

**At Addo you** can see the largest terrestrial animal (the elephant), the most ancient land mammal (the black rhino), one of the largest marine mammals (the southern-right whale), Africa's iconic predator (the lion) and two of the rarest marine birds, the Cape gannet and African penguin, so it is certainly a park worth visiting.

Nevertheless, Addo is not as "wild" as some of southern Africa's other national parks. Much of it is fragmented, surrounded by extensive urban and agricultural areas.

But herein lies part of Addo's appeal.

Because it is situated just off the N2 road, an hour's drive north-east of Port Elizabeth, it is probably the most accessible authentic Big 5 destination in the country. And with its variety of accommodation and scenery, the

park makes a rewarding visit, especially to the repeat visitor who gets to know it well.

**1. From spekboom to sea, mountains to marine**

Addo has several different sections, each offering something unique. If you were to fly 150km in a direct line from the north-west of the park to the south-east, you'd encounter a fantastic array of landscapes.

First up is the semi-desert Karoo of the northern Darlington section, where black rhino browse on the spiky euphorbia "noors" plant. Just to the south are the Zuurberg, with aromatic mountain fynbos, and the forested kloofs of the Kabouga section, which echo with calls of Knysna turacos.

Then you'll come across the low-lying hills of the Main and Colchester sections, where elephants browse on spekboom thicket.

Along the coast, the Woody Cape section boasts emerald temperate forest, as well as the largest mobile dune field in the southern hemisphere, 57km long and up to 2km wide.

And finally there are several offshore islands surrounded by the surging surf of the Indian Ocean, all critical to the conservation of several marine bird species.

**2. Viewing Addo's elephants**

Elephants may never forget, but they clearly forgive. The revival of Addo's pachyderms is one of Africa's greatest conservation success stories, and today the park is probably the best place in



From left to right: Malachite sunbird, Common fiscal shrike, Black-shouldered kite, Greater double-collared sunbird, Speckled mousebird, Black-headed heron

SA to view them up close.

With the arrival of the 1820 settlers in the Eastern Cape, hunters killed thousands of elephants, the most southerly in Africa (along with the Knysna elephants).

In 1919, one particularly unsavoury character – Major JP Pretorius – shot 114 elephants in 11 months. During one hunt, according to the archives, he was "forced to lame an elephant by shooting it through the vertebral column. Then like lightning he jumped on the beast's back, ran to its head and killed it with a shot through the neck." In another incident, Pretorius shot 16

elephants within 30 seconds – or so his journal records.

Elephants in the region would probably have been wiped out but for the public outcry and the actions of a sympathetic farmer, a Mr Harvey, who allowed the elephants to use the dense spekboom on his land as a refuge from the hunting.

In 1931, when the park was proclaimed, just 11 elephants remained. Today, the population has grown to more than 700.

In the early days, visitors were kept out of certain areas because the elephants were understandably aggressive towards humans.

But today Addo has some of the most relaxed wild elephants in southern Africa, largely because of the patient work of Dr Anthony Hall-Martin, who faced down numerous charges during his research and earned the trust of the aggressive females.

Because of the excessive hunting in the 1800s and early 1900s, when hunters targeted elephants with large tusks, Addo's elephant cows became "tuskless" and the bulls had comparative toothpicks for ivory. In 2003 several elephant bulls with sizable tusks were introduced from the Kruger National Park, and today youngsters are showing signs of producing larger tusks.

# The best of ADDO



Addo Elephant National Park was proclaimed in 1931 to protect a single species, but it has grown to more than 1800 square kilometres and is now one of the country's most diverse parks, encompassing five of SA's nine terrestrial biomes – and a marine protected area

Text and photography: Scott Ramsay

Above, left: Elephants at Addo were once aggressive towards humans, because of hunting, but today they are some of the most habituated in Africa.

Above: The open grasslands of the Gorah Loop road offer good opportunities to see grazing antelope, such as eland.

**What does "Addo" mean?**

The name "Addo" may have come from the Khoisan word "lGa dao". "Dao" means "drift" or "crossing" while "lga" refers to the poisonous Noors euphorbia plant that grows in the dry northern part of the park. By the early 1800s, maps depicted "Kadouw" and "Ados Drift" where travellers used to cross the Sunday's River – the only crossing on the road north from Algoa Bay.



**Don't drive over elephant dung!**

Elephants may hog the spotlight at Addo, but the flightless dung beetle (*Circellium bacchus*) deserves a leading role. This endemic invertebrate is found nowhere else in the world, and is specially adapted to exploit the coarse faeces of large herbivores in the dense thicket biome. The beetle is a vital contributor to the health of the ecosystem, spreading elephant and other animal dung over the soil and ensuring that nutrients are recycled. So remember, don't drive over the elephant dung, because you may inadvertently be killing the beetles. You'll notice that the roads in Addo have gently sloping edges to allow the dung beetles to roll their merchandise easily across the roads. Initially, the roads had steep cambers and the industrious insects were dying en masse due to over-exertion and heat exhaustion.



