

KRUGER - AUGUST 2007

The Family had been bitten by the wildlife watching bug the previous year in Yellowstone. We liked the idea of driving ourselves rather than an organized safari so Africa did not seem the right place. However, we found Kruger National Park.

Kruger is one of few wildlife parks where you can drive yourself. The SANPARKS (South Africa National PARKS) website was very useful with lots of information gained from reading the forums. The accommodation in the Park was all booked using the SANPARKS website

We flew from London Heathrow to Johannesburg using Iberian Airlines, with a stop in Madrid. The flight was uneventful and we arrived safely in Jo'burg at 10.30am on Thursday 16th August. The VW Sharan was picked up at the airport and we set off. We did get a bit lost but we went back to the airport and found the correct road! The roads are good and relatively quiet.

We had decided to enter Kruger at Phalabowra gate, which is not the nearest, and spend the first couple of days enjoying the wonderful scenery along the Panorama Route. Our first night was booked at the Hotel Floreat in Sabie. We therefore turned off of the main road at Belfast and headed through Dullstroom and Lydenburg. It did not go according to plan. Travelling up a hill, past a slow truck, the engine started to rev highly. We managed to get past and then coasted downhill. The clutch had gone! We spent the next three hours waiting on the side of the road, for a replacement vehicle. We phoned the hotel and told them that we would be late. They were very good. They would have made us some sandwiches if we were really late but luckily we got there about 8.00, just as the restaurant was closing, but they held it open just for us. We had however missed some views, particularly those into a wildlife park.

17th August – We had a relaxed start to the day as we had had a long day yesterday. Up for a cooked breakfast at 9.00 and then out for a short walk around Sabie before heading to Phalabowra for our second night. Today was our main day on the Panorama route. We stopped at several places en-route: Mac Mac Pools – a series of natural pools creating a long waterfall. A bit short of water!

Mac Mac Falls - a 65m high waterfall.

The Pinnacle – a rock stack.

God's Window and Wonder View – Views across the Lowveld.

Bourke's Luck Potholes – R22 to enter but worth it. A series of strange rock formations caused by swirling water.

Three Rondavals – Good views of three rock formations across a valley. We saw our first wild mammals here, as a troop of BABOONS crossed the road in front of us.

There were several stalls along the road side and at the stops selling local hand-made crafts.

We arrived at the African Lily Lodge, Phalabowra at 6.00.

18th August – Another cooked breakfast before setting off for the local shopping mall to stock up on supplies before entering Kruger. We entered the Park about 12.00 and soon saw plenty of wildlife. The first mammals that we saw in the park were GIRAFFE. We stopped at the first waterhole that we came

across. There were STEENBOK, IMPALA and ZEBRA there. Soon an ELEPHANT arrived, followed by a WARTHOG.

Our first three nights in the Park were to be at Bateleur Bushveld camp. This is a remote camp of only seven lodges. The animals kept coming! More Elephants and Impala, and a small herd of Zebra. A small herd of WATER BUFFALO and two male KUDU were seen after the turn-off to Bateleur. We arrived at Bateleur at 4.30, to our three bedroomed lodge with outside kitchen diner. A lot of noise alerted us to a large herd of Water Buffalo at the waterhole just outside the camp fence, which we could see using the night goggles that we had. The two boys saw a GENET near the lodge when returning after the Water Buffalo.

19th August - The gates of the camps in Kruger are closed between about 6.00pm to 6.00am. This means that to make the most of the Park, you have to be up and out fairly early. Today we left Bateleur at 7.15. Our first stop was the local water hole, Silvervis, where we saw a CROCODILE. Elephants, WATER BUCK, NYALA and Kudu were seen on the road to Shingwedzi. We decided to go to Kaniedood Dam Bird Hide, which is one of the few places in the Park that you can get out of your car. Animals seen here were HIPPOPOTAMUS, Nyala, Crocs and a family of Elephants, as well as several birds. We returned to Bateleur early in the afternoon for a break before going out on an organized Sunset Drive. We visited the Roosiband water hole for Crocs, Hippos and birds, before a general drive around, seeing Impala, Water Buffs, elephant and another Steenbok and our first CARACAL, SCRUB HARE and possible Civet.

