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#184

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KIDS' PAGE How to ID our 10 teeniest raptors
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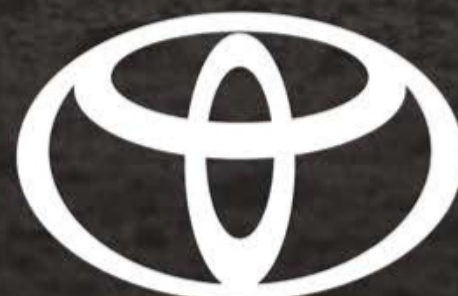
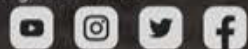
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"We pedal up sandstone and granite koppies and race down into the thick sand on the other side. Kudus snort and kick up stones before we spot them, and a baboon on sentry duty raises the alarm as we come whizzing past."

go!
#184

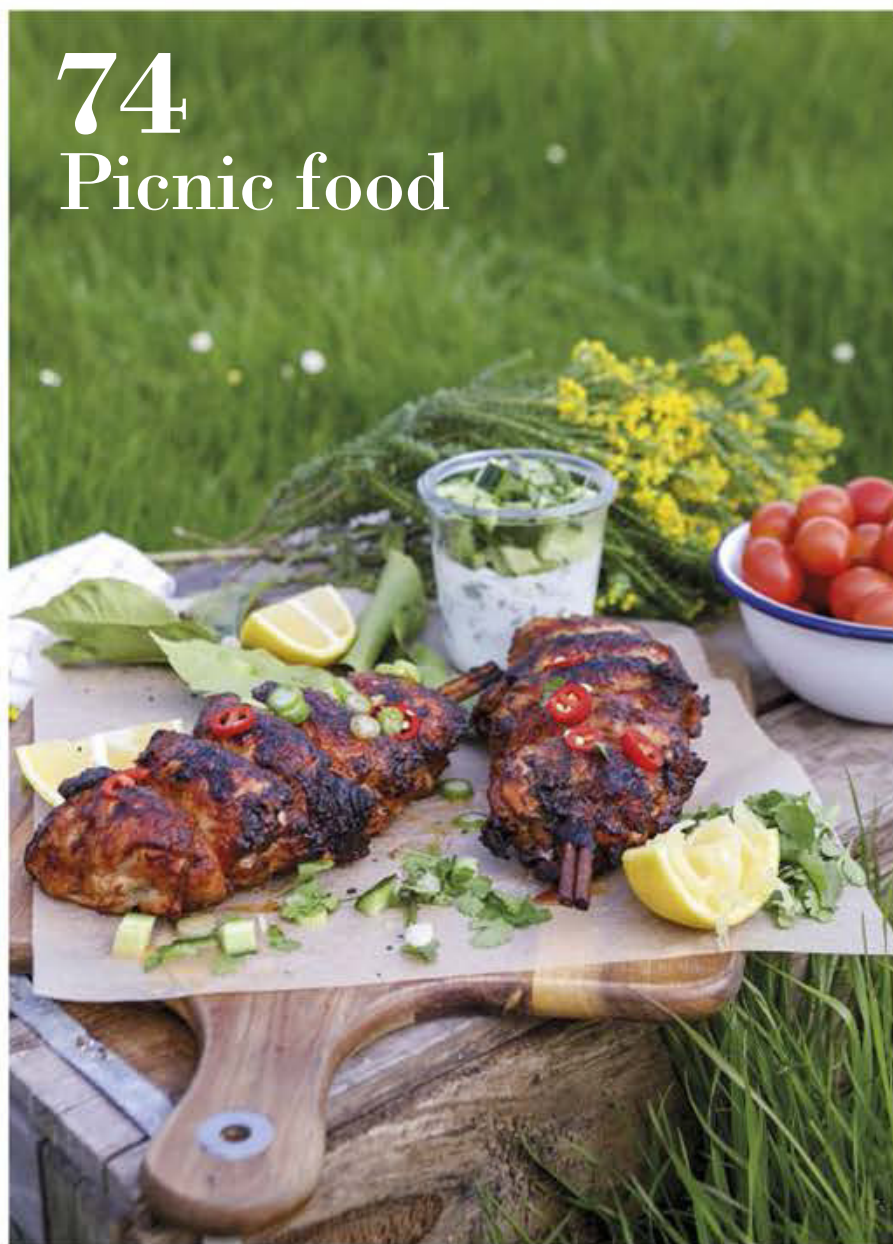


COVER PICTURE
EVAN NAUDÉ

The Waterkloof trail on the farm Bo-Kloof, in the Baviaanskloof.

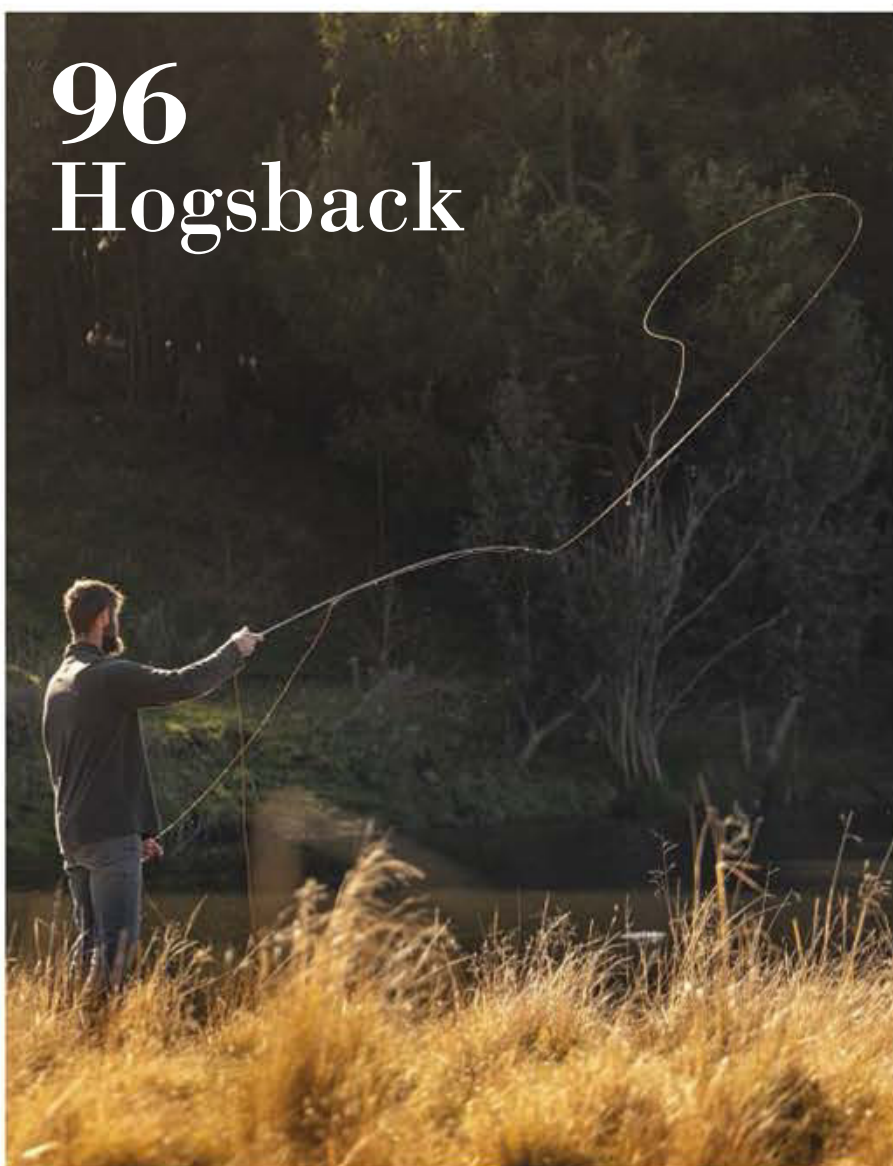
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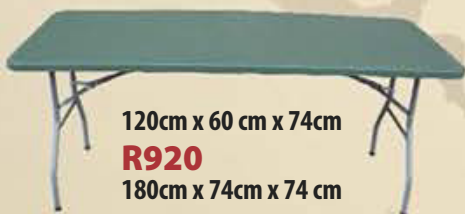
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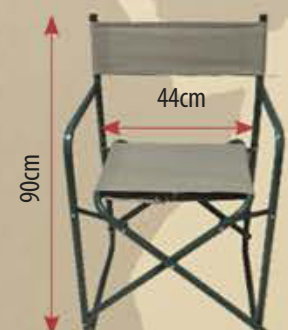
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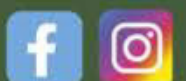
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MIKE WOOLNOUGH



Camping therapy

How do you know if you've had an excellent winter? The way I work it out is by measuring how many nights I spent in a tent. I've been tracking this since I started working at *go!* eight years ago, and it's a failsafe metric. The more nights in a tent than in my own bed means it's been an exceptional winter.

The cooler months are great for exploring our neighbouring countries. In June I hiked in Namibia; in July I rode my mountain bike through the Tuli Block (see page 52); and in August I camped in Chobe and Moremi in Botswana. I returned from all those trips rejuvenated and ready to face real life again.

We all know that artificial light emitted by televisions, computers and smartphones – and the constant attention we pay to these devices – is bad for our physical and mental wellbeing. I definitely feel healthier, and I'm a much nicer person, after a week spent sleeping in a tent.

It's ironic that some of the most popular apps right now are the ones that are supposed to calm us down when we're locked up in suburbia, by playing sounds of birdsong, waves breaking and whales calling. Surely the *real* thing – where only canvas separates you from the liquid notes of a fiery-necked nightjar – is a thousand times better? You don't need an app to reset your body clock either, you just need to go to sleep when it gets dark and wake up with the sun.

The best thing is that you don't have to drive far or spend lots of money to camp, either. Now that the nights are shorter and getting warmer, take your kids or your grandkids camping somewhere just outside the city. Or camp in your garden! You can tell scary stories and cuddle up when the barn owls start shrieking, or when the crowned lapwings raise the alarm when the neighbour's cat comes prowling.

Does it matter if your body aches a bit the next morning? Wear it like a medal of honour. Soon your own bed will feel too soft, and you'll be yearning for the outside again...

Pierre

PIERRE STEYN

PSteyn@media24.com

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!

The December/January issue will be on sale at your retailer from 2 December 2022.

BEHIND THE SCENES



Overland through West Africa alone, in a second-hand van? "Sure!" said **Dot Bekker** in 2018. We've been following her adventure. See page 120 for the next instalment of her wonderful travel series.

What have you been up to since you arrived back home in Zimbabwe?

I left Zimbabwe nearly 40 years ago and lived in five countries, on two continents. It took a while to establish new friends and networks when I returned. It has been a different kind of adventure – I'm starting to find the purpose I had hoped to find.

When I arrived in Zimbabwe, I did some volunteer work for a local competition to promote traditional Ndebele art in the Matobo Hills. I decided to try and engage further with the disadvantaged rural community there, and help improve the small-scale economy and land management. Local leaders granted me a piece of community land in the Matobos on which to build a home and operate from.

Tell us about your book tour... I drove another 5 000 km around South Africa – yes, in BlueBelle! – to promote my book *Going Home to Africa*. I took the opportunity to visit places from my past and some places I hadn't been to yet. I drove to Cape Town, then wound my way up the east coast to Durban, then turned back home via Clarens, Rosendal and Johannesburg.

Along the way, I held book launches at independent bookstores and markets. I've been constantly rewarded by contact from people who are inspired by my journey – some have even decided to set off on travel adventures of their own.

How is BlueBelle doing these days? The bad roads have taken their toll on my poor BlueBelle and I've had to do a number of repairs. Regrettably, spares must be imported from the UK at some cost. But she continues to be my only mode of transport, although I think a donkey cart might be more practical where I live now!

Once your home is built, what's next? I'm excited to move out of the van and into a bigger space. I think I'll enjoy that for a while. Then I hope to travel around Zimbabwe more, and my long-term plan is to drive through East Africa. I doubt BlueBelle will be able to accomplish another long journey, so I'll have to find a new vehicle...

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Where have you been? What have you seen?
Write to ✉ editor@gomag.co.za

COMPILED BY MARTINETTE LOUW



WINNING
LETTER

^ Don't move!

My wife Anesca and I and our kids camped at Xakanaxa in Moremi with our friends Bertus and Inalene Nel and their children. It was our first visit to Botswana, and also our first time in an unfenced campsite. We explained to the kids that they might encounter wild animals and they shouldn't be afraid. They must stay close and stand very still if something were to happen.

This elephant came past our camp one day. Only after I'd taken the photo did I notice the kids – Emma Nel (6), Anneke Nel (10) and Leanke Loots (8) – quietly sitting under the camping table. The elephant was calm and browsed for a while. It rubbed against a tree and took a dust bath – our tent was covered in sand afterwards.

With the washing on the clothesline, the kids' toys on the table and them seeking shelter under it, it looks like just another day in the wilderness! It was an amazing experience and one the children will remember forever.

LEON LOOTS, Knysna

WRITE TO US & WIN!

Leon wins a set of Zartek ZA-748 two-way radios with car antenna kits worth R3 128.

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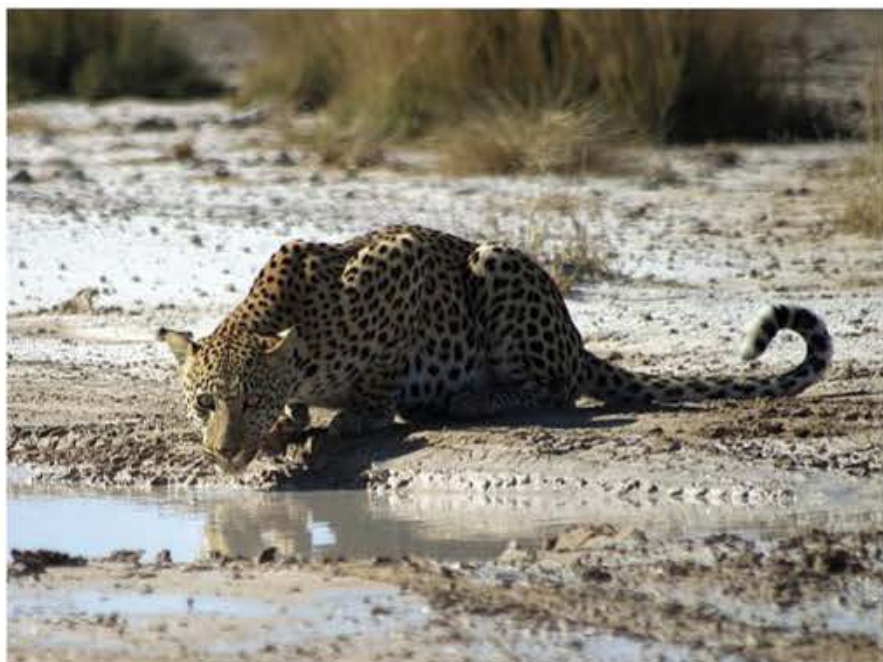
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▼ A lucky shot at Moravet

We visited the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in June 2022. Early one morning we went for a game drive and saw lots of wildlife, but as the sun got higher, the sightings dwindled.

Not expecting to see much, we came over a hill near the Moravet waterhole south of Nossob at about 2 pm, and we were surprised to see this beautiful leopard out in the open. Its paws were still bloody from a recent kill. It drank about 25 m from our vehicle and kept a close eye on us the whole time. I can't believe we got so lucky!

ARCO KLAPWIJK, Pretoria



▲ Tasty tyre

After two weeks in the Kgalagadi without seeing a lion, we finally came across four near Mata-Mata one morning. There were lots of vehicles crowded around the pride, trying to catch a glimpse before they disappeared into the grass again.

There was a vehicle with a trailer in front of us and one of the lions made a beeline for the spare tyre on the back. My wife Alta took this photo just as the lion took a bite... The driver was oblivious. I gave a soft hoot to scare off the lion – I hope I saved the tyre and the driver didn't think I was trying to cut in line!

MIKE BARKHUYSEN, Bellville



▲ Silhouette at sunset

I've been trying to photograph a giraffe at sunset for years. During our most recent visit to the Kruger Park, luck was finally on my side. My sister Retha travelled from Australia to celebrate her 50th birthday with us. While the rest of the family set up for her party at Skukuza, she and I went to watch the hippos at Lake Panic. On the way back I spotted this giraffe under a tree and took my long-awaited shot.

