

Shangani Trails

OUR DREAM,
YOUR EXPERIENCE

On Foot with Shangani Trails!!

June 2016

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Black Backed Jackal,

Makuleke Concession March 2016



Trails Season Update

We have enjoyed a great start to 2016 Trails Season with Guests from Europe, the UK, South Africa and particularly from the USA, enjoying the very best that the Makuleke Concession can offer. A very pleasing aspect is that, in the short period the trails season has been running, we have been able to utilise all the available accommodation types very successfully. We have run trails out of the re-opened Pafuri Camp Lodge, the ever popular tented camp on the Luvuvhu River, the self-catering lodge (Baobab Hill House) and, of course, the wilderness trail of sleeping under the stars carrying your life on your back for a few days!! No matter the accommodation of choice, we have been privileged to enjoy some amazing walks on a Concession that has benefitted from the late rains at the end of March that, thankfully, filled up most of the important pans.

The numbers of Elephant have increased dramatically after they returned from their short rain-induced sabbatical to our south, while exceptionally large herds of Buffalo have been drawn to the Concession by the abundance of grass and water particularly along the Luvuvhu River. Walks have invariably been in the company of good numbers of plains game while the birding remains some of the best in the country with good sightings of the rare Racket Tail Rollers and frequent nocturnal views of the Pels Fishing Owl around the Pafuri Bridge.

A Slithering Encounter!

With the day having dawned a little warmer than previously, we drove onto the airstrip on our way once more to Rhino Boma road for a longer walk into the Limpopo River floodplain to a pan called Dakumila. We were about halfway down the long runway when a cry wet up from Eric Keen, my guest from Maryland, USA... “Hyena”. Hyena indeed, two of them on the edge of the treeline to our right. They were milling around some shrubs so I drove up the cambered edge of the runway and parked a short distance from them, Eric having a great view. They appeared to be smelling the stalks of some bushes so very likely they were investigating old scent markings of other Hyena, issuing low grunts to each other at the same time. We stayed with them as they finally moved parallel to the airstrip edge, eventually losing them in thickets. A good start to the day!



The two Spotted Hyena smell in and around the shrubs on the airstrip! Photo: Eric Keen, Maryland, USA

We reached our jump-off point overlooking the open plain under a large Baobab tree near the old Vulture Restaurant, went over the safety brief once again then set off towards the Limpopo River. We had yet to cross the open plain before the acacia thornveld when we spotted three Jackals to our right.

We stopped to watch them when a warthog appeared near them adopting a very aggressive posture towards the Jackals, ensuring they harboured no ill intentions towards him. A great moment to witness.

We pressed on, flushing a Sharpe's Grysbok while also coming across a termite mound incline where an Elephant had lay down to sleep, the outline of his body very clear in the sandy soil. A short distance further a flash of glistening sunlight to the left caught my eye. At first the image before me didn't register but then it became very clear! The flash I had seen was the early morning sunlight reflecting off the skin of a very large African Rock Python!!! I pointed it out to Eric who also, initially, didn't quite realise what we were seeing!



We walked up to the exceptionally large snake which was inching its way along the ground, very sluggish in the early morning chill, his eyes fixed on us and his tangibly forked tongue methodically slipping in and out of his mouth!

The African Rock Python on his way into the Lala Palm thickets. Photo: Eric Keen Maryland USA

He stopped, allowing us to inspect him closely, taking photos and pacing out his length, a good 3.5 metres!! Eric was able to take a video of him as he continued on his way into a nearby Lala Palm thicket! A privileged sighting indeed and certainly one of the many highlights of the Trail!

Trying to get back to Camp!!!

Eric Keen and I had been dropped off on Pafuri Main earlier that morning, with the intention of walking back to camp via Mashashiti Spring, Mangala and the Luvuvhu Floodplain. After having enjoyed a great first half of this long walk, we paused for a short break under the cool shade of a large old Nyala Berry tree before once again following the large number of fresh Elephant tracks that had been evident virtually since we had left Mashashiti Spring. But it would not be the Elephant tracks that provided our next adventure!

