

Scenery, snorkelling & sandy trails

A GPS IS AN INVALUABLE TOOL TO NEGOTIATE THE SANDY TRACKS ON THE NORTHERN KZN COASTLINE, SAYS TABBY MITTINS, IF YOU WANT TO EXPERIENCE MAPUTALAND'S SHINIEST GEMS.

PHOTOS: VILLIERS STEYN

DESTINATION | MAPUTALAND

Hill with a view. The traditional fish traps at Kosi Mouth are best photographed from this viewpoint at sunrise.





Which way? Maputaland's coastal tracks randomly split and converge, making navigation a challenge. You need Tracks4Africa.



Rainy season hazards. Wet, compacted sand makes for easy driving, but deep puddles might slow you down. Villiers first walked through this big puddle in the road near Sodwana Bay, which turned out to be safe to drive through.



Nguni-land. In low season in Maputaland, you're likely to see more cows than other vehicles. This breed is indigenous to Southern Africa.



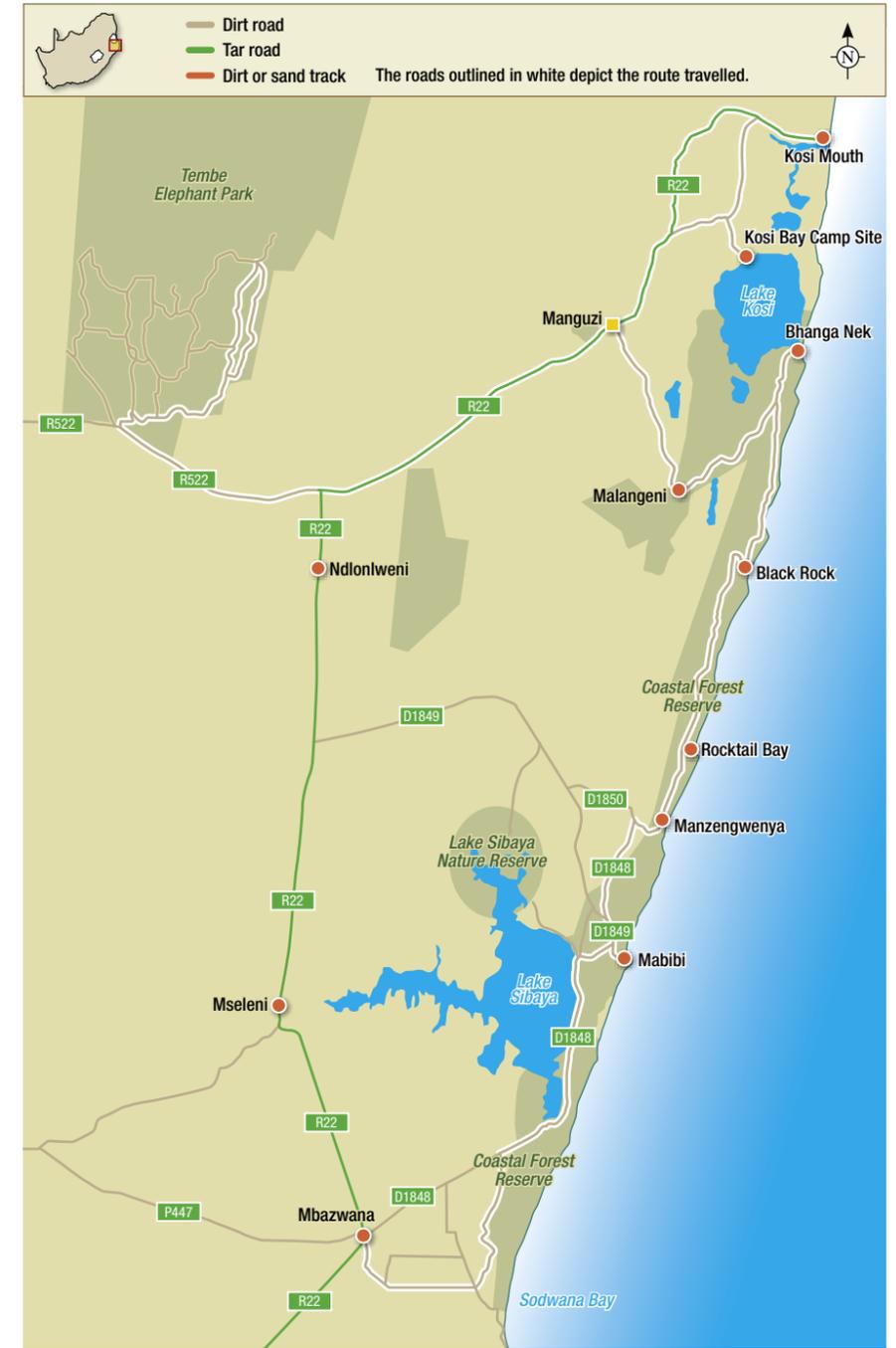
Showers expected. Prepare yourself for rain if you're planning to camp in Maputaland in January. It rained cats and dogs at Mabibi.



