

Northeast South Africa: Kruger and More

About 4 Weeks: October-November 2019 – First Draft, 3 November 2018

Over the years, many of our South African trips have gone into Kruger. To date, none has remained in the park for more than a week. We spend up to three weeks in Kakadu, a park of a similar size, so we decided to see what we do of a similar length in Kruger. We plan to spend about two weeks in the park on this trip. Exactly what we do will be determined both by the wishes of the group and by what is available when it comes time to book.

This document gives some of the possibilities. It is a DRAFT. We can't do every single thing listed below but they should give you an idea of what to expect.

We plan to hire one or two vehicles in Johannesburg and drive to the park. Hiring 4WD vehicles is more expensive, but it does open up more possibilities.

Everyone who goes into Kruger pays a daily 'conservation fee'. As we are going to spend so much time in the park, the best way to do this is by purchasing a Wild Card. The current price is R2430 for individuals or R3800 for couples. This was about A\$260 and A\$410 at the time this was written. For more information see https://www.sanparks.org/wild_new/

Extended Walks in Kruger

There are two types of long walks in Kruger, one where you are transported to a base camp from which you do day walks, one where you carry everything with you on a multi-day walk. We have done both and would like to include both in this trip.

There are three backpacking trails where you carry everything and provide all your own food and equipment. For more information see

<https://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/tourism/activities/backpacking.php>

These cost R2950 per person. The photos here were all taken on the Kruger backpacking trail we did in 2010.



Setting off on a backpacking trail



Coming down to a river bed. The guides carry rifles.



Setting up camp. On this trip, we did a base camp and a day walk from there.



The photo of the buffalo here was taken from our campsite.

Left to right: on a day walk, relaxing at lunch, studying animal tracks.





On the easier trails, you get a basic bed in a camp and all meals provided. For more information see <https://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/tourism/activities/wilderness/about.php>

These cost R4800 per person.

To get to both kinds of trails you are transported in a vehicle like the one shown at left. The following pictures were taken on our easy Kruger walk in 2008.



Left to right above: on the trail with our armed guides, hiking along, camp accommodation – bit better than your own tent, looking at animal signs.



Left to right above: snack stop on one of the walks, rhino and elephant seen just outside our camp – the only thing between us and them was 50 metres and a single strand of heavy duty cable, final scenic view on the last night.

Other Kruger Adventures

Mountain bike trail accompanied by armed guides. Using one of their bikes, the cost is R1025 per person. See https://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/tourism/activities/mountain_bikes.php

There is a link on that page that takes you to three short video clips about the trip.

There are a couple of short 4WD Eco Trails, on one of which you camp overnight. See https://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/tourism/activities/eco_trails.php

Getting more adventurous, there are some longer 4WD trails, see <https://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/tourism/activities/4x4.php>

There is a link to a short video about the trip and links to other information.

The Mafunyane Trail described on the page above costs R6300 per vehicle (up to 4 pax) and goes for four days and three nights. While we haven't done a Kruger 4WD tour, we have done in one of the other South African Parks where we went well off the beaten track. Good value.

Game drives and night drives. We can do a lot, maybe all, of the day driving ourselves but the night drives can't be done except on a tour. They give you a chance to see animals you'd never see in the day. Definitely worth doing at least one.



Picture yourself in a car like the ones shown in the two photos at the bottom of the last page. They were taken on two of our drives in Kruger. As you can see, the animals always have right of way.

Far Northern Kruger

On some of our previous trips, we've made it as far north as the Punda Maria Camp. We'd like to go that last little bit into the Pafuri area. There is even another extended walk here, the Pafuri Walking Trail. This is on a private concession. I've tried looking it up on Google and thus far have found many mentions, but not a lot of good information. The best I've found so far is <https://www.returnafrica.com/activities/pafuri-walking-trails/>

While they suggest that people doing the trail stay at the Pafuri Lodge, with a minimum price of over A\$400 per person per night, twin share, we might see what else is available. But, if people would like that touch of luxury, we can do it.

To put that kind of price into perspective, have a look at the Pafuri River Camp website, <http://www.pafuri.co.za/>

It's just outside the park, far cheaper and looks pretty good to me. There is quite a lot on their website. Well worth a visit. Two of our former clients who recently visited the area recommended it. They also suggested a stop at the Pafuri Border Camp beside the SA/Mozambique border crossing point, "quite upmarket and so a bit more expensive than the usual NP accommodation, very quiet, nice swimming pool, great if you want to be at Crooks Corner or Pafuri Picnic Site or other nearby birding hotspots first thing in the morning (at least 30 minutes before anyone else overnighing further away can get there)." Expensive yes but much cheaper than Pafuri Lodge.

Another possibility suggested by our friends is, "With regard to walking in the Pafuri area, get in touch with Ecotraining (<https://www.ecotraining.co.za/camps/kruger-national-park/>) who have a base camp in the Makuleke concession between Pafuri and the Limpopo. We spent four days there a few years ago and went on morning and afternoon walks with their trainee field guides who were being given their final field assessment. We played the role of tourists they were guiding, so we enjoyed plying them with a mixture of unusual as well as typically ignorant questions - lots of laughs! Both the trainers and the trainees were very interesting and knowledgeable people, so lots of fascinating conversations as well. Ecotraining also do very basic 6-day wilderness walking tours where you camp anywhere, drink water (filtered) from puddles etc. and just walk through the bush. If you could coordinate dates with them I am sure they would be very interested in hosting a party of 8 to 10 walkers - see <https://www.ecotraining.co.za/programs-courses/wilderness-trails-skills/>."

Mapungubwe National Park

The same two people recently visited the area and suggested adding on a visit to Mapungubwe NP - small but stunning scenery and a 4WD trail too. For more information on Mapungubwe see <https://www.sanparks.org/parks/mapungubwe/>

Mozambique?