Dung beetles are as important as elephants to Addo's ecosystem.

**3. Addo's other mammals**

Despite the park's name, Addo is definitely not just about elephants. Although there are only 20-odd herbivore species in the park – a diversity lower than savannah areas – the rich browsing value of the subtropical thicket can sustain a high density of wildlife. In one study, Addo's average biomass of animals was 6700kg per square kilometre – the fourth highest in Africa!

**Mountain Zebra National Park**

If you're heading to Addo, then consider driving two hours north-east to the Mountain Zebra National Park near Cradock. This scenic park of open plains and Karoo koppies is very different to Addo, and although it's much smaller, the unimpeded vistas and semi-arid veld make it easy to spot wildlife, including large herds of black wildebeest, hartebeest and springbok.

As its name suggests, the park was proclaimed to protect the Cape mountain zebra, and its current population of 750 is the largest in the country out of a total population of 1200. This group is one of only three in the country that is entirely indigenous. The other two can be found at Gamkaberg Nature Reserve and Kammanassie Nature Reserve.

Also look out for black rhino, and the newly re-introduced lions, which are often seen near the rest camp.

An unusual activity in the park is cheetah tracking. A ranger guides you on foot within metres of the radio-collared cheetahs, which are accustomed to the presence of humans. For kids and adults alike, it's a superb experience.

The night drives always seem to turn up the usual nocturnal creatures such as aardvark, brown hyena, caracal and bat-eared foxes.

Accommodation is in face-brick chalets, each with a view of Bakenkop mountain, which is sometimes bedecked with snow in winter.

But there's a catch. The dense spekboom can make it tricky to see the animals, so head for the open patches of grassland and the waterholes. The best places are Hapoor Dam, Gwarrie Pan or Rooidam, all just a short drive from the main rest camp. The open grasslands of the Gorah Loop drive in the north-east also make game viewing more rewarding.

The park conserves the region's only indigenous buffalo populations,



Above, left: The Cape gannet colony on Bird Island off Addo's coastal region is part of the park, and is the largest and most important breeding site for these endangered birds. Above: Burchell's zebra is found in the main section of the park. Below, left: The Alexandria forest has a completely different habitat to the rest of the park, offering up fruit like this. Below, centre: The Cape buffalo in Addo are disease-free. Below, right: A protea in the Zuurberg section.



which are disease-free, making this group of around 400 increasingly valuable in an African context.

Lions were reintroduced into the park from Kgalagadi, and the black-maned males are as photogenic as their desert ancestors.

Cheetah, spotted hyena and black rhino have also been reintroduced into the park. Cape Mountain zebra can be seen in the Zuurberg section, while marine mammals include southern-right whales, several species of dolphin and the most easterly breeding colony of Cape fur seals in SA.

**4. Addo's diverse accommodation**

Like the diverse habitats, Addo's accommodation has something for everyone. The main rest camp offers the usual chalets and

cabins, while a flood-lit waterhole with an underground hide gives visitors an opportunity to see animals coming to drink. However, trains can sometimes be heard on the nearby railway line, spoiling the wild sounds.

Matyholweni camp in the south is much smaller than the main camp, and not as busy, with only 15 self-catering chalets but no shop or restaurant.

I prefer the more adventurous options, including the small, fenced Spekboom Tented Camp in the middle of the main game viewing area. This is probably the wildest experience you can have in Addo.

Also recommended is the remote Narina Bush Camp next to the Wit River on the southern slopes of the Zuurberg mountains. It's a basic camp with a few small safari tents, cooking and braai area, and basic ablutions.

**Super spekboom**

While driving through Addo, you may be tempted to ignore the ubiquitous, humble *Portulacaria afra* plant – known as spekboom. But it's actually a botanical superhero in disguise and is the cornerstone of Addo's ecosystem.

This nutritious, adaptable succulent plant can sustain some of the highest animal densities in Africa. It also sequesters carbon from the atmosphere at rates equivalent to tropical rainforests, storing about four tons of carbon per hectare.

The spekboom is drought resistant and fire-tolerant and creates its own microclimate, allowing other plants to take root and flourish in and around it, especially in leached, arid soils.

**The Armstrong Fence**

When the park was proclaimed, there were no fences, and ranger Harold Trollope and his men had to use bonfires at intervals of several hundred metres to keep the elephants contained. But the wily elephants still continued to raid the surrounding citrus orchards at night, retreating back into the dense spekboom thicket during the day. Only in 1954 was a solution found. Warden Graham Armstrong developed a fence made from railway tracks and elevator cables donated by the Waygood-Otis lift company. So strong and effective was his invention that it is still in use today.



Left: Scott took this picture while flying with conservation manager John Adendorff, who regularly patrols the park in his light aircraft. Right: The best place in the park to see lions is at River Bend Lodge.

But there is no one else for miles around, and there's a fantastic wilderness atmosphere.

