

Frogs On The Frontline

It is with more than a hint of curiosity and amusement that I find myself out in the black velvet night on foot – well in gumboots actually - in the bush. Ankle deep in authentic local mud, without a beauty therapist in sight, and armed only with a net and a head torch. I am on the edge of a reed bed, in amongst a small group of fellow enthusiasts enjoying a new edge to Eastern Cape hospitality - a frog safari. After dark is apparently the best time to hear the full extent of an amphibian orchestra, and to get close up and personal with frogs and toads. The decibel level of the surrounding frog oratory was overwhelming, leaving a strange ringing sensation in the ears as we walked around the banks of the waterhole.

To sudden squeals of delight and astonishment we all crowd around to look at a delicate striped reed frog, cleverly concealed on the side of a thin reed blade itself. As the evening went on, we got to see more reed frogs as well as a number of other unusual and colourful species, both in and out of the water, thanks to the expertise of resident frog spotter and ranger, Warren.

Offering the first frog safari in this particular area, the initiative was started by Brent and Chantelle Cook, owners of The Dunes Country House. The Dunes is situated on a 600 hectare nature reserve in St Francis Bay, and as environmentally committed custodians of pristine land and a vast ancient sand dune system, Brent and Chantelle are continually on a mission to manage the resources in their care responsibly. As part of a long-term sustainable tourism project, they were in the process of removing an area of alien vegetation along one border of the property, when suspicions were raised that it might well be part of an underlying wetland system. As time went on and the removal become more extensive, it started to attract a number of new residents, primarily different frog species, one a particularly rare sand toad, confirming the potential success of a wetland area rehabilitation.

It is perhaps coincidental that on a global scale, frogs and toads are incredibly threatened, due to the ongoing destruction of habitat and pollution. Here in South Africa, we are fortunate to have over 37 healthy frog and toad species in existence, and it is attracting increasing interest. Frogs and toads are known as an 'indicator species', which means that the presence of these animals correlates closely with the health of the environment around them. They have thin skins, and this makes them easily susceptible to external changes, and therefore any contaminants present in the atmosphere or the surroundings can be absorbed quickly.

An international campaign has been established to support and promote the survival of the worlds' amphibians and is known as the 'Amphibian Ark. South Africa is one of the countries involved in helping to raise awareness around the challenges that modern frogs and toads face in their fight for survival. As things stand, 50% of all amphibian species are currently threatened with extinction, and

it is known that 500 species will not be able to avoid extinction, even if measures were put in place now to help them. The Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town is a partner in the initiative and has a dedicated and quite delightful frog exhibit in Cape Town, in partnership with the Amphibian Ark project.

The frog safari season is unfortunately a relatively short one, so in order to take full advantage a trip has to be planned carefully between the months of November and April. These are traditionally the warmer months, and once the autumn chill sets in many amphibians quite logically hibernate or become less active.

The Dunes however, can offer a variety of temptations to encourage a visit all year round, and makes full use of its unique nature based setting and favourable climate. Warren offers guided walks and trails into the fynbos vegetation of the reserve extending out into the dunes, where fascinating historical shell middens are in abundance. Vibrant bird life is evident all around. The dune system is breathtakingly awesome, almost lunar in its vastness, but extremely diverse in terms of its wildlife and flora. And after a rigorous frolic in the outdoors, what better than return to the cossetting and care of genuine and warm Eastern Cape hospitality Dunes style. The price of a Dunes getaway is very reasonable too, and shouldn't warrant that much of an excuse to take time out.

On quiet reflection, it was in December that tourists visiting The Dunes were first given the opportunity to go out on the evening nature reserve drive and adventure to uncover the secret lives of the nocturnal amphibians living on the reserve. The positive feedback it has received has since seen it become a firm favourite on the Dunes activity list, and in turn it reinforces the value of the personal investment that Brent and Chantelle have made. As a special reminder of their experience guests can purchase a small beaded frog token, and a percentage of this revenue goes directly into financing the continuation of this vital wildlife conservation project. After all, it is not everyday one gets an excuse to play in the mud for a good cause and along with it enjoy an evening of fun that is 'unfrogettable' !

For more information see:
www.dunesstfrancis.com
www.amphibianark.org