Northern Kruger borders on a large park in Mozambique. It may be practical to cross the border and have a look.

Accommodation and Meals

We'll be doing a lot of self catering but will have some restaurant or lodge meals as well. Some of the Kruger camps are only self-catering. One of my favourites is Shimuwini, definitely worth a return visit.



This little antelope came for a visit at our Shimuwini accommodation in 2004.

Getting to and from Kruger

Johannesburg to southern Kruger is a long drive. Much longer to the northern end of the park. There are lots of other interesting walks we can do on the drives. I'll start working on some of them when I have some expressions of interest in the trip.

What does it cost?

South Africa is one of the few countries where the Australian dollar still goes a long way. Our fee is \$1795. Our public liability insurance requires you to have your own travel insurance. It may sound like overkill, but I have heard of a case where the Travel Insurer sued a tour operator for something that happened that they had to cover.

The \$1795 covers the guide, who also acts as organiser and sometimes the cook. In addition, you will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, accommodation, transport, etc. The guide will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort, reliability and availability will allow.

If exchange rates stay similar, our town accommodation should cost anywhere from about A\$30 to A\$70 per night. The relatively low cost of restaurant meals and the high quality of our accommodation have been one of the more pleasant aspects of our previous trips.

Accommodation in Kruger is likely to be more expensive on average.

Some of the accommodation will be in self-catering cottages. Participants will be encouraged to share in the cooking and/or cleaning up. If everyone takes a turn, it's relatively easy for all concerned.

Based on our recent expenses, we do not expect the whole trip to cost less than \$5500 or more than \$7500. This does not include airfares or any souvenir shopping you may do. We should have a more accurate estimate closer to departure.

What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring, the probable weather, etc. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing most of the food shopping for the self-catering cottages and overnight walks (if any), organising accommodation etc. You also get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses. Hiring a vehicle as part of a group costs far less than hiring it with only two or three.

Note 1. All parks in South Africa charge fees. Most charge more for international visitors. As mentioned on page one, it is likely to be better to purchase a Wild Card which pays fees for all parks. See https://www.sanparks.org/wild_new/ Couples can save more with Wild Cards as a couples card is cheaper than two singles while there is no saving on individual entry for couples.

Note 2. Some of what you get for your money is not very visible. Bushwalking in South Africa is restricted, even for some day walks. Where possible permits should be arranged well in advance. If we want to stay in park accommodation, bookings need to be made far in advance.

While we will be in some sort of accommodation most nights, much of that accommodation is self-catering, possibly far from the nearest store. This means that you might spend time relaxing or sightseeing while the guide goes out and hits the supermarkets, then spends an hour (or two or three) doing the final organising for the meals on the next section. If you can't see the value in services like these, you are unlikely to feel that you are getting real value for your fee.

Note 3. If you are over 65 you will need a medical certificate to say you are fit enough to participate in some of the walks. This hasn't been a problem in the past as the walks requiring the certificate are no harder than the ones which don't.

Note 4. Prices are subject to change.

Note 5. A large majority of those who have taken part in our overseas tours are Australian so all prices are quoted in Australian dollars. We have had several people from other countries take part by making their own travel arrangements to and from the start and finish points.

Note 6. All bushwalks are subject to change due to weather conditions. We will be there at the beginning of their rainy season. Not as wet as ours but rain is definitely possible. As the Kruger walks will have been booked, we cannot cancel, only the park authorities can do that.

Note 7. Vehicles have been a problem for us in the past – it was hard to get small vehicles suitable for four or five people with pack on gravel roads. An eight person minibus worked well on one trip, Toyota Condors on another. The 4WD Hi Lux twin cab we had in 2017 was ideal. While we'll try for a similar vehicle, we've seldom managed the same vehicles on two trips so far. The car companies keep changing their offerings. Using two vehicles would allow us to do through walks as well as loops.

Note 8. Most of this trip will be in a malaria area. Only a few of the mosquitos we may encounter are likely to carry the disease but you must be prepared.

What you don't get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. **You** must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including the guide, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.



A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. A few examples may help you understand just how important this is.

If you don't want to take the time to stop and look at the little things as well as the big ones, this trip isn't for you.

There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you do not want to take the necessary responsibility and/or you cannot obtain the necessary equipment, it is not for you. Good physical fitness and a good mental attitude are both necessary.

If you have never walked over really rough ground, you might find some of the terrain very challenging. On a long day walk in 2016, only one person, the guide, chose the most strenuous but most spectacular route on one of the walks. (Having said that, a family with two children under the age of 13 followed close behind the guide on the hard route. It wasn't **that** hard, just looked it.) Past experience has shown us that a fit, experienced 70 year old may cope better than a fitter 25 year old who does not have experience in coping with adverse conditions.

A Final Caution

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. Such things often fail to happen in South Africa. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off and go sightseeing or simply relax while the guide does the food shopping or tries to organise or reconfirm hiking permits, etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join him he does these things.

There may be occasional days between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guide slows down and relaxes a bit and catches up on the organising. Based on past experience, things will run more smoothly if the guide does this.

Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. This will be refunded in full if five people have not booked by mid July. Final payment is due 6 weeks prior to departure or within a week of your booking, whichever is later.
2. Our cancellation fee is your \$200 deposit more than six weeks prior to departure and the full \$1795 afterwards. The different South African authorities with whom we make bookings all have their own cancellation fees. If you cancel after we have made and paid for a booking on your behalf, you will lose whatever is non-refundable as well as our cancellation fee.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance. We need to see proof of your travel insurance before departure. We need this because of our own insurance.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Russell Willis