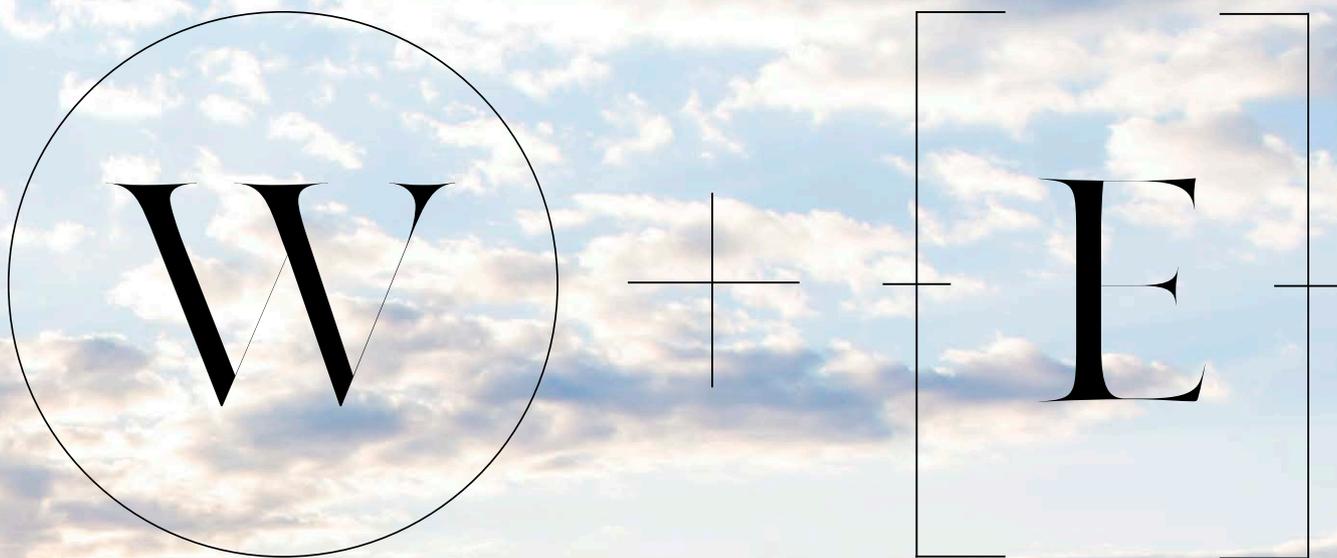


The Eastern Shores of
iSimangaliso Wetland
Park extend from St Lucia
to Mission Rocks, Lake
Bhangazi and Cape Vidal.

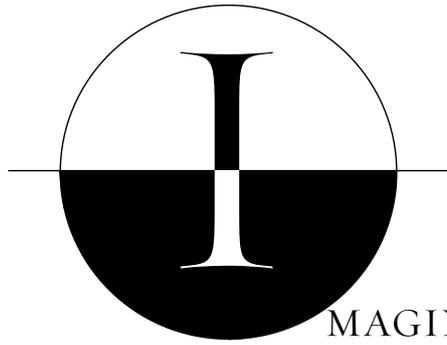


THE WILD, WILD WEST [AND EAST]

SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST WORLD HERITAGE SITE
TURNS 20 THIS YEAR. HERE'S HOW TO SEE THE BEST
OF iSIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK FROM THE CHARMING
VILLAGE OF ST LUCIA

WORDS & IMAGES

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MAGINE A PLACE where you can find

hippos and humans living side by side. A place where humpback whales breach just beyond the breakers in the Indian Ocean and the endangered black rhino finds safe harbour. *iSimangaliso* means miracle and wonder, and you find it in spades when exploring this park.

The 330 000-hectare *iSimangaliso* Wetland Park exists thanks to mining. The rolling dunes of this area are rich in titanium, but their pillaging was halted after a public outcry. When it was declared a World Heritage Site in December 1999, Tata Mandela put it best with this quote: “*iSimangaliso* 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).”

