

‘Amakhosi’ – place of **Kings**



by Andrew Smith

Situated on the banks of Zululand’s Mkuze River in northern Zululand, approximately 24km from Pongola (only several stone throws away from Swaziland) is the 12 000 ha **Amakhosi Private Game Reserve**.

‘**A** *makhosi*’, a Zulu word meaning *Place of Kings* truly is ‘a place of Kings’ for both man and beast. The ‘beast’ is, naturally, King of the Jungle, the Lion, while the human aspect is the Lodge’s guests, who are treated like royalty from arrival to departure.

The Lodge dream, brain child of Hollander Ben ter Huurne, began in the late 1990s when Ter Huurne found the current site, then utilised as a hunting lodge, and decided to build a safari lodge or, more appropriately, an

eco-camp, from scratch. In 2000 Amakhosi Safari Lodge was born.

The private game reserve is made up of a varied ecosystem which includes savannah, mountains and wetlands making it the ideal home to the Big Five as well as cheetah, giraffe, warthog, hyena, over 15 different antelope species, hippopotamus and crocodile.

For bird-lovers the wetlands offer no less than 420 bird species and the rangers at the reserve offer



Our hosts (from left) Shane Van Niekerk, Guide; Mandla Mahlangu Tracker; and Alwyn Wentzel, Lodge General Manager.

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a unique activity known as ‘frogging’, giving sight to some of the 30-plus frog species living in the reserve. There are 116 recognised frog species in South Africa.

“Our game sightings do vary in different seasons,” comments Lodge General Manager and qualified guide Alwyn Wentzel. “Although guests are able to see the majority of game all year round, winter is easier to find game because food and water are more concentrated than in the summer months. That said, in terms of overall life and not game specific, because of the area we’re in it is a lot richer in the summer months.”

Accommodation

The five star lodge which comprises six luxurious river suites; two honeymoon suites and a bush camp called Ibandla Camp offers the ultimate in bush luxury. The river suites capture nature through ceiling-high windows and private viewing decks across the river, with each suite accommodating two adults and offering an air conditioned lounge, bedroom, bathroom with a bath for two, separate shower and toilet, a safe, fully stocked mini-bar and tea/coffee.

The honeymoon suites which also overlook the river comprise high thatched ceilings and glass walls, an open-plan design with spacious deck, a private bubble pool and hammock, an en-suite bathroom made for two, as well as the facilities in the river suites.

The Ibandla Camp is sold as a separate entity to the lodge and is situated in a remote area of the reserve with dramatic cliff faces and running water over rapids in the river below. The two stone-structured houses accommodates four guests in two en-suite bedrooms and can only be used between May and September as its use is seasonal.

The lodge itself has 38 employees ranging from guides, to chefs, administrators & cleaning staff, and include unseen staff who check fences, mend roads, and do overall reserve management.

A personal experience

“Our focus is on personal attention and making our guests feel at home,” emphasises Wentzel. “Our guests arrive as guests and leave as our friends,” he smiles.

When Julie, my wife, and I arrived at Amakhosi at approximately 19:00 on check-in day (we were late), Alwyn was waiting for us outside the reception area accompanied by a Zulu woman who, smiling broadly, handed us warm wet towels to rub away our journey’s grime and dust.

We were then accompanied into the lounge area and given ice cold lemonade while I filled out the necessary paperwork in absolute comfort and relaxation. In the meanwhile, Alwyn ensured our luggage was safely taken to our river suite. Just before supper we were introduced to our guide, Shane Van Niekerk, who promised us a very early wake-up call if the weather held good, or a not so very early wake up call if it were overcast. Early being 04:30 and not so early 05:30.

Supper was an absolute pleasure with personalised menu’s making you feel extra special, beginning with an aperitif followed by starters, main course, desert and then coffee. The menu offered a selection of one of two dishes for each of the above-mentioned courses.

