



Dale Morris is a writer and photographer who's spent the past 15 years being chased up trees by animals who don't like having their photos taken. He lives in Wilderness, South Africa.



i for iSimangal

Dale Morris, having previously fallen for the rich variety of the Eastern Cape's Addo Elephant National Park, decides to push his luck by exploring Kwa-Zulu Natal's most diverse area of wilderness, iSimangaliso. After what seems like a shaky start, he hits the jackpot, discovering it's as magnificent beneath the water's surface as it is above.

With a creak and a crack, the mighty tree wavered, tilted and then fell to the earth with a thunderous crash, sending a little flock of hornbills off into the wind like autumn leaves. A giraffe that'd been watching this logging operation from his lofty vantage point on the horizon turned tail and ran, as did a small herd of perturbed zebra.

"Right, that's the last of them," yelled the foreman, struggling to be heard above the noise of heavy machinery. "Clear these logs away!" And with that, a cavalcade of yellow shirted men swarmed onto the scene and began cleaning up the fallen trees. Diggers revved, smoke billowed and Africa's animals watched on in awe. It wasn't a pretty sight, but then again, when does deforestation ever look nice?

Wholesale logging in iSimangaliso, South Africa's very first UNESCO World Heritage site – who would have thought it possible? And sanctioned by the government no less...

iSimangaliso, formally known as the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, is one of the most important wetland regions on the planet, with one of the highest biodiversity counts ever recorded. It has a very healthy population of both black and white rhinos, 526 varieties of birds (that's 25 per cent of the continent's species) and more frogs than anywhere else in southern Africa. As it is also a marine reserve, there are coral reefs, humpback whales, and little fishes galore.

A huge and impressive place, this 332,000ha chunk of Kwa-Zulu Natal begins on the coast about 250km north of Durban and ends at the Mozambique border a further 224km away. There are three major lake systems, which together make up Africa's largest estuarine system. Also within its boundaries are ancient forested dunes and vast swamps where waterbuck and elephants mill around contentedly.

"It's probably the only place on earth where you can watch wild elephants after eating breakfast and then go for a dive with whale sharks before lunch," said Andrew Zaloumis, iSimangaliso's CEO. He added, "And it's all within the boundaries of the same protected area."

"So why are loggers allowed to operate within iSimangaliso?" I asked.

"Well, it's for conservation, jobs and the environment. After all these trees never belonged here in the first place," said Zaloumis.

We were standing atop a vegetated dune in the southeast, near a camp called Cape Vidal. The views were simply to die for. Behind and below us, the Indian Ocean glowed like a sapphire. Waves lapped against an unbroken and undeveloped stretch of beach that vanished hundreds of kilometres away into a pink and hazy horizon. In front of us, the vastness of Lake St Lucia – shining silver in the sunlight – stretched to fill up the flat spaces between the hills. Barely discernible in the distance to the west were the Lebombo Mountains of uMkhuze, and the rolling topography of iMfolozi Hluhluwe Park. I could see hippos, crocodiles and pelicans down on the lake's edge, and a pair of white rhino nibbling on grass out on the plains. ❖❖

iso

"If you were standing here just a few years ago," continued Zaloumis, "all you would have seen here was a monotonous sea of commercial pine plantations. Now we've chopped them down, all six million of them. Good riddance too. Ooh look, there's a whale!"

And so there was. Just beyond the breakers, it was waving its tail like a glistening flag.

Andrew then went on to explain that the northern part of Kwa-Zulu Natal is in the midst of a serious drought, and that the 70km-long Lake St Lucia has been starved of fresh water.

"Parts of the lake are currently three times saltier than the sea," he told me. "In effect, it's a dead lake."

However, since the removal of the plantations of eucalypt and pine (species with an insatiable appetite for H₂O) fresh water has begun to seep out from the bottom of the dunes and form little pans throughout the Eastern Shores area.

"It's probably the only place on earth where you can watch wild elephants after eating breakfast and then go for a dive with whale sharks before lunch"

"These pans are an absolute lifeline for many of the animal species that we have reintroduced here," said Zaloumis. "They are signs that a phoenix is rising from the ashes."

