

ENGAGING AS A TEAM IN MKAMBATI



For PAPE and its team, spending ample time on the ground engaging with management and understanding the heart of the operations is critical to any investment decision as well as in the management of the investment. This enables the team to develop a more nuanced understanding of the business and to establish strong relationships that will enable us to partner more constructively with management in driving growth.



In May 2023, the entire PAPE family had the privilege (not for the first time) to visit the pristine wilderness of the Mkambati Nature Reserve, one of the most unspoilt parts of the Wild Coast, located between Port St Johns and Port Edward. Intended primarily as a team getaway, the visit was also a great opportunity to see in action and engage more closely with one of the initiatives that our group is invested in. Through its ZUR portfolio, PAPE is supporting the development of the Gwe Gwe Lodge and Villas within a 3 500ha concession of the reserve, which is set to become a landmark luxury eco-tourism lodge on a coastline that is famous for its rugged and wild beauty.



At first glance, this investment might seem out of place in our broader portfolio. But any doubts I had, having recently joined the team, were very quickly dispelled by engaging in such a visceral way with its untouched beauty. It has everything we like to see in an investment – an unique story and offering; visionary and eco-conscious leadership imparted by Colin Bell as one of the doyens of eco-tourism in Southern Africa; and a meaningful impact on local communities. The love for the space, and the commitment to the responsible development of the project to minimise the impact on the local ecology while delivering material benefits to the local communities, was as palpable as the ample sea spray that accompanied the journey there by boat, and the sand under your feet upon landfall.



It took three modes of transport (and several hours) for us to reach our destination, the last of the three modes consisting of an exhilarating 2-hour ride on an inflatable boat. An adventurous captain allowed us to incorporate a couple of amazing detours to see some whales up close and to get almost as close to the mouth of the Mkambati river, one of less than 20 waterfalls in the world that fall directly into the ocean. After a barefoot trek up the hill, our destination for the day was a relaxed braai on the banks of the Gwe Gwe river, with the team taking a hand over the braai'ing. The few hours spent enjoying excellent food and wine in such a rustic environment were grounding in every sense. Given that Gwe Gwe Lodge was at that stage still under construction, it was another trek to our accommodation on the neighbouring concession.



The following morning the team trekked down to the sea-facing rock cliffs close to Gwe Gwe Lodge to participate or observe what has become a customary fishing challenge between team members. After some healthy competitive banter in the days and weeks leading up to our visit between the two main proponents, the entire team was focussed so focussed on seeing the result between them that a third contender stepping in almost went unnoticed, at first. Pheello very quickly made the other two contenders look more like struggling anglers, and her victory was so resounding that the naming of the customary fishing point, being a majestic rock ledge plunging at least 10m into the ocean, has since been brought into question.



Once the fishing contest was over and after grabbing some breakfast, our next excursion was to be back on the boat to see some more marine wildlife, which were still plentiful being only a week or two after the passing of the largest wildlife migration in the world – the Sardine Run. The testy start to the excursion, facing some technical failures, left everyone a little uneasy but that was soon displaced by some incredible viewings of whales as well as dolphins.

Nevertheless, our detour to one of the coast's quintessential pristine, dreamlike beaches proved fateful as, even after disembarking all the passengers, the boat was unable to make it out of the treacherous surf, complicated by the approaching storm. Being shipwrecked on such a beautiful beach almost felt like a privilege.

The rest of the day was marked by two things – at first, the excursion (in and of itself) of returning to our accommodation from where we had been beached, and for the remainder of the day (and night) desperate efforts by the team to assist the captain in rescuing the boat in the midst of torrential rain and surf. I understood then that there was no need for orchestrated team building exercises here – the nature of the space and place created enough challenges for people to overcome.



Much of the next day was confronted by the same storm, although in the afternoon we did manage to appreciate the incredible beauty of the Mkambati Falls, this time from an in-land perspective. The next morning, our bedraggled crew set off early in the morning on the fourth day, taking on the infamously ragged roads to return to Port Edward for our return flight to the big smoke.

The visit, my first to this particular part of the Wild Coast, left me with three indelible impressions. Firstly, the indomitable spirit as well as the familial and close-knit nature of the team. Secondly, the realisation that no degree of luxury lodging will fully tame the true wildness of this coastline, which I'm deeply appreciative of. Thirdly, that the green trenchcoats that I thought beforehand would be somewhat superfluous, were worth their considerable weight in gold. We are all waiting in great anticipation to see Gwe Gwe Lodge in its built form.