It was such a special holiday. We saw rhinos and lions, and a leopard every day. The SANParks staff members were so friendly and helped us make Retha's birthday a memorable event – thank you!

PIETER BROERE, Pretoria



▲ Look both ways before you cross

My wife Kotie and I took our grandchildren to the Kruger in July 2021 – we stayed just outside the park at Ngwenya Lodge and Marloth Park. After a game drive one afternoon, we went to one of Ngwenya's viewpoints to watch the elephants in the Crocodile River. The herd crossed after a while – I was fascinated to see how the adults made sure the babies crossed safely.

LEON VENTER, Kimberley



^ Your guide is great!

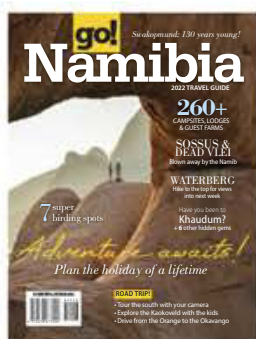
I purchased a copy of *go! Namibia* before the world as we knew it was turned upside down by Covid. When the borders reopened I excitedly began planning our Namibian adventure again. I used your magazine as my only real source of guidance to plot a 10-day trip to central Namibia in July 2022. I contacted most of our accommodation stops ahead of time to book, using your magazine contacts, and your map was useful to get a visual idea of where we'd be going.

Despite the guide being two years old, your suggestions did not disappoint. In fact, without your magazine, we'd have missed out on gems like the Gamsberg, Dead Vlei and the Skeleton Coast.

My eldest son, Shaun, took this photo at Spitzkoppe – what a spectacular place! Namibia offers so many awesome photographic opportunities, which you also highlighted.

Thank you to the team for an amazingly informative, concise and accurate publication. Well done!

BELINDA FUTCHER, Umhlanga Rocks



go! Namibia 2022 (R120) is now available in stores. You can also order a copy from yumna.tofey@media24.com or media24shop.com

✓ Meet the Van der Campers

In December last year, we went to Namibia and travelled from the Fish River Canyon to Damaraland and back. We're a big family – me, my husband Lourentius and our four kids: Liuwa (12), Livan (10), Siah (7) and Rieu (5). Our friends call us the Van der Campers! Here we are at Sossusvlei.

Lots of people ask how we manage to travel so far with relatively young children. We've learnt over the years that they like to have a base camp to explore a new area, so we usually stay at least two nights at every place.

We also give the older family members a role: Lourentius plans the route, I make the bookings, Livan is in charge of the menu and Liuwa captures our holiday memories with her GoPro camera.

We never drive past a farm stall and we know the value of padkos and how important a cold drink can be at the right time. When the road becomes too long, we listen to music and allow the kids to play on their cellphones and tablets. We get to know each other in the van and around the campfire, where we play chess and cards.

In between making memories, travelling enriches our children's worlds and teaches them important skills. Yes, they sometimes fight, but by the fifth day on the road something magical happens: They start to respect and accept each other. Their needs become smaller, too – all they ask for is a soccer ball or some Vaseline to protect their lips against the Namibian wind.

Parents, don't miss out on the opportunity to travel with your kids. It's easier than you think!

MARINA VAN DER MERWE, Polokwane



< How about a nightcap?

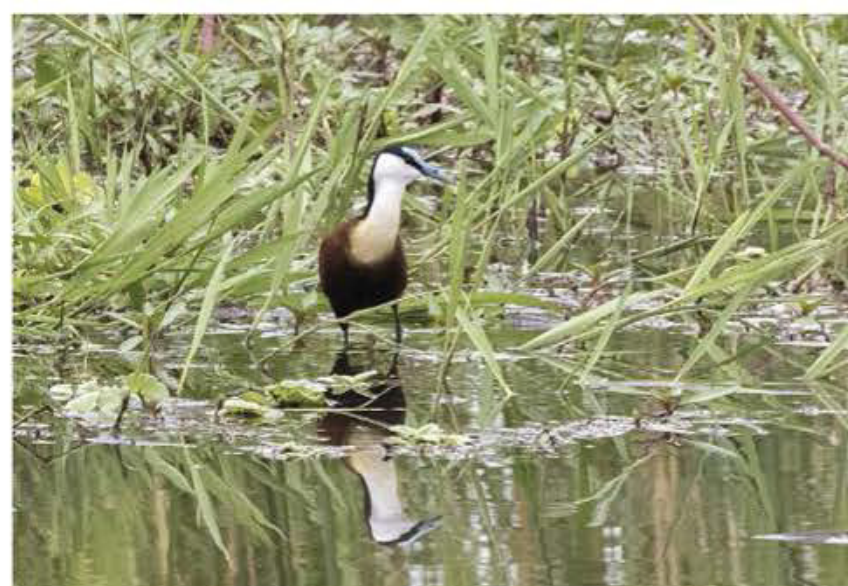
I took this photo during a recent visit to Etosha National Park in Namibia. It was just after sunset at the Okaukuejo waterhole, which is lit up at night. There was a parade of wonderful visitors, but this herd of giraffe literally stood out. There were 23 in total!

RIAAN WOLHUTER, Stellenbosch

▼ Permission to take off

During our annual holiday to the Kruger in June, we came across a group of southern ground hornbills between Satara and Balule. The birds walked into the dirt road, right in front of our vehicle, and formed an orderly queue at a fallen tree trunk. One by one, they hopped onto the highest point of the trunk and then took off! This is not something you see very often – it's almost as if they needed a little help to get into the air.

ZANIE MARX, Bloemfontein



▲ Sabie special

Many people think that birdwatchers are a different species. We're identified by the way we suddenly hit the brakes and get excited over LBJs – to the frustration of other tourists on the lookout for lions and leopards.

The low-water bridge near Lower Sabie in the Kruger Park will make any birdwatcher's heart beat faster, because there's always something to see in the reeds. This African jacana cast a perfect reflection in the slow-moving water.

JACQUELINE JACOBS, Centurion



▲ Heads or tails?

This must be one of the best scenes I've ever seen in the Kruger Park. In March 2022, my wife Yoricka and I saw a carcass stuck in a big bush next to the S130. A female leopard appeared after a while to feed on it.

A hyena sniffed around the bush for any scraps the leopard might have dropped. The leopard eventually moved to a lower branch and her tail dangled above the hyena's head. When the hyena noticed the tail, we held our breath – would it dare bite? It did! The leopard roared and the hyena fled... I think it's still running!

PAUL VAN DER MERWE, Pretoria



▲ Faansie's bird club

When I was a child, birdwatching was like playing Barbie with your sister – so much fun until your friends found out... Thank goodness times have changed – and Faansie Peacock and your magazine have a lot to do with it.

This July, we were one of seven families who visited Botswana together and we had 17 children between us. We took seven copies of *Faansie's Bird Book* and the kids had a great time looking for birds, taking photos and figuring out the different species. The guides were well worn by the end of the trip – some of the kids ticked as many as 160 species.

Here they are on a Chobe River cruise. From left to right: Mariaana Spamer, Lené Wessels, Emma Spamer, Muller Deacon, Cara de Villiers, Chris Lotriet, Dirkie Deacon, Jana Deacon, Simon van Tol, Joah de Villiers, Tommie Wessels, Clara Deacon, Josua Deacon, Ivan van Tol, Dian Lotriet, Mari Wessels and Wihan van Tol.

Thank you for encouraging children to learn more about the outdoors!

JOHAN VAN TOL, Bloemfontein



< Keeping up with the kestrels

My wife Karien and I own a house in Franskraal, near Gansbaai on the Overberg coast. These two rock kestrels were perched on the gutter of the neighbour's house one afternoon. I think they'd just finished eating a mouse – if you look closely, you can see hair and blood on their beaks.

GERT VAN SCHALKWYK, Calvinia

Q&A

Every month our experts answer your questions about birds, bugs and beasts. Send your photos and questions to editor@gomag.co.za



^ A lion with spots?

SANTA HEUNIS from Nigel writes: In the Kgalagadi in April this year, I saw a pride of about nine lionesses between the Kij Kij and Kieliekrankie waterholes. They had faint spots on their stomachs and legs. The other lions in the park had none. Is this a different species of lion?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says: There are (currently) only two recognised species of lion in the world: the African lion (*Panthera leo*) and a subspecies, the Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*). *Panthera leo* occurs in South Africa.

As with any species, colour variations can occur – the white lions of the Timbavati are the best known example of this with lions. The individuals pictured are also African lions.

Lion cubs are born with spots or rosettes for camouflage. These are initially prominent across the whole body but fade as the cubs grow and reach adulthood. The spots remain visible on some adults, especially females, mainly on the legs and stomach.

> Pink and potent

RIKUS SWANEPOEL

from Pretoria writes:

I photographed this pink spider in my mother-in-law's garden in Delmas – it was hunting a bee. The spider must have camouflaged itself as a flower! The Internet tells me it's a crab spider – can you tell me more about this species?



Entomologist DUNCAN

MACFADYEN says: This is indeed a flower crab spider.

Its popular name was coined because of its crab-like motion, and the way it holds its front legs in an attitude reminiscent of a crab spreading its claws as a threat. The species is often strikingly coloured – white, yellow or pink. They're about a centimetre in size and the male is generally smaller than the female.

Interestingly, like a chameleon, the flower crab spider can change its colour over several days to blend in with its surroundings. It's an ambush hunter, sitting and waiting for its prey. Its venom acts quickly on insects, enabling it to catch prey significantly larger than itself. They don't crush their prey but use their fangs to pierce tiny holes into the bodies of their victims to suck out the body fluids.

Crab spiders are common in most urban gardens and are important in controlling insect numbers and thus maintaining a healthy, balanced environment. The individual in your photo has caught an unsuspecting bee-fly – a fly that mimics the appearance and behaviour of a bee.

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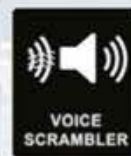
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CHECK THIS



The five-day Erdvark Trail in the Karoo traverses the Nuweveld Mountains near Merweville. You hike through deep kloofs and over high koppies, and you cross several tributaries of the Koekemoers River.

On the third day, you walk along the highest cliffs of Tierhoekse Berg (1 370 m). The day starts in the Western Cape and ends in the Northern Cape – hikers follow the natural provincial border for nearly 4 km.

Remember when Sylvester the lion escaped from the Karoo National Park in 2015? For three weeks, he hid on surrounding farms and followed this same trail. The trackers could see that he'd tried to catch a warthog and a gemsbok in the riverbed but failed both times. Sylvester escaped from the park a second time in 2016 and returned to the area. This time he was wearing a GPS collar and was found after three days.

The wandering lion was relocated to Addo Elephant National Park where he sired a litter of cubs in 2018.

PICTURE SOPHIA VAN TAAK



go! Hiking is on shelf now.

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media24shop.com

IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY KYRA TARR



Renew your car licence on WhatsApp

Your road trip is planned and booked, but then you remember: the car licence is about to expire! A new platform called ChatBack allows South Africans to renew their vehicle licences on WhatsApp. Here's how it works:

- Go to www.chatback.co.za
- Save their number (+27 66 202 6685) and message them as you would a normal WhatsApp contact. Or visit the site on a computer and point your phone camera at the QR code, which will start a chat on WhatsApp.
- Follow the question prompts and you'll be sent a quote, which you can pay securely using your credit card.
- Once you've paid, you'll need to send a message with your delivery address as well as a photo of your ID and proof of residence.
- You can check the status of your licence by sending the message "status" to the ChatBack WhatsApp number.
- Your licence should be delivered in about a week (five working days).

Note: This service is currently only available in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Free State.

Sources: capetalk.co.za; iol.co.za

FOR YOUR CALENDAR

Are you a *Top Gun* fan? If you're in Cape Town, head up the coast and enjoy the aerial acrobatics of former military fighter jets at the very first **West Coast Saldanha Bay Air Show!** There will also be a drone race, radio-controlled aircraft galore, food stalls and various exhibitions to keep you entertained.

When? Saturday 1 October 2022. The gates open at 6.30 am; the programme kicks off at 8.30 am.

Where? Saldanha/Vredenburg Airport

Cost: R140 per adult, R100 per child under 18, free for kids under 6; R40 parking fee per car. Buy tickets online at weskustickets.co.za or via their Facebook events page: "West Coast Saldanha Bay Air Show"

FREE TICKETS! Send an e-mail to Suné Stassen suneopendesign@gmail.com with the subject line: GO GIVEAWAY. There are 10 tickets available, first come, first served. Ts and Cs apply.



LEOPARD LOUNGE

Why are leopards important?

Leopard. What comes to mind when you hear the word? A happy cat stretched out in a tree? A mysterious animal, seldom seen? A sheep killer? Whatever your reaction, the point is that you have one! Leopards elicit emotion in a way that few other animals do.

As a species, the leopard has immense ecological value. It's a large carnivore and therefore plays an integral role in maintaining the function and diversity of the ecosystem in which it lives. Top predators affect herbivore numbers through predation and they affect the numbers of small- to medium-sized carnivores like caracal and jackals because of competition and conflict. The removal of apex predators from a system has a negative cascading effect.

Leopards are a so-called "umbrella species" for wider biodiversity conservation. Conserving the habitats and prey species of leopards benefits a multitude of other species at the same time. For example, the leopard's mountainous habitat in the Western Cape is also a crucial water catchment area for urban settlements and agriculture. Leopards require very large areas of natural habitat, so by protecting the leopards, the whole landscape benefits – and so do we!

Because the leopard is such an iconic wild animal, it can be used to create awareness of more general but no less important environmental issues. They help to shine a spotlight on things that don't always get the attention they deserve. In this sense, they're a "flagship species" – a champion of the conservation cause.

But there's also something deeper... If you've ever had the privilege of looking into a leopard's eyes, you can't *not* be touched in some way. These big cats are an inseparable part of Africa, and represent something that can't be put into words. For that reason, they are also of immeasurable value to humans.

Over the next few issues, we'll take a closer look at leopard behaviour, habits, interactions, threats, research and conservation.

Enjoy the journey with me!

– Jeannie Hayward

Jeannie is the communications and media manager for the Cape Leopard Trust. 🐾 capeleopard.org.za

NIGHT WATCH



The moons of Jupiter

At this time of year, Venus is hidden in the glow of the sun and Mars doesn't rise until the morning hours. So, when you look to the night sky, it's Saturn and Jupiter that dominate the planetary scene.

Jupiter is in opposition during the month of October, which means it rises in the east at sunset and is visible all night long. It will be easy to spot as it's currently the brightest "star" in the night sky, giving us a great opportunity to reflect on its many moons.

Galileo Galilei was the first person to aim a telescope at Jupiter, about 400 years ago. He discovered four bright moons orbiting the planet – we still refer to them as the Galilean moons. The moons revolve around Jupiter at such precise intervals that, in 1676, the Danish astronomer Ole Rømer timed various eclipses of the moon Io to calculate the speed of light for the first time. Long before the days of GPS, you could also determine your longitude on the earth by using Jupiter's moons.

Today, a pair of binoculars is better than the primitive telescope used by Galileo – go grab them and look at Jupiter! In order, closest to furthest from the planet, the four Galilean moons are: Io (mentioned above), Europa, Ganymede and Callisto. They always appear beside Jupiter and form a near-straight line – this makes them easy to spot against the starry background.

To know which moon is which, visit 🐾 shallowsky.com/galilean. You can also use the site to see when the Great Red Spot will be visible – it's the biggest storm in our solar system: a monstrous vortex on Jupiter that has been swirling for centuries!

There are also several free mobile apps that you can use to search for Jupiter's moons. Happy hunting!

– Willie Koorts



Sossusvlei Farmstall, Namibia

A new sign has appeared since the last time I drove past A Little Sossus Campsite... "Sossusvlei Farmstall". I find it very difficult to ignore signs like these, especially in Namibia, where farm stalls are few and far between. There will be droëwors, of that I'm certain.

I pull over and meet Polla and Daléne Swanepoel (pictured above). "What are you selling?" I ask as my eyes roam the goodies on the shelves. "We stock things that campers might have forgotten at home, or forgot to buy in town," says Polla.

