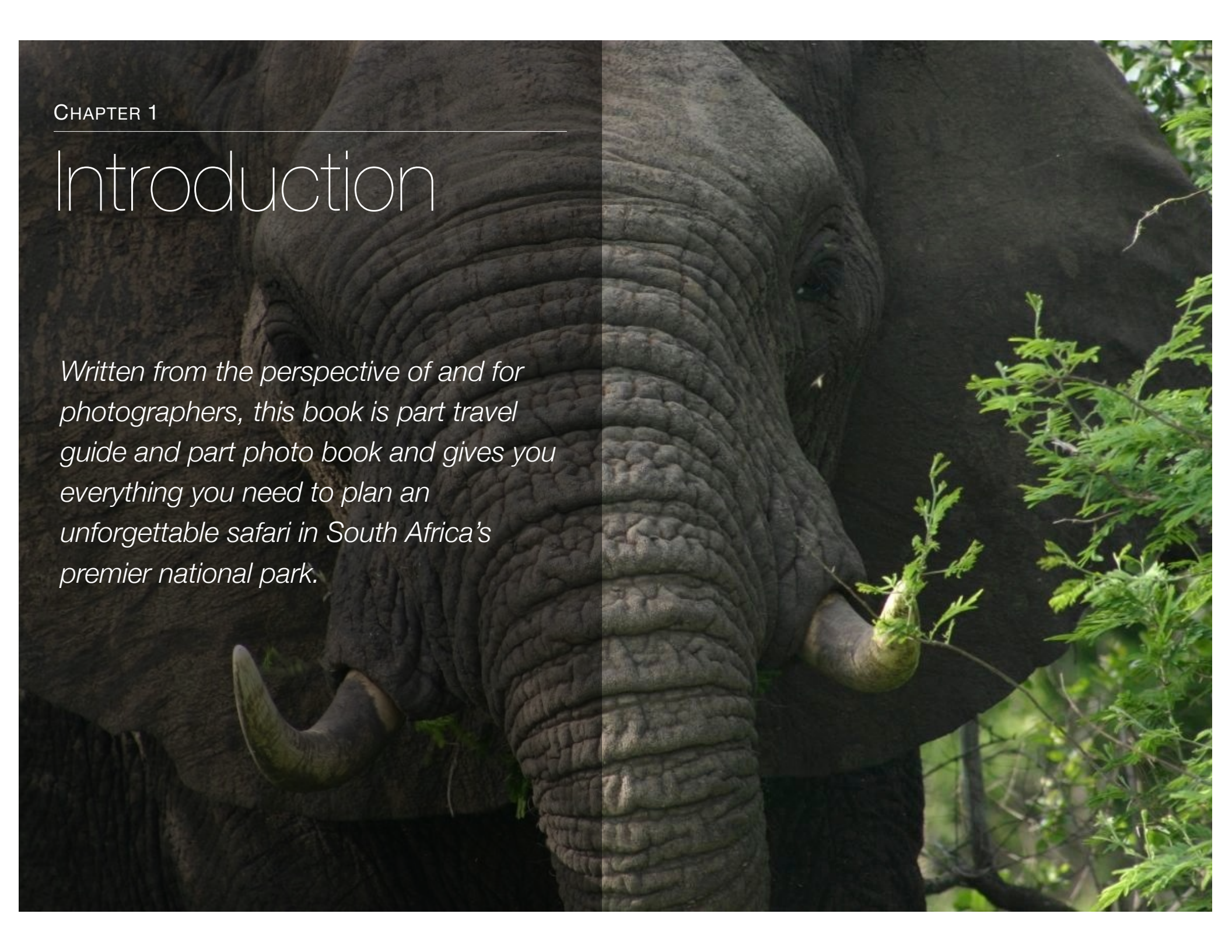


Self-Guided Safaris in Kruger National Park



PHOTOS AND TEXT BY WARREN CARTWRIGHT



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Written from the perspective of and for photographers, this book is part travel guide and part photo book and gives you everything you need to plan an unforgettable safari in South Africa's premier national park.



