

The BlueGnu Guide to Going on a Kruger Park Game Drive!

Introduction

Going on a game drive is an exciting activity and many visitors to Kruger National Park, and other game reserves, really look forward to them. When I go on a game drive, I look forward to the opportunity to concentrate on looking for animals and on my photography. In Kruger Park, one can generally book a game drive at the Reception office and they will advise you of the options and the prices. For those staying outside the park you need to speak to the hotel or lodge where you are staying and ask for their recommendations. There are many companies and individuals offering game drives into Kruger Park, so you shouldn't have too much trouble getting in touch with one. There are far more operators in the southern third of the park. They cater for people staying in the various time share destinations and the many hotels near the Kruger Park boundary.

What is a Game Drive?

A game drive is an organised trip where a qualified guide takes out a group of people for a game-spotting trip in a game reserve. These are almost always done in modified vehicles that have rows of seats on the back and are normally covered with a canvas canopy. A game drive can vary in length from 2 hours to the whole day. Most of the game drives that are run by SANParks are 2 to 3 hours in duration. A game drive can be done at any time of the day, but they are normally done first thing in the morning, late afternoon or at night.



*An Elephant approaches a game drive vehicle
(Photo © Maisna - Fotolia.com)*

Why go on a Game Drive?

There are many reasons why people go on game drives. The main one is that they have arrived at a camp in Kruger Park, or a hotel near the park, and they don't have their own transport. Often the price of the game drives are included in the package deal offered by the tour operator.



Hippo with her very young calf

Others like to go on a game drive every now and then as it offers a different experience to driving yourself around. You are more exposed to the elements, have a higher vantage point and there are lots of pairs of eyes looking for animals. A big advantage is that you have the experience of a guide who will identify the animals and tell you interesting information about them. This is great but can also be a disadvantage as you know that your trip is going to stop at the first Impala, and you will

hear all about it for the umpteenth time. Just remember that there will be others on the trip that are hearing it for the first time. Be patient!

What do I take with?

If you have binoculars and a camera then definitely take them with. Most cell phones take good photos nowadays, but the animal is not always nearby so a camera with a zoom lens is a definite

advantage. At the same time, it might not be practical to take your monster zoom lens with in a fairly crowded vehicle!

What to wear is a tricky question. Kruger Park experiences very high temperatures during the day but can be chilly at night and in the early morning. If you are ever at Afsaal Picnic Site at around 9 am, in winter, you will see plenty of game drive vehicles arriving with frozen passengers who then race to buy coffee. It can get pretty chilly on the back of an open vehicle! Some game drive operators offer passengers blankets to help keep them warm.



An Impala sleeps despite the presence of the game drive vehicle

It is a good idea to take a bottle of water, or other non-alcoholic drink with. A bottle with a screw top is best as it can get quite bumpy. Just remember that there isn't much space so don't take too much with you. Depending on how long the drive is you may need to take some food with or it may be provided as part of the price.

What might I see?

What you are going to see on a drive in Kruger National Park is always a mystery, and this is a good thing. You never really know what you might see, and this applies to game drives as well. On a recent night drive the guide explained that "we mustn't get frustrated because I don't go on the road that you drove earlier today. The animals don't stay still and what you saw then is not what you will see now". This is so true. Guides do their best to make their clients happy and to give them value for their money, but they cannot perform miracles. So, if you are disappointed with what you saw, then go on another drive the next day! Take the time to enjoy and appreciate what you do see.

On most game drives the focus is generally on the Big 5 as that is what most people want to see. You will, however, see many other animals along the way and the guide will share some interesting information about them. Out of the Big 5 you stand a good chance of seeing Elephant and Buffalo. Rhino may well be seen in some areas but in other areas they are absent. Lions are seen regularly but Leopards are undoubtedly the toughest ones to find. You always stand a good chance, depending on the area, of seeing Giraffe, Waterbuck, Kudu, Blue Wildebeest, Zebra, Warthog and more. Impala are probably the only mammal that you are guaranteed to see.



An Elephant seen on a night drive

When going on a night drive expect the focus to be on the Big 5 and nocturnal creatures. Don't be alarmed when the guide doesn't stop for a sleepy-looking Kudu or Waterbuck! It is always exciting, and somewhat nerve-wracking, to see Elephants at night. They are generally relaxed and tolerant of game drive vehicles, but you get the odd one that can be a bit mischievous. In the quiet of the night you can clearly hear the rumbling and other noises they make. Owls, and Spotted Eagle Owl in particular, are seen regularly. Other animals that you might see include Porcupines, Genets, Wild Cats, Scrub Hares and Bush Babies.

If you are particularly interested in birds, then you may get frustrated on a general game drive. The guide is not going to stop for birds except for the few exceptions such as African Fish Eagle, other large raptors, Storks and Owls. I would recommend that birders try and organise their own groups of

people with similar interests. Going on a guided walk is probably a better idea for those interested in birds, trees, flowers etc.



Spotted Eagle-Owl

Is it dangerous?

The guides are generally experienced and have been trained to deal with a variety of circumstances, so the answer is no, it is not dangerous. Having said that some animals may be unpredictable, or you might drive into an unexpected situation. I have heard of game drive vehicles being charged by Elephants but in virtually all situations the guides have been able to avoid physical confrontation with the animal. Predators such as Lions and Leopards usually show no interest in game drive vehicle and, if passengers obey the guide, there should be no danger. The key is to trust the guide and to obey him at all times. Also, don't try and encourage guides to approach an animal closer than they would like just so that you can get a better photograph!

Some do's and don'ts

- Always listen to guide and obey their instructions.
- Do switch off, or mute, your cell phone.
- Keep your voice low if you are observing an animal and you want to talk to someone.
- There are approximately 160,000 Impala in Kruger National Park. Don't point them all out!
- Don't lean outside the vehicle. This breaks up the shape of the vehicle and the animal might figure out that there are people inside.
- Do be respectful to other passengers. Make sure that they can also see and photograph the sighting.
- If you are staying outside the park do check if the price of your drive includes the entrance fee into Kruger Park. Remember that those from outside South Africa pay higher entrance fees than South Africans do.
- Do enjoy the experience no matter what you see or don't see.
- Do tip the guide if you feel that they have added value to the drive, which they normally do.

In Conclusion

Thanks for downloading this guide and I hope that the information is useful! If you go, or have been, on a game drive in Kruger Park I would love to hear about your experience. In a future version of this guide I would like to include your tips or unusual experiences. You can email me on steven@bluegnu.co.za.

Best wishes!

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BlueGnu - Tourist attractions of South Africa