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 Umngazi River Bungalows & Spa



Rest & relaxation - Umngazi style...

The first hint we had of how relaxed Umngazi River Bungalows and Spa would be was the unpretentious sign suggesting that it was 'time to take off your shoes'. We still had 2km to go, which did not seem much considering the lengthy journey thus far, but it was long enough to set daily workplace demands aside and prepare for a wonderful escape...



Umngazi River Bungalows & Spa is nestled in a lush indigenous forest on the rocky coastline of the breathtaking Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Our welcome had an unashamedly African feel, from the helpful security guard at the gate to the smiling ladies at reception, and the paintings of traditional iNguni cattle above the desk - the scene was set for a couple of relaxing days. Soon after arrival we were escorted to our tastefully furnished thatch-roofed bungalow and given time to enjoy the panoramic view of the unspoiled beauty of the Wild Coast from our veranda.

Whilst a host of activities especially designed for young and old alike make this an ideal destination for families, it is a wonderful place for couples to unwind and reconnect beside the private pool or on the secluded beach, or enjoy picnics and walks in the indigenous forests and mangrove swamps. A full programme of children's activities as well as trained child-minders are available to look after children of all ages, should parents want to rekindle the romantic moments of yesteryear...

It is very evident that wholesome family values are very much a part of the Umngazi ethos - the creative children's programmes are run by an enthusiastic team... Nelson, one of the team members, was with great glee referred to as 'Nelson Mandela' by one of the little girls; a 'nanny' childminding service that is facilitated by Umngazi for the 'self-employed' nannies - this is a wonderful service that allows parents time with their little ones,

while still having cherished time alone together; 'self employed' gillies take Dad's and their young lads fishing, maybe to catch their very first fish. The nannies and gillies are a special part of the Umngazi family, and many an adult guest has fond memories of when they were a child being cared for by their Nanny, or the excitement of that very first fish under the watchful eye of their very own gilly - the gillies assist guests and their children with fishing excursions on the river banks and on the beach and rocky outcrops in the area. Special memories and many a firm friendship are formed through these interactions.

Guests are given the choice of a number of activities, many of which are community projects supported by Umngazi. We had the pleasure of the early morning canoe trail through the Mangrove swamps of the Umngazana Estuary, the southern most mangrove forest on the South African coastline. We were met at the Umngazi jetty by our very own River Ranger for our ferry ride across the river to begin our hike across the rolling hills, past grazing iNguni cattle to the next valley. The River Rangers project has proven to be a huge success not only in providing guests with highly skilled guides to take them on walks but also in creating an environmental awareness in these men who are now able to educate and create awareness within the community about litter, indigenous planting, protected species and sustainability of their environments i.e. trees and bird life etc. As we neared the lagoon our ranger

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was on his cell phone (a sign of the times) arranging the hire of canoes from guides from the neighbouring valley - these funds assist this community.

While gliding through the mangroves we learnt about the three species of Mangrove - the White, Red, and Black Mangrove, and how each has a special use within the community, whether as a building material, for fuel, or as part of their animal enclosures. The Honey Project is unique, as it is thought that this is one of the only areas in which bees make their nests in the Black Mangroves, resulting in a very unique tasting honey. Umngazi purchases all the honey which is harvested for use in their kitchen and dining room and to sell in their shop.

Another very special walk is to have 'Tea with Alice' in the village - a local villager has been assisted with the necessary implements and ingredients to be able to offer tea to guests after the short hike to her home in the village across the river. Alice and her family are wonderful hosts and offer a warm welcome as they share a little of their village life with guests.

Giving back to the community is very evident in everything that Umngazi does - from the creation of employment for local community members (when speaking to a waitress, she was so happy she could work close to her family and live at home) to the learning opportunities offered to staff (Nelson, one of 14, who is currently doing a correspondence course with the International Hotel School and Chris one of the spa therapists, a local girl who was given the opportunity to study for two years in Durban).

Dining is also high on the 'priority list' at Umngazi,

and with all the activities offered a healthy appetite is not surprising. The main dining room provides a relaxed atmosphere with a delicious menu - the resort also offers a special children's dining room so parents don't need to worry about upsetting their children's routines while they're on holiday. Where possible fresh produce is purchased locally and community vegetable growers arrive laden with their fresh produce on a bi-weekly basis, allowing for in-season produce to be purchased from them. Due to the recent change to the crayfish licensing laws, these delicacies are no longer purchased locally, but as soon as these licences have been granted to the local fishermen they will resume their buying from these crayfish divers.

No visit to Umngazi River Bungalows and Spa is complete without a visit to the Spa - nestled high on the Umngazi hillside the spa is tranquil and tastefully decorated, and guests are welcomed with a great Pondo smile. The spa offers three private and tranquil treatment rooms, each with an adjoining secluded spa bath and breathtaking panoramic views of the Indian Ocean. The rhythmic sound of the waves rolling gently onto the beach, the breeze gently caressing the indigenous bush and the soft pitter-patter of bare feet on the wooden floors was all I needed to prepare my senses for the 'Izandla Ezine' - Umngazi's Four Hand Signature Pondo Therapy. The ultimate in relaxation... be indulged as two Pondo therapists use simultaneous rhythmic massage techniques combined with traditional ingredients for this full body massage.