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WELCOME

Kruger National Park is one of Africa's crown jewels. A wilderness area of massive proportions where you can see unspoiled landscapes and Africa's incredible wildlife. You will meet some of the friendliest people and experience wild, open spaces that have disappeared from most of the planet. It's an amazing natural resource that everyone should have the opportunity to experience. Kruger is a large park – roughly 20,000 km² – covering a land mass nearly equal in size to New Jersey. It provides a diverse landscape and for many people the sheer size, coupled with the distance from North America, makes the thought of planning a trip to Kruger a daunting one. The truth is, it doesn't have to be. I've been fortunate enough to have made many trips to the park over the years. On my first trip, I had friends show me the ropes and provide guidance on how best to experience the park. Subsequently, all my trips have been self-managed, and it's this experience I want to share with you.

This book is written as a "how to" guide for those interested in a self-catered safari experience who want to see the beauty of the African wilderness, without the pressure and expense of an organized tour group. You don't need someone else to organize a trip like this for you as you can do it yourself. I'll cover getting to South Africa and the park; how to plan your time in the park; accommodation options; what you're likely to see and where, and how to see it.

Written from the perspective of and for photographers, this book is part travel guide and part photo book and gives you everything you need to plan an unforgettable safari in South Africa's premier national park.

Over the years I have come to fall in love with South Africa – its people, their culture, the wildlife and its wild spaces. I hope that through this book many more of you can come to experience this amazing place, and venture off to explore it.

Enjoy,



Warren Cartwright

CHAPTER 2

Kruger National Park

Kruger National Park is one of the great safari destinations in Africa and provides the ideal location for first-time visitors to experience an Africa safari.



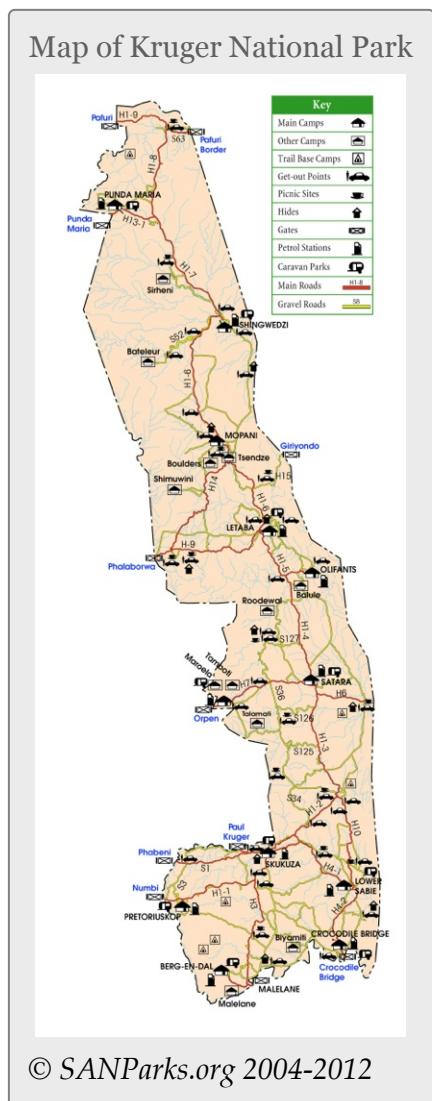
KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Kruger National Park is considered one of the great safari destinations in Africa. Covering an area of about 19,500 square kilometers (~7,500 square miles) and extending about 360 kilometers (~220 miles) from north to south and 65 kilometers (~40 miles) from east to west, it is almost as large as the state of New Jersey, four times bigger than Prince Edward Island and about the same size as Israel. Despite its large size, the park provides the ideal location for first-time visitors to experience an Africa safari. The unique combination of its close proximity to a major center (Johannesburg is a four to five hour drive) coupled with excellent tourist infrastructure makes it ideal for first-time visitors.