Right of way. iSimangaliso has put up signage to alert visitors to avoid dung beetles on the road. Also keep an eye out for them in Tembe Elephant Park.



Green tunnel. There are numerous tracks around Lake Sibaya, but the dense vegetation shields the water from view.



once again, and as we stop at the boom we pray the official won't send us back to Sodwana to fight for a permit. Instead, he smiles, hands us a booklet and waves us through.

"It's okay," he says when Villiers enquires about a permit; "it's okay," and waves us through once again.

I wonder if perhaps we don't need a permit after all, but in the booklet we've just received it quite clearly states that we do. We know that somebody somewhere must know something, so we resolve to try again at Mabibi – where we plan to camp for the night.

Here comes the rain

The scenery is stunning along the road from the iSimangaliso entrance gate past Lake Sibaya, South Africa's largest freshwater lake. Lichen-covered limbs of enormous trees straddle the road, creating a green and orange tunnel above the sandy track.

A light drizzle collects in the overhang-

ing branches and drips fat droplets on the Hilux as we pass beneath, but as the rain gets heavier the windscreen wipers are pushed to the limit of their capacity and our track becomes a pair of parallel streamlets. Our Garmin Nüvi tells us we're driving less than 100m from the lake, but we only catch the occasional glimpse of rippling grey water through the rain and dense foliage. The road still forks and converges perplexingly, and as we follow our purple line to Mabibi we wonder how anyone found their way around here

before we had Tracks4Africa. At Mabibi, the rain lets up long enough for us to pitch our tent in our secluded camp site beneath the dripping trees. As the deluge starts up again we huddle under our little awning, put the kettle on, and pray for sunshine in the morning.

Enjoying Mabibi Beach

The sun beats down on our tent with such vigour in the morning that we're certain it's compensating for its absence yesterday. We've got a long way to go to >

The guard at the boom shakes his head. "No," he says, "you can't get a permit here. Ask at the iSimangaliso gate."

We're at the entrance to Sodwana Bay Reserve, en route to Kosi Bay via the network of sand and gravel roads that link the two, but we need a permit to drive our intended route and we've been told that this is the place to get it.

"No" he repeats and just then the skies open so we decide to take his word for it and continue without a permit.

The start of our trip was in Mbazwana, just 4,5km from the ever-so-helpful boom guard through a dripping tunnel of lush coastal forest, opposite the Drunken Tree Pub. It's tempting to turn left to the pub to wait out the downpour, but our sense of adventure wins out and instead we lock the Hilux's hubs and turn right.

Following the purple line in the direction of the arrow on Tracks4Africa is usually pretty simple, but here on the sandy tracks of Maputaland's coastline it's like

taking a walk-in-a-straight-line test after three six-packs and a shot of tequila. The roads criss-crosses the landscape (and our purple line) like the scribbles of a small child with a crayon. All we can do is aim ourselves in more or less the right direction and hope for the best.

