

Tour Report

Zimanga – Wildlife & Night Sky Photography

3 – 11 June 2023

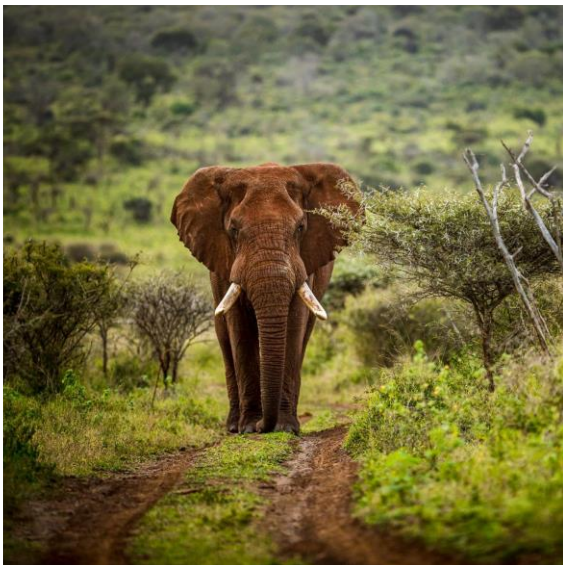
Rhino



Cheetah



Elephant



Lion



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Days 1 – 2: Saturday 3 – Sunday 4 June 2023

Weather: Sunny 20° C

The group and I were flying out of Heathrow to Durban. It was a night flight with British Airways, on their fabulous double-decker airbus. I met the group at the gate and already knew two of the guests from a Zambia tour in November 2022, so it was great to catch up with them.

After a long night flight, we finally arrived in Johannesburg at around 07:00. Once we had all disembarked from the plane, it was time to collect our luggage. There was a slight confusion about our bags, but luckily I saw my luggage on the carousel and we managed to retrieve all the others before heading to Zimanga. Our connecting flight to Durban was a short flight of approximately 45 minutes.

On arrival in Durban, it was time to meet up with our driver from the tour company. Everyone was in really good spirits and very much looking forward to an exciting week ahead as we commenced our three-and-a-half-hour drive to Zimanga Private Game Reserve.

We arrived at Zimanga Lodge at around 14:00 and enjoyed some welcome drinks. Once we had all settled into our rooms, we were briefly shown around the lodge. Then it was time for a quick, but tasty lunch before heading out on a game drive, a couple of hours before sunset.

We had a fantastic encounter with a huge bull elephant who was very curious and came so close that he could have been sitting with us. Our amazing guide Jono spent some time positioning the vehicle to get us in front of him while he was walking down the track.



We also had an exceptional encounter with a crash of white rhinos and several giraffes, then we watched as three cheetah sisters stalked impala. Unfortunately, it didn't turn into a hunt, but it was still amazing to see cheetahs so early on in our trip. The three sisters are around two years old and have left their mum to explore the big wide world.

After such a lovely afternoon, it was time to return to the lodge for dinner and a well-deserved sleep.

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Day 3: Monday 5 June 2023

Weather: Sunny 21° C

I had to split the group into two due to a number limit in the hides. Group One positioned themselves in the Lagoon hide, while Group Two went on a morning game drive.

Group One was in the Lagoon hide. This hide seats four photographers and offers photographic opportunities at any time of day, whether you prefer shooting with the sun, or into it. Each seat is equipped with a top-quality tripod and wheeled dollies, so switching direction is quick and easy, as the heavy-duty dollies silently roll across the smooth floors as you take photographs.

The mostly shallow waters of the Lagoon attract a variety of waterbirds, from tiny plovers and sandpipers to large birds like herons, storks and fish eagles. In the summer months, crocodiles are regular visitors and large specimens can be seen basking on the shoreline, while smaller, growing crocs catch their fish at night. The hide itself is an engineering marvel, as 24 tonnes of water is displaced to keep the hide level, without floating.

The entire hide is made of stainless steel to keep rust at bay and ensure a long lifespan for the Lagoon. All electricity needs are met by a nearby solar panel installation and battery bank, which allowed us to utilise cooling fans and a water pump circulating 9,000 litres of water per hour, keeping the water cool and fresh. The hide is placed off-centre in the Lagoon granting longer and shorter distances for photography, which are excellent for close-ups and action shots.



