

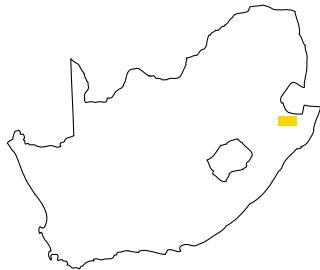
There's a leopard in my campsite!

Ithala Game Reserve in northern KZN might not have lions, but it's got mountains, rivers, rare antelope and enough wilderness to fill a long weekend. Here's everything you need to know.

WORDS TABBY MITTINS PICTURES VILLIERS STEYN



ITHALA HQ. With modern facilities and the Ngotshe Mountain as a backdrop, Ntshondwe Resort is the place to book for a weekend of indulgence.



Google Ithala and you get a mixed bag of uninspiring websites, with very little current information. In my experience of provincial reserves, if there's not much online, there's usually not much on the ground...

What I do know is this: The 30 000 ha reserve is between Vryheid and Pongola in KwaZulu-Natal, a hop and a skip from the Swaziland border, hemmed in by the Ngotshe Mountains in the south and by the Phongolo River in the north. I read that it was once part of Shaka's kingdom and also a prominent gold-mining site in the early 1900s.

But a colourful history doesn't guarantee a prosperous present. So, as we make our way along the R69 from Vryheid towards Louwsburg, I'm silently steeling myself against the worst the reserve can throw at me.

This sense of unease heightens when our progress is brought to a halt by a horde of service-delivery protesters blocking the road – and the way into Ithala. My heart sinks. It's already after 4pm – there's no way we'll get in before the gate closes.

Just then Villiers's phone rings. It's a friendly park official: "Mr Steyn, if you're stuck in Louwsburg, don't worry. We'll send someone to meet you at the staff gate further along the R69. See you at reception."

TURN OFF THE ALARM CLOCK

Most mornings, in winter and summer, mist hangs heavily in the valleys until the sun breaks through at about 10am. This makes early morning game viewing in the lower-lying areas challenging, especially if you're staying at Doornkraal or one of the adjacent bush lodges. But it's also the perfect excuse to sleep late...



I SPY. Take a drive up to the Ngulubeni viewpoint and see if you can spot giraffe next to the snaking Phongolo River below.

Taking the longer route into the reserve turns out to be a treat. The landscape changes around each bend, from a grassland plateau, down through Lowveld-type vegetation and into a riverine valley, where we find the Doornkraal campsite – our home for the next three nights.

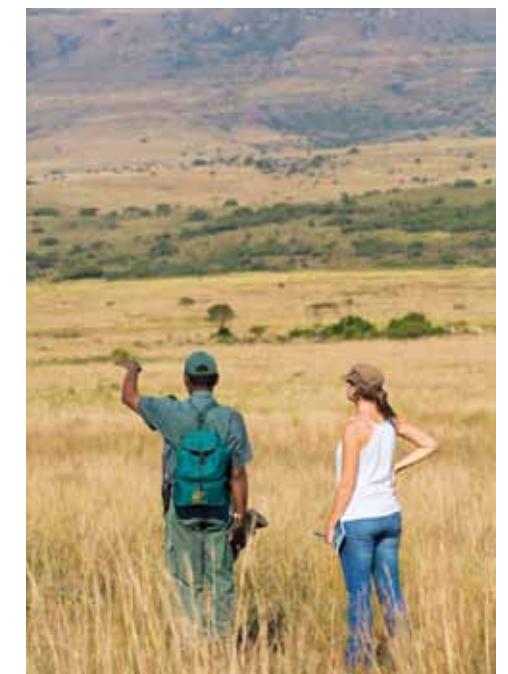
Doornkraal is simple but neat, with lots of space and shade, communal washing and dining areas, and the bonus of a hot shower. (According to all the websites, it's still cold.) Best of all is the Thalu River, which bubbles nearby – croc-free and shallow enough for a summer splash.

Thalu Bush Lodge, one of three bush lodges in the reserve, is close to the campsite and consists of fairy-tale cabins in the woods next to the river. I'm a bit sorry I packed my tent...

The main camp, Ntshondwe Resort, is equally appealing. The chalets huddle together at the foot of some cliffs and dassies, bushbuck and groups of banded mongooses wander around, watched by the resident pair of Verreaux's eagles. The lodge has a shop, restaurant, hide, information centre, swimming pool and all sorts of tourism awards adorning the walls of the reception.

Standing in the winter sunshine, I find myself smiling. My impression of Ithala has done a U-turn!

Make the most of your time in Ithala



SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE. Ithala might not be a Big Five reserve, but you'll see plenty of wildlife when you go on a game drive (like this waterbuck, left) or when you drive a 4x4 trail (middle). If you book a guided walk (right), your guide will help you spot some of the 80 mammal species that call Ithala home, as well as some of the birds.

1 Go find the animals

There are more vegetation types in Ithala than Bulls players in the Springbok squad: riverine forest, deciduous woodland, mixed thornveld, scree forest and two types of grassland. As a result, there's a great variety of wildlife. If you know where to look and what to look for, a game drive can be incredibly rewarding.

Grazers like zebra, wildebeest and red hartebeest frequent the open grassland around the Onverwacht picnic site east of Ntshondwe, and browsers like kudu and giraffe hang out in the lower-lying thickets between the Ngubhu picnic site and Thalu Bush Lodge. You won't see a lion eating any of these animals (there are no lions in Ithala), but you will see rare antelope like tsessebe and mountain reedbuck, which you seldom see in other reserves. If you're lucky you might also see a brown hyena, a caracal or a Cape clawless otter. And keep your eyes and ears open for leopards in the thickets next to streams and rivers, especially around the Doornkraal campsite. Yes, you read right! Leopards often walk through the campsite at night. Listen out for the warning calls of impala or kudu, or for the saw-like cough of the cat itself...

