

While in South Africa, take the opportunity to visit the historic Anglo-Zulu battlefields in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

I was born in Durban and grew up in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, but until now had never made the trip to the historic Anglo-Zulu War battlefields of Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana. As our car winds through the green hills of Zululand – “hills too beautiful to describe”, to quote the Zulus who first settled here many hundreds of years ago – my heart contracts and my eyes grow wet.

More than 20,000 visitors make their way to these battlefields each year, most of them British. The first thing you wonder is what the hell the English were doing here in 1879, anyway. It was in the middle of nowhere – unless you were a Zulu in your sovereign and independent kingdom – and the English government had expressly told them *not* to go to war with King Cetshwayo.

The short answer is that the English had already taken control of the eastern Colony of Natal at Durban and wrested the southern Cape Colony from the Dutch; and their officers here believed that to achieve Confederation by overpowering the central Boer Republics, the mighty Zulus had to be subdued, too.

BATTLEFIELD trails

by Verne Maree

“In 1879 the British invaded Zululand. The central of the three major invading columns forded the Buffalo River at Rorke’s Drift. Within days Lord Chelmsford’s invasion was in jeopardy. Part of his central column had been almost annihilated at Isandlwana in a battle rated as one of the greatest military disasters in British colonial history. A few survivors struggled back into Natal across the mighty Buffalo River [*Ed: at a spot known thereafter as Fugitives’ Drift*]. Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill died in a gallant attempt to save the Queen’s colours, earning the first posthumous Victoria Crosses in history. A great wing of the Zulu army went on to attack the British garrison at Rorke’s Drift, and these warriors were beaten off in a battle that lasted all night. More VCs were awarded for valour in this battle than in any other battle in history. There never was another day like this one ...”

– David Rattray, *Day of the Dead Moon** (audio CD).

The “day of the dead moon” refers to the rare, 73-percent solar eclipse that eerily darkened the Isandlwana battlefield.

The Tours

Historian, humanitarian and guide David Rattray was famous for his wonderful guided tours of these battlefields; and since his untimely death in 2007, his friend and colleague Rob Caskie has taken on his mantle.

It would be interesting enough to visit the area on your own. You could study the explanations and exhibits in the little museums and spend some time wandering through the historic buildings at Rorke’s Drift – still much as they were on that fateful day, 22 January 1879 – and among the myriad white-painted stone cairns below the sphinx-like *koppie* (rocky outcrop) at Isandlwana, each of which marks the burial place of six to eight soldiers.

But Rob Caskie is a master storyteller whose stirring evocations truly bring history to life in the most memorable way. As he describes the average Anglo soldier: undernourished, 5 foot 3 inches, 23 years old and weighing just 140 pounds, his voice lowers and softens; it later rises to a hair-curling crescendo as he bellows forth in perfectly accented Zulu the chieftain’s bloody call to attack, or the English soldier’s cry





of naked terror as he runs down from a hilltop vantage point to warn his comrades of the advancing hordes: "Here they come, black as hell and thick as grass!"

For David – and now for Rob and the other guides who continue his work – the story of the Anglo-Zulu conflict is not about war, but about human beings.

It's about Lieutenant Charlie Harford, the entomologist from Herefordshire, who led the first attack against the local Zulu Chief Sihayo: feared injured in the first approach, he was found merely to have stopped to collect an interesting-looking beetle!

At **Isandlwana**, it's about the miscalculations of Lord Chelmsford, who split his force and wrongly believed that the Zulus would never "stand and fight". It's about the incredible bravery of Lt Col. Durnford and his loyal Basuto troops; and it's about the last surviving soldier, a wounded member of the 24th Foot who hid out in a cave on the hillside and carried on firing until his ammunition finally ran out.

The story is by no means one-sided, however. Rob gives meaningful weight to the Zulu experience, which he and others continue to research and document. He reminds us that the average Zulu who fought at Isandlwana had run a distance equivalent to a standard marathon (26 miles or 42.2km) each day for three or four days, with little or nothing to eat. Heavily drugged with marijuana, caffeine and hallucinogenic mushrooms, these warriors were capable of terrible slaughter and superhuman endurance. So desperate was their thirst, it



Clockwise from top left: Oil painting of the late David Rattray; brilliant guide Rob Caskie; war memorabilia at the Lodge

is said, that when some of them broke into the enemy's medical supplies near the end of the battle, they downed bottles of carbolic acid and other poisonous liquids, and perished in agony.

At **Rorke's Drift**, it's about James Rorke, the maverick Irishman who set up a trading station and frontier outpost here; about Reverend Otto Witt of the Swedish Mission Society, into whose hands the place fell after Rorke's suicide at the age of 48; about John Williams Fielding, one of the soldiers defending 36 sick and injured men in the temporary hospital – "pinned like rats in a hole" – who literally tore his way through a series of four walls to escape advancing fire and Zulu

assegais; he died in England in his seventies, and his hands never recovered. It's about Joseph Williams, who saw off 14 Zulus from his cubbyhole hideaway before being flayed alive and dismembered by the enraged warriors, on the other side of a wall from his best friend, brave Henry Hook the cook.

We can't recommend Rob Caskie's tours highly enough; they were a revelation.

The Accommodation

We stayed just one night in the Fugitives' Drift Guest House, the Lodge being full. David and Nicky Rattray were pioneers of heritage tourism, and Nicky still runs the property. The Lodge is a fascinating treasure trove of cultural artefacts and Anglo-Zulu War memorabilia, including many period drawings of the action by war artists that were published in contemporary issues of *London Illustrated* and *The Graphic*.

Each of the cottages is furnished in style and comfort, with innumerable attractive touches, and has a private terrace on which a G&T at sunset seems almost mandatory. Lunch at the Guesthouse was an excellent cold buffet in the partly alfresco dining area, with nostalgic dishes such as coronation chicken, a cold ham and assorted salads – all calculated to please the British palate. (I mean this in a good way.) Our four-course dinner at the Lodge was even better, with great Cape wines and company to match. We found the serving staff – all local Zulus – unfailingly warm, well-spoken, charming and attentive.

Having arrived in time to join the three-hour Rorke's Drift tour, which started at 3.15pm, we did the longer Isandlwana tour the next morning, so one night at the hotel was enough. Doing both in one day, in the actual order the battles took place, might be even better. If you had longer, you could enjoy a horse-ride, fish along a 20km stretch of the Buffalo River, swim in the pool or take an interesting walk to spot game or birds, both of which are abundant in the area.

Getting There

It's a fairly pleasant 3½-hour drive to the battlefields from Durban (on the eastern coast), or 4½ hours from Johannesburg (in central South Africa). The website gives excellent directions for a number of routes. If Fugitives' Drift Lodge and Guest House is full, you could try Isibindi Eco Reserve, Isandlwana Lodge (popular with Americans) or Rorke's Drift Lodge. 📍



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