



The Big Game Parks of Swaziland lend themselves to bush walks, like here at Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary. A walking safari offers participants the chance to slow down and notice the little things (inset below).

Swaziland is smaller than Gauteng, but its trio of Big Game Parks displays an extraordinary diversity. Lace up your hiking boots and feel the wildness dial go up to 10.

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FOOT SAFARI



Hlane Royal National Park is home to fine-looking white rhino.

Do the French visit the Eiffel Tower? I've heard they don't. They treasure it, I'm sure, but leave it for the tourists. This was my musing on a wet evening, at the start of a tour of the treasures in my own backyard, the Big Game Parks of Swaziland. Living in the Kingdom, it's a bit embarrassing how seldom I've visited Mlilwane, Hlane and Mkhaya. But now I was to set that right, and determined to do it in my favourite safari style, on foot.

First up was Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary, nearest to home. This is the 'tamest' park, located in the Kingdom's heartland, the Ezulwini Valley. It is known both for its conservation programmes and as an activity centre with walking, mountain biking and horse riding available. I arrived at the rest camp after dark and almost fell over some slumbering warthogs, warming their bellies at the campfire that has burned unquenched for half a century.

After a peaceful night in a spotless traditional grass-domed hut, I found the warthogs replaced by damp impalas. It wasn't just wet, but hot, hot, hot. As the sun climbed over distant forest plantations, steam rose from the grasslands where a mixed crew of zebras and antelopes browsed. They hardly raised their heads from breakfast as I joined a small group and set out with Musa Tsabedze, our guide, to a dam. Without Big Five animals, Mlilwane is safe to walk and cycle. But I certainly heeded the warning sign not to get too close to a dozing crocodile.

A couple of fit-looking cyclists stopped to chat. They would cover 13 kilometres on their morning tour. It looked like a great way to enjoy Mlilwane, but the last bike I rode had training wheels, and I was keen to avoid injury for the days ahead.

Up on Mlilwane Hill (the name means 'little fire'), I witnessed the serious side of conservation work, a handsome herd of roan antelope restored from local extinction. The 15-year project has been so successful that soon they will be able to relocate roan to other parks.

Hlane Royal National Park was an hour

away. This park is 'royal' because it is held in trust for the nation by the king, His Majesty King Mswati III. Once a hunting ground, it is now the flagship of habitat protection and home of Swaziland's only big cats. The name of the main camp is a clue as to what else to expect, Ndlovu meaning elephant. The camp is next to a large waterhole, which I found brimful with summer rain.

With no electricity for air-conditioning or a fan, I cooled after dark sitting outside by the light of an oil lantern. The breeze delivered reminders that the wildness dial was up to 10. Odd noises, then the unmistakable roar of lion in the middle distance. Then, the odd noises again, closer, and heavy footsteps. I pointed my torch into the night, to find an elephant facing me, fortunately behind a sturdy fence.

In the morning, my memory fresh with lion sounds, I met my guide, Lucky Vilakati, and looked nervously at the stick he carried in place of a gun. He explained that Hlane has been fenced to keep the endangered species separate from us walkers. What followed was a crash course in nature education. Hlane may be smaller than more famous parks (I'm looking at you, Kruger) but it packs a wealth of natural history.

We lolled in the shade of a thorn tree as Lucky told us of the uses for its wood, which include railway sleepers and mine-shaft supports. Nearby, a giraffe delicately selected some leaves using its long tongue. Thorn trees can sense giraffes feeding and secrete a defensive foul-tasting chemical, and even communicate via gas to other trees nearby to warn them.

A sudden flutter and a couple of "wows" announced the appearance of a purple-crested turaco, the national bird of Swaziland. I've seen this beauty before, a crazy riot of rainbow feathers, but never tire of spotting another. As cameras snapped, we had a chat about how in the avian world it's the males who make the most effort to look beautiful.

Our guide fed our curiosity, bringing us to an aardvark excavation. He called it the bushland "minister for housing", as other animals ▶



1 At Mlilwane hikers enjoy views of grasslands, undulating hills and lush forests. 2 Guests can rent mountain bikes and join a guided trail or opt to see Mlilwane at their own pace. 3 Hlane offers plenty of big game sightings, from imposing elephants to graceful giraffe. 4 The author admiring a rhino at Mkhaya Game Reserve.