We came upon fresh Buffalo tracks, then even fresher dung and no sooner had I pointed this out to Eric when I skirted a large Acacia thicket to see a Buffalo Cow lying down in the shade, her eyes half closed contentedly chewing her cud, literally at my feet!! Eric saw the rest of the herd behind her in the thickets at the same moment and we wasted no time in backing off, putting some immediate distance between ourselves and the Buffalo!! I looked back to see the Bulls staring at us then, as we backed out further, they turned and ran to the west!! Adrenalin flowing, we headed back towards the ridgeline away from the Buffalo, then cut back to re-establish our direction to Mangala. A great experience to walk onto Buffalo so unexpectedly and so close! We finally reached Mangala which was beautiful but quiet, the calm before the storm!



Mangala look-out on the Luvuvhu River! A great place to take it all in! Photo: EJ Scott, Johannesburg, RSA

With time moving on we moved off towards the sandstone ridges to our east having to negotiate some soft sand deposited after the 2013 floods. We had not gone far when, through the Large Fever Berries, I noticed a Buffalo calf to our front about a hundred metres away.

The rest of the herd then started to materialise as we edged closer but the wind must have shifted and swirled as the herd suddenly ran off away from us, the dust hanging thick in the air.

With the herd now somewhere to our front, I decided to find the Elephant paths at the foot of the sandstone ridges across the floodplain to our north and sneak though in the cover of their shade to the left of the Buffalo. Reaching the paths we warily pushed east again only to see a great number of Buffalo stretching the width of the floodplain!! No choice but to head back to the river side of the floodplain and test the outlook there!



The Luvuvhu Floodplain across which the Buffalo were stretched. The sandstone ridges are to the left where we tried to sneak through but to no avail! Photo: Shangani Trails

As we threaded our way back to the river we saw no end to the Buffalo in front of us and, if we weren't to disturb them anymore than we had already, the only choice we had was to go down into the riverbed using the high bank overhead as cover to walk past them. With a large troop of Baboons crossing the river in front of us, we made our way downstream, soon finding a good well used path to go up the bank to see if we had gone far enough to come in behind the herd. We had timed it just right for, as we cleared the bank, we saw the Buffalo to our left and behind, allowing us to cut to the right using the Large Fever Berries as cover.

We were just heaving a sigh of relief when a large grey shape appeared directly in front through the foliage. “Elephant!!” whispered Eric. I immediately gestured to Eric to sit down and keep as quiet as possible. The Elephant was no more than 30 metres away, dozing in the shade, eyes half closed! The situation became clear very quickly, the angular forehead and teats just behind the front elbow, a Cow! Where there are cows there is a Breeding Herd! Time to go! I led Eric out into the open with the Buffalo to our left and the Elephant Cow now behind us! We made distance quickly only slowing down when there was no obvious reaction from the Elephant behind. What next for us on this the last leg of our long walk?

We were nearing our camp by this time and thoughts were turning towards the lunch that Patricia had no doubt prepared for us when Eric whispered urgently “More Buffalo!” More Buffalo there were, lying down in the shade to our left, their horns clearly visible and as were the sheer bulk of their bodies!`



Buffalo lying down are not always easy to see! They can look rather mean as well!! Photo: Shangani Trails

We turned immediately to the south away from the resting herd, luckily without disturbing them at all. Eric and I were fast becoming a well-knit team, with me needing to issue fewer and fewer instructions, he knowing now to follow my lead.

However, with Camp now less than five hundred metres away and the temperature rising after a mild morning, the Big 5 weren't finished with us yet! Off to our left an Elephant Bull appeared feeding quietly in the shade of a Large Fever Berry!! We had now enjoyed six different encounters with Elephant and Buffalo within a space of an hour and a half!