The park is divided into two sections. Here’s how to explore the Western and Eastern Shores, and the unusual island between them.

ONE FINE EVENING IN THE WEST

“By 2025, the plantations should be removed”, says our guide, Shaun, at Makakatana Bay Lodge. “Once these trees are harvested, no more pine or eucalyptus will be planted.”

Makakatana is the only concession lodge in the Western Shores section of the park, which is accessed by the Dukuduku Gate. The gate was only installed in 2013 because this western area was previously covered in forestry plantations, and of little interest to tourists. Over nearly a decade, *iSimangaliso* removed thousands of hectares of alien plant life, rehabilitating the natural landscape so that historically occurring game could flourish once again.

Connected via a series of boardwalks that keep guests out of hippo highways and allow the timid bushbuck to tiptoe below, Makakatana Bay Lodge offers six elegant bungalows. In the past, Makakatana Bay had been a commercial crab-fishing spot; you can still find the old concrete block building where the crustaceans were stored away from the harsh sun.

A game drive in the west yields journeys of giraffe, crossings of zebra, grumpy buffalo and – if you’re lucky – elephant herds.

uMphathe Loop (with its Kweyezalukazi Lookout) and uMdoni Loop – both easy self-drive game-spotting routes – and scour the dry palmveld for creatures great and small. The uMthoma Aerial Boardwalk provides a welcome break from the confines of the car; climbing into the canopy of trees, we can see the sprawling Lake St Lucia from above, and Cape Vidal – our next destination – in the distance.

FINDING WILD WATERS IN THE EAST

The last time I visited Cape Vidal, I was about seven years old. My family used to holiday here, back when you could still drive on the beaches. There are photos of my sister and me buried in the sand, like the precious turtle eggs that call these beaches home.

To honour my inner child, I start my exploration of the Eastern Shores with a snorkel safari. Rick and Elise Stadler are passionate St Lucia locals who share these waters with visitors to Vidal almost every day. They know where the currents are and how to find colourful shrimp; they know the best spots for ogling an octopus, and point out diamond stingrays hidden in the sand.

ISIMANGALISO MEANS MIRACLE AND WONDER, AND YOU FIND IT IN SPADES IN THIS PARK

Although we don’t see them, we certainly hear them, cracking through branches in the surrounding bushveld as we sit around the fire eating a fine dinner. Thick-tailed bushbabies also join us, hopping about in the branches above. Their eerie cries join the sounds of snapping branches and the hippos harrumphing nearby, only to be punctured by a hyena whooping into the night. It’s crazy to think this incredible chorus didn’t exist a few years back.

The following morning, we set our sights on the beach. The only way to get to the ocean is by going around and driving back into the town of St Lucia. Taking it easy, we meander the

This section of the park is best for coastal camping, close-to-shore snorkelling and, amazingly, leopard-spotting. Just a couple of days before my plunge into the Indian Ocean, Rick and Elise spotted a leopard and her cub on an early drive into the park to meet clients. With tropical forest thickets lining the coast of the Eastern Shores, leopard are often seen in the park, and their prints have even been found on the beach. These adaptable creatures are shy, but are often spotted in the village of St Lucia as well.

After a morning spent in the water, it’s back to said village for the night. In kilometres, the drive is short – but there are plenty of viewing points and bird hides to stop at along the way.

Opposite, from top: Hiking at *iSimangaliso* reveals endless views of this World Heritage Site; a cruise on the St Lucia estuary will get you close to the “river horses”; kudu are just one of the antelope that can be spotted on a game drive through the Eastern Shores; hundreds of hippos call the waters of the estuary home.



The best points are kuMfazana Pan on the Forest Loop drive, the views over Catalina Bay, and kuMziki Lookout, which is on the way to Mission Rocks.

The afternoon drive picks up speed as sunset draws near, and with it the gate's closing time. Suddenly, I catch sight of a leopard as it darts swiftly across the tar road. It's so quick, I wonder whether I really did see it. Only the presence of another car, its inhabitants just as awestruck, proves the sighting to be true.

