

Tour Report

Zimanga – Wildlife & Night Sky Photography

23 July – 1 August 2025

White-backed vulture



Elephant



Vervet monkey



Lion



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Wednesday 23 July 2025

Day 1:

London to Johannesburg

I set off from my home town and arrived at Heathrow with plenty of time. It was a classic late- night overnight flight to Johannesburg. At the baggage drop, I bumped into one of the guests, someone I'd travelled with before, so we had a good catch-up while we queued. It's always nice to see a familiar face before a long-haul flight.

Check-in was smooth, no drama with the bags, and we even had time to grab a coffee and just chill before heading to the gate.

The flight ended up being delayed by about an hour, not ideal, but nothing too painful. These things happen. Once we were up in the air, it was a pretty easy ride. A bit of sleep, and time to watch a movie and before we knew it, we were touching down in Joburg, more or less on time and ready for the next leg of the journey.

Thursday 24 July 2025

Day 2:

We arrived in Johannesburg on time, with plenty of breathing room before our connecting flight. Two of the guests had a minor hiccup with their tickets, but it was all sorted without too much fuss.

After landing, we hit the road for the 4-hour journey to Zimanga. A long drive, but we finally arrived and were warmly greeted by our guide, Frikkie. From the main gate, it was just another 20 minutes or so until we reached the lodge. As we entered the reserve, we had our first glimpse of some wildlife. We spotted a genet, a beautiful spotted eagle owl, an elephant moving quietly through the trees, and a pair of black-backed jackals settling down for the night. A lovely welcome to Zimanga.

Once there, a few friendly faces were waiting to welcome us, and we wasted no time tucking into a well-earned home-cooked dinner. I gave the group a quick rundown of what to expect for the next morning's sessions, just to set the tone and run through timings, etc.

Then it was off to bed for some much-needed rest after a full day of travel!

Friday 25 July 2025

Day 3:

Our first full day in Zimanga kicked off with that classic safari ritual, a 5:45 am coffee meet-up at the main lodge. Still a little groggy from the journey, but there's something about that South African winter air, the smell of fresh coffee, and the anticipation that wakes you up fast. By 6:00 am, we were off in the vehicle, split into two groups for the morning.

Group one headed out with Frikkie for a traditional game drive, while I joined group two in one of my all-time favourite spots: Scavenger Hill Hide.

The drive got off to an exciting start as the group came across a breeding herd of elephants standing right on the track, quietly drinking at a nearby water source. Things got a little tense when one of the females gave a mock charge, despite the vehicle being at a good distance. It was odd and this herd is usually very chilled, so it just goes to show that no matter how relaxed you think an animal is, they are still wild! Roars of lions echoed in the distance, not close, but close enough that we suspect it may have unsettled the herd a bit.

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After spending some quality time with the elephants, the group set out to follow the sound of those lions. Before long, they found three male lion brothers lounging on top of a mound, calm, regal, and perfectly posed for portrait shots. What an awesome start to our first day. Other sightings during the drive included a few lilac-breasted rollers showing off their colours, a lizard buzzard perched on a branch, and a handful of warthogs running through the grass.

Meanwhile at Scavenger Hill Hide...

While the drive was unfolding, I joined the second group at Scavenger Hill Hide, an elevated hide overlooking the Doornhoek Valley. This place is always a highlight. The sweeping view alone is worth the early start, but it's the action that really makes it special. Offal is placed on site to attract scavengers, creating a dynamic feeding scene that's both incredible to watch and vital for conservation.

Scavenger Hill isn't just about great photos. It plays a key role in supporting critically endangered white-backed vultures that breed nearby. By keeping them within protected areas, they reduce the risk of vulture poisoning, still one of the biggest threats to their survival in the area.

Our session didn't disappoint.

First to arrive were a pair of woolly-necked storks, appearing with confidence. Not long after, the sky seemed to shift as a swirling venue of white-backed vultures descended, around 25 in total. The usual chaos followed: wings flapping, birds jostling, dust flying. Classic vulture dramatics.



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As things settled a bit, a single side-striped jackal crept into view, followed by two different black-backed jackals, all cautiously navigating the leftovers and trying to avoid altercations with the vultures.

It was a phenomenal morning, between the drama at the hide and the excitement on the drive, everyone came away buzzing!

And this was only day one.

