

VISITING NDUMO AND TEMBE GAME RESERVES

# Where the elephants roam



Exploring the countries north of our borders is very rewarding, but unfortunately it's also expensive and time consuming. You need to set aside a significant amount of time and money for such a trip. So where do you go if you have only a few days to spare, but still want to see plenty of wildlife and put your off-roader through its paces? Geoff and Elise Earnshaw found the ideal destination: a place that is home to Africa's largest elephants

**Text:** Geoff Earnshaw

**Photographs:** Geoff and Elise Earnshaw

**In the northern** part of KwaZulu-Natal, just south of the Mozambique border, you can find the largest elephants in the world. Nowhere else are they quite as big.

And among them are the three biggest tuskers in existence (a tusk is an elephant with tusks that exceed 45,45kg, or 100lb, in weight). Called Isilo, Induna and Makobona, these elephants boast tusks that would once have virtually guaranteed their execution and mutilation by greedy hunters.

Isilo's tusks are the biggest and weigh an estimated 60kg. They are 2,5 m long and have





Although the area is famous for its large elephants, a wide variety of other birds and animals can be found at Tembe and Ndumo game reserves.

a circumference at the lip of 50cm.

Sadly though, there aren't too many of these majestic animals left. Having been decimated by the ivory trade in previous centuries, only about 250 elephants remain.

But the good news is that they are now safely protected. The last remaining indigenous elephant herd in KwaZulu-Natal is securely ensconced within the Tembe National Elephant Park.

And for off-road enthusiasts, Tembe is a delight. Due to the area's sandy terrain, the 30 000 hectare park is only traversible by 4x4. Upon entering the park you

are given an A4 map, and left to roam the trails by yourself.

Be warned, though, that in the northern reaches of the park the tracks are very narrow and lined by thick bush, so there's no way to pull off the roads. That makes any encounter with Tembe's large (and sometimes aggressive) elephants quite nerve-racking. Be prepared to drive backwards as often as you drive forwards. If you meet a group of elephants



**Be warned, though, that in the northern reaches of the park the tracks are very narrow and lined by thick bush, so there's no way to pull off the roads**

on the park's tight tracks, their size gives them automatic right of way, so you have no option but to back carefully away.

You should also accept that your 4x4's paint job is going to be in worse shape when you exit the park than when you entered it. The thorny branches will definitely leave their mark. Our silver Toyota Prado now carries a fair number of scars from its visit to Tembe.

But despite this, a trip to the park is well worthwhile. Tembe boasts plenty of attractions. In addition to elephants, it accommo-

dates a large number of other species. Lions, leopards, kudu, eland, wildebeest, zebra, buffalo and rhino can all be found within the park.

And for bird lovers there are more than 340 recorded species.

Recently, the *Nephila komaci* – a species of golden orb-weaver spider – has also been found here. Prior to this discovery, experts believed the species to be extinct as the only known specimens had been found in museum



Accommodation at Ndumo Game Reserve consists of 14 shady campsites and seven chalets.



collections (one in Pretoria and one in Austria). The spider has a leg span of around 10cm and produces a web with a diameter of one metre.

Tembe offers excellent accommodation, but the suites are quite pricey, so if you're looking for slightly cheaper accommodation Ndumo Game Reserve – about 30km from Tembe – provides a good alternative. And like Tembe, it has plenty of things to see and do.

Fourteen shady campsites are available and all have individual water taps, electricity points, braai facilities and dustbins. The camp is in pristine condition and campsites are serviced daily. Campers can make use of communal fridges, freezers and dishwashing facilities.

If you're not in the mood for camping, Ndumo has seven chalets that have recently been refurbished, with covered decks, kitchenettes and braai facilities. As with the campsites, ablution facilities are communal, but these are spotless.

Finally, the park also has a big screen television and a wonderful swimming pool. The pool is an absolute necessity on those summer days when the temperature creeps over 50C.