Also recommended for forest lovers are the simple Langebos hiking huts in the Woody Cape section in the far south, set in indigenous forest. This is the start of the Alexandria hiking trail, but the huts are open to anyone.

A variety of private luxury lodges have exclusive concessions in the park, including Gorah Elephant Camp, River Bend Lodge and Kuzuko Lodge. Rates

are far higher than the SANParks accommodation, but guests have the advantage of exclusive use of the concessions, and guides are allowed to drive off-road on occasion, getting closer to animals.

Gorah's luxurious tents are suited to couples, while River Bend's manor house and cottages are homely, best suited to families with young children. River Bend's three beautiful lions are accustomed to the lodge's game drive vehicles, so it's probably the best place in Addo to see the predators.



**5. Alexandria Hiking Trail**

No guided walking is offered in the main game viewing area of Addo. The dense thicket makes it difficult to see more than a few metres ahead, and it is considered too dangerous to risk encounters with animals like elephant, black rhino and lion.

However, the beautiful 36km Alexandria hiking trail in the south of the park is one of the best in the country. The first night is

spent at the Langebos huts in the forest.

Hikers then emerge onto the beaches and spend the second night at the Woody Cape hut, spectacularly positioned on the edge of the ocean. Then there's the walk through the dune field, back to Langebos.

**6. Bedrogfontein 4x4 Trail**

For 4x4ers, this pretty half-day 4x4 trail gives access to the most remote areas of the park,

including the northern Darlington section, where black rhino browse among euphorbia, and the mountainous Kabouga section, where you can spot Knysna loeries and Narina trogons in forested kloofs. Also look out for hundreds of cycads growing on the northern slopes.

You can start the trail either in the north at Darlington or in the south near the town of Kirkwood. The trail is not particularly challenging in dry conditions, but if it rains



Guided horse trails are offered in both the main section of the park and in the Zuurberg mountains.



Above: The coastal Alexandria dune field is the largest of its kind in the southern hemisphere, and lies adjacent to the Alexandria forest.

# OVERLAND ADVENTURE

## YEAR IN THE WILD



Above: The Bedrogfontein 4x4 trail provides a great way to see the northern sections of the park. Right, top: The Narina Bush Camp is in a kloof in Zuurberg mountains, and is one of the wildest places to stay. Right, centre: Some of the chalets at the main rest camp have elevated views over the spekboom. Right, bottom: The Alexandria hiking trail cabins at the start of the trail can be hired by anyone, not just hikers.



### K-Way gear review

My favourite item of gear during winter was a K-Way Ussuri Fleece, which offers thick, heavyweight insulating fabric of 430g per square metre. Two deep pockets keep your hands warm, while a chest pocket is useful for small items. The main zip has a wind protector, and an adjustable cord stops cold air from entering around the waist. I just wish it had a "hoodie" to keep that icy wind off my ears and neck! Cost R799. [www.capeunionmart.co.za](http://www.capeunionmart.co.za).


you must have a high-clearance 4x4 with low-range gearbox.

### 7. Addo's important bird areas

According to Birdlife SA, Addo's diverse habitats are home to more than 400 bird species. But most important are the two offshore islands that protect critical populations of Cape gannet (more than 150 000 of them live on Bird Island) and African penguin (7000 pairs on St Croix Island). These are the world's largest breeding colonies of both species.

The islands were included in the park in 2005, but unfortunately there are currently no public tours.

Also impressive are the Alexandria dunefields and coastal areas of Woody Cape, which hold about 17% of SA's breeding Damara tern population, and the only known Damara terns in the Eastern Cape. This area is also home to about 2% of the global breeding population of African black oystercatchers, and is the eastern limit of its breeding range.

For more about Addo's birds, go to [www.birdlifesouthafrica.org](http://www.birdlifesouthafrica.org). 

**Contacts:** For SANParks accommodation at Addo and Mountain Zebra, telephone 012-428-9111, e-mail [reservations@sanparks.org](mailto:reservations@sanparks.org) or go to [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org). Addo's telephone number is 042-233-8600 and Mountain Zebra is 048-881-2427. For private accommodation, contact Gorah Elephant Camp at [www.gorah.com](http://www.gorah.com), Riverbend Lodge at [www.riverbendlodge.co.za](http://www.riverbendlodge.co.za) and Kuzuko Lodge at [www.legacyhotels.co.za](http://www.legacyhotels.co.za).

### Year in the Wild 2013-14

Following on from his first Year in the Wild, photojournalist Scott Ramsay is travelling from July 2013 to October 2014 to some of the same parks (but in different seasons) as well as many new parks and nature reserves in SA and the transfrontier parks in southern Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Again, his goal is to create awareness about protected areas, and to inspire others to travel to these natural wonderlands.

Partners include Cape Union Mart, Ford Everest, Goodyear and K-Way, with support from WildCard, EeziAwn, Frontrunner, Globecomm, National Luna, Outdoor Photo, Safari Centre Cape Town, Tracks 4 Africa, and Vodacom.

Go to [www.yearinthewild.com](http://www.yearinthewild.com) for more information.



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