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Afternoon into Evening – Tamboti Hide

After a solid start to the day, we took some time to rest and recharge before heading out for our late afternoon sessions. Once again, we split into two groups, one heading out on a game drive with Frikkie, and the rest of us settling into Tamboti Night Hide, ready for whatever the evening would bring.

We hadn't even had time to properly set up when a lone bull elephant appeared at the waterhole. No warning, just silently materialised from the bush and walked straight in for a drink. It was a mad scramble to get cameras into position, but we managed to grab a few frames of him before he finished and drifted back into the bush. That kind of start always gets the adrenaline going.

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A little while later, a small troop of vervet monkeys came down to drink. One of them became completely fascinated by his own reflection in the water. He stood up on his back legs, listening intently to the sound of our shutters clicking—seemingly trying to figure out what we were all about. A charming little moment that had everyone smiling behind their lenses.



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Just as the sun dropped behind the trees, a group of nyala moved cautiously into the clearing. They didn't end up drinking, but it was a good sighting and kept us on our toes.

After dark, another bull elephant arrived, just as silently as the first. He didn't hang around long; a single deep gulp of water and he vanished almost as quickly as he appeared.

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These fleeting encounters in low light make for moody, low-key images that really capture a different dimension.



Meanwhile... on the Game Drive

While we were tucked away in the hide, the other group were out on a game drive with Frikkie and they had an awesome session. The highlight? A beautiful male cheetah. They spent a good amount of time with him as he moved across open terrain, offering clean backgrounds and excellent light.

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Saturday 26 July 2025

Day 4:

It was just after midnight, and with another nine hours to go before pick-up, we all decided it was time to stretch out and try to catch a bit of rest or at least pretend to. The night was still, the hide was quiet, and the stars were doing their thing.

A few hours later, the alarm jolted us back to life and we scrambled to our seats only to be met with two massive male rhinos standing silently in the shadows, staring directly at us. A proper heart-racing moment. Sadly, they didn't come in for a drink, and they were tucked too deep into the darkness for any decent photos. But wow, what a moment.

Things calmed down again after that, until a surprising bit of birdy business: a pair of three-banded plovers getting *very friendly* out in the open. Not something we expected to see under a moonlit sky, but hey, nature doesn't keep a schedule.

The final guests of the night? A small group of male buffalo sauntering past the waterhole. Like the rhinos, they didn't stop to drink, just a casual midnight stroll, apparently.

All in all, a fantastic session! Even though no one came to drink, we were lucky to have such cool visitors pass by. You never really know what the night will bring.

Meanwhile, the other group hit up the lagoon hide in the morning and were treated to some pied kingfisher action, plus sightings of a thick-knee and a striated heron. Not bad at all!

That afternoon, I switched teams and headed into the other overnight hide, Mgodhi. It's a little smaller than last night's, but still cosy enough to settle in and cross fingers for some nighttime drama.

As the sun dipped low, a lone bull elephant wandered in. We held our breath... but nope. No drink. Still, it was a beautiful encounter. He disappeared into the bush, only to reappear around 9 pm. We got excited and then, cruelly, he veered off and didn't come our way!

The rest of the night? Silence. One of those very still, very quiet nights where not much stirs and every little sound seems louder than it should be.

But morning brought a bit more life, glossy starlings, yellow-fronted canaries, blue waxbills, and some red-billed oxpeckers flitting around. Later on, a solo female impala showed up, quietly feeding. Then the rest of the herd passed through, including a handsome male bringing up the rear.

Not every night in the hide is action-packed, but that's the magic of it, the anticipation, the stillness, and the unpredictability. You never really know who'll show up next.

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Sunday 27 July 2025

Day 5:

After a pretty quiet night in the hide, the afternoon had us set up at the Bhejane Bird Bath, and boy, did things take a turn, feathered friends everywhere!

We were surrounded by bird activity almost from the get-go. The lineup included some of the usual suspects like blue waxbills and common waxbills, laughing doves, and even a few of their slightly fancier cousins, twin-spotted doves. Add to that a splash of canaries, and it was basically a feathery frenzy.

That said... the wind was seriously picking up. Gusty wind, which made the birds extra skittish. A few would swoop in, look around nervously, and bolt off at the slightest rustle. Patience was definitely key.

But when the wind did settle, we had some beautiful moments. Little flocks would gather at the edge of the pool, cautiously hopping down for a drink or a splashy bath. The waxbills were especially entertaining, tiny, colourful, and constantly on the move.

