



ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK

A place of miracle and wonder

Lord Byron said, "There is pleasure in the pathless woods, there is rapture in the lonely shore, there is society where none intrudes, by the deep sea, and music in its roar; I love not Man the less, but Nature more." It is, no doubt, a sentiment that rings true for many of us today, who are finding meaning, calming our spirits and relieving stress by turning back to nature, and what better place to do it than the expansive iSimangaliso Wetland Park?

Fast facts

- Lake St Lucia is Africa's largest estuary
- Greatest congregation of hippo and crocodiles in South Africa
- Last significant breeding ground for the giant leatherback and loggerhead turtles
- 8 interlinking ecosystems
- 3 major lake systems
- 350km of water surface
- 220km of coastline and beaches
- 190km of marine reserve
- 100 species of coral
- 1,200 species of fish
- 25,000 year-old coastal dunes
- 700 years of traditional fish traps
- 36 snake species
- 80 dragonfly species
- 110 butterfly species
- 526 bird species



In December 1999, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park was listed as South Africa's first World Heritage Site in recognition of its superlative natural beauty and unique global values. It is undoubtedly an area worth visiting, and protecting. "iSimangaliso's eight inter-linking ecosystems, warm clear oceans bursting with a myriad underwater species on our coral reefs, 'Big 7' terrestrial and marine fauna including sharks, whales, coelacanths and nesting leatherback and loggerhead turtles, 526 species of birds and more, makes iSimangaliso one of the rarest and most treasured places on earth" says CEO Andrew Zaloumis, "And with a wide range of leisure activities, there is something for everyone."

The beauty and diversity of the area continue to amaze and delight the Park's Tourism Information Officer, Thandi Shabalala, who has had the pleasure of introducing local and international visitors to the Park for more than a dozen years. "There is still so much to discover, learn and do here. I often mention to guests how this place can awaken your senses to the environment. I never really noticed bird song until I lived here, but now it is the music I wake up to every morning – you just can't help wanting to get out there and explore," she shares.

The Deep Blue Sea and Coastal Wetlands

iSimangaliso's seemingly endless beaches stretch 220 kilometers from Maphelane in the south to Kosi Bay on the Mozambique border boasting some of the best fishing waters in the country. Licensed operators offer deep sea fishing charters out of St Lucia and Sodwana Bay, and visitors with their own deep sea vessels, may also go out to sea. Rock and surf fishing is permitted throughout much of the Park's 220 kilometre coastline, however, in order to preserve our precious coastal resources, anglers and skippers are required to abide by strict rules and regulations. The use of nets (unless under



licence) and lights are prohibited. Vertical jigging is not permitted anywhere in the Park. Spear fishing is permissible to a licence holder on the coast (except in the Marine Protected Areas).

If you'd rather look at the marine life than catch it, you can scuba dive at the world-renowned Sodwana Bay section of the Park. Scuba diving and snorkelling is also offered to guests of Thonga Beach Lodge and Rocktail Beach Camp further north in the Coastal Forest Reserve section. With just a snorkel and a mask you can witness a fantastic spectacle of undersea life during a day trip to one of many small bays along the coast like Mabibi, Dog Point, Black Rock, Lala Nek, Kosi Bay mouth, Cape Vidal or Perriers Rocks.

There is a most magnificent diversity of wildlife for visitors' viewing pleasure, both on land and beneath the big blue. As former President Nelson Mandela himself put it during a speech marking the historic 2002 reintroduction of elephants to the Eastern Shores of the Lake St Lucia: "The Wetland Park must be the only place on the globe where the world's oldest land mammal (the rhinoceros) and the world's biggest terrestrial mammal (the elephant) share an ecosystem with the world's oldest fish (the coelacanth) and the world's biggest marine mammal (the whale)." Estuary boat cruises are run from jetties at St Lucia, offering close-up encounters with hippos, crocodiles and water birds. Guided kayaking is also permitted through a licensed operator in the southern section of the Lake St Lucia Estuary.

For nature lovers, a turtle tour is a must do activity, and should definitely rank high on your bucket list. The coastline of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park is the only remaining major nesting site in Africa where Loggerhead and Leatherback turtles still lay their eggs. These important breeding grounds have been protected by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the conservation partners of the Wetland Park Authority, for over 50 years. This ancient annual nesting ritual starts early in November and runs through to March the following year. Turtle tours operate from St Lucia and Cape Vidal (Shoreline Boat Safaris & Turtle Tours; Thompsons Tours), Sodwana Bay (Phinda and Ufudu Tours), Mabibi (Thonga Beach Lodge), Island Rock (Rocktail Beach Camp) and Bhanga Nek (Community guides). If you're lucky, you might also spot a South Hemisphere Humpback whale or two breaching regularly as they pass along the KwaZulu-Natal coast annually on their migration route between their summer polar feeding grounds in the Antarctic to the tropical and sub-tropical coastal waters of Northern Mozambique and

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Madagascar where they breed in the winter.

