

A photograph of three zebras in a savanna landscape. Two zebras are in the foreground, looking towards the camera, while a third is grazing in the background. The scene is filled with tall, green grass and a blurred background of trees and hills.

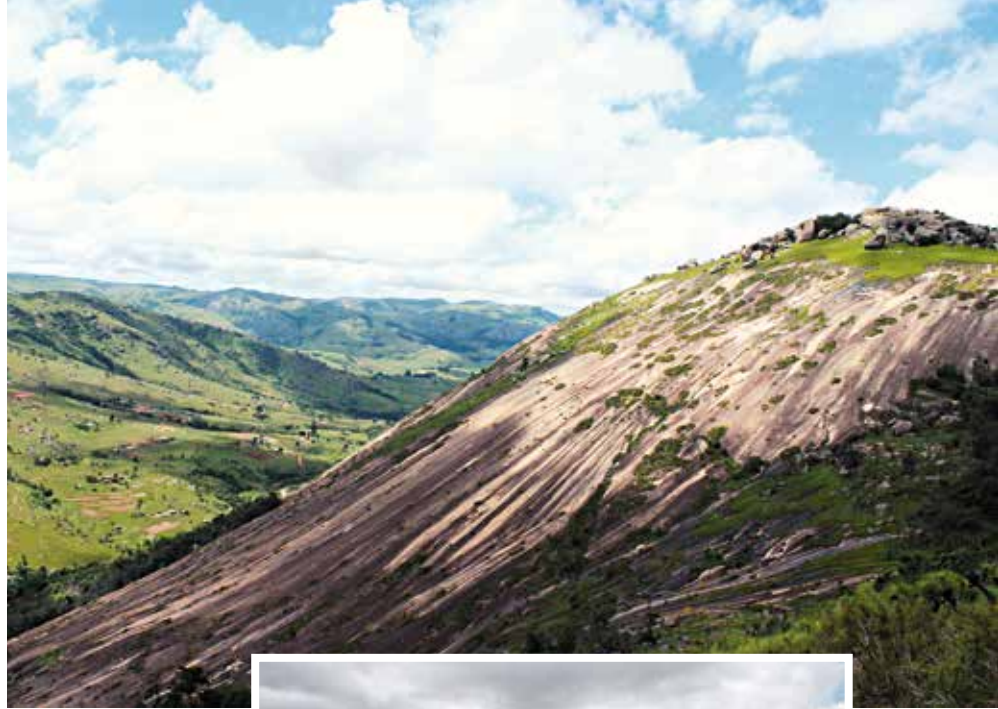
Hike in your neighbour's backyard

Even though it's smaller than Gauteng, the Kingdom of eSwatini (Swaziland) has a variety of landscapes that offer an interesting range of hiking opportunities, many of which can be explored in less than a day. Go spend a weekend abroad!

BY HLENGIWE MAGAGULA

I admit to coming late to the pleasures of walking in the wild. As for most Swazi kids, walking was a chore to me, something endured when the bus didn't arrive. It took a trip to the Western Cape to open my eyes: a scramble up Skeleton Gorge from Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden and a day on the coastal trails in the Cape of Good Hope section of Table Mountain National Park, drenched in Atlantic rain. I loved it!

Back home, my new boots were soon put to use, and the exploration began. These are four of my favourite hiking destinations in the hills of eSwatini.



Sibebe Rock

Even from a distance, the 350m-high Sibebe Rock looks daunting. You can approach the monolith from the north or the west. The standard northern route is an easy 6 km there and 6 km back. The first part of the walk follows a 4x4 track that gradually gets steeper as you near the top. The trail is not marked, but you can see the peak, so it's easy to find your way.

The route up the rock's western face is for the more adventurous. Trust me – it's a heart-pounding climb! Going up, I imagine I'm scaling the flank of the world's largest whale. The granite is grippy when dry, and the best strategy is to keep going and not look back. The climb is not quite rope-and-helmet level, but I often find myself using my hands for balance. And it works the calf muscles *hard!*

Don't tackle the western route after rain and take care as some sections are very steep. Older children will enjoy the scramble, but rather choose the official (northern) route if you have littlies who might have to be carried.

You can cover the half-kilometre climb in less than an hour and you'll definitely reach the top soaked in sweat. But the view is worth it: To the west and south you can see the *Inkangala* – a highveld landscape of mountains and grassland, cattle and plantations. My homeland. To the east and north, the terrain falls away to the Lowveld and its thick, sticky air. Bands of vivid green mark sugar cane plantations.

