

Marakele National Park Access for Mobility Impaired Guests



Marakele National Park is located in Limpopo Province northwest of the town of Thabazimbi. It is set in the Waterberg Mountains and offers an amazing range of scenery and biodiversity. Much of the park is accessible to sedan vehicles, particularly the Kwaggasvlakte section around the campsite, but because of the mountainous terrain and heavy rainfall, some sections of roads are a little rough in places. The only tar road in the park is the narrow track up to Lenong Mountain top and view point. Most of South Africa's large mammals are present, including elephant, giraffe, black and white rhinoceros, several antelope, leopard and lion. The park has limited accommodation and visitor facilities, but both Bontle Campsite and Tlopi Tented Camp have facilities to cater for guests in wheelchairs. The park is renowned for its endangered Cape Vulture colony and making the journey up to Lenong Lookout is highly recommended.



Some Marakele Wildlife

The main **entrance gate** to the park is on the road that leads northeast out of Thabazimbi. The parking area is open plan, so no designated bay for guests in wheelchairs is offered, but the bricked area provides an excellent flat firm surface to disembark. Apart from the reception office the main entrance block has public toilets (including an accessible one), an activities desk (only manned in busy periods) and the park's administration offices.



Activities desk at Entrance Gate

The accessible toilet (shown below) is a little difficult to access in a wheelchair because the door is at the top of a ramp with no landing platform in front of the door to allow a wheelchair user to open the door without rolling backwards. Once inside the toilet has grab rails (although the toilet is too far from the adjacent wall to allow a person leverage) and the basin, which is well positioned in relation to the toilet has push taps. There is also a hand drier that is relatively accessible to use.



From the ablutions it is only a few metres to the back entrance to the reception office which links this facility to the park's administration offices. However this entrance is not intended for public access and there is a step (below left). Instead a person must go through the front entrance. From the parking area this is easily achieved via the park's entrance road, but from the toilets one has to negotiate a curb (below centre). The park needs to install a drop curb here. Once this is negotiated the entrance into the office is via a wide, gentle ramp. The entrance is a double door (below right). Most wheelchair users will be able to pass through the space provided, but some may require the second door to be opened by one of the attending staff, or one of their own travel companions.



Accessible Visitor Locations for day visitors and overnight guests: Marakele is a relatively small and developing park with limited visitor infrastructure compared to parks like Kruger or Table Mountain. The Kwaggasvlakte (*translation: Zebra's Plains*) section of the park (where the entrance gate is located) has a network of roads for vehicles to drive around where wildlife like rhino, giraffe, zebra, several antelope and a few smaller predators can be viewed. Apart from the Bontle Campsite (see accommodation) there are two get out destinations in this section – a bird hide, and a picnic site, both of which are currently limited in their ability to cater for visitors with mobility challenges, particularly those in wheelchairs.

Ikhotseng Picnic Site is a quaint little spot set in silver clusterleaf *terminalia sericae* dominated woodland, where visitors can disembark from their vehicles and have a picnic (unlike picnic sites in Kruger there is no opportunity to hire gas cookers or purchase cool-drinks, so visitors must bring their own provisions). The site itself is on flat ground, although the surface is a little sandy or gravelly in places, but generally is not too difficult to move around. There are a number of provided picnic tables with fixed benches for seating on either side. The top and bottom ends of these tables can be used by visitors in wheelchairs, although ideally the clearance underneath the table's surface would be a little deeper. The sandiest section is probably the pathway to the ablutions (below right). There are also steps up to the toilets and no adaptations to assist mobility challenged persons. Perhaps the park can look into the provision of



Bollonoto Bird Hide was built by the park's Honorary Rangers. It is quite a rudimentary structure compared to some of the hides elsewhere in SANParks, but nevertheless provides an excellent opportunity to disembark from one's vehicle and interact with nature without the intrusion of vehicle engines. It is particularly good in summer time when the reed bed is filled with breeding weavers and bishops. The pathway to the hide is wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair, but thorns will be a risk to those users with inflatable tyres. However at present the entrance to the hide is not wheelchair compatible as there are steps. It should not be too difficult for the park or the honorary rangers to provide an accessible entrance to the hide and help make this facility universally accessible.