Swimming isn't permitted in the Lake St Lucia system, as the area is home to the highest concentration of hippos (approximately 800) and crocodiles (more than 1200 adults) in South Africa. More popular and safe swimming spots in the area are found in the shallow rock pools and sheltered bays at Cape Vidal and Sodwana Bay, and on calm days, Main Beach at St Lucia. Unspoiled stretches of beach can be found at Black Rock, Nine Mile Beach, Lala Nek, Bhanga Nek and Mabibi along the Coastal Forest section of iSimangaliso. The warm waters off the coast are a result of the Agulhas current coming in close to the shore resulting in water temperatures ranging between 19°C in mid-winter (June–July) to approximately 29°C in mid-summer (Dec–Feb), definitely conducive to swimming. Water-sport enthusiasts, with their own equipment can enjoy surfing, body boarding, and jet skiing and paddling at St Lucia, Sodwana Bay and Cape Vidal.

Flora and fauna

The diversity of flora and fauna across the terrestrial wetlands, grasslands, forests, savannahs and mountains is phenomenal. Big and small game are spread throughout the southern and central regions of the Park. If you visit the uMkhuze section where you'll be able to spot the "Big 5", and the southern areas around St Lucia, Western and Eastern Shores are renowned for leopard sightings. Rare, endangered or uncommon species in the Park include wild dog, serval, bushbuck, Samango monkey, black and white rhino, cheetah and oribi. Look out for the kudu who sport possibly the most magnificent horns to be seen anywhere. The Park's giraffe are seen only on the Western Shores, whilst the elephant appear to have made these shores home as well. Visitors may drive themselves through the majority of the park's game roads, or take a specialised 4x4 trip with licensed operators for day or night drives. There are many excellent game viewing roads which traverse the Eastern and Western Shore sections of the Park. You are almost guaranteed to see hippo on the Pan Loop, and the Vlei Loop has very



rewarding game sightings. If you prefer hiking through nature there are a few self-guided walks along the Igwalagwala Trail on the banks of the Lake St Lucia Estuary, nature trails in the Game Park area of the Eastern Shores, or the various delightful trails in the rare sand forest of the False Bay section.

Mountain biking is also permitted on a number of scenic off-road trails in these areas. There are a number of short walks from Mission Rocks to Bat Cave or Perriers Rocks which are suitable for the younger and more elderly members of your family, while the longer walks require more stamina and a measure of self-sufficiency. If you're wanting to see the hippos along Lake St Lucia's edge, the wooden boardwalk is an excellent option and the Westerns Shores uMthoma Aerial Boardwalk boasts spectacular views, as it winds through the forest to a suspended deck overlooking the lake narrows.

For the love of birds

David Attenborough said, "Everyone likes birds. What wild creature is more accessible to our eyes and ears, as close to us and everyone in the world, as universal as a bird?" Boasting more bird species than some entire continents – about 526 of them in all - iSimangaliso offers some of South Africa's finest birding. The uMkhuze section of the Park is particularly rewarding for birders, hosting 420 of the Park's recorded species. It is also one of the country's only pelican nesting sites.

The Wetlands are renowned for huge numbers of water birds, such as flocks of pelicans, storks and flamingos all congregating alongside specials such as Pinkthroated Longclaws, Pygmy Geese and Lesser Jacanas. Guided walks are available by arrangement with operators specialising in birding (St Lucia) or the Fig Forest walk and Aerial Boardwalk at uMkhuze. Of particular note is Catalina Bay Lookout point and the KuMziki Lookout which provide a unique view of both Lake St Lucia and the Indian Ocean.



So much to do

There really is something for everyone at iSimangaliso Wetland Park, whether you're enjoying game drives, fishing or scuba diving, hiking or mountain biking through some of South Africa's most breathtaking scenery. There are also many options for kayaking in the St Lucia area offered by St Lucia Kayak Safaris. The Eastern Shores offer a fantastic equestrian experience, where horses are chosen for their ability to handle the terrain. Horse and rider are carefully matched to ensure that whatever your experience, you can enjoy the adventure.

The range of horse trails for day visitors includes beach, game or combination rides. Sometimes though, it's good just to sit and take in the magnificent surroundings, and what better place to do that than one of the several small protected picnic spots. Favourite quieter spots are uBhejane Picnic Site on the Western Shores, Mission Rocks beach, Catalina Bay, kuMziki Picnic Site on the Eastern Shores, Cape Vidal, Charters Creek and False Bay. Sodwana Bay, Jabula Beach at St Lucia beachfront and Kosi Bay also have day visitor sites that are hugely popular in holiday season. One of life's most simple pleasures is sitting and watching the sun slowly set, as the moon begins her majestic rise. There is no better place to witness this spectacle than the land of miracles. A few of iSimangaliso's favourite sunset spots are Sunset Jetty in the hub of St Lucia town, Lake Mgobozeleni near Sodwana Bay, the 360-degree flaming skies at Kosi Bay, Catalina Bay Lookout or Lake Bhangazi in the Eastern Shores section.

It doesn't matter why you visit iSimangaliso, it simply matters that you do. We live in a country of great beauty and wonder that feeds our soul and sets us steady. Take the time to embrace and cherish the riches that South Africa offers to those of us who call her home, and to those guests who wish they did. ■ Lindsay Grubb

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