WHAT TO EXPECT FOR FIRST-TIME VISITORS

Kruger National Park is a public park, in many ways similar to national, provincial or state parks found in the U.S. or Canada. The entire park is fenced, both to keep wildlife in and people out. You enter through one of nine main entry gates, scattered around the park. If you're just visiting for the day, you can pay an entry fee, drive around and use any of the day visitor facilities available. If you are planning to stay longer than a day, you need to


make reservations for accommodation in advance. I'll cover that in the [Accommodation](#) section later in the book.



Once inside, paved and dirt roads criss-cross the park, allowing you to explore a significant percentage of the park's area. Where you go within the park is up to you, as long as you stay on public roads. Most people will drive slowly around the park, looking for wildlife where they can find it. Others will pick out a prime location (generally near a waterhole) and wait to see what appears. Any of these strategies can turn out good results.

Throughout the park, there are rest camps that provide day visitor facilities, restaurants, shops and accommodations. These camps are gated and fenced, separating guests from the wild spaces around them and giving you a safe place to relax. Any accommodations you reserve will be in one of these rest camps. An overview of all the rest camps is provided in the [Rest Camp Descriptions](#) section of the book along with a [detailed map](#).

As this book is written for first-time visitors to the Kruger, I've chosen to focus on the southern part of the park, south of the area around the Olifants rest camp. I believe this will allow first-time visitors to make the most out of their time in the park. The south part of the park offers more consistent game viewing at all



times of the year, which is likely to be the most important factor for a first-time visitors. The distances between rest camps is also shorter, which means visitors can explore more rest camps and see more diverse landscapes in a shorter time. That said, the northern part of the park has good game viewing and offers some unique experiences I would highly recommend. For example, you will only see baobab trees in the north. As the northern part is much further from Johannesburg, it tends to be less busy, but the distance between camps is significant. Larger distances between camps will limit you to how far you can go in any given day. This is not an issue if there is lots of game around, but if there are limited sightings, the large distances can be discouraging.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PARK

With Africa being the heart of human evolution, it's not surprising that prehistoric human habitation dates to between 100,000 and 500,000 years ago. Stone Age man inhabited the region between 30,000 and 100,000 years ago, and evidence of Iron Age man exists in the park from around 1,500 years ago. If you are interested in better understanding the origins of mankind, the excellent UNESCO World Heritage Site, The Cradle of Humankind, is located not far from Johannesburg, and is well worth a visit.

While one of the most well-known parks in Africa, Kruger National Park was not the first game reserve in Africa, or even in South Africa. In the late 1800s, the great herds of wildlife were starting to be wiped out by hunting and the idea of a “game reserve” was developed to ensure stocks would be available for hunters – not really our current idea of conservation. To address this, proposals

were made, starting as early as 1895, to set aside areas that would allow for game stocks to replenish. It took until 1898 for the first reserve to be implemented. In March 1898, the Sabi Game Reserve was proclaimed, protecting an area of about 250,000 hectares, located between the Crocodile and Sabi rivers. This primarily came as the result of efforts by Paul Kruger, who was then president of the Transvaal Republic (later known as the South African Republic). The Sabi Game Reserve included the current day Skakuza, Malelane and Pretoriuskop rest camps.

In 1902, Major James Stevenson-Hamilton was appointed as the first warden and introduced major changes for the park. His focus was on conservation – curb poaching and enlarging the park. He was a major force with government and successfully lobbied to extend the park boundaries. It took until 1926 for the South African government to define the National Parks Act, with the Kruger National Park as its first protected area. Kruger opened to the public in 1927.¹

WHY SELF DRIVE?

Those who want to experience the wild of the African bush may feel intimidated by the time, cost and/or logistics involved in arranging what I consider the trip of a lifetime. Arranging a self-drive trip within Kruger National Park provides the perfect way to see the African bush, while tailoring the trip to the exact type of experience you want to have. Whether you want to rough it in a tent or experience the luxury of a fully catered private safari, adventures in Kruger can be tailored to your requirements. Regardless of the type of accommodation, self driving offers a number of advantages:

THE CRADLE OF HUMANKIND

The Cradle of Humankind, the World Heritage Site first named by UNESCO in 1999, is about 50 kilometers northwest of Johannesburg. The site contains a complex of limestone caves, including the Sterkfontein Caves, where the 2.3-million year-old fossil *Australopithecus africanus* was found in 1947, helping to corroborate the 1924 discovery of another juvenile *Australopithecus africanus* skull found in the north west province of South Africa. This location has produced a large number as well as some of the oldest hominid fossils ever found, some dating back as far as 3.5 million years ago. Sterkfontein alone has produced more than a third of the early hominid fossils ever found.²

Resources:

- <http://www.cradleofhumankind.co.za/index.html>
- <http://www.maropeng.co.za/>

*The Cradle of Humankind site contains a complex of limestone caves where the 2.3-million year-old fossil *Australopithecus africanus* was found in 1947.*





Control Your Itinerary: With a self-drive vacation, you can book the locations in the park you want to see, spend as much or as little time in the type of camp you want and control the times you spend in the park versus in the camps. With packaged tours, you'll be at the whim of the tour company, which might be fine if you get a good one, but any time you're working with a larger group there are bound to be compromises you may not want to make. As a photographer, you'll want to be out of the camps before the sun rises to capture the best photos, which may or may not be possible with a larger group. By doing it all yourself, you control where you want to be and when, within the confines of the rules of the park. (See [Appendix A](#) for a full list of park rules.)

See What You Want: Self driving means you can spend as much or as little time at every encounter with the park's wildlife, without being pulled by someone else's itinerary. Are you a birder? Spend as much time as you like sitting at one of the lakeside blinds in the park. Maybe elephants are your thing. You'll have plenty of opportunities to see these amazing creatures, but in a large

tour group you may get pulled away from these gentle giants before you are ready. When you self drive, you and the animals dictate the amount of time you spend at each encounter.

Reduce your Travel Costs: Arranging a self-drive vacation in Kruger National Park can be a cost-effective way to experience the African bush. Traveling as a small group, the cost for

accommodation is reasonable, and the shared costs of a vehicle are much less than the costs of having private guides. And while private guides will definitely show you more than you are likely to see on your own (especially the first time), a self drive in the Kruger will still allow you to see an amazing variety of African wildlife. Following some of the simple suggestions made in this book will ensure you have an amazing experience.

WHEN TO VISIT KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

There is never a bad time to visit the park, but each season offers a different experience, which may help you decide when you want to go. Regardless of the time of year you plan to go, try to book as far in advance as possible to ensure you can get the camps you want and the type of

accommodation you're most interested in. I've visited Kruger in every season, and my favorite time of year is in August and September (winter).

SEASONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

North Americans have to remember South Africa is in the southern hemisphere so the seasons are reversed. Our summers are their winters and vice versa. One of the main considerations is in our winter (especially around Christmas and New Year's Day) the South Africans are in the middle of their summer holidays. These are important holidays, and the schools and many businesses shut down for extended periods. The park will be much busier at this time and I would recommend avoiding it. South Africa also recognizes a number of public holidays, which manifest as extended long weekends. Being aware of when these occur may also help in determining the best time to book your trip. [A listing is available on the web.](#)



From a climate perspective, Kruger is considered sub-tropical and most of the time it is hot during the day – generally above 25 C. My preference is for the drier, winter months when the game viewing is at its peak. The temperatures are a little cooler and, because of the die-off of the bush, it is easier for a first-time visitor to spot game. The grasses die down and trees and bushes lose a lot of their density. Because of the reduction in water, game will migrate to available sources and provide great opportunities for spotting wildlife, especially in the early morning and late afternoon as wildlife gets more active. One thing to note about winter is the nights can get cold, and you will need to pack some warm cloths to enjoy those clear nights.

The wetter summer months are visually more appealing as the bush becomes more lush and waterholes start to fill up. The dense bush does make it harder to spot game, but you are rewarded with summer migrant bird populations as well as a lot of newborn wildlife toward the end of November and early December. There's nothing better than seeing a litter of new cubs in a lion pride. If you are planning to camp, the days can get hot (I've experienced temperatures in excess of 40 C regularly) and wet, so be prepared for these type of conditions. Visiting Kruger National Park is great any time but depending on your interests, different times of year may be more attractive to you.

