

SOFT-ROADER BREAKAWAY
HYUNDAI IX35 2.0 4X4 DIESEL AT

Western Limpopo's Hidden treasure

Following on our African Ivory Route trip to the eastern section of Limpopo, published in the July issue, our team travelled to the western region around Bloubaai and the Makgabeng area. Rich in history and great for lovers of the bushveld, it's a destination easily accessible in a compact SUV such as the Hyundai ix35

Text and photography: Anzet du Plessis





Hyundai's ix35 has 170mm ground clearance which makes for a nice balance between on-road handling and dirt road obstacle avoidance. Left: Limpopo is truly one of the most understated provinces of South Africa – which works well in favour of adventurers that prefer to go out with a paper map and discover an area for themselves! It's also a great winter destination. The nights are still cold but in daytime the weather is wonderful.

Travelling into Limpopo is a bit like going back in time. Progressively, fewer and fewer fuel stations stock 50ppm diesel. The towns stretch further apart. The tar road network thins out and well-maintained gravel arteries run off the main routes.

Only a few hours north-west of Gauteng, the areas around Blouberg and Marken take on the landscape and character of places like the northern Kalahari and Namibia. Desolate but beautiful, this is a great route for those in need of a dose of bushveld therapy but with no time for lengthy, cross-border trips.

Our route

We travelled along the N1 to Modimolle, and from there to the Nylsvley Nature Reserve via the Boekenhout dirt road just past Serendipity 4x4 (see co-ordinates below).

From there, we made special arrangements because of time constraints to enter the southern gate of the Doorndraaidam Reserve. Usually one would drive along the R101 to enter Doorndraaidam at the north-eastern gate, and then exit at the same place. It's a great lunch stop, with a beautiful picnic area overlooking the dam. Warthogs, zebra and buck quite happily roam around.

From there, head up to Mokamole and Mogalakwenastroom. The route is mostly thick sand tracks, which are well graded. While there are corrugations here and there, it's a very dynamic drive with great views, small villages and mostly soft-roader friendly surfaces. We'd choose it over the N11 again in a heartbeat.

Then, head for the Masebe Game Reserve, where the gate to the right of the road has a reception desk, and enters the western section of the reserve featuring Nthubu Camp. Remember to leave Doorndraaidam by 14h00

in order to make the gate before closing time. From Nthubu we headed up to the Blouberg via Rebone, turning off east just before the Glen Alpine Dam. Here, several dirt roads criss-cross the area, and it's best to use GPS co-ordinates. All the roads we encountered were well graded and sign posted.

On the return, you could use the same route. It's best not to head to Marken from Rebone on the R561. The tar road here is in a terrible state, and we mostly drove next to it in the dirt. Rather head back to Masebe (road signs indicate Potgietersrus/Mokopane).

Just past Mesebe, take the R519 west and then turn south to Vaalwater. Do not turn off when the tar road turns to dirt, as the dirt road meets up with the tar again and is much more scenic than the main road.

From Vaalwater, head back to Modimolle to return to the N1.

Our trusty steed: Hyundai's popular ix35

Hyundai's ix35 was the perfect choice for this trip. The route offers challenges that would prevent an ordinary sedan from going

on all the roads we used, but showed off the ix35's capabilities very well. It's easy to understand why this vehicle is so popular, given its versatility and practical features. While Hyundai doesn't publish its sales figures, prospective buyers often find themselves on waiting lists, and the vehicle has done very well for the Korean company.

On the open road to Nylsvley, the cabin of the ix35 did its job in keeping us comfortable as tollgate after tollgate flashed past.

With 170mm in ground clearance, the ix35 strikes a decent balance between off-road considerations and on-road handling, and has a well set-up chassis, with barely a roll to be felt in corners.

The model we drove was the latest ix35

En route to Nylsvley

Try these stops to top up on food and cold drinks, though there isn't much by way of supplies.

Lina Pizza: 087 820-4433

S24 40 30.6 E028 26 25.0

Chilli Hotspot farm stall: 072 392-1792

S24 40 30.6 E028 30 44.4

The Nylsvley Nature Reserve is a short drive from Johannesburg and is the ideal weekend breakaway if you just want a quiet retreat to walk around and enjoy nature.

