

CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE Yarns are deftly spun at the Coral Stephens Handweaving workshop in northern Swaziland; sunsets here are truly memorable; woven bags are a speciality of Tintsaba Crafts and Gallery.

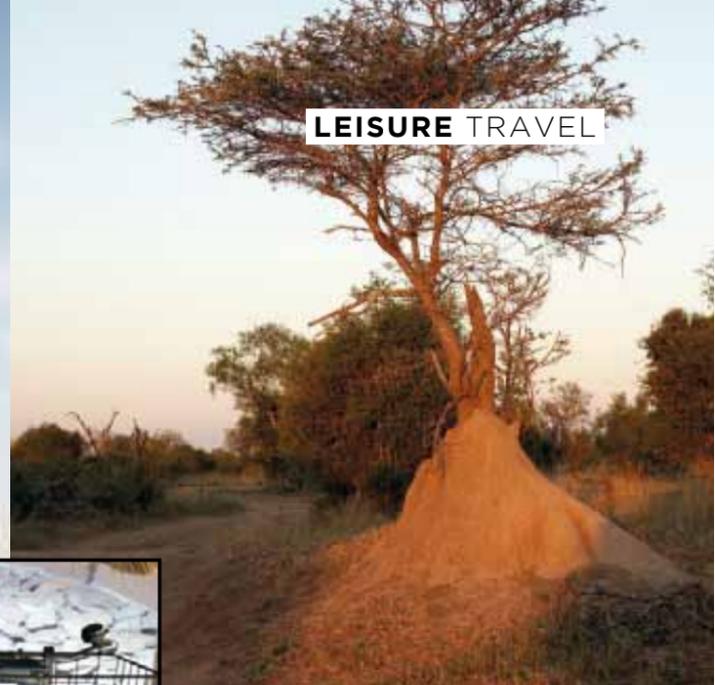
a kingdom in

seven days

Photogenic, underrated and authentic, Swaziland will ignite the

imagination of those seeking this unique country's poetic voice

Text **Kim Chaloner** Photographs **Pippa Hetherington**



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE Nature is celebrated at the annual Bushfire Festival; the House on Fire amphitheatre is a display space for fantastical creations; Swazi locals and international visitors unite in their love for music, art and expression at the Bushfire Festival; Dolores Goddefroy's baked mealie bread is just one of the delicacies at eDladleni outside Mbabane.



Just outside Swaziland's capital Mbabane, photographer Pippa Hetherington and I sink happily into our chairs at eDladleni, the brainchild of Fair Trade activist and restaurateur Dolores Goddefroy. We lap up the warmth and soulfulness of our surroundings (Siswati for 'In the Kitchen'), our animated hostess and her simple, organic fare: baked mealie bread, *umbidro* (organic spinach) encased in pastry rolls, strips of ox fillet paired with *emakhowe* (wild mushrooms) and marula-nut paste. Dolores, who makes annual pilgrimages to Tuscany to learn from the region's expert cooks, has dedicated her life to re-educating Swazis about the health benefits of indigenous foods. Mental note: save space for her chocolate cake. We didn't, and to this day we're regretful.

By now we've been in Swaziland for five days. We're realising that this small, landlocked place is far more than just a convenient stopover between the Kruger Park and Maputo: it offers geographical, social and cultural diversity; it's close to Jo'burg and Durban; and its vibrant royal history coupled with the melting pot of post-colonial realities makes for a unique (and safe) southern African self-drive travel experience.

We'd headed off by car from OR Tambo. What had appeared, on paper, to be a wide stretch of free-flowing highway (the N12 onto the N11) did not translate into a straightforward journey. On these roads labouring coal trucks abound. Nine hours later (it should have been three), we ditched our plans to enter Swaziland via the southern Golela border post near Pongola (Jozini). Our goal was Mahamba Gate in the west by 9pm (closing time), and then south to the heart of the lowveld at the foot of the Lebombo mountains. Finally, we bade a relieved *sanibonani* to Swaziland and her smooth, wide roads.

Rounding the corners at Big Bend, we arrived at Nisela Safaris (niselasafaris.co.za) where an unexpected night drive en route to our chalet presented giraffe, kudu and springbok mere metres from the car. 'Set in a valley abounding in wildlife', declares the resort's information brochure, which clearly isn't exaggerating. Here in the lowveld, agricultural projects jostle for land with wildlife areas, the story of our times. No-one is more aware of the sensitivities

than Mickey Reilly, whose father, Ted, grew up in this part of Swaziland and championed conservation and antipoaching initiatives in the 1960s with the support of the monarch of the time, King Sobusa.

