

# MSR - where 'Special' is part of the Reserve

After years of behind-the-scenes work in Mozambique's southernmost reserve, a number of new facilities and a 4x4 route are being opened to the public. Johan Kriek was lucky to enjoy a quick preview.

As so many things go, this particular journey started with a phone call. On the other end of the line was Niel Crafford, a friend and renowned eco-architect who has been part of designing tourism facilities in reserves from the Richtersveld to Mapungubwe. "Johan," he said, "I have been involved in the development of some of the new facilities in the Ma-puto Special Reserve, and I would like you to join us on a fact-finding mission there in June."

Well, I didn't need much more encouragement. I jumped at the invitation as it had been at least 10 years since I had visited the area often incorrectly labelled the Maputo Elephant Reserve, now better known as the Maputo Special Reserve. This area may well be one of Mozambique's best-kept secrets. Perhaps not for long.

MSR is an essential component of the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation and Resource Area, as it enables linkages to be made between a mosaic of marine, coastal and inland components, with important conservation value and excellent potential for tourism. The reserve itself contains lakes, wetlands, swamp forests, grasslands and mangrove forests, and includes a stretch of pristine coastline that lies within the Maputaland Centre of Plant Endemism. So as a conservation region, it is special indeed.

## A slice of history

The original Maputo Elephant Reserve was proclaimed as a hunting concession in 1932, progressing to reserve status in 1960 in order to protect the elephant populations. It was not until 1969 that it was renamed the Maputo Special Reserve, in recognition of the rich and diverse vegetation and species in the area.

Historically, the elephant populations of KwaZulu-Natal and southern Mozambique moved freely across the border. However, during the Mozambican civil war (1977-1992), these elephants suffered greatly from poaching. In a bid to safeguard them on the South African side, the northern border of Tembe Elephant Park was fenced off in 1989.

Then, in 2009, came the formation of Africa's only Marine Transfrontier Conservation Area with the declaration of the Ponta do Ouro Partial Marine Reserve (PPMR), which adjoins the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Another key link in the conservation chain was added in 2011 with the declaration of the Futi Corridor. Since then, game has been steadily added to the new conservation region, with the tally so far standing at 4 922 animals from 11 species.

The establishment of the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation Area was a cornerstone to re-uniting these fragmented elephant populations. The idea was to open up old movement corridors, which includes those along the Futi system and the Rio Maputo flood-plains. In doing so the area available for elephant would dramatically increase – allowing access to the fertile Maputo River floodplain, and re-establishing traditional seasonal mi-grations between this area and the less fertile sand forests.

In 2018, Mozambique's National Administration for the Conservation Areas (ANAC) signed a partnership agreement with the Peace Parks Foundation to jointly develop the Maputo Special Reserve (MSR), and Ponta do Ouro Partial Marine Reserve (PPMR) according to a strategic business plan. Peace Parks' role was to provide technical and financial

support for con-servation and tourism development. This was a massive task considering the MSR co-vers 112 800 hectares and the PPMR covers 67 800 hectares. During 2019, a light aircraft and a helicopter were brought into play to assist with both day-to-day management and law enforcement duties.

**The preliminaries**

Back to our planned visit, and Niel confirmed that we would need to present a negative Covid-19 PCR test of not older than 72 hours in order to enter Mozambique at the Komatipoort/Ressano Garcia border post. The drill is that we'd need a COVID-19 rapid test (available on the South African side of the border) to enable our return back into the country.

We departed from Komatipoort after a final refuel at around 10:00, arriving at the border 10 minutes later where we 'sailed' through both sides in under an hour. This was a new record for me! Using the N4, we drove through to Maputo, skirting the south side of the city and crossed the Maputo Bay using the impressive new suspension bridge. En-route we stopped at Bela Vista, first taking pictures of the beautiful Portuguese-style buildings and an old church, before buying a few of Mozambique's famous 2M beers for our journey into the park.

Around 18km further, we crossed the new Maputo River bridge at Salamanga, and after another 7km, you approach what at first glance seems to be a herd of elephant crossing the road. Upon closer inspection – and having slowed down to read the "Bem Vindo" sign – we realise we had arrived at the Maputo Special Reserve. The newly-built gate consists of a number of life-sized elephant silhouettes, some of which have clearly crossed the new tar road and left their footprints on it.