They have everything from tin cups and braai grids, to hats, cloth bags and even crocheted blankets (R300), handmade by Daléne's mother.

There's also the Namibian holy trinity of ice (R15 per bag), wood (camel thorn, R55) and meat. The meat options require a whole page, so here are three highlights: game boerewors (R70 per pack), mince (R50 for 300 g) and steak (beef, R40 for one). You'll also need droëwors (R50 a pack), of course, and beef biltong (R60 a pack).

They sell fresh bread (the bakery is at A Little Sossus Lodge across the road; R25 – R30 per loaf), and there are pies and garlic bread in the freezer. There's wine, beer and filter coffee – they even have Wi-Fi.

"We try to be something like a Fruit & Veg in the desert," says Daléne, leading me outside to their vegetable garden under shade netting. "In summer there are usually tomatoes, onions, beans, gherkin cucumbers, green peppers, spinach, lettuce, beetroot, pumpkin and squash."

The garden is an absolute revelation for campers, who've forgotten that anything green exists at all. You're invited to walk through the garden and see what's available.

The Swanepoels use their vegetables to make all manner of things from tomato-and-onion stew to jams and pickles (prices from R35 to R70 per bottle). "The curried beans go so fast we don't even have time to put stickers on," says Daléne.

What's the oddest thing they sell? "Playing cards," says Polla. "You won't believe how many we sell! Sometimes, three friends walk in and all three buy a pack. Heaven knows why!"

Trading hours: They're always open – just ring the bell and someone will come and help you. Polla and Daléne live on the premises.

Where? About 38 km from Sesriem, where the D854 meets the C19.

Contact: ☎ 00 264 81 124 8528 (Polla); ☎ 00 264 81 273 0634 (Daléne)

– Toast Coetzer



go! Namibia is here

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VIEW FROM HERE

Louise & Jeremy Sanders

The Durban-based couple took their sons Thomas (11), William (10) and Oliver (7), cycling along the Camino Francés. They rode 865 km in a month, from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

What inspired you to do the Camino as a family?

Jeremy: As our kids got older and more independent, Louise and I started bouncing adventure ideas around. Getting ready for bed, I would say, "Lou, we *must* do the Orange River!" Or, while packing away groceries, she'd ask, "Hey, did you see that article about the Giant's Cup Trail? We need to do that!" Or "Let's hike Marble Baths in the Drakensberg this weekend!" and "Do you think the boys could do a two-day mountain-bike race?" (We did all of the above, by the way...)

I guess the Camino was just a natural progression. It's a well-travelled route and something we could do on bicycles – a fun element for the kids.

How do you plan a trip like this? *Louise:* It was a long adventure so we only planned the essentials. I organised air tickets, visas and accommodation for the first two nights before we started. Jeremy bought bikes online and had them delivered to a Decathlon store close to the hotel where we stayed for the first two nights. This worked out cheaper than lugging five bicycles to Europe from SA – Decathlon bought the bikes back from us at the end of the trip for 40% of what we'd paid for them. We took our own pannier bags with us.

I bought a guidebook called *Camino de Santiago, Camino Francés: St. Jean - Santiago - Finisterre* by Anna Dintaman and David Landis to briefly read up on the stages of the Camino, trail notes and general Camino etiquette. Little insights like that got us feeling giddy! And lastly, I registered with the Confraternity of St James in South Africa (csjofsa.za.org). They provided an official letter for our visa applications and sent us our Pilgrim Passports, so we didn't have to mission around to get them in France.

Did anyone doubt the wisdom of taking your kids on such a long trip? *Louise:* I think most people raised their eyebrows or smiled with disbelief when they heard the number of kilometres we planned on

covering, especially with kids in tow. Rightly so – it's not your typical family-friendly holiday at the beach.

The main thing was we knew the kids *could* do it. They might not want to speak to us afterwards, but Jeremy and I maintain, from personal experience, that kids tire mentally before they tire physically. The plan of action was to keep them motivated by taking frequent rests – river swims, café lunches, church tours, more river swims – and indulging in ice cream every single day.

Is the Camino well equipped for cyclists? Louise:

The vast majority of people – more than 90% – walk the Camino. But there are cyclists, and even people who do it on horseback or on donkeys.

For the first part, we stayed in hostels or *albergues* as they're known in France and Spain. We'd arrive in a town and use the Camino Ninja app (camino.ninja) to find a hostel with a rating of 8 or higher before knocking on the door and asking if they had space for us and our bikes. We usually arrived early enough to secure five spaces and the bicycles were never a problem.

The terrain was a combination of forest, farms, endless plains, dirt roads, some technical, rocky downhills and mountain ranges. Our boys loved the downhills, but there were some stretches that were difficult to pick through.

The beginning stages were tough, especially the first day where we had a torturous 8 km push... During the communal dinner at our first overnight refuge, a softly spoken lady remarked, "Oh, so you didn't take the more gentle route via Valcarlos?" If only we had known!

Jeremy would push our youngest son's bicycle on steep hills, but almost every time we had to push, a pilgrim would magically appear and take the extra bicycle out of his hands and walk it to the top. There's an incredible sense of kindness on the Camino.

How do you make a trip like this as affordable as possible? Louise: You can do the Camino on a limited budget, but then your tolerance for discomfort comes into play...

You can stay in hostels the whole way and spend €9–€15 per person per night (R155–R258). Some hostels operate on a donation basis and are listed on the Camino Ninja app – don't expect high ratings here, though. In terms of food, most restaurants offer a "pilgrim's meal", which consists of three courses and a glass of red wine or water and a basket of bread. This usually costs about €12 (R206). We often ordered three pilgrim's meals and shared between the five of us as the portions are generous.

Otherwise, most towns have a *supermercado* (general store), where you can pick up some basics to make sandwiches or a light meal, or to get some trail snacks and cold drinks.



Did the boys enjoy it? Louise: I asked William what he thought about doing the Camino and he said, "Mom, I don't have a choice, we're raised by wolves!"

Our eldest son, who is not really into sports, loved the whole experience of meeting new people and going to different places. His bicycle became the means to do this. After we got home, he saw the Tour de France on TV and turned to his dad and said, "You know, I'm actually missing my bike." To us, this was gold!

What was a highlight for you and Jeremy? Louise: Other than the privilege of doing this adventure with our boys, we also got to savour the trail with our extended Camino family – all the beautiful people we met along the way.

I came away from the experience with a restored faith in humankind and a refreshed perspective on our inter-connectedness. Some of our most heart-warming encounters were with people we couldn't even communicate with in words – just facial gestures and pantomime.

Were there any challenges? Jeremy: Our trip went smoothly – thank goodness. We didn't encounter any bed bugs and there were no serious injuries. We did experience a heatwave during the first week and we missed wildfires by one day, which saw pilgrims being evacuated and the Camino being closed temporarily.

One night during the heatwave we happened to be staying in a crowded hostel with minimal ventilation. (Not a great combo, especially when you throw in a few snorers.) I led a little rebellion – we pulled our mattresses out of the room and into the courtyard where we slept under a washing line and a sky full of stars.

As parents, our main challenge was making sure the boys were safe on the roads, especially passing through villages with traffic.

What tips do you have for parents who would like to do something similar? Jeremy: Start by taking your kids for weekend rides of at least 18 to 25 km. If they can easily do a 20 km ride two days in a row, you're all set.

As a parent, make sure that *you're* physically fit because you'll need to give your kids a helping hand at times. We averaged about 30 km a day, so it was essential to take things slowly.

If cycling isn't your thing, shorten the daily distances and walk a section of the Camino with your kids instead.

What's your takeaway from this trip? Jeremy: We didn't see many children on the Camino, but our boys made people smile – many marvelled at their energy. One morning, after a long and somewhat brutal climb, a group of about 15 French walkers stopped and cheered for the boys at the top of the hill. We watched them perk up at the encouragement – it was beautiful to witness.

Louise: So often, we don't give children the opportunity to do hard things. We limit them with our own reference points of what we think or don't think is possible for kids to do. And yet, they can do infinitely more than we give them credit for. Jeremy and I have seen this time and again. Don't let your kids stop you from having a big adventure. Rather, give them the opportunity to join you!

PROFILE

The happy bird people

Imagine a Venn diagram with three circles: one for birdwatching, one for nature books and one for anything to do with the Waterberg. In the centre, where those circles overlap, you'll find **Warwick** and **Michèle Tarboton**.

We chatted to them at their home outside Modimolle.

BY TOAST COETZER

It's not difficult to figure out that Warwick and Michèle Tarboton are into birds. On this particular summer afternoon, Michèle is wearing a shirt with six embroidered birds on it: hoopoe, Knysna turaco, guineafowl, white-fronted bee-eater, malachite kingfisher and what looks like a greater double-collared sunbird.

We're sitting on the veranda of their home in Kokanje, a retirement village outside Modimolle in Limpopo. Throughout our chat, birds can be heard in the background as they forage around the garden – half bushveld, half manicured. On the wall, a laminated poster depicts all the bird species one can see in Kokanje; two other posters show the grasses and butterflies.

To entertain themselves, the Tarbotons have an ongoing competition of "veranda birding" to see who can spot the most species from the stoep.

"The rule is that you must have one foot on the veranda when you see or hear the bird," Michèle says.

"Sometimes you have to sprint," Warwick adds. "You might be in the garden and a vulture comes over, then you have to rush back to the veranda and get your foot on it and make sure you can still see the vulture!"

They both have a good giggle at this. It's clearly a scene that plays out often. Veranda birding has its origins in the many years the Tarbotons lived on a

farm called Sericea next door to Nylsvley Nature Reserve, south-west of nearby Mookgophong. Nylsvley has played a big role in their lives, professionally and personally. Warwick and Michèle both grew up in Johannesburg. Warwick started a career as a geologist, but after seven years he found himself in management and realised that "life's too short for that".

He had always been interested in birds. When he was a boy, he spent many hours scouring the veld on the St Stithians school campus with a group of friends who were into collecting bird eggs. Although he never collected eggs himself, the forays resulted in a lifelong interest in the breeding habits of birds. (His book on nests and eggs is a South African classic – see the sidebar on the last page.)

"An aunt of mine, Elsie Grewar, married a tobacco farmer," he says. "As a kid, I often went to their farm just outside Vaalwater. I would go walking at six in the morning and come back at lunchtime, and then go exploring again. Aunt Elsie inspired much of my interest in nature; she was a mother figure in a way. This period of my life provided the grounding for my love of the Waterberg.

"But when I left school my parents said, 'You can't make a living out of birds – nobody can make a living out of birds!' So, I went the geology route."

At about the same time that Warwick quit his geology job, Nylsvley Nature

Reserve came into being. Proclaimed in 1974, its main aim was to protect a section of the Nyl River floodplain where rare antelope – specifically roan and tsessebe – could be bred. It would also be ground zero for a research programme about the savannah biome – this patch of land was a prime example.

"People I knew in the birding world said, 'If you want to get into birds, this is your opportunity'," Warwick recalls. Already having completed an MSc, he could fast-track to an MSc in Zoology, which would open the door to combining his passion for nature with a new career. "It gave me a shortcut to becoming a zoologist without having to know too much about how many wings a fly has got, that sort of thing. Birds have got two, they're much easier!"

Nylsvley soon became his home – he lived on a farm next door and got a job with Transvaal Nature Conservation. Warwick explored his passion for birds, drawing up management plans for threatened species like blue swallows and wattled cranes.

Michèle's childhood was also filled with excursions into South Africa's beautiful places. "Our big family place was Mazeppa Bay in the Transkei," she says.

After school she became a teacher at Sandown Primary School in Johannesburg, where she started a wildlife club for the pupils.



“To me, a wilderness is a place that is not manipulated and modified. Any place where you have artificial feeding, salt licks, watering sites and all that – it can no longer be a wilderness.”

WHAT IS BIRD ATLASSING?

Keen local birders have participated in the Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2 since 2007. (SABAP1 was conducted from 1987 – 1991.) This extensive project, driven by citizen scientists, divides South Africa and our neighbouring countries into grids of roughly 9x9 km, also called pentads, in which bird sightings are documented. The sightings are fed into a database run by the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology and the resulting analysis informs wide-ranging conservation efforts.

📧 fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za; 🌐 gbif.org

WHAT IS WATERBERG BIOQUEST?

The website 🌐 waterberg-bioquest.co.za is a repository for the biota of the Waterberg. The site is maintained by Warwick and Michèle, with contributions from like-minded friends who go on “bio-bash outings” to search for new species to photograph – whether it’s a bird, a dragonfly, a wildflower or anything else that interests them.

Besides photographs, the site contains links to places to stay in the Waterberg, maps and a list of books about the area.

“We would go to this little reserve in the Magaliesberg called Skilpadsnek, and sometimes we’d go to Nylsvley. Teaching was great because of the regular holidays – every holiday I could get out of Joburg and go to the bush.”

Her love for Nylsvley grew to such an extent that she and a few friends eventually bought a small farm near the reserve. “It was during this time that I met Warwick,” she says. “As it turned out, he lived next door...”

They both have a good laugh at that. They’ve been married for 29 years and their playful sense of companionship has clearly not diminished since those early Nylsvley days.

“Michèle and her friends organised nature weekends at Nylsvley for people from the city, and they roped me in to do courses about birds,” Warwick explains.

“We did courses once a month, every month, during summer,” Michèle adds. “People would camp on the farm. We ran the courses for years and made some jolly good friends, which we still have.”

Listening to them, I get the sense that the Tarbotons figured out early on what they liked – nature and all things in it – and then found a way to build their lives around this shared passion.

After 1994, when Transvaal Nature Conservation was disbanded and four new provinces were created (Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga and Northern Province, now Limpopo) Warwick was given options to pursue his career in different places. Instead, he decided to take his pension and go freelance.

“Since then, I’ve just been free-wheeling, writing books and doing photography work,” Warwick says, understating his achievements as usual. “I did do some contract work – environmental impact studies and that sort of stuff, which made money, but it’s terrible work.”

He laughs and Michèle joins in. “Yes,” she says, gathering her breath. “Money has never driven any of our decisions...”

At the time, Warwick was involved in a research project on Highveld grassland birds near Dullstroom. He and Michèle fell in love with that part of Mpumalanga, and the birding haven of Wakkerstroom in particular. For a while they considered moving to Wakkerstroom permanently,

but the Waterberg was still the place where they felt most at home. They’ve since made it their mission to explore the region, document it and conserve it.

“The Waterberg has been transformed over the past 30 years,” Warwick says. “When I first came here there were no game fences, but now every road is just a corridor of game fences, which has taken away the wildness of the place altogether.”

“Every year on New Year’s Day, we’d go to a place called Tarentaalstraat,” Michèle says, referring to a beautiful section of road south-east of Vaalwater. “We’d go there and stop anywhere along the river and pick *stamvrugte*. Although it was private property, nobody would kick you out. Now there’s a big game fence at Tarentaalstraat and you can’t get off the road.”

Warwick continues: “The game industry has taken over but there’s little recognition of how nutrient poor the Waterberg soils are, and the consequent low carrying capacity of the land. Game farms, being what they are, want a variety of species in good numbers, and to achieve this everything must be fed, from the reintroduced lions and elephants to the plains game. You certainly see game here, thanks to the supplementary feeding, and it is a hunter’s paradise, but it’s a poor imitation of real wilderness.”

“There are still lots of lovely wild places in the Waterberg,” Michèle says. They might not have much big game but they’re wonderful nonetheless.”

“To me, a wilderness is a place that is not manipulated and modified,” Warwick adds. “Any place where you have artificial feeding, salt licks, watering sites and all that – it can no longer be a wilderness.”

We talk for a while about the meaning of wilderness, and where you can still find it – parts of the Kruger, the open landscape of the Great Karoo, the Tankwa, and isolated pockets of the Waterberg. As bird atlassers (see the sidebar) the Tarbotons have visited more than a hundred properties in the area. Michèle fetches a map from inside the house and spreads it out before us so I can see where everything is.

“Curiosity drives us to all these places,” Warwick says. “Our friend Ken Maud might tell us about a farm with



some great baobabs, and we'll make a plan to go and see them."

Ken is a director of Waterberg Tourism and co-owns a farm called Swebeswebe towards Lephalale.