20th August – We decided to have a day in the north of the Park and visit Crooks Corner where South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique meet at the Limpopo river. We did not see any new animals and had decided not to stop unless we did. We stopped at the Babalala picnic area for breakfast at about 9.00 and reached the bridge at Parfuri at 11.00. Bridges are some of the places that you are allowed to get out of the car, basically as animals can only approach you from two directions and they can be seen relatively easily. We did see several animals from the bridge including one antelope that we, and several other people, could not recognize. We had lunch at Parfuri Picnic spot where we were shown a vulture nest, and encountered our first VERVET MONKEYS as well as baboons. We arrived back at our lodge about 5.30 to pack ready for our change of venue tomorrow. We noticed tonight how quickly it got dark. At 4.30 the temperature gauge in the car still read over 30 degrees centigrade ; two hours later at 6.30 it was dark! There is no late afternoon cooling down period.

21st August – A lay-in today! We didn't get up until 7.30! We finished packing and were away by 8.30. We visited the local waterhole where we saw Hippos out of the water for the first time and some water buffalo. There were many birds around including fish eagles building a nest. Passed through the Tropic of Capricorn , stopping for the obligatory photos. We took a long drive to Letaba which was to be our next camp. Saw many animals including zebra, elephant, WILDEBEEST and water Buffalo but the best sighting was of a couple of TSESSEBE at Dzombo waterhole. These are not particularly common in Kruger. Had good views of a herd of elephants at Letaba River bridge. Had burger and chips, with ice cream for seconds at Letaba and went to bed early, ready for tomorrow!

22nd August – Up at 5.30 and out of the gate by 6.15. The plan was to get back for lunch and have a few hours rest before going out again; it didn't work out like that! After seeing another hippo out of the water along the Letaba river, we spotted a COMMON DUIKER, and then our first LEOPARD. We actually found it! It didn't stay around for long. We then found another small antelope that we thought was a Steenbok. It wasn't until I looked closer at the photos when we got home that I realized that we had seen a SHARPE'S GRYSBOK. KLIPSPRINGERS were seen from Olifant's lookout. Rusks for breakfast at Olifants camp. Drove along the S100 and saw many animals but nothing that we had not seen before, although the Secretary bird was pleasing. Called in at Satara for a comfort break, before taking the H1-4 back to Letaba; WHITE RHINOCEROS and BLACK BACKED JACKAL were seen. We eventually arrived back at Letaba at 4.00 where we did a few chores (laundry, shopping) before having a chicken and worst brai.

23rd August – Strange day today. We met at the camp café for a good breakfast before heading north. There was not much about. A car had stopped in the road and we soon saw why. A large bull elephant was just in front. It did not look too happy! After about 10 minutes the car in front put their foot down and went for it. They got through okay but the elephant seemed even more angry, and had moved closer to the road. We waited another 5 minutes and decided to turn around and went south towards Satara. Other than a group of five rhino and some ground hornbill, nothing was seen. We looked at the sightings board at Satara and decided to take the S100 again. Many animals were seen but nothing new. A Kori Bustard was nice. There was a good sighting of another Rhino close to the road on the way back to Letaba, where we arrived at 5.45, only 15 minutes before the gates closed.

24th August – Four SPOTTED HYENAS crossing the road after only ten minutes got the day off to a good start. It was to get better. Several cars parked up ahead indicated something special. Our first LION of the trip was just sitting there out in the open. A troop of baboons approached but after making a lot of noise decided to turn back. We continued south. A cry from our daughter in the back seat alerted us to a group of five lionesses near the Olifants turn-off. A car jam soon occurred with cars all over the place; many too close forcing the animals to change direction. We stayed around for half an hour before heading to Satara for breakfast. Drove the S100 again – Waterbuck jousting, lioness with collar, large herd of zebra, baboons chasing vervets and a small herd of elephants. We found a lion kill that we had been told about the previous day – young male lion on the carcass with three black backed jackals and lots of vultures in attendance.

We returned to Letaba earlier today as we were booked in on a Bush Brai. We stopped at reception, where we saw a car being searched – apparently a spitting cobra had climbed into the engine! The Bush Brai was excellent. A short early evening game drive (not much about) was followed by a brai in the bush. Food was good with plenty of it with three different types of salad and three hot dishes to go with the kebabs, wings and worst sausages, all washed down with beer and wine. A couple of guards with guns kept a look out for us, just in case.