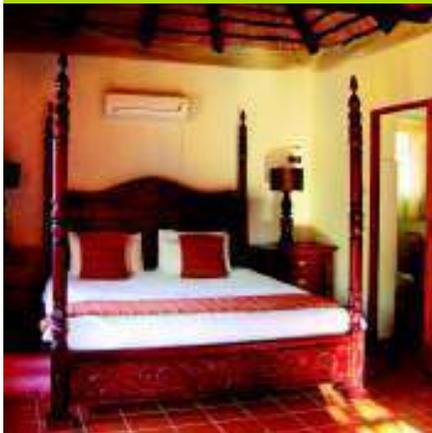


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Above: The atmosphere at Nylsvley is very relaxed, and makes up for the lack of big game. Below: Our accommodation at Nylsvley, which has a great variety in terms of pricing, catering for all budgets.



built in the Czech Republic. Initially, Hyundai imported the popular SUV from Korea, which accounts for the new grille, headlights, fog lamps and roof rails on post-2012 models. In 2014, however, an update is due, with a redesigned steering system among the improvements.

The road is busy all the way to Nylsvley, but it has a great surface. It's easy to get to Nylsvley on a Friday. From Johannesburg, give

yourself about two-and-a-quarter hours for the trip in order to get to the gate in time.

Nylsvley Nature Reserve

Nylsvley is a predator-free park but a birder's paradise. The list of birds regularly spotted there is extensive and includes some 365 species, among them 37 red data (threatened) species.

The 4000ha conservation area forms part of the 16 000ha Nyl River floodplain and is largely made up of wetlands. The river flows for 70km from Modimolle to Mokopane. During the winter, game is easy to view and the animals are accustomed to vehicles. The wetlands are usually quite dry at this time of the year, but birdlife continues to be prolific.

Even if you're not a birder, Nylsvley provides a very relaxing and intimate trip to the bushveld. You can walk without guides in most of the reserve, and camping is affordable and unfenced. The picnic area and tall lookout tower make for great viewing spots, and there are several bird hides. You can also cycle on most roads in Nylsvley.

This is a self-drive reserve, which is great for SUV owners who enjoy viewing game from their cars rather than go in game-drive vehicles. But walking is really the thing to do, so take comfortable shoes.

The ix35 was built for this kind of trip,

and was excellent for game viewing.

While the engine is a bit loud, the animals were untroubled. The large windows and windscreen give the ix35 a European feel, and the slightly raised ground clearance allowed us to make more than one three-point turn in order to avoid disturbing herds of giraffe and tsetsebe.

The passenger front seat was a little low for game viewing, but it's nothing a small pillow can't fix! We were happy to have the air conditioning on a warm day that could barely pass for winter.

While the self-catering units at Nylsvley are comfortable and well maintained, the real bargain is the camping area. There are no showers, but at R30 a night per person, it's a great breakaway not far from Johannesburg that is very affordable for the wonderful experience of visiting the wetlands.

Sunrise and sunset are spectacular across the flat grasslands, and there's something special about enjoying them from your tent. Mind you, winter nights at Nylsvley can be quite cold, so a thermal layer will have to be packed!

From Nylsvley we headed to the Doringdraai Nature Reserve, stopping in Naboomspruit along the R101 (known as Mookgophong these days, from the local name for the naboom tree). Here we filled our fuel tank to the brim, and met up with Ivory Route Legend Klaas Bonzaaier.

Klaas was one of the founders of the Ivory Route and was involved in building the beautiful, community-owned campsites that

En Route to Masebe

Telekeshi Community Development Project

Stop over at Telekeshi, which is used intermittently as a research centre. It's a good source of information on the area. The project provides accommodation and conference facilities and is a great location for groups. The traditionally styled "village" set-up is a few kilometres from the Masebe Reserve.

Right: In terms of gravel handling, the ix35 is difficult to fault. The traction control system is basic but effective, noise levels very low for its price class and there are no rattles or vibrations in the cabin.



we stayed at on this trip as well as on the previous trip to Modjadjiskloof. He was to be our guide for the next few days, and a more informed and passionate person could not possibly be found.