"The provincial reserve, D'Nyala near Lephalale, is one of our favourites, and also Lindani to the north-east of Vaalwater, and Kaingo Game Reserve north-west of Vaalwater. They have 16 000 ha and they brought in the Big Five, but they control the land very carefully. The property itself stretches for 16 km on both sides of the Mokolo River, a meandering river that feeds into the Mokolo Dam, and it's got rare birds like African finfoot. We also enjoy Richard and Lyn Wadley's property, Moletadikgwa Wildlife Sanctuary. It's small but nice for walking."

Lyn Wadley was the lead author on the Tarbotons' most recent book project, *Wildflowers of the Waterberg*. (See go! #181 for an interview with Lyn.) The book developed out of the Tarbotons' existing work on the Waterberg BioQuest website (see sidebar). During 2020 and 2021, Warwick, Michèle, Lyn and a group of dedicated wildflower fans photographed as many Waterberg species as they

could, and then compiled the book.

"It was the wildflower photos on the website that got the whole project going," says Michèle.

"Until Covid, we had a group here at Kokanje who would go out together," Warwick says, explaining how the vast collection of photographs on the BioQuest site came to be. "Thanks to the group's network, we could gain access to many Waterberg properties, which helped a lot. On Tuesdays we'd all meet at the gate – sometimes we'd be in a convoy of five or six cars heading out for the day. People brought their cameras and they'd record everything they saw, even if it was a beetle crossing the road. In that way, we started building up our collection of spiders, lizards, frogs, flowers and others.

"Jonathan Swart from Welgevonden Game Reserve gave us photos of hundreds of species that he'd photographed in the reserve, and others submitted their own flower photos. We ended up with a thousand photos of flowers, covering 700 species."

We're interrupted by the characteristic *chi-chirrr* call of a woodland kingfisher. It's mid-November and these birds

usually arrive here at the onset of summer. But this isn't just any old kingfisher, it's Rosie, the subject of a series of articles about bird migration and habits, some published in *African Birdlife* magazine.

"We used to live in a different house just behind here," Warwick says, as Rosie assumes her position on the perch in front of her nest. "We put a nesting log under the eaves of the house about ten years ago. Two woodland kingfishers found it and moved in. The next year they came back. I was dealing with a lecturer at Wits who was tracking birds at the time, and he had some funds available. I said, 'Let's put some trackers on the kingfishers here at Kokanje.' We had several pairs in the retirement village.

"In 2012, we put trackers on five pairs, including 'our' pair. The trackers were geolocators, which measure sunrise and sunset. You can use that info to co-ordinate where they are. You have to catch the birds a year later when they come back, to take off the geocator and download the information. But the only birds that came back were ours – it was extraordinary. Rosie and her mate came back again, and again.

“When we moved to this house, the birds had chicks in the nest at the other house and we thought, ‘We don’t want to lose them...’ We started feeding them mealworms here – they’d come and fetch the worms to feed to their chicks. It worked. We lured them here and they brought their chicks into this garden and got familiar with it. We brought the box over after they left and set it up for them. The next year, they came straight to this house, and this is where they bred.

“The geolocators tracked the male to South Sudan and the female to the Central African Republic. They followed different routes and left at different times. She left earlier than he did, and flew via Kasane, western Zambia and the Congo basin. He flew over Zimbabwe and Lake Kariba. They fly at night, so you’d see them here in the garden, and the next morning one would be gone. You’d think, ‘What happened? Did one die?’ But the following November, it would be back again.”

This is Rosie’s ninth year of nesting under the Tarbotons’ veranda – her tenth, hopefully, by the time you read this magazine. Her partner of seven years disappeared, but she immediately took on a new one.

“Birds have personalities, they’re like little people,” Warwick muses. “Take a silly guineafowl – there’s one here that calls its head off every night, but he just needs to tell the flock he’s the loudmouth. You know him from his voice.”

“You get to know the birds as individuals,” Michèle says. “They’re so clever. They have this tiny little brain like a computer chip, telling them what to do and when. Who teaches them to build their nests like that?” She points at a collection of weaver nests displayed above the window.

Warwick picks up the thread: “Each has its own style and architecture. We have a nest from each of our region’s weaver species, we just don’t have the olive-headed weaver, which is from Mozambique. It builds its nest with old man’s beard! The red-headed weaver also has a unique style, it’s this one here.” He points to a rough-looking nest with a very long entrance tunnel. “They use thin twigs to build their nests, and strip off a little piece of bark at the end of

the twig to tie to the next twig. It’s an extraordinary weaving process and it takes them ages. Most weavers will knock up a nest in a day, but a red-headed weaver takes weeks.”

“The bird has evolved in this way for some reason,” Michèle says. “And the next generation knows what to do, and where to tie that loose end...”

Of all the birds, it’s another unique nest-builder – the woodpecker – that Warwick considers his favourite. “They’re classy little birds, so different,” he says. “Their tails are stiffened so it gives them a third leg. No other bird can hop up trunks like they do. They also have a special skull structure that can handle the pecking when they build nests. They can excavate a nest hole today and it will still be in use 25 years from now, home to a succession of other birds.”

“There’s a hole at Nylsvley that has been excavated into an electricity pole and it’s been there for more than 30 years,” Michèle says. “All sorts of things have used it: pearl-spotted owl, grey hornbill, lilac-breasted roller, Burchell’s starling...”

The moment I ask Michèle about her favourite bird, a hadeda releases a loud ha! from somewhere nearby.

“Not him!” she says, laughing. “But yes, probably the kingfishers, and my other favourite is the crimson-breasted shrike. I like the glitzy birds.”

Warwick and Michèle are not glitzy people, but their quiet and understated manner belies the immense contribution they’ve made to the appreciation and understanding of our natural heritage. They’ve built happy and fulfilling lives by combining their passion with an incredible work ethic – much like the weavers that built the wondrous nests on their stoep.

By reading one of their books or working your way through the Waterberg BioQuest website (it will take you weeks!) you get a sense of the affinity they have for wild creatures big and small.

These projects are all labours of love, but it’s the love part that ensures that the Tarbotons’ work will endure. Just ask a woodland kingfisher...

READ MORE

The Tarbotons have been involved with several publications over the years. See warwicktarboton.co.za for a full list.

Wildflowers of the Waterberg (2021), by Lyn Wadley, Linda Willemse, Kerry Baytopp, Jonathan Swart, Joseph Heymans, and Warwick and Michèle Tarboton – R300 from warwick@warwicktarboton.co.za

A Guide to the Dragonflies & Damselflies of South Africa (StruikNature), by Warwick and Michèle Tarboton – R239 from takealot.co.za

Guide to the Birds of the Kruger National Park (StruikNature), by Warwick Tarboton and Peter Ryan – R320 from takealot.co.za

Roberts Nests & Eggs of Southern African Birds (2011), by Warwick Tarboton – R240 from warwick@warwicktarboton.co.za

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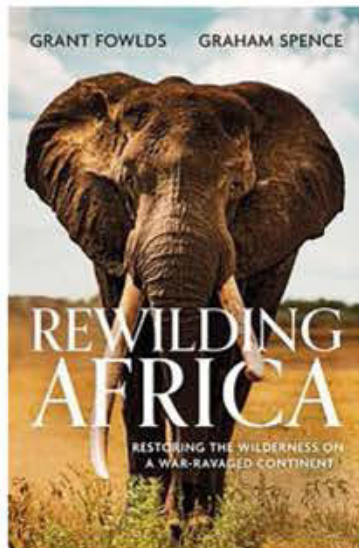
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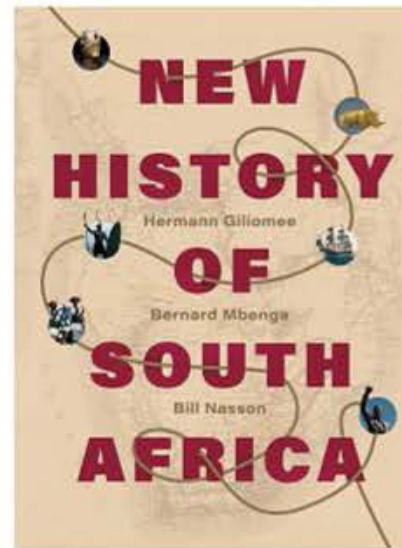
**Rewilding Africa:
Restoring the Wilderness
on a War-ravaged Continent**
*by Grant Fowlds & Graham Spence,
Jonathan Ball Publishers*
R325 in bookstores

Repairing damaged ecosystems and turning cultivated land into wildlife reserves sounds like an idealistic endeavour, but only

a few pages into this book you'll realise it's anything but. This is the second team effort by conservationist Grant Fowlds and writer Graham Spence – their first book together was *Saving the Last Rhinos*, published in 2019.

Rewilding Africa is all about Fowlds's mission to establish wilderness areas and protect endangered species in places like South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, the DRC – even in Saudi Arabia. The authors don't shy away from the challenges they face in conservation, like poaching, politics, conflict with communities who live near wild places, and the loss of colleagues. But the golden thread that runs through the book is the tenacity, teamwork and hope it takes to keep species like elephants and rhinos safe.

This insightful peek behind the curtain will captivate anyone interested in conservation and wildlife.



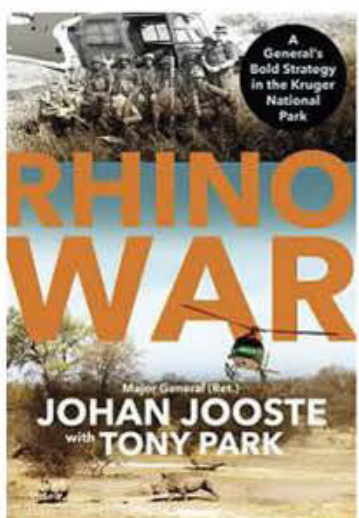
**New History of
South Africa**
*by Hermann Giliomee, Bernard
Mbenga & Bill Nasson, Tafelberg*
R420 in bookstores

This is the updated second edition of the popular *New History of South Africa*, first published in 2007.

Compiled by three heavyweights

of South African historiography – Hermann Giliomee, Bernard Mbenga and Bill Nasson – and a team of researchers, it documents the history of our country since the arrival of modern humans in Africa to the present. The establishment of the Dutch colony at the Cape, the Mfecane, the Union of South Africa, apartheid, the democratic era... All of these periods are discussed in a balanced manner that complements our country's complex history.

Each section opens with a timeline to give an overview of how events played out, then each chapter presents historical events in a readable style. It's a good source to have around the home.



**Rhino War: A General's
Bold Strategy in the
Kruger National Park**
*by Johan Jooste & Tony Park,
Pan Macmillan South Africa*
R340 in bookstores

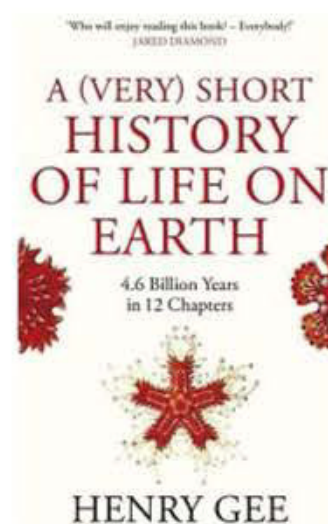
Australian author Tony Park is best known for his fast-paced thrillers, usually set in the African bush. For this non-fiction work, he's teamed up with retired Major General Johan

Jooste to shed light on Jooste's time in the Kruger Park.

In 2012, at the height of the rhino poaching crisis, SANParks brought Jooste in to turn its ranger corps into a paramilitary force equipped to take on armed poachers. Jooste's appointment was controversial and was met with resistance from within SANParks itself, as well as from the police and the military.

Rhino War tells his side of the story: what he did, what he could have done differently, and his perspective on the wildlife poaching crisis and the efforts to combat it.

If you're used to only seeing headlines about rhinos killed and not much about how poaching is being addressed on the ground, this book is an intriguing read.



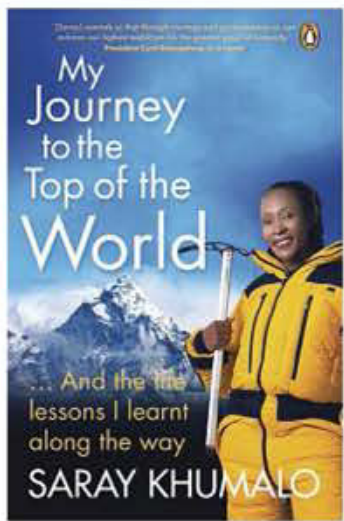
**A (very) Short History
of Life on Earth**
by Henry Gee, Picador
about R400 in bookstores

It's an art to be able to present complex scientific research in an accessible and engaging way, and it's something that Henry Gee – a British palaeontologist and

evolutionary biologist who has been a reporter and editor at the journal *Nature* for more than three decades – is masterful at. He's written a slew of non-fiction books, mostly on fossils and evolution.

So, when you read the lofty promise on the cover of this book – that Gee will cover 4.6 billion years in 12 chapters – you know you're in good hands. He starts at the very beginning of the universe and takes you through the earliest signs of life on earth, the progression to more complex life forms like mammals and reptiles, dinosaurs, extinctions, and the emergence of humans. He even explores what the future might look like on planet Earth.

It's a great book if you're new to the subject, and if you're left wanting more, there's an extensive reading list at the back.



My Journey to the Top of the World... And the life lessons I learnt along the way

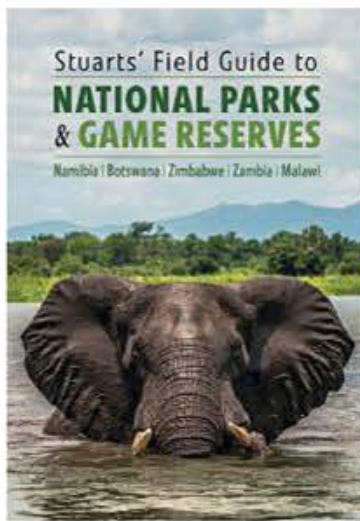
by Saray Khumalo, Penguin Books
R290 in bookstores

Whether you're a mountaineer training for your next high-altitude adventure or a couch potato who needs a push to climb the koppie behind your house, this book is inspiration distilled.

In 2019, Khumalo – born in Zambia and currently living in South Africa – became the first black African woman to summit Mount Everest.

Making it up the highest mountain on earth is an amazing feat, but even more so is the fact that she had to return to Nepal four times to make it happen. Her first three attempts were thwarted by avalanches, the severe earthquake of 2015 that struck near the city of Kathmandu, and a faulty oxygen mask. She also had to recover from a serious mountain-bike accident between attempts, which left her in a coma.

She tells of her training, the challenges she faced, the mountains she scaled in preparation, and how dangerous and exhilarating the life of a mountaineer can be. Riveting!



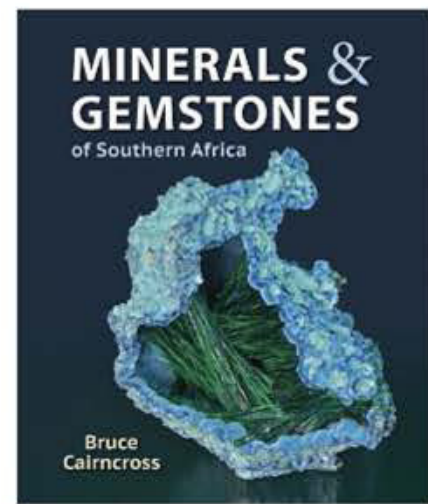
Stuarts' Field Guide to National Parks & Game Reserves: Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi

by Chris & Mathilde Stuart, StruikNature
R350 in bookstores

When you venture into national parks and reserves in foreign countries – or even in your own country! – a well-researched guide is invaluable. Conservationists Chris and Mathilde Stuart have produced many field guides and they spend a lot of time in the bush, so they know exactly what you'll need to make the most of your visit.

This guide is organised by country and covers about 50 protected areas in Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. All the highlights of the region are included, like Etosha, Chobe, Mana Pools, Kafue, and Liwonde.

The focus is on the history and geology of the landscape, and the plants and animals you'll encounter. Each section is accompanied by a detailed park map and a short summary of the facilities and activities on offer. There are colour photos spread throughout the book, as well as an identification guide for mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and trees. An excellent addition to the cubbyhole of your overlander.



