

ONGELUKSNEK NATURE RESERVE GENERAL TOURISM PRODUCT INFORMATION

www.ongeluksnek.com

The 13 000 ha reserve is located in the steep mountain grassland of the southern Drakensberg, on the Lesotho border. It was proclaimed as a protected area in 1976, and forms an important part of the upper catchment of the Kinira river, which feeds the greater Umzimvubu basin.

The reserve is drained by the perennial Lebelle and Jordan rivers. Rainfall is in the region of 750mm per annum, and the area has verdant green summers and snowy winters.

TOPOGRAPHY & CLIMATE

The area lies in rugged mountainous terrain, dropping-off steeply from the Maluti/Drakensberg Escarpment. It is mainly underlain by basaltic lavas of the Drakensberg Group of the Karoo Super group. In the eastern lowlands around 1600m, fingers of fine grained sandstones of the Clarens Formation are exposed, along with Quaternary alluvium, Molteno sandstones and mudstones, with Elliot mudstones extending westwards in to the basalt. (Lechmere-Oertel, 2006).

The steep gradients and shallow soils of the Drakensberg result in almost half of the rainfall leaving the area as run-off (MDTP, 2008). If the soils are bound by intact indigenous vegetation, the surface flow is rapidly absorbed, and controlled gradual water yield will be released throughout the year. Under these ideal conditions, high quality sediment-free water will reach streams. This situation is demonstrated by the presence of alpine wetlands in the upper reaches of the reserve, and the high water quality captured in the Lebelle stream weir which supplies the Thaba Chicha bulk regional water supply to villages adjacent to the reserve.

Average minimum temperatures in summer range between 6 and 12°C. Daytime summer temperatures range between 20 and 28°C. Winters are cold with night temperatures frequently dropping below 0°C and a high frequency of frost nights, with occasional snow and ice creating a challenging climatic environment. Maximum winter temperature rarely goes above 18°C. Annual rainfall is in the region of 750mm, occurring mainly in the summer months, with February rainfall levels reaching 125 mm. Some parts of the escarpment have recorded 1800mm per annum (MDTP, 2006), resulting in extreme run-off events. This indicates high run-off capacity during concentrated periods, resulting in increased erosion and topsoil loss where groundcover is insufficient. Precipitation also occurs in the form of mist and snow.

VEGETATION & FAUNA

The topography reflects the area's position on the escarpment with Lesotho, and is mainly covered by grassland defined in Camp's newer veld classification as *Drakensberg foothills moist sourveld*. The Nature Reserve is mainly composed of impressive rolling valleys and spurs running up to the escarpment. The road corridor climbs from East Griqualand grassland (vegetation type Gs12) dominated by tropical and temperate bunch grasses such as *Themeda*, which have been degraded through livestock pressure to become dominated by wire grasses and scattered Karroid shrubs (MDTP, 2008). At higher altitudes, the grasslands shift to become more alpine in nature, underlain by basalts with less grass cover and greater percentage of shrubby fynbos and karroid species, which have been allowed to increase through decreased grass competition from overgrazing. This has reduced soil cover and allowed an increase in erodibility, resulting in increased run-off and erosivity of rainfall.

A good representation of grassland flowering species occurs in the area, and was documented by studies undertaken by the Maloti Drakensberg Tansfrontier project (MDTP) in the early 2000s. Biodiversity is however threatened by the annual veldfires which sweep through the area, despite attempts by the Reserve to establish fire breaks and control wildfires.

The Reserve has a range of raptors and large birds, including the Bearded and Cape Vulture. There is no available bird list for the reserve, but the area provides a habitat for a combination of grassland and alpine species, including Orange throated longclaw, pipits, larks, chats, etc. These seed and insect eaters assist with pollination.

The Reserve has never been stocked with wildlife, but has provided a fairly safe habitat for existing species in the upper catchment, although poaching has been problematic. There is a limited representation of wildlife, however some successful breeding populations include Mountain Reedbuck, Grey Rhebok, duiker, hyrax/dassie, jackals, caracal / rooikat, water and grey mongoose, hares, porcupines, aardvark and baboons have left evidence of their activities. Some good birding opportunities exist – see activities section below.

ACCESS

3 hours from Durban via N2 and R56 to Matatiele. The R56 leading west from Matatiele towards ONR is 12km tar (R56) plus 38km of challenging gravel (DR08646, with signboard to reserve), with fantastic views of the southern berg. Approx 1 hr (Matatiele is the closest town).

Road from the Eastern Cape (western) side is via Maclear and Mt Fletcher along the R56, with no signboard for reserve at the gravel road turn-off marked "Farview/Xaxazana". Approx 1hr along gravel to reserve through scenic villages. Approx 5-6 hours from East London. Very scenic drive.

The reserve is bisected by the DR08646, a public gravel road, which leads up the impressive Ongeluksnek Pass between SA and Lesotho. An SA border post is located at the base of the pass (08h00 to 16h00).

The pass has a 1000m rise (equivalent to Table Mountain), and was first driven in an old Land Rover by Matatiele resident Lionel Whittle, via the stock trails in the early 1950s. A simple hand built road was developed as a trading route between Matatiele and Mt Moorosi in the late 1960s by a local trader. The old trading store ruins can still be seen alongside the road half way up the pass on the western side. The road was properly shaped and built in 1991 by the then Transkei Roads Department, and was under renovation in February 2009. The route leads through to Mphaki in southern Lesotho, via the spectacular Lake Letsie wetland area, which is a declared RAMSAR site.