JANUARY THROUGH MARCH

These summer months normally have dry and hot days. Newborn wildlife from November/December is growing and getting more

active. This is a good time of year for bird watchers, as there is a large migratory bird population during this period.

APRIL

April starts the fall or autumn period, and the lack of rain starts to change the bush from lush green to a sparser brown. Temperatures begin to cool down at night but daytime temperatures are still quite warm and pleasant. Scattered thunderstorms can be experienced in the afternoons, and get quite spectacular.

MAY AND JUNE

May and June starts the winter months. Especially at night, the temperatures can get quite cool. As there is not a lot of moisture, the bush starts to die off and becomes brown and the trees start losing their leaves. With the reduction in the density of the bush, game viewing becomes better during this time.

JULY TO AUGUST

July and August is the heart of the winter; the bush is very dry and the nights are cold. If you're doing night drives at this time, you'll need to bundle up. Game viewing is amazing at this time, as the bush drops off to its lowest levels, making visibility good. Fires are also common at this time, making for some interesting landscapes once the fires burn out.

SEPTEMBER TO OCTOBER

Spring comes to the park in September and October. It's still dry for the start of the spring season, with low water levels that allows for



Giant Kingfisher

MALARIA AND KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Kruger National Park is in an area of the country that is susceptible to malaria, and proper precautions should be taken for any visitor to the park. That said, the risk of malaria is relatively low, especially during the July to October dry season, and the risk of the disease should not stop you from visiting the park. To be safe, anti-malarial medication should be taken by all visitors to the park, particularly if you're going during the wet season. As no medication is 100 per cent effective, it also makes sense to take other precautions during your time in the park:

- Avoid being bitten by mosquitoes by covering up and wearing light-colored, neutral clothing;
- Use an insect repellent;
- Burn mosquito coils when spending outside, especially around dawn and dusk;
- Use mosquito nets in your sleeping area.

While most mosquitoes do carry malaria, being bitten does not mean you will contract the disease. The normal incubation of the disease is about seven to 14 days, but can vary depending on the individual's immune system strength and medications taken. Typical symptoms can include fatigue, dizziness, muscle pain, general weakness, periods of chills and fever/sweating. If in doubt, seek medical attention immediately.

excellent game viewing. As it gets to the end of October, the rains come and the cycle begins again.

NOVEMBER THROUGH DECEMBER:

As spring turns to summer, Kruger park starts to heat up. These days are hot and humid, with lot of rain. One of the highlights of South African summers are the afternoon and evening thunderstorms that can light up the night. You will not experience anything quite as dramatic as a large thunderstorm over the African plains. Late November and early December also brings the birth of many young animals, which can be a treat for anyone to see.

SAN PARK WILD CARD

Anyone who enters the park will need to pay a conservation fee as part of entry. For anyone who plans to have an extended stay in South Africa, a Wild Card might be a good investment. The Wild Card allows you to pay an annual fee, which then covers all conservation fees for any of the national parks for the year. For a single visit, it's probably not worthwhile, but if you plan to visit another park (say Addo Elephant National Park or Table Mountain National Park) during your time in South Africa, it can definitely save you money. I like to think of it as a charitable

donation to a park system that does a great job of conserving wild spaces in Africa. More information on the Wild Card program can be found [on the SAN Park web site](#).

AVERAGE DAYTIME TEMPERATURES IN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

MONTH	AVERAGE TEMPERATURE
January	18 to 34 C
February	18 to 33 C
March	18 to 33 C
April	13 to 28 C
May	13 to 28 C
June	9 to 26 C
July	9 to 26 C
August	12 to 28 C
September	12 to 28 C
October	16 to 32 C
November	16 to 32 C
December	18 to 34 C