To get from the the relatively small and flat Kwaggasvlakte section to the larger mountainous section of the park one must travel underneath the Hoopdal public road via a tunnel with a remote controlled gate. This requires a person to press a button which is at a convenient height for a person to operate through their car window. The gate is to prevent the more dangerous game such as lion and elephant from passing underneath the public road and entering the Kwaggasvlakte Section of the park. Thus the Bontle Campsite can remain unfenced.

In the larger mountainous section of the park there are roads that are accessible to sedan vehicles, but others that are only accessible to 4x4 vehicles. The main attraction on both type of routes is the amazing scenery of the Waterberg Mountains, particularly when one takes the narrow tar road up to the towers that are on top of the mountains at **Lenong (Vulture) Viewpoint** where there are 3 communication towers of national interest. The road to the towers is actually a service road for these towers and only through mutual agreement with SANDF and Sentech (the signal distributor for the South African broadcasting sector). In travelling up to the towers one leaves the bushveld/woodland habitat where one can find many of the park's large mammals to the exposed mountain plateau with grassland, proteas, cedar trees and rugged sandstone outcrops. Because the potentially dangerous animals don't climb up to the mountain top visitors may alight from their vehicles here and have a picnic. One of the world's largest Cape Vulture colonies is located on a cliff face just out of view from the towers and these massive birds can soar closely overhead. There are also a variety of small mammals, lizards and birds one can see here that one will not find elsewhere in the park. Getting from the parking area to the mountain edge viewpoint has no formal path, so wheelchair users will be limited in where they can move, but the brick roads around the towers do offer some degree of opportunity to move around and absorb the location.



The drive to the mountain top is not far distance wise (15.5km from Tlopi Camp and about 30 km from the park's entrance gate), but a good 3 or 4 hours are needed to do the trip justice. The frequent pull-over spots en route are well worth using for photography or scanning for wildlife. There is a rudimentary toilet about half way up the tar road to the towers, but these toilets are little more than long-drops and are not accessible to guests in wheelchairs

Marakele Accommodation: As the park is limited in terms of its infrastructure, there is limited accommodation inside the park. For visitors there are 2 options – Tlopi Tented Camp and Bontle Campsite, both of which have accessible facilities for mobility challenged guests. There are however several B&Bs and privately run accommodation options in Thabazimbi and the surrounding Waterberg region. An internet search may reveal if any offer properly .accessible facilities.

Tlopi Tented Camp: There are 10 tents named after birds, each with 2 single beds and 2 stretcher beds available for small children. One of these tents (Jacana) is equipped for guests in wheelchairs, with ramped access, and a roll-in shower and grab rails in the bathroom. The camp is on the banks of a small dam which has good wildlife. The surrounding mountains make Tlopi one of the most picturesque of all SANParks camps.





Although the gravel road through the park leading to Tlopi is sedan vehicle friendly, the last little bit down to the unit's parking is on a steep slope and hence the heavy convection storms the area experiences in summer lead to heavy erosion. The park has to frequently grade this access slope and it can be a bit of a challenge at certain times.



Once one's vehicle is down designated parking for the unit is sufficiently wide, flat and firm to enable wheelchair users to disembark and make their way to the access ramp which is fairly steep and about 7m long (see left). The beginning of the ramp also suffered from erosion after heavy rain, so a sunken cement slab has been added to address this.



Once up the ramp the deck is spacious and allows for ease of movement in a wheelchair and provides excellent viewing for passing wildlife



On the one side of the deck is the open plan kitchen. The sink, hotplate and fridge (below left and centre left) are all easily reached by a guest in a wheelchair, although there is no clearance beneath the sink and hotplate. With the deck being open the camp suffers from the perennial problem of African parks with raids by monkeys and occasionally baboons. This requires guests to lock food away and keep the fridge barricaded. The park has plans to secure the kitchenette further in the near future. The unit's dining table (below centre left) is suitable for use by wheelchair guests in that there is easy clearance underneath the table surface when the chairs are removed. The unit's braai (barbecue) facility (below centre right) is open and also fairly easy to access from a wheelchair.



