

A Traveller's Guide to **Swaziland**



BOB FORRESTER





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to
Swaziland

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To
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sahee

sustainability for agriculture, health, education and environment

sahee is a small Swiss foundation that supports **Sustainable** projects in **Agriculture**, **Health**, **Education** and **Environment** through local NGOs and community-based organisations in Swaziland and Peru. All supported projects empower disadvantaged people and contribute to improving their livelihoods in a sustainable way.

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sahee paid for the printing of this book, sales revenue will be used for revisions and new editions. By using rural community projects you will support community development, promote cultural exchange and help create a more equitable country.



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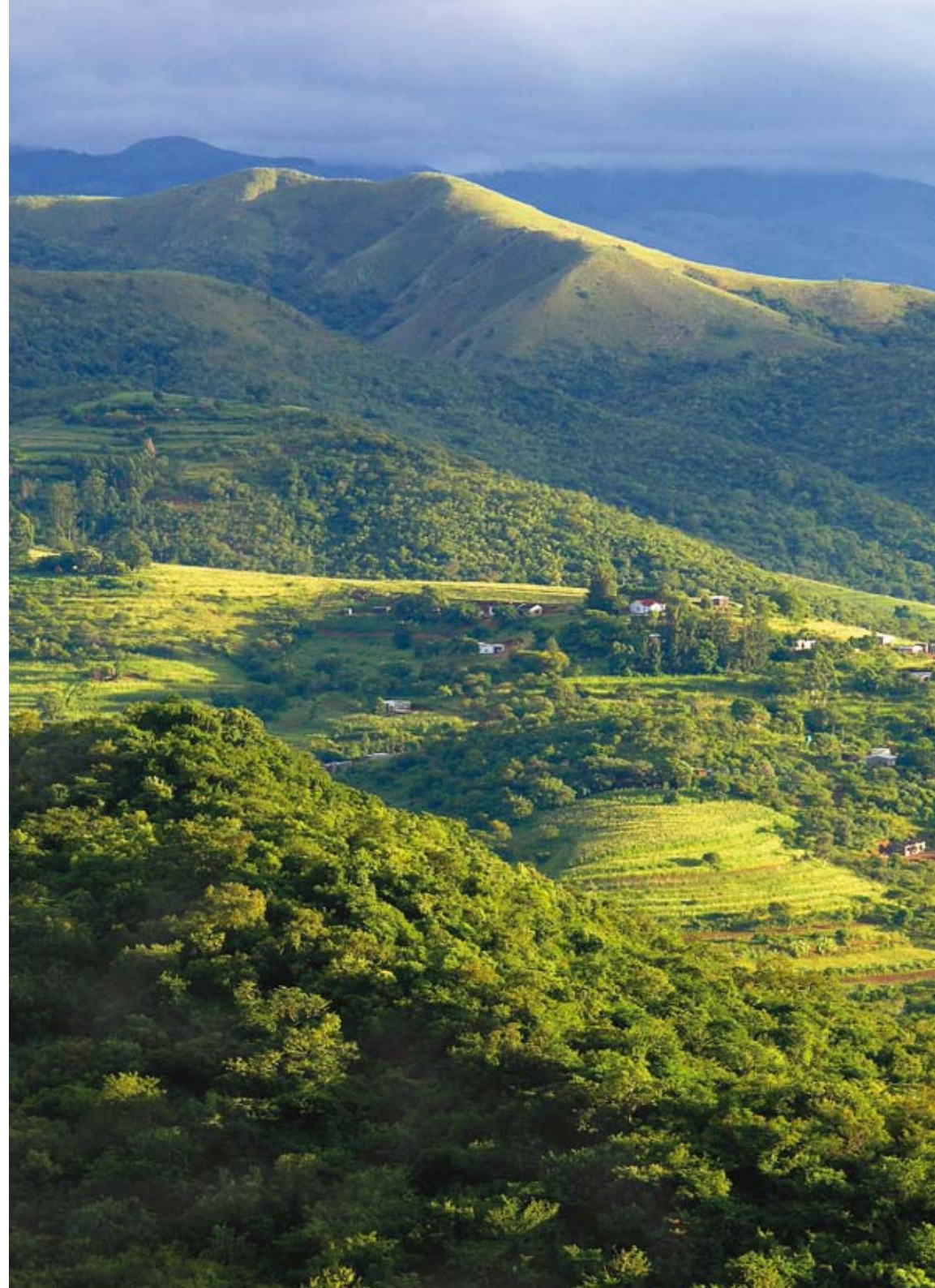
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INTRODUCTION