Having gone up the steep western route, I go down the gentle northern route. Away to the east, I can just discern another ridge of mountains, the Lebombo range, on the border with Mozambique. Ahead, three vultures wheel in synchronised, effortless flight.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Where? Sibebe Rock is about 8 km north of Mbabane and 22 km from the Oshoek border post on the N17/MR3. Follow the Pine Valley Road out of town and you'll soon see Sibebe's western face rearing up on your right. To climb that side, ask to park in one of the private properties on Pine Valley Road. We advise carrying on to the official access point, where the northern route starts. Look out for the Sibebe Trails community project sign posted on the right 11 km from the start of Pine Valley Road.

Cost: R30 per person – pay at the office (safe parking). Hiring a guide is optional (R300 per person) – you'll be shown around

the monolith and you'll explore some small caves. To book a guide, call Sibebe Trails. ☎ 00 268 7819 8218; ☎ 00 268 7605 3138

STAY HERE

Silverstone Falls Lodge
R1 610 per night for a double room, breakfast included (single rate R995); R2 015 per night for a self-catering family room (sleeps four). ☎ 00 268 2410 3376; 🌐 silverstonefalls.com

Sibebe Resort
R1 250 per night for a double room, breakfast included (single rate R950). A campsite is being developed. You'll need a vehicle with high ground clearance to reach the resort. ☎ 00 268 7602 9903; 🌐 sibeberesort.com

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Emlembe

At 1 862 m, Emlembe is the highest point in the Kingdom. It's part of the Makhonjwa Mountains, also known as the Barberton Greenstone Belt, along the western border with South Africa. These are not dramatic peaks, but rather ancient layers of rock formed during the Archaean period, up to 4 billion years ago. They have rounded summits and deep valleys.

The mountains contain fossils of global importance as they're believed to show evidence of the earliest life on earth. No wonder the South African part of the range was declared a World Heritage Site in 2018, and it's hoped that the protection order will extend into eSwatini one day.

You can hike to the top of Emlembe through small areas of woodland and past grazing cattle. Most of the walk is exposed to the sun and there's no water, so be prepared. When you pause for a rest, turn around and you'll see the colourful houses in the town of Bulembu, down in the valley.

The view from the top shows the full Makhonjwa range – a panorama of montane grassland and pine plantations, with pockets of native forest in the clefts. Just a broken wire fence marks the border between South Africa and eSwatini.

Hiking to the top will take approximately one and a half hours. Pack some snacks for a picnic. The ascent is moderate, rising about 400 m from the start to the summit, over a distance of around 4 km.

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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Where? Emlembe is accessed from the former mining town of Bulembu, close to the Josefsdal border (42 km south of Barberton on the R40). The road from Barberton to the border is excellent, but on the eSwatini side it's a rough logging road that can be tricky after rain. (It's okay in a sedan if you drive slowly.) The hike starts where the town's golf course used to be – ask any local for directions.

Cost: You don't need a permit to do the hike.

STAY HERE
Bulembu Country Lodge
Comfortable accommodation in former mine management houses. Rates from R950 per night for a

double room (sleeps two) or family room (sleeps 2 – 4); breakfast included. From R760 per night in a self-catering unit (sleeps 2 – 10). ☎ 00 268 7602 1593; 🌐 bulembu.org

What else? Even if you're not planning to stay over, it's worth visiting the lodge restaurant for a delicious pulled pork pizza (R99) and a milkshake made with locally produced honey (R27).

If you have some time left, visit the museum dedicated to the town's asbestos mining history, which is a few minutes' walk downhill from the lodge, under the disused cableway line. Open weekdays from 8 am to 4 pm; Saturdays from 9 am to noon; entrance R40 per person.



Malolotja Nature Reserve

If you're looking for an overnight or multi-day hiking experience, this 18 000-hectare reserve offers prime walking terrain. In my opinion, it's eSwatini's best wild hiking destination. With 200 km of marked trails and 19 different campsites, you could spend *weeks* exploring! Pick up a map at reception and ask for a suggested route that matches your time available.

For a one-night visit on a looped trail, the Mbulukudvu campsite is well situated, right in the heart of the reserve. It takes four hours to reach the site from the reception office, but if you're in a rush you can halve the time by driving to the Silotfwane viewpoint and leaving your car there.