There were a few golden opportunities for photos during these calmer spells, birds fluffed up mid-bath, droplets flying, reflections in the water, magic!

It wasn't the most dramatic session, but there's something peaceful about spending an afternoon just watching birds come and go. Especially when the hide gives you that perfect eye-level view of all the action. The session ended with a visit from a thirsty Nyala which was the perfect ending!



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Monday 28 July 2025

Day 6:

What a start to the day! It was a chilly 7°C this morning with a sneaky little breeze that made it feel even colder. Thankfully, the amazing Zimanga lodge team had us covered with hot water bottles and blankets (talk about a luxury safari), absolute lifesavers on the game drive.

Our first mission was to drop one half of the group at the Scavenger Hill Hide, and wow, did they hit the jackpot! Three side-striped jackals showed up along with a crowd of white-backed vultures. Lots of action, lots of interaction, and plenty of excitement for them!

Meanwhile, my group set off on a morning drive. We rolled down to the reservoir where the low-lying mist created the perfect moody atmosphere, a dreamy setup for hippo photography. Sadly, the hippos weren't playing along (clearly not in the mood for modelling today), so after a while we decided to move on in search of something more cooperative.

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Next on the list: the cheetah brothers. After some tracking, we finally got a signal and found them... fast asleep, of course. Classic cats, they weren't going anywhere and certainly not for us! After watching them snooze for a bit, we left them to their beauty rest.

The rest of the drive was pretty quiet thanks to the cold, but we did spot a pair of secretary birds strutting across the landscape. Beautiful as always, but too far off for photos this time.

Before long it was time to swing back to collect the hide group (still buzzing from their jackal-and-vulture show!) and head back to the lodge for a well-earned breakfast.

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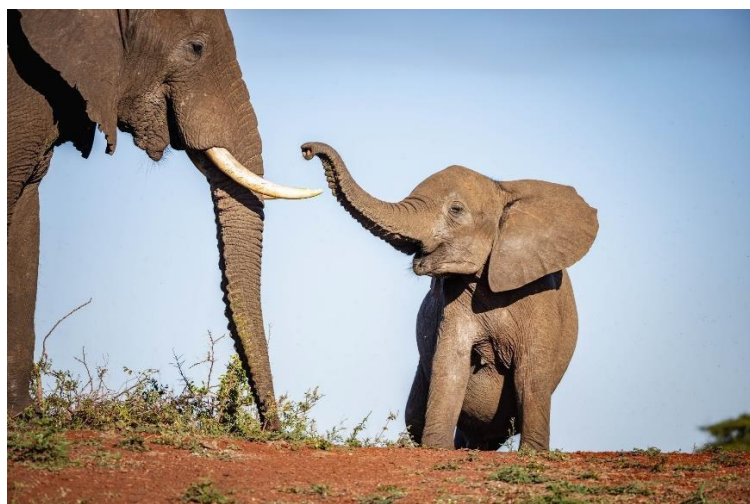


Tuesday 29 July 2025

Day 7:

The afternoon drive began with a sighting of the breeding herd of elephants near the Zimanga dam wall. Our initial plan was to try for dramatic photographs of the elephants silhouetted along the crest of the wall. The positioning looked promising, but the herd moved in such a way that the scene never quite lined up as hoped.

Undeterred, we shifted to plan B and made our way around to the dam, anticipating that the herd might head in that direction. Fortune was on our side, and the elephants did exactly that, drifting steadily toward us until they were almost within touching distance. It was a magical encounter that allowed for beautiful close-up images and time to really appreciate the size and presence of these gentle giants.



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We decided to remain with the herd for the rest of the drive, following them as they moved purposefully across the reserve towards the river. Their slow, deliberate progress created a peaceful atmosphere, punctuated by the sounds of breaking branches and low rumbles of communication between individuals.





The highlight of the afternoon came as the sun began to sink toward the horizon. Along the riverbank, a young elephant discovered a patch of loose sand and began dust-bathing in the golden light of sunset. The scene was both playful and serene — the calf rolling, tossing sand, and covering itself while the warm colours of the evening bathed the landscape. It was a fitting finale to what had already been a remarkable session with the herd, leaving everyone with lasting memories of one of Africa's most iconic species.

