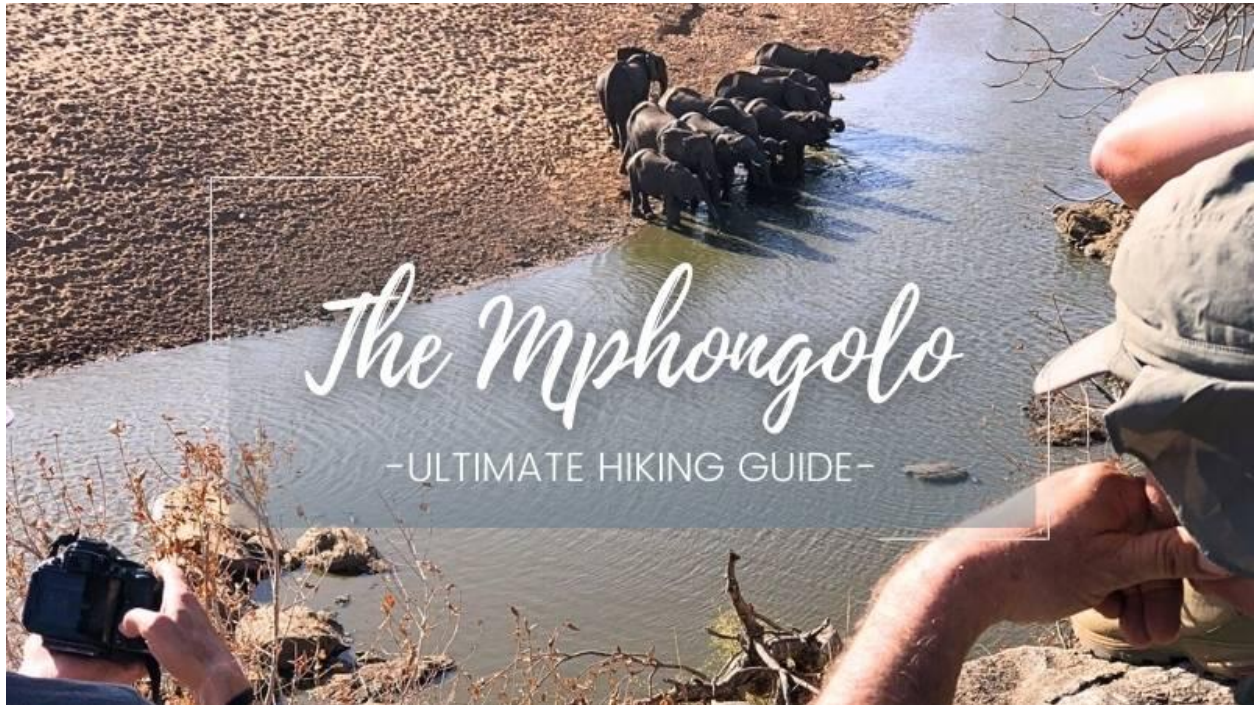




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The Mphongolo Backpack Trail - Ultimate Guide

Do you want to step off the map and into the wild? The Mphongolo Backpack Trail, deep in the remote northern reaches of Kruger National Park, offers you a rare chance to walk among giants – from ancient trees to legendary elephants.

With no fixed campsites, no cellphone reception, and no luxury but the stars, this is hiking stripped back to its purest form. If your soul is craving wilderness and your boots are itching for something more... Mphongolo is calling.

Contents

Why Should You Choose The Mphongolo?.....	3
Things To Look Out For on the Mphongolo	3
When To Hike the Mphongolo	4
About the Mphongolo Trail (What You Need To Know About the Hike).....	4
The Mphongolo Route & What To Expect.....	5
The Route	5
Expect:.....	6
Current Cost To Hike The Mphongolo Trail (2025).....	6
Other Expenses.....	6
How To Book To Hike the Mphongolo	6
Getting To the Mphongolo Backpack Trail.....	7
About Shingwedzi Rest Camp.....	7
What To Pack For the Mphongolo Trail	8
How To Pack For The Mphongolo.....	8
Don't Forget To	8
FAQs	8
Top Tips.....	9
Anything Else?	9



Why Should You Choose The Mphongolo?

If you're looking for an unforgettable, off-the-grid hiking adventure in the heart of the Kruger National Park, the Mphongolo Backpack Trail is the ultimate choice.

This self-sufficient, guided wilderness trek offers hikers a rare opportunity to explore an untouched landscape teeming with wildlife, where the only sounds you'll hear are the calls of birds, the rustle of leaves, and the distant roar of a lion.

The Mphongolo is great for:

- Adventurers seeking a true wilderness experience
- Birdwatchers, with the Kruger's diverse avian species to spot
- Hikers looking to disconnect from technology and immerse themselves in nature
- Those who enjoy wild camping with no permanent facilities.

