

ELEPHANT QUEST

Leisure time with Big Foot

Geoff and Elise Ernshaw travel at least twice a year. On this trip, however, they had just one mission in mind – to see lots of elephants. So they set off in their Toyota Prado 4,0 litre VX (petrol version) with its Howling Moon rooftop tent. The ellies didn't disappoint

Text: Geoff Earnshaw

Photography: Elise Earnshaw



The elephants of Tembe were most accommodating!

We enjoy elephants. We've watched and photographed some tuskers of note in Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique and SA, as well as plenty of baby elephants. So, this time, we planned our trip around them. The result? A bonus of enjoyable, sandy, less travelled 4x4 tracks.

With modern technology, even older folk like us can surf the internet, key in GPS waypoints and have fewer surprises at border posts and game parks. Elephants don't attract as much attention as the big cats or rhinos, who face the terrible plight of poachers. Still, they have their own survival problems. Organisations like Save the Elephant (sponsored by the Environmental Systems Research Institute) track 24 specific, collared elephants, and their migratory issues.

We live in Ramsgate on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, so the quickest route to Crocodile Bridge in the Kruger National Park is through Swaziland, whose border posts are now computerised and much more efficient than they used to be. We stayed over in the park's Huts and Safari Tents, despite having our own rooftop tent. We wanted to get an early start to view some game, and the extra cost wasn't that much.

The elephants did not disappoint. We encountered large herds, some males with massive tusks, and a few calves. Our last night in the Kruger Park was at Letaba, and we were pleased to see the statue of Duke restored and tastefully fenced in. Duke was one of the park's most photographed elephants, and died at the age of 55.

We made an early start and reached the Giryondo border post with Mozambique, about 45km from Letaba, in good time. No commercial traffic is allowed through here, so the process is speedy and the officials are polite and efficient. It took about half-an-hour to get through both sides of the border. The Mozambique post charged a reasonable park/third party insurance fee.

Limpopo Transfrontier Park – watch this space!

The trip from Giryondo to the south gate of the Limpopo Transfrontier Park is 80km. Although we found the trail a leisurely drive, a 4x4 is mandatory in the park as poor weather conditions could bring problems.

The track is a sandy, single lane and it is sign-posted only at a few major intersections, which are far apart. Andy and Lorraine Tinker's Kruger Park Map Book contains six pages on the Limpopo Transfrontier Park, from the Pafuri border gate southwards to the Massingir gate, and it is a worthwhile purchase.

Without doubt, the Limpopo Transfrontier Park has an exciting future. It is in the first stage of its development and game is scarce, to say the least, but the park shows a lot of potential. Inquisitive 4x4 drivers seeking new trails will enjoy it, and so will tiger fishing



Above: The ferry at Catemba, which took the travellers to Maputo.

Right: The Bilene beach – so beautiful that the Ernshaws decided to take their "rest day" there.

Right: Typical sandy roads in Mozambique were no match for the Toyota Prado 4,0 litre VX.



enthusiasts. Rondawels at various campsites are clean, and the charges are basically at South African prices. South African Leisure Liner house boats are available for hire on the Massingir Dam. They sleep four people at reasonable costs. The park has its own charm and is worth a separate visit of a week or so, in which one could cover the entire park and enjoy the drive, its remoteness and its size.

Beautiful Bilene

The lack of photographic opportunities for elephant, in particular, prompted us to hot foot it to Bilene and its beautiful beaches. Bilene was only 210km from the magnificent Massingir Dam wall, and we arrived mid-afternoon, in good time to put up the rooftop tent and enjoy a sundowner on the beach, with prawns for supper.

The next day was our "rest day". We filled up with fuel, topped up with perishable food and organised ourselves for an early start next day to catch the ferry in Maputo.