Doorndraai Dam Nature Reserve

Doorndraai is a small reserve built around the dam. Although it is not supposed to have predators, there have been rare sightings of leopards and jackals.

A project to drop fences between the reserve and a neighbouring private game park would greatly improve game viewing, but for now the various antelope, warthog and zebra draw visitors – along with the large population of carp in the dam!

There is plenty of bird life as some of them visit the area for the same reason that most people do – to fish. Pack a picnic lunch to

enjoy next to the dam.

The ablution facilities are clean and well maintained – and the last of their kind you may see for a few hours.

There are campsites in the reserve, which forms part of the Greater Entabeni Conservancy, as well as a caravan park.

Nthubu to Masebe

The Masebe Nature Reserve is also a predator-free park, but various cats and jackals do occur naturally in the area, so be aware of that. The Nthubu camp lies hidden, deep within the reserve, and is unfenced but well sign-posted.

The large safari tents are well spread out and make for quite a private stay. There is an excellent communal kitchen and a deck overlooking a shallow valley and the Nthubu River. There's a small bridge over the currently dry riverbed and its dense

reeds, which caught fire in 2009. The flames spread rapidly through the reeds and burnt down the old deck around a beautiful boerboonboom, as well as the kitchen and one of the safari tents.

Since then, a large new deck and well-stocked kitchen facility have been built – and more precautions are being taken against wildfires.

The staff speak nostalgically about the old tree, which used to cast its shade over the kitchen area. It's still beautiful, even in its lifeless state, and gives character to the camp.

There is no electricity, but camp staff put out lanterns in the evening. It would nevertheless be wise to have some lighting of your own.

This is a self-drive reserve, with a challenging route that's safe for a compact SUV like the ix35 but not suitable for sedans. The Hyundai's under-guard protection came in handy

Narrow bushveld roads and middlemannetjies were no match for our soft-roader in the Masebe reserve, but might hinder a family sedan.



Nylsvley Nature Reserve

S24 38 50 E028 39 52.6

Gates open:

1 Sept-30 April: 06h00 to 18h00

1 May-31 August: 06h30 to 17h30

Entrance: Adults: R15, Children 6-12 and pensioners: R10

Vehicles: R25 (extra charges for bicycles, trailers and combis)

Accommodation:

Nylsvley has six campsites, four two-bedroom cottages, one six-bedroom guesthouse and a group camp facility that sleeps 36 people. The latter is great for birding groups and school tours. It is basic but clean and well maintained.

The Spoonbill Restaurant caters for breakfast and dinner, but all the free-standing units are self-catering with braai facilities outside and crockery/cutlery available.

Rates (check their website for updates on prices):

Duck Den Chalets: R480 per night per chalet

Campsite: R30 per person per night
Bicycle for hire: R40 per hour (R60 deposit)

>> Limpopo Wildlife Resorts:

www.lwr.co.za

Friends of Nylsvley:

www.nylsvley.co.za

Birding route:

www.birdingroutes.co.za/limpopo

Call: 014 743-6925

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when driving through the tall grass on the *middelmannetjie*. There are also a few descents with loose rocks and thicker soil, so it's useful to have a vehicle with good traction control.

Here the ix35 surprised us. This is probably the furthest from a tar road that the SUV could safely go, and while the rough route was a challenge, it wasn't a stressful one.

The vehicle is easy to control at slow speeds and you can guide it gently over rocks and obstacles. In the thick sandy roads on the western side of the reserve, the central diff lock was used only for a few 200m stretches that were thicker than usual. It takes a lot of punishment, and does so without knocking on suspension travel, catching in the undergrowth or groaning on steep inclines.

The park covers 4500ha and has few main roads, but it's great for hiking, cycling and even klooing.

One special attraction is the bushman paintings at the western end of the park. The staff at Nthubu camp will take visitors on walks through the reserve, and the rock paintings are really worth seeing. It's a bit of a walk, but the detail in the paintings is extraordinary.

From Masebe, dirt and tar roads criss-cross the Makgabeng area along the Mogalakwena River up to Rebone.

At first glance, the region may seem devoid of attractions, but this is where it really starts to feel like the bushveld. The sand gets redder and darker as you go north, the villages are further apart and more rural, and there are more open vistas.

