

Northwards in Kruger

If you want to escape Kruger National Park's well-beaten paths, head for terrain that offers the laid-back rhythm of the good old days

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☐ Sunset over the Olifants River.



□ The beauty of Kruger's northern landscapes: ancient baobabs tower over a sea of mopani trees.

□ Letaba, spread out under huge riverine trees, is a favourite family camp with an ambience reminiscent of old Kruger.

OUR ADVENTURE BEGAN ONE LATE afternoon on the bridge over the Olifants River – in many ways a watershed between south and north. With a booking at the Olifants Rest Camp some eleven kilometres away, we had time to linger, all the while keeping an eye on the clock so as not to miss the gate closing time. It was that hushed hour at day's end, and we were the only people on the bridge. The potato bush was sending its distinctive aroma into the burnt orange sky while a lone elephant splashed in the slow-flowing water.

The camp's cliff-hanging location affords it an eagle's view over the wide bend of river and the bushveld beyond. A good pair of binoculars and some picnic goodies was all we needed to spend an hour or

two on the lookout deck, spotting elephant, hippo, crocodile and antelope. Because the area is situated in the transitional zone between bushveld and shrubveld, diverse habitats support a wide variety of fauna and the sightings of animals and birds on the various routes around the camp were excellent. On two occasions frustration ruled supreme as a friendly, somewhat smug driver informed us that we had "just missed" a leopard. But we did see a magnificent male lion on the early morning drive to Letaba.

Spread out under enormous mahogany, apple-leaf and sycamore fig trees, Letaba Rest Camp on the banks of the sandy Letaba River is one of the reserve's oldest camps. This is the last resting place of six of the Magnificent Seven, some of the biggest tuskers that roamed the park in the 1980s. Under the cool thatch of the Elephant Museum are the tusks and skulls of Mafunyane, Ndlulamithi, Shawu, Dzombo, Kambaku and Shingwedzi. João, whose ivories had an estimated combined weight of 130 kg, making him the biggest tusker of the Seven, broke both tusks in 1984, but the pieces were never found.

Following the loop of the Letaba River Road with its turning point at the Mingerhout Dam, we continued finding our way north-westward into a mopani-clad landscape. The trees were still dressed in their autumn hues with butterfly-shaped leaves of russets, oranges and gold. Rising above this sea of saturated foliage, stood the gnarled old kings of the savannah, ever so proudly.

It is the oldest and biggest of nature's species that are named by man, so it was with anticipation that we neared Shimuwini, Shangaan for 'Place of the Baobab'. Texture, shape, character, legend – no tree in Africa matches the baobab for pure presence. Our northern expedition was crystallising into a mission to seek out and photograph these enigmatic characters with the wisdom of ages guarded in their scars and folds.

Our den for the night was Shimuwini Bushveld Camp – a place that stole my heart. Swept away by the Letaba River during the 2000 floods, the rebuilt camp is a small haven of thatched, buff-coloured cottages overlooking hippo pools where giraffe, antelope and elephant came to drink. The resident grey duiker sauntered onto our stoep and the camp manager paid a friendly visit to see if everything was in order. The fragrance of wood-fire and braaivleis drifted through the camp as we sat quietly, listening

In a small triangle created by the Luvuvhu and Limpopo rivers, nature has crammed a diversity of plants and animals that represents seventy five per cent of the whole of Kruger.



to the night-time sounds of the bush, underscored by the whooping cry of a hyena. This is one camp I will visit again.

Our early start the following morning did not reward us with cat sightings, but the spectacle of a breeding herd of elephant, kicking up dust as they hurried towards their waterhole, more than made up for it. We were nearing the Tropic of Capricorn, the most southerly circle of latitude that runs through some of the world's more arid climates. It had been a long and dry winter in these northern parts of Kruger, and the temperature was in

the high thirties, enough reason to go and seek out the watering hole at Mopani Camp.