Minerals & Gemstones of Southern Africa

by Bruce Cairncross, StruikNature
R450 in bookstores

If you think that minerals and gemstones, erm, rock, then you're probably already familiar with Cairncross's work – he's emeritus professor in the Department of Geology at the University of Johannesburg and the author of several books and field guides on the subject.

For this publication, he casts a wide net, describing important minerals and gems found in Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, southern Mozambique and Zimbabwe – it's the first book to comprehensively cover the gemstones found in the region.

The chapters are arranged alphabetically, from Aegirine to Zircon. Each describes what the rock in question looks like, where it's found and how it can be used, and the guide contains more than 900 colour photographs.

It's a good buy if you're a collector or a gemmologist, or if you have a keen interest in geology and the rock formations you see on your travels.

**ROAD
MUSIC**

It's Gonna Be Fine

by Shotgun Tori

US\$6 from shotguntori.bandcamp.com

When Joburg-based singer-songwriter Shotgun Tori received funding from SAMRO (Southern African Music Rights Organisation) to record an EP, she reached for the songs that had sprung from her life at the time. These six songs also very much reflect what many of us have gone through recently.

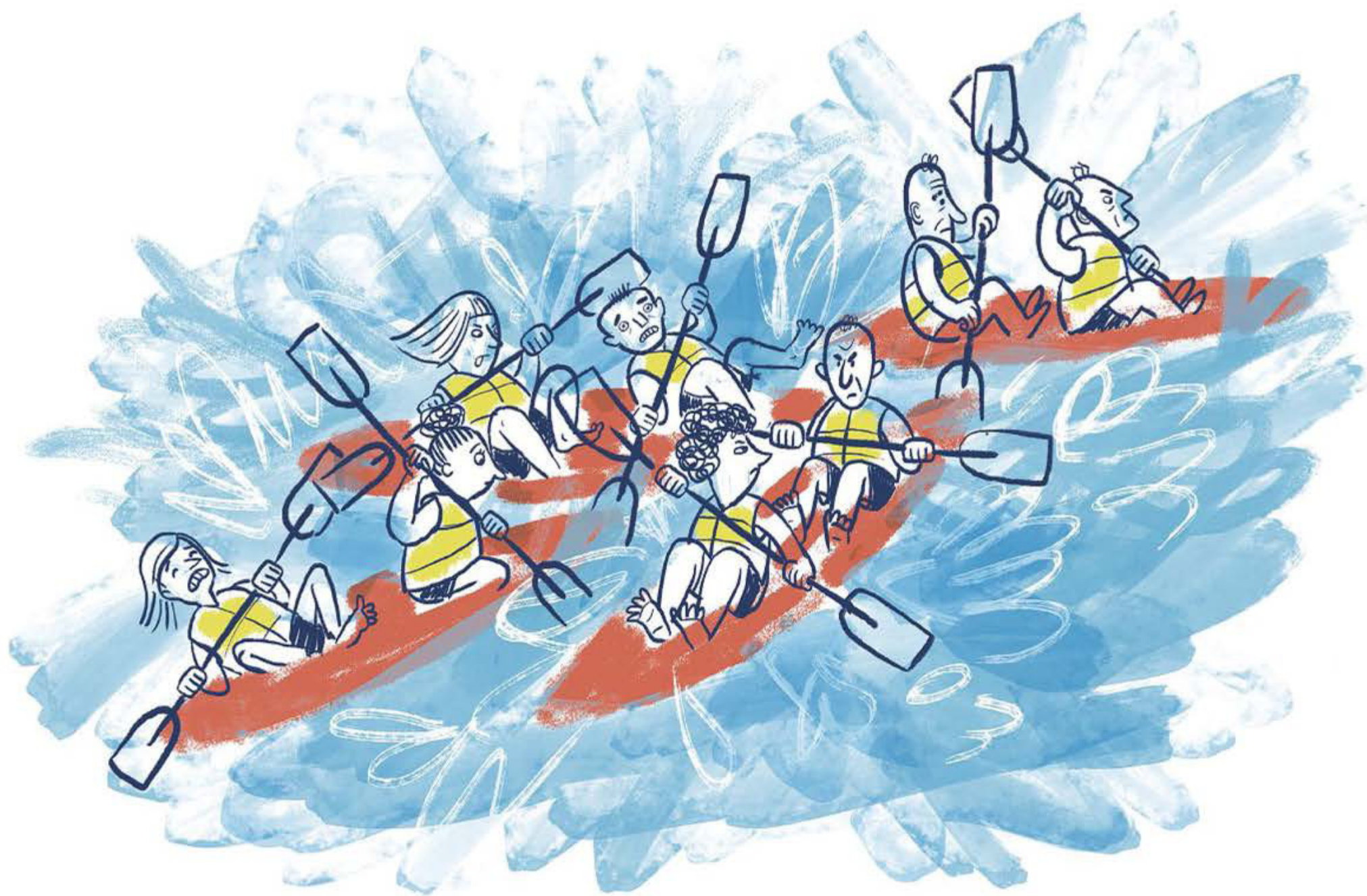
On the upbeat title track, she sings: "If we weren't in lockdown and there was no curfew, I'd drive to the coast to take in a sea view / Instead I'll count steps in the driveway, to counter the carrying / of the weight of banana bread tests on my hips..."

"Driven To Drink" is moodier ("leave me be, I just need a moment to think"), but the overall vibe is positive, ranging from the tongue-in-cheek "Wrong Queue" (about standing in the wrong line at Home Affairs) to the thoughtful "Unfolded", which blurs boundaries between the inner and outer world: "This gentle unfolding inside me has come out unfolded / A map that you're trying to read in the wind."

Lekker, life-affirming stuff that is perfect for a long-weekend road trip to the Waterberg.

– Toast Coetzer





Don't let the old man in

Camping with the older generation yields all kinds of insights.
Kyra Tarr remembers a camping trip with her dad and his friends.

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**

Since my sisters and I were small, my dad Mike would whisk us away from civilisation's tame embrace and we'd clamber up snow-covered peaks or hike through game reserves where dangerous animals roamed. Unlike most parents, who mellow with age, Mike has chosen the opposite direction. Now on the other side of 80, he often quotes lyrics from that Toby Keith song "Don't Let the Old Man In". And to his credit, he never has.

So, here I am, at 26, trying to keep up with Mike. That's what has brought me to this hunting lodge (a stuffed giraffe will watch us dine) a few kilometres downstream from the Vanderkloof Dam in the Northern Cape. Tomorrow, we'll start a four-day Orange River paddling trip. All Mike's idea.

Our party consists of dad's friend from his Round Table days, Gavin Elliot; David "Doc" O'Connor and his wife Nunu, a renowned fisherwoman; Peter Miller, an ex-politician like dad, and his wife Bev.

Then there's my sister, Pauli, my lifeline to survival (she thinks of everything – bottled water, wine gums, a torch...) and her husband Dave. Their friend Linda will be my paddling buddy.

The morning breaks clear and crisp. I carry my cup of tea to the braai area overlooking the river and the irrigation circles on the opposite bank – the Free State side. On quiet mornings like this, I remember a poem that I recited once for a primary school eisteddfod: "For a space

of time, however brief, between the night and coming day, it's the world of the early riser, with no one in your way..."

As the members of our party emerge from the lodge, a grumbling suspicion grows. The Orange River is in flood and the water is flowing fast. Our guide, Gavin, confirms our fears.

"Listen guys, if you fall into the river when it's full like this, it's not a question of whether you'll be able to get back into the boat, it's a question of whether I'll find your body."

We begrudgingly admit that a paddling tour of Vanderkloof is preferable to washing up in Alexander Bay. Our inflatable crafts are swapped out for two-man kayaks and we head for the dam instead.

Having fully expected the river to do most of the work (right?), none of us are physically prepared for flat-water paddling. The plan is to spend two nights camping wild along the shore. Today we have to paddle about 20 km to the campsite, where we'll set up base and explore the dam at leisure before paddling back to Vanderkloof's boat club on the final day.

Almost immediately after pushing away from shore, I know I'm in trouble. Unlike my legs, which get plenty of daily exercise, my biceps are more dormant. All the mornings I hit snooze instead of going to gym come at me in a rush of nauseating regret. As Linda and I fight against the wind-chopped water, we struggle to keep the kayak's stern perpendicular to the waves.

"You want to slice *through* the waves," Gavin yells above the wind, calmly striking forward in his craft.

The rest of us bob on the surface like panic-stricken apples, thrashing and yanking at the water with our paddles. Instead of synchronised strokes, each pair looks like they're in a duel. All the while, the (overflowing!) dam wall, which is a few hundred metres away from our launch site, looks awfully close. I feel like I'm paddling for my life, trying to put distance between myself and a terrifying plummet.

Eventually the wall disappears from view behind a koppie and my fear wanes, which gives my mind the freedom to

Almost immediately
after pushing away
from shore, I know
I'm in trouble. Unlike
my legs, which
get plenty of daily
exercise, my biceps
are more dormant.

contemplate imminent muscle failure. But I dare not speak my pain aloud. Between replaced joints, sporting injuries from rugby, canoe races and marathons, my dad and his mates are putting me to shame.

"Another 15 km to go!" Gavin calls. "Now it's time to cross the Grootwater."

Open water is a curious thing. It seems to swallow time, and there's something meditative about using the power of your arms to propel you forward. Soon, Linda and I find a stroke that's less punishing on the shoulders and our kayak starts to make good progress.

We arrive at our campsite in high spirits, filled with pride. A 20 km paddle with no training to speak of!

We're warned to pitch our tents far away from the waterline; there's been more rain predicted and the dam level rises quickly. Despite the rain warning, dad and Gavin decide to leave the fly sheet off their tent.

"In fact," Mike declares, "I think I'll sleep under the stars."

It's a little after 2 am when the first rumble of thunder rolls across the sky. I peek out from the corner flap of my tent to observe my father, stoically lying on his mattress "under the stars".

The wind comes up.

Dad doesn't move.

The first drops of rain patter against my tent, waterproof fly sheet firmly in place.

Dad doesn't move.

Crack! The sky lights up with a bolt of lightning and the rain starts pelting down.

That will do it. Dad is up and looking for his torch. It doesn't help that his inflatable mattress is precariously close to a thorn tree and that the terrain is

covered in boulders, just the right size for a toe stub.

If "I told you so" could be represented visually, it would be my dad and Gavin floundering about in the darkness, getting drenched, trying to attach a fly sheet to their tent in a gale.

The rain persists throughout our trip. We spend the next two days huddled under the communal gazebo, swapping stories and drinking tea. In the brief moments that the sun peeks out, Nunu grabs her fishing rod and heads for the water. The rest of us swim or read, returning to the gazebo when it's time to eat.

A Vanderkloof local comes past in his speedboat and treats us to a spin around the dam. We see owls and fish-eagles and drink wine in the evenings. Dad doesn't sleep outside again.

If a camping trip with your parents and their buddies is on your to-do list, here are some things you should know:

There will always be someone whose toiletry bag is better described as a mobile pharmacy. Make friends with this person. (Nunu, in our case.) There will always be someone filling up your wine glass. (Erm, me...) Be careful, but again, make friends with this person.

When it comes to exiting a tent, your youthful joints will be the object of envy. In fact, when you're in your 70s, getting out of a tent is only half of the battle – getting vertical is the main challenge. Answering nature's call also requires planning and strategy – there's nothing quite like debating bush toilet tactics over your morning coffee.

And, importantly, if you're going to hang out with people who've successfully raised children, participated in the world and paid their dues, it's best to keep your millennial opinions to yourself. There will be questions about posting your life online, the validity of taking selfies and using words like "woke". You won't have any reasonable answers for them.

Above all, travelling with my dad has reaffirmed a simple truth: There is a difference between ageing and getting old. The one is a certainty; the other, a choice.

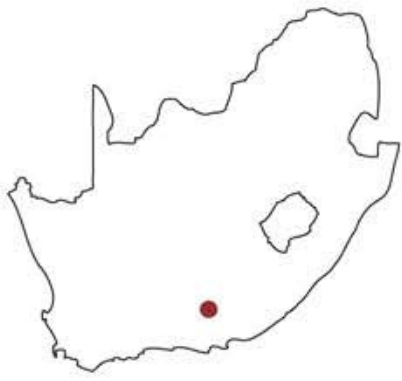
Conquer your mountain

Day 2: The descent towards Modderhuisie – an outpost tucked away in a kloof at Entkrale.

The Baviaans Camino is a 95 km slackpacking trail that traverses the Baviaanskloof and Kouga mountains in the Eastern Cape. You can do the route on foot or on horseback. Either way, you must earn your views...

WORDS & PICTURES **KYRA TARR**





The soles of my trusty hiking boots are worn through. With every step, I can isolate each of the small, aching bones in my feet. Hiking more than twice the length of the Otter Trail (in less time) certainly takes its toll...

We've been on our feet since 6 this morning and it's now late afternoon. We've come to the final 5 km of the Baviaans Camino. The white cottages of the farm Nguniland, where we left our cars five days ago, are visible in the distance.

Having crossed two mountain ranges, you'd think that the sight of civilisation would be welcome, but walking has a way of bringing you home to your thoughts. Despite my weary body, I'm not ready to say goodbye to the quiet majesty of this place just yet.

I slow down. As the hiking party descends into the valley, I remember what it took to get here...

DAY 1: 18 KM

Legendary lasagna

After breakfast we shuttle to the starting point on the farm Nakop, which borders the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve. Hercules "Herkie" van Huyssteen is waiting for us. We met Herkie and the rest of the Camino support crew – husband-and-wife duo Eric and Esti Stewart – the day before in Willowmore.

Eric and Esti won numerous awards for their Chokka Trail, a slackpacking route between Oyster Bay and St Francis Bay, and they were looking to expand their offering when they met Herkie, a Boerperd breeder and trainer who led overnight horseback excursions into the Baviaanskloof. Having grown up near Kareedouw, Herkie knew the lay of the land. He and the Stewarts charted a route across the mountains suited to both horse and human. The result: The Baviaans Camino. Tough. Rugged. Beautiful. The trail launched in 2016 and quickly developed a reputation as one of South Africa's hardest slackpacking routes.

Some sections of the hike, which mainly follows disused farm roads, can't be accessed by vehicle. If you were to twist an ankle, Herkie would have to throw you over his horse and gallop to where the support vehicle is stationed! Ok, maybe not gallop, but you get the idea...

Herkie is waiting with two horses. Carmen Hamilton, another guide, will be riding Noodle, a grey mare, and Herkie will ride Bismark, a bay gelding.

"The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a person," Herkie is fond of saying. "And you won't find a horse with more grit than the Boerperd. They can go for ages and are totally unflappable."

Herkie's horses are so well trained that even a beginner could ride this trail, but most of our group are here to walk.

The day begins with a punishing 4 km ascent in which we climb 400m to a Telkom tower. This road was built by the Department of Forestry in the 1970s, giving farmers a shortcut over the mountain to Steytlerville. It was then used by the Telkom maintenance guys and now, only hikers and horses venture up here. In some parts the incline is so steep I have to wonder: What vehicles were they driving over at Telkom?

As we walk, I can hear the creak of leather from the horses' saddles. Their hoofs clomp against the shale-covered hill in a comforting tattoo; riders confidently staring out over the vast Karoo landscape to the north. My gaze is firmly fixed on my feet until we reach the tower about an hour and a half later.

From the top, you can see the entire Kouga mountain range stretching to the south. The hills bleed into the hazy horizon and seem to carry on forever. That forever is precisely where we're headed. We'll traverse both the Baviaanskloof and Kouga ranges – 95 km of steep climbs and descents – before reaching Nguniland near Kareedouw in four days' time. What we just climbed was mountain number one.

Trepidation aside, I'm in awe of this remote place. We take in the hard-earned view and, when our breath has evened out, we push on.

The descent is equally challenging – not on the lungs, but on the legs. We chat among ourselves until we reach the lunch spot at Doringkloof Bushcamp, where we plonk down in the shade and soak our feet in the swimming pool. Kudu biltong, Powerade, sandwiches, boiled eggs, rusks, soup, date balls and fruit are spread out on the table. Eric is the coffee guy and proclaims to brew the tastiest *moerkoffie* in the Baviaans. We agree.

