

Land Rover does Umfolozi

(words and photos – Ralton Bentley)

Finally! a trip to the wild untamed plains of Africa in my new Land Rover Defender 90. Off to Umfolozi, with its tarred roads and soft off-road tracks. No worries, I just want to experience the outdoors, feel the new Land Rover in my hands.

The new Land Rover Defender 90 is an extremely exciting drive. There's no luxury here. There's no perfectly smooth, absolutely silent cruise in this vehicle. No. But it's exciting, wild, untamed, and energetic. Just sitting in the Defender makes you feel like you're out in the wild, and that you're part of the "African Experience".



Off we went, my wife Renee and I, for a quiet 3 hour drive from Durban to Umfolozi, along the old R102 to Richards Bay, and then the N2 to Mtubatuba for diesel and a bit of pavement shopping. The Land Rover may not be the softest ride, but it is softer than my previous vehicle (double cab bakkie)! The 6th gear provided a smooth, reasonably quiet drive.., quite pleasant it was. Mtubatuba is a very clean, friendly town. We felt quite safe here for the 20 minutes we spent here, me refuelling, while Renee explored the wares of the hawkers on the pavements. The drive to the main gate of Umfolozi along the R618 takes you through some built up rural townships. We felt a little wary on occasions, it's not the friendliest welcome to this tourist attraction.



We were staying at the Mpila tented safari camp, which meant we had 2 or 3 hours to drive around before checking in. Many animals were seen during this short drive around (elephant, hyena, zebra, and warthog, to name a few). Umfolozi has a few off-road loops which I eagerly turned onto to test the Defender. Yes, very “soft” 4x4 experience I know, but an exciting and comforting experience none the less. The Defender easily negotiated the routes in High Range. Low Range must surely only be needed in serious sand or to climb walls?!



We stopped at lunch time at one of the picnic sights, found a quiet isolated table and tucked into the sandwiches and sauvignon blanc! Pure bliss – warm humid weather, quiet African bush, beautiful view of the White Umfolozi River valley, perfect company, wonderful wine and food... and the ever present knowledge that there could easily be a lion, or hyena, or similar, watching us. None of the picnic or camp sites are fenced; it's just you and the wild! And there are plenty of gentle reminders in the form of bright red painted signage, that this is a big-5 reserve...

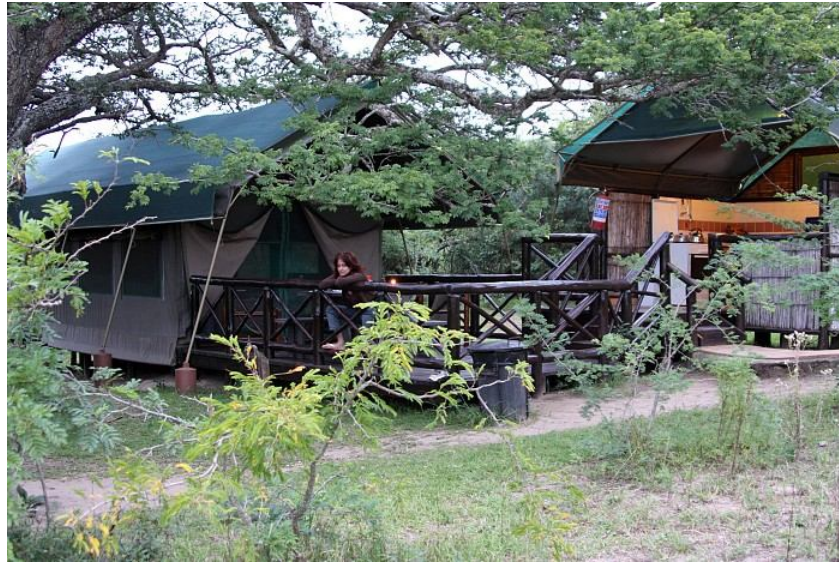


Arriving at Mpila was an exciting affair. “Beware the elephant bull walking around the camp site”, we were told. And “don’t try to stop the hyena stealing your food”, and “don’t walk around at night”, were some of the messages we received on checking in. We quickly unpacked, had a half an hour lay down, and off to the water hole hide we went, to see what we can see. Giraffe, impala, zebra, eagles, baboons, waterbuck, wildebeest, etc. Plenty of game in this park! The Defender was a joy too, good height for game viewing, comfortable driving around.



The tented safari camp is an adventure in itself. The kitchen is separate from the tent (so that the tent and occupants don’t get damaged when the wild animals come and trash the place looking for food!). The fridges and cupboards have deep gouges where animal’s teeth and claws have damaged them in their attempts to get to the food! Our closest neighbour was, in simple terms, too far away to help. But that was part of the adventure... Quiet, peaceful solitude... Just you and the lions... Out with the red wine and brickets, and soon the lamb chops and boerie were ready. We had hardly sat down to eat on our patio, darkness upon us, when a hyena came walking along looking for

food. Wow!! Although it just walked off, it left us feeling very aware of where we were and exactly how vulnerable we are!



Midnight saw the return of the hyena looking for food in the rubbish bin. Again, a scary part of the adventure, not knowing exactly what was out there! How safe is it really inside these canvas tents?! Can I shine a torch onto it?! We had securely fastened our bin before bed, removed all the food, and made it animal safe as requested. Our neighbours hadn't though, and there was rubbish all around their camp in the morning as we departed on our early morning drive. Again, loads of game to be seen, all while experiencing the additional excitement of driving the Land Rover! Back to camp, had a nice hot shower and breakfast, and off back to Durban we went.

In closing: Mpila tented camp at Umfolozi is a wonderful adventure and stay over! And, the new Land Rover Defender 90 is the most exciting vehicle I've ever owned!

Important information:

GPS Co-ordinates: Main Gate: S28 15 42.8 E32 00 59.0

Malaria: Yes, low risk.

Safety: The R618 into Umfolozi can be dangerous. Don't stop along this stretch.

Roads/Vehicle: The roads are good.

Other: One night is not enough!