We arrived at around 15:00 at the Futi Corridor entrance gate, also recently completed, where we checked in and collected a map of the park. From there, it was easy to follow the well-marked routes to our destination. Our first night was spent at the Xinguti Lake campsite, another smart new ecotourism facility with its state-of-the-art buildings and ab-lutions. It commands a spectacular location very close to Lagoa Xinguti, which is a must-see with its prolific birdlife and wildlife. Of course, as we went to bed later that evening, the hippos started telling jokes. How did we know? They all disappear under the water when someone tells a joke, and laugh out loud when they all surface: "Ho ho ho ho!" It goes on all night...

**The real 4x4 adventure begins**

Our second day proved to be the real start of the adventure. The 4x4 trail through the Futi Corridor has been many years in the planning and the making, so this was to be an all-new experience. Entering the 4x4 trail from the south-western side of the park, we travelled in a northerly direction all along the fertile Futi River valley with its dense riverine vegetation and hygrophilous grasslands. These grasslands remain permanently moist, providing water and green forage for the wildlife well into the dry season.

While the scenery was spectacular, the density of wildlife was a real surprise. On our route, we saw giraffe, hippo, waterbuck, kudu, reedbuck and elephant – just for starters. Along the way, we took a brief turn in to inspect the nearly completed Elefantes and Futi 4x4 wilderness campsites, which will form part of the attraction of driving this new trail.

From here, the sand tracks swung away to the east, where we came across a series of never-ending floodplains and sand forests lined with thousands of Pod Mahogany trees (*Azelia quanzensis*). It is hard to describe the richness of this region; it really is the original "romantic Africa" that we are all in search of!



*Johan joined a fact-finding mission to the Maputo Special Reserve and found a 4x4 trail and an area with spectacular scenery, coupled with surprisingly dense wildlife including giraffe, hippo, waterbuck, kudu, reedbuck and elephant.*





*The Futi Wilderness 4x4 trail in the Maputo Special Reserve will offer adventurers challenging sand driving, coupled with floodplains, stunning views and some great wild camping sites.*

Arriving at Lake Nela later that afternoon was another eye-opener. Wild camping above the lake with spectacular vistas must surely be one of the biggest attractions of the MSR. Neat ablutions, and a well-positioned lapa proved to be the ideal place to enjoy the camp fire and experience wild Africa until late into the night.

**✿ I believe crossing the floodplains could be seriously challenging during the wet season – while it may look like loads of fun, it would not be recommended.**

**The Indian Ocean calls**

Our destination for the next day was Ponta Membene, a campsite right on the Indian Ocean. Departing after yet another scrumptious breakfast expertly prepared by Niel and Elize, we started off by exploring the eastern side of the park. What becomes evident is the incredible biodiversity of this park. The MSR boasts nine biospheres, and it truly does span a scenic combination of land and ocean, plains and hills covered by woodlands, marshes, grassland and forest-capped ridges, as well as turquoise seas and pristine white beaches. Call it paradise? You bet!

Our meandering route took us past the large lakes of Lagoa Piti and Munde, negotiating deep sand tracks en route until we finally reached Ponta Membene. This shady campsite is built on the landward-side of a huge primary dune. This is enough to provide ample shelter against the prevailing winds and occasional tropical storms which occur during the summer months.

Here again, everything is fresh and new with the construction having been completed just recently. The ablutions are state-of-the-art, and blend in almost seamlessly with the surrounding coastal forests. Wooden walkways take you across the dune to the ocean, and there are even wooden platforms along the way so you can relax and admire the seascapes stretching out in front of you. The beaches are of that pristine variety that you almost expect Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe to come strolling towards you.

**✿ You would need a minimum of 6 days/5 nights to begin to properly explore this jewel of a park. I would recommend three nights of bush camping and at least two at the ocean.**

**A reluctant exit**

It is unfortunate, but as they say, all good things come to an end. So, after our all-too-brief encounter with this jewel of Africa, we had to depart the next day for South Africa. After another of the now famous breakfasts, we exited the park through the Futi gate at around midday.

Being adventurous types, we sought another small challenge and decided to take the new tar road via Boane to the N4. All went well until we hit the last 20km. This was a real shocker as the tar road has completely disintegrated over the years and is now only a deeply gutted gravel "road". It took a full hour to complete that difficult 20km stretch – definitely not recommended.

Shaken and stirred, we arrived back at the Ressano Garcia border post and once again sailed through the border formalities and on to the South African side. The COVID-19 rapid test there took only a couple of minutes, and we could then cross the border back into South Africa at Komatipoort.