Things To Look Out For on the Mphongolo

- **Huge Elephant Bulls**
 - The area between Shingwedzi and the Mphongolo River is famed for its massive tuskers. This part of Kruger was once home to some of the original "Magnificent Seven" elephants, and the legacy lives on. The bulls here often roam in solitude – a powerful sight in this vast wilderness.
- **Pel's Fishing Owl**
 - This elusive and highly sought-after bird is a real treat for twitchers. The Mphongolo Riverine system, with its big trees and slow-moving water, provides ideal habitat for this nocturnal, fish-eating owl. A rare and magical sighting if you're lucky!
- **Ancient Nyala Berry and Jackalberry Trees**
 - The riverine forest belts along the Mphongolo and Shingwedzi rivers are home to huge, gnarled trees that seem almost enchanted. These towering giants are not only stunning to see but also support a rich diversity of life, from birds to bushbuck to leopards lounging in the branches.
- **Leopard Country**
 - Speaking of leopards... this quiet, dense terrain with good cover and prey makes for prime leopard territory. You're more likely to hear one rasping than see it, but sharp-eyed hikers may catch a glimpse of a tail vanishing into the thickets.
- **Rarer Antelope – Like Roan and Eland**
 - The remoteness of this northern area means less competition with other grazers, so rarer antelope species like roan antelope and eland might be spotted. Their presence is a good sign of healthy, undisturbed ecosystems.
- **Natural Beauty**
 - The trail takes place in the large, mopane dominated wilderness area between the Shingwedzi and Mphongolo rivers.
 - Being further north in the Kruger Park definitely adds to the remote and isolated feel of this trail.

- Stunning sunsets over the wilderness, with no artificial lights to disrupt the view.

When To Hike the Mphongolo

Firstly, be aware that Kruger Park’s three backpack trails, including The Mphongolo Backpack Trail, only operate from 1 February – 30 November.

The best time to hike the trail is between May and August. You’re (hopefully) looking at cooler temperatures, lower humidity, and less chance of encountering high water levels!

Temperatures can still exceed 28°C in winter, so be prepared for heat even in the cooler months.

About the Mphongolo Trail (What You Need To Know About the Hike)

Here’s all the essential information you need to know for The Mphongolo Trail:

How Long is the Mphongolo?	Distance covered varies depending on the group and guides’ decisions (usually around 30km in total).
How Many Days	Four days and three nights
Difficulty Rating	Moderate: The terrain is mostly flat but can be physically demanding due to heat and carrying a full pack.
Fitness Level Required	Moderate fitness is needed. You must be able to carry your own backpack for the duration of the hike.
Age Limit	Minimum age: 12 years old Maximum age: No official limit, but you must be physically capable. If you are over 65 years of age then you will be asked to supply a letter from a doctor specifying that you are capable of the hike.
Backpack Information	Self-carry: You must bring all your own food, water purification, and camping gear. Need lightweight, just-add-water meals? Trail Food has a full range of hearty hiking-ready options – browse the menu here. No slackpacking options are available.

Group Size	<p>Maximum group size: 8 people</p> <p>Minimum group size: 4 people (individuals can book, but the hike will only go ahead if at least four participants are confirmed)</p>
Accommodation	<p>Wild camping with <u>no huts</u> or facilities.</p> <p>Tents are compulsory due to the presence of predators.</p> <p>You will camp in dry riverbeds or other selected locations chosen by your guides.</p>
Water	<p>You will need to bring a water purifier and even drops potentially.</p> <p>Water will be taken either from the closest river or you might need to dig in the riverbed for water.</p> <p>*See Top Tips for more information.</p>
Facilities	<p>None. The trail follows a strict “leave no trace” policy.</p> <p>Please note that there are <u>no toilets</u> – hikers must follow bush etiquette (e.g., cat-hole method).</p>
Important Information	<p>Departure days: Every Wednesday and Sunday from 1 February to 30 November</p> <p>No cellphone reception – a true digital detox!</p>

The Mphongolo Route & What To Expect

The Route

- The trail starts from Kruger National Park’s Shingwedzi Rest Camp.
- Vehicles can be safely left at the designated parking area in Shingwedzi Camp.
- The group is transported by an open vehicle with a trailer to a drop-off point.
- There is no set route, allowing guides to adapt based on wildlife movements and water sources.
- The hiking pace and distance are determined by the group and agreed upon with the guides

Expect:

- No fixed campsites – each night's stop is determined by the guides.
- Encounters with wildlife on foot – an exhilarating but humbling experience.
- Small fires are sometimes allowed but are not for cooking. That's why [The Trail Food Company's](#) cook-in bags are so handy.
- Night-time sounds of the African bush – from lion roars to the grunts of hippos.
- A true wilderness experience, completely isolated from other tourists

Current Cost To Hike The Mphongolo Trail (2025)

There are three costs involved in a Kruger Backpack Trail.

1. **The Activity charge:** As of 2025 this is R4018 per person.
2. **A Conservation Fee** per person per day (rate depends on your nationality and age).*
3. **A Community Fund Fee** of 1% will be added to the cost of all accommodation and activity reservations.

