

# A Traveler's Tale

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## *The myth of the Pafuri Lion*

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We have been to the Kruger thirty-something times, but we still get that Kruger thrill every time.

Our last trip was no exception, with the added thrill of having our daughter from the UK with us in the park, for the first time in five years. We tick off “The Kruger List”: camera, video recorder, binoculars, map, bird guide, citronella candles, etc, etc, etc... and make an early start.

As usual, we spend the drive to the park discussing previous trips, recalling the exhilarating sights that keep us coming back, and trying to predict what we will see this time. We test each other's memories... that cheetah with the gorgeous, fluffy cubs, on the road to Afsal; that leopard stalking an oblivious impala on the S114; three leopard cubs running up and down a tree on the road H3, an eagle swooping from the sky and catching a snake right in front of our car, that black mamba rearing up at us for disturbing his sun bathing...

We arrive at Crocodile Bridge in the heat of the midday sun, but it's a welcome relief from the dreary April weather in Gauteng. At reception, we mill around the day visitor area, taking in the familiar smells and atmosphere of the Park, before setting off.

The road to lower Sabie is quiet in the afternoon sun but we are happy to be in the park. We always recommend the H3 from Malalane to Afsaal. On almost every occasion we have entered the park at Malalane gate we have seen one of the big cats on this stretch, as well as numerous sightings of wild dogs, white rhino, elephant and antelopes. Another favourite is the S26 Biyamiti loop at first light...but I digress...

The rest of the trip to Skukuza where we were to spend our first night was uneventful – only guaranteed by monkey-proofing our fridge with a well-placed chair mind you. Over our regulation braai we discussed the day's sightings with our neighbours – one of the pleasures of the Park has always been how friendly people are.

Our days in the Park have always been structured around the gate opening and closing times – we fondly remember times when we would wake up at 3am for nine or ten days in a row, packing goods and children into the car to be able to be on the road at 4:30. But April is slightly kinder to our sleep patterns, and we are ready for the 6h00 opening, jumpy with anticipation about the day ahead.

Our eagerness is soon rewarded on the high level bridge over the magnificent Sabie river. Voted the best river in the Park by a family majority, the Sabie does not fail us, giving us a spectacular sunrise. A perfect way to start the day.

We have a long drive to Mopani where we will spend our second night. In the Nwatindlopfu area we are delighted to see five rhino feeding alongside the road. The wonder of driving in the Kruger is that it can be slow for an hour then suddenly round the next bend, this.....



No time to take the S36 to Jones Dam and Manzimhlope where we normally go hunting for Sable. Come to think of it we haven't seen Sable for a while. Where are the Sable?

This is only the second time in thirty-something visits that we are staying in Mopani and the game viewing is disappointing. We take an evening drive on the S50 towards Letaba and then back towards Mopani on the H1-6. We see absolutely nothing on this 30km drive. Not an antelope or bird or reptile. But a day that started so perfectly could not end with nothing to show for it and we had a perfect sunset over the Mopani bush. Paradoxically we have seen game, herds of buffalo and lion, elephants and cheetah when driving past Mopani to Shigwedzi and Bateleur.



The next morning we set off for Satara. It feels good to be out in the early morning and we are ready for the first sighting of the day. Half an hour of slow driving, nothing...45 minutes, nothing...some cussing, some complaints about getting up early..."Wake me up when you see something..... anything!"

Then finally after one hour of driving we see ground hornbills. The Park is not all about lions and we were happy to see the birds. Some of our best sightings of birds have been in the rest camps and the owl (see below) was on a tree next to our bungalow in Satara.

We had three different sightings of ground hornbills and also saddle billed storks and it is good to see that both these endangered birds are thriving.

As we begin moving out of the thick Mopani that hides all sign of life, we begin to feel better. Being the very first camp we ever stayed in, Letaba has a special place in our hearts, and everyone is looking forward to nearing the camp, irrespective of what we see around the area. However, Letaba must have a special place for us too, as it offers us our first sighting of lions for this trip, in the dry riverbed.



From the bridge on the main road we could see waterbuck through the binoculars. As we followed a short detour onto the S95 to get a better look, we saw an encouraging sight: a clump of cars parked along the riverbed. This roused up the normal squeals from our party –“ what have they seen, there must be something exciting there, and it can't possibly be the waterbuck, can it?”

A friendly woman who had been parked there for a while helped us out. There were six lionesses in the riverbed, but they had moved under cover. We catch glimpses as they move in and out of the reeds, but none stay out long enough to have their picture taken.

In high spirits, we make for a quick stop at Letaba. On the way we see a magnificent tusker having a snack by the roadside. We stop but kept our engine running. Years of angry snorts and cautionary trumpets have taught us to be wary of these beautiful animals!