Why do we visit countries? What do we hope to see and feel? There are as many answers as there are travellers. Sometimes there is a specific goal, sometimes general curiosity. Or perhaps it is just where the bus stopped. Whatever your reason for visiting Swaziland we have tried to make a guide that will be practical, informative and reasonably realistic.

For many visitors to Swaziland the answer is quite clear: African traditions. This is the only absolute monarchy left in Africa. With the monarchy come ancient traditions that once were common throughout the continent, but now remain only in Swaziland. Other countries re-create ceremonies for tourists - but here they are real and are performed very much as they have been for many generations.

The ceremony of Incwala when warriors dress in war regalia of skins and feathers with shields and spears is a celebration of power and kingship - and apart from the odd wristwatch or cellphone - could be at any time during the last two centuries.

These traditions extend well beyond the monarchy, pervading many aspects of modern life. Marriages are often both traditional and modern. Many brides are smeared with ochre in the traditional way - but also have a Western ceremony with a white silk dress, bouquets of flowers and bridesmaids. Funerals similarly bridge two cultures, with Christian and traditional rituals.

This duality between ancient and modern, African and Western, extends right throughout the power system. Prime Ministers are always from the royal clan, the Dlamini, many cabinet ministers are chosen because of clan loyalties and bloodlines that extend back generations. In effect many political relationships within the Government extend in a social web from the King outwards. His persona is firmly woven into many aspects of the Swazi life-style. It is difficult to talk of Swazi tradition without speaking of the King; and it is difficult to talk of the King without speaking of tradition.

The political opposition recognises this relationship, generally calling for a constitutional monarchy within a multiparty democratic state. They believe this would preserve unique traditions, while involving the increasing numbers of workers in politics more fairly than the current traditionally based system.

In this book we cannot hope to give more than a glimpse of the rich culture of the Swazi people. Rather we can show you the outward face of Swaziland: its magnificent scenery through which you may drive or walk; its nature reserves with their rare cycads, abundant bird life and their fair share of wildlife; the hotels that range from the ritzy to the rural; the casinos where fortunes are to be won - and lost; the Continental class restaurants and the fast-food outlets. Everything, in fact, from architecture to workpermits, airport facilities to vets; the rest you must discover for yourself.

USING THE GUIDE

This guide to Swaziland will not make you an expert on Swaziland, its history or its people, but it will arm you with a broad knowledge with which you can confidently strike out on your own personal road to discovery. It was written with the aim of helping you to design your own individual tour of Swaziland; choose what you think will be of interest. We have tried to be straight forward in describing what the country has to offer.

If something is badly run or is not user friendly in some way, we say so, or simply leave them out. If prices are out of line, we say so too. Similarly, if businesses are below standard that is also mentioned. We believe not having advertising has helped us to remain objective. There are only about twenty five places or activities that are highly recommended. As in many countries, most businesses perform reasonably well, but are not remarkable.

The main section is arranged alphabetically so that it should be fairly easy to find the information that you are looking for. The second section gives an outline of recommended routes, chosen primarily for their scenic attraction, but also includes places of interest, handcraft markets, historical sites and buildings and the opportunity for some wildlife spotting. Care should be taken after heavy rains or during the summer storms when using gravel roads. Roads which are prone to flooding are indicated in the text, as are the routes where vehicles with higher road clearance are more suitable.

