

— Ghost Mountain Inn organises a cultural tour involving breathtaking views of the Lebombo Mountains.

A KZN RESET

A WEEK AT KWAZULU-NATAL'S GHOST MOUNTAIN INN AND SALA BEACH HOUSE WAS JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED FOR A WINTER GETAWAY THAT LEFT A LASTING IMPRESSION

Words Megan Paulsen



RIGHT You will see rondavels like these throughout KZN. They are space for the ancestors.

BELOW Inside a rondavel, Justice demonstrates the correct technique for wielding a spear.



I can't wait to have an authentic spiced pineapple, I thought as I boarded a flight to KwaZulu-Natal. I hadn't been to the province in decades, but these humble, spicy treats had stuck in my mind since my last visit. Alas, the closest I got was passing people selling pineapples on the side of the road as we made the three-hour journey from King Shaka International Airport to Ghost Mountain Inn.

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

Nestled in Mkhuzo, 'Zululand's finest country inn' is, to put it mildly, a luxurious oasis. It's easy to see why

what started as a family home where friends gathered while travelling to other destinations has become a four-star hotel.

Warm smiles and welcome drinks awaited us as we entered the hotel lobby. Fully exploring our home for the next few days would have to wait, though, as there was only time for a quick lunch and walk over to the jetty, where you can dine or enjoy a yoga session if you wish while taking in the beauty of Ghost Mountain, after which the hotel is named. Legend has it that the mountain is the resting place of many tribe chiefs. There is even a 'taboo cave', which the Gaza family has used as a tomb for generations. Whatever is up there, the mountain is a thing of beauty in its own right.

Well-fed and refreshed, we embarked on a cultural tour of a nearby Zulu village. Isaac, our driver and guide, warned us that parts of the 45-minute drive would be bumpy and that it could get chilly as we headed to the village on Lebombo Mountain. 'We call it our small Table Mountain,' he chuckled before telling us that the large number of wild boars in the area have attracted a leopard.

We're safe in this open-air vehicle just before sunset, I thought. My concerns disappeared as quickly as they had set in once we reached the village and saw the first of many children smiling, walking and playing. Suddenly, they stretched out their hands toward us. 'They know this vehicle,' Isaac said. 'Usually, we bring something along for them. They love sweets.' But Ghost Mountain Inn does more for the village's children than offer them a temporary sugar high. Every year, on 26 December, they pack Christmas gift bags and drive through the area, handing them out to the kids. On we went, passing mango, banana and guava trees, crops of corn, a primary school and hand pumps that provide the community with water when the Jojo tanks can't. Finally, we reached our destination. Justice and his family's home. Having started work at Ghost Mountain Inn as a cook, he now offers tours of his village. For at least one hour—longer, if you ask him the right questions—he takes you around his family's land, where you see cattle, chickens and a vegetable garden, as he explains the importance of each animal and building to him, his family and his culture.

RIGHT A luxurious stay awaits you at Ghost Mountain Inn, with a peaceful night's sleep in a king-size bed.

BOTTOM RIGHT A male lion at Manyoni Private Game Reserve prepares to fight for territory.

'What are these buildings?' I asked, pointing toward the rondavel directly behind him. I'd noticed these structures on every property during our journey to Ghost Mountain that morning, which had piqued my interest. 'This is where our ancestors live,' Justice responded, smiling. 'You'll see that we have two here. One is for my grandparents, the other for my father and the rest of my ancestors.' These buildings are meeting places for prayers to the ancestors, gatherings and tribal meetings to discuss big decisions. They play a significant role in celebrations like Justice's upcoming nuptials. I was honoured when he let us inside one of them. Entering felt like stepping onto hallowed ground. Our time with Justice ended, but the night was falling, and we still needed to head back down the mountain.

Having said our farewells, we returned, stopping briefly for Isaac to pick some guavas from the side of the road before we took in a glorious sunset accompanied by red wine, coffee or hot chocolate and a side of homemade biscuits, courtesy of the hotel. 'I woke up at 4 am to have them ready for you', Isaac joked.

We finally settled into the Gaza Suite back at the hotel before getting ready for a late supper with Bea, the hotel manager. The suite's kitchenette, living room, simple bathroom, outdoor shower, king-size bed and patio overlooking an impeccable garden made it hard to leave the room to eat. But I'm glad we did because not a morsel of the chef's cooking was disappointing.

After breakfast the following morning, we headed off on our next adventure. We met Isaac at Lake Jozini for a boat cruise. The lake, spanning an impressive 16 000 ha between northern KwaZulu-Natal and Eswatini, is home to various fish, including catfish, carp and tigerfish. And birdlife: we witnessed no less than three African fish eagles during our short time on the water. A pod of hippos thought it a great idea to play hide-and-seek with us, disappearing underwater as soon as we saw them, only to reappear a short distance away.

