

A Wild Teen Trek to Pafuri

It all started with a car packed to the brim and Red Hot Chili Peppers blasting as four teens, Luca, Jamie, Jaren, and I, hit the road to Kruger. Jamie had never been to Punda Maria, so this trip was all about fun, birds, and hopefully a lifer or two.

We arrived at Punda in high spirits. The skies were blue, the grass was lush, and the camp was buzzing. We scoped out the campsite options and, after rejecting the fence line (flood risk plus measly tents equals bad idea), we defaulted to our regular spot, up on the higher ground near the ablutions, the same place we once saw an Eastern Nicator. Classic spot, nostalgia points.

With tents pitched and heat setting in, we discovered the first hiccup, our camping plug didn't fit. Quick trip to the shop, problem solved, power restored. Dinner was a simple chicken pasta for the meat-eaters, with Jamie prepping his own veggie-friendly option. After a relaxed meal, Luca and I checked the hide (nothing exciting), then we all turned in.

Well, tried to.

That night, Kruger unleashed chaos. Thunder, lightning, and a storm that flooded everything. Important detail, while pitching my tent earlier, we'd accidentally torn a small area at the seam. We'd patched it with duct tape, clearly a rookie mistake. Water poured through every corner, not only through our best effort patchwork. My brand-new First Accent hiking mattress (bought with my own money – and as a scholar that hits hard) was now at risk. I scrambled, stuffing towels and clothes everywhere to block the flood.

Eventually, soaked and defeated, I called Luca, "Help, I'm flooding." As I prepared to make a run for the car, I noticed my flip-flops were gone. Just gone. I looked up and saw Luca doing the same shoe-search, his were missing too.

So, barefoot in the mud, we woke Jamie and Jaren and slogged to the car. In the predawn hours, we drove the short distance to the bathrooms, dried off as best we could, and changed into our least-wet clothes. The decision was made; camping wasn't it. We unplugged everything and as the gates opened, we hit the road to Shingwedzi.

Birding in the rain was surprisingly rewarding. Dwarf bitterns were around, and harlequin quails called, though stayed hidden. I slept for most of the drive, only to wake up with a problem, my car window had misted up, and when I lowered it to clear the fog, it wouldn't go back up. Pouring rain and an open window? Another disaster.

We drove to the only shelter we could find, some parking shade, where the boys got to work. Luca called his dad in patchy signal, who said this had happened before. His advice? Pliers and a cloth. Luca had tiny pliers in his toolkit, and Jamie (for reasons still unclear) had a large pair of pliers in his toiletry bag. After ruining a dishcloth, we resorted to a thick, dirty sock and, miracle, we got the window up.

Time for breakfast. We hit Shingwedzi's restaurant, stuffed our faces, and headed back toward Punda. And just when we thought the day had peaked, two male lions casually

walked down the road in the rain. They were majestic, calm, close, and then gave us the perfect shake with droplets flying everywhere. Most certainly one of the best lion sightings ever. And of course, it was on my side. And of course, my window was still broken.

Back at camp, the rain had eased and we assessed the wreckage. Jaren's camera battery wasn't charging (cue panic), but we eventually got it working. Still, everything was damp and we'd lost half our shoes.

That's when I phoned my parents with the "we've been through war" tone, and they came through like legends, booking us into a chalet for the remaining nights. Hallelujah. We moved in, aired out the tents, mopped the floors, hung everything to dry, and shoved our food into the fridge. Even the plug sockets got a cleaning.

With the Mahonie Loop closed from the rain, we opted for a quiet tar road drive. Nothing spectacular, but the dry bed that night was all we needed.

The next morning, we set off for Pafuri, stopping at the Luvuvhu Bridge. It was pouring, but that didn't stop the birding and we were rewarded with a Böhm's Spinetail, an absolute lifer for all of us.

Later, we drove toward the Pafuri Gate area, well-known for Racket-tailed Rollers. Some fellow campers tipped us off to a good marker where they'd seen one. We parked and waited. And waited. And just when we were ready to give up, I heard it. There it was, flying and displaying, and it was incredible to see. Another lifer for all of us.

We wanted to go all the way to Crooks Corner, but the road was closed due to flooding. So we started the drive back, and wow, what a sight. Little yellow flowers were everywhere, and impalas and baboons were feeding amongst them. It was lush and vibrant and felt like another world.

That evening, Jamie made tomato soup, we braaied some meat, and we ended the day full and dry. The following morning, we packed up, showered, and got back on the road. Everything was going smoothly until, about six kilometers out of Punda, I looked down and realised I still had the chalet keys in my lap. U-turn time. Back we went, keys dropped in the box, and now, finally, it was time to go home.

Soaked socks, lost shoes, broken tents, and busted windows aside—what an absolutely unforgettable trip.