Group One had a fantastic three-hour session, with many visits from pied kingfishers - one juvenile was screeching for food. One of the guests captured kingfisher silhouettes. Other bird sightings included: thick-knee, malachite kingfisher, cattle egret, cormorant, giant kingfisher, a green-backed heron catching a fish, ibis, African darter and Egyptian goose.

I joined Group Two on safari and we had a pretty quiet start to the day, but there were lots of impala around. Eventually, we came across the Zimanga pride of lions: two lionesses, a male, and two younger males, nearly two years old now. They were not doing much aside from sleeping, so after a while, we moved on.

We found the three cheetah sisters resting in some dense vegetation. Getting out of the vehicle, we walked up to them. They were so relaxed that they just continued to rest. We spent some time with them before returning to the lagoon hide to collect the other group, then return to the lodge. On the way back, I got a sighting of a leopard known as 'Adidas' (due to three prominent markings under her left eye) up in a tree. We stopped under her in the tree for a better look, but unfortunately, this spooked her.

The leopard ran down the tree and escaped into the bushes somewhere. Apparently, she has a cub, so we think she was running down to protect it - wherever she had left it.

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When Group One headed out on safari later, they were extremely lucky to encounter a female leopard in a tree, a great sighting. She eventually came down and walked straight towards the vehicle for a short amount of time before heading off into the bushes.

Group One also found the group of lions, which were resting, so they spent the rest of the afternoon with the lions concentrating on images. One guest also got a nice shot of the male roaring.

From 14:30, I spent nineteen hours in the Umgodhi night hide with Group Two. We would be collected at 09:30 the following morning.

Initially, there wasn't much activity. However, at sunset, a three-banded plover made a few visits to the watering hole. It was a very long session, but we were also blessed with visits from two bull Cape buffalos who come in for a drink at around 20:10. After many hours of waiting in silence, a male rhino stopped by for a quick drink at 01:20. It stayed for less than a minute but this amazing encounter made all the waiting worthwhile.



Day 4: Tuesday 6 June 2023

Weather: Sunny 23° C

Group One spent their morning in the scavenger hide. This hide is elevated above the Doornhoek valley and the sweeping views from the top serve as a backdrop to this vulture restaurant.

Scavengers are attracted by the offal which is placed on site. To date, five species of vultures, together with other scavengers like marabou storks, woolly-necked storks, tawny eagles, bateleurs and several other species like kites, buzzards, jackal and hyena have all been seen here.

By feeding the scavengers, and most importantly the critically endangered white-backed vultures which breed nearby, they are kept within officially protected areas, limiting their exposure to vulture poisoning incidents, which is the biggest threat to these magnificent but declining species.

Group One was even lucky enough to observe a side-striped jackal and two black-backed jackals on their visit. They also encountered approximately 20 white-backed vultures and one very curious yellow-billed hornbill, which was pecking at its reflection in the glass.

In the afternoon, we went on another game drive. We were looking for the leopard from the first drive, but sadly we did not have any luck.

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After a short drive through the forest to the reservoir, we stopped on the reservoir's bank to photograph hippopotamuses who were a good distance from the banks. We also stopped to photograph a crocodile basking in the late afternoon sun, which everyone enjoyed.

Then we got a radio call through with an update on the cheetah sisters. We caught up with them and stayed for a while, watching as they stalked and attempted to hunt impala. Sadly, they went over a ridge and we lost sight of them. It was time to head back to the lodge for our dinner.

Day 5: Wednesday 7 June 2023

Weather: Sunny 23° C

Group One went on a game drive. It was a quiet morning, but there were a few rhinos around at a distance. We also found two male cheetah brothers asleep in long grass, but they were not waking up anytime soon!

We decided to follow up on a radio call about a lion sighting, but by the time we arrived, the lion had eluded us. Instead, we visited the cheetah sisters, who had eaten through the night and were also fast asleep. It was a tricky morning, but you can't win every drive.

Group Two were in the Scavenger hide. They saw plenty of white-backed vultures - around 20 birds in total. Group Two were also visited by two black-backed jackals. One of the highlights for them was seeing three yellow-billed hornbills display their reflection on the glass. This group also had a visit from a white-necked raven and a tawny eagle, which was a great sighting.

Day 6: Thursday 8 June 2023

Weather: Sunny 23° C

On our morning game drive, we went in search of the lion family, as we had not had too many sightings of them up until this point. After driving for a while, we tracked them to the northern part of the reserve. Frustratingly, on arrival, we found them in a scrubby area. We waited for some time for them to move. Eventually, they stood up and walked away from us deeper into the scrub, so we decided to leave them and move on to find something else.

