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Berg-en-dal Deep into rhino country

Berg-en-dal has masses of fauna and flora for guests to enjoy – and you don't even have to leave the camp.

Story: Claire Gordon-Brown Photos: Eric Reisinger and Lorna Stanton



It's a good thing that Berg-en-dal rest camp is not far from the Malelane Gate

(12 km, to be exact), because my clutch broke as I was about to enter the Kruger Park at this gate. The friendly gate ranger who offered to drive me to the camp therefore didn't have far to take me.

This friendliness became characteristic of my stay at Berg-en-dal: the dining-room staff greet visitors with a smile and immediate assistance; the cafeteria staff have an energetic enthusiasm, despite the intense heat; the camp manager, John Mweni, saw to my every need, including the provision of an e-mail facility. Even the cleaning staff were friendly.

There is a peace and tranquillity about the Berg-en-dal rest camp, which is a balm to the soul of someone who has been wrung out by the city. It may have something to do with the architecture and design of the camp. Berg-en-dal is situated in a valley surrounded by the Khandizwe Mountains (the Khandizwe Mountain is the highest in Kruger, at around 850 m above sea level). Architect Johan Jordaan wanted the camp to blend in with the surroundings. As a result, the buildings deviate from the norm in Kruger. There are no *rondavels*. All the buildings are made with face brick and thatch, and the flooring is also of brick (somewhat



ABOVE: The camp was designed to give maximum privacy to visitors and was named one of South Africa's best.

BELOW: This friendliness became characteristic of my stay at Berg-en-dal: the dining-room staff greet visitors with a smile and immediate assistance; the cafeteria staff have an energetic enthusiasm.

impractical when it comes to cleaning, says John, but definitely more rustic than vinyl.)

But more than this, very few of the original trees and plants were destroyed when the camp was built. As a result, the camp almost seamlessly becomes part of its surroundings. Many of the plants and trees that are indigenous to Kruger, and which you can see from your car as you drive around game-spotting, grow in the camp itself.

A walk around the camp allows you to view them from close up; to touch the knobs on the knobthorn, to feel the difference in the textures of the bark of the new and old stems of a zebra tree, to examine the fine detail on the deep red flowers of the sausage tree.

The camp was designed to give maximum privacy to visitors. The chalets are hidden amongst the trees. None of them face onto

each other, and each verandah has its own view. Those on the very edge of the camp are within spitting distance of the fence, giving ideal sightings of any game that comes past. Even when the camp is full, as it was on my visit, it does not feel crowded.

And this is no mean feat. Berg-en-dal is one of the bigger rest camps in Kruger and, while it doesn't compare in size with the mammoth Skukuza, the chalets themselves can sleep more than 340 people in total. Its size could make the camp a bit like a shopping centre on a Saturday morning – busy and impersonal – but its design and the attitude of its staff give Berg-en-dal a restful intimacy; a real feeling of being away from the world and in the bush.

However, there is more to Berg-en-dal than just this. It is not often one gets to hang around in a Kruger rest camp. Mostly the camps serve as a base from which to go out game-viewing. The



Timbila



choice of camp is almost incidental to the trip. My car's broken clutch, however, meant that I had no car in which to drive around. I therefore had little choice but to experience what the camp had to offer.

And there is a lot. The main area of the camp faces east onto the Matjulu Dam, which is fed by the seasonal Matjulu River. In the dam there are crocodiles, a variety of fish, and terrapins sunning themselves on the rocks. Bushbuck and herds of impala regularly come to drink and to graze on the grass and bushes, as do kudu, buffalo and other antelope.

The area itself has a higher density of leopards, wild dogs, and white and black rhinos than others in the park. I did not see these come to drink at the dam during my stay, but that was my bad luck. As an alternative to sitting in a hot car at a waterhole, sitting in the shade on a bench in Berg-en-dal seems to me to be a good option – and to promise just as much success. Of course, there's the added advantage of being able to run up to the shop for an ice-cream, if needed.

More than this, the abundance of trees means that the bird life in the camp is prolific. The camp is, in fact, a bird-watcher's paradise. One of the rangers spotted some 45 different species in the camp in one day. In all, more than 64 species have been seen in the camp. And there are probably more.

A fish eagle, its haunting cry symbolic of the African bushveld, has made its home at the dam. It sits on a dead knobthorn that stands tenaciously upright on the edge of the dam, its grey branches bleached almost white by the sun.

At breakfast, I watched some busy red-billed wood hoopoes in the weeping boerbeans outside the dining-room. These trees are filled with the chattering of small sunbirds and are a perfect hiding place for woodpeckers. I could hear the "tok-tok" above me, but was completely unable to see the bird that was making the sound.

Around its 2,5 km perimeter, Berg-en-dal also has a Braille trail called the Rhino Trail. Distinctive trees are labelled with information in English, Afrikaans and Braille and there are animal skulls at different points along the trail, giving some idea of the proportions of the animals close-up. The elephant skull, needless to say, is huge.

The walk is easy and, with a bit of effort, a wheelchair could be pushed along it too. It's a relaxed way of learning more about the surroundings and possibly of spotting some game on the other side of the fence. There are plans to extend this facility this year, with the addition of a look-out which will be accessible to wheelchairs, and which would provide a listening-point for the visually impaired.

Possibly the best way of doing the walk, however, is with one of the camp's environment officers. Berg-en-dal is one of the few camps in Kruger to have this service and the officers are mines of information on the flora and fauna in the park.

They can relieve your frustration when you've seen a bird, plant or animal, but don't know what it is. "It's a kind of grey colour with a long tail, a tuft on its head and I saw it on that tree outside," you

Sunrise at Berg-en-dal

Facing east, the seats at the Matjulu Dam provide an excellent place to watch the sun rise – it is Africa at its most evocative!

