

**Nature and Wildlife Photography in Kruger National Park, South Africa**  
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Many nature photographers dream about going to Africa one day to indulge in shooting the abundant wildlife, birdlife and landscapes it has to offer, and to soak up the feeling that is uniquely Africa. When one is finally ready to get the dust and dung of Africa on one's feet, a decision must be made about a specific destination visit.



In Southern and Eastern Africa, there are about seven well-known safari countries: Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. I have intentionally left Uganda and Rwanda out of this shortlist since they are mainly of interest for primate safari trips.

Several factors may affect which country best suits the photographer's interests, such as cost, possibilities for travelling independently, length of trip, preparation time, resident wildlife, seasons and the political situation.

I have been fortunate enough to travel to Africa on multiple occasions. All of my trips so far have been to Southern Africa, with the exception of Zambia (see my [October 2006 article on Zambia](#)).

The main reason for my choice has always been cost. Although Kenya and Tanzania undoubtedly boast the highest numbers of wildlife and arguably offer the best chances of seeing as many species as possible, it is rather expensive to get there and travel around. For a photographer, the best way to go would be to book a special photo safari, such as those offered by several NatureScapes.Net members. The huge expense of such a trip, however, simply cannot be justified by some people, including myself. And as I do not want to get stuck in a normal tourist vehicle with non-photographer tourists (and guides!), the second best option would be a self-drive and that unfortunately more or less rules out Kenya and Tanzania.

Therefore, as I started making plans for a two-week African holiday in October 2007, I soon decided to travel to South Africa's Kruger National Park. Why? South Africa is a well-developed country which can easily be traversed by a 2-wheel driven rental car. Car rental, accommodation and entrance fees are relatively inexpensive and can all be booked online. And most importantly: Kruger is world famous for its excellent numbers of a wide range of wildlife and birdlife species.

### **Kruger NP: The Practicalities**

Kruger NP is located in the north-eastern-most corner of South Africa and directly borders neighbouring Mozambique. At 400 kilometres long and with a surface area of almost 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it is about the size of Wales and one of Africa's largest parks. It was founded as Sabie Game Reserve in 1898 by President Paul Kruger, and nowadays boasts a dazzling 507 species of birds and 147 species of mammals, including the famous Big 5.

#### **Getting There and Around**

From Johannesburg International Airport, it is an easy 4-5 hours drive to one of the southern or western gates of Kruger NP. All international car rental companies are represented just outside the arrivals terminal. Of course, one should book the vehicle ahead to prevent a disappointing start of a long-awaited trip! About 10 kilometres from the airport in the direction of Kruger is a hypermarket where food, drinks and camping equipment can be acquired. Alternatively, it is possible to fly to Kruger/Mpumalanga International Airport from either Johannesburg or Cape Town and pick up your rental vehicle there.

Travelling around within the park independently is very easy, as all main roads in the park are tarred and the gravel roads are maintained very well. Only the special 4x4 trails, which need advance booking anyway, cannot be negotiated by a normal vehicle. In the rainy season (October – April), the gravel roads can be in a bad condition with mud and potholes and the like, and a rigid vehicle is very useful. Sometimes these roads are simply closed for the day (or longer).

Fuel is available (cash only!) in all main camps. For this trip, I used a regular sedan, which worked out fine. Although at times I wished for more clearance to make spotting easier, the lower shooting angle of a sedan makes smooth backgrounds easier to achieve than from the higher vantage point of a 4x4.

#### **Accommodation and Facilities**

The park is host to enormous numbers of visitors all year round, either day visitors or overnight guests who stay the nights in one of Kruger's many main camps, satellite camps, bushveld camps or private (luxury) lodges. Accommodation types in the government run main camps and satellite camps (which are all fenced) vary from family bungalows to camping areas. I chose the most basic types of permanent accommodation. Even these simple safari tents and huts offer the visitor a fridge and air-conditioning, but cost very little at 15-25 euros/night.

Every accommodation type has a private braai area where one can have a nice barbecue with boerewors (a local specialty sausage), steaks and kebabs. Meat, groceries and all other necessities, as well as photo books and the typical cliché souvenirs, can be bought in the camp shops which are found in all of the main camps. For people in the camping areas, there are small kitchenettes equipped with electric plates and taps with boiling water.

If you are of the opinion that "holiday" and "cooking your own meal" should not be in the same sentence, all main camps have restaurants with great food at very affordable rates.

Between the main camps, there are designated picnic areas where one can have breakfast during the early morning game drives or just relax and wait for the afternoon light without having to go back to camp. Here, complete braai equipment can be rented and cool drinks and simple snacks are sold.

Accommodation in the park are best booked in advance through the website of Sanparks (see below), which shows real-time availability, especially in the holiday season when most camps are booked to the last bed. Proper planning can help keep you from having to spend the night in your vehicle somewhere in a corner of the camping site. Staying more than one night in a camp enables you to get to know the area better and provides you with the opportunity to go back to that special last minute sighting the next day!