You will find that certain routes include an “intrepid option”: these should only be attempted if you are driving a four wheel drive vehicle, or at least a bakkie (light pick-up truck) and if you have had some experience of driving on dirt roads. These routes provide the ideal opportunity to experience for yourself the peace and tranquility of the remote, less densely populated areas of the country.

A wide range of information is included in an attempt to cover not only the expected guide to hotels, restaurants, nature reserves, and the like, but also a little of the country’s history and culture, as well as practical pointers, such as where to fix the car, find a doctor, and when to expect the shops to be closed - Swaziland has a relatively high quota of public holidays. We hope that this guide will also provide a few hours of enjoyment of an evening - or a rainy afternoon - and help you to get to know Swaziland from the comfort of your armchair.

KOPHO LODGE, NGWEMPISI



Alphabetical Section



ACCOMMODATION Swaziland has good quality accommodation in all price ranges, everything from de luxe hotels to backpackers. Quality accommodation is basically the same worldwide: you get what you pay for to international standards. But Swaziland also offers something much more interesting – a comfortable stay in beautiful surroundings in rural communities.

There are five visitor oriented rural community projects with seven destinations where you can stay in the kingdom. These offer an opportunity to step outside of the pre-packaged mainstream tourism routes and see what life is actually like for people in rural areas - and have a good time. The projects are all in rural areas and are important because they are often the only cash employers in the most economically depressed parts of the country – these of course, are what people from the first world like to call “unspoiled”.

These projects were set up by donors in one form or another, however they are now run by and for the communities. All of them are in areas of natural beauty, in gorges, or on mountain tops and all have spectacular views. Five of the seven offer accommodation and hiking trails, one offers the world’s most vertical walk and another offers a chance to see rock art in the Bushman / San tradition dating back tens of thousands of years, deep into the stone age.

Community projects offer people the chance to see rural daily life if they wish – but not if they do not. Visitors can ask a family to show them how they live, what they do, how they operate, some people are quite happy to have you stay in their houses for a fee, the experience can be quite transformational for people from the First World.

You should make whatever arrangements you wish for payment in advance and be specific about what you will pay for your accommodation and food. Then sit back and experience what rural life is like for almost half of the worlds population - a daily sequence of fetching water, looking after livestock, talking to the neighbours, weeding crops, preparing food, collecting firewood and sitting under a tree and watching the world pass slowly by.

You can make a difference by choosing to stay in one of the places listed below, these projects help empower local people. This is one of the best ways for visitors to improve the lives of poor rural people. Visitors contribute to a new sustainable source of income – in much the same way as the sahee Foundation supports rural projects in Swaziland. sahee supports A Traveller's Guide to Swaziland because Community Development bridges visitors and rural community development projects to their mutual benefit

MAHAMBIA GORGE Mahamba is dramatic mountain gorge where the Mkhondzo River winds its way into the country. This is on the south-western part of Swaziland, quite close to Mahamba Border Post which is near Nhlanguano in Swaziland and Piet Retief in RSA. The surrounding area has been set up as a wilderness preserve and has numerous

KOPHO LODGE AND NGWEMPISI VALLEY

hiking trails. The gorge itself is really beautiful and unspoiled, there are endless rock platforms for clambering on and at the heart of the gorge the rest of the world simply disappears and water, rock, mountains and sky fuse. The water is clean and ideal for swimming. Trails have been laid out from the lodge, these vary from half an hour to a day long hike.

The turnoff is less than a kilometer from the border, on the northern side of the road and is signposted clearly. The road is less than five kilometers of good quality dirt, suitable for all cars. On the way you will pass close to a stone gothic church, the oldest church in the country, built in 1911 by Wesleyans. The combination of vestigial stone spires, gothic windows, bare earth and skinny dogs is a little surreal. This mission was the first in the country, started nearby in 1844, and was the scene of the massacre described in the Kings entry.



