotraining.co.za



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SHIPANDANI HIDE

5 Sleep in a hide

There are two hides in the Kruger Park where you can overnight: Sable Hide (sleeps nine) near the Phalaborwa gate; and Shipandani Hide (sleeps six) about 7 km from Mopani.

At Sable, it's a blissful feeling when the last vehicle leaves at sunset and you're the only one allowed to stay behind. You're next to your own dam (or so it feels) and you have a nice braai spot under a big tree.

Pull your car up to the braai spot – remember to lock the gate – and leave the unpacking for later because it's time to crack open a beer...

It's quick and easy to set up the beds in the hide and mosquito nets are included with the bedding you picked up at the Phalaborwa gate. Remember to close the mesh shutters on the windows to keep out the insects – and the bigger critters...

The living area is fenced, but it's a good idea to have a thorough look around at night before you walk the 10m to the bathroom. (The American tourist in our group wanted to know exactly how high a leopard can leap. We still owe him an answer...)

You'll love sitting around the braai fire but you'll sneak away every now and then to see the new arrivals at the dam: impala, thick-knee, a flutter of wings, a swish, a plop... and hyenas laughing in the distance.

You have to be out of the hide half an hour after the park gates open in the morning, but you can linger at the braai area and have coffee. There are two pit toilets but no shower facilities; you'll get a container with water for *waslap* ablutions.

Rates: Both hides from R960 per night for two people; R370 per extra person. The hides sleep up to nine people each. You pay a deposit of R300 at the gate or at Mopani, for bedding, a braai grid, two torches and washing water (cash preferred). Bring your own drinking water.



ANNEMARIE VAN DER WALT

SABLE HIDE



TSENDZE LOW WATER-BRIDGE

MORE WILD THINGS TO DO

Mountain biking. Go on a guided ride from Olifants. You'll mostly follow jeep tracks and hippo paths. You'll stop next to the Olifants River to watch hippos, crocodiles and birds. It costs R870 per person (own bike) or R1 200 (bike supplied, along with water, snacks and a helmet). No children under 16.

☎ 013 735 6606/7 (Olifants)
Skukuza Half Marathon. This race around the staff village in Skukuza only starts at 8.30 am, so that rangers and helicopters can first patrol the route for hyenas, lions, and elephants. The marathon is held on the first Saturday in August, but 2023 is already sold out. Start training for 2024! ☎ 082 541 8433 (WhatsApp only); 📧 krugerparkmc.co.za

Kruger Shalati. This unique lodge has 24 train carriage suites (and a swimming pool!) on the old Selati Bridge about 15 m above the Sabie River – you can basically look a soaring eagle in the eye. At R7 750 per person per night, the price will also give you a shot of adrenaline. ☎ 013 591 6000; 📧 krugershalati.com

Nyarhi Rustic Campsite. This unfenced campsite is near Mopani

rest camp. They offer three-day self-catering camps between March and October. Guides will take you on two outings in the bush per day. The campsite has toilets and a donkey boiler for hot water, but you have to bring everything else you'll need. It costs R31 500 for a group of eight people (no children under 12).

📧 bushcamps@honoraryrangers.org
Birding weekends. From January to March (make a note for 2024), birding weekends are held in some of the rest camps, including Crocodile Bridge, Letaba, Mopani and Olifants. Rates from R4 000 per person depending on the accommodation you choose, including two guided game drives per day, and dinner. 📧 westrandbirders@gmail.com

Sunset Serenade Concerts. Ever wondered what the whoop of a hyena sounds like accompanied by a string orchestra? Find out during the long weekend of 3–7 May 2023, when classical music concerts will be held in the bush near Mopani rest camp. Rates from R13 300 per person for four nights, three sunset concerts and three dinners. 📧 counterpoaching@mweb.co.za

The Kruger Honorary Rangers host the last three activities listed. Visit 📧 sanparksvolunteers.org, click "See more events" and choose "Kruger National Park" for more things to do. Funds raised by these events are used for conservation efforts in the park.

Day visitors: R115 per adult; R57 per child. Free with a Wild card.
Bookings: ☎ 012 428 9111; 📧 sanparks.org/parks/kruger (The contact number for each rest camp can be found on the website.)



SKUKUZA HALF MARATHON

SUPPLIED



KRUGER SHALATI



VILLIERS STEYN

OLIFANTS MOUNTAIN BIKING