

# OUTSIDE THE NORM

ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK STRETCHES FROM ESTUARY TO REEF AND REMOTE NORTHERN SHORES, OFFERING A WONDROUS EXPERIENCE FILLED WITH WHALES AND TURTLES FOR THOSE WILLING TO TAKE THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

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**LEFT** From high viewpoints in the Eastern Shores, the canopy closes in on both sides. In winter, the understorey thins and sightlines open even further than in the wet season.

**BELOW LEFT** Sunrise over Jabula Beach, on the route north to a deep-sea fishing launch site.

**RIGHT** The northern shores between Sodwana Bay and Kosi Bay receive almost no foot traffic, allowing visitors to enjoy golden beaches entirely to themselves.



**A**t first light on the iSimangaliso estuary, an African fish eagle calls from a fever tree on the far bank. The water is coffee-coloured and still. A hippo surfaces, considers the morning, and submerges. Somewhere behind you, one of its pod-mates is making its unhurried way back from a night's grazing on someone's lawn.

This is St Lucia in winter, and it's already more than most visitors expect. The problem is that most visitors mistake it for the destination.

South Africa's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, inscribed in 1999 and still not quite given its due,

iSimangaliso Wetland Park protects an ecological range that reads like an inventory of an entire continent compressed into a single protected landscape. Coral reefs, seagrass beds, lakes, wetlands, dune forests, coastal grasslands, and the largest estuarine system in Africa, spanning more than 332 000 ha across over 220 km of coastline.

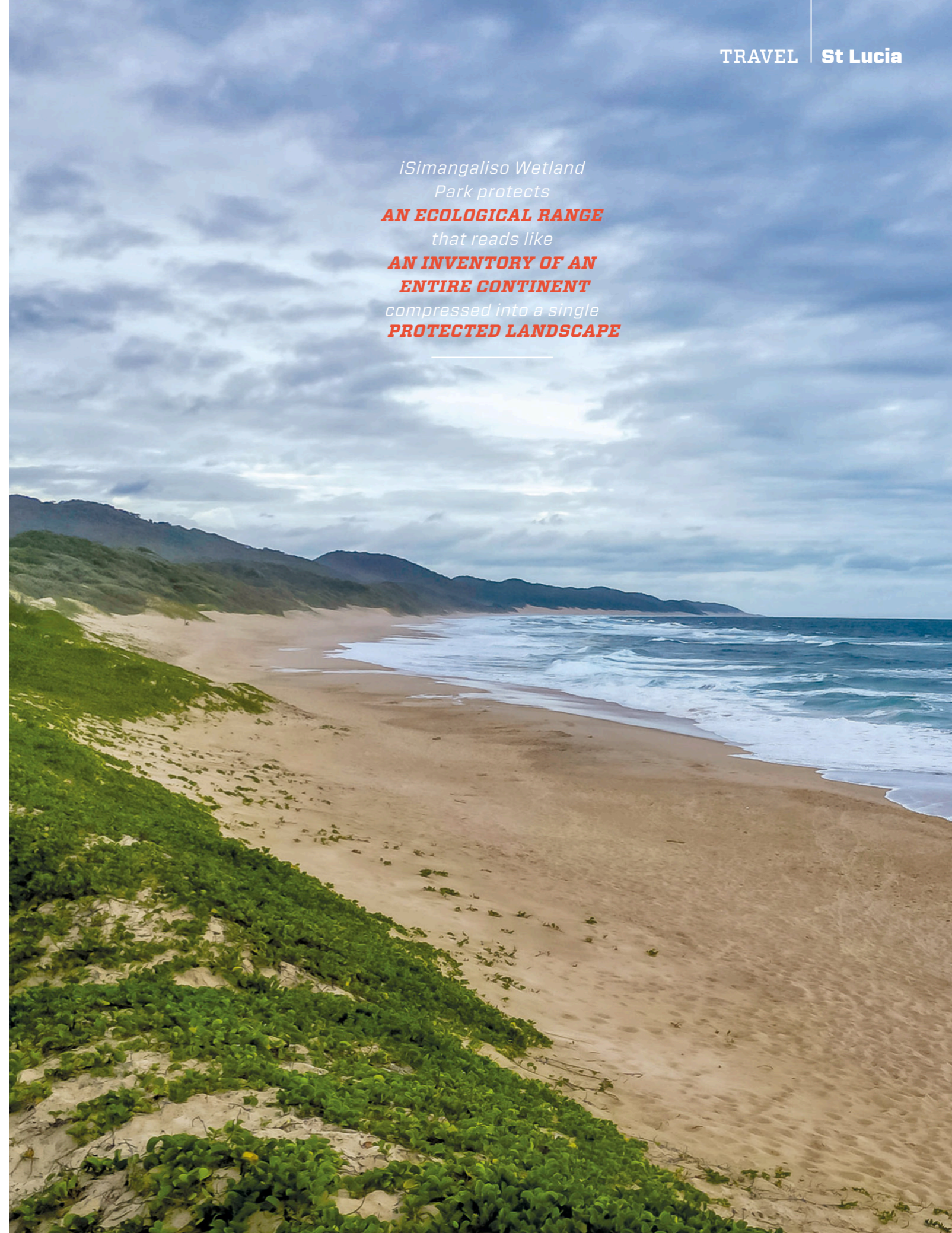
It is, on paper, extraordinary. In practice, the majority of visitors take a boat cruise on the estuary at St Lucia and return to Durban. The rest of the park continues north, leaving the daytrippers and weekenders behind. Which, practically speaking, is an advantage for anyone travelling further.

