

## The Battlefields and Weenen

(words and photos – Ralton Bentley)

Sometimes a man needs a little time out, a little time by himself. On one such occasion I decided to take two days off work and embark on a slow drive up through Zululand, visiting a few battlefield sites along the way, and then camping over at Weenen Game Reserve before heading back home to Durban the next day.

A perfect day dawned, and while everybody else got ready for work and school, I loaded the tent and cooler box into the Landy and headed up the R74 toward Kranskop. From there I took the road less travelled and wound my way along the dirt road that passes through Ekuzameni and Ekombe, winding its way up through the Zululand mountains and valleys, past many informal settlements and across so many streams I lost count!



It is a rough road and cannot be travelled at speed. Even the taxi's drive slowly along this route! The beautiful rolling valleys and hills, with the colourfully painted interspersed villages, make up for any frustration caused by the poor condition of the road.



The road eventually joins up with the R68 and heads towards Nqutu. At the R68 intersection I stopped at a small general dealer, with it's large polished cement floor and "Rama" signboard outside, and bought myself an ice cold Coke before heading on toward Nqutu.

First of the two battlefield sites to visit was Isandlwana. This was one of the best victories ever for the Zulus. The battle began at about 11.15 am on Wednesday, January 22, 1879. At 2.30 pm, during its dying moments, there was an eclipse of the sun, and an hour or so later it was over. 24 000 courageous Zulus swarmed over the rocky ridge to the left of the camp where the British soldiers (with their guns) camped on the slopes of the hill. The soldiers stood-to under the sweltering sun, confident in the firepower of their Martini-Henry rifles and disdainful of "this bunch of barefoot savages armed with spears and sticks" (as one commentator later described them). 1357 British soldiers and 3000 Zulus lost their lives in this 3-4 hour skirmish!



There are little grave sites scattered all over the side of the hill. It's quiet here now and it is difficult to imagine the drama of the day. It makes for a very interesting visit, walking around the veld in the sun trying to imagine what happened and what it must have been like.

There's also a small museum here with some interesting artefacts, and all the details of the battle of course. Refreshments are also available, and ablution facilities too. Remember to bring a hat if you're visiting in the summer, there's very little shade here and it gets as hot as hell!



Next stop is Rorke's Drift. This battle took place on the same day as Isandlwana, but with somewhat different results. Rorke's Drift, an old farm, had been occupied by the British as a supply depot and hospital where some injured soldiers were being nursed. The garrison comprised only 110 men. Shortly after 3pm, two survivors from the Isandlwana confrontation arrived to warn of an imminent attack. The only means of

fortification were 2 ox wagons, some biscuit boxes and bags of maize meal. 4,000 fearsome Zulu warriors arrived flushed with victory from their Isandlwana battle, and probably without orders to do so, stormed the hospital. Against overwhelming odds, there followed one of the most gallant defences in British Military history. The battle raged for 13 hours after which the thwarted Zulus withdrew. Remarkably the British casualties were only 17 dead and 10 wounded. Eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded for gallantry in this battle. There's a museum, a quaint chapel, refreshments and ablutions on the site. There's also a bit of shade here under the trees and a light picnic lunch was in order!



Departing from Rorke's drift just after lunch I continued along the dirt road and took a short-cut past Knostrope and Paddock to the R33, near Helpmekaar, that heads towards Greytown.



At Keates Drift I turned right onto another dirt road short-cut to Weenen. The Weenen Game Reserve is just on the Western side of town on the R74. I arrived at around 3PM, and was so very hot and thirsty and ready for a few cold beers while I watched the sunset. It took 10 minutes to set up my tent and get my chair out and sit and relax after a hard day out of the office!



Weenen is a game reserve which includes Rhino, but allows camping on any of its 12 campsites. The ablutions are quite reasonable. The campsites all have water and 7 of them have electricity. Weenen have both White and Black Rhino, as well as giraffe, red hartebeest, eland, zebra, kudu, ostrich and common reedbuck. Other species which have recolonised the area include grey duiker, bushbuck, steenbuck, black-backed jackal, hyena and mountain reedbuck. There are more than 251 bird species here.



The reserve has an excellent road network, including some 4x4 only areas, which allow thorough exploration of the reserve. There are water holes and hides, spectacular gorges and scenic walks. It is an exciting experience being able to freely move among some seriously large animals!

As the sun started getting lower, and the storm looked like it may not materialise and spoil things, I lit a fire and cooked my dinner, all the while working hard at quenching my thirst after all the dust and outdoors!

Early the next morning I heard a strange flapping and snorting sound. I quietly opened my tent and peered outside to find a White Rhino no more than 10 meters from my tent, making his way to the water hole just a bit further along! He was really big!, and really close!, and I kept really quiet!! After a nutritious breakfast, a short walk to the water hole and back, and a refreshing shower, I packed up my camp and took a drive around the game reserve. It's not a large reserve but there's plenty to see and it's quiet and peaceful. I stopped for a while in the bush and just sat on my roof listening to the sounds of the wild and watching as animals moved about and got on with their daily doings. There are plenty of short walks around the reserve too and I found myself strolling dreamily along a path, completely oblivious to the fact that I actually lived in a large city and had some kind of crazy stressful job! It had been just over 24 hours of "me time" and I was already feeling completely rejuvenated!



I stumbled upon another White Rhino, with her calf, relaxing on the plains. After spending some time watching them, and photographing some of the rather odd Giraffe here, I decided to start my homeward journey.



I exited the reserve and headed along yet another short-cut dirt road to the R103 near Estcourt. I decided to stick to the R103 as I wasn't quite ready for the madness of the N3 after my quiet time. I couldn't avoid the temptation of turning into the Rawdon's Hotel (on the Midlands Meander Route) at around lunch time, where I tucked into a delicious pie and homemade beer... absolute bliss! My mission was complete..., and I slowly made my way back home.

Important information:

GPS co-ordinates: Isandlwana Battlefield: S28 21.657 E30 38.890  
Rorke's Drift Battlefield: S28 21.492 E30 32.247  
Weenen Game Reserve: S28 50.044 E29 59.850

Malaria: No

Safety: I felt safe throughout my journey, even through the heart of Zululand.

Road/Vehicle: It can be done in a sedan, but drive carefully and slowly.

Other: It can be very hot during summer.

Weenen bookings: [www.kznwildlife.com](http://www.kznwildlife.com)