



# Rituals and reptiles populate PheZulu Safari Park

Zulu community highlights their customs and reveals their unique way of life

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA—Finding your mate in a traditional Zulu community doesn't involve matching mathematical algorithms on a dating website. It's about getting the go-ahead from your ancestral spirits.

The sangoma — a traditional Zulu healer — is chanting and dancing to the hypnotic beat of drums, with rattles tied around her ankles, to work herself into a trance state. Then, getting down on all fours, she tosses bones from a pouch onto an impala skin.

The “scattering of the bones” provides her with knowledge about the betrothed couple seeking her advice. For this couple, the union is a good one; they will have three children.

This is a re-enactment at PheZulu Safari Park, for the benefit of tourists, but it's a practice that continues today. It's estimated there are 200,000 practising sangomas in South Africa, according to the government's traditional health practitioners council; they're involved in everything from divination to healing and providing protective medicine — even finding lost cattle.

Following the wild, rugged coastline along the Indian Ocean north of uber-chic Cape Town, with its silent discos and trendy cocktail bars, lies Durban — the country's second-largest city.

It's also Zululand (or, officially, KwaZulu-Natal).

At one time, this was the Zulu Kingdom, which rose to power under legendary warrior king Shaka Zulu — sometimes referred to as Africa's Napoleon — who used military prowess to expand his territory.

But, in the end, their spears couldn't compete against Gatling guns and they were defeated by the British in the Anglo-Zulu War to become part of the British Empire in the 1870s (which is now, of course, South Africa).

As travellers, we're often looking for authentic experiences. Back in Shaka



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The performers at PheZulu Safari Park are not actors, they are real Zulus who have strong roots in the valley.

Zulu's day, men were only allowed to get married after they “washed their spear” in the blood of the enemy. Some authentic experiences are, perhaps, better left in the past.

The Zulus no longer engage in the “washing of the spears” ritual, nor do they live in traditional thatched huts. But many traditions — such as consulting a sangoma — are alive and well. (On a game drive, the Zulu driver told me about his friend who died suddenly because of a curse from a witch). Even urbanized Zulus have strong connections to their ancestral home, where it's believed the spirits of their forefathers protect the family from evil.

Though apartheid has been abolished in South Africa, there are still divisions. You don't just go into Zulu territory, for example, without permission; to get that permission is difficult for a tourist, independent

guide Colin King said.

That's why we headed to PheZulu Safari Park, which offers a “Zulu experience” in a replicate homestead (with huts made from thin branches formed into a beehive shape and covered with a grass-thatch roof). There's also a Zulu shield and spear factory here, as well as a game reserve and reptile park.

“We have a privilege of being exposed to a little window into their culture, which goes back quite a few centuries,” King said during the hour-long drive from Durban to PheZulu through the Valley of a Thousand Hills, with its lush forests and flowering trees.

The “Zulu experience” may seem like a compromise to an authentic experience, King said.

“But those people are not actors, they are authentic people who have very strong ties and roots in the val-

ley, coming there to promote their culture and express their pride and enthusiasm for the continuance of their culture,” he said. “One could possibly mistake it as . . . a stage performance, but in this case, it is authentic.”

Here, the Gasa clan performs a dance of courtship and betrothal, and demonstrates the “throwing of bones” by a sangoma.

“The village was obviously built that way for tourism, but what you learn, they are facts, there's nothing made up,” said PheZulu's general manager Tristan Dickerson. “We don't put in special lights and fancy drums . . . the dances that they do are real. They will do them at the next wedding they attend.”

While the Zulu experience provides cultural education, PheZulu also offers “a bit of adventure, a bit of fear,” Dickerson said. In the reptile park,

## > WHEN YOU GO

**Get there:** Fly to Cape Town or Johannesburg with KLM (klm.com) or Air France (airfrance.ca) (connecting in Amsterdam or Paris), then catch a short domestic flight to Durban with South African Airways (flysaa.com). You'll need a rental car or tour guide to get around.

**Stay:** The newly renovated three-star Protea Hotel Durban Umhlanga (by Marriott.com) is located in trendy Umhlanga Rocks, a few blocks from the beach (with some of the best surfing spots in town) and next to restaurants, lounges and bars.

**Do your research:** durbanexperience.co.za, discoverdurban.com

you'll find Indigenous and exotic snakes, such as the green mamba — an electric-green snake that's strikingly beautiful, even to someone like me who is terrified of them — as well as lizards, tarantulas and Nile crocodiles.

You can pet a tarantula or touch a harmless brown snake. If you dare, you can handle the 40-kilogram Burmese python “Cleo.” (I took a pass.) The truly fearless can opt for the Fear Factor Experience, which involves eating a meal in one of the crocodile enclosures. With crocodiles.

The park has plans in the works to add a Segway game drive and zip lines over the croc ponds. “Even though (the park) is cultural and educational, we want to bring the elements of adventure in over the next two years,” Dickerson said.

Tourists come to this part of the world for adventure, to see lions and elephants and rhinos, and to soak up the year-round subtropical climate (which makes it a favourite holiday spot for South Africans). It's also a chance to get a glimpse into Zulu culture, past and present, that goes beyond picking up a few handicraft souvenirs and brings their heritage to life.

Vawn Himmelsbach was hosted by Durban Tourism, which didn't review or approve this story.

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