After lunch, we're ready to tackle the final 5 km to our overnight spot – a farmhouse on Joachimskraal, where Esti and Eric are waiting with cold beers and broad smiles.

We enjoy hot showers, courtesy of the donkey boiler, and tend to our feet.

Chris Lamprecht, the farmer, brings our dinner: lasagna, fresh bread and mountains

After a steep 4 km climb to the top of the Baviaans, the trail goes downhill again.



of crisp salad. The lasagna recipe was passed on by an Italian research student who spent time on the farm. I would happily walk the Baviaans barefoot if it meant eating it again!

DAY 2: 24 KM

Blisters and bliss

I wake up to the *piet-my-vrou* call of a red-chested cuckoo. Out on the stoep, a fellow hiker, Huw Collett (and his binoculars) has been awake for hours. He's spotted striped flufftail and some boubous. We drink more *moerkoffie* as the sun slowly creeps under the awning. Oh, and look, a Verreaux's eagle just swooped past...

The day starts with an easy 5 km stroll through open farmland. I find my stride a safe distance behind Noodle, who swaggers ahead.

"There are a few big climbs today," Herkie warns us during a water break. The first two hills pass without much fuss, carrying us from thorn tree country to hillsides dotted with wild plums, aloes, num-nums, shepherd's trees and botterboom. We dub the third hill *troukoek* (wedding cake) because it has three tiers with false peaks – every time you think you've reached the top, another level presents itself. In some parts, the incline gradient bounces between 45 and 60 degrees. Unlike yesterday, I decide to abandon my ego and I walk within the limits set by my cardiovascular system.

"Stay with the hill," Herkie advises, and that's what I do. My hat's peak is my horizon and I dare not look beyond it. I count my steps, lose count, and start again, until we reach the top of the *troukoek*.

From the top, yesterday's Telkom tower is barely visible in the distance. We've left the Baviaanskloof behind and we are now truly in the Kouga range.

Today's lunch spot is also the day's halfway mark. With a Coke in hand, I can't imagine any place I'd rather be. It's bliss! The only bliss my feet are feeling, however, are in the form of blisters. I'm referred to Eric, the ad hoc medic on duty.

"Don't worry, I patched up my rugby guys all the time," he says, plucking out the first aid kit and grabbing what (to my eyes) looks like an unusually large lancing needle.

("Doctor" Eric's open-air surgery had me wincing more than once, but my feet wouldn't have survived the hike without his daily blister care. Another hiker, Dirk Krafzig from Germany, also saw Eric to have his knee taped after a particularly brutal downhill. His limb looked mummified when Eric was through

with him, but both of us made it to the finish.)

After lunch, we set off on a road that undulates across a series of hills. We go up, down and around peaks and valleys until a view opens up over the Tsitsikamma Mountains. There isn't another soul in sight.

We've already covered the distance of a marathon since yesterday and the distance of another one still lies ahead! If you think of a contour map, we've walked through hundreds of concentric circles to reach this point. But the two dimensions of a map are only that; the vastness of this world, with its plummeting ravines and towering peaks, demands to be felt.

That evening we sleep in Modderhuisie – a rustic outpost at Entkrale. The amenities are basic: We unroll our sleeping bags for the first time and the floors are compacted mud, but there's hot water, electricity (only for light) and a communal dining area with a fireplace.

We feast on kudu potjie and tell stories around the fire until exhaustion sends us to our beds.

DAY 3: 23 KM

From grey to green

The sun rises and so do we. While we were asleep, Herkie woke twice to feed the horses, as he does every night.

Today's walk takes us through a beautiful kloof covered in cycads, flowering spekboom and tall aloes. Baboons call to each other and the sound ricochets through the valley in blasts. We've been spotted!

Dew frosts every blade of grass, reflecting the sunlight. The green surroundings of the kloof are like a balm after the drier terrain of the Nama Karoo. Our bodies are no less tired, but we're stronger today – in mind and spirit; distance doesn't scare us any more.

With this mindset, we climb to the highest point on Koude Nek – 965 m above sea level. Carmen lets me ride Noodle for a few kilometres and my feet rejoice. Noodle's back is a great place to be. My gaze sweeps across the landscape, which manages to be imposing and beautiful at the same time, remote and comforting.

At the end of the day, we descend into a small farming community called Nooitgedacht where Pierre Strydom puts us up in style on his farm Mooigedacht. Plush beds, hot water and luxurious finishes greet us in our respective cottages and rooms. After the relentless crunching of earth beneath our boots and spending so much time in isolated surrounds,

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The hikers make their way to Modderhuisie, their overnight spot on Day 2. Herkie rides his horse Bismark, while Dirk takes a turn astride Noodle. The final morning of the Baviaans Camino – breakfast with Leverage and Sandra Barnard in Nooitgedacht.





this hint of civilisation is much appreciated but also slightly jarring.

Eunice Nortje, Pierre's sister-in-law, has prepared jugs of honeybush iced tea for us. We sit at tables covered in red gingham cloth, savouring the iced tea and tucking into pecan squares made from nuts harvested from the farm's own grove, planted in the 1960s.

Later that afternoon, Herkie's wife Anika takes me on a short walk to show me a nearby waterfall. We soak our feet in the mountain stream as their dog Jasper crashes about in the undergrowth.

DAY 4: 30 KM

Gratitude in every step

On any other given day, hiking 30km through the mountains might feel impossible, but after filling up on a big breakfast prepared by neighbouring farmer Leverne Barnard and his wife Sandra, we feel ready for anything.

"I'll be pushing you hard until lunch time," Herkie says. "We need to reach the lunch spot by 12.30pm. If we make it in time, we'll be able to ease up for the rest of the day."

We set our minds to the task, walking along the Ragels River before climbing the Moordenaarskloof Pass. The only person we see is a farmer's son herding cattle into another encampment. Herkie knows him. Coming from this world, everyone knows everyone.

We cross the Kouga River at the bottom of a valley and climb back out before we break for lunch. We make the cut-off time – just.

After lunch, we tackle what Esti calls "the unadvertised hills" – three short, savage climbs – before following an old postal route down to Nguniland.

I walk the final 5 km in silence, humbled by the enormity of what I've accomplished and the scale of the world we've walked through. My feet might be sore but I feel gratitude in every step.

The Baviaans Camino is not like its genteel European cousin. On this "pilgrimage", the churches are mountains, your fellow pilgrims often have four legs, the hills are your measure and your aching muscles, the judge. But with the vast sky above and the complete silence that swallows the night, it's no less holy.

Clockwise from top left: Farmer Leverne Barnard shows off the "monster" car of his own creation. Herkie's wife, Anika van Huyssteen, watches as their dog, Jasper, takes a dip. Kayla, Pierre Strydom's champion sheep dog, gives a demonstration. Eric Stewart prepares lunch for the hungry hikers. Jane van der Spuy (left) and Gail Smuts.



The old postal route, about 8 km from Nguniland.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

When? The hike runs from March to October. Visit baviaanscamino.com or call Esti 073 825 0835 for dates.

Logistics. You park your car at Nguniland farm near Kareedouw. From there, a shuttle takes you to Willowmore where you spend the night at The Willow Historical Guesthouse (willowguesthouse.co.za). A shuttle transports you to the hike's starting point the next morning, on a farm called Nakop. All you'll carry each day is a daypack. A support vehicle meets you approximately every 5 km. You spend four days and three nights in the mountains; the last night is at Nguniland.

Flying in? If you hail from further afield, Esti can arrange

a shuttle to pick you up from Dawid Stuurman International Airport in Gqeberha and drop you off again.

Cost: R9 950 per hiker. Contact Esti for rates should you wish to ride a horse. The horses are suitable for beginners and seasoned riders alike. To keep things cost effective, groups usually number about 14 in total of which six can be on horseback.

Drinks. Plenty of refreshments are provided, but if you'd like something alcoholic or a soft drink for the evenings, let Esti know. She'll provide your preference and you can tick off what you consume in the honesty booklet. You can pay by EFT at the end of the trip.

Fitness requirements. You have to be a fit, strong walker. Make sure your boots are worn in and comfortable. The main thing is getting used to spending time on your feet!

The shade situation. There's not much shade during the day. Wear a long-sleeved shirt, sunglasses and hat, and remember your sunscreen. It's a good idea to carry a hydration bladder and bottles – you'll need at least 4 ℓ of water per day.

Cellphone signal? There are only two or three places where you'll have patchy signal. Don't count on signal – rather leave your phone switched off to save battery.





Ndumo gives you wings

Ndumo Game Reserve is in the far north of KZN, flush against the border with Mozambique. It's a magnificent refuge for all sorts of creatures, especially those that fly, but it's a refuge under threat...

WORDS & PICTURES **TOAST COETZER**





Guide Joseph Gumede and his guests on a drive to Nyamithi Pan in Ndumo. The area has lots of fever trees, and waterbirds like to congregate here.

NDUMO GAME RESERVE

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: This scene will greet you from the Mapondo viewpoint if you look south-east, along Ndumo's fence. Frans and Elfreda Senekal from Pretoria with guide Joseph Gumede (far right) look for the shy eastern nicator. A gang of crested guineafowl scour the road – they eat anything from fruit to spiders. Half of the white-crested helmet-shrike's diet consists of caterpillars. Yum.

NDUMO'S CHALLENGES

The adjacent rural area is densely populated and the competition for fertile farming land has spilled over into the reserve. After politicians promised local farmers access to 20ha of prime land inside Ndumo back in 2009, the eastern side of the park (between the Phongolo River and the eastern border fence) has slowly been turned into fields.

It's estimated that more than 600ha of Ndumo's total land area of about 10 117ha has become farmland. The affected area doesn't have any tourism infrastructure, however, and as a visitor you never enter that part of the reserve.

Source: Tony Carnie,
Daily Maverick #168

It's late at night and a fiery-necked nightjar chirrups from one of the many marula trees in the rest camp at Ndumo. Occasionally, I hear a marula fruit fall onto the chalet roof with a loud clank, followed by the sound of it rolling down and dropping softly onto the grass. But the noises don't keep me up. I love listening to them, in fact, because they tell me that I'm back in one of South Africa's most incredible reserves after more than a decade.

The geography, climate and vegetation of Ndumo make it a unique habitat for many bird species that you'd normally struggle to see in South Africa. This part of KwaZulu-Natal is similar to the adjacent Mozambican coastal flats – Ndumo's height above sea level ranges from about 80m at the rest camp to barely 30m at the edge of Nyamithi Pan. It has a warm, wet climate, with an average annual rainfall of more than 650mm.

There are riparian forests along the Usuthu River, which forms the reserve's northern boundary, and along the Phongolo, which slices through the eastern part. More than 900 plant species are crowded into a variety of vegetation types, including something called Mahemane bushveld (characterised by thickets of various thorn trees), sandveld forest (where black monkey orange and silver cluster-leaf trees grow) and huge stands of fever trees along the rivers and pans.

Ndumo is famous among birders because it's home to enigmatic species like Pel's fishing-owl, the fabulously coiffed crested guineafowl, and the cute and tiny pink-throated twinspot.

Although I don't keep a life list, I'm always interested in exploring special habitats where unusual birds can be seen. And the best way to track them down is to go on a guided walk with one of Ndumo's expert guides.

That's why I eventually stop counting marula fruit and fall asleep, because tomorrow I have to be up early...

Birds and beasts

I meet Bongani Mkhize at reception and he gets into the Mitsubishi Pajero Sport I'm driving. Although most of the roads in the reserve are 4x2-friendly, it's good to know I have the extra ground clearance and the option of four-wheel drive if need be.

Not far from camp, we pause to watch a Bell's hinged tortoise crossing the road. I take the opportunity to snap a photo of the view. From this slightly elevated point, we look out over the reserve to the north-west where the Lebombo Mountains are

visible. The Kingdom of eSwatini – Swaziland – is just beyond.

Then the road dips and narrows. We cross a stream and park at the edge of Nyamithi Pan, which is full of water. On the opposite side, impala enjoy the peaceful morning. They take turns to jump over a fallen log, watched by a troop of vervet monkeys. Further along the shore, some nyala bulls are doing that slow "dance" of dominance you sometimes see them do – like a sumo wrestling warmup.

The surface of the water is flat and calm, except for a small bay where hippos pop up occasionally to check us out. A handful of crocs, in log-imitation mode, float here and there.

Now that all the obvious, big animals are out of the way, it's time to home in on the more obscure creatures: I spot water thick-knee, black-winged stilt, pied kingfisher and whistling duck. A saddle-billed stork stands next to an Egyptian goose: Marco Jansen alongside Temba Bavuma. Then a colourful bird in a treetop draws our attention – a blue-cheeked bee-eater. Shortly thereafter, a team of white-crested helmet-shrikes cross our path; and Bongani points out an unobtrusive bird in a nearby thorn tree: yellow-breasted apalis.

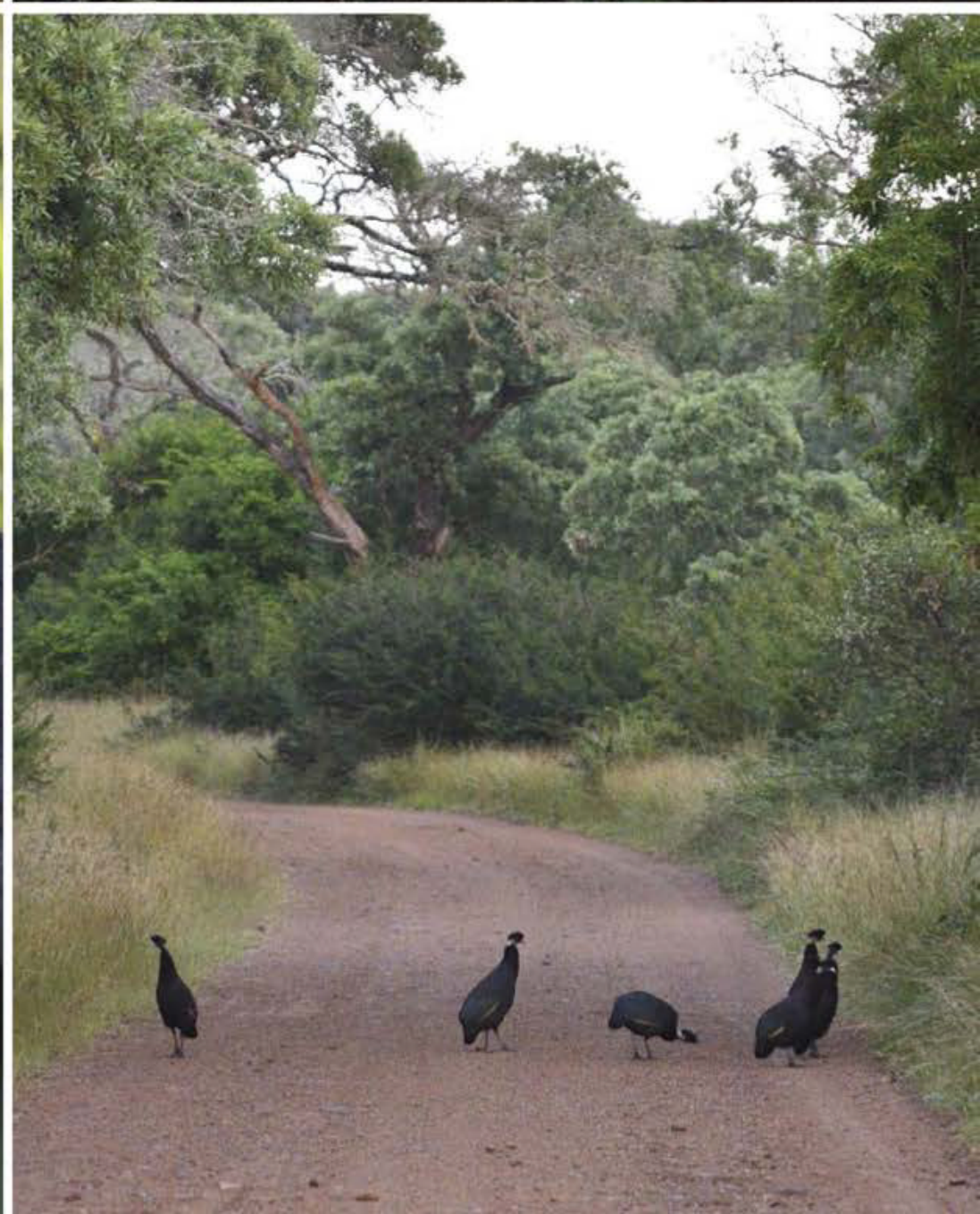
Bird calls can be as cryptic as a SARS tax return form, but Bongani is here to decode them for me. He worked alongside Ndumo's famous birding guide Sonto Tembe (now retired) for years.