WHAT NOT TO EXPECT

For first-time visitors to the African continent, South Africa is a great starting point. While different from what you experience in North America, there is still an aspect of First World comforts. Experiencing a safari in Kruger is likewise a good first step for those new to travelling in Africa. Kruger provides a safe, controlled environment for experiencing the African bush. That said, it's important that people going to Kruger enter with correct expectations. For many, the "classic" African safari experience will differ somewhat from the experience in Kruger. Kruger has a relatively built up infrastructure – paved and dirt roads, well maintained and serviced rest camps, service centers to buy fuel, restaurants and a full range of accommodation options. While the major "brands" haven't started taking over the park (you won't find a McDonald's in the park), there is a fully developed infrastructure in place. While you will see large tracks of open space in parts of the park (primarily the north), don't expect to be heading off road to

track down the pride of lions you see off in the distance – leaving the maintained roads is strictly against park rules.

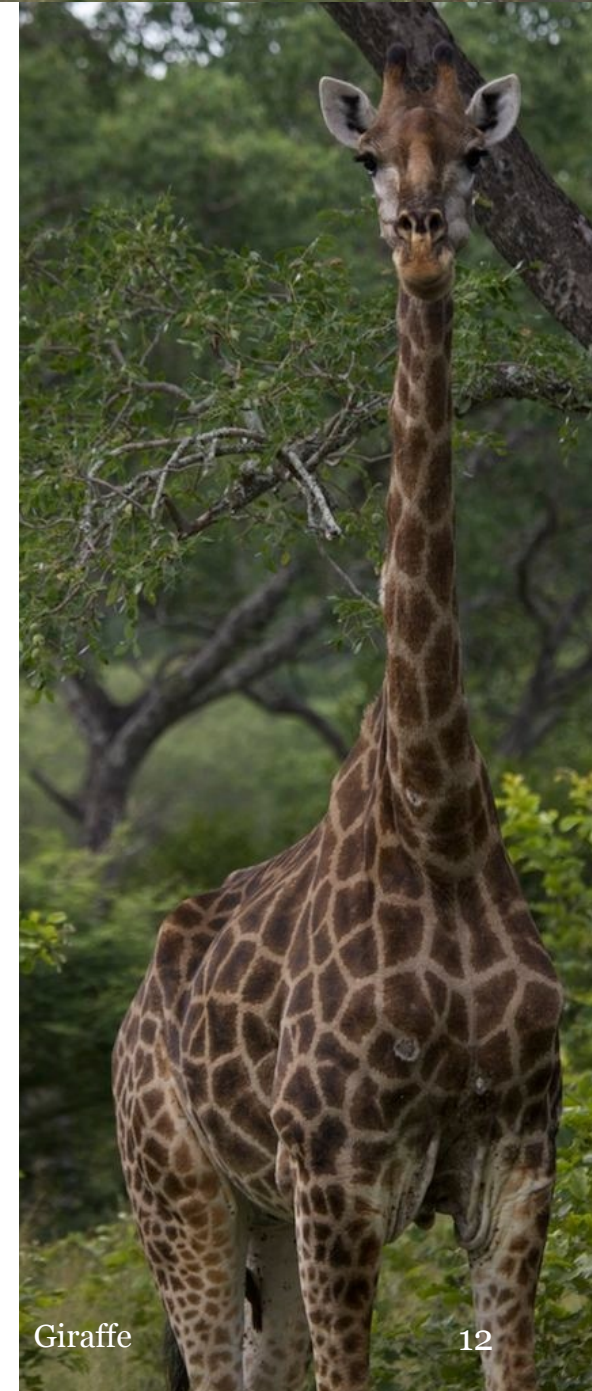
RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET

In addition to this book, there are a lot of great resources available on the Internet to help you plan a trip to Kruger. The following web sites are a good place to start:

- [South African National Parks Kruger Web Site](#)
- [Online Bookings for Kruger National Park](#)
- [GPS Coordinates for All Camps](#)
- [Siyabona Africa](#)
- [O.R. Tambo International Airport](#)
- [Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport](#)

¹ Dennis, Nigel and Scholes. Bob, 2000. The Kruger National Park Wonders of an African Eden.

² Smith, David (15 January 2010). "Visit to the Cradle of Humankind". London: [The Guardian](#). Retrieved 2012-02-15



Giraffe