From St Lucia, the drive into the Eastern Shores shifts the landscape within minutes. Forested dunes rise to more than 150 m above sea level, the canopy dense enough in places to eclipse the sky entirely. In winter, the understorey thins and sight-lines open that the wet season shuts. The forest gives way at Cape Vidal to open beach and open ocean, where pods of dolphins move south along the coast in the cleaner winter waters. The Western Shores open into pans and grassland; further inland, uMkhuze adds some of the park's best birding and classic game viewing. It is safari country, just not in the way most people are accustomed to seeing it.

Further north, the road eventually ends, which is not a figure of speech. The final approach to the Mabibi section is thick sand, threading through dense dune forest, rising and dropping over the crest of your bonnet. There are no day visitors; the track sees to that.

**Thonga Beach Lodge** ([thongabeachlodge.co.za](http://thongabeachlodge.co.za)) is on a ridge above this stretch of coastline, set between Sodwana Bay to the south and Kosi Bay to the north. What this position offers is a combination that remains rare even by iSimangaliso's standards. It's at the exact intersection of everything that makes the park exceptional: a reef system spanning more than 80 km of protected marine zone, one of the most reliable whale migration corridors on the South

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By June, humpback whales migrate north along the Maputaland coast, where they are regularly spotted from the ridge above the Indian Ocean.



African coast, and loggerhead sea turtle and leatherback sea turtle nesting beaches that have been active for longer than any human record of them.

The first humpback whales appear offshore in June. By August and September, masses of them are moving north, close enough to the beach and the ridge above it that sightings accumulate naturally across a stay. With winter's reduced rainfall keeping run-off low and visibility high, the reef is at its clearest. Midweek in June or July, it is possible to dive or snorkel world-class coral with almost no one else in the water.

Come November, the park shifts. The humpbacks have gone, but between November and February, loggerheads and leatherbacks haul themselves ashore on the beaches north and south of the lodge to nest, a behaviour unchanged across millions of years, playing out on beaches that remain undeveloped precisely because the park's boundaries have held.

Guided night walks follow nesting females by torchlight, moving quietly behind them as they excavate, lay and return to the water. Later in the season, hatchlings make their first run for the Indian Ocean, navigating by nothing except their own ancient instinct. These are not marginal



wildlife experiences offered to fill the calendar between the headline seasons. They are among the most affecting things the African coast produces, at any time of year, and they happen here because this stretch of coastline has been left alone long enough for them to keep happening.