Thankfully, the rain is more of a help than a hindrance, as it has compacted the sand in the tracks, so much so that we're able to drive comfortably in 4x2. But, as always, Villiers engages 4x4 to limit corrugations in the sand. I don't think we'll need the spade anytime soon.

The rain continues to pour down and the occasional small puddle turns into a string of bigger puddles.

We arrive at what looks like Lake Kariba in Zimbabwe. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating, but it's almost big enough to make me wish the Hilux were a houseboat. Villiers, on the other hand, relishes the opportunity to put his bakkie through its paces, and we have no trouble sloshing through it.

Nguni traffic jam
The dense coastal forest peters out into a damp, grassy dune field with the occasional homestead cropping up. Dozy Nguni cows wander freely across the dunes or huddle together in the road, raising their doozy eyes at us with the baffled curiosity of cattle that see very few vehicles.

Their black, white and brown markings stand out in beautiful contrast to the verdant landscape.

The only other traffic is a small hinge-backed tortoise hurrying across the road in front of us and a determined little dung beetle rolling his precious ball uphill in the sand.

I'm grateful for the cool weather and the easy drive the rain has brought, but even as the puddles grow bigger and more numerous, I can tell Villiers feels cheated of the sandy roads he signed up for.

An iSimangaliso Wetland Park gate with its string of colourful flags marks the start of jungle-like coastal forest

get to Kosi Bay and we're not sure what condition the roads are in after December's traffic and all the rain, but we know we cannot leave before we've seen what Mabibi has to offer.

So, leaving our damp pillows, sleeping bags and mattresses scattered in the sunlight, we patter down the 137 wooden steps to the virgin sand of Mabibi Beach. Hundreds of tiny ghost crabs scatter like springbok before a cheetah as we approach the tideline. We decide it's the perfect beach for a slow-mo *Baywatch* run. Since we have the coastline to ourselves as far as the eye can see, Villiers does just that – splashing through the surf like David Hasselhoff until the sunshine we missed so sorely yesterday chases us back into the shade to pack up.

Legit, at last

Rattling and dripping, we splash through yesterday's puddles northwards towards Kosi Bay. The woman at the Mabibi office told us to show our camp site booking receipt if we're asked for a permit, but she's not a hundred percent certain it's enough to get us through without any trouble.

As the morning wears on, the puddles grow smaller and Villiers's smile grows wider as the sand we're driving on dries. For at least 10km the Hilux bounces from side to side as the wheels follow in the previous driver's tracks, taking us through more open grassland and forested tunnels before delivering us back onto tar with a jolt, and all the way down to another smiling boom-gate official just outside Rocktail Bay, barring our way. Please be more helpful than the last three...

"No problem," he says, smiling, as we explain our permit predicament. "Just go to the office – they will help you."

A quick visit to the Manzenzwenya office just around the corner eases our minds and provides us with a shiny new permit, which grants us access to the Coastal Forest Reserve, which encompasses Rocktail Bay, Black Rock and Bhanga Nek, all the way up to Kosi Bay, where we'll be spending the next two nights. We still need to be one of the first 12 vehicles to be allowed onto those beaches, but at this time of year we know we're not likely to be turned away. We wave goodbye to the helpful official and hit the sand.

Piece of Eden

iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a World Heritage Site since 1999, is home to one of the longest stretches of unspoilt beaches on the African coast, so it's no wonder

"THE HILUX BOUNCES FROM SIDE TO SIDE AS THE WHEELS FOLLOW IN THE PREVIOUS DRIVER'S TRACKS."



A challenge at last! Maintaining your momentum is the key to driving in the thick sand between Mabibi and Kosi Bay.



Rock and sand. It's far off the beaten track, but it's worth the trouble to see the pristine Black Rock Beach. You may have the entire beach to yourself.

Wilderness Safaris has built a permanent camp at Rocktail Bay. It's an exclusive site and therefore off-limits to the likes of us (nosy journalists who just want a peek), but if it's anything like the unadulterated beaches of Black Rock Bay or Bhanga Nek it's already way ahead of the pack.