After 40 minutes of driving, we came across the two cheetah brothers by a small freshwater stream. We got out of the vehicle and lay down opposite the stream, ready for the cheetahs. It didn't take long before they came to the water, giving us some incredible eye-level photos of them drinking. This was definitely a highlight of the trip so far.

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We had a fairly quiet start to the afternoon game drive, but soon we received a radio call from one of the other rangers, telling us about a large group of giraffes with babies. We headed to the location. On arrival, there were around 15 adults and eight calves. It was a very special sighting, with lots of interactions between mothers and their young. These moments provided ample opportunities to capture some really lovely images.

We ended up spending the majority of the drive with the giraffes. Eventually, we moved on to see what else we could find. After a little while of driving, we came across a small flock of white-fronted bee-eaters dust bathing on the track. It was a fun little sighting. The light was now starting to drop, so we decided to head towards the male cheetahs. We found them sound asleep and it did not look like they were going to move anytime soon.

It was time to head back to the lodge as the sun had set. We found a fiery-fronted nightjar on the track, not far from the lodge. Our driver, Jono, spot-lit it for us with his torch, so we could grab a quick photo.

Another nice surprise was a quick encounter with a spotted eagle-owl that was silhouetted on a dead tree very close to our lodge. It was a great day and everyone enjoyed themselves.



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Day 7: Friday 9 June 2023

Weather: Cloudy 18° C

It didn't take long to catch a glimpse of the cheetah sisters on our morning game drive. We enjoyed some great action from them that morning in beautiful light (front light and back light). Some nice yawning photos too. We stayed with them most of the morning, as they were in a lovely open area.



Eventually, we moved on, slowly heading back to the lodge. En route we came across two lionesses along the dam wall. They had picked up the scent of something and were walking off following the trail. They started stalking warthogs in the dense bushland, but didn't have much luck with their hunt. We soon lost sight of them. It was cool to see though!

Group One spent the afternoon on a game drive, photographing a herd of elephants. There were around 30 individuals with approximately five calves. This group had great encounters with the elephants, as they pulled

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up roots and stripped the bark from the trees. They spent the whole afternoon with the herd as the photographic opportunities and encounters were superb!

Four rhinos joined the elephant herd and there was an altercation between the species! One elephant also pulled down a tree and was eating its roots.

Later, I joined Group Two in the overnight hide. Our first sighting was a male waterbuck which walked past at around 17:00 but didn't stop for a drink. It was a quiet session for a while, but at 22:00, we saw a lion walk straight past us, sadly the light wasn't good enough to capture any images.

An hour later, a rhino came to drink with her young calf. Mum was very hesitant, while the calf was very young, but it was a great encounter that produced some lovely images.



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Day 8: Saturday 10 June 2023

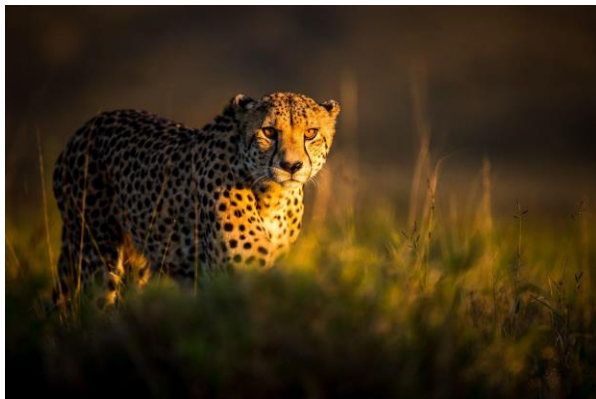
On our morning game drive, we found the cheetah sisters on the hunt for impala. It was a beautifully misty morning, but conditions were quite tricky for photography. The cheetahs eventually moved into an open area, where they began to groom each other.



On our afternoon game drive, we went in search of the lion pride family, though this time they eluded us. However, we did encounter two male cheetahs that we had seen previously. This time, they were bathed in glorious evening light, grooming each other and walking towards us. It was one of the best encounters we had, producing some fantastic images.

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Day 9 – 10: Saturday 10 – Sunday 11 June 2023

We flew back to the UK via Johannesburg, arriving the following day.

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