

Mkuze Picnics

(words and photos – Ralton Bentley)

Mkuze Game Reserve has been a bit of a no go zone lately due to water restrictions. So although you could visit the park, you couldn't sleep over. However, good summer rains and some reengineering of the boreholes, and the park has re-opened the Mantuma Camp in the Northern section of the park. There are a variety of accommodation options in this camp, as well as a small shop, a small food outlet, etc. The tented safari camps are currently being renovated, so there was unfortunately quite a bit of debris lying around...



We decided to take a leisurely drive up to Mkuze on the Saturday morning. Loaded a few basics onto the Landrover Defender 90 (water and diesel cans onto the roof rack, gas bottle, compressor, etc) and off we went, bright and early. The new Defender 90 is actually quite a comfortable drive, with the Ford 2.4 common-rail turbo diesel providing ample power for the hills, allowing one to cruise comfortably and quietly at 110km/hr in 6th gear. The journey takes around 4 hours from Durban, including stops and not rushing. There are two entrances into Mkuze. We entered via the gate just North of Hluhluwe town, with about 15km of reasonable gravel road needing to be covered.



After the 4 hour drive we were feeling like a break, and a cup of tea, so headed to the first picnic site that was signposted after entering the gate (S27 36.691 E32 10.686). This little picnic site has a few concrete tables and chairs, and we quickly had the water boiling in the kettle on the gas burner for a cup of tea and biscuits. We decided that the objective of this particular trip was just to go slow, relax, enjoy the outdoors, and not be particularly driven to see wildlife. We also wanted to spend more time appreciating the smaller things, so after tea we did a short scout around the site to identify any signs and tracks. Certainly frequent impala and baboon visits to this site!



As check-time was still 2 hours away we took the opportunity to drive around. Plenty of Zebra, Giraffe, Impala, Nyala and monkeys to be seen. Birdlife is awesome! We headed North, past the Mantuma camp toward another picnic site / hide (Kumahlala Hide - S27 35.058 E32 14.146). By this time it was around 12.30, so out with the sandwiches and chardonnay! We chose to sit in the picnic area as apposed to the hide itself. This was wonderful, sipping cool chardonnay in the shade, perfect company, and listening to all the sounds. Some baboon barking very nearby! Mkhuze allows visitors to spend time outdoors without being “fenced in”. This makes for an exciting experience, especially with the knowledge that there are 4 of the Big-5 here, as well as Hyena, hippo and crocs (there are no lions). One has to exercise caution at all times.



After lunch we headed back to Mantuma Camp (S27 35.809 E32 13.203) to check in. A wonderful warm and friendly greeting awaited us (except for the bad news that one of their three remaining Wild Dogs has been killed by a snare that morning). There's a huge meteorite outside the entrance of the office, which Renee gave a big hug to, trying to "connect" to the aliens... ah, the Chardonnay...) . Our tented safari cabin was right on the outer edge of the camp, so we were really excited about the prospect of seeing some animals while sitting on the deck.



A short nap, followed by a short walk around the area looking for tracks. Mostly just Impala and Nyala, but also a single set of Hyena prints. Like the Mpila tented safari camp at Umfolozi, the fridges and cupboards in the outdoor kitchen have locks and cages to prevent the hyena and baboons from making a mess of things. The fridge and cupboard doors are all gnarled from previous attempts! At night it's just a thin piece of canvas between you and the wild animals. Naturally, keeping food inside the tent isn't recommended, that is why the kitchen is set some distance from the sleeping area!

Around mid-afternoon we prepared a braai, with the view to taking the cooked food to the XXXX hide later in the afternoon, and eat while watching for animals that came to the water hole for their evening drink. This hide is a fair way off the road and one has to walk through the bush, keeping your eyes peeled for any wild animals (especially with picnic basket filled with delicious treats!). We sat and ate our food, sipped wine and watched the animals (very skittish at that time of day) come and drink. As soon as it started getting dark we headed back to our camp and soon were fast asleep, stirring through the night when some of the animals got really loud (the hyenas being the most raucous of the lot!).



On Sunday morning we got up at a reasonable time and had a look around to see what animals had left their tracks the night before. Again, just Impala and Nyala, and then strange “railway” track of a large beetle that came looking for leftovers... We had a light breakfast on our deck before packing up and heading out – the plan was to drive around for a few hours and exit through the KKKKKKK gate on the Eastern side of the park. We were a mere 1km from the camp when we came across leopard tracks on the road! We followed these for about half a kilometre where we were able to confirm the leopard by its dung. There were also nice clear hyena tracks along this road. As much as we hoped, and scanned the surrounding bushveld to find the leopard, we were only blessed with the magnificence of the fever tree forests. This area is worth a bit more time... We continued our drive for more than an hour without any significant sightings, heading toward the FFFFFFFF pan near the South of the park, when suddenly, as we came around the corner, a huge rhino was standing on the side of the road, chewing loudly on a large piece of stick! We switched off the engine and just sat and watched. He was so big, and so noisy, so intimidating! Every now and then he’d look at us and snort and move his feet a bit, I’m not quite sure he could actually see us though! Eventually we had to move on, and gently moved forward until he stepped off the road and let us pass.



We stopped at the GGGGG picnic site for a snack (S27 40.063 E32 18.775). This site is nothing less than awesome. The aquatic birds glide to and fro, the view of the lake is breathtaking, plenty of braai place and long-drop toilet to wrap it all up! Only being there, or at the very least studying the photographs we took, will properly explain the splendour experienced here. The grunting of the hippos, contrasting with the vast silence as you stare out across the lake. The awareness that crocs live here. The untampered wilderness. It was magnificent, we could have spent the entire day here!



But, after an hour or so we decided to drive a little further down the road to a spot where we can park the car right next to the lake, and make a cup of tea. Once again, in no time at all we had boiling water to make tea, camp chairs out, and continued to sit and stare out blankly over the pan.



With all good things, this short trip also had to come to an end, and we quietly drove through the GGGGG gate, onto the D820 road, turning onto the R22 toward Hluhluwe, and home to Durban....

Important information:

GPS co-ordinates: Entrance: S27 38.746 E32 09.049

Malaria: Yes

Safety: The entrance through KKKK is a little intimidating, not the usual friendly waving from the people there.

Road/Vehicle: The last 15km aren't bad. The roads inside the park are ok too.

Other: We want to return and try the camp ground when it's opened (after the drought). Be aware of snakes in the bathroom of the safari tented camp, they like the warmth of the geyser...