With fish eagles circling nosily overhead, and kudu snorting fastidiously at our scent, Andrew filled me in on the history of how iSimangaliso, its elephants, its ancient and rare swamp forests, its lakes and its 25,000-year-old dunes were nearly swept away by industry.

"Do you know that we have both leatherback and loggerhead turtles nesting on our beaches?" said Zaloumis. "The most southerly place on earth that this occurs, or so I believe."

Marine turtles usually lay their eggs on tropical beaches, but the presence of titanium in iSimangaliso's sand acts like an incubator. In the 1990s, before the park

existed, an international mining company applied for a concession to strip mine the dunes for this titanium, a process that would have decimated the ancient indigenous dune forests and caused irreversible damage to the entire aquatic system. The wetlands might have died, the near shore coral would probably have been affected and the turtles would no longer come to nest.

"iSimangaliso means 'miracle' in Zulu" said Zaloumis, "and believe me, everything about it is."

The mining application was met with public outcry by more than half a million people (Nelson Mandela included), all of whom signed a petition against it. As a result, for the first time in South African history, traditional smokestack industries were turned away in favour of conservation and eco-tourism potential.

"After the mining issue was buried, and prior to the World Heritage designation," continued Zaloumis, "the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority was created to manage a series of relatively unknown nature reserves that were cut off from each other by giant forestry plantations, unused farms and a military base used for testing missiles." He went on to tell me that the army would fire ordinances into Lake St Lucia, something that no doubt caused a great deal of distress to the various pelican breeding colonies.

Now, though, the silos and barracks have been removed and the peninsula on which they stood – a beautiful spot that looks out over the lake and its islands – is earmarked to host a new low-impact luxury lodge.

"Block by block we are developing the park for conservation and tourism," said Zaloumis, "and in the past few years we have integrated all of the sections into one contiguous area which stretches 70km from the Lebombo Mountains to the ocean and encompasses more than a third of Kwa-Zulu Natal's coastline."

Plans are also afoot to create Africa's first marine transfrontier park linking iSimangaliso's Marine Protected Areas to newly created ones in neighbouring Mozambique.

From a tourism perspective there is a great variety of things that one can do in iSimangaliso. For starters, there are traditional game drives on a network of roads that wind their way through rolling grasslands, lake shores, beaches and indigenous forests.

"The roads within iSimangaliso are mostly new and well maintained," said Zaloumis, "which means anybody and everybody can visit us now. A few years

The diversity of iSimangaliso

iSimangaliso's 332,000ha contains Africa's largest estuarine system as well as extensive forested dunes, swamps and offshore reefs. With such a diversity of habitats it's no surprise that there is such a variety of wildlife patrolling both above and below the water's surface.

Marine turtles lay their eggs in iSimangaliso's incubating sands



White & black rhino are thriving in iSimangaliso





Above: The shallows of Sodwana Bay are a treat. Depending on your constitution, the waters offshore can be too – the reefs here are famous as a site for diving with ragged-tooth sharks

Divide and conquer

iSimangaliso can be divided up into several distinct sections, all of which have accommodation options and something unique to offer the visitor.

St Lucia

This small town in the very south of the park is a major hub for tourist activities and accommodations. Here you can go on river trips to see hippos and crocs, or hike around some of the park's trails. At night-time, hippos are often seen wandering down the high street or hanging out on

residential lawns.

Find out more
www.stluciasouthafrica.co.za

Eastern Shores and Cape Vidal

Here you'll find fantastic beaches, good snorkelling and excellent game drive roads. There is also great hiking to plenty of scenic lookout points.

uMkhuze

This sector in the east has the look of a more 'typical' bushveldt than the rest of iSimangaliso. The sprawling Nsumo Pan, with its fringing

sycamore fig forests, makes for excellent birding.

Sodwana Bay

This is one of the busiest dive spots in the country, with plenty of scuba and snorkelling facilities. It's also a great place to hang out on the beach.