The ferry saves you a three-hour trip via Boane, which is not a pleasant road. We set off for Maputo (145km) and arrived just in time to join the motor vehicle queue at position No 8 out of 34 available positions. In the end, 40 vehicles made it on board. Ferries are always interesting, whether on Lake Malawi, Lake Kariba or just crossing Maputo's river mouth. It took one hour to load the cars, the trip took 20 minutes and the ferry was empty within 10 minutes of docking at Catembe!

A reasonable gravel and stone road leads through Bella Vista (42km) to the Salamanga police check point (17km), and then onto a sandy track the Maputo Elephant Reserve HQ's main park gate.

Maputo Elephant Park

The Maputo Elephant Park covers about 50 000ha and is a mixture of forested dunes, mangrove swamps, flood plains, woodlands and several clearly identifiable lakes – none of which is sign posted. The "extended park" stretches from Cabo Santa Maria on the northern tip down to Lago Xinguta, providing a pristine coastline of about 50km. A network of challenging sandy tracks criss-crosses the reserve.

The only campsite is at Ponta Milibangalala, and while there are helpful rangers there, no other facilities are available. Camping is allowed at park headquarters, and this is an option worth considering. At the time of visiting, the Ponta Dobela campsite was closed. Still, the pristine beach and setting made up for this shortfall. Bird and animal life was scarce, although we saw small herds of elephant, nyala, red duiker, suni, reedbuck in large numbers and vervet monkeys. Between October and February, turtles come onto the beaches to lay their eggs, which take about two months to hatch. A visit at such a time is a unique experience.

We spent the night at Ponta Milibangalala, and the next day we retraced our steps to headquarters. The route from the park HQ to the border with KwaZulu-Natal at Ponta do Ouro was a straight, sandy road of some 50km, and took about three hours to traverse.

Both sides of the border post were casual and welcoming, and from there we hit 15km of good tar road to Kosi Bay Wildlife Camp.

Right: Typical sandy roads in Mozambique were no match for the Toyota Prado 4,0 litre VX.

Below: Setting up camp at Bilene – just in time to enjoy prawns for supper and watch the sun set.



Accommodation and service from Tina and Benn was excellent, and we stayed for two nights in comparative luxury.

Tembe Elephant Park

It was only 50km on a good tar road from Kosi Bay to Tembe Elephant Park. We had visited Tembe several times and always enjoyed excellent sightings of lion and elephant.

Tembe is a wonderful, little visited game reserve of 300 square kilometres, administered by KZN Wildlife. It has a luxury lodge. With good reason, only 4x4s are allowed to enter the park.

In June, 2002, four lions were released into Tembe and today there are 40! Of these, 11 have radio collars.

The park boasts the Big Five, including both black and white rhino, wild dog, the tiny suni antelope, and about 340 bird species.

It is, however, Tembe's elephants that take pride of place. The area was very much a part of the legendary Ivory Route, and three of the largest tuskers in Africa – iSilo, Induna and Mukobono – live here. They are not difficult to find as they spend most of their time in the south of the reserve.

The park has a network of mapped roads and two very well located viewing hides. We enjoyed excellent sightings of elephant, waterbuck, nyala, kudu, warthog, impala and wildebeest at The Mahlasela Pan hide near the entrance gate – all within 30 minutes of arriving. We then travelled the length of the reserve to the Ponweni hide in the north. Here we had just as much success.

Tembe has a 24-hour webcam at one of its water holes (www.tembe.co.za/isilo_tusker.htm). After six hours of driving, viewing and taking photographs, we returned to the Kosi Bay Nature Reserve, where a large spotted genet joined us for a braai that night.

A coastal meander

The next day we left early to enjoy the 100km 4x4 coastal trail from Kosi Bay to Sodwana, run by KZN Wildlife. We had all the necessary permits for the trail and to visit the points of interest along the parallel trail on the beach.

The first part of the trail from the Sihadla west entrance gate to Banga Nek, which is only 15km, was made difficult by the deep sand, the many route alternatives and the lack of signs.