*If you have a valid Wild Card then this fee is not applicable.

Other Expenses

Budget for accommodation before and after your Mphongolo Trail adventure, as well as the costs of getting to and from Kruger Park.

[Shingwedzi Camp](#) offers a variety of accommodation options to suit all budgets.

How To Book To Hike the Mphongolo

Call: +27 (0)12 428 9111

The SanParks Central Reservations Call Centre is open Monday to Friday from 07:30 AM to 3:45 PM

Book online: <https://www.sanparks.org/reservations/overnight-activity>

Email: reservations@sanparks.org

Early booking is essential as spots are limited.

Getting To the Mphongolo Backpack Trail

- The closest Airport is
 - **Hoedspruit (Eastgate) Airport** (which has daily flights to and from Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban)
- **Drive**
 - You will need to then drive or arrange a transfer to **Shingwedzi camp**.
- **Closest Kruger Gate**
 - The closest entrance gate to Shingwedzi Rest Camp in Kruger National Park is the **Punda Maria Gate**. Allow yourself at least 2 hours to get from Punda Maria Gate to Shingwedzi.
 - While Phalaborwa Gate is another option, it's about 135 km from Shingwedzi and is more commonly used by visitors traveling from the south.
- **Speeding Restrictions**
 - Bear in mind that the roads in Kruger have speed limits of 50 km/h on tar and 40 km/h on gravel, and wildlife sightings can cause unexpected delays—though those are the best kind of delays! So give yourself ample time to get to the starting point.
- **Meeting point:**
 - Shingwedzi Rest Camp at 13:00 on the day of departure.
 - Do not be late – the open vehicle transporting you to your drop off point leaves at 2pm sharp.
- **Trail Start and End**
 - Hikers are transported to and from Shingwedzi Camp at the start and end of the trail.

About Shingwedzi Rest Camp

Since you are going to be up this way, we've highlighted a couple of our favourite things about Shingwedzi.

1. Shingwedzi exudes that old-school Kruger charm: think low stone walls, large shade trees, and an unhurried atmosphere. It's a favourite for long-time Kruger regulars who value authenticity and quiet. You're likely to experience **long, peaceful drives** without seeing another car which makes the whole experience feel much wilder
2. Shingwedzi is a birding hotspot. Especially during the **wet season**, this is a top spot for **migratory birds** and specials like:
 - **Dwarf bittern**
 - **African openbill stork**
 - **Eastern nicator**
 - **Three-banded courser**
 - The **Kanniedood Dam road (S50)** east of camp is a must-drive for birders and general game viewing.

What To Pack For the Mphongolo Trail

It can be overwhelming to figure out what should stay and what should go when you're trying to pack for any hike. Take a look our super handy tips on [what to pack](#) for your next trail!

How To Pack For The Mphongolo

You'll want to pack as light and as compact as possible.

It is typically advised that you pack your hiking food so that you eat the heaviest (and fresh) items first to make space in your backpack and decrease the weight you have to carry. But with Trail Food, you don't have to worry about your hiking meals taking up too much space or weight!

Here are some [expert pointers on how to pack your backpack](#) if you're feeling slightly uncertain about what should go where.

Don't Forget To

We understand that hiking in a Big 5 area can be a scary thought. But don't worry, your guides are well-trained. So...

- **Listen to your guides** – they ensure safety in big game territory.
- **Respect nature** – follow the “leave no trace” principle.
- **Check weather conditions** before your trip.

FAQs

Here are some of the most frequently asked questions about the Mphongolo Trail and hiking in Kruger.

Is the trail dangerous? Wildlife encounters are possible, but experienced guides ensure safety.

Can I hike alone? No, a minimum group of four is required.

Is there a backup vehicle? No, but guides carry emergency radios.

What happens in case of an emergency? The guides have radios to call for assistance if needed.

Can I bring alcohol? If you're going in the depths of winter maybe take a [tiny tipple](#) just to warm you up – but you definitely don't want to be carrying cans and bottles. Remember it's important to be safe for yourself, the other hikers and the guides.

Top Tips

- I have 2 water filters, a small hand-held MSR one and then a larger hanging one that enables you to filter larger volumes of water. On a number of occasions hiking not everyone has a filter so I have found that it is useful for me to bring the larger one to help others out.
- Bring a bar of chocolate or something like that to share with the group on one of the nights. It's a nice way to get the group chatting and a nice, sweet treat for everyone.
- Don't forget to tip your guides. Lead guide should usually get around R150 per person per night and back up guide should get about R100 per person per night. SANParks Rangers don't get paid a lot so every bit of appreciation makes a difference.

Anything Else?

For an unforgettable wilderness adventure, the **Mphongolo Backpack Trail** is one of the best ways to experience the Kruger National Park like never before. Are you ready to trade the crowds for the call of the wild?

Plus, with your supply of [Trail Food](#) conveniently and lightly packed in your backpack, you'll have no worries about whether you've packed enough or too many hiking meals. Have fun on your adventure!