"That one," he says, pausing to imitate the call I just heard from somewhere along the shore. "It's a common greenshank. And that small one next to it is a Kittlitz's plover."

We hear other birds without seeing them, like purple-crested turaco, southern boubou and red-fronted tinkerbird. In Bongani's company, the veld becomes a 360-degree experience – it's much better than just driving with one elbow out of the window hoping to randomly bump into a Pel's fishing-owl.

After about an hour, we turn around and start walking back towards the car. A game viewer approaches us – it's Ndumo's other guide, Joseph Gumede, with two tourists from Pretoria, Elfreda and Frans Senekal. I'll see them all again tomorrow morning when Joseph will take us to a different part of Ndumo to search for African broadbill and eastern nicator. (We'll find both.)

Back at camp, I see a handful of excited visitors in the parking lot. They must have seen an interesting bird, I think, and stroll over to ask. But it turns out they're here for something completely different: dragonflies! And they've just spotted a very rare one called a Zambezi siphontail near the Red Cliffs picnic site.





WHAT DOES THE EXPERT SAY?

Bongani Mkhize, guide

I grew up in rural areas. Even as a boy, I used to copy bird calls when we were in the bush. You could measure time according to the bird calls. Early in the morning it would be the white-browed scrub-robin, to tell you that it was time to wake up. Later we'd hear the rufous-naped lark, and we knew it was still a couple of hours until lunchtime. At dusk we heard the nightjars – it was time to take the cattle back to the kraal. And when we heard the red-chested cuckoo, we knew that summer was here. In isiZulu we call it *uPhezukomkhono*, which refers to using a hoe – working the fields in summertime.



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Crocodile tears

I also end up at Red Cliffs later that afternoon, which is high on the riverbank where the Usuthu River makes a lazy bend. About 20 hippos anchor the scene upstream (pictured above). A minor tiff causes two bulls to lift their bulky bodies out of the water. With jaws open to show off their frightening pearly whites, one bull wisely decides that today isn't a good day for a coup d'état.

Directly across from where I'm standing is a wide sandbank, recently flattened when the river must have been in flood. I count seven crocodiles, most in the region of two-and-a-bit metres.

A variety of herons and egrets stand dead-still in the shallows, waiting for a fish to venture too close. Two yellow-billed storks drift into the scene, landing close to the hippos. On the riverbank, the roots of wild fig trees are exposed where the fast-flowing water has nibbled away the ground under their feet. The atmospheric are just right for me to hear the water as it rushes through, amplified in the otherwise quiet afternoon. It sounds like a friendly crowd, some distance away, chatting and having drinks.

Then, from a hidden perch, a fish-eagle unlatches itself from one of the figs, swoops down and flicks its talons into the water with laser accuracy, rising again with a dripping fish in its clutches.

Besides racketing hadedas, I also hear that purple-crested turaco again, the wail of a trumpeter hornbill, and some European bee-eaters. From elsewhere in the bush comes the mournful call of an emerald-spotted wood-dove.

The melancholy sound reminds me of a conversation I had with Bongani this morning. When I asked him what inspired him to become involved in conservation, he told me about an Afrikaans poem called "Voël" by Ronnie

Belcher, which he learnt about at school. In the poem, the author describes coming across the carcass of a dead bird. In a bid to hold onto the memory of the perished creature, he takes a bone from the bird and carves it into a whistle, which he uses to imitate its call, giving it a second life.

Bongani can effortlessly mimic many of the birds he grew up with, and today he's at the frontline of protecting Ndumo, a reserve under threat. There's poaching, especially from the Mozambican side, but the greater existential threat is habitat loss. On the eastern side of the reserve (east of the Phongolo) subsistence farmers from the area have gradually occupied more and more land over the past decade, clearing bush to plant vegetables and other crops. (See the sidebar on the previous page. – Ed.)

How long will Ndumo's winged wonders – dragonflies included – manage to hold out? The reserve's rhinos have already been relocated for their own safety. Will there be a day when the Roberts app will be the only repository of the extraordinary call of the African broadbill?

At Ndumo, such concerns feel tangible. Can a compromise be found, beneficial to people and wildlife? There's no better place to contemplate these issues than here at Red Cliffs. Being here feels important. You'll probably be here all by yourself, which allows nature to talk, to tap out its special rhythm, eventually making you feel as if you're part of it all, too. In short, being here is a soulful experience – an experience that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

And next time, a decade from now, when you're standing around a braai fire and a friend asks you about your favourite reserve in all of the land, you might just think of Ndumo and a marula falling onto a roof...

IN OTHER WORDS



**Felicity Grundlingh,
Durbanville**

I have a fascination with dragonflies, damselflies and the like – everything in the order *Odonata*. As a pursuit, it's a bit like birding in the sense that people

travel around with their binoculars and guidebooks, ticking species off a list. After seeing the Zambezi siphontail in Ndumo, I've now seen 158 of the 165 species of South African *Odonata*.

Although we specifically came to Ndumo to find the Zambezi siphontail, we also spotted other rare species like little duskhawker. A visit to Ndumo is a must for any dragonfly enthusiast!



**Elfreda and Frans Senekal,
Pretoria**

Elfreda: Our previous visit to Ndumo was 22 years ago. We camped back then, but this time we opted to stay in a self-catering unit with aircon. It's no use being stingy when you visit – make

sure to book a birding walk with one of the guides. They're extremely skilled at finding rare bird species.

It was a joy to see so many specials: African cuckoo hawk, gorgeous bush-shrike, narina trogon, Pel's fishing-owl, African broadbill, blue-mantled crested-flycatcher, lizard buzzard, blue-cheeked bee-eater, pygmy kingfisher, pink-throated twinspot and eastern nicator.



**Diana Russell and Richard
Johnstone, Richard's Bay**

Richard: I've been to Ndumo five times over the years. The campground, which I usually use, is always neat and tidy. The ablution blocks are clean and

have flush toilets and hot showers. There's a communal kitchen with a stove, fridge and washing up facilities. The staff are always friendly and helpful.

Because the park doesn't have a lot of big game, it's lovely and quiet, which is what birders like us prefer. The pans are fantastic for finding waterbirds, and the hundreds of storks, herons and egrets that roost in the trees around the pans are an amazing sight.

We were also on an *Odonata* mission in February 2022 – we wanted to find a dragonfly called a bottletail, and a damselfly called a sickle spreadwing. We were successful on both counts, but the highlight of the trip was finding a very sparsely recorded dragonfly called a Zambezi siphontail, which none of our group had seen before.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Where? Ndumo is 72 km to the north-east of Jozini, against the border with Mozambique. Be careful when following directions on Google Maps – in the town of Ndumo you might end up at the police station. If you do, double back for 400 m and look for the unmarked turn-off to the reserve gate, which is about 1 km from this point.

Road conditions? You can manage most of the roads (all gravel) in Ndumo in a car with good ground clearance. Some tracks are very overgrown, and you might end up scratching the sides of your vehicle.

Day visitors: R55 per adult; R25 per child (12 years and under).

Accommodation: The campsite has 14 stands, each with a power point and braai

spot – R180 per person. There are 10 self-catering chalets (pictured above) that sleep two people each, and two that sleep four people each. The bathrooms are big, the kitchens well equipped and there are TVs. It costs R1 080 per night for two people, or R1 620 per night for four. The campsite and the chalets were upgraded earlier in 2022.

Facilities: There is a beautiful swimming pool, but not much to buy in the shop at reception. Rather buy all your food and drinks elsewhere – there are shops in the nearby town of Ndumo.

Activities: Guided birding walks cost R180 per person. Enquire about game drives.

Malaria: Yes, take precautions.

Contact: 📧 bookings@kznwildlife.com; 📞 kznwildlife.com



On two wheels through the Tuli

If cycling along ancient elephant paths through three different countries sounds like fun, then put the Tour de Tuli on your bucket list.

WORDS **PIERRE STEYN**
PICTURES **HENDRIK STEYTLER PHOTOGRAPHY**



The mopane forest in the Tuli Block stretches all the way to the horizon.

Like a rock monitor, our guide Adrian Saffy scampers across to a ledge, lies flat on his stomach and drinks from a puddle of water bubbling out of the ground. He jumps up smiling and invites us to do the same.

“Once you’ve drunk from the Sizi Spring, you’ll want to keep coming back. This is the fountain of everlasting youth!”

The wild animals think so, too. Fresh balls of elephant dung are scattered all around the spring... We’re taking a breather in the most south-western corner of Zimbabwe, about 7 km north of the Limpopo River, which we waded through earlier this morning with our bicycles on our shoulders.

As the riders in our group kneel down to sip the magic potion and fill their water bottles, I drink in the landscape around me. Baobabs, nyala berries, ironwoods, fever trees and wild figs stand guard around the spring which, according to legend, has never dried up. Was this the permanent water source for the Mapungbuwe Kingdom that flourished here a thousand years ago? Many people believe so.

The impala that bolted when they heard us approaching are now looking down at us from a nearby outcrop. What an adventure. And the Tour de Tuli has only just begun!

Meeting up at the confluence

You’ve probably heard of the Tuli Block. It’s a big conservation region on the easternmost border of Botswana. If the map of Botswana looks like a face to you (it does to me), then Tuli is the nose. On this four-day ride, you pedal from Mapungubwe National Park in South Africa, through Zimbabwe and Botswana, and back: 300 km; thick sand; mopane forests; elephants; camps that are set up for you; cold beer; delicious meals at the end of each day... All the profit generated by the tour goes to Children in the Wilderness, an NPO that supports rural education in all three countries.

A month ago, Tjaart van der Walt, one of the volunteer guides that rides the tour each year, joined me on a hike in Namibia. He didn’t need to do much to convince me that I really, *really* needed to sign up for this adventure.

So here I am – a bit nervous and not knowing what to expect – on a Tuesday afternoon in July, at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers in Mapungubwe. The 350-plus participants will spend the night here in a village of pop-up tents.

I meet my teammates and guides. The

cyclists are split into 20 groups, each with two experienced guides who ride in the front and at the back.

I make some last-minute adjustments to my bike, feast on chicken espetada and fillet steak in a big marquee tent, send a “chat to you in four days” WhatsApp message to my wife while there’s still a scrap of signal, and turn in early. Ten minutes later I switch my headlamp on again just to make 100% sure that my passport is in a watertight bag and safely zipped into the pouch on my hydration pack. See you tomorrow, Zim!

Welcome “in” Zimbabwe

“Group Three! Group Three! Are you ready? You’re starting in five minutes,” a voice calls in the scarlet dawn. The other 13 members of Group Three look very ready. Some are leaning nonchalantly over their handlebars. Others are tweaking the straps on their hydration packs. I’m not completely sure that *I’m* ready, but here we go...

We head towards the Limpopo River along a jeep track, downhill from the confluence viewing site. Thankfully, the Nedbank Tour de Tuli is a tour, not a race. The pace over the first few kilometres is easy and everyone starts to relax. Adrian, an accomplished multisport athlete and adventure racer from Bloemfontein, has a GPS loaded with each day’s route, and he always takes the lead. Robyn de Groot, a former South African Olympic cyclist and national mountain-bike champion from George, is our sweeper at the rear. Both guides carry radios to stay in contact with the organisers and the other guides.

It’s cloudy but not cold; perfect cycling weather. We enter a small floodplain and there, scarcely 200 m away, an elephant bull grazes in the grass.

“Would you look at that,” whispers Mike Woolnough, a business owner from Johannesburg. “It’s like the organisers plonked him here for our benefit.”

Our phone cameras are working overtime – little do we know how many elephants we’ll see over the next few days – before Adrian motions that we should get going. It’s time to cross the mighty Limpopo into Zimbabwe.

Excellent summer rain has kept the river flowing deep into winter. In the 16 years of the Tour de Tuli, the organisers have never had to cope with so much water. It creates a number of logistical problems – all camp supplies and our luggage have to be transported in trucks from

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Taking in the sunrise from the confluence viewpoint in Mapungubwe National Park. According to legend, Sizi Spring in Zimbabwe has never run dry. Zimbabwean immigration officials at a pop-up border post make quick work of checking the passports of hundreds of cyclists. Adrian Saffy (in the red shorts) guides his group across the Limpopo River floodplain.



PIERRE STEYN

camp to camp, country to country – but our more immediate concern is how to get across the river with our bikes.

The floodplain here is almost a kilometre wide. Robyn powers her way through the thick sand, past us mere mortals, but eventually she also has to dismount and push her bike. When we reach the water, some volunteers are waiting for us with a small rowboat. There's just enough space for the four e-bikes in our group. The riders – most of us with our non-electric bikes on our shoulders and our shoes in our hands – wade through. The water tugs at my hips and all of us are thinking the same thing: crocodiles...

But we make it safely to the other side, where there's another 10-minute hike to the temporary passport control that's set up under a gazebo on the Zimbabwean riverbank.

"Welcome in Zimbabwe," says the border officer, with a big smile and a stamp in my passport. There's a mobile tuck shop a few metres away where we help ourselves to coffee and condensed milk, fudge and biltong.

We're heading due north now, on hard-packed elephant and cattle paths. It's a flat landscape, a giant mopane forest that stretches to the horizon in hues of orange, yellow and green. We're cycling at a steady pace. There are still 70km to go to our camp in the Shashe River. We're in single file behind Adrian as we wind our way through the mopane trees. Every now and then, the sinewy branches lash out at the most sensitive parts of your body.

We head past the Sizi Spring, past the homes and kraals of subsistence farmers where goats glare contemptuously and children wave excitedly, to a dry riverbed where the organisers are waiting with lunch. Pita bread filled with chicken, washed down with a Coke, has never tasted this good.

Now it's only 25 km to camp. We arrive at the tented village at 3 pm, way before our luggage, which is still stuck on a SAMIL truck somewhere at the Limpopo River. No matter. We order Zambezi Lagers at the bar and plonk ourselves in the camping chairs that have been set up under Bedouin tents and umbrellas.

I sit next to Jonathan Robinson, owner of Bean There, a Fair Trade-certified coffee company that sources its beans from small farmers across Africa. This is Jonathan's 10th Tour de Tuli and he sponsors the coffee for the event. His heroic team of four baristas – Tshepo Mokwena, Simphiwe Mnyamana, Thabo Moerane and Brilliant Ndlovu – are the guys that *everyone* befriends. They end up serving more than 7 000 cappuccinos and espressos! And yes, all the cups are recycled.

Sure, Jonathan has made some excellent business contacts over the years on the Tuli, but he remains involved because the cause of uplifting rural education is important to him. "Plus, it's a blast to cycle through the bush," he says. "How can you get tired of this?"

Wild, wilder, Botswana

Today we're heading south, following the course of the Shashe through orange orchards, along paths where the donkey cart is still the primary mode of transportation. The 80 km we're covering today is the longest stretch of the tour, but there are only 35 km in Zimbabwe.

Crossing the border into Botswana entails another stamp of the passport under a gazebo, and then walking another kilometre through the thick sand. This time it's the dry Shashe we're crossing.

"We're in ellie territory now," Adrian warns as we saddle up in Botswana. "We need to be wide awake. Less talking, more listening."

It immediately feels wilder. There are fewer mopane trees and more ana and apple-leaf trees. We're following proper game paths now, not cattle paths, as we swoop through one little riverbed after the next. Zebras, impalas, eland and wildebeest all make an appearance, and in the distance we spot the long necks of giraffes.

We cross a wide gravel service road and enter a mopane thicket when Adrian brakes sharply and raises his hand. "Robby, there's a big herd of elephants about 50m in front of us," he says softly into his radio, warning Robyn, our sweeper. It's astounding how quickly yet silently these giants can move through the bush. They stop and stare at us.

