

exploring

YEAR IN THE WILD



SCOTT RAMSAY

“ This park is smallish and different – well worth a visit to see the major efforts being made in conservation

MOKALA National Park takes its name from the Setswana word for “camel thorn tree”, which dominates the acacia woodland south-west of Kimberley in the Northern Cape.

Although Mokala is located at the southern end of the Kalahari sand deposits, it is comparatively small, just 28 000 hectares, so it lacks the size and wildness of the Kgalagadi’s 3.2 million hectares. And the comparatively flat, monotonous landscape can’t compare to the dramatic scenery of Augrabies Falls National Park.

Even though this area of the Northern Cape seems less scenically spectacular than other regions of South Africa, it was rated by the IUCN as one of the most important in the country to conserve.

South Africa’s newest national park, proclaimed in 2007, Mokala is considered the successor to the old Vaalbos National Park, which was deproclaimed in the late 1990s, after a land claim which saw the area returned to the local community.

It’s located on old farm and hunting land, so there is much evidence of man’s influence. There are lots of gravel roads and management tracks, and parts of the veld have been transformed. The invasive – but indigenous – “swarthaak” (*Acacia mellifera*) has choked some of the woodland.

But like all other parks I have visited, Mokala is unique in some ways, with its own flavour. The park’s tagline of “where endangered species roam” is a good summary of its intended purpose – to breed and protect rare and threatened sable, roan and tsessebe antelope, black and white rhino and disease-free Cape buffalo.

It’s a critical area for the conservation (and breeding) of the endangered roan and sable antelope (numbering 65 and 50 respectively), while the disease-free buffalo (numbering 350) are some of the most impressive I have seen.

These species are sold to local game farms generating valuable revenue for national parks. According to park manager Deon Joubert, R28 million has been generated in the past seven years from sales of endangered species.

For photographers, be prepared to work hard. Landscape shots are very tricky, and it’s hard to get an



MAGNIFICENT: Kudu in early morning light. Pictures: SCOTT RAMSAY

OFF BEATEN
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elevated viewpoint, because of the flat landscape. The animals are also difficult to photograph, because of the dense woodland, especially in the south-west of the park.

The Vaalbos road in the north-east, however, is superb for open grasslands, and offers much better opportunities.

The gemsbok are skittish (probably because they are regularly captured and sold to game farms), but the buffalo are relaxed, and make for great photo subjects.

In terms of accommodation, Mokala’s Mosu Lodge comprises several thatched chalets that are fully equipped for self-catering. Some of the chalets don’t have any views, because they are built in front of each other, but there’s still a good “bush” ambience.

The Lillydale Lodge in the north-

east comprises 12 chalets perched on the edge of the Riet River ravine, so these have great views, and the interiors are fantastic. But the main dining area lacks the traditional national parks atmosphere (probably because it’s an old farmhouse that has been converted to tourism use).

There are restaurants at both Lillydale and Mosu.

Each of the six campsites at Motswedi have their own kitchen and ablutions, but there is limited shade, so remember to take an extra awning or two.

The best accommodation spot at Mokala is the wonderful tree house, which is located in the middle of the park, away from the main camps. Although it’s not luxurious, it’s my kind of place, with a double bed, small toilet and shower, basin and a



PERCHED: The treehouse at Mokala, the best place to stay in the park.



THUNDERSTORM: Mokala’s flat landscape and rolling clouds.



SUPERB GUIDE: Kabelo Mothupi with a leopard tortoise.



BEWARE: An impressive disease-free Cape buffalo.

huge deck on which to braai and admire the views. It’s perched halfway up a copse of acacia trees, and is unfenced. It can’t be booked online, so you have to call the park to book directly.

There are no large predators at Mokala. The biggest is the black-backed jackal – no one has seen evidence of leopard for a number of years. But Deon did tell me that they are investigating putting lions into the park, although they might be separated in a large fenced-off section, away from the endangered species like roan and sable.

After a few days of exploring Mokala, I grew to love it, especially when the thunderstorms rolled in, and the skies cracked with fire and fury. If you can see past the highly managed state of the environment, and forget that it’s basically a large

farm for the breeding of endangered species, then Mokala is worth a visit.

Finally, I have to mention Kabelo Mothupi. He is one of the best guides I have met in the national parks network, and is enthusiastic, friendly and ever willing to impart what he knows.

He’s a real asset to the park, and although he’s only just arrived, having worked at Marakele National Park in the Waterberg, he’s one of the best guides I have met in the national parks network.

For Mokala, call 053 204 0158, or see www.sanparks.org

Ramsay is a photojournalist focusing on protected areas in Southern Africa. For more, see www.yearinthewild.com Partners include Cape Union Mart, Ford, Goodyear and K-Way.