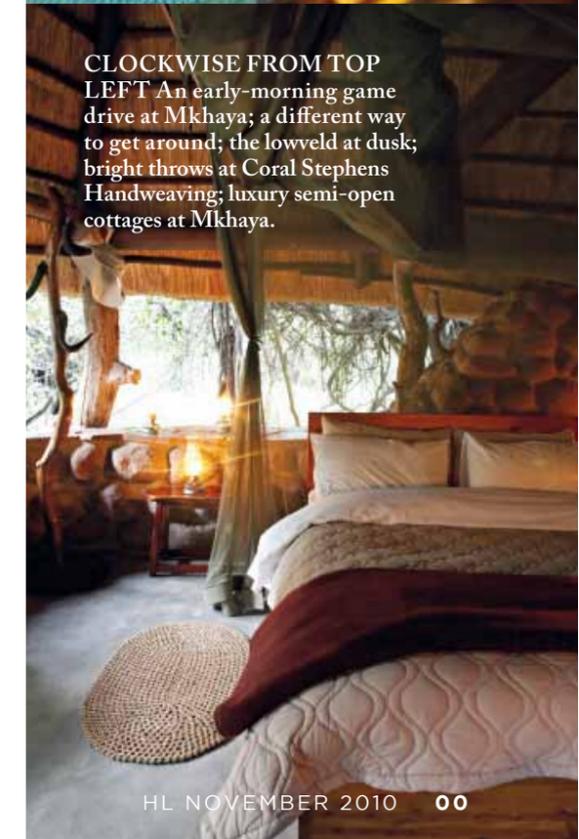
On entering Mkhaya Game Reserve, which Mickey oversees, and which is home to a sustainable breeding population of rhino, our bush cred is shattered when our vehicle gets stuck in the sand as Mick's intrepid wife, Cots, leads us through the gates. (Rather accept the complimentary escort-and-game drive via Land Rover by a resident guide.) Once at Stone Camp we're shown along a winding, forested walkway to our semi-open stone-and-thatch chalets. I memorise the route so as not to lose my way after dark, and discreetly quiz my porter about the nocturnal prowling habits of wild animals.

Later, after aperitifs around a roaring campfire and a candle-lit dinner in a dry riverbed, I'm ensconced between the finest goose-down duvet and a weighty eiderdown, and am unfazed by any rustling in the undergrowth. The sky is still inky black when I'm woken with a flask of coffee in bed. Ten minutes later we're traversing the park, where we admire a rhino and its baby up close; spot that recessive-gened anomaly, the white wildebeest; and release Mickey's daughter Josie's pet chameleon back into the wild. Immersed in the beautiful dawn light, scanning the red-earthed, acacia-dotted landscape, the cool, fresh air on our faces, Pippa and I are making plans to relocate. I can't imagine that recent big-name visitor, British actor Stephen Fry, was given any more royal treatment by our gracious hosts.

Onwards to Hlane, another of the Big Game Parks camps offering an authentic bush experience. (Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary, close to Malkerns, is the oldest and perhaps best known). 'Hlane' means 'wilderness' in Siswati, and fittingly, we're woken by lion in the camp (to the untrained ear, they could be grunting warthogs), before heading out on the new addition to their itinerary – the white-rhino dawn bush walks, led by expert guides.

Later that day we wend our way from the lowveld towards Pigg's Peak, via Maguga Dam in the Komati River Basin in Swaziland's Hhohho region and the Peak Craft Centre. ▷

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT An early-morning game drive at Mkhaya; a different way to get around; the lowveld at dusk; bright throws at Coral Stephens Handweaving; luxury semi-open cottages at Mkhaya.



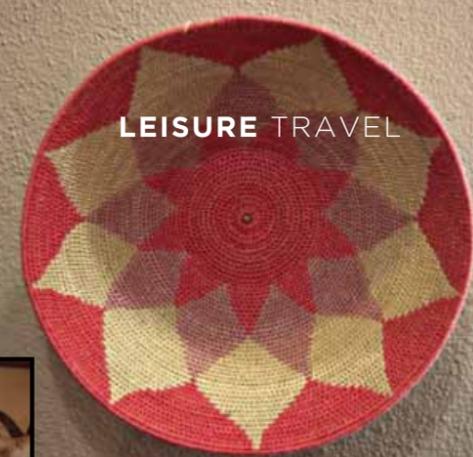


CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE The suites at Mandela's B&B are a sensory delight; fine silver-and-woven pieces at Tintsaba Crafts; the Phophonyane Falls; just outside Beehive 2, a bench with an unforgettable view; a staple at eDladleni – a bowl of African beans.