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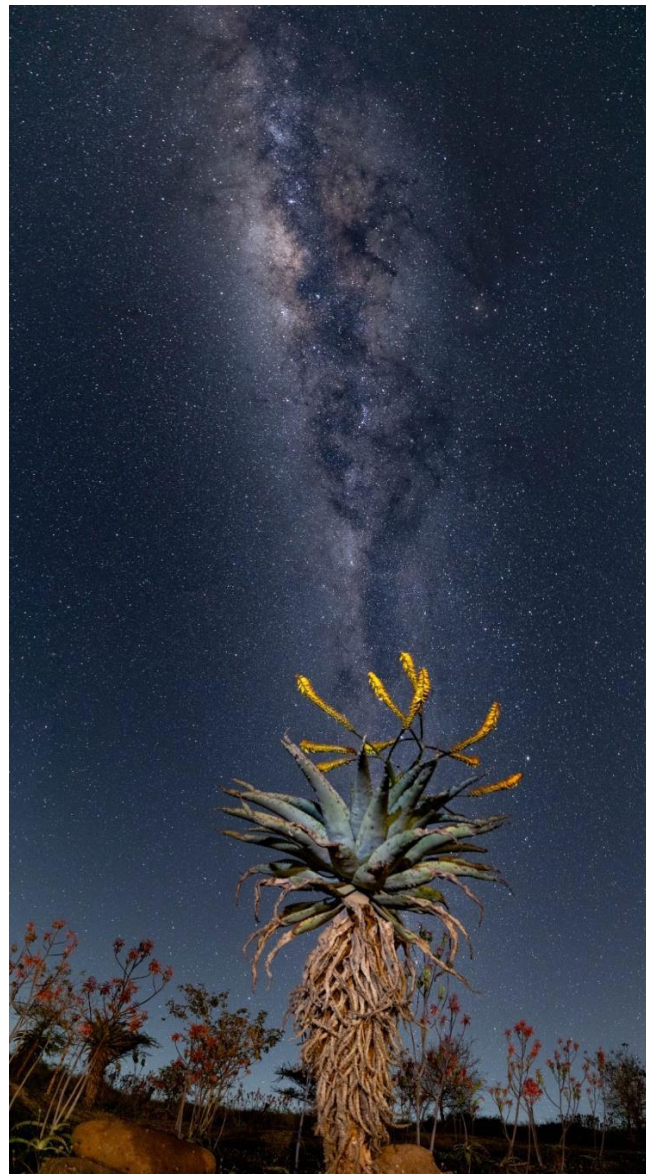
That evening, once back at camp, we enjoyed another amazing dinner. I took the group out around the lodge to practice some astro photography, teaching them the basics of settings and constellations to help locate the Milky Way galactic core.

After returning to camp and enjoying another excellent dinner prepared by the lodge team, we gathered our cameras once more for a different kind of adventure. This time, rather than searching for wildlife, our focus shifted skyward for an evening of astro photography around the lodge.

With the night clear and crisp, conditions were ideal. Away from artificial light, the sky above Zimanga revealed a dazzling canopy of stars. The Milky Way stretched in a brilliant arc overhead, its galactic core glowing brightly against the darkness. Before long, we were able to pick out the main constellations, using them as guides to orient ourselves and frame compositions.

The session began with an introduction to the fundamentals of night photography, balancing exposure, aperture, and ISO to capture the stars while avoiding noise. The guests had the opportunity to put theory into practice, experimenting with settings and refining techniques to capture epic astro shots.

It proved the perfect close to a day already filled with memorable encounters, a reminder that the magic of Zimanga continues long after the sun has set.



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Wednesday 30 July 2025

Day 8:

This morning's mission? Track down the elusive three male lion brothers who've been playing hard to get all week. They've been hanging out in a notoriously tricky area, steep, thick, and not exactly camera-friendly but we were up for the challenge and sometimes in wildlife photography, you have to take the risks.

We climbed high into the hills, tuned in for any distant roars that might have given us any indication of where they were. Before long, we caught the distant sound of lion calls echoing through the chilly morning air (and man was it chilly), deep, guttural roars that got our hopes up fast.

We made a move in the direction of the calls, weaving our way through the hills, trying to close the gap. But after a solid bit of searching (and no sign of them), it started to feel like the trail had gone cold. We were just about to call it and move on...

...and there they were. Just a little further up the hill, chilling right in the middle of the track like they'd been waiting for us.

Classic lions, silent, and suddenly right in front of you! I love lion sightings like this, when it all looks to be not working out, and they just appear.