You have to carry everything you'll need, including a tent in case of rain. The river water is said to be drinkable but use purification drops to be safe. No open fires are allowed in the reserve, so bring a stove and fuel.

From Silotfwane, the path follows a northern route and descends through Themeda grassland, where you might see zebra and other animals grazing. I saw oribi, grey rhebok and eland. The park is also known for its flora and spring is a great time to visit. There are two species of endangered cycad in the reserve: Barberton and Kaapsehoop, as well as aloes and orchids. Birders should be on the lookout for a number of endangered species, including blue swallow, bald ibis and Stanley's bustard.

It gets steeper as the path descends into a gorge, turning west amid shady thickets of wild plum and lavender trees. The campsite (a level clearing with no facilities) is near a small stream. It's okay for a wash, but there's better bathing on the second day, as the trail follows the Malolotja River south. (One of the best things about hiking in the reserve is how many streams and rivers there are for a cooling dip after a day on the trail.) You'll eventually reach the Malolotja campsite. From there, it's three and a half hours along the river and then uphill to return to Silotfwane.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Where? From the Oshoek border post, follow the MR3 for about 8 km and then turn north onto the MR1. From the turn-off, it's another 18 km to the reserve gate.

Cost: Malolotja is operated by the Swazi National Trust Commission and has a conservation fee of R30 per person. Camping on a hiking route costs R70 per person per night.

STAY HERE

Malolotja Main Camp
This camp is a kilometre from the gate and has 10 self-catering log cabins that are clean but a

little run-down and lacking some utensils (some cabins sleep four; others sleep five). Rates from R300 per adult per night (discount for kids). Camping at the main campsite R100 per person per night. ☎ 00 268 2444 3241; 🌐 sntc.org.sz

Hawane Resort

This resort is 14 km back along the MR1. Twin-sleeper chalet from R990 per night. Accommodation in the backpacker lodge R120 per person; a night on a self-catering houseboat on Maguga Dam from R1 600 (sleeps two). ☎ 00 268 2444 1744; 🌐 hawaneresort.com

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OTHER GREAT HIKES IN ESWATINI

The big game parks of eSwatini can't compare to the nearby Kruger, but they're still worth a visit. Both **Hlane Royal National Park** and **Mkhaya Game Reserve** have guided walks. In Hlane, these walks take place in a separate area, away from the elephants, lions and rhinos, but it's still a fascinating way to learn about the smaller treasures of nature.

In Mkhaya, walks are a bit shorter because the veld is dense. It's exciting to be on foot with the rhino.

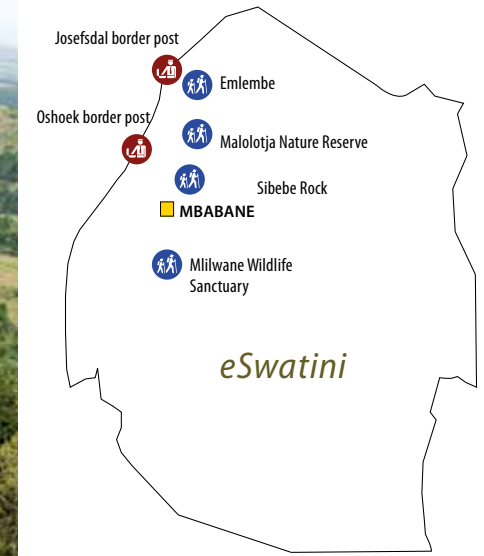
The SANParks Wild card is accepted at both Hlane and Mkhaya, otherwise the daily conservation fee is R50 per person. A walk in Hlane costs R240 per person; at Mkhaya it's included in your overnight fee (day visitors not allowed). More info: ☎ 00 268 7677 6772; 🌐 biggameparks.org

Outside the reserves, there are exciting hiking possibilities on community land in remote pockets of the kingdom. To the south, in the Ngwempisi area, **Khopho Lodge** is the base for walks in a beautiful area of rocky gorges and bushveld.

In the Lebombo Mountains on the Mozambique frontier, the new **Mhlumeni Bush Camp** has been opened to facilitate adventures in this little-explored region. Book a luxury tent (sleeps three) for R750 per person; breakfast included. ☎ 00 268 7829 2617; 🌐 thekingdomofeswatini.com

For both of these areas, it's recommended to hire trained community guides because the trails are not marked or mapped.





Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary

The Ezulwini Valley is the cultural heartland of eSwatini. As well as having the royal palace and national museum, it has the best choice of places to stay, and good craft centres. It also has some fine hiking options, although not as wild as Malolotja.

The sanctuary was established in 1961 and continues to play a vital role in the country's wildlife conservation. There's no dangerous game, as long as you give the crocs and hippos some space... Hikers, cyclists and horse riders are free to explore nine mapped trails in the reserve, totalling about 20 km.

The shortest route is just 1 km and the longest is the 6,8 km Hippo Trail. Trails can be combined to fill a day. For example, follow the Hippo Trail to the Mhlangane River (3 km; 1 hour), and then take the summit trail to Nyonyane (3,2 km; 1½ hours). Alternatively, if time is an issue, park at the Nyakato viewpoint and hike the Ridge Trail which is just 20 minutes from the summit.

Another option is to join a reserve guide for a morning walk (R165 per hour; book beforehand). I did a loop of Mlilwane Hill (the name means "little fire"), while guide Musa Tsabedze explained the reserve's success in breeding endangered roan antelope over the last 20 years. He also pointed out the distinctive granite mountain called Nyonyane. It means "little bird" in SiSwati and refers to the mountain's chilling history, and its other name Execution Rock. Musa told the tale of how in ancient times, it was a place where criminals were put to death – forced to "take flight" from the precipice.

You can park at Reilly's Rock, the old homestead dating from when the reserve was a farm. From there, it's about an hour and a half of empty trail – the route is never very busy – gradually steepening through forest and grassland.

Say hello to the dassies at the 1 100m summit while you catch your breath and ponder this peaceful spot's violent history. If you have time, take a diversion on the way back, following the sign for Machobane. This path has some added excitement as it hugs a slope that occasionally becomes a sheer cliff, steeper than Sibebe. A wooden walkway helps hikers down, but be careful because there's no hand rail.



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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Where? Travel east on the MR3 and exit at the sign for the MR103 towards Ezulwini/Malkerns. Once you've crossed the bridge over the highway, continue straight on the MR103 for about 10 km to the entrance.

Cost: Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary is part of the Big Game Parks family and Wild cards are accepted. If you don't have one, the conservation fee is R50 per person per day. If you'd like to do an overnight hike in the park, you have to book it through Chubeka Trails (more info at biggameparks.org). They offer a trip where you can sleep in a cave with Bushman rock art; R2 500 for two people.

STAY HERE

Mlilwane rest camp
Stay in a traditional beehive hut with a spotless en suite bathroom: R495 per person (each hut sleeps two). You can also camp under the eucalyptus trees: R130 per person. Each stand has braai facilities and some have a tap and power point. ☎ 00 268 2528 3943; biggameparks.org

Reilly's Rock Hilltop Lodge

The lodge has six en suite twin-sleeper rooms from R1 395 per person, including dinner and breakfast. Down Gran's self-catering cottage (sleeps seven) costs from R3 270 per night. ☎ 00 268 2528 3943; biggameparks.org



HLENGIWE MAGAGULA

SABIE BOTHA



MARIANNE SCHWANKHART

TRIP TIPS

- If you're coming from Gauteng, eSwatini is about a four-hour drive. From the N4/N12 junction at Witbank, it's two and a half hours to the Oshoek border post, and three hours to Josefsdal via Barberton.
- The currency of eSwatini is the emalangeni, which is equal to the rand. Credit cards are widely accepted, as is cash in rands.
- There's a R50 road tax fee to pay at the border. Don't forget your passport and a ZA sticker for your car. Officially, no meat, vegetables or fruit can be taken into eSwatini from South Africa, but it's unlikely that the contents of your cool box will be a problem. There are good supermarkets in Mbabane. If you're travelling to Mlilwane, it's easier to skip Mbabane and shop at the Gables Mall in Ezulwini.
- No visa is required for South Africans with a valid passport, for stays of up to 30 days. Passports must be valid for at least six months and have at least two blank pages.
- Medical requirement: Malaria meds should be taken if you're staying in the eastern parts of the country bordering Mozambique and northern KZN.
- If you want to combine great hiking and music, plan your trip for late May when the annual Bushfire Festival is held at House on Fire (bush-fire.com).