Never have I felt so

connected to nature (or water so cold) as at Phophonyane Falls Eco Lodge



LEISURE TRAVEL



Here we enjoy the best espresso this side of the border and sample the handicrafts of the Ezulwini Valley. We make a turn past the Coral Stephens Handweaving (coralstephens.com) workshop to watch yarns being dipped into gloriously coloured vats of dye, and master weavers deftly conjuring handspun silk, mohair, cotton and raffia into blankets, rugs and throws. The Centre is also the site of Fair-Trade registered Tintsaba Crafts and Gallery (tintsaba.com), renowned for their hand-crafted silver jewellery and sisal basketware, which enable 750 rural women to earn a livelihood without having to leave their homesteads.

Never have I felt so connected to nature (or water so cold) as at Phophonyane Falls Eco Lodge (phophonyane.co.sz). Set in a 600-hectare nature reserve a mere 30 minutes from Pigg's Peak and 70km south of the Malelane Gate of Kruger, the Lodge itself is perched in a lush, riverine forest overlooking cascading 80-metre falls, 3.5-billion-year-old rocky precipices and a series of secluded viewing decks and bridges. In this tranquil, restorative setting (the sound of swishing water makes a wonderful sleep tonic), you've the choice of thatched cottages, safari tents or traditional Swazi beehive huts made from local grasses (choose Beehive 2 for more space and an additional day bed).

Our personable hosts are Rod de Vletter, who settled here after decades spent working in Africa as a diplomat and for the UN, and his wife, Lungile, whose herbal butternut soup and spicy chicken curry are the best you'll ever taste. Rod knows the landscape intimately, and often takes guests on a tour of the super-steep hillside. Phophonyane is truly the kind of memorable place one spends a lifetime searching for. Bird-watchers might spot the elusive narina trogon, while mountain bikers and hikers are sent off into the wild with picnic baskets bearing smoked salmon sandwiches, chicken drumsticks and seasonal fruit.

Pippa and I while away an evening in the African artefact-adorned library room (where an exchange system keeps things current) over a glass of Glen Carlou Merlot from Rod's fine collection. Everywhere, colourful paintings by Rod's artist mother, Fiona Berrange, who lives on the grounds, are no doubt inspired by the tropical surroundings.

Next day we bolt into the wonderful madness that is Mbabane, and a chance to stock up on supplies (thick socks, camera batteries and a warm blanket, as it's getting chilly), and

then to the Malkerns Valley to the comfortable, convenient self-catering Brookside Lodge (brookside-lodge.com), our base for three nights.

Five minutes away, sparks are already flying at the Bushfire Festival. Held at the House on Fire amphitheatre and performance arena (house-on-fire.com) the festival is a coming together of thespians, musicians, the arty set and young families to enjoy a fusion of live music, DJs, theatre, poetry, dance, circus, film, interactive workshops, a Fair-Trade market and a global food fair. This theatrical setting is the brainchild of Swazi local Jiggs Thorne, whose family owns the sugar-cane farm that the festival showgrounds call home.

Adjacent to the 'Afro-Shakespearean Globe Theatre', Mandela's Farm House Restaurant and B&B (malandelas.com) is a hip meeting place for entertainers and concert-goers alike. With the option of self-catering, it features eclectic, spacious suites, while for the more adventurous there's the option of camping (just pack your earplugs). Also on site is craft initiative Gone Rural (goneruralswazi.com), which supports a women's handiwork project, while the Fair Trade aspect of the festival showcases works by, among others, Needil, known for repurposing concert billboards as funky handbags and pouches.

At the House on Fire Gallery we spend much time entranced by wood-carved figures, fantastically named Black Napoleon, Swazi Barbie and Frida Khumalo, carved by Shadrack Masuku from House on Fire Studio in collaboration with artistic director Jiggs. We bump into Mickey Reilly's sister Robyn and her husband, Kim, who tells us about his latest volunteer and adventure travel company, All Out Africa (alloutafrica.com). We soak up the entrancing recital by grandfatherly US poet Coleman Barks of his translations of Sufi poet Rumi's mystical works. 'The longing is for the longing itself' – just one of his pearls.

Our road trip across this country has been a veritable feast for the senses, and an opportunity to experience first-hand responsible eco-tourism and the warm, passionate individuals behind it. As we head back to Jozi via the Oshoek border, we dream of the haunting vocals and soulful acoustic guitar of Kenyan artist Winyo; and animated jazz hero Ray Phiri jamming onstage with Swazi gospel legend-in-the-making Bhalojo, his gentle, angelic features bathed in a halo of light. ☺

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT The House on Fire Gallery exhibits works from the adjacent Studio; woven baskets at Tintsaba Crafts and Gallery; ancient striated rock faces at the Phophonyane Falls; acacias dot the landscape at Mkhaya.