I can now unequivocally declare that the border crossings are really smooth and quick these days, adding yet another reason to visit Mozambique's 'best-kept secret'. That's on top of the spectacular scenery, rich wildlife and standout facilities – what more could one ask from a bush and beach family holiday?

# Fact file

## Fees

### Maputo Special Reserve Park Entrance Fees

**SADC residents:** 600 MZN per person, plus 900 MZN per vehicle

**Other nationalities:** 900 MZN per person, plus 900 MZN per vehicle

**Mozambique residents:** 400 MZN per person, plus 600 MZN per vehicle

*\*This is a once-off fee, not per day.*

## Camping fees

600 MZN per tent site per night (up to a maximum of 6 people)

\*Approximate exchange rate: R1 to 4 MZN (Meticals)

## Facilities

### Lake Xinguti

- **Camping:** Seven ablution blocks with 2 to 4 stands each. USB chargers and electric lights, but no 220V outlets. Gas-fired hot showers and cold water are available.
- **Other:** A small restaurant and seven self-catering chalets are almost complete.

### Ponta Membene

- **Camping:** Eight ablution blocks with 2 to 6 stands each. USB chargers and electric lights, but no 220V outlets. Gas-fired hot showers and cold water are available.
- **Communal camp:** Sites for 10 camping spots with double ablution block, closed-in equipped kitchen and open verandah dining area. (Bring your own portable braai if not joining the group every night.)
- **Other:** Eight fully-equipped self-catering chalets, with a small restaurant and bar to follow by the end of 2022. Another eight chalets are also being planned.

### 4x4 trail camps

- **Elefantes:** 4 to 6 campsites with "wet" ablution block and central lapa.
- **Futi:** 4 to 6 campsites with "dry" ablution block and central lapa.
- **Futi North:** 4 to 6 campsites with "dry" ablution block and central lapa.
- **Lagoa Nela:** 4 to 6 campsites with "wet" ablution block and central lapa.

✿ Fees for the 4x4 trail and its associated campsites have not been established. Once you book one of the campsites, it is yours for the duration of your stay. Each site has space for 4 to 6 tents in shaded locations on the edge of the forest with a view. Each site has a shower, dry toilet and a closed-off washing area, with a central lapa for evening fires. ■

# Join up and enjoy

Join Johan Kriek on the inaugural self-drive Bundutec Adventures safari to the new Futi Wilderness 4x4 Trail in the Maputo Special Reserve (MSR) in southern Mozambique. Experience Jozini, Tembe Elephant Park, Kosi Bay, the MSR, Futi Corridor and Ponta Membene!

## Itinerary: 9 – 17 October 2021

### Saturday, 9 October:

Meet and camp at Nkonkoni Fishing Camp in the Pongola Game Reserve.

\*You are welcome to arrive earlier and do a bit of tiger fishing

### Sunday, 10 October:

Game drive in the famous Tembe Elephant Park before arriving at Amangwane Camp in Kosi Bay. You can opt to stay in a chalet or camp (dinner is included).

### Monday, 11 October:

COVID-19 tests at Manguzi, followed by a wonderful day at Kosi Mouth.

Overnight at Amangwane Camp (chalet or camping).

### Tuesday, 12 October:

Enter Mozambique at the Kosi Bay border post and drive into the wilderness of the Futi Corridor.

Overnight at Futi South 4x4 Wilderness Camp.

### Wednesday, 13 October:

Further north along the Futi Corridor

Overnight at Futi North 4x4 Wilderness Camp

### Thursday, 14 October:

Still on the 4x4 wilderness trail, we cross the vast Futi flood-plains.

Overnight at Lake Nela 4x4 Wilderness Camp.

### Friday, 15 October:

Follow the deep sand tracks all the way to the Indian Ocean. Overnight at Ponta Membene (camping).

### Saturday, 16 October:

Fun in the sun!

Overnight at Ponta Membene (camping).

### Sunday, 17 October:

Depart early for Ressano Garcia/Komatipoort border post and complete a COVID-19 rapid test on the South African side of the border before re-entering South Africa.

### Tour price: R4 750 per person

#### Included:

- Park entrance fees
- Wilderness Trail fees
- Camping fees
- Dinner at Amangwane Camp
- Bundutec guide with own vehicle

#### Excluded:

- COVID-19 test costs
- Catering
- Camping equipment
- Vehicle
- Fuel
- Two-way radios

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