

## Exploring St. Lucia

(words and photos – Ralton Bentley)

It's actually a shame that we don't spend more time in the St. Lucia area when we live in Durban – it's a leisurely 3 hour drive up to a truly awesome region. So that's what we did, we took a few days to quietly relax and explore the region. The 3 hour drive i refer to takes you up the N2 to Mtubatuba, where you turn right and head toward the coast to St. Lucia town. The total distance is only 250km! The route itself is scenic and easy. You have the choice of either driving along the N2 or along the old R102. Both routes have interesting places to turn off and explore, but more on those in another story!

There are many accommodation options in and around St. Lucia, but our preferred method for this trip was to camp in a tent. Camping options are vast, there are private and KZN Wildlife Campsites to choose from. Our first 2 nights we stayed at a quaint little caravan park, a few kilometres outside the town, called Futululu (meaning "under the trees"). This site is special because it is a little way away from the more central and busy camp sites (St. Lucia is quite a popular destination and can get a little crowded). In addition, the Futululu sites have lovely indigenous forests surrounding them where you can walk and enjoy the nature. They also cater for those who want to camp in the wild, with some of their sites being quite deep in the bush. We chose the more civil option and pitched our tent near the ablution block and quite central to the park. It was mid afternoon and we decided to spend the rest of the day relaxing around the campsite, sipping wine (as usual) and planning some of the "must do's".



The next morning we explored the outer areas of the greater St. Lucia lake system. A visit to Charters Creek was rather interesting. Because of the drought in the area they have closed this campsite down. It really is spooky here, it looks like nobody has been here for years.



It is difficult to describe the peace one feels here, with the wide expanse of water in front of you as you dangle your legs over the jetty, watching and listening to the hippos, photographing the birds as they fly by, while behind you (and surrounding the lake) a thick indigenous bush. I like it like this!

A word of caution though, these areas are somewhat isolated these days and one should always be aware of where you drive and what you leave lying around and keep a lookout for strange people hanging around, etc.



Staying at Futululu is a pleasure because you return to the bush from your outing in the bush. Our evenings were spent relaxing quietly around a fire, (sipping wine) and reflecting on the beauty and peace we'd experienced during the day. We were surprised how full this site suddenly became in the evening, with quite large groups of people arriving from their day's exploration, setting up camp and departing again in the morning.

Futululu, being on the road between Mtubatuba and St. Lucia with its many informal curio markets, you can buy some wonderful carvings here. We bought an "upside down" tree. Basically, it's the roots of the tree that are made to appear like the branches. We've subsequently learnt that this is a bad idea because the vendors are pulling out indigenous trees! But fear not, there are education programs in place teaching these people to rather use the non-indigenous trees for this decorative tree trade.

In the morning we went for a long walk through the Futululu Forest (incredible papyrus plants, awesome views and wonderfully peaceful) before returning for a healthy breakfast and packing up our tent to move on to Sugarloaf Campsite on the edge of St. Lucia town.

Sugarloaf Campsite is fairly large campsite and is part of the KZN Wildlife camps. It is an old park and we were a little disappointed at the quality of the ablutions and the

general unkempt nature of the stands, but we weren't going to let this destroy our exploration of the region. It is also wonderfully central for such a mission, being within walking distance to the town and a "stones throw" from the estuary with its crocs and hippos and snakes and things! (and the "do not feed the crocodile signs"!)



We set up camp and then headed into town to have a look around. St. Lucia is a bustling little town and tourism is obviously its main source of revenue. Everywhere we looked we saw visitors and tourists. Besides a few small supermarkets and restaurants and curio shops, there isn't much else happening here. Lunch time!, and we sat down at a quaint steak house and got stuck into burgers and large draft beers... i love Africa!

The afternoon was spent exploring the beach area of St. Lucia. An incredibly wide beach here, at least 100m to the water. Being used to the fairly narrow beaches around Durban i was quite surprised by this. A note to self: "always take shoes when visiting this beach in summer, there's a lot of hot sand to get across here!". Again, we were quite surprised by the number of people here. It does stand to reason though, it is a particularly lovely part of the world! Back to our campsite for a braai and early night, ahead of a visit to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.



We were up early in the morning, packed a picnic basket and set off to explore the nature reserve. We entered the gates after a short wait (no charge if you have a KZN Wildlife Gold Card) and took the first dirt road right and headed into the thick bush. There is a lot of game here! We saw Buffalo, Rhino, Zebra, Kudu, Hippos, just to name a few.



There are plenty of small roads and paths in the reserve and it never gets overcrowded (they limit the number of cars that enter the reserve, and most people either head straight for Mission Rocks or Cape Vidal).



The gravel roads are generally suitable for a normal sedan, but if you want to try the really small “jeep tracks” you need a 4x4. Getting stuck here could be a disaster with all the crocodiles and hippos around. We took the lesser travelled roads and came upon some lovely drinking holes and quiet spots along the lake.



Some of these little places we discovered had jetties running out into the lake and every opportunity we'd stop and walk around and have a mini-picnic. The peaceful sounds of wildlife and nature are the best medicine when you're all stressed out!

Much like our visit to Charters Creek 3 days earlier we were able to enjoy the quiet tranquil surrounds without any other people being there. This is why it remains such a popular destination – although the town and beaches were busy, the lake and surrounding areas are quiet. The lakes are extensive, so it does stand to reason.



We stopped at Cape Vidal Campsite just to have a look as well as Mission Rocks, but both places were a teeny bit crowded for our liking.



Off along a back road we went and found a large tree in the middle of nowhere to have lunch. Again, out with the Chardonnay, sandwiches and picnic blanket, and a nice peaceful hour or two relaxing and eating.



That night we lay awake listening to the night sounds coming from the lake. It is truly wild here, and no wonder they have declared it a World Heritage Site. This was our last night and we had planned a river cruise the following morning on the way out, on the way home to Durban. We woke up leisurely, packed up camp and were ready and waiting for the 10AM boat cruise. Now this is the way to see St. Lucia, from the water itself. We got really close to some huge crocodiles whiling away their day on the banks of the river, and saw plenty of hippos and birds. The photographic opportunities are wonderful, not only of the wildlife and scenery, but also of the faces and expressions of the tourists on the boat.

Two hours later we were back on land and homeward bound. This is certainly the beginning of a long term goal to explore and spend more time in this area. Also, the climate is wonderful here and it's quite pleasant visiting here in the cooler months when less people are around. My advice to you – get there!

Important information:

GPS co-ordinates:	Futululu	S28 26.342 E32 16.917
	Sugarloaf	S28 22.983 E32 25.150
	Entrance to park	S28 21.394 E32 25.212

Contact details:

Futululu Caravan Park; [www.futululu.co.za](http://www.futululu.co.za) ; +27355504431

Sugarloaf Rest Camp; [www.kznwildlife.com](http://www.kznwildlife.com) ; +27338451000

Malaria: Yes

Safety: Beware of wild animals!

Road/Vehicle: Easily accessible in a normal car

Other: You need time here, there's a lot to see. Mostly, you need to relax here.