

LOVING LOCAL



TRICKLE TREAT In Phophonyane, there are several short walks in the region of the eponymous falls. Pictures: Hlengiwe Magagula

5 STUNNING SWAZI WALKS

Hlengiwe Magagula counts the little kingdom's natural beauties

Emlembe

Let's start at the very top. Swaziland's highest mountain is right on the border and can be approached via the fascinating Barberton Makhonjwa Geotrail. Rising above highveld forests, it's a perfect half-day climb from the historic mining town of Bulembu.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: The trail takes you into eucalypt and native woodland and then up to pasturelands and the 1 843m peak. In the forest, watch out for vervet monkeys and remember to take plenty of breaks to enjoy the splendid views.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: At the top, you'll have

one foot in South Africa, and one in Swaziland.

WHAT'S NEARBY: In Bulembu, visit the little museum dedicated to the town's mining history. Grab a delicious coffee-and-honey milkshake at Bulembu Country Lodge, made from the fresh milk of the cows

that graze the former golf course.

BOOKINGS: No booking is required. For a guide, ask for Benjamin at the lodge, and pay his fee there. You'll learn the local lore and history as you walk. The lodge is ideal for beds (R950 double) and meals.

● bulembu.org.



LOOK SHARP A white-fronted bee eater in Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary.

Phophonyane Nature Reserve

Descend through the forests to Piggs Peak, turn a little north, and follow the signs for Phophonyane Falls. There's a number of short walks in the area of the falls, and you can access them via Piggs Peak Casino or Phophonyane Falls Ecologde.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: This is classic middleveld, a rich mix of native plants and birdlife, with over 240 bird species recorded. The waterfalls are a series of photo-friendly cascades over aeons-old rocks.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: Watch out for the narina trogon, a vivid green-and-red, forest-dwelling bird.

WHAT'S NEARBY: The deck of the ecolodge is a fine place to combine a cold Sibebe beer and birdwatching in comfort. **BOOKINGS:** There's a small fee for day visitors to access the trails maintained by Phophonyane Falls Ecologde. It has tents, cottages and beehive huts (R1 610/R2 360/R2 520 double).

● phophonyane.co.sz.

Malolotja Nature Reserve

Drive south on the M1, Swaziland's most scenic road. You'll wind back into the highveld, known locally as Inkangala. Malolotja is prime walking territory, with over 200km of mapped trails in 18 000ha.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: As well as day walks, this is the place to disappear for days of wild camping; suggested routes range from one to seven nights. As well as the montane grasslands, there are tree-shaded valleys, and croc-free rivers for cooling off. You're sure to find grazers – zebras, blesbok, eland and wildebeest – as well as some of the 280 recorded bird species.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: With luck, you can spot the endangered blue swallow. Go in spring for the outrageous wildflowers, including orchids and rare species such as Barberton

and Kaapsehoop cycads.

WHAT'S NEARBY: Enjoy a thrilling zipline over the treetops (malolotjajacanopytour.com) and pick up some fine, soapstone carvings from the vendors near the reserve gate.

BOOKINGS: R30 for day guests, R70 per person per night for trail camping. You don't need to camp, as there are alpine-style log cabins for self-catering, as well as a bar/restaurant. Cabins are R300 per person per night (minimum charge of R400).

● sntc.org.sz.

Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary

Continue your adventure into the heart of the kingdom, descending to warmer climes. Mlilwane is a gorgeous reserve, and part of the Big Game Parks family that includes Royal Hlane and Mkhaya. Unlike those places, you can walk freely here, but steer clear of the water's edge, where crocs and hippos lurk.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: Rise early to catch the dawn light on the hills and sparkling dewy grasslands. Take your pick from nine mapped trails, totalling 20km. You'll share your walk with blue wildebeest, zebra, warthog, kudu, nyala, blesbuck and other antelopes. There's a breeding programme for endangered roan antelopes.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: At the rest camp, bush pigs come to enjoy the evening fire, which has burned continuously for almost 60 years. If you stay at Reilly's Rock, you'll likely meet bush babies in the evening.

WHAT'S NEARBY: At the rest camp, Chubeka Trails offer horse riding in the reserve, and it's also perfect for mountain biking. Mlilwane is in Lobamba, the cultural heart of Swaziland. The national museum is close by, and it's a short drive to Malkerns, where top-class craft shops include Swazi Candles, Baobab Batik and Gone Rural.

