



YEAR IN THE WILD
With Scott Ramsay

Place of miracles and wonder

As part of his year-long journey through 31 South African nature reserves, including all the national parks, photojournalist Scott Ramsay explored one of the country's most important and diverse protected areas

The huge iSimangaliso Wetland Park on the far north-east coast is a truly impressive stretch of land, ocean, lakes and rivers. At 332 000ha, it is SA's second largest protected natural area, after the Kruger National Park. (The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park that straddles both Botswana and SA is bigger than Kruger, but the South African portion would be the

third largest nature reserve, after Kruger and iSimangaliso.)

At first, iSimangaliso can seem daunting to explore. The park, the name of which means "miracle" in Zulu, was SA's first World Heritage Site (declared in 1999), and is a collection of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, stretching 250km by 50km at its widest.

It incorporates places as diverse as uMkhuze (a game reserve comprising bushveld and pans), Kosi Bay (a series of four lakes used for centuries by Thongan fishermen), Lake Sibaya (SA's largest freshwater lake), Lake St Lucia (Africa's biggest estuarine system) and the so-called Western and Eastern Shores. These comprise beaches, grassland, swamps and

forests. Offshore is a marine protected area, extending three nautical miles out to sea. It includes the most southerly warm water coral reefs on the continent.

The diversity of animal life at iSimangaliso is unrivalled in the country. There are more than 3400 animal species including 129 mammals, 526 birds, 128 reptiles, 50 amphibians, 1400 fish species, 282 butterflies, 228 spiders, 54 dragonflies and 36 snakes! The park hosts SA's largest populations of hippos (at least 1200) and crocodile (more than 1600), as well as the highest number of southern reedbuck and red duiker, the latter being endemic to SA.

There are no lions, but there are elephants, rhino, buffalo, wild dog and hyena.

This is one of two protected areas in SA where it's still possible to see a leopard walking on the beach (De Hoop Nature Reserve in the Western Cape is the other).

It was Nelson Mandela who said about iSimangaliso: "It must be the only place on the globe where the oldest land mammal (the rhino) and the world's biggest

terrestrial animal (the elephant) share an ecosystem with the world's oldest fish (the coelacanth) and the world's biggest marine mammal (the blue whale).

It's not surprising that here you will find some of the rarest creatures in Africa, and there's no better person to point them out than Kian Barker of Shakabarker Tours.

He is based in the town of St Lucia, where hippos and leopards are regular garden intruders. (St Lucia is the only urban area in the world surrounded entirely by a natural World Heritage Site.)

Kian, a former game ranger, is one of the few professional guides allowed to take guests on night drives. Before we'd gone 10m, he slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the Landy, gently plucking a tiny chameleon from the edge of a leaf.

"It's a Setaro's dwarf chameleon," Kian elaborated on the tiny creature, no longer than about 4cm.

"And it's found only here. The survival of this species depends almost entirely on iSimangaliso."

Like this chameleon, the park's most iconic animals are inextricably linked with iSimangaliso. Its beaches are the most important nesting area in the southern Indian Ocean for endangered leatherback and loggerhead turtles. Leatherbacks can weigh more than 800kg and reach 2m in length. They can dive to depths of 1km to feed on jellyfish, holding their breath for more than an hour.

In November and December, females make their way onto the beaches to lay their eggs, which are buried in the sand. In January and February, hundreds of hatchlings emerge and make their way down to the sea. It's estimated that just two in every 1000 hatchlings survive to reproductive age, returning to the same beach on which they were born to lay their eggs.

The turtles and iSimangaliso's other creatures almost lost their sanctuary in the 1990s when mining companies wanted to dredge large parts of the shoreline and forested dunes for ilmenite,



Opposite: The beautiful campsite at Kosi Bay in the far north of iSimangaliso is situated on Lake kuNhlange, the biggest of the four lakes close to the sea. Hippos and crocodiles are common, so remember to watch out for them when swimming. Above: iSimangaliso has the greatest diversity of animal life of any protected area in SA. From top left: a ghost crab, fish eagle, forest cobra and golden orb spider.



Top: Horse riding is one of several activities offered near the town of St Lucia.
 Top and above left: There is a Crocodile Centre near the entrance to the park, where both large and small specimens in fenced-off enclosures can be observed up close.
 Above right: Fish caught in the traditional traps at Kosi Bay.

a mineral that is processed into titanium. This black sand may be valuable as an industrial and consumer product, but it's vital to the survival of the turtles.

