

## Mkuze, The Surprise Highlight

Our December trip to St Lucia had been planned with excitement. We imagined days spent between the Eastern and Western Shores, a few Cape Vidal snorkelling sessions, and maybe even the odd twitch for something special. But by the fifth or sixth day, the reality of paying full entry fees every single time, with no multi-day passes or discounted return rates, started to wear thin. It's not that we don't believe in supporting our parks, but it felt excessive when all we wanted was a couple of shorter visits without having to fork out the same amount as a full-day guest. In my opinion, they really could consider introducing some sort of Wild Card programme or similar pass system, it would be well worth it.

So, we changed course slightly. We decided to leave the shores behind and try somewhere new, uMkhuze Game Reserve. And what a decision that turned out to be.

From the moment we drove in, the difference was obvious. The roads were in good condition, the hides well maintained, and the whole place just felt cared for. The first hide we visited was shaded and comfortable, with a broad view over a waterhole where nyala and impala came and went as if on cue. Sitting quietly, binoculars in hand, we watched a malachite kingfisher dart across the water's surface, its flash of colour catching the light. The experience felt immersive in a way that made you want to slow down and savour every second.

The picnic sites were clean, inviting, and well spaced, the kind of places you could happily linger over a coffee and a sandwich without constantly looking over your shoulder for marauding monkeys. The ablutions were spotless and stocked, a small thing, but after our recent St Lucia experience, it was a detail we appreciated.

Everywhere we went, there was a sense of quiet order. The hides offered a variety of viewing experiences, some overlooking open water, others peering into reed-lined pans where jacanas strutted and herons stalked in the shallows. A few were tucked into forested edges, where the dappled light and stillness made even the smallest bird movement feel magical.

We soon realised that uMkhuze was not just about the birds, though the birding was exceptional. The reserve had an atmosphere of calm that made it easy to forget about time. The landscape shifted from open savanna to thick sand forest, from floodplains to rocky ridges, each change offering something new to see.

As first-time visitors, we found ourselves wishing we had come here sooner, and for longer. There was so much more to explore, so many hides we did not get to, and trails we barely touched. It was one of those rare places where the more you see, the more you want to see. By the time we left, we had already made ourselves a promise, we would be back, and next time we would give uMkhuze the time it truly deserves.

Leaving that day, we could not help but reflect on how the best moments of a trip sometimes happen when plans change. We went looking for birds and beaches at St Lucia, and found something entirely different, and far better, at uMkhuze. Sometimes, the detour really is the destination.