25th August – Did not get away until 8.00 following our trip the previous evening. No mammal sightings along the main road. Saw most of the usual suspects – giraffe, elephant, zebra with a good sighting of an ostrich. I lost my tea break biscuit at Mazandzeni picnic area. A hornbill took advantage of the time it

took to get it from the packet into my mouth. The rest of the family laughed. I don't know why! Watched a large elephant walk past the picnic area. We had several good bird sightings on the way to the Southern Most Baobab Tree. Arrived at Satara, our camp for the night, at about 4.00. Early night ready for another trip along the S100 before heading off to our final camp.

26th August – Out at 6.05 to drive to our final destination Berg'n'dal. We decided to take the scenic route and headed out on the S100 for the final time. Water Buffalo and Duiker. Lone Hyena at 6.30. Good views of Giraffe, Wildebeest and Zebra. Very brief views of a BLACK RHINOCEROS, which are quite rare in the Park. Turned onto the H6 where a SLENDER MONGOOSE was seen and a large herd of 300+ Water Buffalo was interesting. Continued along the H1-3 towards Tshokwane, which was to be our breakfast stop. Wart Hog, White Rhino, a Lizard Buzzard and a Brown Hooded Kingfisher kept us occupied. After breakfast, we continued south along the H10 to Lower Sabie, where we had distant views of a Lioness across the river. H4-1 to Skukuza for lunch, then H3 to Malelane – Three ground hornbill, water buffalo, mongoose. White rhino, giraffe and elephant on final road to camp. A Spotted Genet and a Gecko were seen on a walk around the camp

27th August – A day of highs and lows. Out of the gate at 6.05 to drive the S110 loop around the Camp. A few Rhino about but little else. Continued along the S114. A Pied Kingfisher and a large Croc at Biyamati Wier were the only animals of note. We stopped at Afsaal for breakfast and found the famous Scops owl high in a tree. A lioness seemed to be hunting nearby Zebra and Impala at Ample-se-Boorgat waterhole but after waiting half an hour, she had not moved so we continued our journey. We returned to B'n'D for lunch before setting off again at 4.00 along the S110. A couple of Rhino at the Matjulu waterhole but nothing else.... Until... we were just about to turn off the main road back to the camp when we saw a lot of cars parked up. We didn't have much time to spare but decided to check it out. It was a Leopard in a tree. We had driven around all day and here was a Leopard only 1km from the turn off to the camp. Another Genet was seen in the camp, by everyone apart from me!

28th August – Our last full day in the Park. We had booked the morning walk today. A Lion family crossed the road in front of our truck only ten minutes after we left camp. We set off on the walk. Saw a few Impala in the distance as we headed towards a lookout point. A Rhino was spotted and we tracked it for a while before eating our snack watching it from about 50m. We passed within about 50m of two elephants on the way back to the truck. We returned to Camp at 9.05 and quickly had some coffee and toast before heading off in the car again. The leopard in the tree had gone. We took the road to Afsaal, where somebody told us about a lion cub nearby. We soon found it and spent the next half an hour watching it. We returned to Berg'n'dal where we had lunch and packed a bit before going out again at 4.00. After stopping to let 20 elephants pass we proceeded to the leopard. It was back again and this time we had left ourselves plenty of time to watch it.

29th August – We had a few hours to drive around Kruger before heading back to Jo'burg. There was a male lion sitting alongside the road which soon attracted a crowd. We checked the notice board at Afsaal but there was nothing that we had not seen within a reasonable distance. We left Kruger at about midday but our adventures were not over!

Upon arriving at the airport we could not find our flight. We later found out that the flights now only flew six days a week but nobody had told us. After several phone calls and discussions we rebooked the following day. We spent the night at the airport hotel and took a local tour, visiting Soweto and Jo'burg town centre, the following day. After that the flight home was uneventful.

A total of 28 mammals were seen, as well as Crocodile and Gecko, and numerous birds including Kori Bustard, Ground Hornbill, Secretary bird, Ostrich and a nesting vulture. The main animals that we hoped to see but could not find, were Cheetah and Wild Dog, although we knew that both would be difficult.

We do wish however that we had taken the trip in the opposite direction. There are two main reasons for this: There were many opportunities along the Panorama Route to purchase locally made crafts. We did not buy much because we thought wrongly, that we would see more later on the trip. Also, it would have been better to visit the quieter Bushveld camp later, as a relaxing finish to the holiday, as the animals in that area were not so prevalent.