You pass the mission - now mostly re-abandoned - and enter wide flat lands, the gorge becomes clearly visible ahead, the mouth is your destination. Mahamba Lodge is really four attractive stone chalets, each with two rooms, all with private bath and attractive if rather small balconies facing the view. The rooms are furnished and have bedding, they are clean. There is a communal kitchen, guides for the hiking trails if you wish them, and privacy if you do not. This is an excellent place to chill out because once you have turned the first bend in the gorge, which is very close, you are cut off from the world. For more information and bookings, go to www.welcometoswaziland.com or call them at 617 9880.

NGWEMPISI COMMUNITY PROJECT The Ngwempisi community own a massive river gorge carved out by the Ngwempisi River which lies hundreds of meters below the rim. The gorge is almost twenty kilometers long and until recently was a major obstacle for the community who would have much preferred nice rolling countryside that was easily ploughed and where you could find your cattle at the end of the day with going mountaineering. Instead they ended up with one of the most dramatic geological formations in the country. Of course this also meant that the gorge formed a natural barrier and as a result the slopes and bottom have been left almost completely untouched. What was once a major hindrance to the community is now turning in to an asset in an increasingly urbanized world. People seek grandeur, space, solitude, physical freedom – and Ngwempisi offers them all.

Basically the community has formed a wilderness area of the gorge and provided access to the wilderness through three lodges, one on the rim, one at the entrance to the gorge and one buried deep within it.

KOPHO LODGE is in a spectacular setting. It is built in a koppie (a rocky outcrop) and is difficult to describe because the architecture is unique. Perhaps something like the fortress at Zimbabwe ruins crossed with the Flintstones crossed with a minimalist aesthetic would describe it. In any case there are winding stone stair cases, trees growing through the roof. It has multiple levels, because that is how the rocks are, and sweeping views over the gorge. There are outdoor showers and the toilets are approached by perilous paths. There are few safety features whatsoever in a pleasant break with our nanny society, and in various places you are free to plunge over the edge of the building to the rocks below. This is definitely not a place for people with small children or people who like to combine wilderness with

heavy drinking. There are two main dorm areas with rough wooden beds and canvas covered mattresses, they sleep twelve altogether. Because the place is open plan it is best to fill it if you want privacy, otherwise you might be sharing it quite audibly with others, there is no sound insulation whatsoever.

The community people who service it are pleasant and helpful, they will provide you with firewood, paraffin lanterns, and reconnect the water supply when cattle stand on it. The lodge is kitted out with a two burner gas stove top, pots and pans, cutlery etc. At time of writing one half of the buildings roof has been recently sealed against water, the other is still to be done, at the time of writing, and it leaks in heavy rain.

There are trails from the lodge along the rim to dramatic viewpoints, and one trail right down into the valley itself and to the river. Other trails are part of the gorge network, these are indicated by stone cairns and maps are usually available from reception.

To get there first you should go to the Tourist Office at Cooper Center. They should have an A4 map of the route, if not try the Swaziland Tourism Authority, fourth floor of Lilunga House, an office block just up from the junction of Somhlolo and Gwamile streets. They have a wide selection of brochures on anything touristic in the country and the receptionist is helpful. Their site is www.welcometoswaziland.com

From Mbabane or Manzini you take the tar road to Luyengo, which is past Malkerns and then carry on towards Bhunya. Just after passing the agricultural campus of the university on your left you will pass a bus rank and then there is a tar turn to the left. Ngwempisi is prominently signposted. Follow the signs to the top of the mountain range ahead, turn left onto the dirt and follow the map, You may have to stop and ask people, not all the turnoffs are signposted, but basically you pass between some large colonial style farm pillars marked Horse-shoe Estate and proceed until you see the estate farmyard ahead.

