

# Introducing Babanango Game Reserve - an exciting new reserve in the heart of Zululand

 ByDi Brown

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Babanango Game Reserve promises a captivating bush experience, and they definitely deliver on their promise. Situated in the heart of Zululand in KwaZulu-Natal, this new kid on the block is something special.

A biodiversity hotspot and area of astounding natural beauty and contrasting landscapes, Babanango Game Reserve has taken hands with the local Emcakwini, KwaNgono and Esibongweni communities and come up with a blueprint that promotes conservation, sustainable tourism and rural development.



Valley views from Zulu Rock Lodge. Babanango Game Reserve - © Di Brown

Although a work in progress, the results to date are two spectacular lodges, a tented camp and 22,000 hectares of land that will be rehabilitated and protected as a biodiversity hotspot for future generations.

Located in the Umfolozi Valley between Ulundi and Vryheid, this is where the legendary King Shaka was born and where he built the Zulu Nation. These hills and rocks hold the secrets of the past, some steeped in blood, others in the hopes and dreams of men. Close to the reserve the history is brought to life at the sites of the Isandlwana battlefield, Rorke's Drift, Devil's Pass, the grave of Piet Retief and the site of the Battle of Blood River.

## Sneaky hippo and a gay giraffe

As Babanango is a game reserve in the making, elephant and lion will be introduced in 2022, taking it to big five status.

Presently, a safari offers rhino, giraffe, hippo, buffalo, leopard, if you are lucky, and a variety of antelope. An unexpected delight, due to the absence of lions in the reserve, for now, is a sighting of horses, goats on the road and cows on the banks and in the water of the White Umfolozi River that runs through the reserve. In the next year, the communities and their livestock will be relocated to new land and nature, aided by the conservationists, will restore it to a pristine state.



Hippo pool, Babanango Game Reserve - © Di Brown.

We spent some time at the waterhole just past Zulu Rock Lodge watching the family of hippo. They remind me of spies, just their eyes and tiny ears breaking the surface, scanning the landscape then disappearing to assess the situation. They decided we were not welcome and warned us off by loud grunting and a display of teeth as they opened their massive mouths. We left.

Parked on a rise, we watched in delight as a pair of giraffes broke cover from the trees and started their mating ritual. After a few half-hearted mounts and annoyance from the female, nothing was going to happen. I learned that many giraffes are homosexual and this particular guy has not fathered a baby in 14 years. However, when other males are brought in to increase the herd, he chases them off and pretends to do it himself, but his heart is not in it. We all felt sorry for the female.





Those giraffe - © Di Brown.

## The White Umfolozi

Construction of a bridge over the river is in its final stages, but we took the adventurous route, crossing the river in a Landy and stopping to marvel at the lifeblood of the reserve. Ivory-coloured rock, flattened, smoothed and shaped by the continuous flow of water over thousands of years. Dun-coloured mud stains the rocks in parts and the river twists and turns creating sandy beaches lined by rich green shrubs and trees. In the still, humid air the sound of water is mesmerising, the river a living thing of great beauty. The cows agree as there are plenty of them in and around the water, reluctant to leave this exquisite spot.



The White Umfolozi - © Di Brown

## Chasing sunrise

My phone buzzes at 3.45am. "Weather looks fine, we are good to go!"

We are chasing the sunrise and, in summer, that requires a painfully early start. Lucky, our guide, kindly gave up precious sleep to take to the closest high point, a distant koppie overlooking Valley Lodge. The track is rough and the going is slow in the dark. After 45 minutes and a nail-biting ascent up a slippery steep incline, we are on a plateau. The sky lightens,

bringing the colours of the earth to life. Burnt orange rocks contrast with vivid green Bulbine, wild grasses and purple-flowering shrubs.



Babanango Valley Lodge sunrise - © Di Brown

The mountain aloes stand straight and tall, like silent witnesses to the impending sunrise. White clouds drift into view, waiting to animate the sky as they catch the first rays of the sun.

Suddenly the air cools, and we see the dreaded mist creeping through the gorge. For a few seconds, the sky lights up, a bruised purple-tinged with yellow and pink then the mist steals the colour, and the moment is gone.

## Things that grow

The diversity of the flora at Babanango is phenomenal and game drives include stops to look at trees, grasslands, tiny flowers growing out of a crack in the rock or a mighty Euphorbia splitting and growing around a black wattle. We gaze up in awe at an eight-metre high mountain aloe, dry leaves crackling around the trunk and the juicy greener ones loved by elephants right up at the top.



Looking up at Zulu Rock Lodge, Babanango Game Reserve - © Di Brown



Babanango is home to 12 species of aloe, and they have identified 200 species of trees and 120 plant species to the ever-growing list. Grasslands, wetlands, savanna and riverbeds all play a role in this biodiversity hotspot.

## Accommodation

Zulu Rock Lodge is an intimate luxury space perched on a hill overlooking the valley. Rates include three meals and one game drive daily. The cuisine is outstanding. I like eating but am not well versed in food trends, ingredients and techniques. My foodie friends were extremely impressed with the varied and creative meals.



The stylish Zulu Rock Lodge - © Di Brown

Babanango Valley Lodge is obviously down in the valley on the reserve. Equally luxurious, it has a more social feel and is ideal for groups of family and friends. The cuisine is as inspiring as that at Zulu Rock.

Matane Camp makes the reserve accessible to those not wanting to fork out for a luxury experience. Situated in the White Umfolozi Valley, close to the impressive Nhlazatshe Mountain. This is the place to be for a holiday filled with hiking, game viewing, mountain biking, birding and soon-to-be-completed activity centre with adventure activities such as abseiling and zip-lining.



Pool at Valley Lodge, Babanango Game Reserve - © Di Brown

## Activities on the reserve

- Three-hour game and nature drives, twice daily; 56 mammals, 285 bird species, 33 butterfly species, and that's just what has been identified and listed to date.
- Stargazing, guided mountain biking over 25km of trails or a guided nature walk.
- Explore the reserve on horseback. The South African breed Bopere horses are stabled at the Matatane Camp and many trails traverse the reserve.
- A tour with Bongani the expert of the history and stories of the abandoned copper mine a short walk from Valley Lodge.
- Guided photographic tours in the game drive vehicle.

Wide-open space is the new search phrase for holidays, and we all know that we need time in nature to soothe our souls and ensure we stay sane. Babanango Game Reserve is the answer to your searching.

For more info go to [babanango.co.za](http://babanango.co.za)

## ABOUT DI BROWN

Di Brown is a freelance travel writer based in Cape Town. Part of the tourism industry for the last 20 years, Di is a supporter of responsible tourism, advocates for animal rights in tourism and is a keen amateur photographer.

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