At Bhanga Nek, only the ramshackle cottages and camp sites erected by locals vying for a bigger piece of the tourism pie detract from the beauty of the beach, a protected breeding site for leatherback and loggerhead turtles. But the calm, quiet waters and soft sand of Black Rock Bay are the stuff that dreams are made of; it's a great place to stop for lunch before driving the final stretch to Kosi Bay.

By the time we reach our camp site, in time for sundowners on the lake, Villiers has had his fill of driving in thick sand. We're both looking forward to tomorrow's inland excursion to one of South Africa's most underrated reserves, Tembe Elephant Park.

From beach to bush

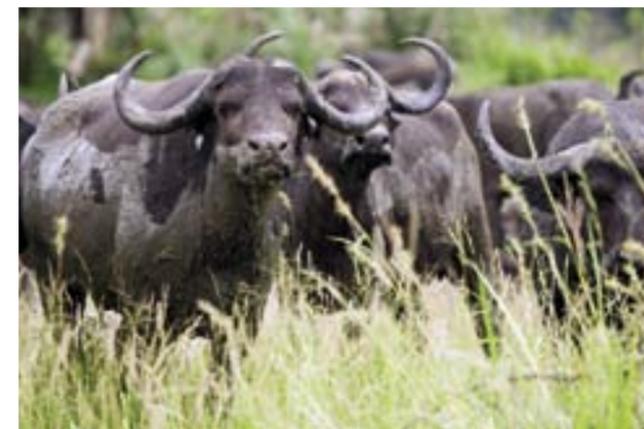
"Tembe Elephant Park, 4x4 only" we read as we pull through the gate less than an hour after leaving our camp site at Kosi Bay. It's my first time in the reserve and Villiers is confident it won't disappoint. "Last time I was here I saw loads, including the biggest tuskers ever!" he says excitedly.

Sure enough, before we've even reached Mahlasela Hide we've seen kudu, bushbuck, impala, warthog, a huge rock monitor, hundreds of dung beetles, birds aplenty... and I've given up counting nyala in the lush tropical bushveld vegetation that walls in the sandy roads. From the hide itself we watch two bull elephants amble out from the summer thickets to splash and wallow at the water's edge, but neither have particularly large tusks. Apparently there's a bull named Isilo that walks around Tembe with tusks that nearly touch the ground, but unfortunately he doesn't make an appearance.

Leaving the hide, we take a bumpy drive round Muzi Swamp in search of more elephants, and instead find a bunch of baffled-looking buffalo, muddied from head-to-toe, with red-billed oxpeckers sliding across their fur like Land Rovers on the Makgadikgadi Pans in the wet season. A small herd of elephants appear around the next bend, at least three generations of happy pachyderms raising their trunks in goodbye as we wind our way out of the reserve and back to Kosi Bay for our final afternoon exploring Maputaland's coast. >



Stairway to paradise. More than 100 wooden steps separate Mabibi Camp Site from the beach, but it's worth the effort.



Here's mud in your eye. Buffaloes enjoy a mud bath after the rain in Tembe Elephant Park, which is home to the Big Five.



Subtropics. The dense summer vegetation in Tembe is ideal for antelope such as nyala and kudu to thrive.



Space to spread out. The stands at Kosi Bay Camp Site are large and private. Remember to pack a basin for washing dishes.



Baby tusker. Tembe is home to about 200 elephants, and some of Africa's great tuskers.



Woven grass maze. Thonga fish traps are passed down from father to son.



Natural aquarium. There are some extraordinary fish in the estuary, including surgeonfishes and moray eels..

Saving the best for last

“If you’re really brave, you could try the adventurous route,” says Tiny Major, the official in the office at Kosi Bay Camp Site who has both a brilliant name and a sense of humour to match.

She’s talking about the “short cut” to Kosi Mouth, where we’re bound for an afternoon of snorkelling, but we can tell from her expression that it’s likely to take us longer than the tar road that’s almost double the distance. Still, these back roads along the coast are half the reason we’re here, and we have our purple line on Tracks4Africa, so it’s really a no-brainer.