They would not be the last animals to catch us unaware that day. On an afternoon game drive at Manyoni Private Game Reserve, we found a lion preparing to go about his business for the night. Stretching and yawning, he got up and padded to the front of the game vehicle, where another male lion had been hiding in plain sight. Having spotted mostly giraffes (including calves so young they still had their umbilical cords attached) and various antelopes, the lions—and white rhinos moments before—were an awe-inspiring sight.

We followed the lions for the rest of the evening. Ivor, our game driver, explained they wanted to



When you stay at Ghost Mountain Inn, you may book a game drive at any of the three game reserves in the area, including Manyoni Game Reserve, uMkhuzo Game Reserve and Hluhluwe Game Reserve. Speak to the team at Ghost Mountain Inn about tailoring an experience just for you.

take over territory in the area. The sun began to set on our second night in Zululand, indicating our time in this magical slice of KZN would soon end. Even though night safaris are available in the Manyoni, we would only get a taste of it on this visit. We were driving back to the main gate in the dark when a crackle over the radio broke our reverie. 'Someone just spotted a leopard,' said Ivor. Excitement bubbled once more before he added, 'It's on the other side of the reserve, though, so we won't be able to get to it now.' Next time, for sure, I thought, as I watched multiple pairs of eyes stare back at me in the dark—all, according to Ivor, belonging to buck or wildebeest.

Cocktails around the fire pit and traditional Zulu dancing in the hotel's boma awaited us on our return before we indulged in yet another delicious supper. While watching the dancers was almost hypnotic, I was more than happy when they did not ask me to join them in performing a few high kicks—those days are long gone, and since it was our last night in this slice of paradise in northern KZN, I was glad I would not be limping to our next destination.



ABOVE The spa at Sala Beach House is the perfect place to unwind.

TOP The Sala Beach House villa is the ideal space for families or small groups wanting to enjoy coastal luxury.



TO THE SEA

We left Ghost Mountain for the seaside paradise of Sala Beach House in Thompson's Bay, Ballito. Its website describes it as 'an intimate boutique hotel all about luxurious coastal living', and entering felt like we had walked into an exotic island getaway. Lush greenery and wooden steps led to an open-air bar and seating area on the right, the spa to the left and the most spectacular sea view lay ahead.

We watched the waves break and sipped sparkling wine. Our rooms were luxurious, overlooking the pool deck and fire pit below and, of course, we could see the sand and surf from our balcony. 'Be sure to close the balcony door when you're not in the room,' warned Hotel Manager Zinhle. 'The monkeys can be cheeky and like to come inside to steal biscuits and fruit.'

Whereas Ghost Mountain Inn had offered us an adrenaline rush, Sala Beach House was about total relaxation. Having a late lunch on the deck (overlooking the ocean, naturally) and a soak in the room's spacious bath. Pulling down the screen next to the bath for complete privacy, leaving it up to watch the waves roll below, or watching



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television (we're pretty sure you'll choose the former, though). We had an early night after a seafood supper, as the following morning called for sunrise yoga on the pool deck, which you can arrange with the hotel and leaves you rejuvenated. It's the ideal start to a day of slow exploring or lazing. The yoga session was so good that I promised myself I'd research classes when I got home. Whatever you do, don't skip breakfast when staying at Sala Beach House, and do yourself a favour and order the shakshuka. It's tasty and the perfect fuel for a walk along the beach – accessible from the hotel's private entrance.

We walked across the warm sand toward the Hole in the Wall, passing beachgoers enjoying the winter sun and swimmers in the tidal pool. The 'hole', in the face of a rock next to the tidal pool, is an Instagramable spot judging by the queue of people waiting to have their photo taken beneath its archway. If you're feeling brave, take a few steps through the Hole, and you will find a spectacular view on the other side. The walkway is slippery and becomes narrow, so if you do venture further, be careful.

LEFT Spectacular ocean views greet you at Sala Beach House, with the sound of the waves a soothing soundtrack to a relaxing stay.

BELOW The Hole in the Wall at Thompson's Bay.



We returned to the hotel via the stairs through its private entrance. I sat on what I had claimed as my bench. Just below the dining deck by the pool, it offers the perfect vantage point to take in all the beauty around you while being hidden away from anyone else who may be nearby. It's a great spot to put your feet up, read a book and sip one of the hotel's signature cocktails – especially before visiting the spa, which was our next stop.

I walked into the spa, my body travel-weary, ready for someone to work on my knots, which Dee, the spa's therapist, did with an expert touch. I'll admit that I dozed off more than once due to the sheer relaxation.

While these hotels offer different settings and activities (if golf is your thing, staying at Sala Beach House is the perfect base camp for you, as it is next to some of the area's top courses), they spare no expense when it comes to attention to detail, friendly staff and exceptional amenities and food. By the time we returned to the airport, I didn't care that I didn't get my spiced pineapple, as I had received something so much better from Ghost Mountain Inn and Sala Beach House that I hope to experience again. 🍌

For more information and to book your stay at Ghost Mountain Inn or Sala Beach House, visit ghostmountaininn.co.za and sala-beach.co.za