Just before it you turn left and proceed to Etjebovu School, a well known landmark which anyone around will know. Pass the school on your left, the track rapidly deteriorates and not long afterwards you will end up at a homestead on the edge of the rim, with game fencing to your right. Although the track continues, it is not a good idea to drive further, it gets very steep in places. The homestead will look after your vehicles in safety and this is the place where you pay the bill when you leave. They will give you a receipt. Do not try this road in a car, it is rough, you need a bakkie or probably a 4x4 in wet weather, it really depends on your off road driving skills. Highly recommended.

KHELEKHELE is another lodge in the Ngwempisi project, at the entrance to the gorge. The lodge itself is series of stone walls in wire cages, technically gabions. The walls are composed of gleaming white crystalline quartz and partly black dolorite chunks, these are formed into geometric patterns. The buildings are on the flat and you can drive right up to them.

The interiors are plain, but have rough wooden beds with mattresses, pots and pans, a sink etc, there are showers and toilets behind and above the lodge. The lodge is on the edge of Swaziland's only known beach, at least one hectare of deep soft river sand that has been deposited in front of the lodge. This is a perfect place to bring kids because the pools are sand bottomed, shallow and there is no fierce current in this area where the river is broad and slow flowing. Unlike Kopho there are no potentially dangerous drops for kids. The beach is very exposed to the sun, you might think of bringing shade and sun screen if needed.

The beach is at the entrance to the gorge, there is a path on the north bank that meanders for kilometers downstream. In winter the water is clear and a pleasant jade green colour, one can sit on the bank and watch schools of fish moving about or simply move from pool to pool, in a leisurely swim-walk. It is quite easy to go farther than you realise because it is so pleasant and then face a fairly stiff walk back. Ultimately the route can take you right through the gorge and you come out at Siphofaneni, but most people would never go that far. You can certainly go as far as the area beneath Kopho Lodge, high on

a promontory above you and back in a day without much strain. Take lunch and water. You could also walk from one lodge to the other, if you have organised a pick up. The easier direction is from Kopho to Khelekhele.

All Out Africa offer an interesting adventure experience in Ngwempisi Gorge: tubing. They drop you off at Khelekhele with a car inner tube, lifejacket, helmet etc and you float down the beautiful river. At times the experience is slow and mellow, at others, when the current picks up, there is a very real thrill. You go downstream for about five kilometers in this way, passing superb scenery, majestic trees line the banks in places, offering deep green shade. At other times the walls of the gorge are towering rocky cliffs. Just below Kopho you deflate the tube, climb up the hill to Kopho Lodge to a welcome beer and spend the night in the unique rock lodge setting before going back. tours@alloutafrica.com Phone: 602 3694. Highly recommended.

To get there you should contact the tourism office or Swaziland Tourism Authority listed above for Kopho, or contact All Out Africa. Note that Khelekhele is some distance from the other two lodges and is not on the same map. Check that you have the correct map before leaving, the directions are clear until you leave the main road, after that there are a series of tracks through the bush. You can find your way there by asking, but set aside some time for this. Generally most teenagers and young adults in the country speak English, many older people in the rural areas do not.

HORSE RIDING AT KHELEKHELE



MHLABENI LODGE lies deep within the Ngwempisi Gorge. The lodge is a series of thatched huts that lie close to the water in a secluded setting. Here you can chill out, swim, whatever is your pleasure. The lodge can only be approached by hiking, the time from the road depends on your speed and fitness, but is usually about two and a half hours, going downhill. This is handy because it means that you are not carrying your food uphill. There is an option to climb up to the Gorge View point on the way to Mhlabeni, resist it unless you are very fit, it is easier to simply carry on along the river bank. The lodge is marked on the map from the Tourist Office or the Swaziland Tourism Authority, details are listed above.

Because Mhlabeni is so remote it is also rich in birdlife and small mammals. If you walk along the rails at night you can hear bushbabies calling to each other in the trees just above your head, if you shine a torch softly you may well see the gleam of eyes everywhere around. All three lodges are basically backpackers or hiking lodges with interesting architecture, they are priced accordingly and provide bargain accommodation for around E100 per person per night, they offer student discounts as well.

