

Back into the wild

Touted as the stronghold for some of southern Africa's rarest and most threatened wildlife species, Stephen Cunliffe visits SANParks' new kid on the block

A slither of wildlife-rich wilderness hidden among the prosperous diamond fields of the Northern Cape, Mokala National Park – positioned a mere 70 kilometres from Kimberley – was officially opened to the public on 19 June 2007. Deriving its name from the Setswana word for the ubiquitous camel thorn trees that pepper its semi-arid landscapes, Mokala is South Africa's newest national park.

After land claimants secured control of a large portion of Vaalbos National Park in 2005 and announced their intention to mine the soon-to-be de-proclaimed wildlife sanctuary, South African National Parks (SANParks) immediately began scouring the Northern Cape for a suitable chunk of prime wilderness to replace the defunct national park. Five potential replacement locations were short-listed before a game ranch known as Wintershoek in the Plooyburg area, southwest of Kimberley, was selected.

Although officially opened to the public in June 2007, it was only in 2008 that park authorities overcame the monumental challenge of translocating all the animals from Vaalbos to the new reserve. Prompted by the arrival of hundreds of herbivores to supplement existing wildlife populations, SANParks soon set about expanding the protected area.

Lilydale farm to the east of Mokala was purchased during 2008, and in 2010 park authorities secured ownership of the inter-leading Valsfontein farm, linking Mokala to the Lilydale sector, and creating a contiguous conservation area of 26 485 hectares.

The new reserve, which typically receives between 300 millimetres and 500 millimetres of rainfall per annum, boasts a surprisingly diverse range of habitats for a comparatively small national park.

Over and above the unusual game species that roam within its confines, Mokala's pristine and varied natural landscapes give it an unexpectedly rugged and secluded feel.





Visitors can make use of a network of well-maintained roads to explore Mokala in their own vehicles, but there is also the opportunity to embark on specialist guided game drives, endangered species drives or night drives.

Cultural activities such as visits to well-preserved rock art sites and old Anglo-Boer War battlefields can be arranged.

The absence of large predators within Mokala means the park is ideally suited to walking, mountain biking and horseback safaris, all of which are in the pipeline for the near future. One thing's for sure: there will be no shortage of exciting activities on offer at Mokala.

In order to better understand what Mokala is all about, I joined head tourist guide, Stephan Prins, on one of his regular forays into the new reserve.

"The park serves as a reservoir of rarity. It's a stronghold and prime breeding ground for a wide variety of endangered herbivores," he said.

Mokala's mandate tasks the newly created conservation area with protecting and propagating threatened wildlife species.

"The aim is to build up stock so that the offspring can be used to repopulate other South African national parks and private game reserves," Prins elucidated.

"Game-capture operations and wildlife translocations are the main management tools for controlling wildlife numbers and maintaining genetic diversity in a small enclosed park such as Mokala," he explained. "So from time to time, we swap animals – like rhinos – with Kruger or other South African national parks to circumvent inbreeding."

I learnt that Mokala's sable population was given a huge boost with the arrival of a herd from a Czech zoo as part of the 'Back to Africa' project, which saw rare captive-bred animals returned to their distant homelands to augment local gene pools.

Prins went on to explain that aside from translocating animals to maintain genetic integrity, excess wildlife sold on auction generates an important revenue stream that can be ploughed back into Mokala, while simultaneously helping restock denuded parks and newly created conservation areas around the country.

When we bumped into a big herd of impala, Prins killed the engine and explained: "Impala, blesbuck, waterbuck and nyala do not naturally occur in the semi-arid Northern Cape. We refer to these non-indigenous species, which were inherited from the previous game farm owners, as 'extra limitals' and they're systematically being removed from Mokala."

The wildebeest is another contentious customer and, although it's highly debatable whether black wildebeest would have naturally occurred in the area, park authorities have opted to keep them on the land, as they fit in well with Mokala's ethos of being a reservoir for rare and endangered species.