The day isn't over yet. To experience the Shores in a different way, I enlist the help of Kian Barker to see it under the cover of night. As owner of Shakabarker Tours, Kian has been driving the park for more than a decade. He shares how chameleons glow in the dark: with a light shining on their scaly skin, they give off a bright glow, which makes them easier to spot when hidden in the foliage. We're lucky to spot the tiny, endemic Setaro's dwarf chameleon, and find bushpigs, buffalo and hippo too, before the evening drive comes to an end.

AN UNUSUAL ISLAND TOWN

Technically, St Lucia is an island – and we're not talking about the one in the Caribbean. Completely surrounded by a park,

this village is ensconced in wilderness. Hippos walk the streets at night in search of grazing, and leopards are often caught in the gardens – probably because bushbuck and duiker tend the lawns. By basing yourself in St Lucia you get the best of both worlds: bush and beach, with easy access to cocktails and croissants should a craving kick in.

The stay ends with a classic: the St Lucia estuary cruise is a sedate way to get close to the river horses and flat dogs of this sprawling lake system. Hundreds of hippos call these waters home; fish eagles cry out from tall riverside outposts, and an estimated 1 000 Nile crocodiles swim here.

One wonders, if Tata Mandela were still around, whether he'd add more achievements to iSimangaliso's impressive track record. Not only is this magical place home to the world's oldest land mammal, biggest terrestrial mammal, oldest fish and biggest marine mammal, it's also the domain of one of the oldest predators (the crocodile) and sanctuary for one of the most persecuted large cats in the world (the leopard). With the recent World Wildlife Fund "Living Planet Report" stating that "60% of the world's animals has been wiped out since 1970", iSimangaliso is hope – and proof – that humans and hippos can live together in harmony.

T H E E S S E N T I A L S

BEST TIME TO GO It's always sunny in St Lucia. Situated south of Sodwana Bay and 2,5 hours' drive north of Durban, St Lucia's winters are mild and summers tropically hot. June to November is best for finding whales off the coast.

SAFETY Only 120 day visitors' cars are allowed into the Cape Vidal area per day. The park gates are open from 5am to 7pm in summer (November to March) and 6am to 6pm in winter (April to October).

WHAT TO PACK Snorkelling and beach gear, binoculars and mosquito repellent.

W H E R E T O S T A Y

SUNSET LODGE in St Lucia offers affordable self-catering log cabins that face the estuary. sunsetstlucia.co.za

MAKAKATANA BAY LODGE is a four-star, all-inclusive lodge situated inside the iSimangaliso Wetland Park in the Western Shores section. makakatana.com

CAPE VIDAL CAMPSITES offer incredible access to the beach, but are sheltered by a small dune. kznwildlife.com

F O O D

BRAZA RESTAURANT serves homely Portuguese food, and has the added bonus of sharing a menu with the neighbouring Ocean Basket (for those after seafood).

ST LUCIA SKI BOAT CLUB has great views of the St Lucia estuary and is a vibey, affordable local hangout.

C O S T S

Park entry fees are R48 per adult, with a R58 vehicle fee. There's also a R5 community levy per person.

isimangaliso.com

T H E W I L D L I F E Y O U ' L L S E E

There are 526 bird species and 129 mammal species in the park, including humpback whales, many antelope, elephants, leopards and hippos, as well as 109 reptile species, including glow-in-the-dark chameleons.



G E T T I N G T H E R E

•• **FLY** SAA franchise partner SA Express flies daily from Johannesburg to Richards Bay, 76km from St Lucia. **Visit flysaa.com**

Opposite, from top: Giraffe-spotting in the Western Shores; whales are commonly seen off the coast of St Lucia between June and November; the rehabilitated natural landscape of iSimangaliso ensures that historically occurring game can flourish in the park; heading out on a snorkel safari at Cape Vidal.