Our wake-up call came at approximately 05:00 and after some coffee and snacks with some fellow guests (ironically from Holland) and an introduction to our tracker, Mandla Mahlangu, we set off on our game drive and were very pleasantly surprised when, after only about 10-minutes, we saw – what has colloqually become known as ‘the brothers’ – four cheetah lying next the lodge aeroplane runway. Further along the runway was a deserted baby wildebeest, so we waited a while anticipating some action but none was forthcoming as ‘the brothers’ were either ignorant of its presence, or just enjoying the sunshine too much to be bothered.

As Alwyn had mentioned in my interview: “Our safaris are planned inasmuch as our guide know in which

part of our 12 000 ha to look for game and, in addition, our trackers are not only well-trained but also have an inherent ability to track and 'feel' for the game's location. All of our guide are extremely passionate and knowledgeable and therefore able to interpret the whole environment and not just the 'big stuff'."

This was proven when Shane stopped our vehicle in response to a bird call, and after uttering the call himself a few time elicited a response. Even though said bird was invisible to most of us, from the call alone he was able to identify it, give us background and habits, and show a picture of the evasive winged creature.

We later encountered a bull elephant in musk, who passed so closely that had I extended my right arm I would have easily brushed his side. Being in musk, Shane warned us to switch off camera flashes as they may cause the big guy irritation and, of course, that's the last thing you want in such close proximity.

Over the two-day period we encountered four of the 'Big Five', missing the allusive Leopard, which was more than made up for by the antelope, warthog, giraffe, birds and water life which was in abundance. With regards to 'the allusive' Leopard, Shane, our guide, explained: "No amount or type of fencing can keep a Leopard enclosed. They are solitary meanderers and go where and when they please." The fact that Shane, guiding two game drives a day, had not seen Leopard for two or so months is testimony to this fact. "They are around though," he commented with a smile, "so be careful, very careful."

We were fortunate enough to witness four young lions stalking a herd of buffalo. When these two cross paths, the phrase 'ultimate enemies' is bandied about. Our tracker first noticed fresh lion tracks over fresh buffalo tracks and, between him and our guide, we followed them using the long way (sand road) round. The story is too long to relate in an article as short as this, but what excitement for the duration of the 'hunt'. In the end, the buffalo won the day by moving a significant distance from the lions. This could have been attributed to the fact that the lions in question were adolescents and younger, and experienced mom was not around to show them the ropes.

Walking and frogging

The game walks are something of a treat, allowing guests to stretch their legs and try rid themselves of excess weight gained from the excellent food. The guide takes time and effort to point out different types of flora, their role in ecology and on the reserve – the good, the bad (poisonous) and the ugly, while their knowledge of insects and their role in this extraordinary 'society' is rather phenomenal!

Frogging takes place after dark as this is when they are at their liveliest, and Alwyn, who has an absolute passion for frogs, leads this expedition. We encountered a variety of types of these magical creatures with Alwyn pointing out distinct markings which identify different species, and displayed no reservations by getting soaked when catching our webbed friends.

There is so much more to tell but insufficient space to describe it all. I highly recommend a visit to Amakhosi Safari Lodge, and more information can be obtained by phoning: 034 414-1157, Faxing: 034 414-1172 or e-mailing: info@amakhosi.com or visit www.amakhosi.com. □

Amakhosi Safari Lodge is offering *CEO Magazine* readers a special offer of pay for two nights and stay for three. The offer includes three meals per day; two game drives daily; and game drive drinks and snacks, and is valid from 01 April 2010 to 31 May 2010. Other details are:

April

- R3 300 – pp sharing per night in a River Suite.
- R3 800 – pp sharing per night in a Umntwana Honey moon Suite

May

- R2 200 – pp sharing per night in a River suite
- R2 700 – pp sharing per night in a Umntwana Honey moon Suites

The offer excludes all drinks apart from the game drive drinks, massages, internet usage and items of a personal nature. It is also subject to availability and standard terms and conditions.



The 'tusker' who passed less than an arm's length away.



An outside view of one of the River Suites.



A Zulu woman prepares high tea for the Lodge's guests.



The interior of the Honeymoon suite



Lion, we're not scared of Lion!



The lounge interior where one can relax with a glass of vino after the evening game drive.