Another good spot to look for leopards is along the jungle-like Dakaneni Loop, which is also where you'll usually find Ithala's resident elephant population.

2 Get out and about

Three self-guided trails depart from Ntshondwe Resort. They vary in length from a few hundred metres to 5,2 km,

and each one is neatly mapped in a booklet that all visitors receive at reception.

The trails lead up into the nearby koppies, where you'll find fantastic vantage points for spotting giraffes or sipping sundowners.

For those who want to hike deeper into the reserve, guided morning and afternoon walks can be arranged from any camp. You can also go on a guided game drive.

It's worth taking a drive up to the Ngulubeni viewpoint on the Bergvliet Loop, high above the Phongolo River. Afterwards, head over to one of Ithala's picnic sites for lunch. Phongolo and Ngubhu are the best: The former is in the forest next to the river and good when you have to hide from the heat; Ngubhu, upstream from the campsite, is sunnier and better for winter.

How much? Free to walk the self-guided trails. Guided walk R170 per person; no children under 13. Guided game drive R190 per person; no children under 4.

3 Drive a 4x4 trail

The visitor's map shows three dotted 4x4 tracks:

- Link road between Ngubhu Loop and Doornkraal campsite. This has been paved in recent years and it's passable in any vehicle. It serves as a short cut between Ntshondwe Resort and the accommodation in the valley below.

- Ntshamanzi 4x4 Trail.** The views on this overgrown, one-way trail in the centre of the reserve are incredible, but chances are that you'll be focusing more on the slopes and scan the valleys with my binoculars."

IN OTHER WORDS



Sandra & Dave Fourie

Regular visitors

"Doornkraal campsite is lovely and quiet. Impalas often spend the night right there. The more open eastern part of the reserve is best for game viewing."



Jeremiah Ntuli

Guide for 23 years

"The animals move around the reserve as the seasons change, but there's not really a best time to view game in Ithala. Those who go on regular game drives will always see something. I like to stop on the slopes and scan the valleys with my binoculars."



serious climbs and treacherous descents. It'll take about half an hour to complete in a Hilux with low range; much longer if you're brave (or stupid) enough to tackle it in a Terios like we did.

- **Bivane 4x4 Trail.** This 17 km trail is the toughest of the lot. You have to book and collect a key at reception (R75 per vehicle). Only three vehicles are allowed on the trail per day. Only attempt the trail in a vehicle with low range and be prepared to make a day of it.

EXPLORE ON FOOT. There are some great trails leading up into the koppies from Ntshondwe Resort. Check yourself for ticks!



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

GENERAL STUFF

Where is it? Ithala is about 370 km north of Durban and 450 km south-east of Joburg.

Road conditions in the reserve? Most of the roads are passable in a sedan, but you'll be more comfortable in a vehicle with raised ground clearance. It's promising to see that flooded and disintegrating sections of road are being repaired.

Fuel? Diesel and unleaded are both available at Ntshondwe Resort.

Buy this: The Ithala visitor's map, on sale at the Mvunyane Entrance Gate for R10.

Do this: Stop at the Kwahlathi viewpoint near the Ngubhu picnic site, make yourself comfortable on the bench and scan the valley below with your binoculars. You'll see a great variety of game species. If you're lucky, even black rhino.

Skip this: The hide at Ntshondwe Resort overlooks a pond that is choked with reeds. Until the reeds have been cleared, it's not worth visiting.

Ticked off: Ithala is known for pepper ticks, so apply insect repellent to your legs and trousers before you go walking in the veld.

Drink up: Pack plenty of bottled water for drinking. The water at Ithala is not potable.

Campfire fact: Ithala rises more than 1 000 m, from an altitude of 400 m on the Phongolo River to 1 450 m near Louwsburg. Your ears will pop.



ACCOMMODATION GUIDE

Ntshondwe Resort

Chalets sleeping 2–6 are at the base of a mountain. There's a sightings board next to reception that tells you which animals were recently seen, and where.

Price: Four-sleeper self-catering chalet from R1 650 per night for the first three people; R300 for the fourth person.

GPS: S27.51255 E31.20394

Doornkraal campsite

There are 20 level stands on the banks of the Phongolo with plenty of shade, but little grass and no electricity. Each stand has a bin and a braai. Taps are spaced between stands. There are two

communal gazebos (one with a place to wash dishes), two communal flush toilets and an open-air hot shower. The campsite is unfenced.

Price: R120 per stand for one person; R120 per additional adult.

GPS: S27.51255 E31.20394

Bush lodges

Thalu (sleeps four), Mbizo (sleeps eight) and Mhlangeni (sleeps 10) are secluded, self-catering camps. Each lodge has hot showers, flush toilets and a kitchen, but only Mhlangeni has electricity. The other two use gas. If you book any of the bush lodges, you'll have the whole place to yourself.

Price: Thalu R1 230 per night for three people; R205 per additional adult.

Mbizo R2 460 per night for six people; R205 per additional adult. Mhlangeni R2 870 per night for seven people; R205 per additional adult.

GPS: Thalu S27.50297 E31.20604; Mbizo S27.52002 E31.20509; Mhlangeni S27.52315 E31.37325

Bookings: bookings@kznwildlife.com; 033 845 1000; reception office 034 983 2540. You'll find the reserve's official website here: bit.ly/15xLy4L

Tabby and Villiers travelled independently and the magazine covered all costs.