

SANPARKS UPDATE

2008 – PART 1



by Mandy Latimore
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Every now and then I get the urge to find out what new accessibility features have been added to our country's 20 plus National Parks. So I made contact with SANParks employee Chris Patton, himself a paraplegic, to find out:

Chris conveys there is a steady increase in accommodation and general facilities for mobility challenged visitors to the parks. He tells me that there are now 91 units throughout SANParks which have specific adaptations for guests in wheelchairs, alongside other units that may be "accidentally" accessible, but with no formal adaptation. These 91 units are spread across 16 of the parks throughout 37 camps, affording visitors with physical disabilities the opportunity to stay in a wide spectrum of venues embracing our national natural heritage.

When the Tourism Grading Council launched its guidelines for establishments catering for people with disabilities in August 2006, Chris helped SANParks develop the guidelines for the "mobility impaired" specifically for the national park environment. On



top of that he got the SANParks executive management to endorse a balanced scorecard objective to aim for a minimum of 10% of all accommodation across all the parks to be classified as "universally accessible" and hence be suitable for physically challenged visitors and their travelling parties.

However Chris cautions that the situation is not as rosy as it might sound. Just because specifications are available and rough targets exist, the actual design and construction of new units or the modifying of existing ones gets outsourced to the private sector, often to emerging contractors with little real understanding of accessibility fundamentals. Their application of the requirements is not always appropriate and because the management at park level may be equally unfamiliar with what is needed, sometimes facilities get signed off that are "the wrong thing

for the right reason". And so it is Chris tells me that while most adapted units offer great access, some so-called accessible units might have flaws for example: the grab rail adjacent a toilet is on a parallel wall too far from the toilet; or a roll-in shower has a fold-down seat, but no grab rails or vice-versa; or the seat is too high or its surface too small. In one instance, a contractor insisted on leaving a curb at the entrance to a roll-in shower facility.

While Chris will point out such shortcomings to park management when he becomes aware of them he stresses that the most effective way to affect change is to have people with disabilities visiting parks and engaging with SANParks via their customer care department. A well-worded and constructive critique tends to get some form of action or at least put it on the maintenance radar.



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Travel For People With Mobility Impairment

Mandy Latimore, sole member of Novel Travel cc, has traveled extensively despite her disability paraplegia. Novel Travel cc is also the travel agency of choice for the QuadPara Association of SA (QASA). She has been involved with the Accessibility Issues for the Disabled for 27 years and consults and assists many venues with accessibility, always adding to the growing database of accessible places and facilities to be able to offer comprehensive assistance to all travelers with disabilities - both inbound & out.

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Travel Tips



I asked Chris to list some of the newer accessible initiatives and which ones he would particularly recommend. He tells me that since the last article written in this publication about SANParks accessibility in 2005 accommodation has been added at Bontebok and West Coast National Parks in the Western Cape, and even to the remote yet starkly beautiful Tankwa Karoo National Park; in the Northern Cape as well as to Namaqua and Richtersveld National Parks; other parks that have seen accessibility improvements include: 3 of the camps in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park; Mountain Zebra and Addo Elephant National Park in the Eastern Cape, Golden Gate in the Free State and several additional units in Kruger National Park. Kruger has also seen some exciting new additional facilities, there is a board-walk near Skukuza Camp between the Golf Course and the Nursery that provides superb ac-

cess through some indigenous woodland and over a reed bed wetland. Another pleasing development in the Skukuza area is that the Lake Panic hide has revamped its entrance, which formerly had a gum pole at the entrance to prevent rainfall erosion, this is now wheelchair accessible. This is a wonderful place to spend a few hours for those who love watching birds, hippos and crocodiles, even leopard sightings are not uncommon here.

Other new accessible attractions within the SANParks are Letaba, Makhadzi Picnic Site, at Giriyondo, as well as the five other accessible units within the Addo Elephant National Park which will be detailed in the next issue.

Travel tips for people with disabilities

- Should visitors require accommodation with accessible facilities for mobility difficulties, they must inform the reservation office when making their booking.
- Persons with mobility difficulties wishing to fly via airports near any of the parks should make arrangements for PAU (Passenger Assistance Unit) assistance when booking their flights.
- Persons with mobility difficulties wishing to drive and hire a hand-controlled vehicle need to give the car rental agencies about 4 days notice.
- All major service stations en route to the parks are equipped with accessible toilet facilities.
- Travelling with an inflatable back cushion with suction points is a good idea for showers and baths. These can be purchased at 'Clicks' Stores and at many pharmacies. Folded towels make comfortable seat padding.
- Visitors with inflatable tyres are advised that thorns are a potential risk – though not generally a problem at main tourism destination. However as a precaution, spare tubes, puncture repair kits or heavy-duty tyres are recommended.
- People susceptible to extreme heat should note that summer temperatures (particularly December to February) could be extremely high in many of the parks. Parks in the country's arid northwest, the Lowveld (Kruger) and Limpopo Province are particular hot spots. While drinking water is available in all major rest camps, travelling with supplementary supplies is recommended.

Visit South African National Parks

Reservation Details:

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Go to www.sanparks.org, then click on Information for:

People with Disabilities

for comprehensive information and images on SANParks access



South African National Parks: Addo Elephant, Agulhas, Augrabies, Bontebok, Camdeboo, Golden Gate Highlands, Kgalagadi Transfrontier, Karoo, Knysna, Kruger, Mapungubwe, Marakele, Mountain Zebra, Namaqua, Richtersveld, Table Mountain, Tankwa Karoo, Tsitsikamma, Vaalbos, West Coast, Wilderness.



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