It didn't take long for them to get on the move again. We managed to grab a few shots as they casually strolled through the hills before plopping down for another mid-morning rest. Can't blame them, really. That terrain was no joke!



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Our guide reckoned they'd already covered around four kilometres that morning from where they were last seen. Impressive stuff!

We spent pretty much the rest of the morning with them, soaking it all in and working on getting some solid portrait shots. It turned into a bit of a creative session, playing around with compositions, trying to get those low angles that really show off their size and power. These boys are absolute units, and we wanted to do them justice.



There's something about looking a lion in the eye through the lens that never gets old. What a morning. Definitely glad we took the gamble this time, it totally paid off!

In the afternoon, we were in the lagoon hide.

Wow, what a session. Honestly, one of the best bird photography sessions I've had in ages. It started off slow and quiet, the kind of afternoon where you wonder if the action's going to pick up at all... and then boom. Chaos!

We were surrounded by birds. Egrets everywhere, a stunning Great White Egret strutting through the shallows, Black Crakes darting around, Thick-knees standing awkwardly adorable, Blacksmith Lapwings, a whole crew of juvenile and adult Night Herons, Jacanas doing their leaf-walking thing, a lone Striated Heron, and even an African Spoonbill making an appearance, just to name a few.

It was one of those *"I don't know where to point my lens"* kind of afternoons.

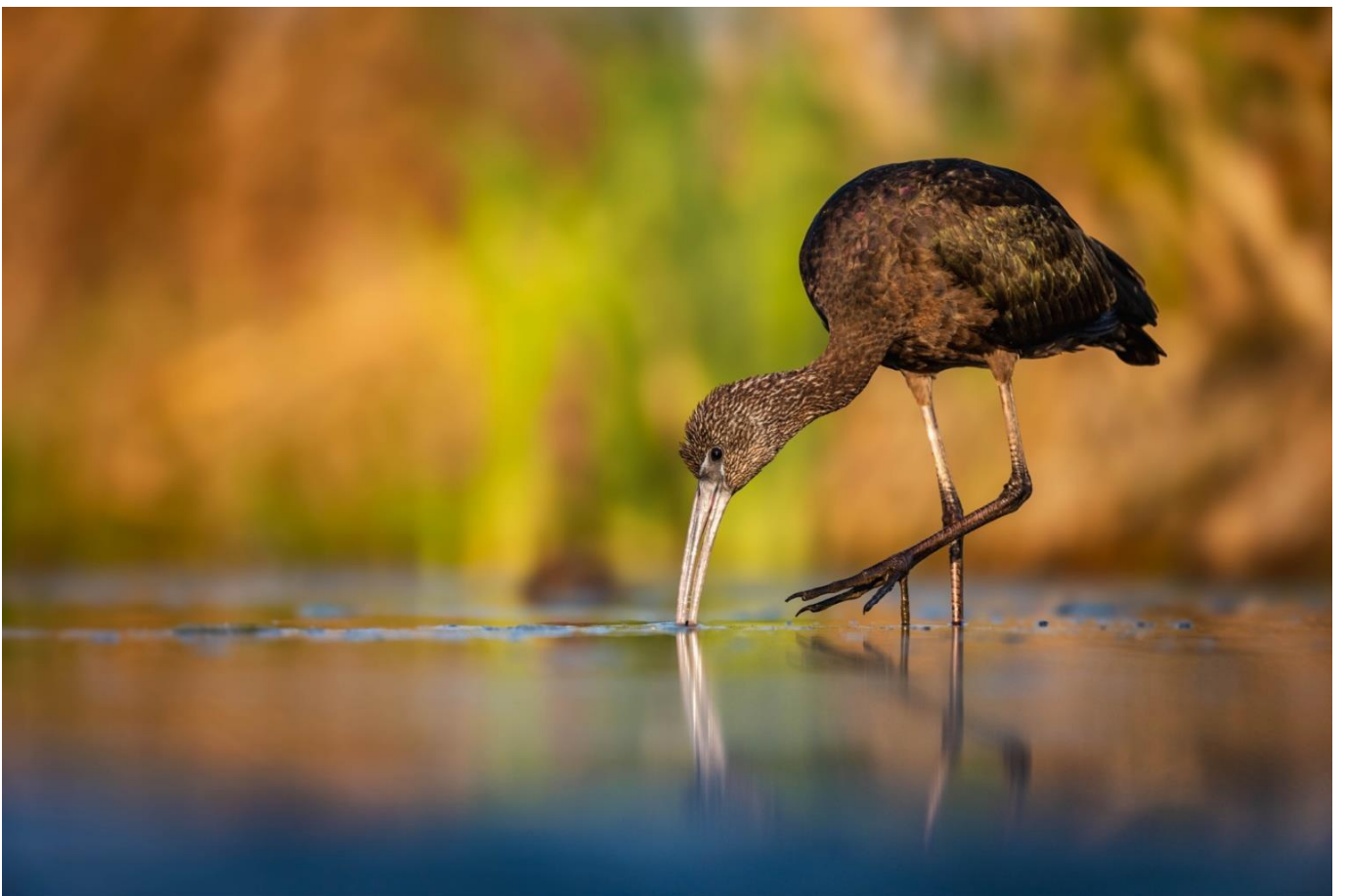
But the glossy ibis totally stole the show. They were fishing, bathing, putting on a full performance, and the light? Oh man, the light was good. It lit up their iridescent feathers perfectly. Greens, purples, bronzes, it's easy to see why they're called *glossy*. Absolutely stunning birds!

