

Whales, wetlands and wildlife

Angus Begg revisits his childhood holiday haunt and finds iSimangaliso Wetland Park a worthy carrier of its World Heritage Site status



I was driving into town down McKenzie St in St Lucia last night when a hippo crossed the road.

It was making its way from the grassed pavement outside the fish restaurant to the self-catering cabanas – there was more grass on that pavement, surrounding the palm tree. The number of tourists in the adjacent parking lot grew, most photographing the animal with cellphone cameras, while locals on the deck of a restaurant next door continued chatting over their meals.

A second hippo followed, lumbering across the road to the other side of the tree.

For many years my sketchy, yet overriding memory of the village of St Lucia, gateway to the Lake St Lucia estuary and a wetland park famed for hippos and crocodiles, has been one of fishing, ski-boats, dodgy Seventies architecture and beer. But this holiday Mecca has changed.

Driven by developments in the beautiful surrounding countryside, it's a tale that involves elephants, lions, whales, wetlands, woolly-necked storks, prehistoric fish, ancient peoples and more recent arrivals from Europe.

It's the story of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, the latest thoroughly compelling addition to the South African wildlife tourism landscape.



It was this combination of beauty and uniqueness that resulted in the park being declared the country's first World Heritage Site in 1999. In the demanding tick-box language of the United Nations (UN), such recognition is supreme.

Critical to being awarded such an accolade is what's



father, he clearly knows and loves this landscape. A former political activist and project manager of a spatial development initiative linking Maputo to South African business hubs, he's been driving the creation of this park for the past decade – and every year he's seeing milestones reached.

In the roughly 500km we drive through and around the 332 000ha park (which includes a 220km coastline, 9% of SA's total), the signage, facilities and boardwalks are brand-new and ubiquitous. They're consistent destination reminders.

Braai facilities, camping sites and birding hides have been created with a contemporary conservation ethos in mind. Everything is explained.

And when confusion reigns

Clockwise, from top left: A Mission Rocks day out for the family. A new bird hide at uMkhuze Game Reserve – just one element of iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Boat operators cruising the St Lucia estuary deliver tourists to a variety of hippo pods. The eastern shores are populated by plains game such as zebra.

known as “outstanding universal value” (OUV). This comprises biological diversity, ecosystems (and their functioning) and superlative natural beauty. Outside the bureaucratic corridors of the UN, in the tourism world, this is big cheese. And iSimangaliso has OUV by the spadeload.

“iSimangaliso” replaced “Greater St Lucia” as the name of the wetland park in 2007. Which – to paraphrase its CEO, Andrew Zaloumis – makes sense: St Lucia in the Caribbean also boasts a World Heritage Site. Andrew is my guide through the park and he's big on branding.

Having spent much of his youth here, guided by his environmentalist

around existing place names, Andrew's taken into consideration the fact that two profound cultures call iSimangaliso home – the Zulu in the south and the Tonga in the north.

Whereas it was once a place dismissed or ignored by tourism authorities, the Zulu legend of the conical hills (around Lake Bangazi) becomes significant. Culture, respect and tolerance are part of the fabric of this park.

No surprise, then, that it was opened by the late Nelson Mandela, SA's first democratically elected President, who also championed its World Heritage site application: “iSimangaliso must be the only place on the globe where the world's oldest land mammal (the rhinoceros) and the world's biggest terrestrial mammal (the elephant) share an ecosystem with the world's oldest fish (the coelacanth) and the world's biggest marine mammal (the whale),” he said.

My most recent iSimangaliso experience started just outside St Lucia village in the park's Eastern Shores section. Populated by non-threatening plains game, the first fenced section is open to walkers, mountain-bikers and horseback riders. Beyond the big, heavy-duty fence, it's pretty much game on for game-viewing. ➤





Here rhino and buffalo could pop up at any minute. However, park rangers say the resident herds of elephant have crossed Lake St Lucia to the western shores.



Key attractions for me are the bird hides positioned alongside the numerous pans along the lake and throughout the park. Elephant, hippo, rhino, zebra, aquatic birds... everything can be seen here. Or nothing. That's just the way of the bush.

A turning above and over the grassland dunes to the west brings us to Mission Rocks, pounded by Indian Ocean waves, and the Mziki picnic site. A boardwalk connects both. Here the rock pools are marine treasures of note, taking families back to the days when hours were spent seeking sea urchins and starfish.

