

Happy times in PONDOLAND

Pondoland, for its wildness, beauty and serenity, makes it a place to indulge in carefree, family magic...

When I first visited Umngazi River Bungalows & Spa, in the heart of Pondoland – 20km south of Port St John's – my kids Enya and James were still toddlers, and I desperately needed some me-time. I made good use of Umngazi's much-loved nannies, while I relaxed at the swimming pool and did... nothing. Now that Enya and James are a little older and my energy levels are back to normal, I wanted to experience the other side of Umngazi and spice up my natural tendency for inertia with the activities on offer and regular visits to the spa.

Umngazi is immersed in a lagoon on one side and a sand dune on the other, and lush gardens and cosy thatch-roofed cottages dot the area. When they were still little, the kids dined in the kids' restaurant, but they're older now, and join me for lunch on the deck. At night, starry lights add a touch of magic to the much anticipated Saturday night seafood buffet, and we're entertained by a feast of traditional dance and live music. We're mesmerised by the shaking hips and shoulders, beating of the drums, bright smiles and delightful squeals of joy.



Exploring the mangrove by canoe is both entertaining for grown ups and edutaining for kids.

Pondoland's awe-inspiring coastline is a treasure trove of delights for nature-loving families.

Hiking along the coastline

It's early morning, and we meet our guide at the jetty. A ferry takes us across the river along thickets, open fields and stretches of forest. The early morning mist blankets the beach and enhances the sweet scents of flowers.

The views are breathtaking and I enjoy our guide's extensive knowledge of the area and his views on conservation with its many challenges, like the cows. 'The the cows are clever and break the fences to get to the mealies. They also like to stay on the beach because the sand is hot and there are no ticks there,' he says. 'But, how do they get to the sea?' I ask,

looking quizzically at the fences in the water. 'The cows are clever – they swim around the fences.'

Canoeing in the mangrove

On our mangrove walk, Enya and James are amused by hundreds of crabs peeping out of the holes in between the mangrove trees. Paddling is a great way to explore this area; it offers a welcome rest for my legs and a good workout for my arms. On the way back, via the beach, Enya and James look for shells and corals that have washed up on the sand. At the end of the walk, we sound the gong to call the ferry that will take us back to the lodge. I look forward to putting my tired feet up and indulging in a foot massage at the spa.

Meeting the locals

I want to know more about our guide and the people who pamper us at the lodge, so he takes us to his village, Cwebeni, to get a glimpse into his world. Women sing in the distance, little children play and a lone rooster calls for his hens. The kids collect the velvety fruit of the iron wood and I love the tranquillity of this picturesque village with its quaint huts. We have tea in one of the rondavels and as custom has it, women sit on the one side of the room while the men sit on the other. Enya and James play with a growing group of children outside, while the local 'band' sings and dances for me inside.



Intrigued by the mangroves crabs, Enya inspects one before it gets a chance to scuttle back into its hole.

Sunset cruise on the river

We've crossed the river a few times on the ferry to hike or sand board on the dune. Today, we join the sunset cruise and relax to the hypnotic rhythm of the boat as it travels up river. The tranquillity of the scenery is only interrupted by our skipper's bird calls. When he throws a fresh fish in the water, a majestic Fish Eagle treats us to an impressive dive to catch its prey. An adventurous fish jumps into the boat and Enya grabs it and pleads with the skipper not to give it to the Fish Eagle. With a smile, he lets her throw the fish back into the water and we cheerfully continue our cruise.

Fun on the beach

We bask in Umngazi's white sandy beach, enjoy the early morning mist, watch the sunset, and in between, build sand castles or pick our way past the beautiful Nguni cows when they come down to the beach for a stroll.

While I immerse myself in a luxurious spa bath and watch the dolphins show off in the ocean, the entertainment team takes the kids on another exciting activity. Honestly, how much better can it get?



A mighty Fish Eagle demonstrates his hunting prowess during the sunset cruise.

How to get there

GPS COORDINATES S 31 36.680 – E 29 25.938

SELF-DRIVE: If you're driving from the Cape, take the N2 North and follow Port St John's direction from Mthatha. From Durban, follow the R61 route past the Wild Coast Sun/Bizana/Flagstaff/Lisikisiki.

SA AIRLINK offers daily flights from Johannesburg to Umtata (90km from Umngazi). Umngazi will organise your transfer.

CHOOSE UMNGAZI'S FLY-IN OPTION from Durban to Port St John's, Friday to Friday.



At Umngazi you'll forget about cellphones and iPads and have a chance to explore the outdoors!

Contact

VISIT Umngazi.co.za, call 047 564 1115/6/8/9, or 082 321 5841/2, or email enquiries@umngazi.co.za

WHAT'S THE COST?

From R865 per person per night, including three meals a day, with special rates for children.

BOREDOM BUSTERS

- Hiking ● Mountain biking
- Canoeing ● Fishing ● Mangrove swamp walk
- Tennis ● Dune surfing
- Swimming ● Snorkelling in the rock pools

Treats for mom and dad

- Hire a nanny, check the daily kids' activities board and spend some quality time with hubby.
- Enjoy a romantic dinner at the intimate Riverside Gazebo or spend the evening in the Green Door Wine Cellar.
- Paddle up the river in the early hours of the morning and enjoy a bush breakfast in nature.
- Join a sunset cruise on the river.
- Include a Saturday in your stay so you don't miss out on the Saturday Night Seafood Buffet.
- Be pampered at the award-winning spa – the views are awesome and the Africology body wraps are well worth it.

Don't forget to bring...

- Evenings can be cool, so pack your warm clothes.
- Walking shoes, binoculars, snorkelling and fishing gear, tennis racquets (can be hired) and mountain bikes.
- Mosquito repellent (Umngazi is malaria free). ■



Start the day with a hearty outdoor breakfast – the food is delish and the decor a real pleasure.