The Umngazi Spa has a clear development programme for the spa team that aims at growing their skills by being exposed to various skills and job

types within the spa i.e. Cleaner to therapist; Receptionist to therapist; Receptionist to Stock Control and ordering and potentially Spa Manager.

It is incredibly heart-warming to see so many individuals being given opportunities to better themselves and to create their own employment and means of support, but even better to see them doing it with such pride - this is very evident when speaking to the local staff members and community entrepreneurs. There is no doubting the sincerity of management at Umngazi - just seeing the passion in Michele and Graham Walker (the General Managers) when they speak about their staff and the various community initiatives is evidence enough. The long-term financial commitment from the owners seems to indicate that their input is not just to satisfy a whim - they started along this path long before social responsibility became the 'right thing to do'.



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'Making a difference'

Umngazi River Bungalows & Spa prides itself in being actively involved in making a difference to their local community. They are committed to serving a social responsibility, sustained development and empowerment by creating jobs and uplifting their local community. Umngazi supports three villages in the area, namely: Vukandlule, Cwebeni and Sicambeni - staff are drawn from all three villages. Umngazi management interacts with the local chief and/or headmen or committee of elders from these villages, as well as Cultural Village and Headmaster and teachers of Vukandlule Junior- and Pre-School.

Schools, churches, halls and a clinic (in building process) have been built by Umngazi for these communities. The little local church was built by Pat and Karin Goss the owners of Umngazi River Bungalows five years ago and given to the community as their place of worship. Every couple of months they arrange for two pastors from Durban to fly down for the day to pray with their team, they have also donated over 300 Xhosa and Zulu bibles to the community.

Umngazi has developed an alliance with the Department of Health and has opened a Health post which provides primary health care to the local community. This includes massive HIV Aids and TB awareness campaigns within the area. The TB awareness campaign which was conducted recently provided testing for over 800 people in the valley. They have developed three HIV Champions who are Umngazi staff members that provide physical, emotional and practical advice and support for their team and their families battling HIV and Aids. Food packages and transport to the doctor are provided for team members who are too ill to come to work and are in need of food and correct nutrients.

Umngazi is a family owned property and owners, Pat and Karin Goss ensure that the staff benefit directly from working at Umngazi by offering them an annual profit share every July. This is paid out according to percentage profit made by the hotel.

Winner Amarula Best Retreats in Africa Awards - 'Heart of Africa' category.



Community Crafts

A large group of ladies contribute to the stock which is purchased for sale in the craft centre and Umngazi shop - items that are purchased range from baskets, mats, jewellery (for which they provide the beads); clay cars, place mats and little pondo huts. A large amount is also purchased for use in the hotel i.e. décor items in the rooms and dining room. All the grass mats used throughout the hotel are purchased locally. Local wood, bead and wire work is also purchased - i.e. fish, spoons, décor items and bowls from craftsmen.

Umngazi recently started a Sewing Project where they have taught a group of 15 ladies basic sewing skills. For their first project the ladies made felt hearts using a "straight" stitch. "One lady in particular has wonderful talent and is already experimenting with the beading of these hearts and we are hoping that this project will grow their skills and enable them to grow their product range to appliquéd t-shirts and vests as well as aprons. We are very excited at the possibilities here and will keep you posted on this project!"

Louise, the assistant manager, runs a weekly knitting workshop with the ladies in the hotel and the ladies are enthusiastically knitting for their families! Scarves, beanies and even jerseys have been produced. They will - once they are little more confident - have items to sell in the shop proudly made by these ladies. "Interestingly from the knitting project came a realisation on our part at the huge need for spectacles!!

We have since the inception had an eye testing campaign where we have flown an optician in and assisted the staff to purchase glasses - which has added great quality of life to so many as well as much happier knitters who are now able to fix their own dropped stitches!"

The Umngazi Deli range was launched in 2008. They have taken the much loved items that guests have always enjoyed and packaged them for guests to take home and enjoy. They range began with Mirriam's lemon curd, jams and muesli and the ladies in the kitchen have added many items to their skills repertoire over the year to include short bread, biscuits and chilli relishes.

They have also added a range of products from the ELANINI Project which is being run by CART, an initiative within the Umngazi Valley, which is bringing skills and development to the valley. Umngazi is currently assisting them with water for their crops and they sell the items to Umngazi for sale in the shop.

Pottery, beadwork and leather work (shoes and bags) are purchased from Ikwezi which is a rehabilitation centre for mentally and physically disabled adults.

Umngazi also supports (through donations) the Bethany Children's Home / Orphanage which is also located at Ikwezi - guests are invited to be part of a knitting project where they are asked to knit 30 x 30cm squares. These are sewn into blankets which we donate to Bethany every 6 months.