

Publication: SundayTimesEastLondon - Lifestyle

Title: TUSKERS AND TEMBE: AFRICA AS IT ONCE WAS

Publish date: 02 Feb 2025

Page: 10

Reach: 6000

AVE: R 447843.00

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FEATURE



Elephants are thriving in Maputaland. Pictures SUPPLIED

TUSKERS AND TEMBE: AFRICA AS IT ONCE WAS

Forget your troubles at Tembe Elephant Park in Maputaland, where the splendour of the bush offers you a welcome respite from the rigours of the rat race. By **Maureen Girdlestone**

Wanderlust is an addiction for me. It has been ever since, as a teenager, I boarded a lilac-hulled Union Castle vessel to set sail for new horizons, with just a few pounds in my pocket. Thus, when I heard about Tembe Elephant Park, my ears pricked up. "Where on Earth is that?" I wondered.

Tembe is in the top northeast corner of KwaZulu-Natal, bordering Eswatini and Mozambique, in an area known as the Elephant Coast. As the crow flies, the park is almost 2,000km away from the Cape.

The Tembe people pride themselves on being the first Nguni nation to migrate south from Central Africa down the east coast centuries ago, where they found an area abundant with game and wildlife. They were the first, too, to establish a game reserve owned, run and managed by themselves. Thanks to a unique conservation model put in place by the Tembe people and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, elephants thrive in Maputaland's coastal forests, bushland and thickets.

Over time, their population has burgeoned in this peaceful paradise. Some elephants migrated east, away from encroaching civilisation in Natal, while others came south from Delagoa Bay, to escape the bullets and gunfire of the war in Mozambique. The Tembe elephants are



Glamping, Tembe-style. Beauty in nature.

said to be the largest in Africa and apparently have the longest tusks. *Isilo*, which means "King of Kings" in Zulu, who died several years ago, was more than 50 years old and weighed almost seven tonnes. He stood more than 3m tall and had 2.5m tusks weighing 65kg. The Tembe elephants are said to carry more ivory than those in the Kruger National Park.

We flew to Durban's King Shaka International Airport and then took the N2 up the KwaZulu-Natal north coast. Our eyes were soon drawn to a strange sight:

trucks parked nose-to-tail alongside the oncoming lane, looking like crusty, black crocodile corpses. The seemingly never-ending line snaked over the next hill and even further for kilometres. The vehicles were just sitting there waiting to get into Richards Bay to drop off their loads of coal for export.

As we left the depressing scene behind us, the countryside became more rural. Umbrella thorn acacias grew sporadically among small homesteads consisting of a tiny rondavel or two in the yard. Cattle

ruled here, as in the rest of Zululand. They grazed nonchalantly on the hills and right beside the N2, keeping our driver on his toes. He said resignedly, "Cattle are considered currency here."

Abundant eucalyptus plantations followed, the trees standing in stark rows. Tall slender trunks reached for the sky in their thousands, like a platoon of soldiers stiffly on parade. Wood for Africa.

Our first stop was to explore the 16,000ha Lake Jozini. About 30km long and 5km wide, it is fed by the Pongola River, which flows from the foothills of Eswatini. We stayed at the luxurious Tiger Fish Lodge, a favourite of fishermen. Our multilevel room sat high on the hill and had beautiful views overlooking the dam wall. We took a short boat ride around the heavily-wooded shore and spotted a couple of crocodiles dozing in or dipping beneath the water, never expecting we would be dining on croc that evening. The meal was surprisingly delicious.

GONE GLAMPING

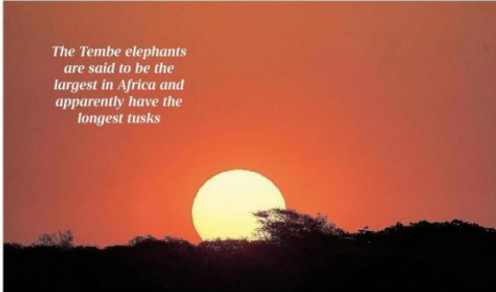
Then on to Tembe to a warm welcome and a first impression of elegant simplicity. There is a spacious, cool communal area, open on two sides, where guests gather for meals. It has all the basic necessities, including a well-stocked bar.

The accommodation is entirely tented. Head guide Vusi Tembe led us along soft white sandy tracks that cut through the dense bush to our tent. No campsite is

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Publication: SundayTimesEastLondon - Lifestyle
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AVE: R 455961.00
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The Tembe elephants are said to be the largest in Africa and apparently have the longest tusks

An awe-inspiring sunset in Maputaland.



The Tembe lodge offers luxurious accommodation in a secluded magical setting.

visible to any of the others. In the distant past, this area was beneath the sea, Vusi explained.

What a treat our first experience of "glamping" was! We had our own patio with two comfortable camp chairs to relax on as well as a spacious interior with every comfort a weary traveller could wish for: two queen-sized beds with crisp white linen, electric blankets, air conditioning and a bar fridge. There was also an en-suite bathroom at the rear as well as a huge outdoor shower set against the electric fence that protects the lodge area.