Ndumo isn't very big – only about 10 000ha. Despite this, it houses a wide variety of habitats that include sandveld forest, riparian forest, seasonal pans and coastal wetlands.

Due to this diversity, more than 420 bird species have been found here.

Being keen birders, my wife and I jumped at the opportunity to accompany a knowledgeable ranger through the park.

On our first day, we met up with one of the guides, Sonto Tembe, in Ndumo's parking lot just as the sun was peeking over the horizon. With his help, we were going to visit the Nyambithi Pan.

He jumped into our vehicle and directed us to a parking area where the trail started. Once there, we started our walk.

The pan was absolutely magnificent. Thanks to the fact that it was filled with water, it held an abundance of wildlife. Hippo pods dotted the water and crocodiles lazed on the shore.

The birdlife was exceptional. During our three-hour walk, Sonto helped us to spot fish eagles, yellow-billed storks, trumpeter hornbills, African harrier hawks and countless others.

As an enthusiastic photographer, Elise took along her monopod and managed to get quite a few long-range shots of the birdlife around the pan.



**Top:** Those interested in game viewing won't be disappointed by Tembe and Ndumo. Animals like zebras, lions and crocodiles are a common sight. **Above:** Ndumo offers excellent wetland scenery. **Below:** Geoff and Elise's Desert Wolf 4x4 trailer parked under the leafy trees at the Ndumo campsite. **Bottom:** The swimming pool and Ndumo.



## TRAVEL GUIDE

**Getting to Tembe and Ndumo:** Regardless of whether you're coming from Durban or Johannesburg, follow the N2 until you reach the Jozini turnoff. Take this road and follow it for about 50km. You will see a large Ndumo Reserve sign on your left.

To get to the Tembe gate, follow the road for a further 17km. Once through the gate, follow the road for 7km until you reach the camp.

**Prices:** The daily rate for camping at Ndumo Reserve is R106 per person. Getting into Tembe Elephant Park costs R35 per person, and a further R35 for your 4x4. For Rhino Club Gold Card members, admission is free.

**Contact:** Tel. 033 845 1000 (Ndumo); 031 267 0144 (Tembe); [www.kznwildlife.com](http://www.kznwildlife.com); [www.tembe.co.za](http://www.tembe.co.za)

When we arrived at our campsite after the hike, we discovered that the camp itself offered just as many opportunities to view the area's birdlife. Crested guinea fowl, grey sunbirds, violet-backed starlings, southern black tits and many other species visited the camp.

And not only birds are regular visitors. The camp at Ndumo isn't fenced, so it's not unusual to see animals such as rhino walking through the camp at night.

Overall, Tembe and Ndumo offer wildlife and 4x4 enthusiasts an ideal opportunity to sneak away for a few days. The parks are fairly easy to get to and accommodation is reasonably priced. So why not take a few days off and visit the largest elephants in Africa? You won't be disappointed. 🌍

## SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES... AND WIN!

Send us an account of your off-road adventure and some of your nice photos, and stand a chance of winning a great prize! You don't have to be a journalist, and the article can be written in the language of your choice. We will translate and re-write if necessary. As long as the details are there, we can make a plan.

This month a mini-fridge that can be kept going in a vehicle, as well as a durable car sunshield goes to Geoff and Elise Earnshaw for their interesting account of a visit to Ndumo Game Reserve and Tembe National Elephant Park in the north of KwaZulu-Natal.

The handy mini-fridge and sunshield is supplied by Shatterprufe. Genuine Shatterprufe windscreens contain virgin vinyl that keeps glass together in a crash in order to prevent it from breaking into dangerous shards. Leading South African motor manufacturers approve of Shatterprufe windscreens, so insist on Shatterprufe next time you replace your windscreen. It could save your life.



Authorised fitment centres are located nationwide. More information: [www.shatterprufe.co.za](http://www.shatterprufe.co.za).