

# Through the Zulu Country – 2017 Style

By Ian Knight

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One of the privileges of my position is that I have the opportunity to take parties of enthusiasts now and then across the historic sites of northern KwaZulu Natal. It's something I've been doing now for more than twenty years, initially with Ian Castle, and then for many years with Holts Tours (I took over with them from our very own Dr Adrian Greaves!). Sadly my last tour with Holts was in 2014, and they succumbed to the pressures of the recession shortly afterwards. For a while I thought it might be the end of these adventures although in 2016 I ran (together with my co-organiser Paul Marais) the first of a series of small custom-made tours which were aimed at the experienced Zululand traveller who wanted to visit some of the more out-of-the-way places. This proved quite successful (although if you are interested, be warned – they do involve some long drives down very bumpy roads! The very definition, at times, of 'off-the-beaten-track'!) but this year there was a chance to return to a more comprehensive tour organised by history-tour experts *The Cultural Experience* (anyone interested in coming in 2018 should visit their website

This tour is designed as an introduction to all aspects of nineteenth-century Zulu history but principally the Anglo-Zulu War. Whilst there are plenty of tours which will give you a weekend at iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift, or perhaps combine the highlights of 1879 with a tour of the Anglo-Boer War in Natal (never works in my opinion! They are two very distinct periods of history, and the distances involved are too great to give more than a passing glimpse of the sites) this tour will take you to all of the Anglo-Zulu War battlefields and other sites besides. We begin with a visit to the grave of King Shaka, who founded the Zulu kingdom early in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, then visit the site of the Ultimatum Tree, where the British presented their ultimatum to Shaka's successor, King Cetshwayo, in December 1878. From there we follow the route of the Coastal (Right Flank) Column – an aspect almost entirely neglected by other tours – past the battlefields of Nyezane and Gingindlovu and on to Eshowe. Using Eshowe as our base we drive out to the remote spot near Nkandla where King Cetshwayo lies buried before heading off to Ulundi – to see both King Cetshwayo's homestead at oNdini and the battlefield memorial – and then to Ithala Game Reserve (well, we are in Africa, after all!) which serves as our base for the northern sector. From here we visit the battlefields of Hlobane, Khambula and Ntombe before curving south again for the grand climax, three days exploring the iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift campaign. Along the way we take in the 1838 battlefield of Blood River and the remote spot where the Prince Imperial was killed.

This year we had a fairly large group – seventeen people, which is as large as some of our lodges can accommodate – with a range of interests and backgrounds. The group were mostly British but included five Americans, an Australian and a gentleman from Guatemala, and the level of interest ranged from 'intense' right through to 'well, I've seen the film!' Where possible we like to explore the sites on foot as much as possible, and, while the 'walking days' are optional, they can be demanding. This year we only had two stalwart adventurers prepared to accompany Paul and myself on the long walk up and over the top of Hlobane Mountain to the Devil's Pass and – more to the point! – back again but they were rewarded with an unmissable insight into the story of the battle and some truly spectacular scenery. Our walk up the mountain was shrouded in mist and I was worried that all that effort would be wasted with nothing to see at the end of it; in fact the mist finally burned off before we reached the pass, and the experience of reading George Mossop's account of his escape down that jumbled staircase of boulders on the very spot where it happened was, as usual, unforgettable. On the way back that mist was sadly missed as the sun bore down relentlessly and the temperature rose to the low 80s; as one of the party put it, 'it was like walking across a frying pan!'

This year there was quite a lot of water in the rivers and we decided not to do the full 'fugitives' trail' from iSandlwana all the way to the Mzinyathi; instead, those keen enough walked as far as the cluster of cairns which marks the 'last stand' of Lt. Edgar Anstey and his men on the banks of the Manzimnyana stream. Along the way I re-acquainted myself with the stone that marks the spot where Trooper Macleroy of the Natal Carbineers was killed; it lies off the path taken these days by

most of those walking the ‘trail’, and it took some finding. I’d last seen it in 1991 and went armed with photos from that visit to line up the slopes of the hills in the background. In fact these proved almost useless and the exercise proved an interesting demonstration of the extent to which the bush along the trail has grown up over the last twenty-five years. By the time we reached the Anstey cairns we were getting hot and tired and a mood of sombre reflection settled over us as the group realised just how terrible must have been the experience of the men who had got so far only to find themselves trapped against the steep banks of the stream with no way to escape.

For me, visiting all the sites on this tour on a regular basis has made me aware of how much the pace of change around them is accelerating. At Eshowe the site of the old KwaMondi mission, which Pearson defended for three months in 1879, is over-grown, and the small cemetery across the road where the men who died of disease during the occupation are buried, is now largely surrounded by settlements spreading out from the town. New monuments commemorating the Zulu dead have been erected on several of the sites but at Nyezane, nearby, one lasted just a year before mysteriously disappearing again. A similar monument inside the small stone enclosure protecting the graves of Campbell and Lloyd high on the upper shoulders of Hlobane mountain has been knocked flat and a display panel explaining the story of the battle has been smashed – yet the monument to Campbell and Lloyd itself, which has been no stranger to vandalism in the past, was untouched. Quite why the new markers have been targeted is unclear. In several places access roads are in danger of giving way entirely to potholes. At iSandlwana the heavy rains earlier in the year had damaged the low-level bridge across the Nyogane stream – ‘Durnford’s Donga’ – and a bigger structure is currently being built in its place. Outside the area of the fenced-off battlefield reserve was marked out the spot where the present Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini, intends to build a royal palace and visitors’ centre; it stands on the slopes where once the Zulu centre had charged across the last few hundred meters which separated them from the British firing-line. The twenty-first century, it seems, is steadily catching up with Zululand’s historic past – quite how its battlefields, monuments and lonely graves will fare over the next twenty years is difficult to say. Yet there are still places where the ghosts still seem to linger; on Captain Moriarty’s bank of the Ntombe river, where his command was over-run in March 1879, or on the empty summit of Hlobane where there is still a sense that if you turn your head quickly enough you might just catch a glimpse of Buller’s horsemen riding by.

Go and see them while you can, for in South Africa, like everywhere else, time and progress wait for no one.

The Thukela River, towards the site of the 1856 ‘Battle of the Princes’ and the 1879 site of Fort Tenedos.

