

10 bushwhacked facts South Africans may not know

Few things are as captivating as the African bush and the buffet of game-viewing destinations, like those offered by Legacy Hotels and Resorts tucked in the expanses of the Pilanesberg National Park. You'll be amazed by some of the lesser know facts you'll learn while on safari.



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For example, did you know that 1.4kg of elephant dung can vanish, within two hours, when 16,000 dung beetles arrive at the scene to collect their piece of the "pie"? Did you know that elephants can hear one another's trumpeting calls from up to eight kilometers away?

Kwa Maritane Bush Lodge's head guide, Juan Heydenrych (who accompanied Arnold Schwarzenegger during his recent well-publicised meeting with a bull elephant), and Bakubung's senior guide, Lucy Mabaso, shares 10 fascinating facts of the bush that even South Africans may not know.

1. Pilanesberg is the only reserve set in an alkaline ring complex (of which there are only three in the world). An ancient alkaline volcano fashioned the very hills that Kwa Maritane stands on today. Hence the Lodge's name, which literally means 'Place of the Rock'. Fortunately, the volcano is long extinct, having erupted 1,200 million years back.

2. In the Pilanesberg, traces of Tswana habitation are found, dating back to 1750 AD although many traces can be found in the Rustenburg area dating as far back as 1300 AD. Scattered throughout Pilanesberg are various sites that

originate from the Iron Age and Stone Age and which show the presence of man in those periods in these areas.

3. Ever heard of the ground-breaking Project Genesis - the largest game translocation undertaken in the world? In the early '80s, more than 6,000 animals from other parks were settled in the Pilanesberg. R1.5 million was spent on the game fence surrounding the Park, while R1.8 million was spent on the game itself. Today the area has virtually all animal species of Southern Africa, including lions, elephants, buffaloes, leopards, zebras, hyenas, giraffes, hippos, and crocodiles, not to mention over 350 bird species.

4. When it comes to the best time of the year to safari, April, May, and September come out tops. Wildlife is easier to spot because there is less vegetation and animals gather around rivers and waterholes. There's also less chance of being caught in a storm while in the middle of a game drive. Skies are clear and most days are sunny. There are also fewer critters and a lot less mozzies to bug you while counting stars.

5. Game viewing can be compared to fishing. You never know what fish you're going to catch but you can narrow the possibilities down a bit depending on what bait you put on the end of the hook. In this instance, rangers are the 'hook'. You'll see far more on a guided safari than in your own vehicle. Rangers have the advantage of knowing their Park backwards. They know which animals stay in which areas and for how long they hang around. They're also a wealth of knowledge when it comes to all aspects of nature, including mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, plants, grasses, soils, and trees.

6. When it comes to successful hunts, the lion's share goes to the African wild dog. They are Africa's most effective predators, boasting an 80 percent success rate with hunts; far higher than the 30 percent rate of lions.

7. The average age of lions living in the Pilansberg is 12 years old. Ketimetsi, a male lion who lived in Kwa Maritane, made news headlines last month when he passed away at the astonishing age of 17.

8. The best hotspots for a variety of game viewing including elephants, rhino, lion, crocodiles, birds, leguans, and terrapins, is Mankwe hide, situated on the edge of the Mankwe dam (the largest body of water in Pilanesberg), and Makuwani hide, but prepare to be patient as good things come to those who wait.

9. You may inadvertently encounter the Ficus wasp - but because of its size (they're less than 2mm long) you'll likely be unaware that the chance meeting even took place. What makes this wasp so ingenious is the way it pollinates figs. The female wasp crawls in through a tiny hole in the bottom of the fig and lays eggs before dying. After hatching the male fig wasp bites a hole through the flower wall and impregnates the hatching females. He then chops a tunnel for his pregnant pollen-dusted female to escape from the fig. You'll be surprised to learn that while the Ficus trees that grow in the Pilansberg are not as big as you'd expect them to be, some are over 300 years old.

10. The term 'Big Five' has nothing to do with size because a giraffe is obviously bigger than a lion. It originally referred to the difficulty in hunting lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and African buffalo. These five large African mammal species were known to be dangerous and it was considered a feat by trophy hunters to bring them home. Contrary to popular belief, the Black rhino is part of the Big 5 and not the White rhino. Although much smaller than the white rhino (a ton or more lighter), the Black rhino is more dangerous due to its more curious nature, keen eyesight and feisty attitude. So we even have it wrong on the R10 note.