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Another... slightly unexpected highlight? Two Egyptian geese mating just metres away from us. It made for some wild and intimate photos, though I couldn't help but feel for the female, she was definitely having a rough time with the male holding her neck and pushing her head underwater. Nature doesn't always do romance gently.



As the session went on, the lighting just kept getting better and better. Backlit magic everywhere, perfect for both high-key and low-key shots. That golden, glowy stuff photographers dream about, well, definitely what I dream about!

At one point, I was in such a rhythm, snapping, filming, repeating, that my camera literally gave me an overheating warning. Probably a sign to ease off the shutter a bit (oops).



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But honestly, the other two guests and I, who were sharing the experience, didn't want it to end. Birds flying, feeding, calling, and interacting in every direction, it was non-stop action. So many species, so much going on, total sensory overload in the best way possible.

Hands down, one of my top birding sessions I've had.



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Thursday 31 July 2025

Day 9:

It was departure day, but we weren't ready to say goodbye just yet. With a bit of time before we had to hit the road, we decided to squeeze in one last game drive. You know... just in case the bush had one more surprise up its sleeve. Spoiler alert, it did.

Before we jumped into the vehicle, we heard some deep, distant roars echoing through the air, almost certainly from the local trio of male lion brothers. That was all the encouragement we needed. We loaded up and set off, ears perked, eyes scanning, and our trusty telemetry system ready to pick up their signal.

It didn't take long. That familiar beep-beep-beep started chirping, and just like that, we were on the trail of those cats.

The signal led us deep into some seriously thick bush, exactly the kind of terrain you do not want to play hide and seek with lions in. Still, we pressed on. And then, just as we were starting to wonder if we were going to find them... There they were. Plonked right on the road like they owned the place (which, let's be honest, they kind of do).

Much like the day before, they were on the move, then lying down, then moving again. For a while, they stayed annoyingly just out of reach; they were in front but walking away from us. Nice if you like photos of the back of a lion... trying to get around them was difficult as there were sickle bushes everywhere.

But then our guide, Frikkie, an absolute legend, pulled off a bit of bush magic and manoeuvred us in front of them, trying to avoid a nasty puncture from those sickle thorns. Finally! Some glorious head-on shots of these big boys, strutting their stuff.

They were also pretty vocal this morning, lots of low rumbles and calls, and it soon became clear they weren't just talking to themselves, they were calling for a lady friend. And sure enough, we turned around and boom, there she was. A stunning lioness, bathed in golden morning light, was coming down the ridge behind us like some kind of sunlit goddess.

She was still a little way off, but it made for a perfect photo-op framed against the landscape bathed by the rising sun.

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Eventually, she and the boys came face to face. Turns out, she's not from their pride; this girl is flying solo. So, as you might imagine, the introductions were a little tense.

A bit of roaring, some growls, a few well-placed swats. Lion dating is *dramatic* to say the least and these boys have a lot to learn to win her over. But after some theatrics, everyone seemed to settle in and get comfortable. Peace was restored, and the felines tucked themselves into the shade for a sleep.

For us, though, it was time to head back to the lodge, pack up, and prepare for the journey home. What a way to end the week. It started quietly, but man, did it build up into something special. Wild moments, unforgettable sights, and just enough lion drama to keep things exciting right until the end.

Zimanga, you have been incredible as always!

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