The adventurous route turns out to be more of the same scribble of sandy tracks we’ve been driving since day one, more of the same guessing game of which one to take to reach our destination. The purple guideline is all over the place, and more than once we wonder if we’re trespassing on a farmer’s land. Eventually, though, our rough and overgrown track links back up with a freshly gravelled road and we find ourselves at the gate to Kosi Mouth.

“Close your eyes,” says Villiers, and I wonder why when we begin a roller-coaster ride up and down what feels like the deepest and deadliest roads of the trip, but then we stop and he invites

me to open them again. We’re on a dune overlooking the estuary and the bizarre yet beautiful Thonga fish traps that lie like giant fossilised centipede skeletons curled up in the shallow water. The afternoon sun is sinking slowly, gilding the water and the ancient traps in late-afternoon light, leaving me spellbound and unwilling to leave.

Driving back to Kosi Bay later, after spending our final afternoon snorkelling in the estuary with the tangs, parrot fish and eels, Villiers asks, “So what do you think: Is it worth the drive?”

“Yes,” I reply without hesitation... “hell, yes.”

I WANT TO GO TOO!

Road conditions: The sandy tracks running parallel to the coast can become very thick in certain patches. A vehicle with low range isn’t necessary, but four-wheel drive certainly is. Remember to leave a detailed itinerary with a friend or family member, because if you get stranded here outside school holidays, it may take more than a day before somebody finds you.

Safety: Isolated incidents have made authorities understandably cautious, and as a result you’ll see warnings on pamphlets urging visitors to keep valuables safely hidden at all times. However, we felt very safe in the camp sites and on the road, even in the most remote areas.

Filling stations and ATMs: Fill up in Mbazwana (in the south) and Manguzi (in the north). You’ll find ATMs in both towns.

Food: If you’re not too picky, buy groceries at a large town like Mkuze or Hluhluwe on the way, not in Mbazwana or Manguzi. If, like us, you are particular about the state of your bananas, it’s best to do your shopping in the big city before you go.

Navigation: If you plan to drive the sandy tracks along the coast, make sure you have

Tracks4Africa installed on your GPS. Without it, you will get lost.

Malaria: Make sure to use prophylactics, especially between November and March.

Park fees: There’s a one-time entry fee of R20 per adult, R10 per child and R15 per vehicle to enter Kosi Bay and the adjoining Coastal Forest Reserve.

Permits: The offices at Manzengwenya and Kosi Bay issue a limited number of permits for certain points of interest each day, including Black Rock (12 cars) and Kosi Mouth (16 cars), so make sure you get to the office early during school holidays.

Drive Out says: Don’t leave any food, especially fruit, unattended or even zipped up in your tent – the monkeys will steal it. Leave it in your car.

Accommodation

• **Mabibi Camp** is north of Sodwana Bay, between Lake Sibaya and the Indian Ocean. You can approach it from the south, near the coast.

GPS coordinates: S27.33047 E32.74742

Camping: From R96 per person per night.

Facilities: The camp site is located on a dune above an unspoilt beach shared only by visitors from the neighbouring Thonga Beach Lodge.

Ten sandy stands each have shade, a braai, dustbins and taps. When we were there, there was a problem with the borehole, so it’s best to bring your own water. There’s talk of finding a new, cleaner water source in the near future. The ablution block has flush toilets, but don’t expect lights or hot water.

Contact: ☎ 035 474 1504;

✉ res@mabibicampsite.co.za;

🌐 www.mabibicampsite.co.za.

• **Kosi Bay Camp Site** is situated on the edge of Kosi Bay’s largest lake, kuNhlange, just south of the Mozambican border.

GPS coordinates: S26.95814 E32.82419

Camping: From R400 per stand for four people.

Facilities: The 18 stands of varying sizes all have shade, power (remember your blue caravan plug adapter), a braai, a light, a dustbin and a tap. There are two neat ablution blocks with flush toilets and hot showers. Bring your own basin, because there’s no place to wash dishes or clothes.

Contact: ☎ 033 845 1000;

✉ bookings@kznwildlife.com