On the other side of the deck is the entrance to the bedroom chamber. The door (above right) is spring-loaded and lockable because of the primate problem, which can be an inconvenience for wheelchair users, but there is a chord attached to the door that loops over the nearby bannister and enables the door to be held open to pass through when needed.



The 2 single beds in the bedroom chamber (left) are of an easy height for wheelchair users to transfer to and from. There are 2 stretcher beds (right) in the chamber too, but these are only suitable for children. There is sufficient space for a chair to pass between these beds, and alongside both beds (below left and centre-left). Also in the chamber is a fan useful for heat in summer and an open wardrobe (below right) which is simple but very accessible.





From the bedroom chamber the access into the ablutions is easily achieved. The door is easy to close by a person inside the abluion chamber, but does not have a handle to close from the bedroom.



The unit's roll-in shower (left) is very comfortable for wheelchair users to use. The seat has a good surface size and the shower head is easy to reach, position to one's discretion and detach if needed. The toilet (right) is also suitably accessible for guests in wheelchairs although there is no basin or tap within reach of the toilet.



The unit's basin vanity (left) has good clearance underneath for users in wheelchairs, but if the unit's ablutions have shortcomings, it is that the basin has a turn-style tap instead of the recommended push or lever type mixer; the basin's ridge is narrow and sticks up above the level of the vanity (which is uncomfortable for the many wheelchair users with balance issues – who rely on their arms to support themselves); and the facilities mirror is on the left of the basin too high for a wheelchair user to be able to use it.

Bontle Camping Area: The site is unfenced and a nearby waterhole and salt-licks means that there is a steady stream of game that can be viewed in and around the camp. Bontle received several awards by the camping fraternity for its layout, cleanliness and location. It is also very accessible to visitors in wheelchairs and 3 of the 35 sites are allocated on the reservation system for mobility-challenged guests (NB. These will only be guaranteed if booked 30 days ahead of occupation and if you are visiting in busy periods it would be wise to confirm this with SANParks reservations in advance).

The camping area has 3 circles of sites and each circle has its own abluion and scullery block. Only one of these blocks (*Tsessebe*) has accessible facilities. To get from the individual sites to the central block one has to cross over open ground (near right) which is flat and relatively firm, although frailer wheelchair users may battle a little until they get to the paved area around the block (far right)



The sinks for campers to wash dishes (left) are moderately accessible for wheelchair users as a shelf below the twin sinks prevents one from getting underneath the sinks. The ablutions are divided into male and female sections and there are accessible ablutions in both genders. This may present a problem for couples where one gender needs to assist a companion of another gender, but the accessible cubicles of both ablutions are separate from the rest of the ablutions and have doors that can be closed, so this can be overcome.

The roll-in showers have a good sized seat and an easily reachable shower on a sliding pole. The horizontal grab rail is positioned too far from the seat and hopefully this will get moved closer to the seat soon.





The accessible toilets at Bontle has support rails in the recommended positioned and importantly the basin is within easy reach of the toilet and has a push style mixer. The unit also has a very accessible mirror.

Other park accommodation: Currently there is a bush camp (Modikala) that is very rustic and not very accessible. It cannot currently be booked through the reservation system and is done so directly through the park. Another facility is the **Thutong Environmental Education Centre** which is available for school groups and booked through the SANParks travel trade centre. This EE Centre is set to open officially in June 2011. There are several ramps in the facility and there is an accessible ablution (see images below), but there are some major issues affecting physical access in the rest of the facility that will need to be addressed before special needs school groups will be able to make use of the facility, e.g. there is no ramped access into the auditorium and into the bedrooms. This shouldn't be too difficult to resolve.



The toilet in the accessible ablutions (left) has a rear rail that will benefit wheelchair users, but one needs to be installed alongside the facility. The basin has lever taps and is within reach of the toilet. The roll-in shower (right) has the required size of seat and a shower on a height adjustable pole, but the rail needs to be repositioned so that it can be of better use to a person in a wheelchair using the facility.

