

BETWEEN THE ROCKS AND THE STARS

In a great wilderness once ruled by Shaka Zulu, adventurous souls bed down under the stars. **Hlengiwe Magagula** conquers her fears in Zululand's Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park



WALKING SAFARIS OF SOUTH AFRICA

Guided walks and trails
in national parks and
game reserves

Hlengiwe Magagula
and Denis Costello



Walking Safaris of Southern Africa by Hlengiwe Magagula and Denis Costello

Keen to do the Primitive Trail and a whole lot of others besides? Our writer's new guide is out now! Hlengiwe is joined by Denis Costello in describing more than 50 guided walks across 22 parks and reserves in South Africa – from short dawn and dusk walks and multi-day outings from a base camp to backpacking trails that span several days. Available at good bookshops or online.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hlengiwe Magagula is a full-time writer based in eSwatini (Swaziland). She is a resident blogger for returnafrica.com, a regular writer for SANParks's *Wild* magazine, and a contributor to *Escapes*, the *Sunday Times*, *Getaway*, *Travel Africa*, *High Life*, and other publications.

NOBODY WANTS TO BECOME AN ELEPHANT DOORMAT, RIGHT?

That's why we listened wide-eyed as the guide explained safety protocols before the first night sleeping wild. And when I say wild – well, we were in the middle of a vast wilderness area in KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park and we'd already skirted a dust cloud of buffalo, listened to the munching of a browsing rhino, and tip-toed over the fresh tracks of a lion clan.

Field Guide Ayanda Nzuza had found a perfect overnight spot for our little group of hikers. We'd dropped packs on a shelf of rock that was worn smooth by aeons of watery action. Next to the sandy bed of the White Umfolozi river, it was not far to fetch sand-filtered water. Behind, a steep rocky slope was a deterrent to accidental nocturnal interlopers. But it was not too sheer to stop us from scrambling up to appreciate the view, as the sun sank into a rose-pink Zululand haze.



Need to know: Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park Primitive Trail

The Primitive Trail runs every week from mid-February to early December. The usual duration is three nights, but four nights can be arranged for the enthusiastic. Wear earthy colours such as green, brown or khaki, and pack light. Don't forget to leave space for a share of the food and cooking kit. The park can supply backpacks and sleeping bags, but make sure to let them know before arrival. The minimum age is 16, or 14 if accompanied by an adult. Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park's Nyalazi Gate is a three-hour drive from eThekweni, and from the gate allow another hour to the meeting point at Mpila Resort. Three nights costs R2 870 pp, which includes food. Book at KZN Wildlife Wilderness Trails. 033 845 1067, kznwildlife.com

Before the packs had hit the rock, assistant guide Jabulani Thethwayo was blowing on embers in a bundle of dry grass. Soon, he was chopping veggies and calling for our help. He showed us how to make a paste from river clay and smear the outside of his pots, so the fire would not char the steel. Later it would be easy to wash off, leaving the pots as shiny as new.

Now, with full bellies, we focused our attention on Ayanda as his voice turned serious. KZN Wildlife runs several varieties of Wilderness Trails, and this was the 'Primitive' flavour. Why is it primitive? Because it means carrying everything needed for three days in the

veld, leaving no trace. What's more, we would sleep without tents, which not only reduced the load, but would let us really absorb the immensity of the world, as we drifted to sleep, spinning slowly under a star-filled canopy.

Ayanda explained how each of us would take a turn on night watch, alone. Our job was to keep the fire going and patrol the camp with a torch, looking and listening out for danger. No going back to the cosy sleeping bag until the next in the rota was up and attentive! When my turn came, I felt the weight of responsibility with trepidation. The moonless night seemed infinitely black. Sounds came from near and far. The deep, low bark of an Eagle owl, echoed by a distant hyena. That crack of a branch must be an elephant feeding on the other side of the river. Closer, there was a rustle in the tall reeds and my mind raced through the list of African night prowlers. Then, a heavy breath closer still. Oh, it's just a snoring hiker.

It's a rare thing to camp without tents in a big-game area, but an experience we can share with thousands of generations of our ancestors. This was not the first fire to burn on our rocky shelf, and I was but one in a long line of night watchers. It made me think of our place in nature – just another animal on the move, feeding, resting, scheming.

In the soft light of dawn, my fears fell away. Each day, Ayanda led us on winding explorations, climbing to dizzy lookouts



and shady overhangs. He explained how traditional bush lore is key to survival in wilderness: knowing where to find water, and what berries and roots are edible; how to tune into the sounds of birds and monkeys that warn us of big cats in the thorn thickets, and learning to read tracks and scat to develop our awareness of wildlife ahead.

That wildlife was abundant. It's no wonder that 200 years ago, this area was the favoured hunting ground of King Shaka Zulu and his people. Like them, we could spot the animals from vantage points high above the river, such as Mahobosheni (puff adder, for the shape of the river's meander) and Nqabaneni (the fortress). In Shaka's time, game was trapped by driving them into pits near the confluence of the Black Umfolozi and White Umfolozi rivers.

Shaka's Rock lookout is infamous, a favoured execution spot. As Ayanda told the tale, I took a step back from the precipice. Then he asked us to separate and sit a while, no chit-chat. It was a moment to reflect on what is lost in the modern world, how we can easily forget our connection with the nature that has sustained us. A reminder that wilderness and adventure is still out there, we just need to look for it. ✈

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