

## Walking the Giraffes in Amatigulu

(words and photos – Ralton Bentley)

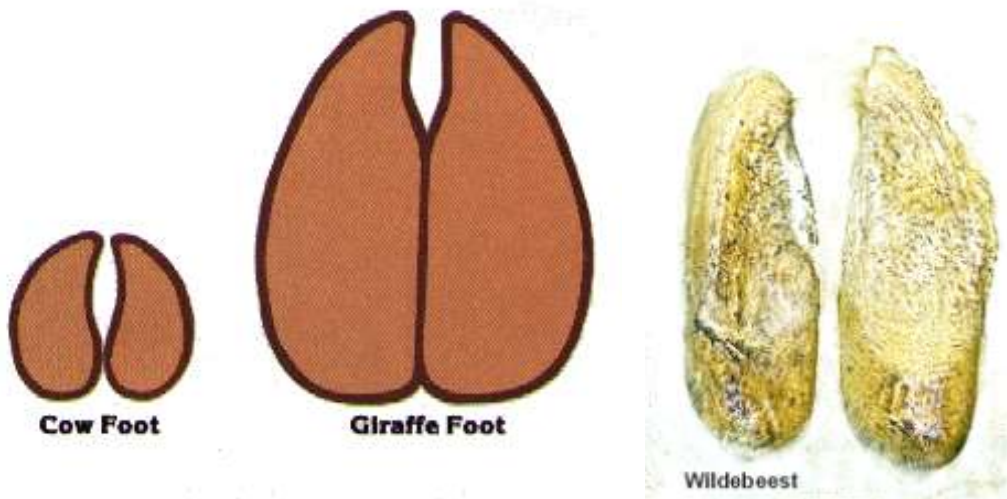
Amatigulu Nature Reserve is 100km north of Durban, so it's an easy one day destination. I often venture up that way, mostly because hardly anybody goes there, but also because I love to walk the Giraffes.



I recall one visit in the Spring. There had been a fire in the Winter and the young green grass shoots were plentiful, the Zebra were scattered all over the reserve, eating their fill and getting nice and fat. There were also many young ones. I quietly drove around, taking photographs, occasionally stopping and walking around, studying the animal tracks and referring to my reference books in an attempt to identify them. It's easier to learn the tracks when there are a limited number of animals in a reserve (Amatigulu has giraffe, zebra, vervet monkeys, waterbuck and some small antelope, to name some).



With a little practice you can become certain of your identification, and then when you enter a large reserve with a wide diversity of species, you're able to eliminate the more common tracks with confidence when you see them.



Spring is also a fantastic time to visit if you're interested in wild flowers. There are some really beautiful flowers here, bright and strong, with insects and bees enjoying them too. And again, spend some time trying to identify them.





Anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself. After driving around for a while (there's a 4x4 only section, a little more about that later) I stopped to walk around and came upon a herd of giraffes. They were a little nervous (so was I, these are large animals when you're on the ground with them), but they allowed me to take a few photographs, and as long as I didn't get too close, especially to the young ones, they were reasonably happy (albeit extremely curious). This is a fantastic experience, both as a photographer and as a nature lover. You're able to get interesting angles and expressions when you're right there among the giraffes!



I recall a visit one winter too, when the grass had died down and the risk (or so I've always believed) of coming across snakes is lower. The grass had dew on it and I decided to take my 4x2 down the 4x4 section. It was easy, I spent an hour or two driving around the pathways in the lower section, taking in the wonderful nature, walking around occasionally, eventually even talking to myself it's so quiet and

peaceful down there. But then, on trying to drive back up the hill with the slippery dew, I realised why there was a 4x4 only sign! Anyway..., it was a long wait at the bottom of the hill until a family came along in their 4x4 and helped me up the hill. How embarrassing.



Getting back to the snakes. I have seen/identified Black Mamba and Natal Bush Snakes here, and have also glimpsed other unidentified types. Snakes are high up on my “do not like” list, and although I haven’t seen any here in the winter, and although I have falsely believed that they hibernate in the winter, be aware that in these sub-tropical regions snakes are certainly out and about during the winter months too. I do still feel safer walking around in the grass during winter though...



Getting out and walking has also rewarded me with some other interesting finds, like coming across an old dry Zebra skull and then being able to remove one of its large teeth to add to my silly collection of souvenirs in my Defender 90 – it really is starting to look like a travelling hippy van I must say, with beads and shells and porcupine quills and feathers hanging from all over the place..

There’s a wonderful lagoon/estuary here with a peaceful and shaded picnic area. When I visit I come early, drive around and walk around all morning, and then when noon comes I head to the picnic area, light myself a fire and quietly sit and overlook the water and the surrounding bush while I sip on a glass of Chardonnay and enjoy a small braai. The picnic site can get a little busy during the summer, with canoes available for paddling, and fishing (license required) also permissible. After lunch I usually take a stroll down the pathway that leads along the waters edge toward the ocean. It’s probably a kilometre or so, and the lagoon doesn’t enter the

ocean. I've noticed there are occasionally a few nudists who hang out (excuse the pun) on this very secluded beach and estuary.



Amatigulu also offers accommodation in the form of rustic tented chalets (with shared ablutions and kitchen). They're quite basic, but clean and tidy and a rather pleasant stay... They also have camp sites which I don't recommend (very basic, no electricity, borderline ablutions), but that's not the reason to visit. It's the quiet peaceful nature that attracts people here, with plenty of hiking trails and a wonderful estuary. And if photography is your game, this is a fine place to take some interesting pictures of birds and animals, and of course, to walk the giraffes...



**Important information:**

GPS co-ordinates: Main Gate S29 06.847 E31 35.299  
Directions: Drive north along the N2 from Durban, approximately 16km past the Tugela River, take the Nyoni Off ramp (S29 07.574 E31 33.707). Turn right and follow the signs.  
Malaria: No  
Safety: It appears to be.  
Road/Vehicle: 4x4 a must of you want to go down to the bottom part of the reserve – not difficult at all.  
Other: KZN Wildlife Reserve – Gold Card gets you free entrance.