

ELEPHANTS OF THE SEA

For once, forget the Western Cape – South Africa has a more unusual, warmer whale-watching destination you should head to this winter.

By MELANIE VAN ZYL



The Elephant Coast in northern KwaZulu-Natal is popular for being home to the Earth's biggest land mammal, but it's rarely considered to be the most desirable destination for another intelligent and enormous mammal – the whale. That accolade normally goes to the Western Cape.

Near the end of June last year, WILDOCEANS, Wildlife ACT (a conservation-monitoring programme and Fairtrade-accredited volunteer project) in association with the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and various other conservation bodies and universities began the first humpback whale survey off the shores of iSimangaliso Wetland Park in nearly twenty years. The survey forms part of a long-term, shore-based migration survey designed and initiated in 1988 by Professor Ken Findlay (now working with the Cape Peninsula University of Technology) and Dr Peter Best (from the University of Pretoria's Mammal Research Institute). Everyone wants to know how these gentle giants of the sea are recovering after their numbers dwindled drastically due to a history of rampant commercial whaling.

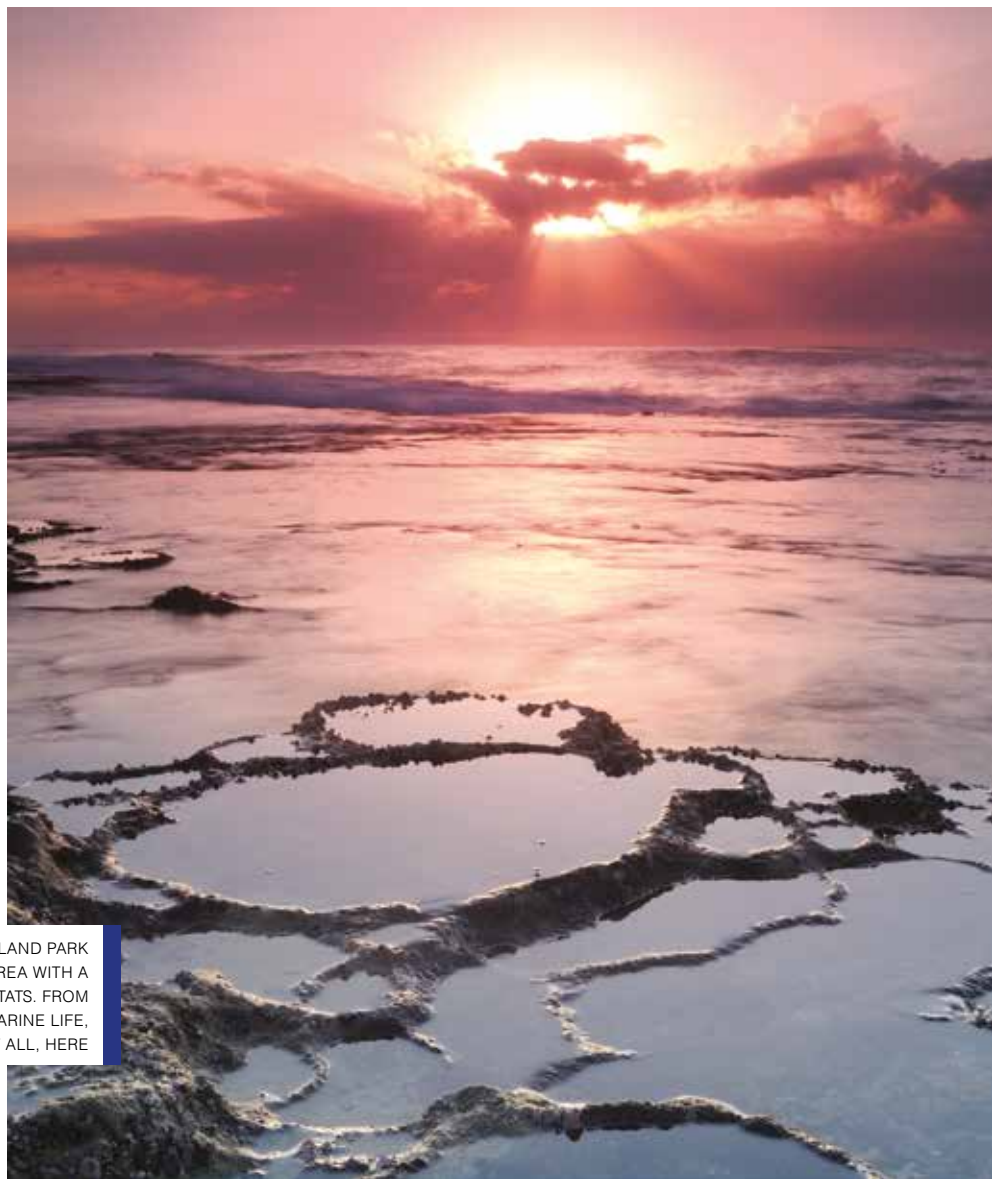
Findlay shared some stats on an official iSimangaliso Wetland Park news update saying, 'The recovery of southern hemisphere humpback whales from severe whaling pressures last century when some 210 000 animals were whaled, must rate as one of the world's great conservation recoveries. Populations that migrate on the KZN coast each year were whaled in the Antarctic, on their migration and in their Mozambican breeding grounds. Their current recovery at some ten per cent per annum is really heartening to see.'