Banga Nek was primitive and beautiful, and a popular haunt for dedicated fishermen.

From Banga Nek at the end of a sandy peninsula, we headed south for 60km, which took about two-and-a-half hours. The road was sandy, undulating, and fairly straight.

Several minor sand hills required low range. The trail ran parallel to the shoreline behind a range of scrub-covered dunes.

Short diversions to the beach were available at Dog Point, Black Rock, Rock Tail Bay, Lala Nek and Mabibi.

After Mabibi the trail followed the eastern shore of Lake Sibaya for 15km and finally left the park at the Gobeys Point gate.

The trail is an easy trip through pristine dunes and forested landscape that adds a bit of variation to one's 4x4 experiences.

From the trail exit gate we passed through Mbazwana and Hluhluwe village, all on tar, to the Memorial Gate of Hluhluwe/Umfolozi Game Reserve, where we spent two action-packed days of viewing and photographing in relatively up-market surroundings – but that's another story.

Fuel for the trip totalled R4570, and overall the venture cost us about R500 per person per day – well worthwhile, considering all the places we saw that had been on our travelling "bucket list".

OUR ITINERARY

Day 1-6: Travel to Kruger National Park (elephants around Letaba) and stay for four days.

Day 7: Cross the border into the Limpopo Transfrontier Park, Mozambique, at Giriyyondo border; travel through the park, skirting Massingir Dam (renowned for its tiger fishing), and then off to Bilene.

Day 8: A rest day at the beautiful beach of Bilene.

Day 9: Take the "Out of Africa" ferry from Maputo to Catembe and visit the Reserva Especial da Maputo.

Day 10: Leave Mozambique at the Ponta do Ouro border post.

Day 11: Visit the Tembe Elephant Park for a day of uninterrupted photography.

Day 12: Complete the coastal 4x4 trail from Kosi Bay to Sodwana.

Days 13-14: Two days of luxury at Hilltop in Hluhluwe Game Reserve, for white rhino pictures.

Distance covered: a leisurely 3000km.

TRIP COSTS (IN RANDS)

Swaziland border

Road tax for one month: R50

Kruger National Park

Basic Huts and Safari Tents: About R200 per person per night.

Giriyyondo border posts

SA side: No costs.

Mozambique insurance: R150 (one month)

Limpopo Transfrontier Park entrance: R195 (two people and vehicle).

Bilene camping:

R90 (per night at electrified campsite).

Ferry, Maputo-Catembe:

R100 (4x4 and driver) Passenger: R3.

Maputo Elephant Reserve

Park entry: R70 per person, plus R70 for the 4x4. Camp site: R35 per person.

Ponta do Ouro border post:

No costs on either side.

KZN Wildlife (Kosi Bay)

Accommodation: R230 per person per night

KZN Wildlife Coastal 4x4 Trail: R45 per vehicle.

Tembe Elephant Park:

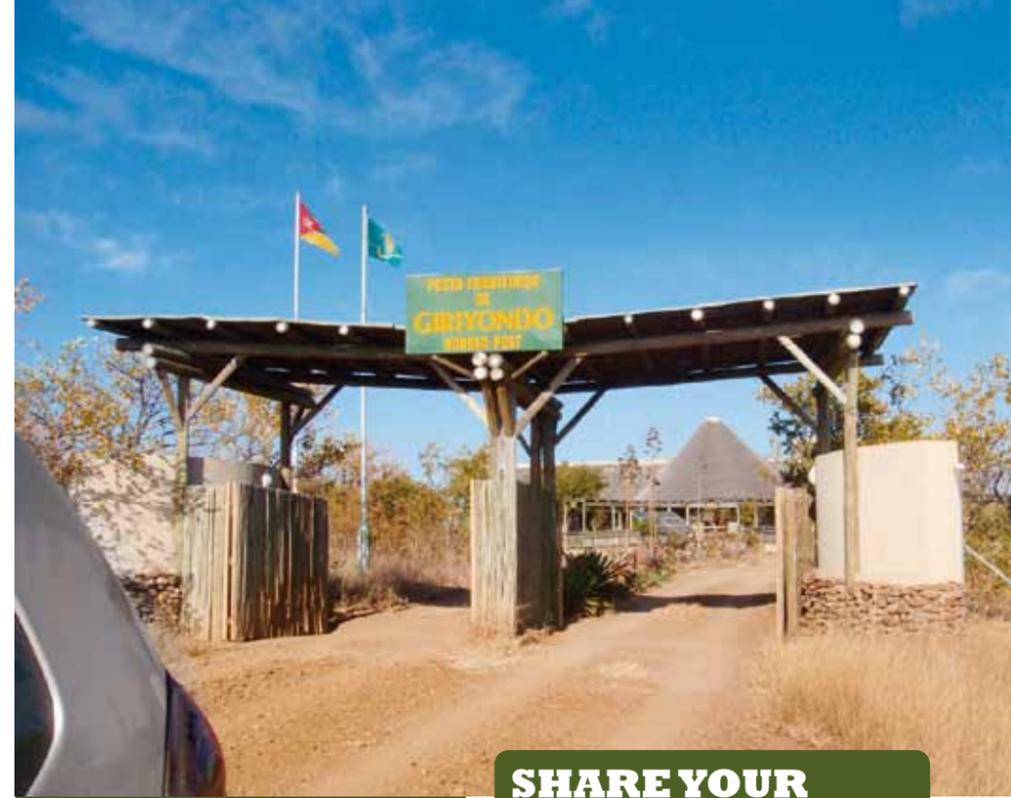
Day visitors and lodge visitors: both pay once-off fees of R35 per vehicle and a R30 conservation levy. (We had a Wild Card.)

Limpopo Transfrontier Park – At a glance

- Only accessible to 4x4s.
- There are 4 gates: Massingir Dam (Mozambique), Giriyyondo (SA/KNP), Mapai (Mozambique) and Pafuri (SA/KNP).

Organised Activities:

Machampane Wilderness Trails



Above: The Giriyyondo border post does not allow any commercial traffic to pass. It can be hard to find, so using GPS co-ordinates is best: S 23°35'2" and E 31°39'36"

SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES... AND WIN!

Send us an article about your off-road adventure and a couple of nice pictures, and stand a chance of winning an attractive prize!

You don't have to be a journalist, and the article can be written in English or Afrikaans. We will translate and rewrite if necessary, as long as the details are there.

This month our prize goes to Geoff and Elise Ernschaw, for their article on their quest for elephants.

The Ernschaws win a Samsonite X'Blade business case on wheels, valued at R1995.

The X'Blade range is lightweight and durable, and has plenty of features. It is available in both black and white, and has a pocket for a PDA, a cell phone pocket, lockable zippers, an address tag, a CD/DVD pocket, a 15.6-inch laptop sleeve and a cable pocket or pencil case. It's got both a top carry handle and push button and a retractable wheel handle, and is the perfect size for carry-on luggage.

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Contact

Transfrontier Parks Destinations

E-mail: info@tfpd.co.za

Tel: +27 21 701 7860

Elephant Facts

- Elephants can weigh up to seven tons, the combined weight of 80 human adults weighing about 85kg each.
- To be classed as a tusker, an elephant's tusks must exceed 100lb each (45kg).
- Duke, the Kruger Park elephant that died in 2011 aged about 55, is honoured by a statue at Letaba camp. His tusks weighed 140,5kg.
- The largest tusker in SA is Tembe's iSilo. His "vital statistics": Age: 45-52 years; tusk weight: 50-60kg each; length: 2.5m; body height: 3.2m; weight: 6500-7000kg.
- The largest elephant ever recorded weighed almost 11 tons and was 4m tall! He was shot in Angola in 1974. 🐘

