

Go with the flow

In an arid country like South Africa rivers are the source of all life. Birds, animals and humans are drawn towards them. Five of the most important rivers run through *Wild Card* properties. By Nick Dall

1 | THE OLIFANTS and Kruger National Park |

The Olifants River is a major feature of southern Kruger and two of the park's most gorgeous camps, Olifants and Balule, are located on its banks. It is indeed a magnet to elephants, but it is also home to the biggest crocodiles in Africa, elusive otters and rare bird species such as Pel's fishing-owl and white-backed night heron.

The Olifants is a reminder that a river is only as strong as its weakest stewards. Unprecedented crocodile deaths in the Olifants Gorge have been linked to massive algae blooms caused by pollution, which is rife. The upper reaches of the river flow through parts of Limpopo and Mpumalanga which are overpopulated

and home to a number of mines. Add to this the heavily reduced flow rate brought about by huge irrigation demands and the future of this Kruger icon is in jeopardy.

"Literally hours of enjoyment can be derived from ... admiring the huge rocks below the camp," writes Kruger aficionado Leo Braack, referring to the boulders sculpted by aeons of surging waters. Guests of Olifants Trail Camp have front row seats. Soon after the Olifants leaves South Africa it merges with the Limpopo and this superriver fuels the economy of southern Mozambique before discharging into the Indian Ocean near Maputo.

Read more:
Mapungubwe's
supertrees pXX
and archeological
treasures
pXX.



2 | THE LIMPOPO and Mapungubwe National Park |



3 | THE ORANGE and |Ai-|Ais / Richtersveld Transfrontier Park |

Between 900 and 1300AD the Limpopo was the backdrop for the rise and fall of Southern Africa's first kingdom. The location of the capital of Mapungubwe at the confluence of two major rivers, the Limpopo and the Shashe, was for agricultural reasons as much as for commercial gain. It placed the kingdom at a crossroads which enabled extensive trade with

Arab merchants based in East Africa. The Mapungubwe culture flourished for over a thousand years and more than 200 archaeological sites have been discovered, the most magnificent of which is at Mapungubwe Hill. To celebrate our past, a national park has been created which places wildlife conservation on a par with the preservation of

our cultural heritage. Kipling immortalised the "great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees," but there's more to this exotic corner of South Africa than alliteration. While you seek out big game, allow the river to take you back to one of the most important chapters in sub-Saharan history.

Born in the highlands of Lesotho, South Africa's largest river rushes westwards relentlessly, providing not only sustenance, but also electricity and diamonds. By the time it reaches the Richtersveld the contrast between the soothing water and the baking sun, between the wafer-thin strip of emerald and the desert beyond, could not be more marked.

Like the Nile, the Orange or Gariep is one of the world's arche-

typal desert rivers. Time stands still, and the river flows steadfastly towards the icy Atlantic as the lizards, tortoises and halfmens look on unperturbed. No-one describes it better than William Dacey in *Borderline*: "A metre off the water you are already in the desert. A few steps further and the onslaught of rock and hammering sun so overwhelms you, you can hardly conceive of water any more,

you begin to doubt the Orange's ability to wet you." This harsh landscape has been home to humans for millennia. Archaeological records show that hunter gatherers moved through the area over 4 000 years ago, while the Nama people have been continuous occupants for more than a thousand years and today jointly manage the Richtersveld Transfrontier Park with SANParks.

The Limpopo was the backdrop for Southern Africa's first kingdom.

4

THE THUKELA and Royal Natal National Park

The Thukela's source is the same watershed from which two other great rivers, the Vaal and the Orange, flow. But in its early stages the Thukela outshines them both. From Mont Aux Sources the river plunges headlong from the Amphitheatre in a series of cascades with a combined vertical drop of 947 metres. These are the Thukela Falls, the second highest waterfall in the world. No wonder then that Thukela means 'fearsome' or 'startling' in Zulu.

The Thukela is at the heart of KwaZulu-Natal's economy, its landscapes and its history. To be truly appreciated the Thukela Falls need to be seen from above, from below and from afar. On a clear day in the summer wet season they can easily be seen from the main road leading into the park, but this is only a taste of what's to come.

The most spectacular viewpoint is accessed along the famous Chain Ladders, and a day-hike which begins and ends at The Sentinel car park, about an hour's drive from Royal Natal. Once you've bottled your nerves and stand atop the Amphitheatre, the jaw-dropping viewpoint at the lip of the falls is a flattish 3 km walk away. For the third and final perspective you need to walk the Gorge Trail which connects Thendele Camp with the base of the falls along a boulder-hopping trail that Peter Briggs refers to as "the prettiest day-walk anywhere in the Drakensberg".

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5

THE BREEDE and Bontebok National Park

Bontebok National Park in the Western Cape may have been established to rescue a species from extinction, but it has also preserved a slice of the Breede River in its pristine form. Much of the fertile land on the banks of this river has been cultivated, or at least transformed, by humans. The Breede was a great natural barrier to the cattle traders of the 17th and 18th centuries and it is no coincidence that a famous Kho-

khoen herder called Lang Elsie, after whom the main rest camp is named, pastured her clan's animals here. She made her home at one of the river's main drifts.

Lang Elsie left archaeological traces, but for hints of what the Breede was like, we turn to Lady Anne Barnard, who visited in 1799: "On falling down to the river there was much fragrance from the bushes, a thousand agreeable but

old-fashioned smells, such as nieces and nephews have been regaled with on the opening of old India cabinets of their grandmother's or aunt's."

Lady Anne also left us with an observation on eating a roast of "Bonte bock stewed in its own gravy and admirable ... the flesh a mixture between venison and beef." Modern-day visitors to the park are still able to experience the fragrances of the Breede, if not the antelope meat.