Full Detailed Itinerary - South Africa Photo Tour

Day 1: Durban to Zimanga

After a morning arrival at Durban International Airport, we drive into the lowland bushveld near Mkuze Game Reserve, one of the most diverse areas in South Africa. We plan to arrive in Zimanga with enough time to enjoy an afternoon session in the blinds.

Days 2-4: Zimanga Reserve

This special place is fast earning a reputation as the best place in Africa to photograph birds. There are currently six hides, with another several in the planning stages. These hides have been designed and built in collaboration with Bence Mate, a former winner of the coveted BBC wildlife photographer of the year award. Bence has previously built hides on his farm in his native Hungary as well as in Costa Rica and South America, but these are his first hides in Africa. Each of the hides is designed for its potential subjects whether large mammals like giraffe or elephant, or the smallest of birds like waxbills and twinspots. The photographers are invisible to their subjects behind specially imported one-way glass so as not to startle the subject with any movements or sounds. Photographers are seated on comfortable chairs that glide effortlessly and quietly across wood laminate flooring. A solar-powered air conditioning unit situated in the roof of the hide controls the temperature and humidity within. The hides are spacious and soundproofed, with carpet on the walls to muffle the sound. They allow photographers a non-intrusive method of wildlife photography and although the subjects are free-roaming, and hence no sighting is guaranteed, the hides tip the balance heavily in favor of the photographer to get some amazing shots. There are myriad potential subjects to shoot at the hides, including a bounty of large mammals and hundreds of bird species. Zimanga is home to Cheetahs and sometimes Wild Dogs, and although encounters with these scarce predators are never guaranteed, we stand an excellent chance of not just seeing, but spending quality time with these amazing predators – including on foot! However, it is the many fabulous bird photos being taken in this place that have caught the attention of photographers worldwide. Keen photographers have an option to spend a night in a hide, to try to get moonlight photographs of drinking animals like elephants, buffalos, giraffes and rhinos. There is also a vulture hide, allowing up close and personal sessions with multiple vulture species and scavenging mammals like jackals and hyenas . If you get bored with sitting at the blinds, you can always take in a game drive or two. With so much to see and shoot here, our time in Zimanga is sure to fly by.

Day 5: Zimanga (Mkuze) to Kruger

After another early morning session at a blind or on a safari, we make the long drive to Kruger National Park, where we spend the next five nights. The legendary wilderness of Kruger National Park, replete with its “big five” mammals, as well as over 500 bird species, will most certainly keep us busily photographing. We will spend the night at Skukuza Camp inside Kruger National Park, with a night drive an optional possibility.

Days 6-9: Kruger NP

Kruger National Park has a fantastic series of camps, many with tame birds and other wildlife that make for superb photography opportunities. We will visit Skukuza, Satara and possibly another camp, the best camps in the park for photography, with many birds right on their grounds. We are likely to see Woodland, Pied, Giant and Malachite Kingfishers, Sulphur-breasted and Gray-headed Bushshrikes, Saddle-billed, Marabou, Yellow-billed and Woolly-necked Storks, Trumpeter, Yellow-billed and Red-billed Hornbills, White-browed Robin-chat, White-browed Scrub-Robin, Scarlet-chested and Marico Sunbirds, Kurrichane Thrush, Village and Lesser Masked Weavers, African Green Pigeon, Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver, Grosbeak Weaver, Southern Cordonbleu, and many others. The grasslands in this part of Kruger host monstrous birds like Kori Bustard, Secretarybird, and Southern Ground Hornbill. At night, Pearl-spotted, African Scops or Spotted Eagle Owls may be seen and photographed. While looking for birds and predators we should also get great opportunities to photograph the many handsome ungulates in this area including Impala, Greater Kudu, Hartebeest, and Waterbuck. With luck, we might find the rare Sable or Roan. Warthogs, Vervet Monkeys and Hippopotamus are also common. Big targets will certainly be encounters with the “big five”, Lion, Leopard, Elephant, Buffalo and Rhinoceros, for which Africa is justly famous. We may also be lucky and run into the much rarer creatures too. Each day we will rise pre-dawn to be out on the roads early, looking for wildlife and taking advantage of the beautiful golden light of the mornings on the African savannah. After our morning game drive looking for wildlife we will come back to camp for lunch and some “free time” where people can opt to bird/photograph around camp, head to a hide or a water hole, or just take a siesta. Each afternoon we will head out for another game drive until dusk when we must return to the camp before the gates close at dark. There are a variety of birding hides around Kruger and several are near the camps where we stay, again providing some fantastic photographic opportunities.

Day 10: Departure

After a little bit of early morning activity, we will head to Skukuza Airport where we fly back to Johannesburg where the tour concludes. For those keen on extensions, we have a 4-day pre-tour to Cape Town and a post-tour Big Cat extension to the exclusive private reserve of Sabi-Sands.

