



Reaching Nkwazi, I breathe a sigh of relief. It's a long sprawling collection of rustic chalets rather than a fishing village, and it's perched high above the lake with vast views of water and bush extending to the distant horizon. We are welcomed by lodge manager Mientjie Devane, and that warmth and hospitality from all the staff is set to become one of the highlights of our stay.

The central area of the lodge comprises a panoramic viewing area, the Hippo Hole bar, a lounge with TV, the dining area, a boma, and three small swimming pools, one of which is heated. Although game drives and boat rides are on offer as separately purchased activities, the viewing deck offers some wonderful game watching from a distance especially with a good pair of binoculars. The next day, we watched for hours as a herd of elephant across the lake grazed in the bush, and bathed in the shallow waters. My eyes followed a large croc as it swam lazily and undisturbed across the water.

Accommodation is rustic, in wooden chalets with a generously sized bath

and a cleverly designed private viewing area that resists both wind and sun, and feels connected to the great outdoors, via cleverly designed glass walls. It's just ideal for families and fisherman, which form the primary market for Nkwazi, one of the six lodges and camps on the reserve.

Dinner at night is around the boma, complete with fire and lanterns, and comprises good home cooked fare; three courses with meat and venison fresh from the reserve's own butchery. There's a large group of guys at the one table, telling jokes and fishing stories, having clearly swapped their suits for shorts and takkies on one of those corporate weekend bonding sessions. It is all quite lively and jovial.

The lake – a glassy jewel

The following afternoon, after a lazy late breakfast served between the sensible times of 9 and 11 am, it's the highlight of the trip – a game-viewing ride on the lake in one of the lodge's powerboats,

and a visit to the other main lodge, Mvubu. The lodge has boats of all shapes and sizes, from a luxurious riverboat to canoes. Gerrit Brits is the young and enthusiastic game ranger who accompanies us for the trip. The lake itself is a glassy jewel surrounded by rich and alluring vegetation. We see rhino, crocodile, zebra, and wildebeest and warily skirt a pod of hippos that look ever so tame languidly bathing in the shallow waters. We were not lucky enough to spot the ever elusive and secretive leopard, but Gerrit says that sightings have been quite plentiful recently. The wildlife is simply amazing, almost as if one had stepped into the Garden of Eden as a secret observer.

Then it's the trip across the bay to Mvubu River Lodge, high on the hillside overlooking the Pongola River and the old arched concrete bridge that crosses it. Mvubu Lodge is charming, with great views and an all-embracing feeling. It's an immediately likeable place, peaceful and contained; one could sit on the deck for hours with a good book or stare at the animals, such as elephant wandering