Unfortunately, we're going to have to wait a little longer to see more results from the survey, though.

WILDOCEANS is a new marine and coastal conservation programme of WILDTRUST, an organisation running various programmes to ensure ocean health and sustainability for all. The results from the humpback whale survey are set to feature in an upcoming documentary series called *Our Oceans*, and will report on the rich biodiversity of Africa's oceans and the associated conservation challenges and threats. One of these threats is very much a controversial one.

Lauren van Nijkerk at WILDTRUST said, 'You can't talk about the whales of KwaZulu-Natal without mentioning the strandings.' Although we have no South African studies, investigations

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RIGHT ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK INCORPORATES A VAST AREA WITH A DIVERSE ARRAY OF HABITATS. FROM LAND ANIMALS TO MARINE LIFE, EXPECT TO SEE IT ALL, HERE



LEFT A TRIP WITH ADVANTAGE TOURS WILL OFFER A GOOD CHANCE OF SEEING THE WHALES

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abroad suggest that deep-sea oil and gas exploration using seismic equipment may be the cause of whales as well as dolphins washing up on our beaches.

Dr Jennifer Olbers, senior marine ecologist at Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, put together a thorough report on beach strandings in KZN, with noise interference cited as one of the causes. Predators, man-made toxins and severe weather conditions are cited as other causes. 'Globally, it is recognised that seismic surveys – researchers use vibrations produced artificially by explosions to create detailed images of local geology to help them identify oil and gas reservoirs under the ocean – can have direct detrimental effects on marine animals, such as soft tissue damage, hearing loss or even death. While indirect effects of additional sound in the water may disrupt communication, feeding behaviour, reproduction and navigation which are essential for survival.' Why is this controversial? Well, in 2014, a change in the environmental and mining legislation occurred. There's a loophole in that it's no longer a requirement for an Environmental Impact Assessment to be carried out prior to the issue of a seismic survey permit.

Tempted by this resurgence of interest in these seaside statistics, I decided to take a closer look for myself. In action since 1991 and a responsible operator belonging to the SA Boat Based Whale Watching Association, Advantage Tours was my way into the ocean with Berno Phillipson as my skipper. He's been



tackling the rough ride off St Lucia's beach out into the sea for ten years. It was a relatively calm morning, but the sea was seriously choppy. 'These conditions are great for whale-watching. The whales use this swell to propel their bodies up and out of the water,' said Berno. No one was seasick on our trip out, but wearing jeans was a bad choice. I got thoroughly drenched by water splashing into the boat. Soon enough, though, humpback whales were flicking out of the water all around me and my damp denims soon became a delight as I felt the sprays from their splashing at such close quarters.

On board, Berno taught us some of the tricks performed by these sweet

cetaceans. There's the regular blowing, but also lobtailing, which is when the whale slaps its tail on the surface (and each tail, or fluke, is unique, just like our fingerprints), but the most impressive sight had to be when they breached. Despite their elephantine size, the humpbacks would throw their entire bulk out of the water and into the air, falling back with a loud and incredible splash.