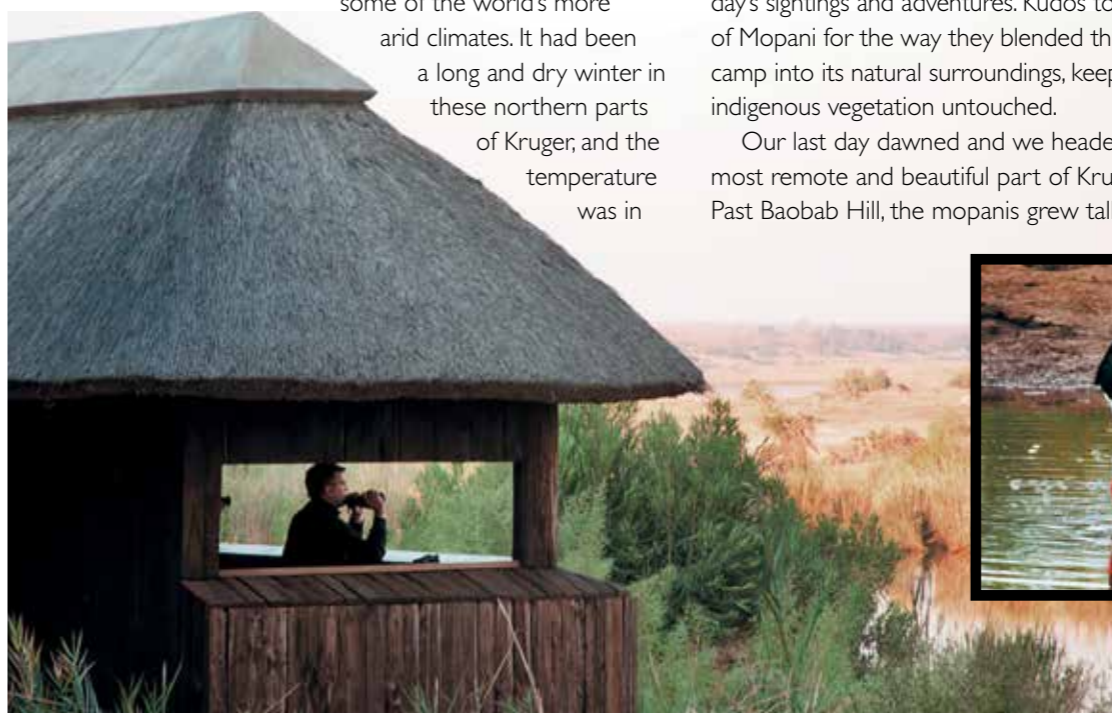
From the deck of the ladies' bar, we had a ringside view of the Pioneer Dam, a tiny miniature of Kariba, complete with dead trees punctuating the waterscape and a pair of Fish-Eagles echoing each other's cries. It seemed that it was always happy hour here, with families dropping in for a cold drink after jogging the in-camp trail and people comparing notes on their day's sightings and adventures. Kudos to the architects of Mopani for the way they blended this modern camp into its natural surroundings, keeping the indigenous vegetation untouched.

Our last day dawned and we headed towards the most remote and beautiful part of Kruger: Pafuri. Past Baobab Hill, the mopanis grew taller, sightings

□ In the sparse shade of an acacia, an adult male lion finds refuge from the heat.

□ Birdwatching from Shimuwini's hide is very rewarding.

□ A long-legged saddle-billed stork intent on finding tasty fish or frog for breakfast.





□ In a cloud of dust, a very thirsty breeding herd of elephant rushes towards a waterhole in a dry riverbed..

□ The Pafuri Picnic Site on the banks of the Levuvhu River.

picked up significantly while traffic trickled to just about zero. In a small triangle created by the Luvuvhu and Limpopo rivers, nature has crammed a diversity of plants and animals that represents seventy five per cent of the whole of Kruger. Turning east towards the Pafuri picnic site on the Luvuvhu's banks, we entered the riverine forest with its colossal nyala berry and fever trees.

Set in the lovely rhythm of the past few days, we were reluctant to leave the picnic site after a late lunch, but the exit time at the Pafuri Gate, and the world beyond, called. It is of this area that T.V. Bulpin wrote, 'In this most pleasant place, then, our journey regrettably ends, leaving the longing to return once again to see the cheeky glossy starlings; to breathe in the air... to feel close to nature for just a little while before civilization envelops you once more in its depressing rush'. ■

Map reference A8
see inside back cover



Letaba



Olifants



Mopani



Shimuwini Bushveld Camp



CAMPS

LETABA

Letaba is a peaceful camp spread out in spacious indigenous gardens with accommodation units arranged in semi-circles facing the Letaba River. The units range from safari tents with communal facilities, to air-conditioned two- or three-bed huts and bungalows with basic facilities. Two luxury guest houses, the Fish Eagle and Melville, accommodate groups of eight to nine. The popular campsite has ample shade, and ablutions and kitchens are communal. There is a restaurant and cafeteria. **013 735 6636/7**

OLIFANTS

It is hailed as the camp in Kruger with the best views, and the units on the perimeter are the most popular. It is a good idea to inquire about these units when booking. There are air-conditioned, one- and two-bedroom bungalows, either with communal facilities or with their own kitchenettes and bathrooms. The two guesthouses, Lebombo and Nshawu are fully equipped and sleep eight. The restaurant is popular and there is a well-stocked shop. **013 735 6606/7**

MOPANI

Mopani is a large, modern camp, but has kept its bush ambience because of the clever layout and the fact that the natural vegetation was left intact. The bungalows all have fully equipped kitchenettes and bathrooms and each sleeps two to four. Four-sleepers have two singles plus bunk beds, an arrangement that will suit families with younger children. The fully equipped three-bedroomed guest cottages each sleep six and have two bathrooms. Eight people can enjoy the luxury Xanatseni Guest House with its four en-suite bedrooms, one of which is wheelchair-friendly. **013 735 6535/6**

SHIMUWINI BUSHVELD CAMP

Kruger's small bush camps offer guests the optimum opportunity to experience the essence of Kruger. These camps have no shops or restaurants and guests can enjoy the tranquility. Shimuwini's accommodation is spacious, tastefully furnished and well-equipped. Cottages for up to six guests are available. **013 735 6683**