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Africa R15

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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



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.

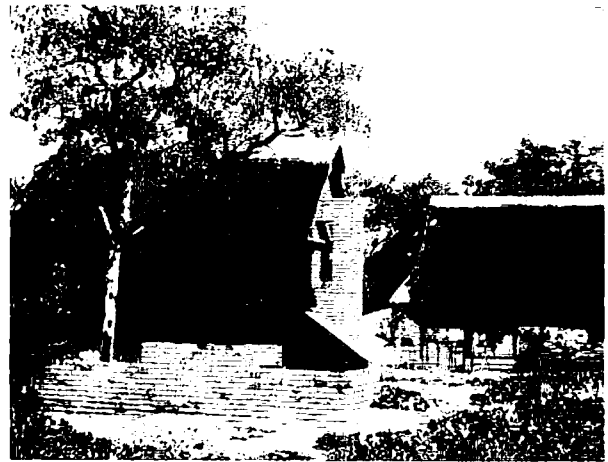
They can relieve your frustration when you've seen a bird, plant or animal, but don't know what it is. "It's a kind of grey colour with a long tail, a tuft on its head and I saw it on that tree outside," you

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.

As I drive away from Berg-enda-
- 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-enda-
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.