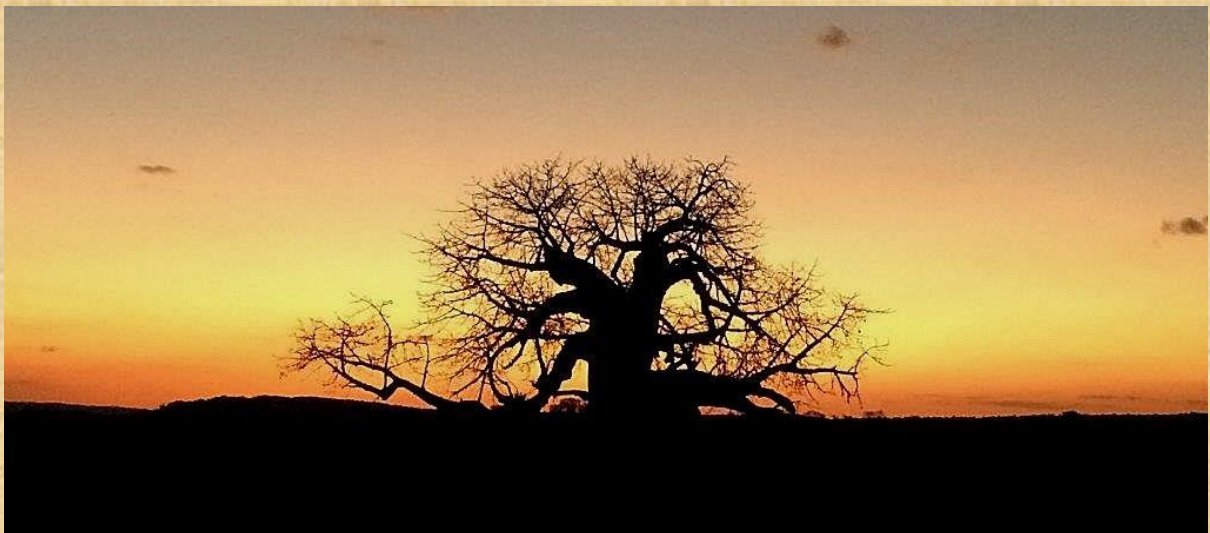
We had not had the opportunity to view, for any decent length of time, any of the encounters we had enjoyed thus far, so I checked the wind and moved around him to get a better view.

We lowered our profile and crouched down as he moved across us stopping to feed off the tufts of grass. Once again, the wind must have swirled and he immediately succinctly curled the end of his trunk to smell, raising his foot in some thought as to his next move. He sniffed a while longer then slowly turned moved away from us towards the ridges.



The Bull moves across our position before moving off! Photo: Eric Keen, Maryland, USA

A trifle tired mentally after the last action packed hour and a half, we made no effort to follow him and turned contentedly southwards for the camp, now just a short distance away. An amazing walk for both Guide and Guest!!



Sunset over the Baobabs!! The end of another extraordinary day in the Makuleke!! Photo: Eric Keen, Maryland, USA

New Trails

Apart from the tented camp and the wilderness trail sleep-out, the re-opening of the Pafuri Camp Lodge and the conversion of the old Section Ranger's house at Moleteni into an 8- Sleeper self-catering lodge have provided an opportunity for those guests who are keen to walk but would probably not prefer to get as close to Nature as the former two accommodation options would dictate.

The Pafuri Camp offers a Luxury Walking Trail using the lodge and all its trimmings as a base. Accommodation is in luxury tents on platforms each with a river front view, swimming pool, bar and three high class lodge meals a day. As with the tented camp option, a game drive vehicle would be allocated to the trail to drive to and from your walking area and an extra Guide utilized should the size of the Group exceed 4 people.



The duration of the trail would normally follow the tried and tested 3 nights/4 days but having no set departure dates it would allow one to extend or reduce this to your own requirements.

One of the luxury tents- Pafuri Camp

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Pafuri Camp lounge area.



Baobab Hill House offers a self-catering, fully fenced and serviced 4-bedroomed house with all amenities including solar power and back-up generator, swimming pool, fully fitted kitchen, outside lapa and braai area. The house sleeps 8 with two of the 4 rooms being ensuite, an allocated Game Drive vehicle and extra Guide. A fully catered option is also available at an extra charge. There are no set departure dates and the duration of your stay is as per your requirements.



Baobab Hill House from the adjacent Kopje



Baobab Hill House lounge interior

Baobab Hill House from the outside Lapa





Always the unexpected in the Makuleke! One tusker Elephant Bull enjoying a good rub!! Photo: Eric Keen, Maryland USA

No matter your accommodation preference, come and experience this 24 000 hectare Big 5 wilderness area that offers a bio-diversity like no other in the Kruger National Park. I am indeed privileged to be able to invite you to join us

On Foot.... with Shangani Trails in the Makuleke Concession.

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