## Money Matters

One can pay his or her way through a Kruger holiday with plastic. Credit cards of all types are taken at camp receptions and camp stores, even for the smallest bill. Fuel can only be paid for in cash, so bring enough South African Rands or some jerry cans. Currently, there is one active ATM in the park, which can be found in the main camp and administrative centre of the park, Skukuza. When in need of cash, it is always possible to exit the park and drive to the nearest village with an ATM.

## When to Go

Kruger NP has roughly two seasons: the dry season from May to September and the wet season from October to April.

During the dry season, the bush is mostly dull-coloured with various shades of brown, grey and tawny colours. Bush fires (manmade or natural) are common and large patches of the bush may be ash black, with the smell of burnt wood prickling your nose. Animals congregate at waterholes which makes spotting them a lot easier. Be aware though that at the end of the dry season the grass can be rather long. This makes both spotting and photography easier from a vehicle with higher ground clearance. Temperature during the days is pleasant, but the nights can get a bit chilly.

During the rainy season, everything is lush with shades of green. This can make for interesting photographs, at least if you can find the animals to feature in your shots. Many of the herbivores spend their days deeper into the bush in this time of the year to have their young. Temperatures may get very high, and so does the humidity level. Visiting the park in this time of the year can be a sweaty experience, so try to book accommodation (and a vehicle) with air conditioning. For birders, the rainy season is as good as it gets, with many colourful summer visitors getting back from their European holidays.

Also, keep an eye on the agenda for South African school holidays, during which the park gets absolutely flooded with people which may make your safari experience less enjoyable than you'd hoped for.



## Photography in Kruger NP

### Which Part of the Park to Visit?

The landscape in Kruger NP varies a lot from north to south. The general consensus is that the far north sports the fewest mammals but offers the most prolific birdlife, especially in the rainy season along Pafuri River. The central part has wide open spaces which attract large herds of buffalo, zebra and wildebeest. These in turn attract the big cats. It was in this area (around Satara) that I saw most lions; also cheetah and leopard. The lush riverine and mountainous areas in the southern part are good for rhino, leopard, wild dog and specialties like sable antelope.

All in all, Kruger is a relatively densely vegetated park, so getting shots with those beautiful smooth backgrounds is not easy and sometimes even impossible. There may be tall vegetation between you and your subject, not always evident when photographing but which certainly shows up in the photos. At the same time, thickets can be used to your advantage, e.g., by using them to express the elusiveness of your subject.

### Which Roads to Drive?

Because Kruger NP is easy to travel to and around, has perfect facilities in all main camps and offers an abundance of wildlife and birdlife, it makes for a beloved travel destination for South Africans and foreign tourists alike. Especially during the school holidays and weekends, the park is crowded. For the serious photographer, that could be a major drawback to a Kruger holiday.

With all these people driving (and speeding) around, just thinking about hitting the brakes already results in at least three vehicles surrounding your car and asking you what you've spotted, often flushing your subject. Being a birder is even worse, because most people just seem to have a blind spot for anything with feathers. I've heard about people who had a sign behind their window saying: "Don't mind me, I am watching birds." I think, without exaggerating, that I must have missed at least 40% of the photo opportunities, including my only leopard sighting in the two weeks! Fortunately, there is a

workaround: take the less-travelled gravel roads.

Driving the gravel roads, I came across fewer cars than on the tarred roads and had some great sightings all to myself, like a hyena den with 4 tiny cubs and 2 cheetah brothers on the prowl. Granted, you might miss a sighting or two because fewer human eyes survey those parts of the bush, but most sightings you might miss when you are all by yourself are way too far into the bush for decent photography anyway. And an additional bonus: I think gravel and dirt roads look a lot better in photographs than tarred roads.



### What to bring?

As you will be doing a self drive (apart from the occasional night drive you can book at the main camps) and are not allowed to leave your vehicle, the only way of supporting your lens is some sort of a beanbag. Bring an empty one and fill it with some cheap rice, which can be purchased just about anywhere.

As for cameras and lenses, I refer to excellent articles and forum discussions on the subject written by specialists like Andy Biggs. Generally speaking, bring two camera bodies, a long telephoto zoom and a short zoom. As you are not allowed to drive off road, you'll often need all the focal length you can get, especially with birds. I used a 500/4 lens with converters most of the time, but missed the flexibility of a zoom a lot. For variation in my shots and for landscapes (from the car) I used 70-200 and 17-40 lenses on my second camera body.

Of course, bring enough flash cards and portable hard drive space, as you'll be filling your cards very quickly! Bring enough batteries and your chargers too. Most accommodation types have at least one power plug, so all your batteries can be charged when needed. I did not bring a laptop, as I wanted to travel light. Also, most of the daytime (5.30 – 18.00) I was either shooting (90%) or buying/preparing/catching/eating lunch and dinner (10%), after which I was glad to fall sound asleep, so no time for post processing anyway.