Find out more
www.coraldivers.co.za
www.amoraydiving.com

Rocktail Bay

Those in search of an exclusive beach and dive escape can go to this remote bay. Here there are 5-Star

lodging options, and you usually get the reefs all to yourself. It's also very close to the beautiful lake Sibaya.

Find out more
www.wilderness-safaris.com

Kosi Bay

Situated near the Mozambique border, this is a large lake system that has been in use by traditional fishermen for almost a thousand years. Their partially submerged fish-catching corals can be viewed from the surrounding countryside. A 4WD is needed to access this part of the park.

Coral reefs line the protected marine reserve



Hippos are found in the three major lake systems



Aquatic life (big and small) is prolific offshore



AD

back though, the Park was mostly inaccessible to anything other than 4WD vehicles.”

Outside the park, public roads have been upgraded with the intention of providing easy routes between the southern, middle and northern reaches of iSimangaliso, and to other nearby reserves such as Tembe Elephant Park, Ndumo Game Reserve, Lake Jozini, Phinda Game Reserve and the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.

Off road within the park is an abundance of other exciting activities: nocturnal turtle tours with expert guides, kayaking amongst hippos and crocodiles on the lakes, easy-going boat tours for birdwatchers along estuarine mangrove forests, and dolphin and whale watching out at sea. You can also catch fish from the shore, make sandcastles, catch a tan and go scuba diving or snorkelling on some of the most beautiful reefs on the planet.

Sodwana Bay (a sector of iSimangaliso) has long been considered a premier dive destination, in part because the offshore reefs there play host to an annual gathering of ragged-tooth sharks.

“Its quite a thing to see,” said Zaloumis, as we made our way off the dune. “Dozens of very big sharks placidly hanging out in shallow water.”

Apparently (and fortuitously) the sharks are experiencing a fast of some sort from November through to February, and hence are not interested in food... humans included.

“Diving with them is safe,” said Zaloumis. He then went on to describe many of the marine wonders of iSimangaliso’s reefs, in the process whetting my appetite for a dive

“It’s one of the most biodiverse reef systems on earth, with over 2000 species recorded so far. We have hawksbill turtles, bottlenose dolphins, whale sharks and mantas, beautiful coral shelves, octopi and nudibranchs, and what’s more, the water is always lovely and warm. Want to go see it?”

What a silly question, I thought.

It took but a few pleasant hours of slow driving through the southern reaches of iSimangaliso and into



Above: Warning signs at Lake Bhanghazi say it all

the rolling countryside of Zululand before we reached the shallow waters of Sodwana Bay. Along the way we stopped to say hello to a herd of giraffe and a lovely and plump (read ‘pregnant’) rhinoceros who was scratching her flanks against the stump of a recently extracted pine tree.

Less than two hours later I was underwater, surrounded by a flurry of tropical fish and hugging on tightly to a very friendly grouper who was almost twice my size.

No sharks though... Shame. But as a stingray glided gently over a multicoloured montage of oddly shaped corals, I couldn’t help reflect on Nelson Mandela’s praiseful observations on the diversity of iSimangaliso.

“Nowhere else on earth can one find the oldest land mammal (the rhino) and the world’s biggest terrestrial mammal (the elephant) living naturally in the same protected area as the ocean’s oldest fish (the coelacanth) and the sea’s biggest mammal (the whale).”

And all of it saved from destruction, just in the nick of time.

iSimangaliso truly is a miracle as its name suggests – a miracle that it’s even here at all. 🐋

Plan your trip

Getting there

iSimangaliso is accessible by road from Durban (three hours) and Johannesburg (six hours). There are also scheduled flights from Johannesburg to several nearby airstrips.

When to visit

iSimangaliso enjoys a warm sub-tropical climate throughout the year. However, the summer months (December to February)

are very hot and humid – they also experience afternoon thundershowers. Temperatures are more pleasant during the drier winter months (June to October). Humpback whales and southern right whales are typically in this area between July and November.

Find out more

www.iSimangaliso.com
www.kznwildlife.com
www.thewetlandpark.co.za