We all vividly remember one mischievous teenager who hid behind a bush and played a dangerous game of peek-a-boo every time we tried to pass, and a grumpy loner who refused to let us pass on the S100, forcing us to backtrack and take an alternate route back to camp. Our Letaba tusker was friendly enough though and allows us some photographs, until he decides to cross the road. He give the cars closest to him a warning glare and looks as if he is about to move toward the car, causing some stress, as we are blocked in by an unaware viewer who has pulled up behind us. Frantic hand gestures convince him to reverse a little, and we quickly follow, moving away from the elephant. Satisfied with our retreat, he takes himself (and his large tusks!) to the other side of the road, and continues his peaceful meal.

Although our “game-plan” was to follow the main road to Satara, we decide to follow a gut-feeling as we pass Olifants, and veer off onto the S91 to pass Balule and join the S90. The S91 and S92, or Balule loop, as we call it, is one of our prime game viewing areas, but we had never (in thirty years!) taken the S90 before. It proved to be part of the lucky area around Balule, and we had frequent sightings of herds of zebra, wildebeest, impala and giraffe and even ostrich. It made a lovely drive down to Satara. We seem to have caught the pre-winter zebra migration south.

Over the braai, we discuss a plan for the next early morning, and decide that our luck will hold on the S90. But, in keeping with tradition, we also want to hit the S100 in the early morning, and so, decide to use that road to join the S41 and the S90.

As always with the bigger camps, there was already a queue at the gate when we arrived there at 5:40. However, most other people seemed to be heading for the road to Orpen, where there had been numerous lion and cheetah sightings the previous day. We were the first car to turn onto the S100, something we always felt to be a good omen. The early bird sees the worm...

And so we did. A leopard with the shiniest, healthy coat, was on its way to the river, but had time to stop and look back over its shoulder at us. Not quite enough time to stop for a

photo, but still a beautiful sighting and a superb start to the day. Nothing else on the S100. Not even the Kori Bustard which we always see here or the frequently sighted secretary bird.

Our interest in the newly discovered S90 proves to be extremely fruitful. Almost as soon as we turn onto the road, we are greeted by some lazy early morning cats, soaking up the sun.



The lionesses are very willing to be photographed and laze around for us for a good while. But a few stray impala happen upon them, and the lionesses swiftly disappear into the grass. We are amazed, as always, that if we had not arrived there when we did, we might have missed them, as they were completely hidden in the grass.

A few playful mock charges at the impala reveal them to us again. The impala dance around the lionesses, snorting and grunting, but the cats looked well-fed, and are more interested in teasing the impala and, now that they had been roused from the sun, playing with each other. This is our favourite way to see lions, and we have been fortunate to see them up close often.

A herd of buffalo further along the road completes our sightings of the big five for this trip and cements the S90 on our favourite road list.

We head north to Shingwedzi. This trip was booked erratically, and we are zigzagging from south to north and back again, but driving long distances in the Park is never a strain. We were looking forward to staying in one of our favourite camps, much loved by the children when they were younger for the novelty of the loft bedroom. The main road north of Shingwedzi, toward Pafuri has always been good to us. We had, on a previous trip, seen five African wild dogs chasing an unlucky impala along the road, right in front of our car. We were making up the rear of the pack, following the chase!

Our first evening in the Shingwedzi area is spent at the Kanniedood dam, watching baboons grooming each other and playing in the trees. But it is the next morning and the drive up to Pafuri that we are really looking forward to. We seldom travel so far north, and the Pafuri lion, supposedly more magnificent than his southern brothers, is a myth to us.

As we are watching Nyala near the Luvuvhu river (another family contender for the best river in the Park), we are told by another family that they had seen a lioness with cubs on the S64, mere minutes away from where we were. We head off to see if perhaps the Pafuri lioness will grace us with her presence, but, although lion and cub tracks were plentiful in the gravel, the Pafuri lion seems destined to remain a myth for us, perhaps till our next trip to the north of the Park.

In compensation the bush yields up a mother cheetah with five sub-adult cubs running along the road.



The mother seemed keen to walk in the grass along the road, and was calling for her offspring, but the youngsters seemed determined to follow the road, much to our pleasure.

It was amazing to see not one, but six beautiful cheetah, and remarkable that they were so bold. It was only after we had been allowed a good helping of time with them that the cubs decided to listen to their mother's

distinctive calls and follow her into the bushes.

By the time we leave through Punda Maria gate, we are mixed in feeling that we had had a blessed five days and feeling that we could do with another five, at least! However, we feel completely rejuvenated and will be able to bear the city until, June when we return to the park once again.