



Burchell's Zebra approach the water at Kumasinga (top). Tent number 30 has a kitchen and wooden deck to relax on (middle). Above is a Nyala, the mascot of Mkhuze. Pictures: Leon Marais

HIDE AWAY

IN MKHUZE GAME RESERVE

Tour guide **Leon Marais** shares some of the best game viewing

OUR timing was just right. We arrived at Kumasinga Hide just as the coolness of the early morning was dissipating and another hot day announced its arrival. This is the time of the day when animals begin to think about water, and in dry periods the only water for quite a distance is to be found at Kumasinga.

So we settled in and waited. The first to arrive were the Burchell's Zebras, a herd of a dozen or so that approached cautiously from directly opposite us. After a long period of hesitation, the dominant mare approached the water and began to drink. Soon others joined her.

Then came a herd of Nyala, the striped antelope that is perhaps the mascot of Mkhuze. Next up was a herd of nearly 20 boisterous Blue Wildebeest, cavorting and kicking up dust as they made their way down to the water with reckless abandon. They're not nicknamed the "clowns of the veld" for nothing.

Loose herds of Impala joined in the meleé, and on a smaller scale a group of courageous Dark-capped Bulbuls were leading other birds down to the water in a similar fashion to the Nyala.

The bathing Bulbuls were joined by Blue and Common Waxbills, Yellow-throated Petronias (showing off their seldom-seen yellow throats as they drank), a Dusky Indigobird and other seed eaters.

A flash of green, blue and brilliant red announced the arrival of a thirsty Purple-crested Turaco and after minimal deliberation he joined the smaller birds at the water's edge.

Flocks of dancing Brown-veined Whites, Autumn Leaf Vagrants, Common Dotted Borders and other butterflies settled on the muddy margins and here and there Marsh Terrapins hauled themselves out on to rocks, logs and even each other's backs to catch some sun. And while all this was going on a couple of inquisitive young Vervet Monkeys settled in the doorway to the hide behind us, watching intently as we watched the other creatures.

After nearly two hours in the hide the rumbling of stomachs indicated it was time to head back to camp, albeit reluctantly. And even though the clients I was with had spent a week in the Kruger National Park and seen virtually everything, our two days at Mkhuze in northern KwaZulu-Natal were a highlight for them.

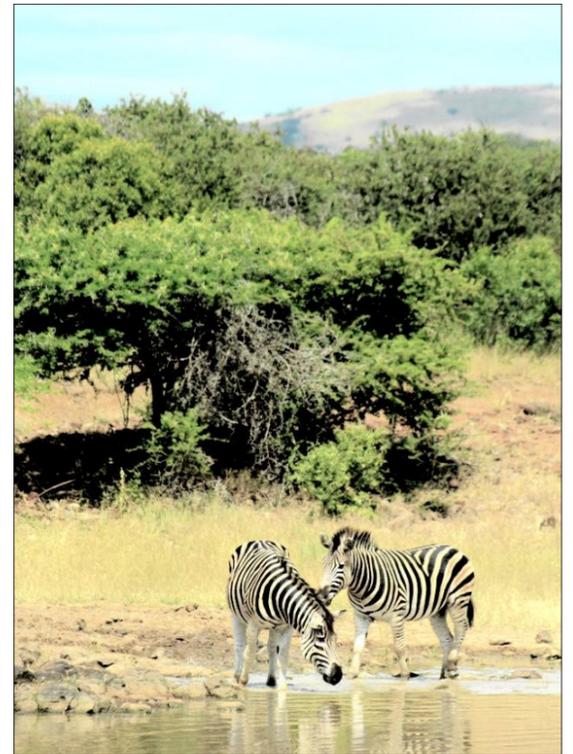
The wildlife viewing from the hides was one of the reasons, but the Mantuma Tented Camp was another major plus factor in the Mkhuze experience.

It's nice to be a bit more intimate with the nature that surrounds you, and tents offer just such an opportunity. By sleeping under canvas the night's noises are not blocked out; the sounds can stir the imagination, as every noise coming from the darkness is multiplied in your mind... perhaps a leopard kill next to the braai, or a hyena clan moving through the kitchen area.

If that sounds a bit scary, well, it is only scary if you imagine it to be. It's actually as safe as houses. The tents have en-suite facilities; the bathroom is tiled, roomy and adequate, there are large wooden decks in front, as well as braai stands and kitchen units with a fridge and freezer.

Utensils are provided, and Mkhuze has a small "Rhino-Dino" take-away shop, so self-catering is essential. But do take extreme precautions to prevent baobons from gaining access to your food.

When I visit Mkhuze, I take a length of strong strapping that can be used to tie the frame securely, and I never leave food in my tent or in the cupboards. Food should be kept in the fridge or, in the case of non-perishables, left locked in your car until needed – simple



Quench your thirst for wildlife viewing by lapping up the action while zebras drink at a waterhole.

but important steps that can prevent your stay being ruined by crafty primates.

Activities in the 40 000 hectare reserve include game drives in your own vehicle along a 100km network of dirt and tar roads that take you through a variety of habitats from dry acacia savannah, open woodland and riverine forest to the sand forest and large, shallow Nsumo Pan.

This diversity of habitats gives the reserve a huge bird list of more than 400 species, one of the highest totals for a protected area in South Africa. Each change in habitat brings a new range of species.

The get-out points and hides provide a welcome break from driving and, at Nsumo Pan, enthralling wildlife viewing as hundreds of water birds such as the massive Pink-backed and Eastern White Pelicans, Yellow-billed Storks, Grey Herons and others come and go across the water, while waders such as African Jacana and Black-winged Stilt make their living along the shoreline and noisy Blue-cheeked Bee-Eaters hawk insects over the water.

There are picnic tables and after a morning in the car it is the ideal spot to have breakfast to the sounds of grunting hippos.

Other activities include a guided walk through the fig forest, which is a must for the birders, as well as other guided game walks and night drives.

Mkhuze is a refreshing bush experience and even though quite a drive from Johannesburg can be combined with a stay in other parts of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park such as Cape Vidal or destinations like Ithala Game Reserve for a week-long holiday.

For more information, consult the KZN Parks website: www.kznwildlife.co.za.

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