

**CLUB
OF THE
MONTH**

JUMBO PATROL

The Land Rover Owners' Club of KwaZulu Natal search for
elephants along the Mozambique border

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“The tranquility of the game hide was entrancing”

In a place called Tembe Elephant Park one might expect that the mighty pachyderm reigns supreme, yet it is the diminutive dung beetle that holds right of way. Their ignoble job of tidying up after 220 elephants is often under-appreciated, yet their unseen labours are essential to the health of the eco-system

Tucked into a northeastern corner of South Africa along the border with Mozambique, the park is a hidden gem of nature and is unknown even to many South Africans. Solitude and ruggedness make the place special and the bumpy drive to reach its sandy forests is definitely worthwhile.

The park has strong ties to the local Land Rover community. Each year staff host six fundraising events during which clubs are invited to visit and see Tembe in ways that most can only dream of. The Land Rover Owners' Club of KwaZulu Natal is a long time supporter of the park and its members return yearly for the magic of the wilderness.

The four-day weekend began with an unexpected detour. Prior to leaving Durban for the 298 mile drive, club member Kenneth Jones received an urgent phone call from the park. A Defender belonging to one of the volunteer rangers had a dead battery and could he please bring a replacement and an



alternator? Never one to refuse such a request, Kenneth hustled over to Landy Parts 4 Africa to collect the spares.

Our drive along the N2 motorway demanded constant vigilance. The two lane dual carriageway became a five lane road as slower traffic pull onto the shoulder to let faster vehicles pass, sometimes two abreast. This sounds easy, however the shoulder was frequently occupied by slow-moving lorries, pedestrians, livestock, pineapple sellers and stopped minibus taxis. With relief we turned our pair of Rovers off the highway at Hluhluwe and made more relaxing progress past villages and fields to the park gates.

With the ranger's battery sorted, we proceeded along sandy tracks into the heart of the park as night fell. An hour later we pulled into the Ponweni camp in time for dinner. Most visitors to Tembe stay in the lodge near the main gate or outside the park. The club was allowed to stay at the staff camp in the remote reaches of the interior. It was simple accommodation and a perfect base from which to explore.

The rangers welcomed the club and thanked everyone for their longstanding commitment to the vitality of the park. By the light of the fire we sat down to a traditional South African bush meal: potjie stew, in which a cast-iron cauldron



is filled with layers of meat and vegetables to cook for hours over open coals. This delicious version featured nyala, a type of antelope common in Tembe. Club members rekindled old friendships, forged new ones, and fell asleep as lions roared in the inky night.

The days started early, with some departing before dawn for game viewing while others enjoyed cups of tea with rusks. We had the privilege of driving our own vehicle across the entire park; other visitors could only travel to designated areas as passengers in game-viewing 4x4s. Having the freedom to explore independently afforded wildlife encounters that might not otherwise have been possible. On one foray into the northern reaches of Tembe my wife and I watched in excitement as a lone bull elephant glided past within ten meters of our Defender.

The most consistent wildlife traffic was at the Mahlasela hide. A pump refilled a watering hole where animals congregated. From the elevated and concealed viewing platform we could watch as elephant, nyala, impala, warthog, monkeys and birds gathered to drink and socialize. At one point we counted 30 elephant around the water, trumpeting, splashing and relaxing. The tranquility of the game hide was entrancing; one could easily have spent the entire day in rapt observation.



Above and Left
The northern reaches of Tembe offered off-roaders a perfect viewing platform for wildlife

NEED TO KNOW

Travel tips for South Africa:

Most major airlines fly into and out of Johannesburg. Travel within the country on low-cost domestic flights is inexpensive and the service is good. Mango and Kulula are two budget domestic carriers to consider.

Where to stay in Durban:

It's a big city and some parts are nicer than others. There are many hotels and B&Bs to choose from, as well as private individuals who rent granny flats, entire homes, or spare bedrooms through the website AirBnB.

Driving in South Africa:

Roads outside of cities present many hazards not present in the UK or Europe. Livestock, pedestrians, cyclists and vendors may share major motorways with motorised traffic. Smooth stretches of road may have unexpected potholes. Motorised traffic often travels at a wide range of speeds, from minibus taxis stopped on the side of the road to slow heavy goods lorries and impatient drivers in fast German cars. Be constantly alert and try to avoid driving after dark.

Other places to see:

KwaZulu Natal offers a plethora of amazing destinations. Worthwhile areas to explore include St. Lucia coastal wildlife preserve, Hluhluwe-Mfolozi game reserve (only three hours from Durban), the Midlands, the Drakensberg mountains and Sani Pass – the eastern gateway to Lesotho.

Food:

The variety of food in KwaZulu Natal is superb. Local specialties to try include bunny chow (a hollowed-out half loaf of bread filled with curry), potjie stew, mealie pap (porridge), biltong (dried strips of beef or game) and boerewors (seasoned sausage, best cooked over the coals of a braai).

Where to hire a Land Rover:

Some specialist services offer fully kitted overland Defenders, along with suggested itineraries and pre-loaded GPS waypoints. These tend to be expensive and are best suited for longer journeys into remote areas like Botswana or Namibia. An overlander is not necessary for travel in Kwazulu Natal, as excellent and inexpensive accommodation is prevalent in most areas. Sites like drivesouthafrica.co.za and experiencecarhire.co.za also offer newer models such as Discovery 4.

“It was clear the Land Rover of choice was the Defender”



Left
Road signs illustrating 4WD and dung beetles and a braaivleis (BBQ over hardwood coals) are typical South African sights

in his Series One to stake out the marshy plain through which the lions often passed at dusk. Over gin and tonics we finally saw a lion as the sun was setting.

Once darkness closed in the evening festivities commenced at camp. The highlight of the merriment was the braaivleis, the traditional South African barbecue. Over hardwood coals hungry club members grilled generous heapings of meat: steaks, chops, ribs, bacon, chicken and the ubiquitous boerewors, or farmers' sausage. In typical South African fashion families shared food with one another and laughter floated up into the night with rising sparks from the fires.

From walking around camp it was clear the Land Rover of choice was the Defender, joined by a couple of Discoveries and Kenneth's charismatic Series One. Each had extensive customisations, ranging from drawer systems to sleeping arrangements, bespoke roll bars to concealed storage spaces. The comparisons in camp were all well and good, but the main purpose for our Land Rovers was to drive. The soft, sandy tracks snaking through the park were easily negotiated in high range with

For much of the visit it seemed the lions were evading us – other club members reported sightings while we were elsewhere. One evening my wife and I joined

Kenneth and his daughter

centre diff locked, burbling along at a sedate 12 mph. Even with 15 Landies roaming the park we rarely encountered other vehicles in the 300 sq km expanse.

It was with sadness that the end of the visit drew near. Club members reluctantly bade farewells and ventured out along the tracks for one last drive en route to the gate. This had been, in many ways, the quintessential Land Rover experience: exploring open country in the southern African wilderness with windows down, warm breeze blowing, while watching majestic animals at ease in their natural environment and sharing the friendship of fellow enthusiasts. We departed, grateful for the chance to see the hidden corners of a lesser-known park and keeping a watchful eye on the tracks, ready to yield to dung beetles.

ABOUT THE CLUB

LAND ROVER Owner's Club of KwaZulu Natal is the largest club in the region, organising monthly activities that include trials events, wine tours, multi-day trips into the wilderness and social gatherings. Land Rovers of all vintage are welcome, and the club is often a highlight at motor shows with their collection of older Series models. See <http://www.landoverclub.za.org/> for more information.