As the sun dipped toward the horizon and painted the sky crimson, Prins stopped the vehicle at the top of a rise. The timeless African tradition of sundowners ensued. As we sipped Amarula on ice and chewed tender strips of biltong, our knowledgeable guide shared an intriguing story about a surreal-sounding quagga breeding programme.

The Quagga Project was initiated in 1987 after DNA analysis confirmed that the quagga was, in fact, a subspecies of the plains zebra. The long-term objective of the project is to try concentrating the still present, but diluted and dispersed quagga characteristics from plains zebra. The quagga's markings were unusual, in that it had black-and-white stripes on its forequarters, while the hindquarters were almost solid brown, so the project focused on selecting zebra with reduced striping and darker background colouration for the breeding project.

In recent times, Mokala has become SANPark's focus area for the project. Young

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Wet 'n Wild is the ultimate adventure for both young and old adrenaline junkies. Experience the thrill of the Drop Zone – Africa's highest slide – and then take on the Mamba tunnel tube ride and some kiddies rides. There's also plenty of chill time on the Lazy River adventure river ride. DJ Spike creates a funky party vibe between 12 noon and 5pm from Thursday to Sunday.

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The Village Walk boasts restaurants offering something for everyone, from fine dining to family establishments like Ocean Basket and Cape Town Fish Market. There are also plenty fast food establishments for passers-by with the munchies.

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Photo: Stephen Cunliffe

Mosu Lodge

zebra are carefully examined for desirable traits and those showing heavy striping are removed from the population before they reach sexual maturity, thereby ensuring only those with the desired 'quagga-like' traits remain in the Mokala gene pool.

Interestingly, although the Mokala zebras exhibit reduced striping toward their hind-quarters and on the legs in much the same way as the quagga did, they have a distinctive 'pale rump' appearance rather than the quagga's brown rear. And this aberration has led to the Mokala plains zebra being dubbed the *witgat* (white-backside) zebra.

Tsessebe sightings are all but guaranteed; roan and sable viewing is consistently good; and with a little luck, you should bump into a rhino or two while you're there.

While Mokala may not boast many of the Big Five, visitors to this unique park will get an incredible opportunity to view some of southern Africa's rarest species as well as be educated around its various objectives and projects as a feeding pool for other reserves.

Visit <http://sanparks.org.za/parks/mokala> for more information

Travel info

The good news is that Mokala boasts excellent accommodation facilities in a malaria-free area. The bad news is that there is no convenience store or petrol available within the park.

Mosu Lodge comprises a restaurant, the Jakkalsgat bar, a conference facility and 14 modern, tastefully furnished units that look onto a reeded pan favoured by buffalo and warthog. The luxury executive suites (R820 per night) are especially impressive, with excellent views of the waterhole. The lodge can be contacted directly on +27 53 204-0158.

Mofele Lodge and conference facility has been purposefully designed to cater to school groups, environmental clubs, wildlife societies and wedding parties. An education centre and museum will be set up in the near future.

Haak-en-Steek Rest Camp is Mokala's best kept secret. This tiny self-catering camp consists of a solitary rustic four-bed cottage

(R810 per night) overlooking a rhino and tsessebe-frequented mud wallow.

Lilydale Rest Camp, located on the Riet River in the east of the park, offers recently refurbished chalets (R530 per night) facing the perennial watercourse. The river affords intrepid visitors the opportunity to fish or leisurely float down the waterway on a raft. Call the camp on +27 53 581-7163 for further details.

Motswedi Camp Site offers six campsites, each with its own private ablution facilities and fully equipped kitchen area. The thoughtfully situated sites lie adjacent to a game-frequented waterhole and cost R270 per night for two people.

Accommodation availability and information can be found at <http://sanparks.org.za/parks/mokala>. Alternatively, email Tess White (the hospitality services manager) at tess.white@sanparks.org or contact the park directly on +27 53 204-8000 if you have specific queries.

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