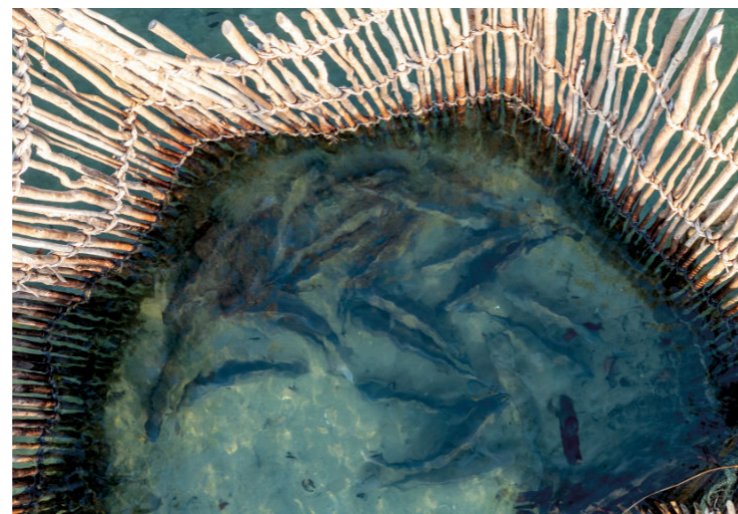
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**ABOVE** Loggerhead sea turtles have been nesting on these beaches longer than any human record.



**LEFT** One of the picnic spots at Cape Vidal Beach, where forested dunes give way to open ocean.

**BELOW** The four interconnected lakes at Kosi Bay open at a tidal mouth to the sea, fringed by raffia palms and mangroves.

**BOTTOM** Traditional fishing kraals, maintained by local communities, have operated in the shallows of Kosi Bay for centuries.



Beyond Mabibi, the park continues to its northern limit at Kosi Bay, where the landscape changes once again. Four interconnected lakes and a tidal estuary open at a clear tidal mouth to the sea, fringed by raffia palms and mangroves. Traditional fish kraals, maintained by local communities, have operated in these shallows for centuries, circles of reed and wooden stakes set to intercept fish on the incoming tide. The park's boundary here runs close enough to the Mozambique border that guides are familiar with the names of the villages on the other side. It is, by any measure, a long way from where most visitors leave off.

iSimangaliso has a lower profile than Kruger and draws a fraction of its visitors, which you feel most clearly once you're inside it. Roads through the Eastern Shores carry almost no traffic by mid-morning. The northern sections can go hours

without another vehicle. On a busy day at Mabibi, a handful of boats work the reef. This isn't a limitation the park is waiting to overcome, but the very thing that makes it worth visiting.

This park gets better the further you go, which is either an argument for a longer trip or a guarantee that you'll want to return. Go further than you think you need to. You won't regret it. **6**

# Trip Planner



## GETTING THERE

Fly into King Shaka International Airport in Durban. St Lucia is a two-and-a-half-hour drive; Thonga Beach Lodge is approximately four to five hours away. The last stretch to Thonga Beach Lodge is on a thick sand track, meaning self-drivers will need a 4x4 vehicle. You can arrange for a lodge transfer from designated meeting points along the N2.

## WHEN TO GO

June to September for whale watching and peak reef visibility. November to February for turtle nesting. Both seasons make a compelling case for travelling this far north.

## WHERE TO STAY

Thonga Beach Lodge is the only lodge in the Mabibi section, with direct beach access and the full marine experience on its doorstep. Rocktail Beach Camp offers a slightly more accessible alternative further south with a barefoot feel. For a Big Five pairing before the coast, Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge is the only private lodge inside the adjacent Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.



— **ABOVE** First Rocks, a coastal landmark roughly 7 km north of St Lucia Main Beach, is visible at low tide.



— A beach ride with Bhangazi Horse Safaris, which also runs trail rides through the iSimangaliso Eastern Shores.



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