SHEWULA MOUNTAIN CAMP is on the top of the Lubombo mountain range that separates Swaziland from Mozambique. It can be reached by car from Mbabane in just under two hours. The dirt road section to the lodge is about ten kilometers and is well signposted. The turnoff is on the road to Namahacha Border post, some three kilometers beforehand, on the right going down a hill. All turns are clearly signposted and the destination has attractive stone roundhouses on the edge of a vast escarpment with spectacular views across the lowveld hundreds of meters below. At times on a clear day you can see right across the country to the high mountains of the central African plateau.

The Shewula Mountain Camp is the most visible aspect of a project that includes a whole community. Shewula Mountain Camp near the Mozambican border is the focus for a range of community based activities run by the Shewula Trust. The stone and thatch camp dramatically perched on the lip of the Lubombo escarpment has sweeping views over the lowveld. The camp has been built by the Shewula community and is open to visitors.

Accommodation costs E100 for bunks, four to a room, distant ablutions. (About double that per person in a twin with own bathroom, students get 20 % reduction.) You can cook for yourself or have food made for you, either traditional Swazi cuisine or Tuscan food – this

may seem bizarre, but one of the project founders was from Tuscany. If you stay for a few days you will be able to see their many faceted operation. A visit to the community is sometimes the only way that westerners can actually meet rural people and see and understand the daily challenges of their lives. At Shewula this is not a question of integrating with the community, it is the community. There is no strained formal meeting with a “model” family, all smiles and sticky buns, it is the day to day reality.

For instance their approach to conservation within the 2600 hectares that the community has set aside as a nature reserve is nothing like neighbouring reserves. Instead of clearing the area and declaring it “sacred” they use traditional African rules for management with community support. The increasing numbers of parentless and vulnerable children has led to a program of strengthening and optimizing resources, both traditional and modern. Using traditional solidarity and modern schools, they are building classrooms and setting up food programs etc. They set up social structures to make orphans useful to the community by building houses for elderly widows and so on. This raises the orphans self-esteem, gives them a useful role in society and provides food and shelter. The aim of all these programs is to reduce dependence on outside help.

There are also numerous other activities that range from education, to a nursery growing traditional medicines for healers to a school for orphans. The basics have not been neglected – there is an HIV/AIDS clinic, support for the ill and counseling. The school gets donor funding, there is an internet connection and perhaps most ambitious of all are the water projects. These have been funded by the Japanese, the EU and COSPE, the Italian NGO that is most present in Shewula. The water projects collect water from springs in the region and made it flow into through sand filters into underground cisterns where it then trickles by gravity to taps that the community use. This may not sound much, but it is crucial because it separates the cattle and goats from the water, allowing people to have clean drinking water for the first time, making a major difference to people’s health and well being. You can see all of this from their mountain bikes which are for rent, or if that is too energetic, you can view it all from the sedate pace and comfort of a donkey cart. For bookings call Nomsa at 605 1160, you can also leave a message. www.shewulacamp.com Recommended.

NSANGWINI ROCK ART is a community project on the rim of the Komati Valley near Piggs peak. The area is idyllic rolling grassland with mountains and the Komati, which is the second largest river in the country, winds its way through a broad valley. The community have the best rock painting site in the country, it has been sensitively developed and is open to the public. The paintings were executed by people in the Bushman / San tradition, the date is unknown, but probably they were painted over hundreds of years, not in a single event. Whatever the date, it was before the colonial period started in the 1880s. See the Bushman entry for more details on their culture. Whatever their origins the paintings are fascinating.

The community has trained guides who have accurate information on the site. They take you to the rock shelter which is about twenty minutes below the rim of the valley where you park, and about thirty minutes back up again. The path is steep and in places quite uneven, but the destination is well worth the effort.

