

AFRICAN INSIGHT

EXPERIENCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE



YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PONGOLA RIVER JOURNEY



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Have you ever driven across the Jozini Dam wall en route to Ponta Do Ouro or Ponta Malongane in Mozambique or perhaps to Ndumo Game Reserve or Tembe Elephant Park? It is a pretty awesome experience to actually drive on the 90m high wall with the dam on one side and a sheer drop down to the Pongola River on the other. In fact, many people stop at the lay-by on the far side of the wall to get a better look at the river as it flows off into the Makhathini Flats wondering what it would be like to paddle this stretch of the river. Well wonder no longer here is a brief description of the first 15 km of Pongola River from directly below the Jozini dam wall to the Pongola River Camp.



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Day 1:

The Pongola River Company starts their trip directly below the dam wall with a safety briefing under the shade of a beautiful Sycamore Fig tree. The briefing introduces you to the area including the basic ecology and goes on to explain basic river safety, how to use the boats and how to navigate through the 15 km of river between the wall and the Camp

With the safety talk completed the first objective is to paddle right up under the dam wall and see where the water comes hurtling out of the sluice gates creating a 30m high plume of mist and boiling water

After this, we head downstream to tackle the weir. Depending on the water level we either decide to run the weir or portage around it and as a general rule of thumb the weir is safely runnable when the river is running at about 7 cumecs. Anything higher than this and extreme caution needs to be taken as weirs are notoriously dangerous due to the suck back or washing machine generated by the falling water which can recycle an unwary swimmer. Qualified river guides should always be in attendance when attempting to shoot dangerous rapids or a weir. Having said that if run properly and safely the weir can be a huge amount of fun and is by far the largest 'rapid' on the river.

From the weir downwards the river forms a pool drop system with a few large pools between numerous small but fun grade 1 rapids interspersed with narrow runs between reed beds.

The water is crystal clear, and the birding is exceptional with numerous Kingfisher and Heron species as well as African Finfoot, African Jacana and the occasional sighting of something special like the Pels Fishing Owl, Brown-hooded Parrot, and Narina Trogon. At dusk, you have a good chance of seeing a Bat Hawk where the paddle ends at the Pongola River Camp.

For the more relaxed paddle, the trip can be split up over two days with a night spent sleeping at the Lunch Pool campsite. For the more energetic and as the name suggests this is where we stop over for a lunch break before paddling another 4km through to the Pongola River Camp.



Day 2:

Pongola River Camp to Sand Bank Campsite

Today is a super chilled, where you spend as much time floating next to your boat as actually paddling it! With loads of Sycamore Fig trees hanging over the sandy shores picking a good shady spot for lunch and an afternoon siesta is a given. If you have a fly rod and would like to try your luck for Tigerfish now is your chance. After an hour or so lunch break, we hop back into the kayaks and drift/paddle the remaining 10km to the overnight Sand Bank Campsite, which is on a small sandy island next to an excellent fishing hole. As is the case every night on the multi-day paddling trips the tents are set up for you and we do all the catering allowing you to enjoy a sundowner on your own little island overlooking the Pongola River.



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Day 3:

Sand Bank Campsite to Forest Campsite 20km

On day three the river changes again; the water becomes deeper and the river narrower so that the Sycamores form a canopy above as you paddle the 20 km to the Forest Camp. Day 3 is slightly shorter than the other days leaving you ample time to fish for Tigers with lures should you wish. The birding and scenery are outstanding as you float through the heart of the floodplain. We set up camp where an old sandy riverbed runs into the Pongola river. The white sandy riverbed is surrounded by dense forest and about 3m above the water level and comes complete with an inlet to park the boats - perfect.

Day 4:

Forest Campsite to Skimelela 30km

The river here is stunning and thickly vegetated with Giant Sycamore fig trees, Natal Mahogany and Fever Trees. The birding is really good with lots of African Finfoot, Green Coucal and a chance to spot the elusive Pels Fishing Owl. The fishing on this stretch of the river can be challenging with the thick vegetation along the banks but is often rewarded with some nice size Tigerfish. Ten km/2hours can reduce the distance on day four should you need the extra traveling time to get home. Once we get to the extraction point, we will return you to your vehicles in Jozini which is a 45-minute drive.



In summary, the 90+km 3night/4day river trip has a bit of something to offer everyone. (The trips can also be shortened to anything from a one day to four days). The fishing is great and heats up in Spring/Summer while the birding is truly exceptional all year round and the canoeing, as always on the Pongola, is a real treat.

The trips are run by qualified African Paddling Association (APA) and Field Guides Association of South Africa (FGASA) accredited guides so you are in good hands. The water is crystal clear, the rapids are small and safe but more fun than paddling on flat water and above all the scenery and birding is outstanding!

