

Lost trail of the north

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Along the secluded beaches, coastal dunes, lakes and swamp forests of Maputaland is an Eden with one of the best hiking trails in South Africa. But internal rivalry broke out in the community in Kosi Bay and the first camp was burnt while others were left to fall apart.

For a while the trail was lost. However, a few community members and tour operators have recently come together to resurrect the area. The old trail used to be a circular route, starting from the northern side of Third Lake at the hiking camp now burned. The new trail has been redesigned by Siyazenzela Co-Op and they've split it up into several flexible routes for both slackpackers and hardcore hikers who don't want assistance. They've also included optional activities such as boat rides, snorkelling and horse riding.

I decided to take the easy way and slackpacked, starting in the south side at Maputaland Bush Camp.
Sandy shoes

The morning began with the sun barely creeping out of the clouds and a shower of rain. So much for the fact that this area had been short of good rains for seven years. But the clouds soon disappeared and we set out for the hills.

The water in the valley, which was once a vast wetland, has dried up and some pioneer trees and grasses have started making a home where crocodiles used to rule. A few hippos have found refuge in a small pool and gave us a few hurrumphs.

The soft sand at the top of the hill was heavy going underfoot and trumpeter hornbills warned that the path ahead would be even longer. The air was humid but not too hot and all around us the vegetation was green and alive with insects.

We stopped to watch ginger tailor ants marching in and out of their ball-like web in a waterberry tree. Its edible fruits were ripe but our guide, Musa Ngubane, advised us against picking them. 'If you have too many, you may not be able to walk,' he said. The berries are evidently used to make beer. After the sand and the humidity, it was a pleasant surprise to walk into a swamp forest under the cool canopy of tropical plants, on ground that was a soft carpet of ferns.

We followed human and bush pig prints until we found ourselves on the banks of a shallow section of the Siyadla River. A fallen tree provided a makeshift bridge and we crossed like tightrope walkers.

But soon we were back on soft sand. A reedbuck, alarmed by our presence, darted back into the trees. We hugged the edge of the forest of climbing raisin trees (*Grewia caffra*), red milkwood (*Mimusops obovata*) and ferns. We followed hippo tracks to the banks of a river, where a raft of raffia palm bark awaited us. Using a rope, we pulled ourselves across.

We reached Amanzimnyama Camp around 12 kilometres later, with sore feet and sand-filled shoes, and were warmly welcomed with homemade vetkoek and mince.

There are four lakes in the region. Third Lake is the largest and deepest. Local people also call it Nhlanga, which in Thonga means reed.

We paddled on Fourth Lake, which gets its Zulu name, Amanzimnyama (meaning black water), from the dark silt at the bottom. We decided to follow the current and gently glided into the Siyadla River. A pygmy kingfisher in a forest karee tree allowed us to get close, while a shy samango monkey dodged our gaze. Wading through aquatic grass, African and lesser jacana hopped across the leaves of blue flowering water lilies, scanning the surface for food.

The people in the region are still dependent on the land for food and medicine. Several trees serve many purposes. The coastal silver oak is used to make spearheads to kill fish, while the dune soapberry lives up to its name. But no other tree beats the raffia palm. 'Don't think you are crazy when you hear singing at night. It could be someone trying to keep the hippos away, but most likely it's the palm wine,' a local joked.

Fish traps and fishers

The hippos grunted as we shoved our way through shrubs trying to find the right path the next day. The trail hadn't been used in a while and had grown closed. We ducked large spider webs and branches, walking a few metres along Amanzimnyama on our way to Nhlanga (Third Lake).

Along the way there were plenty of greetings by people who were off to hoe their fields, collect reeds or fish. On the beach at Bhanganeke, a few fishers were casting their bait and, from the coastal dunes, we could see the beach where between November and February large leatherback and loggerhead turtles swim long distances to come and lay their eggs in the sand.

After lunch, we jumped into a boat, chugged across Third Lake and slowly meandered up a channel into Second Lake, or Pundwini (meaning dawn in Thonga, the time when fishers collect their catch). Its water is crystal clear and traditional Thonga fish traps are all about. It's also a great place to snorkel. Fishers were poling mekoro (dugout canoes) and two giant kingfishers were scanning the water for dinner.

On the last morning, we decided to rest our aching feet and ride horses instead, setting off to the dune forest at Dog Point beach. After an hour of sandy hills and uneven ground, we cooled off the horses in the ocean. While ghost crabs burrowed for safety, we cantered along the gloriously empty beach.

The old trail may be lost, but the new one will leave you with the feeling that you've seen a small piece of Maputaland magic.

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