When you arrive at first it looks as though there is nothing there, but quickly one tunes into the style of the paintings and then suddenly they are everywhere - on walls and the ceiling. Some of the figures are large and crude, there is a big elephant, indicating that this was a rain-making site, as well as some small and exquisitely painted figures with human bodies, birds wings and preying mantis heads. Ask the guide to show you the paintings of the black pastoralists, these are special. Remember to take water and sunscreen, the valley can get very hot on summer afternoons. It is then best to start off fairly early in the morning to get back up again before midday and the risk of afternoon storms.

Getting there is simple and the access is good, the route is close to a tar road and suitable for cars, except in or just after heavy rain. But even then the road soon dries. Nsangwini is signposted from up to twenty kilometers away on the main Piggs Peak / Mbabane road between Piggs Peak and the sawmill a few kilometers on the way to Mbabane. The signs indicate rock art, not Bushman paintings. This can be a bit confusing in a country with a lot of carvings sold on the side of the road. From the old main road take the tar loop to Maguga Dam, this too is clearly posted. If you are coming from Piggs Peak then before you get in to the valley proper you will start seeing signs indicating rock art. On a shoulder the turnoff is posted left turn onto a good dirt road that winds its way through fertile rural countryside before arriving at Nsangwini reception 14 kilometers later. Every single turn is



BLACK SETTLERS PAINTED BY BUSHMEN AT NSANGWINI

signposted with large clear brown signs showing Bushman paintings, this is a very easy place to find.

At the start of the trail down to the site there is a reception hut with drinks and curios for sale, this is where you meet the guide. There is a twenty Emalangi entrance fee for adults, discounts for students and children. If you want to phone ahead to book, call 637 3767, but the guides are almost always reliable and available. Highly recommended.

SIBEBE TRAILS Sibebe is arguably the world's largest single granite rock, for basic details of the geology see the Sibebe entry. As far as hikers are concerned it is certainly a superb highly accessible area which is extremely beautiful. The Sibebe community have set up a reception center towards the end of Pine valley, one of the valleys that branches out from Mbabane. To get there look at the Mbabane map which will take you to the start of the valley and then simply follow the large clear signposts until you reach it at the end of the valley. If you run out of tar you have overshot the section by a couple of hundred

meters. If you are going by bus you should ask for Mbuluzi School, which is opposite the reception area.

The trail starts at reception and wends its way up the vast granite domes you should allow about three quarters of an hour to get to the top, it all depends on how fast you walk and how often you stop and pretend to look at the view. The route is marked by cairns and white markers, it is not difficult to find the way. Do not attempt this in summer if it looks as though there is mist descending, this can be dangerous. You should allow at least four hours for the expedition and work backwards from sunset so that you do not get marooned up there. If you do, there are numerous caves to explore and keep dry in if it rains. Do not try coming down at night.

Once on top the scale of the single rock becomes apparent, this is a truly vast geological phenomenon, the top is flat. Or rather there is a plateau with a stream running through it and wild horses graze in the distance. Sometimes they spook and you see horses running free and wild, their manes blowing in the wind.

VIEW FROM THE TOP OF SIBEBE

There is a route on the top, if you walk along the edge you get sweeping views over Pine Valley and the walking is easy, the paths are clear and the surface is smooth. It is very beautiful. You will cross small streams of clear drinkable water and - depending on the time of year - you may see carpets of wildflowers. These are best in spring after fires and rain, so the timing is variable, but October to December will have flowers.

You do not need to book for this, the reception is open all year, but might be a bit erratic on Christmas and New Year's days. Remember to take water and sunblock. Highly recommended.

COMMERCIAL ACCOMMODATION is listed by area, starting with the most expensive and ending with the cheapest. Hotels in Swaziland range from small country inns with low prices and a limited range of services to large luxury resorts. Prices reflect the standard of service and amenities you can expect. Generally, you can be guided by the