ACCOMMODATION:

GATEWAY LODGE

The sandstone lodge is an old renovated farmhouse, built in the early 1900s, located at the entrance to the reserve. It has 3 rooms, with two doubles, 6 singles, 2 sleeper couches, and can sleep a total of 12. It has solar lighting and plugs, plus gas fridge, stove and geyser. The kitchen is fitted for self-catering guests, and a cook can also be arranged.

The large covered porch with a great view of the mountains is an ideal spot to unwind.

Chopped firewood is supplied for the outside braai area, as well as the lounge's open fireplace.

Also has a conference/dining room for mini meetings of up to 20 people, which can be catered for.

Please note septic tank cannot take any foreign matter, so please respect this.

Gas appliances should be used with care, especially the stove.

Solar lighting and plugs – please follow directions on wall-mounted instructions in kitchen and lounge to prolong the life of the system.

Local village shops have basic supplies if required. Catering can be arranged.

BUSHCAMP

The **Tweespruit bushcamp** has 4 shady well grassed campsites located along the Jordan river. Has a covered open plan boma with potable running water, sink, tables, stone benches, overlooking campsite with great view of the mountains. Has gents and ladies ablutions with flush water and hot showers, with a bath for children. Hot water supplied by donkey boiler

The camp is a good base for hiking or mountain biking up into the catchment where high altitude wetlands are found, and for visiting the interesting and ancient volcanic basalt rock formations.

Has 4x4 or hiking, mountain bike or horseback access (from the main gateway lodge where vehicles can be safely left), with 4 vehicle sites next to the Jordan river, and a capacity of 24 (4 parties) people using own tents.

ACTIVITIES

- From the lodge or bushcamp, visitors can explore the beautiful sandstone **Marizell Mission**, built in 1904, either on a day walk or vehicle accessible, with its self-sufficient hydro electrical system, high school (which Patrick Mosiua Lekota attended) and farm. Guided tours could be arranged via the reserve staff.
- **Hiking** - lots, for beginners to experienced, guided or self-exploratory with a map. Great swimming pools in Jordan river, at waterfall near reserve HQ (short walk from lodge west along road towards pass), old grave sites, ruins, rock art, etc can be visited. Grassland has wonderful flowers in summer. Some indigenous forests in gorges north of HQ, and Lot's Wife pillar (basalt formation) accessed from bushcamp in the Jordan valley. Drive around to Tweespruit bushcamp site, leave a vehicle and hike along old track leading west towards picnic site at Charles Mills – old homestead ruins and fruit trees, graves sites, swimming upstream of site, etc.
- **Horse riding** - horse can be hired, with a guide, from the local Mabenyeng Horse Association. Arrange via reserve manager. Visitors pay horse owners directly in cash.
- **Rock paintings** - guided walks or on horse back.
- **Mountain biking** - the surrounding villages have a myriad of footpaths which make for excellent singletrack riding. The reserve has good riding up the pass, with some loops and links for the adventurous and technically skilled rider, allowing exploration of the little known southern berg/Lesotho border area, such as Nene's pass.
- **Mehlodging Hiking Trail** - based from a community-operated chalet adjacent to the reserve just beyond the mission. Can do day walks or a 4 day uni-directional trail leading east. Also provide traditional and conventional catering by prior arrangement.
- **4x4 trails** up Ongeluksnek pass or along northern bushcamp track along Jordan river to picnic sites. Can drive through border up into Lesotho to the spectacular Lake Letsie wetland area (24km from lodge).
- **Birding** - The reserve and Matatiele access route along the valley have great birdwatching (Blue and Crowned cranes, Southern ground hornbills, Denham's bustard, Cape vulture, Lammergeier, secretary birds - all of which are endangered) plus Lanner Falcons, Marsh Owls etc. Sighting of a European Roller as well - very rare here!

A trained THETA accredited local guide can also be arranged (via reserve manager), who is very knowledgeable of the area, has a driver's license, and is a birding enthusiast. R100 for half day, R200 for full day, payable directly to the guide.

Five trainee guides are also being supported to gain experience.

LESOTHO / TRANSFRONTIER ACCESS

The pass up into Lesotho has been upgraded (leads from lodge through reserve for 16km up to physical border), and is accessible by vehicles with clearance (4x4 pref but only necessary in wet weather).

Need a passport to go through SA border at base of pass. Lesotho border post still being renovated.

The road leads into Lesotho, through to Mphaki village (fuel, food, rustic lodging) or to Mt Moorosi (fuel, food, lodging, basic shops, historical sites, community chalets).

The A1, main road through Lesotho which passes through Mphaki and Mt Moorosi, is tarred, and leads on towards Maseru in a north westerly direction. The roads to these towns are very scenic, through rural landscape.

Could also make a circular route, via Qachas nek pass to the east or Rhodes area to west. Check out the Maloti Route www.malotiroute.co.za on the web for more transfrontier travel planning info.

**Please notify the reserve manager, duty staff or gate keeper regarding any problems or queries.
Please feel welcome to provide any feedback or comments in the visitors book and attached comment sheets, so that we can improve our service and your experience.
We trust you will enjoy your stay.**

Reserve manager contact: Mr Harold Mdhluli 039 256 4888 / 082 345 3709

EC Parks Central Reservations: 043 701 9600

Friends of Ongeluksnek: Nicky McLeod 082 782 6067

