



THE KINGS OF TEMBE

Just five hours north of Durban, the Tembe Elephant Park is a little-known wildlife reserve, but it's one of the wildest and most beautiful in South Africa, and home to some of the biggest elephants on the continent.

We had arrived at the waterhole at just the right time. Several elephant bulls were emerging from the thick emerald forest to have their midday drink. From our eyrie in the elevated game hide we had a superb view, as the grey giants sauntered to the water's edge and sucked up trunkfuls of water, spurting it into their capacious bellies.

But it was obvious that these weren't ordinary elephants – this was a gathering of gargantuan proportions. All of them had tusks that seemed impossibly huge.

A five-hour drive north of Durban, Tembe Elephant Park lies just south of the Mozambican border in a wild, forgotten corner of the country. Here a fairyland forest grows in ancient



An elephant and her calf, Tembe Elephant Park.



iSilo, the famous elephant of Tembe Elephant Park.

© Courtesy Tembe Elephant Park

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beach sand, left millions of years ago by a retreating sea. This little-known protected area of 300 km² is unique for a remarkable fact – it conserves some of Africa’s biggest tuskers, those elephants whose tusks weigh in excess of about 45 kg (100 lb) each.

Like a monarch entering a royal court, another elephant bull ambled out of the forest, his tusks almost scraping the ground. This was iSilo – his name in Zulu means, appropriately, “king of kings”. He is Tembe’s biggest tusker, the biggest in southern Africa and one of the biggest on the continent.

“We think his tusks weigh about 65 kg each and are about 2.5 m long,” our guide Patrick Mthethwa whispered as iSilo came closer. “He probably weighs about 6 500 kg, and is about 50 years old. He’s reaching the end of his life, so we’re really fortunate to see him.” We watched in awe as one of the largest mammals ever to walk the earth went about his daily business.

According to elephant expert Dr Johan Marais, 200 years ago there were several million elephants roaming the continent. Then the white man arrived with his gun and hunters targeted those with the biggest tusks. Within a century 90% of the elephants had been killed for their ivory.

“Bulls reach their breeding prime at 35 to 40 years of age – the same time

as they emerge as 100-pounders,” said Marais. “From then on, their ivory grows exponentially, so that it becomes very large over only a short number of years.”

“Hunting of these magnificent bulls takes place at this stage, so that few of them are able to pass on their genes to future generations. This is why the number of 100-pounders has dropped to fewer than 40 in the whole of Africa.”

“The best genes for ivory are currently in Kenya’s Tsavo National Park, and the next best place is Tembe.”

So why Tembe? What is it about this park which makes its elephants so impressive? Quite simply, even the toughest of hunters were too timid to enter the thick sand forest. For centuries, the elephants retreated into the forests as protection from ivory poachers. While most of Africa’s other elephant populations were decimated, the Tembe elephants are descendants of a long line of survivors.

So the white man stayed away, leaving the forest and surrounding floodplains to the Thongan people, who have lived here for 1 000 years side by side with elephants and other wild animals. Today, the local Tembe community owns the park’s land, leasing it to KZN Wildlife, the provincial conservation authority. It is one of the few wildlife reserves in Africa that was created at the specific request of the ■■■

locals, who wanted protection for their crops from the elephants.

Besides the 200-odd elephants at Tembe, there is also a thriving population of lion, which now number over 30. Buffalo, rhino (both black and white), leopard, wild dog and a host of antelope species including nyala roam the park, while the furtive suni, Africa's second-smallest antelope, can also be seen.

Although Tembe is as wild as it was centuries ago, visitors don't have to rough it. Instead, the park's lodge – managed by the local community – has comfortable en-suite safari tents, with a central dining boma, all set in the shade of pod-mahogany trees.

The lodge offers guided morning and evening drives, and because there is no other accommodation tourists are few and far between. Only lodge guests and a limited number of day visitors are allowed to explore the reserve. Vehicles must be 4x4s, because of the thick sand.

That evening, after a dinner under the stars and some traditional dancing by the lodge staff, I lay in my safari tent gazing at the moonlit forest. The camp is unfenced, and animals regularly pass through, including iSilo. "He often comes to feed here," Patrick smiled, "so he obviously feels at home."

And sure enough, I woke up during the night to see iSilo standing in a forest clearing near camp, his huge tusks shining in the moonlight leaving no doubt as to his identity. Somehow, instead of fear I felt strangely peaceful, knowing that one of Africa's biggest tuskers was keeping watch while we slept. 🐘

WHERE TO STAY

Tembe Lodge in the south-west of the reserve is the only place to stay. There are 15 en-suite safari tents and meals are served in a central dining boma. Prices range from R795 to R1 550 a person per night, including three meals a day and two guided game drives. Tel +27 (0)31 267 0144, e-mail info@tembe.co.za or visit www.tembe.co.za



Elephants at Mahlasela water hole, Tembe Elephant Park.



Lion in Tembe Elephant Park.

GETTING THERE

Tembe Elephant Park is on the northeastern border of KwaZulu-Natal, on the southern border of Mozambique, about 450 km north of Durban. The reserve lies between Kosi Bay and Ndumo Game Reserve. Drive north on the N2 for about 270 km. Then turn right onto the R22 to Hluhluwe and travel about 150 km to a T-junction and turn left. After a few kilometres, look out for the signs to Tembe on your right. Day visitors and lodge visitors both pay once-off fees of R35 per vehicle and a R30 conservation levy.