Cape Extension

Days 1-2: The Cape Peninsula

After arrival in Cape Town we begin exploring the unique surroundings of one of Earth’s most spectacular cities. And it is surprisingly wild. The Cape Peninsula, a spectacular 1 km high and 70 km long mass of sandstone mountains, shelters the city that is pummeled by one of the stormiest oceans in the world. We begin right at the world-renowned Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, skirting the slopes of Table Mountain, which holds more species of flowering plants than the whole of the British Isles. Here we will see and photograph Cape Fynbos endemic birds such as Orange-breasted Sunbird, Cape Sugarbird, and Cape Spurfowl. The gardens also allow a look at many of the wonderfully sculpted protea flowers, pastel-painted ericas, and chiseled restios that make up much of the Western Cape’s famous flora, offering fabulous macro photography opportunities for those whom are interested. We next wind along the spectacular Ou Kaapse Weg pass on our way to Kommetjie, where we stop to look for Benguela (the cold-water current of South African and Namibia) endemic seabirds including African Oystercatcher, Hartlaub’s Gull, Bank, Crowned and Cape cormorants. The sandy shoreline may also hold Three-banded and White-fronted Plovers, and Blacksmith Lapwing. We continue to follow the scenic coastline via Misty Cliffs and Scarborough to the entrance of the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve. Here there are more Fynbos specials and a few more seabirds from the high cliffs at Cape Point, with the added attractions of game viewing and whale watching.

The most striking of the mammals is the endemic Bontebok, but we might also see Chacma Baboon or even Eland. Rounding the peninsula to Simonstown, we stop at Boulder's Bay to mingle with a large colony of breeding African Penguins. We will photograph them as they rocket out of the water, pose upon the white sand beach, or engage in raucous nesting activities. If time allows, our final stop is the Strandfontein Sewage Works, a series of settling ponds on the northern shores of False Bay, which support a remarkable variety of waterfowl, including the near-endemic South African Shelduck and Cape Shoveler.

Day 3: The West Coast

Located north of Cape Town, southern Namaqualand is famed for its spring displays of many annual flowers, especially daisies. The arid and rather bleak terrain is sprinkled with a series of wetlands, which in the austral summer holds the greatest densities of shorebirds on the entire eastern Atlantic flyway. In the spectacular Langebaan Lagoon of the West Coast National Park, Palearctic waders abound, while resident shorebirds include African Oystercatcher, White-fronted, Three-banded, and Chestnut-banded Plovers. The marshes and sedges are home to African Marsh Harrier as well as skulking marshland specialists. Here we are lucky in that several hides are scattered across the reserve, and we will choose the best based on the light and the tide-dependent proximity of the birds. The terrestrial vegetation surrounding the wetlands supports a variety of species that are not easily seen elsewhere. The most absorbing of these are the endemic Black Harrier, Black Bustard, and Gray-winged Francolin.

Day 4: Cape Town to Durban

After a fantastic introduction to some of the best of Cape Town's wild environments we transfer to the airport for a domestic flight to Durban, where we start the main tour.

Big Cat Extension

Extension Information

Although our chances to see some of Africa's cats are also very good at Zimanga and Kruger NP, the size of the park and sometimes "restricted" mobility means that we cannot always chase after every available opportunity. So it can be possible to miss some of the cats in Kruger, most notably the most elusive of them all, the striking Leopard. However, adjacent to Kruger is the Sabi Sand Game Reserve that is justly famed for its intimate wildlife encounters, and particularly leopard viewing. Home to a host of wildlife, including all of the Big Five, Sabi Sands is part of a conservation area that covers over two million hectares (almost five million acres), an area equivalent to the state of New Jersey and larger than some independent countries.

Day 1: Kruger NP to Sabi Sands Game Reserve

We take the short transfer from the government gazette park to the private Sabi Sands Reserve.

Days 2-3: Sabi Sands

With no boundary fences between the reserve and the Kruger National Park, Sabi Sand benefits from the great diversity of wildlife found in one of the richest wilderness areas on the African continent along with the additional benefits experienced by being on a private game reserve. Daily and nightly game drives led by some of the most skilled wildlife trackers on Earth, allows for intimate game experiences from the comfort of your open safari vehicle. And the resulting photographic opportunities are simply sensational. The Sabi

Sand is especially famous for its leopard sightings. Unlike many other areas, where leopards are rarely glimpsed in daylight hours, sightings of these shy animals are not uncommon during the day. The area also supports several resident lion prides, and while the relatively smaller and lighter build of the cheetah generally makes this elegant hunter reluctant to share an area dominated by lion and leopard, a number of them are also regularly spotted in the area. Herds of African Elephant and Cape Buffalo, as well as family groups of White Rhino, move throughout the reserve and are regularly encountered on game drives. Game drives traverse an area of 6 300 hectares (15 700 acres) and strict vehicle limits at each and every sightings in the area ensure the exclusivity of your game viewing and photography experience. Off-road driving ensures that you have the best possible view of any exceptional sighting and rangers are constantly in touch with each other to keep track of animal movements. The Sand River flows year-round and is a major source of water for the animals in the reserve. The deep water provides a home for rafts of Hippopotamus while lethargic Nile Crocodile lounge along the wide sandy banks. Thick reed beds along the river's course are home to many species of water birds and weavers, while water monitors slither among the tall grasses, and buffalo and elephant wallow in the cooling mud of the reed beds. The thick band of riverine forest found along the course of the river is the ideal home for shy species such as Leopard and Bushbuck, as well as tiny Lesser Bushbabies. Bird wise we will not have moved away from the very same habitat we have birded previously at Kruger National Park, thus birdlife will be very similar as previously described, although with the significant difference that photographing from open top vehicles is far more comfortable, easier and flexible. Whether we focus on birds or on the ultimate Leopard "photo-grab" we shall enjoy the best possible conditions to do so.

Day 4: Departure

We will head back to Johannesburg, where the extension concludes.

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