"The ilmenite in the sands of iSimangaliso is critical," researcher Dr Ronel Nel told me. "The turtles have no sex chromosomes, so when they hatch in temperatures above 29° Celsius it's a female and if the temperature is below that, it's a male.

Without ilmenite's warmth, most hatchlings would end up as males, effectively dooming the population to extinction."

The turtles are just one of many species that would have lost their home if mining had gone ahead. Concerned citizens and organisations fought the plan, and the government appointed the Leon Commission to investigate the best course for the area traditionally known as Thongaland.

The message came back loud and clear: "The unique combination of socio-political history and environmental and biological diversity makes this area a very special asset to the nation. There is no substitute."

No substitute indeed. Mining was banned, and more than 3000 animal species could carry on

thriving in the lakes, rivers, forests, bushveld and beaches. From almost being dredged to oblivion, the park is now a sanctuary to natural diversity and a beacon of conservation.

Getting to know iSimangaliso Wetland Park

The park comprises 10 sections, which together form one contiguous protected area.

- **Kosi Bay.** On the border of Mozambique, Kosi Bay is actually a series of four lakes of varying levels of salinity, connected by redlined channels. It's here that the local Thongan people have fished for more than 1000 years, using ingenious fish traps in the lakes.
- **Coastal Forest.** This section of thick dune forest runs along the coastline and includes the beaches of Black Rock, Rocktail Bay, Island Rock and Mabibi.
- **Lake Sibaya** is SA's largest freshwater lake. Guests at Thonga Beach Lodge are allowed to canoe on the lake, which is otherwise off limits to fishermen and boaters.
- **Sodwana Bay** is a mecca for scuba divers and anglers.
- **uMkhuze.** Just 40km west of Sodwana, this 40 000ha wildlife reserve comprises lakes, forests and riverine habitat and is a must-visit. Look out for black and white

The traditional Thongan fish traps of Kosi Bay have been used for more than 700 years, and are still passed down from one generation to the next.



rhino, buffalo, elephant, wild dog, cheetah, hyena and birds from a list that is among the longest in the country.

- **False Bay** is an inland area on the wild western shores of Lake St Lucia.
- **Western Shores**, on Lake St Lucia, is a good area to spot elephant, buffalo, rhino, giraffe and tsessebe antelope.
- **Lake St Lucia** is the centrepiece of the southern portion of iSimangaliso and SA's largest estuarine system. At 80km long and 23km wide, it's also home to the biggest hippo and croc populations in the country.
- **Eastern Shores**. This is the most popular part of the park and incorporates several game-viewing roads and lookout points, as well as the most popular campsite at Cape Vidal beach.
- **Maphelane** is in the very south of the park, below the town of St Lucia. It's a popular spot for fishermen, and boasts the tallest dune (183m) in the park.



Ranger Jabulani Simelane walks through the fig forest at uMkhuze, one of the premier birding sites in the country. Below inset: Rocktail Bay offers a memorable scuba diving experience.

Where to stay

There is a range of accommodation options throughout iSimangaliso. For more information, contact KZN Wildlife, which manages most public camps inside iSimangaliso. Tel 033-845-1000, email bookings@kznwildlife.com, www.kznwildlife.com. You can also check out www.isimangaliso.com.

Camping is available at Kosi Bay, Coastal Forest, Sodwana Bay, uMkhuze, Eastern Shores (Cape Vidal), Lake St Lucia Estuary and Maphelane. Prices start at R385 a campsite for up to four people (additional adults pay from R70 and children from R35 each). The most popular camp is at Cape Vidal, near the main beach.

Self-catering safari tents, bungalows and chalets are available at Kosi Bay, Sodwana Bay, uMkhuze, Eastern Shores and

Maphelane. Prices start from R400 a night for a two-bed hut.

Rocktail Beach Camp (a private lodge run by Wilderness Safaris) has 17 stylish cabins with en suite bathrooms and is well suited to families. It's in the Coastal Forest section and is just a few hundred metres from the beach. Costs from R1 579 a person a night, including all meals, but excluding drinks. Tel 011-807-1800, www.wilderness-safaris.com.