Every year, the whales work their way along this migratory route for six months. First, they move north to breed in Mozambique from June to September, before doubling back during spring to reach the nutrient-rich waters of Antarctica.

Kwasheleni Tower has 360-degree views across both Lake St Lucia and the Indian Ocean

Back inside the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, I enlisted the help of the park's marketing and brand manager, Lindy Duffield, to see exactly how the survey was being conducted. The dunes at Cape Vidal in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park provided the perfect vantage point for the shore-based counts and one

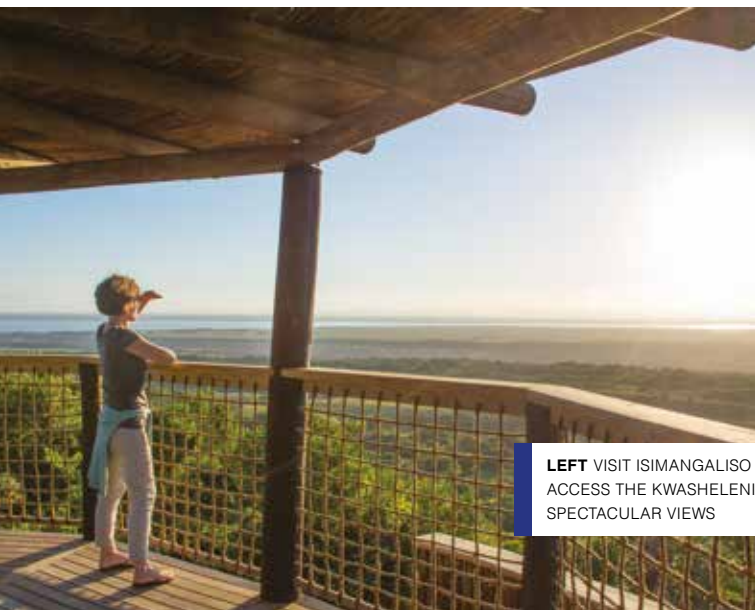
tower, in particular, has been magnificently revamped for locals and visitors alike. Kwasheleni Tower has exceptional 360-degree views across both Lake St Lucia and the Indian Ocean, and it's perfect for finding whales. We also saw a bachelor herd of buffalo and almost 20 kudus that padded peacefully across the grassy slopes.

Undeniably, there's cause for concern out in our oceans, but there's good news too. During my time in St Lucia, I learnt about iSimangaliso's first black female owner of a whale

watching concession in the World Heritage Site, Abigail Mncwango, (good news for a nation where female empowerment is still a work in progress) and, at the other end of South Africa's coastline, a new record was set for whale sightings at De Hoop Nature Reserve. More than 1 116 southern right whales were spotted on an aerial survey in the Western Cape.

As I looked out from Kwasheleni Tower, across the glistening Lake St Lucia and past the forests harbouring furtive leopards right beside the sea (I know because one darted across the tar road before my own eyes), I couldn't help but feel hopeful for the local humpback inhabitants. The inspiringly rehabilitated landscapes of iSimangaliso Wetland Park are a living success story and there is definitely hope that the success achieved on land will be echoed in the sea.

There is hope that South Africa still has some wild waters – wild, whale-filled waters.



LEFT VISIT ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK TO ACCESS THE KWASHELENI TOWER WITH ITS SPECTACULAR VIEWS



GOOD TO KNOW

SEE THE WHALES Head out to sea from the wild village of St Lucia with **Advantage Tours** (there are also boat trips that depart from Richards Bay and the launch is said to be calmer). 035 590 1259, www.advantagetours.co.za.

Alternatively, contact **Whale Safaris**. 035 590 1363

To stand on top of Kwasheleni Tower, enter **iSimangaliso Wetland Park** from the Eastern Shores Gate and drive towards Cape Vidal. www.isimangaliso.com

BEST TIME TO GO The winter months, between June and November, are the best for finding whales off the coast of St Lucia and Richards Bay.

WATCH OUR OCEANS Keep an eye on the WILDOCEANS website for release info on the documentary series that reports on epic ocean exploration. Each episode will focus on an iconic group: whales, coelacanths and sharks, from remote outer reefs in the Indian Ocean to popular South African surf beaches. www.wildtrust.co.za/wildoceans 📍