

A green oasis

On a sweeping riverbend slap bang in the middle of Kruger National Park, Letaba Rest Camp is much loved by laid-back game viewers, says Roxanne Reid.

Strange as it sounds, Letaba is a splendid place to be even for those who don't want to go game driving from sunrise to sunset. It's cool and calm, with green grass and shady trees, and there's lots to do; you don't even have to leave camp to enjoy great sightings.

From the elevated riverside walk that passes in front of the restaurant, you may see elephant, hippo, croc and waterbuck in the river below, not to mention waterbirds. 'Letaba's also the only place at Kruger where you'll find bushbuck in the camp,' says duty manager Patience Mabaso. There are sticky-fingered vervet monkeys and baboons too, so don't leave food lying about or windows or doors open to tempt them when you're out. Thicktailed bushbabies are less *skelm* residents, or you can watch hundreds of insectivorous bats leaving the man-made bat houses at dusk to catch their dinner.

Believe it or not, you might even see leopard and hyena from the comfort of your armchair. 'A resident leopard is often seen in the riverbed just below the restaurant,' says field guide Cecilia Phophi, 'and spotted hyena are around the fence at night.' That's one reason the perimeter sites are in such demand with campers.

In the heat of the day, cool off in the swimming pool or duck into the air-conditioned information centre to learn about

With its river backdrop, Letaba has lots of large trees that provide both cool shade and a habitat for numerous bird species.

'Letaba's also the only place at Kruger where you'll find bushbuck in the camp'



elephants, including Kruger's 'Magnificent Seven' big tuskers. Or take a walk around the camp for some good birding. 'Sometimes there's a pair of barn owls in the lala palms near the restaurant,' says head guide Saskia Taylor. 'We also have African scops-owl, pearl-spotted owl, African green-pigeon, even burnt-necked eremomela in the acacias at the campsite.' Letaba's also well known for red-headed weavers and you'll probably hear African fish eagles cry overhead.

When you finally pull yourself away to venture out on a drive, several good choices present themselves. 'On the tar road south towards Satara, you should see elephant, lion, giraffe, buffalo and kudu,' says Patience. 'There's a cheetah family

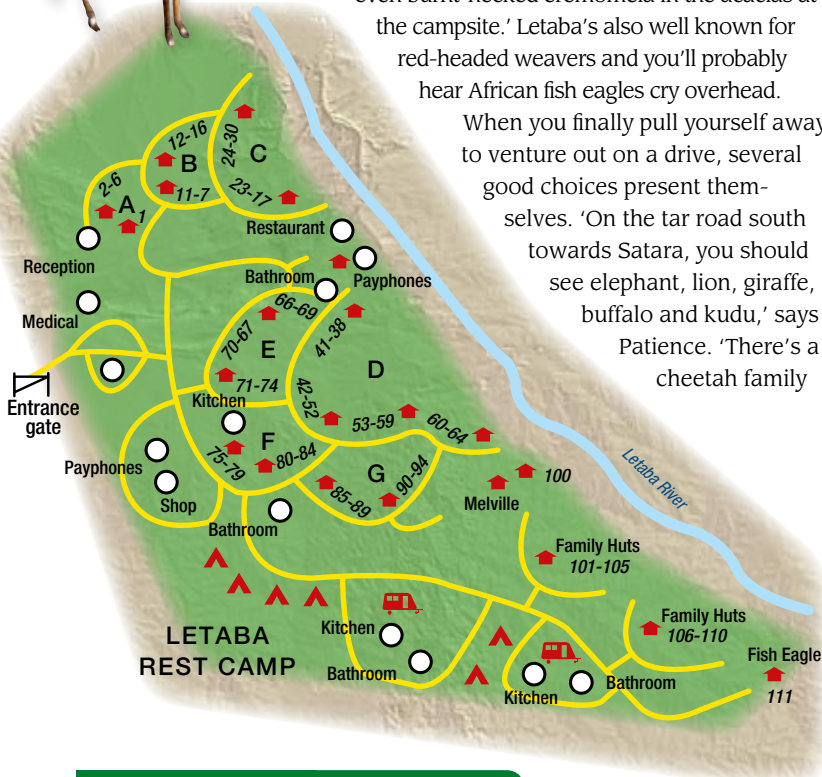
just south of the turn-off towards the Timbavati Picnic Site. For rhino, try near the Ngotso North Waterhole.'

You'll usually find elephants between the camp and Engelhard Dam (along the S46) in the late afternoon. 'There are at least three notable tuskers in the Letaba area. One of them, Tsotsi, has a reputation for breaking into the picnic site and staff village gardens every now and again,' chuckles Saskia.

For the best game-viewing opportunities, stick to the river along the S46 in the early morning or late afternoon. On hot afternoons, look for elephant and buffalo at Nhlanganini Dam on the H-9 tar road towards Phalaborwa Gate. Or take the river-hugging S47 gravel road to Mingerhout Dam. 'The area's regularly used by large game, but it's also a wonderfully scenic drive through a canopy of trees,' she smiles.

If it's lion you're after, there's no lack of buffalo action along the tar road north of Letaba up to the Middelvei Windmill – and that attracts lions. The big open areas on the way are good places to catch sight of kori bustard, honey badger and white rhino. Patience also suggests turning off the tar road to Makhadzi Picnic Spot, which is a relaxing place to stop for breakfast or lunch.