The 24-bed luxury Thonga Beach Lodge, run by iSibindi Africa Lodges, is situated about 20km south of Rocktail, overlooking Mabibi Beach and close to Lake Sibaya. From R2760 a person a day, including meals, snorkelling gear and other selected activities. iSibindi Africa Lodges also run Kosi Forest Lodge, near Kosi Bay. Tel 035-474-1473, email res@isibindi.co.za or www.isibindiafrica.co.za.



Privately run lodges within iSimangaliso include Thonga Beach Lodge (top and middle) and Rocktail Beach Camp (bottom). Both are situated close to the beach, and offer excellent accommodation and food.

Top things to do at iSimangaliso

- Go turtle-watching with Kian Barker of Shakabarker Tours. Kian is one of the most knowledgeable and entertaining of guides who have a concession to take visitors into iSimangaliso. During summer, he offers walking beach tours at night to watch turtles nesting and the hatching of eggs. Excursions include night game drives. Turtle tours cost R1950 a person and include dinner, breakfast and refreshments, while night drives are R350 a person, including tea and coffee. Tel 035-590-1162, email info@shakabarker.co.za, www.shakabarker.co.za.
- Visit the crocodile breeding centre near the entrance of the park at St Lucia town. Here you can see three crocodile species as well as American alligators and various snakes. Crocodiles are fed at 15h00 on Saturdays and 11h30 on Sundays. Costs: R35 an adult and R20 a child from Monday to Friday and R45 an adult and R30 a child over weekends. Tel 035-590-1386.
- Scuba dive at Sodwana Bay, Rocktail Bay and Thonga Beach Lodge to spot a myriad underwater wonders. Reefteach operates dives at Sodwana Bay and these start from R285 a dive with equipment rental at R25 an item.

Reefteach, tel 035-571-0231, email info@reefteach.co.za, www.reefteach.co.za.

- For Rocktail Bay, contact Mokarran Dive Charters, which offers dives from R430 a dive and equipment rentals from R60 an item. Mokarran Dive Charters, cell 084-953-0487, e-mail mokarran@worldonline.co.za, www.mokarrandivecharters.com.
- Thonga Beach Lodge offers dives from R460 a person for the first dive (from R410 subsequent dives) and full gear rental costs R220. Tel 035-474-1473.
- See plentiful wildlife at uMkhuze. Day entry fees are R35 an adult and R25 a child. Check out the rebuilt kuMasinga Hide on Nsumu Pan or do a two-hour walk through a fig-tree forest with ranger Jabulani Simelane, an expert birder. Watch out for Pel's fishing owl and the African broadbill. Tel 035-573-9004.
- Tour the Kosi Bay lakes by boat with guide Stephen de Lange. He gives an excellent overview of the lake system and Thongan fish traps and you may see hippo, crocodile and the rare palm-nut vulture. You'll also be able to snorkel near the traps. A three-hour cruise costs R340 a person (rates for customised tours depend on size of group). Cell 079-991-7714.

- Take a guided boat tour on Lake St Lucia with Shoreline Boat Safaris. The boat leaves from the jetty near the entrance to the town of St Lucia and erudite guide Stacey Farrell gives an excellent overview of the lake. The two-hour cruise affords guaranteed sightings of hippos, crocodiles and fish eagles. Costs R170 a person. Tel 083-457-2147, email info@stlucia.co.za, www.heritagetoursandsafaris.com.
- Go snorkelling at the mouth of Kosi Bay and see plenty of fish and eels. No guide is needed.
- Drive the Western and Eastern Shores of Lake St Lucia, stopping at the various hides and viewpoints. You may spot hippo, crocodile, birds and a variety of antelope. The uMthoma Aerial Boardwalk on the Western Shores is well worth a visit.



At Rocktail Bay, divers sometimes encounter pods of dolphins. The warm water coral reefs are the most southerly on the east African coastline. After a morning in the water, divers can enjoy a beach-side breakfast at Rocktail Beach Camp.

Year in the Wild

Year in the Wild is supported by Total, Ford, EeziAwn, Fronrunner, National Luna, Goodyear, Evosat, Vodacom, Digicape, Lacie, Garmin, Hetzner, K-Way, Cape Union Mart and Conqueror Trailers.

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