

Getting There & Away

A non-share taxi to Matsapha airport costs around E50. The main bus and minibus taxi park is at the northern end of Louw St. Buses run up the Ezulwini Valley to Mbabane for E2.

Transtate buses run from here to South Africa via either Mbabane or Hlathikhulu and Nhlanguano.

NHLANGANO

Nhlanguano is the closest town to the border crossing at Mahamba, but unless you want to visit the *Nhlanguano Sun* casino (☎ 78211), four km out of town (with single/double rooms for E255/378 with breakfast), there's no reason to come here. The run-down *Phoenix Hotel* (☎ 78488) is poor value at E100/130.

MKHAYA GAME RESERVE

Mkhaya (☎ 44541; fax 40957) is a private reserve off the Manzini-Big Bend road, near the hamlet of Phuzumoya. It is run by the people who run Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary near Mbabane, and the same hands-on commitment to conservation is evident.

The reserve is on rehabilitated cattle farms, although the area had always been popular with hunters for its game. Mkhaya takes its name from the mkhaya tree (or knobthorn, *Acacia nigrescens*), which abounds on the reserve. Mkhayas grow only on good land, and are valued not only for their fruit, from which Swazis brew beer, but for the insect and birdlife they support.

Although small, Mkhaya has a wide range of animals, including white and black rhino, roan and sable antelope and elephant. The reserve's boast is that you're more likely to meet a black rhino in the wild here than anywhere else in Africa. There are also herds of the indigenous and rare Nguni cattle which make the reserve economically self-supporting.

Walks & Game Drives

The game reserve organises a couple of good-value day tours. A three-hour guided walk costs E55 per person (E66 on week-

ends), a longer Landrover drive, with lunch, costs E121 (E143 on weekends). Minimum numbers for the Landrover tour are just two, so you don't need to get a huge group together.

Places to Stay

Mkhaya is worth staying at for at least a night. Safari tents start at E460/720 a single/double (more on weekends), including three meals, game-viewing drives and walks. There is also *Nkonjane* (Swallow's Nest), a luxurious stone cottage, at E715/423.50 per person single/sharing (more on weekends).

If accommodation described as 'luxury' puts you off, don't worry, it's better than that. *Stone Camp*, the safari-tent option, is like a comfortable 19th-century hunting camp rather than a hotel sitting incongruously in the wilderness. The floors of the tents are on sand, allowing you to see ant trails and the tracks of the small animals which come in at night. The food is also simple and good, with traditional methods and ingredients used.

Note that you can't visit without having booked, and even then you can't drive in

Nguni Cattle

Mkhaya started out in 1979 as a stud-breeding programme for the indigenous Nguni cattle. The Nguni is an old breed, and centuries of natural selection have made it heat tolerant, disease immune, self-sufficient and, importantly, tick-resistant. It was and still is highly prized by the Nguni tribes who led these cattle south during the Difaqane. The Zulu king has a herd of Royal White Nguni (*Inyonikayiphumuli*) near Ulundi in KwaZulu Natal.

Nguni are small and were interbred with larger foreign breeds to increase beef production. This led to a degeneration of their gene pool, hence the attempts at Mkhaya to preserve their purity. When supplemental feeding of other breeds became expensive the Nguni came into its own as an effective beef producer and they are now highly valued. Conservation activities at Mkhaya are funded entirely by the sale of these cattle. ■

Else e.a. 1997

alone; you'll be met at Phuzumoya at a specified pick-up time.

BIG BEND

Big Bend is a neat sugar town on, not surprisingly, a big bend in the Lusutfu River. It's quite a picturesque spot.

The *New Bend Inn* (☎ 36111), on a hill just south of town and with good views across the river, is good value at E104/143 for singles/doubles, without breakfast. There's a restaurant and a pleasant outdoor bar overlooking Big Bend. There's also a friendly workers' bar with a lively disco on Friday and Saturday.

The *Riverside Motel* (☎ 36012; fax 36032) is a 10-minute drive south of Big Bend on the road to KwaZulu/Natal; singles/doubles with breakfast are E110/140 plus 10%.

One of Swaziland's best restaurants, the *Lebombo Lobster*, is a few km south of Big Bend. 'Highway hen' (spatchcock cooked with *peri peri*) is E22, tasty steak rolls are E6 each and the seafood includes crayfish.

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About four buses a day run south to the South African border at Lavumisa for E6. Coming

the other way they continue on to Manzini for E10.

SITEKI

This trading town isn't really on the way to anywhere anymore, but it's a nice enough little place and a bit cooler up here on the Lebombo mountains than down on the plains. There are good views on the steep road up here. The town is sometimes still known by its colonial-era name of Stegi.

The town was originally named when Mbandzeni (great-grandfather of the present king) gave his frontier troops permission to marry - Siteki means 'marrying place'.

The *Siteki Hotel* (☎ 34126) has dinner, bed and breakfast for E99 per person, and the host, Graham Duke, knows lots about the surrounding area.

Several express buses run between Manzini and Siteki daily for about E7. The local bus company is the reliable Tit For Tat Bus Service (☎ 34304).

HLANE ROYAL NATIONAL PARK

This park (Hlane means 'wilderness') in the north-east is near the former royal hunting grounds. There are white rhino and many antelope species. Elephant and lion have

Rhino Wars

In 1965 white rhino were re-established in the kingdom after an absence of 70 years and since then there has been an ongoing battle to protect them from poachers. At the forefront of this battle has been Ted Reilly and a band of dedicated, hand-picked rangers.

This defence has not been easy as the poachers have received hefty financial backing from Taiwanese interests. Poaching escalated in the late '80s and there were determined efforts to change the laws in Swaziland relating to rhino poaching. Rhinos were dehorned and confined to enclosures for their own protection. After Hlane was attacked in January 1992 by poachers with AK47s, the rangers armed themselves. With the rhinos dehorned at Hlane, the poachers shifted to Mkhaya. The battle commenced.

In April 1992 there was a shoot-out between rangers and poachers at Mkhaya, and some poachers were captured. Not long after there was a big shoot-out at Big Bend and two poachers were killed.

The last rhino (the majestic bull Mthondvo) was killed for horn in December 1992 while the Swazi courts still agonised over action relating to the Big Bend incident. The young king, Mswati III, intervened on behalf of Reilly's rangers and poaching declined dramatically. The rangers still wait with their rifles at the ready. You can help - your presence at any one of the big game parks assists in rhino conservation.

A happy postscript was the donation by the Taiwanese government in 1996 of enough money to purchase six black rhino; a gesture of good faith which was welcomed with open arms. ■

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