You can watch as the earth's colours, which have been anticipating the sun's arrival for almost an hour, change from shades of black and navy blue to soft pink and smoky blue. You can watch as the trees on the horizon take shape and soften the line of the hills.

In the end, the sun slips almost unnoticed into sight: an indistinct funnel of deepening pink over a dip in the hill, the only indication that it is about to rise. It comes as a sliver of fiery pink, gradually increasing in size as the earth turns towards it, and then it hangs there – a disc of indefinable hue; pinks, reds, yellows, oranges, all glowing against the pale blue sky; auras of bright red traversing its circumference. The waiting over, as it rises higher the disc disperses and its light strengthens into the harsh, unrelenting



light that you can no longer look at directly.

Walking part of the Rhino Trail on my way back to the chalet after watching this process, I heard a crackling in the trees outside the camp. I looked up to see five giraffe eating the new growth on the trees and I watched them, their lips curling around the leaves, and in a state of almost perpetual motion as they followed their leader, never depleting a tree of its leaves, but leaving behind food for other browsers.

It was a complete bush experience: always a surprise around the corner.

can say (as I did). They will suggest it was either a loerie or a mousebird, and confirm it by showing you a picture from a book. (Mine was a mousebird.) They are incredibly helpful and if they can't give you the answer immediately, they will find the answer and then find you later to tell you.

A walk with one of these officers is a real treat. It was my guide who told me that the fish eagle's tree was a knobthorn. He filled me in on the medicinal uses of the trees along the way and some of the superstitions associated with them. He told me about the six types of night-jar in the area and how difficult they are to tell apart. He identified the blue waxbill for me, with its dull grey top feathers and vibrant turquoise under-belly.

All of this is available inside the camp – proof that you don't have to spend the day in the car to experience the beauty and variety of the Kruger Park.

Yet Berg-en-dal's attractions extend beyond the camp itself. It offers guided bush drives. Every night a 20-seater truck goes out just before the camp gate closes, driven by one of the information officers. At night the bush comes alive with animals that hide during the day: civets, honey badgers,

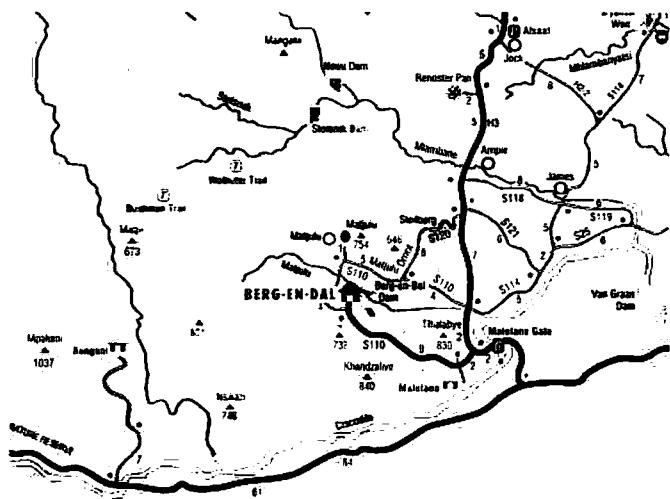
genets, bush babies, owls – all of these and more come out to play and there is no-one else on the road to spoil it for you.

More than this, you are guided by someone who knows the bush and can help to bring it alive; who can tell you that giraffes sleep only for 20 minutes in one day, and this not all in one stretch. The reason? They chew the cud in much the same way as a cow and would drown if they slept for any longer than a few minutes at a time.

The information officers also take morning and day rides on request, in a smaller eight-seater vehicle. All of these services make a drive around the area more than just an occasion to stare uncomprehendingly into the bush and tick off one more animal if

you see it. They are examples of how much the bush can come alive when you experience it with an expert.

As I drive away from Berg-en-dal - my clutch now fixed - I reflect that not having a car proved to be a good thing. It took away the pressure of getting out of the camp to see the game and opened me up to the camp itself. Berg-en-dal is unique among Kruger camps, both in its design and in the services it has for visitors. It is well worth getting to know.



Facilities

- There are 92 chalets: 23 have six beds and 69 have three beds. There are also two guest houses: the Jannie le Roux can sleep six and the Rhino can sleep eight. In addition, there is a campsite for visitors who want to bring caravans or tents. All the chalets are fully air-conditioned, as are the main buildings. They have self-catering facilities, with a fridge, stove, cutlery and crockery in each.
- The camp has a dining-room, a cafeteria, a curio and grocery store, a swimming pool and a coin-operated laundry. The dining-room, for those who are not in the mood to cook for themselves, provides a five-course lunch and dinner and a cooked and/or continental breakfast. The cafeteria

provides smaller meals for the less hungry. In summer the staff bring cooldrinks and beer to the pool to make lazing in the water even more pleasant.

- Berg-en-dal is one of four camps in the Kruger Park to provide conference facilities, and its venue is the biggest. The conference hall can seat about 120 people with tables and about 200 people without, but it can be divided into three for smaller groups. Each division is fully equipped with overhead and slide projectors, public address systems and other conference essentials. When it comes to food, the camp will cater specifically to the needs of the conference and is able to put on gala dinners and other special

events. It can also provide telephone, fax and e-mail facilities.

- Every night, except Sundays, a wildlife documentary video is shown in an open area designed specially for this purpose. The camp shows some of the best documentaries on offer, among them *Beauty and the Beasts* – a seminal study on the behaviour of leopards that were photographed between Mala Mala and the Kruger Park.

- Night drives take a minimum of 10 people and a maximum of 20 and places can be booked at reception. Morning and day drives are booked with the information officers themselves. These take place when there is sufficient demand.