Vusi mischievously said elephants sometimes came right up to the other side of the fence – a guest had apparently reported seeing a long trunk stretching over the fence while he was showering, scaring the wits out of him. Vusi's broad grin was a clue this might just be a tall story (no pun intended).

Showering became a special treat, given the piping hot gas-heated water and splendid view of grazing antelope on offer. Crested guinea fowl also came clucking past at this time.

On our first game drive, we saw abundant antelope, impala and nyala;



An elephant saunters past a game vehicle.



Crested guinea fowl made a regular appearance at the Tembe campsite.

warthog; and a distant giraffe. Then we experienced a heart-stopping moment. The usual bone-shaking bounce of the game vehicle suddenly stopped and from down the road the immense bulk of an elephant approached. It lumbered towards us at a leisurely pace, though these African giants can reach speeds of up to 10km/h.

"It's the wrong thing to try to reverse," Vusi warned. He placed a finger on his lips to indicate we should keep quiet. The magnificent creature, one of the largest mammals on Earth, kept heading towards us and then it sauntered right past our vehicle, so close we could have reached out and touched its hide. My son managed to take a close-up picture of the elephant's

eye, the magnificent animal's eyelashes clearly visible.

We then stopped for sundowners – *utshwala-tshwala* time, as Vusi called it. This is a reference to beer, though G&Ts are in fact the favoured tipple.

On a flat, open stretch of ground, a few elephants put on a magical show for us in a mud pool. Five or six of them sprayed themselves and each other with mud until they became blacker than the darkening sky, before rubbing their hides against each other to dislodge various pesky critters. Then with their bodies blackened, they trundled off, one after another, like spooky creatures from the depths of darkness. Spa completed.

We went back to the lodge for drinks and dinner. The bush cuisine, served buffet style, was simple but ample and very tasty. We enjoyed different game each evening: impala, nyala and a particularly delicious warthog.

Then we slept like logs in our gorgeous tents, undisturbed even by a persistent cricket.

The welcome pack at Tembe describes the Tembe people as softly spoken, peaceful and respectful of both human and animal life. They set great store by their ancestors, and I don't think we ever heard a raised voice while we were there.

We were up early for the morning game drive, with coffee in our hands out on our patio, where we enjoyed seeing the first rays of sun dappling the leaves of the surrounding bush with light. The sense of peace was almost tangible and it permeated the soul. Silence, broken only by the occasional call of birds, welcomed the dawn. It was freedom from cellphones for a while, with Wi-Fi available only in the office. The setting was so peaceful and relaxing, we were almost tempted simply to chill at the lodge and forgo the drive altogether.

Each game drive went off in a different direction, through either sand forest or woodland, beneath mahogany or marula trees. Vusi hopped out of the vehicle to pluck a bright yellow monkey orange from a bush, before bashing it on a rock to crack it open. This was a chance for us to taste a fruit the game cat for its nutritional value and antioxidant powers. Though the sweet-and-sour bush orange was not to my taste, it was yet another never-to-be-forgotten experience.

We stopped beside a long, straight sandy road to make space for an approaching elephant. A huge one. Were they getting larger? It trundled towards us, getting closer and closer. Its pace was steady and there were no obvious signs of hubris. Still it came towards us, until we were looking right at its forehead. Just when we thought its long tusks might scrape the vehicle's mudguards, it veered off at the same leisurely pace and vanished into the bush. Phew! Now we can breathe again.

When our midmorning break rolled around, a few thrilled passengers disembarked from the vehicle to enjoy hot coffee laced with Amarula as well as heavenly homemade rusks. It turned out to be a momentous morning when we later came across a pride of lions feeding on a

GETAWAY AT A GLANCE

WHERE IT IS: Tembe Elephant Park is a game reserve in Maputaland.

ACCOMMODATION: Luxury tents accommodating up to two, three or six people.

RATES: From R 1,740 per person sharing per night (low season). Children aged 0–3 years stay free. Children aged 3–11 pay half price. Rates include accommodation, meals, two daily game drives and transfers to and from the hide during the day. The price excludes beverages from the bar and drinks consumed on game drives as well as laundry and spa treatments.

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nyala kill. They were semi-hidden in the dense bush until one came out to pick up a stray morsel closer to the road, allowing us to briefly eyeball the "king of the jungle".

The drive ended humorously as we observed the hyperactive antics of a mongoose in a pile of elephant dung. He was so preoccupied by his exertions he scarcely gave us a glance.

Sadly, our stay was coming to an end. On our last drive, while we were making our way back to the campsite in the pitch darkness of a moonless night, the sharpest eyes in the vehicle spotted in the glow of the searchlight a speckled blur ahead of us. The creature immediately disappeared into the bush, but it was a leopard – a fitting finale to an unforgettable visit to a remote and pristine corner of the country that reveals Africa as it once was.

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