

ESWATINI

Swazi expert **Jenny Bowen** of Sense Earth shares a personal take on why you should visit this captivating kingdom

If you're looking for a safari destination that is safe, off-the-beaten track and genuine, then Eswatini is the place for you. The kingdom delivers the ultimate bush experience, where time seems to slow down, and there is a sense of peace and tranquility. Approximately the size of Wales, Eswatini is very easy to get around. And while you could see many attractions in one day, I don't advise it: you would simply not do the country justice. Take your time to immerse yourself in the culture, the wildlife and the scenery. Here are ten things I love about Eswatini... and good reasons you should visit!



Festivals

Eswatini hosts many festivals throughout the year. Organising your trip around the traditional festivals can be tricky because they don't release the exact dates until about two weeks before they occur. But, if you happen to be in the country for one of them, consider yourself lucky — and be sure to go.

Cultural events include the Marula Festival (February/March), celebrating the fruit's harvest and its use in making marula beer; the Umhlanga (or Reed Dance) Festival in late August or early September, where thousands of young, unmarried women cut reeds for the Queen Mother; and the Incwala Ceremony, celebrating the first fruits of the harvest and at which the warriors gather (late December).

Modern festivals are easier to plan for as they have set dates. These include MTN Bushfire Festival (May), with live music, dance, theatre and visual arts; Luju Food and Lifestyle Festival (August); and Eswatini Kota Festival (September), which celebrates local culture and food.

Walking with wildlife

There are several reserves in Eswatini where you can explore using self-guided trails and walk among wildlife. These include Mlilwane for zebra, antelope and for seeing crocodiles basking in the sun; Mbuluzi for ambling with giraffe; Malolotja Nature Reserve for big mountain ranges and eland; Phophonyane for its nature trails; and Mlawula Nature Reserve for its fabulous trail network. For an extra special experience, sleep out under the stars on an overnight supported hike with Ehlatzini Bush Trails in Hlane Royal National Park.



ADVENTURE

Adrenaline-fuelled sports in Eswatini include caving, whitewater rafting and the canopy tour at magical Malolotja, where several zip wires traverse a ravine. Getting there by 4WD is an adventure in itself.

Intimate safaris

This is the place to come if you want to avoid countless vehicles surrounding the wildlife. Chasing down the 'Big Five' is not in the remit of the talented and professional EmaSwati guides; for them it is more about the experience as a whole. While leopard and buffalo are few and far between, you are likely to spot both lion and elephant in Hlane Royal National Park, and rhinos in Hlane and Mkhaya Game Reserve. Safari in Eswatini is an immersive experience, including bird spotting, learning about traditional uses of local plants and, potentially, spending time simply watching a dung beetle roll its ball of poop.



Arts and crafts

The EmaSwati are extremely talented artisans, and the choice and scope of artefacts they create is extraordinary. There are three privately run ventures — Gone Rural, Swazi Candles and Ngwenya Glass — where you can watch pieces being made. There are shops at each of these locations where you can purchase something special to remember your visit by. It is also worth visiting the craft markets in Mbabane and Manzini.



Favoured place

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Days 1-3:

Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary

Walk among zebra and antelope, spot birds and see nyala around camp during the day and warthogs warming themselves by the fire at night. Stay in traditional beehive huts.

Days 4-5:

Mkhaya Game Reserve

Explore the home of black and white rhino and buffalo. Enjoy game drives, and track wildlife and spot birds on foot. Dine out under the stars. Stay in cottages in the riverine forest at Stone Camp.

Days 6-8:

Hlane Royal National Park

Hlane hosts the largest herds in the kingdom, such as impala, nyala and waterbuck, as well as lion, elephant and rhino. Watch wildlife at the Ndlovu waterhole. Stay in rondavels at Ndlovu Camp.

Days 9-11:

Foresters Arms, near Mbabane

Head to the mountains for a stay at this boutique hotel. As well as the scenery and rich plantlife, there are many attractions nearby, including Ngwenya Glass and Malolotja Nature Reserve, with its wildlife and zipline.



Rhino

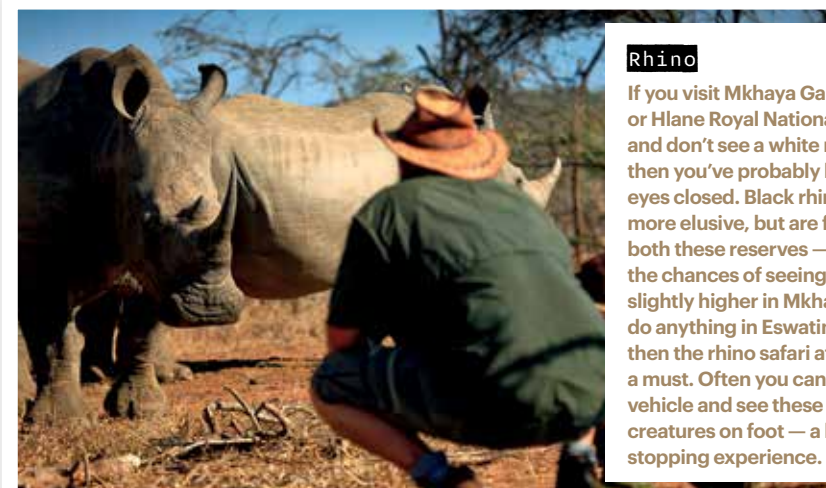
If you visit Mkhaya Game Reserve or Hlane Royal National Park and don't see a white rhino, then you've probably kept your eyes closed. Black rhino are more elusive, but are found in both these reserves — though the chances of seeing one are slightly higher in Mkhaya. If you do anything in Eswatini, though, then the rhino safari at Hlane is a must. Often you can leave the vehicle and see these magnificent creatures on foot — a heart-stopping experience.

Self-drive safaris

The kingdom is ideal for self-drive exploration, with an easy-to-navigate road system. If you would like a guide at any point along your way, such as for the national parks, you can request one at your accommodation. Self-drive allows you to get off the beaten track and there are plenty of self-catering places to stay, including at Mbuluzi, Royal Jozini Private Game Reserve, KaMsholo Bushveld Safaris, Dombeya Game Reserve and Malolotja, to name but a few.

Culture

You can't fail to experience Eswatini's rich culture. While many reserves put on traditional dancing in the evenings, Mantenga Nature Reserve and Cultural Village is well worth a visit. Here, you can learn about the local way of life and watch dancing performances at 11:15 and 15:15 every day. There is also the option to visit a *sangoma* (traditional healer), a fascinating experience you can arrange at Shewula Mountain Camp. Or stay the night in Shewula community and let the ladies cook a traditional supper for you?



QUIRKY ACCOMMODATION

Eswatini has unique and varied places to stay. These include traditional-style beehive huts in Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary, safari tents at Phophonyane Falls Ecolodge, a self-catering lodge in Mbuluzi Game Reserve, or why not sleep in a cottage with no walls in Mkhaya. I would recommend staying at least two nights in Mkhaya to truly experience it — the first night is often a little disconcerting after being told to keep the (small and unassuming) gate closed to prevent warthogs and hyena coming in.