I had also brought an adapter with which I could use the cigarette plug of the vehicle as a regular power source. As a side note, I should mention that I only had to charge the 1D Mark III's battery one time in two weeks, the battery life of the camera is nothing short of amazing!

I did not bring a flash, and did not miss it at any time. Maybe if you plan to book a night drive you could bring your flash, but my experience is that guided night drives offer very little photographic satisfaction. You could use flash for wildlife around the camp perimeters at night, such as hyena. I personally don't use it for fill much anymore since digital cameras provide so much

detail in both shadows and highlights.

## Some Tips and Tricks

### Drive Slowly, or Even Slower

Speed limits in Kruger NP vary from 40 km/h on gravel roads to 50 km/h on tarred roads. Driving around at these speeds will most likely lead to a very disappointing safari trip. With the rather dense vegetation, it pays to drive at a 30 km/h speed maximum. I had many vehicles overtake me at high speeds and disappear in the far distance, when elephant (big), hyena and mongoose were right next to the road. Also, driving too fast means once you have spotted something you will likely have to drive in reverse to get back to where you spotted your subject, possibly frightening it away.

### Look Up and Be Amazed

Don't just drive around and look at eye level. There are many animals and birds that may be up in trees and bushes. Over the last four years I have become frustrated trying to find and photograph leopards, almost never spotting any; when I do someone else ruins the photo opportunity for me. But as a result, I have spent a great deal of time obsessively looking for leopards up in trees and have found giant eagle owls, pearl-spotted owls, tree squirrels and lots of raptors. Species I surely would have missed otherwise.

### Camps Aren't Just for Eating and Sleeping

Wildlife is not restricted to the park areas outside the camp perimeters. Squirrels, warthog, monkeys, lizards, frogs and many, many birds spend time within camp fences. They are accustomed to human presence, so some just put out some bread crumbs and take photos from the convenience of their chairs with a cold drink at hand.

### Sitting, Waiting, Wishing

Take your time at a sighting. Don't just take the quickie "normal" shots and rush for the next sighting, but wait for interesting behaviour to occur or animals to arrive. One day I was at a lion kill where everyone else had left after about an hour of watching the animals do essentially nothing. Not much later, the lions began to drag the carcass around and about 60 vultures arrived. Bring some coffee and biscuits to make your wait a bit more comfortable.



## Enjoy the Weather, Anytime

During my stay, the weather was volatile to say the least. Days with heavy rains and dark grey skies took turns with hot and sunny days. Don't despair when the day does not start with an iconic African sunrise. Even in rainy weather, interesting and moody photos can be taken. By using long exposures, you can create rain streaks which add drama to an otherwise boring composition. Making pan blurs is much easier when the lack of light lets you actually dial in those long exposures.

Buffalo or wildebeest portraits have added attitude to them when their fur and horns are covered with fresh mud. Finally, incoming thunderstorms in combination with a sunset can result in very dramatic skies, so keep an eye open for suitable landscape compositions!

## Ignore the Boards

Every main camp has a board with a map where people can put coloured pins at places interesting sightings (mainly Big 5) have taken place that day. Please ignore these! I have seen children fight their boredom by sticking the pins all over the place. Believe me, no need in chasing those mid-river leopards. Also, many times the boards aren't emptied at all, so sightings may be at least a day old. And even if they are recent, many times the sightings are way too far into the bush or the animals have long since left the scene.

Best thing to do is chat with your neighbours in camp. People who have seen interesting things always seem very willing to share information with you about locations. Just try to develop a feeling of which part of the story could be real and which part of the story could be made up in the lively imagination of the average safari tourist. Also, hide your big lens when asking for sightings and locations. When people see you walk around with it, distances seem to evaporate into the air and everything suddenly is within easy range for "great pictures."

## Conclusion

If you want to go on a photographic self-drive safari to a destination that is affordable, needs little planning and is easy to travel to (and around), Kruger National Park may just be the place for you. It boasts large numbers of wildlife and birdlife, so there is always something to photograph.

If you manage to avoid the school holidays and stick to the gravel roads, you will find you have many great sightings all to yourself. Just do not expect the enormous herds, the wide open plains and the easy spotting of the famous eastern African safari destinations. Seeing cheetah, wild dog and leopard, let alone taking a prize winning picture of them, is more the exception than the rule.

## Useful links

<http://www.sanparks.org> offers lots of information on Kruger and all other National Parks in South Africa. Bookings can also be made through this website. It further has a forum area where lots of useful information is willingly shared between members.

[http://www.ecotravel.co.za/Guides/Reserves/KNP/KNP\\_Map\\_Full.htm](http://www.ecotravel.co.za/Guides/Reserves/KNP/KNP_Map_Full.htm) has a very detailed map with all roads and accommodations in the park.



Marijn Heuts is a nature photographer from the Netherlands. More of his photos from Kruger National Park can be viewed on his website, <http://www.destinationanywhere.nl>. Please feel free to email Marijn with any queries on travelling to and around Kruger National Park.

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