From Cape Vidal we drive north along the beach for 70km to the diving hub of Sodwana Bay. Andrew feels the need to



Clockwise, from top left: Once covered in forestry plantation, this pan shows nature's ability to recover. A villager riding towards Sodwana Bay on his "reward", a bicycle. One of the area's many fish eagles.

do an unannounced beach patrol (something normally not permitted), at the same time showing off the pristine sand.

It's 90 minutes of sheer wilderness. As he does wherever we go, from Sodwana Bay to uMkhuze Game Reserve and the Western Shores sections of iSimangaliso, he uses the opportunity to check every tap in each bathroom facility and flush every loo. He wants to ensure they're all functioning.

The lush and hilly uMkhuze section forms the western boundary of iSimangaliso and on the 60km drive inland through rural Zululand, Andrew points out bridges that have been repaired and roads that have been built – all through small and medium enterprises.

Tarred roads are crucial in these parts to allow access to clinics and schools. And when local

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communities are provided with such basic services – thanks to a wildlife/tourism project – poaching inevitably decreases.

The positive message of the tourism projects associated with iSimangaliso continues in the bright red and yellow bicycles seen on the roads. As we witnessed on the beach, locals who'd grown 70 indigenous trees were given bikes donated by corporate sponsors. It's just one effort at expediting alien tree removal.

uMkhuze's long been recognised as one of SA's top two birding spots. One of the brand-new hides we visit on the edge of Nsumu Pan wouldn't look out of place in an architectural journal. Inside is a Nordic couple in safari gear. Surrounded by lenses and bird guides, with fever trees,



reeds and mountains framing the pan, they want to share the osprey they've captured in their lens. Andrew looks chuffed.

I'm impressed with the main

Clockwise, from top left: Both mangroves and crocs are crucial to the functioning of the St Lucia ecosystem. A pride of lions has just been released into the uMkhuze Game Reserve. A common reedbuck, with a spurring goose in the background.

camp. This is where I must have stayed as a child. With its thatched family chalets and children's laughter emanating from the swimming pool, I want to return with my own two little ones.

As one of the guardian reserves of our precious black rhinos, uMkhuze's an integral part of the park. So is the pride of lion recently reintroduced to the reserve (in a boma, "acclimatising", at the time of writing). The plentiful impala, zebra and giraffe – the latter having developed the unusual habit of lying down – will have received a nasty surprise by the time you read this.

With the opening of the 25 000ha Western Shores section of the park and the revamped uMkhuze, the final pieces in the iSimangaliso resurrection puzzle are falling into place. Andrew seems to have directed the next big thing in South African wildlife tourism. 🦋

ACTIVITIES

The Eco-Series is a range of activities aimed at increasing interaction with the park:

- iSimangaliso St Lucia Half-Marathon: 18 May
- iSimangaliso Sodwana Bay Shoot-out: 7-14 July
- iSimangaliso MTB Four-Day (powered by Nashua): 21-24 August

uMkhuze Fig Forest Walk
Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife

☎ 035 573 9004

✉ mantuma@kznwildlife.com

Lake St Lucia Estuary Cruises
Shoreline

☎ 035 5901555

✉ info@stlucia.co.za

🌐 www.stluciasouthafrica.com

Eastern Shores Night Game Drive
Shakabarker Tours

☎ 035 590 1162

✉ info@shakabarker.co.za

🌐 www.shakabarker.co.za

Sodwana Bay Scuba-diving
Triton Divers

☎ 082 494 8761

✉ tritondiving@mweb.co.za

🌐 www.tritondiving.co.za

Reefteach

☎ 082 339 6920

✉ info@reefteach.co.za

🌐 www.reefteach.co.za

ACCOMMODATION

Camping and self-catering

Lake St Lucia Estuary, Cape Vidal,

uMkhuze, Sodwana Bay, Kosi Bay

☎ 033 845 1000

✉ bookings@kznwildlife.com

🌐 www.kznwildlife.com

Guest lodges – St Lucia

Serene Estate

☎ 035 590 1016

✉ info@serene-estate.com

🌐 www.serene-estate.co.za

Lidiko Lodge

☎ 035 590 1581

✉ lidiko@wetlands.co.za

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UPMARKET LODGES

Thonga Beach Lodge –

Coastal Forest

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Rocktail Beach Camp –

Coastal Forest ☎ 074 182 4581

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Makakatana Lodge –

Western Shores

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