The Letaba area is great leopard habitat, so there's a chance you might see one within five kilometres of camp. Patience advises keeping an eye out at the four-way stop on the tar road. Saskia adds, 'You could find one resting in a shady tree during the hottest part of the day, but look on the ground in the



Things to do and see

- **Guided bush walks:** morning, three to four hours, R340 a person; afternoon, two to three hours, R265; no children under 12.
- **Guided game drives:** morning, three hours, R180; sunset, three hours, R180; night, two hours, R150; children over six only and they pay half price.
- **Bush braai:** 1.5-hour game drive ending with a braai in the bush, R490 a person.
- **Letaba Elephant Hall:** information on the physiology and behaviour of elephants, and stories of Kruger's most famous tuskers (see photo inset opposite).
- **Riverside camp walk** on a paved walkway overlooking the Letaba River.
- **Watch hundreds of bats** leave the bat houses at dusk to hunt.
- **Masorini Iron Age site,** 38 km west of the camp, near Phalaborwa Gate.
- **Hire a gas skottel** to cook breakfast at **Makhadzi Picnic Site** about 30 km northeast of Letaba.
- **Matambeni Bird Hide,** 10 km north of camp, for hippo, crocs and waterbirds.
- **Sable Dam Sleepover Hide** near Phalaborwa Gate, equipped with mattresses and linen. Book ahead through central reservations.

BELOW: There's a popular vantage point in front of the restaurant where people gather to watch animals in the river below.

INSET TOP: Bushbuck gently pick their way through the camp in search of grass and leaves.



early morning and late afternoon. They often use paths along riverbeds.'

Although great sightings depend on luck, one insider secret is not to go fast. 'Around 25 to 30 km/h is best for game viewing,' Cecilia maintains. As one of the regular guides on the sunset and night drives, she should know.

If you're a keen birder, Letaba's a first-rate place to be. 'Cape vultures enter the area in winter,' explains Saskia, 'and the Engelhard Dam is good for squacco heron, black egret and spurwing goose. At Matambeni Bird Hide on the dam, you'll see a large hippo family, lots of crocs, egrets and yellowbilled storks.' Maybe even African jacana or collared pratincole.

For a change of pace, head to Phalaborwa Gate to visit the Masorini Archaeological Site, where a guide will tell you about the Northern Sotho iron smelters and forgers who lived there from about 1300 to the late 1800s.

Another way to get a different perspective is to join a drive or bush walk with a guide. 'A sunset drive is something no visitor should miss,' claims hospitality services manager Lerato Khoza. Patience votes for the bush walks as a way to get close to nature on foot and Saskia chips in: 'Our best sightings are on morning walks and sunset drives. On the drives, we regularly see leopard, but there's also a chance you might see spring hare, African wild cat, civet and porcupine.'

For something really special, book the three-day Olifants Wilderness Trail that leaves from Letaba and takes you on foot into an area that usually boasts high numbers of both large herbivores and predators. Or spend a night at the Sable Dam sleepover hide near Phalaborwa Gate – great for seeing hippo and crocs, waterbirds, maybe even leopard.

Lerato is proud of the care Letaba takes of its guests. 'We can't be happy unless our guests are happy,' she insists. That's borne out by a Nelspruit couple here for the first time. 'It's already our favourite Kruger camp,' they confess. 'We'll definitely be back.'

Travel planner

Where to book

Contact Sanparks central reservations on tel 012-428-9111, e-mail reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org. Call Letaba Camp direct on tel 013-735-6636.

How to get there

From Johannesburg/Pretoria, take the N1 north and 40km before Polokwane, turn right onto the R71 to Phalaborwa Gate to enter the park. Allow six to seven hours for the trip to the gate. Letaba is 51 km further, requiring an hour (or more if you want to view game). The speed limit in the park is 50km/h.

Accommodation options and costs

Tent/caravan sites without power are R150 for two people and R165 with power. Additional adults pay R54 and kids R27 (maximum of six people a site).

Safari tents on stilts with communal facilities are R375 for two in a two-bed tent and R405 for two in a four-bed hut. Adults are R106 and children R53 extra.

Three-bed huts with communal facilities are R440 for two people, with additional adults paying R106 and kids R53.

Thatched two-bed rondavels with kitchens are R730 a night and

R675 without kitchens. Three-bed huts without kitchens are R675 for two (R820 for river view). Extra adults pay R160 and children R80.

Six-bed cottages (two bedrooms with three beds each, two bathrooms, open-plan kitchen/living room, river facing) are R1 400 for four. Additional adults/children pay R270/R135.

There are two luxury guest-houses with river views and all mod cons, including microwaves and DSTv. Melville sleeps nine, Fish Eagle sleeps eight and has its own bird hide. R2590 for four, extra adults are R470 and kids R235.

Precautions

Kruger is a malaria area, particularly in summer. Consult your doctor beforehand about prophylactics, cover up at dusk and dawn, and use repellent.

Further reading

African Elephants: A Celebration of Majesty by Daryl and Sharna Balfour (Abbeville Press) – over 200 photographs revealing elephant behaviour and relationships.

Bats of Central and Southern Africa by Ara Monadjem and FPD Cotterill (Wits University Press) – hot-off-the-press facts about these misunderstood creatures.

Olifants Wilderness Trail

Sleep in A-frame huts on this three-night trail (maximum of eight people), all meals provided but bring your own drinks. R3430 a person and no children under 12. Departs Wednesdays and Sundays. Pre-book through central reservations.



Get more online

See the Letaba (Kruger) category on Roxanne's blog at <http://roxannereid.weebly.com/blog.html>