

Kruger's *last stop*



Megan Emmett follows in the footsteps of hardy naturalists and brave explorers and ventures into the wildest parts of South Africa's Kruger National Park. Here, in the northernmost reaches of the Makuleke region, the Outpost, with its cutting edge design and superb service, offers a very different wilderness experience.

The cold may have arrived in Johannesburg in May, but there is no sign of winter here. We've spent the best part of the afternoon on the road that runs north from the Kruger's Phalaborwa Gate and the unexpected heat has all but melted me onto the seat of the Land Rover. The road dips and rises and the seemingly endless sea of amber mopane finally gives way to a simple traditional stone wall and three broadly smiling faces. We have arrived at the Outpost, a lodge located a stone's throw from Pafuri Gate and the Kruger's northern border.

Until now, it has only been hardened nature lovers or intrepid explorers, undeterred by heat and remoteness, who have ventured to the park's most far-flung parts. It is this relatively low density tourism that has kept the area, known as the Pafuri or Makuleke section, wild and unspoilt, and gave hoteliers Peter Aucamp and Christoff van Staden (of Ten Bompas fame) a unique opportunity to offer a fresh wilderness experience to safari-goers.

It's not long before I am standing on the vast deck of the main lodge, ice-cold Coke in hand, appreciating just how fresh that experience is. Designed by architect Enrico Daffonchio, the lodge is a contemporary and minimalist combination of steel and stone. Cattle-skinned ottomans echo a little local flavour, but aside from a subtle engraving on the coffee table, there are no distractions. No walls get in the way



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of a 270-degree view and, as we're essentially on a stilted structure built into the side of a rocky cliff, that's every bit of view there is. Separated from the environment by a simple railing, I look out over the Luvuvhu River Valley to the confluence of the Luvuvhu and Mutale rivers where the giant spider-like anatomies of baobabs stand guard over the landscape.

The lodge design might be simple but it is suited to the Kruger's warmer parts. A combination of raw cement floors, steel ceiling fans and, well, great ventilation ensures a very comfortable ambient temperature. 'Wait,' I'm told, 'until you test the evaporative cooling system in your space.'

'My what?'

'Come and see!'

A 500-metre-long boardwalk built against the contour of the cliff (home to the largest impala lily I've ever seen and a pair of klipspringers that only pretend to bound away when humans approach) leads me to my 'room'. But, as the door swings open, I realise why the lodge staff call it a 'space' – like the main lodge area, this 'room' has no other walls except for the one supporting the

ABOVE This is the land of the baobabs – and the views from the lodge's rooms (or 'spaces' as they are called) certainly do it justice.

OPPOSITE An afternoon amble down to Mutale Falls and the potholes is just one of the items on the Outpost's menu of enticing activities.

roof. Here in the honeymoon suite (so named because it's at the end of the row not because it is any different to the other 11 'spaces'), we're even higher than the main lodge and I watch as a flock of white-crested helmet-shrikes takes off and flies *below* us. Even the raptors soar beneath us. Unable to move myself from the steel-railed verge, in 20 minutes I see elephant, nyala, impala, kudu, baboon, African fish-eagle, martial eagle and black stork. Not bad considering that we saw three elephants and one nyala on the four-hour drive here!

Like the main area, the spaces are designed to optimise your enjoyment of this beautiful yet harsh environment. The open-plan layout includes an 'inside' and 'outside' day bed (depending how much sun is preferred) and the free-standing mosquito net provides your only shield from the outside world. If you're fainter of heart (or the wind

picks up), canvas screens slide easily and neatly around the space. A steel-framed wardrobe pulls out from a cleverly designed cavity that only partially conceals the bathroom, where the shower and enormous walnut-shaped bath teeter at the space's edge.

As tempting as the space may be, I opt for whatever surprises may be on the afternoon agenda. The lodge's post-lunch menu offers a blissful variation from the often ritualised programmes of many other lodges as guests decide what they want to do each day. While we relish a light meal of chilled cucumber and courgette soup, calamari salad and vanilla ice-cream with fruit and seeds (elegant portions for the climate!), guide Natasha Britz briefs us on our choices. Would we prefer a four-hour round trip to the historic Crook's Corner, meeting place ▶

of Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa? Perhaps we'd prefer sundowners at the spectacular Lanner Gorge or an exploratory amble down a shallow stretch of the Mutale River to the waterfall and potholes?

Opting for the amble (I've been assured there will be time for everything), we set out a little before 16h00, gin and tonics on board. No pretence is made of the fact that game-viewing is trickier here than in the south because the animals are less concentrated (this despite the fact that 75 per cent of the Kruger's fauna and flora occur here). It is interesting to note, though, that in the two years since the Outpost opened, sightings of lions and leopards have become more common as the rangers learn more about territorial movements and the animals become increasingly accustomed to vehicles. Specials include Samango monkey, eland, Pel's fishing owl, crested guineafowl, racket-tailed roller and any number of central African species that make it this far south.

Driving in an open-topped vehicle, I'm increasingly astounded by the changing kaleidoscope of vegetation that is the Makuleke area. The mopane trees regularly give way to three other biomes: broad-leaved woodland, thornveld and grassland. We pass stands of fever tree forest and lala palms, and the undulating topography constantly adjusts our view to include striking cliffs and impressive gorges, rocky outcrops, open plains, centuries-old forests and wide, dry perennial rivers. Out there somewhere are fossils from dinosaur times as well as archaeological proof that humans have lived here for two million years. A visit to the ruins at Thulamela can be arranged on request.

When it comes to people and the Makuleke region, the story is fascinating and represents one of the world's most advanced integrated conservation models. The section is named after the Makuleke people who inhabited the area historically. In the mid-1990s, some 20 years after they were evicted, they launched a successful land claim, but agreed to leave the area under SANParks management and remain in their current location near Punda Maria. Provided the land is used for ecotourism, the Makuleke people have absolute control over it and it was under these terms that the Outpost



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The swimming pool offers respite from the afternoon heat, and serves as an illuminated backdrop to dinners under the stars.

INFOTRAVEL

The Outpost is an award-winning lodge located in the northern-most regions of Kruger National Park and offers, among other activities, game-viewing, hiking, birdwatching and visits to the Makuleke village and the ruins at Thulamela.

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was awarded a 30-year concession to operate a lodge. It pays a percentage of its turnover to the Makuleke, including an amount that goes into a trust that funds basic service provision in the community, and also employs all its staff members from the village. At the end of the concession period the lodge will be handed over to the community to own and operate, which is a great incentive for its members to learn hospitality and wholesome land management practices now.

The gin and tonic is well received during our shoes-off enjoyment of the peaceful Mutale Falls, as is the evening meal a little later beside the illuminated

swimming pool. Our dinner of tomato and red pepper soup and springbok carpaccio was accompanied by a label-less 'surprise' red house wine (for pickier guests there is a comprehensive cellar).

Between a multitude of other constellations, Scorpio eyes me as I drift back along the boardwalk to my space. I'm looking forward to a soak in that enormous bath before slipping under my down duvet. The night sounds and breeze are blissfully inescapable and I know I'm going to sleep like a baby with nothing between me and wildest Africa. The sunrise the next morning is spectacular – but there is not much about this Outpost experience that isn't. ■