We moved on animal trails and 4x4 tracks, pausing often in the shade to absorb more lore.





Mkhaya staff in traditional Swazi dress welcome guests.

We call the wildebeest *ingongoni*, the siSwati word for December, as that's when they give birth.



A handsome blue wildebeest grazes on the lush grasses in Mkhaya.

The highlight was a very close encounter with three handsome lions – I swear I could smell their breath when they yawned!

After exploring Hlane on foot in the morning, a guided game drive in the afternoon holds its own rewards.

TOP TIPS

Spend your first night in Mlilwane in beehive accommodation.

Explore the park's natural beauty from the saddle – the mountain scenery and open grass landscapes are perfect for MTB and horseriding.

including pythons and warthogs are happy to take over these burrows. We moved on animal trails and 4x4 tracks, pausing often in the shade to absorb more lore. Under a tamboti, Lucky described how its hardwood is preferred for furniture, and powdered bark can cure headaches, yet if burned the smoke can not only give you a headache, but an upset stomach, too.

In the afternoon sun, I was happy to take a break from the trail and jump in a vehicle to enter the inner fenced park. The highlight was a very close encounter with three handsome lions. I swear I could smell their breath when they yawned!

My final destination, Mkhaya Game Reserve, is 10 000 hectares of dense lowveld, and has both black and white rhinos. The experience at Mkhaya is quite a contrast to the other parks. It caters for small numbers of visitors, who must leave their vehicle at the gate, where the welcome included chilled face towels and even colder drinks.

We transferred to a game-viewing vehicle and immediately met some of the park's famous residents, the wildebeest. We call them *ingongoni*, the siSwati word for December, as that's when they give birth. We soon spotted a small group of white rhino grazing and climbed down to approach for a closer look on foot. A little later we were thrilled to meet their cranky cousin, the black rhino. It is shocking to think how few are left.

Mkhaya's Stone Camp is something special. If I tell you that the accommodation has no doors or windows and just low walls, you'd think it was unfinished, but I promise it's not. Never have I felt more immersed in the natural world and, after three busy days, I slept like a baby.

The expert guides at Mkhaya can tailor walks, picking a different area depending on visitor interests. On my last morning we left camp and crossed the low flowing Umgwenyana (Little Crocodile) River to walk to a bird hide on a nearby hill. It was a little rainy and not much was moving. It gave me time to reflect on the wonderful diversity of habitats in our little kingdom. With the activities at Mlilwane, the lions at Hlane and the black rhinos and luxury of Mkhaya, each is a distinct experience. And unlike at the Eiffel Tower, there are no crowds to battle. 🐾



Mkhaya's Stone Camp

Plan your Swazi trip

Getting there A round trip from Johannesburg is around 1000 km. Budget about R1300 for petrol, plus R180 for four toll gates there and back, as well as R50 for road tax. Remember paperwork for your vehicle and a ZA sticker for the back of your car.

340 km Gauteng to Oshoek border post. Leave home at 09h00, short stop for coffee, arrive at the border 13h30. Allow 90 minutes here. An early arrival is recommended, especially on Fridays, when people go home for the weekend. Take note: no meat, veg or fruit can be taken into Swaziland from South Africa.
46 km Oshoek to Mlilwane. Stop at The Gables Mall, 10 km from Mlilwane, to buy whatever you need. Good roads to Mlilwane.
96 km Mlilwane to Hlane. Good roads.
61 km Hlane to Mkhaya. About 2 hours on the MR 16 due to potholes.
450 km Mkhaya to Gauteng, 6½ hours with a stop for lunch. Just 20 minutes at the border on the return.

Accommodation

Mlilwane has a variety of accommodation, from beehive huts (R470 a person a night) and rondavels for self-catering (R505 a person) to the luxurious Reilly's Rock Hilltop Lodge (from R1205 a person for dinner, bed and breakfast). Hlane has camping (R125 a person a night) and a range of options for self-catering (from R495 a person). Mkhaya offers all-inclusive packages with guided activities, dinner, bed and breakfast. Prices vary according to the amount of time spent and start from R2125 a person.
Reservations +268-2528-3943, www.biggameparks.org

Conservation fees

Mlilwane and Hlane R55 a person, *Wild Card* members free. At Mkhaya conservation fees are included in the package.