The landscape here is quite different to the rest of Limpopo. The terrain is flat and covered in thorn trees (mostly camel and



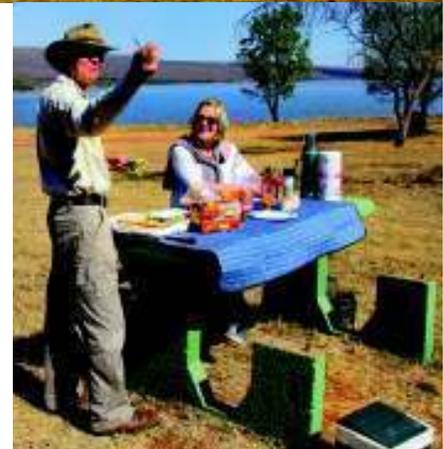
Doordraaidam Reserve offers great views of the dam that stretches from east to west. Visitors can fish, canoe or just enjoy a picnic on the lawns.

Below: Klaas Bonzaaier has a deep passion for this area and was a driving force behind the African Ivory Route's establishment.

buffalo thorn). There are also cactus plants and nabooms, with occasional rocky hills breaking the skyline.

This is another place where some extraordinary bushman paintings can be found. It's worth getting a guide for the Makgabeng area as it is rich in history dating back to the days long before Europeans began to settle on the land.

Our guide, Jonas Tlouma, was well read and an absolute treasure (contact details opposite). He has taken both local and international tourists, historians, geologists and researchers through the area to find, interpret and study the history and the rock art. The local authorities, in association with Wits University, have preserved and protected the rock art. Tlouma tells about the ancient people who lived here, and recorded their stories on the walls of the caves and cliffs. He speaks with great passion and a



respect for the past that could only come from a local person. It was a memorable experience to walk with him through the Makgabeng.

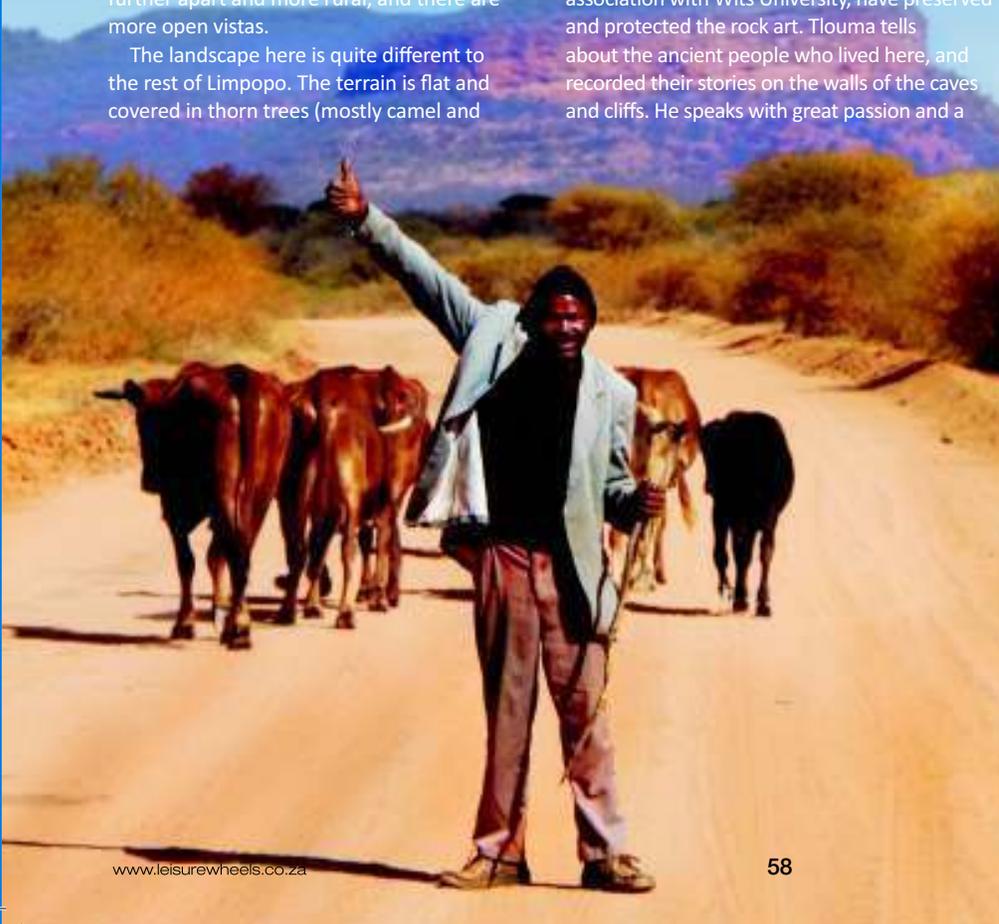
Not only bushman paintings but also Northern Sotho art feature on the plateau, and with his knowledge, Tlouma weaves an enthralling story of the political and economic pressures that influenced the people who lived here before him.