BOOKINGS: R50 conservation fee for day visitors (Wild card also valid). The main camp has traditional beehive huts with spotless bathrooms (R470pp), and there's also a backpacker option (from R125), and the luxury Reilly's Rock homestead (from R2 410 double). Guides R150 per hour.

● biggameparks.org.

Lubombo Eco Trails

If you make it this far, you'll be astounded at how such a tiny country can have such a variety of environments. An exciting network of trails is being developed in the northeast, where Swaziland meets Mozambique and South Africa.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: You'll sweat in lowveld forest in Mlawula and Mbuluzi reserves, and climb shady clefts onto the rocky escarpment of the Lubombo Mountains. The 10 mapped trails in Mlawula are just the start. See lubombo.co.sz.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: The rare samango monkey has been recorded in the area, and it's perfect leopard country, but you'd be very lucky to spot either. Instead, enjoy the serenity of this little-visited corner of Africa. **WHAT'S NEARBY:** Mozambique! This area is an ideal stopover for those heading to Maputo or beyond.

BOOKINGS: Newly opened in January 2018, the Mhlumeni Bush Camp has four luxury tents (from R300). To book, call (+268) 7829 2617 or email mhlumenicamp@gmail.com.

Mlawula has a R30 fee for day guests and a range of overnight options, from camping (R100pp) to Magadzavane Lodge (R900 double). Guides on request, from R50.

● sntc.org.sz.

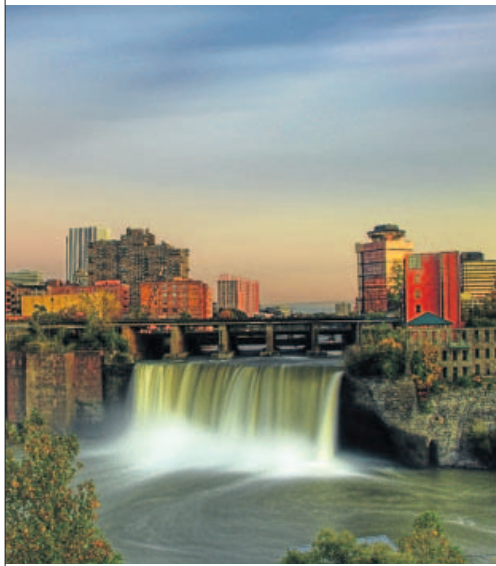
Mbuluzi Reserve offers camping (R110) and fine tents and lodges from R580 per person.

● mbuluzi.com. @

THE EXTRA MILE



PAUL ASH
ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS



SCENIC SPLENDOUR The High Falls in Rochester, New York. Picture: wikipedia/commons

NEW YORK, LONDON IN MARCH

I will be travelling to the US in March. Do you have any suggestions for how to spend a few days in upstate New York? I will be with my brother and we will likely hire a car. I will also be in London from March 30 and would be grateful for suggestions on what I could do that Easter weekend. — Anita Gihwala

Your question arrived while I was staying with friends in Brooklyn, New York. As they spend a lot of time upstate, I asked them for some ideas.

The short answer is that upstate can be pretty bleak at that time of year – what little snow that remains is grey slush and the trees are still bare. If you are undeterred by this, however, one suggestion is to visit the Finger Lakes (fingerlakes.org) area – named for its long, thin lakes and famous for its vineyards. It's three to four hours by car from NYC.

While very much a scenic destination, Finger Lakes is a beautiful area at any time of the year and is on the way to the city of Rochester (visitrochester.com), home to Kodak, as well as the women's-rights activist Susan B Anthony, who lived and worked there, and slavery abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who helped many escaped slaves to safety along the "Underground Railroad".

From there, you can head to Niagara Falls, an awe-inspiring sight in all seasons.

London over Easter will be even more busy than usual – whatever you do, book in advance. I recommend a ride on the London Eye (londoneye.com) for the most excellent views of the city. Then walk across Westminster Bridge to Parliament Square and hop on the No.24 bus to the magnificent – and free – British Museum (britishmuseum.org).

We can help with your destination dilemmas, visa puzzles and itinerary ideas. E-mail travelmag@sundaytimes.co.za.

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