
TOUR OF THE BATTLEFIELDS NOVEMBER 2022

By Ian Knight

I've just got back from leading a tour of the battlefields on behalf of The Cultural Experience (<https://www.theculturalexperience.com>). My last tour was literally on the eve of lockdown in 2019 – we were worried that entry from South Africa to the UK might be cancelled, and we might not get home; in the event we snuck under the radar with about forty-eight hours to spare – so it was interesting to be one of the first groups doing this type of comprehensive tour since the end of Covid restrictions. There's no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating effect on South Africa's tourist industry, and we had to alter our itinerary to take account of the fact that several hotels, which had in some cases been favourites for more than a decade, have not survived.

There were smaller changes around the edges, too – the restaurant and souvenir shop at Fort Nongqayi in Eshowe is closed, as are the small tea-rooms at both iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift – and the country as a whole has a tiredness about it. 'Load shedding' – power cuts – are a daily reality, and very little money has been spent on maintain the infrastructure of the rural roads. Some of the sites are showing the strain of neglect, notably the monument area at the Nyezane battlefield, where the memorials are so overgrown that I thought for a moment they had been removed! At Eshowe the area of Pearson's old fort was looking shabby while across the road a grass fire had recently swept through the military cemetery, blackening many of the name-plates on the graves.

On the other hand, I was surprised to see that the track leading up to the eastern end of Hlobane had been improved, although the site remains difficult to visit; the Khambula battlefield nearby, being on private farm-land, is much as it ever was, despite a change in the configuration of the access roads. The Prince Imperial monument is in good condition, and indeed is sporting a new picnic area – though I do wonder how many casual picnickers pass by that remote spot. For the most part the iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift battlefields were in a better condition than I expected, with some care taken of the graves, despite some recent vandalism; the one disappointment was the small exterior chapel at St Vincent's, iSandlwana, where the remains of some of the Zulu dead are buried; this has been the subject of a fire which has gutted the interior and badly buckled the tin roof. Our tour also coincided with the onset of the rainy season, which gave us some worries about the state of the roads and visibility.

I have, in the past, taken tours where the mist and rain was so heavy that you literally couldn't see iSandlwana a few hundred yards from its base, and when sudden unexpected thunderstorms sent us scurrying off exposed hill tops! This

time we were generally lucky – yes, we did manage to get down that dreadful access road through the forestry plantation at Khambula – and we were at least rewarded with a sense of the conditions endured by the warring armies in 1879, and some wonderfully lowering views of iSandlwana. On the whole, however, it was a pleasure to be back, and my group enjoyed the experience, aware as we were that we were testing the waters after what has been a very difficult time for the country. At iSandlwana, in particular, there was a real delight among those we encountered to see visitors’ returning, so here’s hoping that things are on the mend, and that the footprint on these extraordinary sites – upon which their preservation depends – can start to rise again.