The roads around the Makgabeng area are, again, not made for ordinary sedans, and a bit of ground clearance is required. They are mostly sandy tracks and the central diff lock of the ix35 came in handy, although it wasn't necessary when momentum was maintained. The roads wind quickly and sharply, with thorn trees protruding from all sides. It's not a main road, and very few of the locals have vehicles of their own.

[En route to Blouberg] **Fuel and supplies**

S23 25.640 E28 37.090 (on N11)

On the way to Rebone is a small centre with a very basic supply store, bakery and fish and chips shop. The chips are delicious, the milk is fresh and the diesel is limited to 500ppm, but it's a haven for those running short on supplies.





Nthubu has five safari tents, each with an en suite bathroom, gas hob and bucket shower, and a private porch. The tents are far enough from each other to be quite private. Below: Jonas Tlouma passionately tells the tail of the bushmen spiritual rituals, depicted in this small cave.



Blouberg

It's not until the sun goes down at Blouberg, and the lights around the hills come on, that one realises just how many people live in the area. The last census showed a population of 145 000 people, most of whose income comes from workers far away in Johannesburg or on the mines. Still, it's a peaceful camp, marked by the electronic-sounding call of fruit bats and the tinkle of cowbells.

Interestingly, the different bells are said to be distinguishable by each cattle herder, and the symphony that greets you at the campsite in the evening helps you unwind after a long day.

The Basohla River gently flows near the communal fireplace. The name "basohla" means grey, and refers to the colour of the piles of stones that line its banks. The rest of the area is starkly colourful in contrast, with dark red to peach-coloured sand and thick, evergreen vegetation.

The camp at Blouberg is different to other

En Route to Masebe

Alfa Café (wood, repairs, emergencies)
S24 34 12,2 E28 39 12,6

A little café on the R101 to Naboomspruit. It didn't stock anything cold (and their long-life milk isn't long-life!) but it will help out with a spare tyre or wood for the camps.

Doorndraai Dam Reserve

For reservations and prices of the camps and two-day hiking trails, contact 015 293-3611.

Masebe Nature Reserve

Masebe entrance: S24 31 24.1 E028 42 35,8
Info: www.golimpopo.co.za

Our accommodation: Nthubu Camp

Nthubu is a tented safari camp in the African Ivory Route trail within the malaria-free Masebe Reserve. It has five safari tents, and a wonderfully calm atmosphere. Staff are well-informed about the area and will take visitors on hikes through the reserve and to the bushman painting sites. Pots, cutlery and crockery are supplied, along with a gas hob.

As with all of the camps, visitors must take their own wood. There is drinking water, though many may prefer to have bottled water. There are also gas hobs in the rooms for a warm bucket shower.

Nthubu's safari tents costs R425 per person per night, with a fully catered stay costing R1000 per person per night.

>> www.africanivoryroute.co.za

The Makgabeng

For information on the rock art in the Makgabeng, the most comprehensive online resource is Wits University's website. Navigate to their geography section and then simply search for the Makgabeng art article: www.wits.ac.za. To contact Jonas Tlouama, tel 078 954-4435

Ivory Route wild campsites. With a quaint wooden fence around the grounds, open lawns and a beautiful view of the hills, it only lacks a horse to feel like a ranch. It's much more open, but just as welcoming, with five units with a gas hob for the bucket shower, as

well as a communal kitchen, a lovely dining deck and a fireplace area.

The cattle herders that pass by with their little bell choirs give just the right balance between seclusion and pastoral life. This is the kind of place one should book for several days for a relaxing stay.

You can take a long, half-day hike up to the top of Blouberg, cycle along the sandy roads through the bushveld, or go on a cultural excursion to see traditional dancing, or even have a meal at the home of one of the villagers.

The road up to Blouberg would be slow going in a vehicle without a good ground clearance. While 170mm may seem low, the protective guard on our vehicle was again a help, with lots of tall grass hiding obstacles in the middelmanneljie.

Our group were fortunate to be welcomed into the home of Agrineth Mano, who prepared enough food to feed a party twice as big. Her dishes included thopi (melon pap), makgaa (sorghum), traditional bogobe pap, spinach with peanuts and beetroot leaves, a warm cabbage and carrot dish, a special marog known as telele, African beans (dinawa), two cold salads and mashotja – cooked mopane worms.

There's a first time for everything, and it was a great way to end a wonderfully diverse trip.

SOFT-ROADER BREAKAWAY

HYUNDAI IX35 2.0 4X4 DIESEL AT

Hyundai's ix35 – A soft-roader for all occasions?

Our diesel ix35 produces 130kW, which was ample on the open road when paired with the standard cruise control system. The 392Nm of torque from a low 1800 r/min is what made it such a breeze to handle in the fine sand around the Makgabeng and Blouberg areas, and it did better than we expected.

The six-speed gearbox was easy to live with, and was especially well geared for the rocky roads at Masebe.

The 55-litre tank had its limits around the Blouberg area, where it was necessary to top up with a small amount of 500ppm, which is not advisable.

Great features included the Bluetooth hands-free phone system as well as an audi and USB jack for cellphones and all the gadgetry that our team travels with.

It's also a very safe vehicle, with driver, passenger, side and curtain airbags as standard. There are front and rear crumple zones and side impact protection beams. The trip computer showed an average fuel consumption of 7,7 litres per 100km, which



The interior is modern, with Aux and Bluetooth connectivity, satellite controls, cruise control, comfy leather seats and space-amplifying windows, windscreen and sunroof.

HYUNDAI IX35 2.0 4X4 ELITE DIESEL AT

Engine: Common rail turbodiesel

Displacement: 1995cc

Power: 130kW @ 4000 r/min

Torque: 392Nm @1800 to 2500 r/min

Gearbox: Six-speed automatic

Fuel tank capacity: 55 litres

Towing capacity: 1600kg

Drive system: 4WD

Assist systems: ABS, EBD, Electronic Stability Program

Ground clearance: 170mm

Price: R418 900

Quoted fuel economy: 7,5 litres/100km

www.hyundai.co.za

Other models: The 4x4 version comes only in this specification, with an Executive diesel 4x2 also available. Three two-litre petrol models remain, with the entry-level model being the older, Korean version first introduced to SA in 2010.

was quite good considering the slow going terrain that made up much of our trip.

We drove just over 1100km and it was quite clear why the ix35 is popular. It's an easy vehicle to live with, and great for road trips. 



Blouberg camp

Blouberg intersection up to mountain from main road: at African Ivory Route sign – S23 08 06.4 E028 59 54.7

Our accommodation: The Blouberg thatched rondavels are secluded and make for a great retreat. Be sure to book for more than one day here. Staff can arrange hikes to the top of the Blouberg, walks to the natural rock pools in summer and suggest cycling routes and rock climbing areas.

Kitchen facilities are well stocked, but linen and firewood are not provided. Bucket showers with warm water from gas hobs are provided in each rondavel.

Blouberg rates are R425 per person per night, sharing, with a 50% discount for children.

Camping rates are also available.

>> www.africanivoryroute.co.za



Above left to right: Our accommodation at the Blouberg camp was idyllic – it's the kind of place one should book several nights at. With sand, of course, come thorns! Make sure to wear decent hiking shoes if you're headed out for a walk! The Mopane worms are a delicacy to some, and a Fear Factor episode to others! It's worth at least one try to see which side you are on.



Facelifted in 2012, the ix35 has been one of Hyundai's biggest success stories – it offers great value for money and is both practical and comfortable to live with.