"We have to find another way around. There's a baby in the herd," Adrian whispers. We turn on our tails and gingerly head back to the gravel road, but not before warning the groups behind us.

It's a scene that repeats itself again and again before we reach the Loensa tented village late in the afternoon. What a day!

The priority now is a cold St Louis Lager to wash the dust out of my throat, then a shower and maybe a massage. My legs feel like they could do with some attention. Then a buffet dinner that would put most luxury lodges to shame, before I make good friends with my sleeping bag.

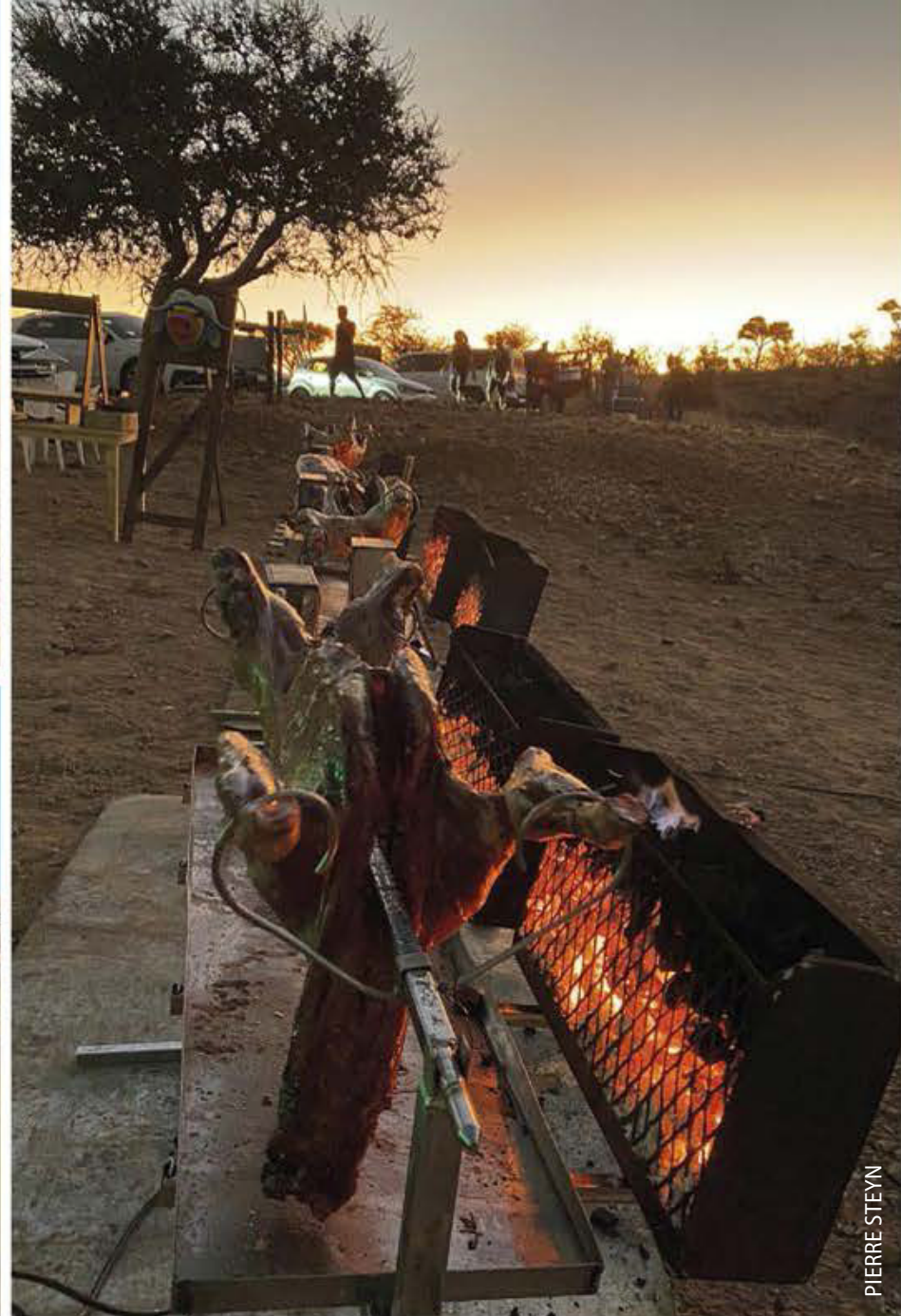
Not even the choir of snoring mamils (middle aged men in Lycra), who might have enjoyed one St Louis too many, is going to keep me awake tonight.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Game is plentiful along the route – especially in the Botswana part of Tuli. At the start of Day 2, riders kick up dust. When you come across a herd of elephants with little ones, *they* have right of way. The landscape is varied – sometimes flat, at other times you'll ride over and around sandstone koppies. A tented village was erected in the dry Shashe riverbed in Zimbabwe.





PIERRE STEYN



PIERRE STEYN

Circles in the forest

There's no need to have our bags packed and luggage ready before dawn, since we're spending another night at Loensa. Today is a relaxed sightseeing day – a 58 km circular “game drive” on our bikes. (Was I dreaming or did I hear lions roaring just before sunrise?)

We pedal up sandstone and granite koppies and race down into the thick sand on the other side. Kudus snort and kick up stones before we spot them, and a baboon on sentry duty raises the alarm as we come whizzing past. Southern yellow-billed hornbills fly next to us at eye-level, like colourful fighter planes escorting us to lunch under a wild fig tree. From there, we head for the biggest sandstone hill in the area, where we dismount and climb to the top.

We sit under the branches of a gnarly old boabab that has forced its way through the rock over centuries. Even though I can't find any trace of it, Cecil John Rhodes is supposed to have carved his initials into this tree. It's a vantage point with a panoramic view of the Tuli Block. The silence up here is reverent. It's one of those big moments in life; you realise how privileged you are, and that you might never see this remote and beautiful place again.

Clockwise from top left: On the first and last night you sleep in a tented village in Mapungubwe. Fires are lit for a spitbraai to celebrate the final evening. A climb to the top of this koppie takes you to a baobab tree where Rhodes apparently carved his initials.

Opposite page: Robyn de Groot, former national mountain-bike marathon champion and Group Three's sweeper, is in her element – speeding down a hill.

The big fall

You *will* fall off your bike on the Tour de Tuli. It doesn't matter how good a rider you think you are; the thick sand and mopane branches will humble you. Even the best riders (everyone except Robyn) find themselves prone in the sand while their fellow riders take photos and make fun of them. I fell six times on one day!

After misjudging a short, sharp downhill, we have to pry Peter Badham out of a thorn bush. The only damage is a torn cycling jersey, some scratches and a briefly bruised ego. But on the final day – the 60 km leg back to Mapungubwe – Peter's sister, Colleen Clackworthy, isn't as fortunate. She goes over the handlebars as we ride down into a dry riverbed and her heavy e-bike falls on top of her. She remains seated in the sand with her arms around her body.

“My ribs,” she groans.

The Tuli's emergency response system kicks into high gear. Adrian sends our GPS co-ordinates to the organisers by radio. Luckily we're not too far from one of the compulsory checkpoints. A paramedic arrives within 15 minutes, and a doctor arrives 10 minutes thereafter. We carry Colleen out of the riverbed on a stretcher. The helicopter is on its way.

“Please ride on,” she implores the men clucking around her like mother hens. “I'm



PIERRE STEYN

sorry I won't finish this with you, but I'm going to be fine."

None of us wants to leave her. After four days, we're not Group Three any more, we've become close friends.

We're in a sombre mood as we ride away. A few minutes later, the chopper *whup-whups* over our heads. Adrian stops every few kilometres to check in on Colleen's situation via radio. The helicopter takes her straight to a hospital in Johannesburg. She's cracked two ribs. It's the worst injury on the tour but she's going to be okay.

Slowly but surely, we regain the state of tranquillity of the last four days as we roll through this ancient landscape. For long stretches, I'm just freewheeling. The elephant paths are superb, mapped out by some of nature's best trail builders.

By the time we reach the Limpopo, not too far from Mapungubwe and the end of the tour, I'm not keen on crossing the river. And it's not because of the hippos that are blowing up a storm 200m downstream...

No, I want to turn around and head back – back to Sizi so I can lie on my stomach and drink the sweetest water, imagining a time when wilderness was everything.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How does it work? Tour de Tuli is four days and five nights long, starting and finishing in Mapungubwe National Park. You ride 60–80 km per day. You can drive to Mapungubwe and park your car (R500, with security) or you and your bike can jump on a shuttle in Rivonia near Sandton (R2 500 return). You camp for two nights at Mapungubwe, one night in the Shashe riverbed in Zimbabwe, and two nights at Loensa in Botswana. You're provided with a tent and mattress, and there are hot showers and ablution facilities. Your luggage is transported on a truck. All your meals, snacks and one massage a day are provided. You have to pay for your own drinks in the evenings.

What must I bring? A mountain bike fitted with tubeless tyres and lots of sealant (thorns are plentiful). Also take a hydration pack that carries at least 2 litres of water, your own cycling gear, a sleeping bag, and the clothes that you'll wear at night. You need a valid passport – there's no riding the tour without one – and travel and medical insurance in case something goes wrong. Remember your earplugs if you're a light sleeper.

How fit do I need to be? It's a tour, not a race, but you must be fit and comfortable riding a mountain bike. It's not a technical route, but eight hours in the saddle can hurt if you haven't conditioned your body ahead of time.

Cost? The minimum donation for an entry is R26 000 per person (bigger groups get discounts). It's expensive, but it's a bucket list event. People travel from around the world to take part. The meals and facilities are top notch, and you get to ride your bike in a wilderness through three countries. Over the last 16 tours, the Nedbank Tour de Tuli has raised more than R20 million for Children in the Wilderness.

When? This was the first tour since 2019 because of Covid. It only happens once a year, in July. The exact dates for 2023 still need to be announced.

More info: Contact Bronwen Blunden 📧 BronwenB@wilderness.co.za or Liza Steyn 📧 LisaS@wilderness.co.za; ☎ 011 257 5000; 🌐 tourdetuli.com

Pierre was invited to ride by Children in the Wilderness, as a member of the media team.



TAKE YOUR PIC

Do you have a great travel or wildlife photo? Send it to **Toast Coetzer** and you might see it on these pages! E-mail it to 📧 takeyourpic@gomag.co.za



WINNING PHOTO

^ ELEANOR HATTINGH

Nikon D90

Sigma 105 mm f2.8 macro lens

ELEANOR WRITES: This is *Hyllus treleaveni* – the biggest species of jumping spider in South Africa. I photographed this beautiful female specimen in Marloth Park, just outside the Kruger Park.

She decided to jump onto my son who is terrified of spiders, so I relocated her to a protea flower and took her portrait.

I used a macro lens with the aperture set to f8, shutter speed 1/320 second and ISO 400.

TOAST SAYS: Eleanor's Sigma 105 mm f2.8 macro lens is a great addition to your camera kit. It doesn't cost a fortune (about R9 000) and it immediately opens up a whole new world. We're easily distracted by the bigger animals and we tend to forget about small critters like spiders and insects.

Most "kit" lenses – the lens you got with your camera – are not great for macro photography. You need a specialist lens. Once you

own one and start using it, you'll see fresh photographic opportunities everywhere.

The dazzling eye contact (multiple eyes!) is key here, as it would be with any portrait of a bird or mammal. But I also like the similarity in texture between the spider and the flower. The "hairiness" of both gives the scene unexpected depth and character.

Eleanor's composition is perfect, with the spider sitting

roughly one third from the right and one third from the top of the frame. By not plonking the spider in the middle, Eleanor ensures that we look at its environment, too.

Wonders unfold in this miniature world. Just as a lion grabs your attention when it raises its head from the grass, so too does a jumping spider when it appears from inside a protea.

Great stuff, Eleanor. You're the winner of the *go!* camera bag.

✓ **IAN MCGUIGAN**

Canon EOS 60D

Canon EFS 10 – 22 mm lens

IAN WRITES: At the end of a relatively boring day in the Kruger Park (*Sacrilege! – Ed.*), we decided to park at Renosterpan on the road between Malelane and Skukuza, near the Afsaal picnic site.

There were a few impala at the water's edge when we arrived, but soon other animals started arriving to take a drink. It almost looked as if they were forming a queue!

Being in the passenger seat and not wanting to capture the scene through a grimy windscreen,

I leaned out of the side window, only to have the wing mirror obstruct my view. But *'n boer maak 'n plan*, as the saying goes, and I switched my camera to Live View and held it above the offending mirror. I pointed it towards the pan, composed the picture using the articulated screen, focused and pressed the shutter button.

My settings: shutter speed 1/500 second, aperture f8, ISO 200.

TOAST SAYS: Because you're not allowed to disembark from your vehicle in the Kruger (except at

designated points), you often end up doing Houdini-like contortionist moves inside your car to get the best angle for a photograph.

As Ian points out, the advent of digital cameras with their handy articulated screens means that you can switch modes and see what your camera is seeing without having to use the eyepiece. It gives you a little more leeway.

Many cameras also have on-screen grid lines or a digital spirit level, which helps to ensure that you hold the camera straight so you don't end up with a giraffe that looks

like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

I always try to get waterhole shots with as many as possible species in the same frame. This helps to create that "Garden of Eden" feeling – a gathering of different animals – and shows off the diversity and plenitude of a park like the Kruger. (Etosha waterholes in winter are exceptional in this regard.)

For me, that is why Ian's photo is successful. Look closer and you'll also notice smaller animals. There are terrapins on a log, obscured behind the branches in the front, and oxpeckers on the giraffe's neck.



▼ STEFANIE ASH

IG: @_stefanie.ash

Canon EOS 5D Mark IV

Tamron SP 24–70 mm lens

STEFANIE WRITES: After visiting Velddrif on the West Coast many times over the years, I decided to move there permanently from the Harties area. What a proud new *inkommer* I am!

Most days at sunset, I go for a walk along the marshland with its flamingos, all the way to the harbour at Laaiplek and back again. One evening in July 2022, I noticed a beautiful scene at Rooibaai on the Berg River, close to the harbour mouth. I ran home to fetch my camera. Luckily I was wearing running shoes!

The tide was coming in and I had to jump around to avoid getting wet while taking photos. I just love the detail on this old fishing boat – all the colours from

years of different layers of paint and rust.

I believe that a good photo is not just a nice setting and a stunning sunset, but also an understanding of how to line up the shot.

To bring out more detail on the hull, I used Adobe Lightroom to brighten the shadows and increase the clarity. The light was so amazing – it seemed to come from all sides, lifting the colours and textures.

TOAST SAYS: You nailed it, Stefanie! Composition can make or break a shot – no matter how impressive the light is at the time. By shooting from a low angle, the boat stands proud of the horizon. It seems to loom over the viewer, emphasising those big old rusty nails and other bits and bobs around the edges.

Judging by the hazy clouds, it

was one of those days where the clouds almost act like a diffuser, spreading the light and “wrapping” your subject, rather than just illuminating it from one side.

Still, you’d expect the hull of the boat to be dark, almost silhouetted. But thanks to that magic light – and some careful editing – Stefanie managed to achieve a perfect balance between preserving detail in the sky and on the water (which reflects the sky like mirrored silk) and on the hull of the boat.

Ultimately, it’s the detail on the hull that counts. That classic West Coast patina, somewhere between decay and lived-in character, created by the rust, flaking paint and lichen, gives the image soul.

I’m looking forward to more of your Velddrif shots, Stefanie.

> NADINE LEONARD

IG: @nswildlife_photography

Canon EOS 800D

Canon EF 70–300 mm lens

NADINE WRITES: We visited the Kruger Park in June 2021. On this particular morning, we wanted to drive from Skukuza to Berg-en-Dal to see rhino. Along the way, a herd of elephants blocked the road for about half an hour. While we waited for the herd to move off, a friendly man approached us. He said if we followed him, he would show us a leopard.

When we arrived at the spot on the H3 near the turn-off to Jock Safari Lodge, there wasn’t just one leopard, but two! The mother was feeding on a carcass and her cub was higher up in the tree. After a while, the adult leopard dragged the carcass to the ground and I took this photo.

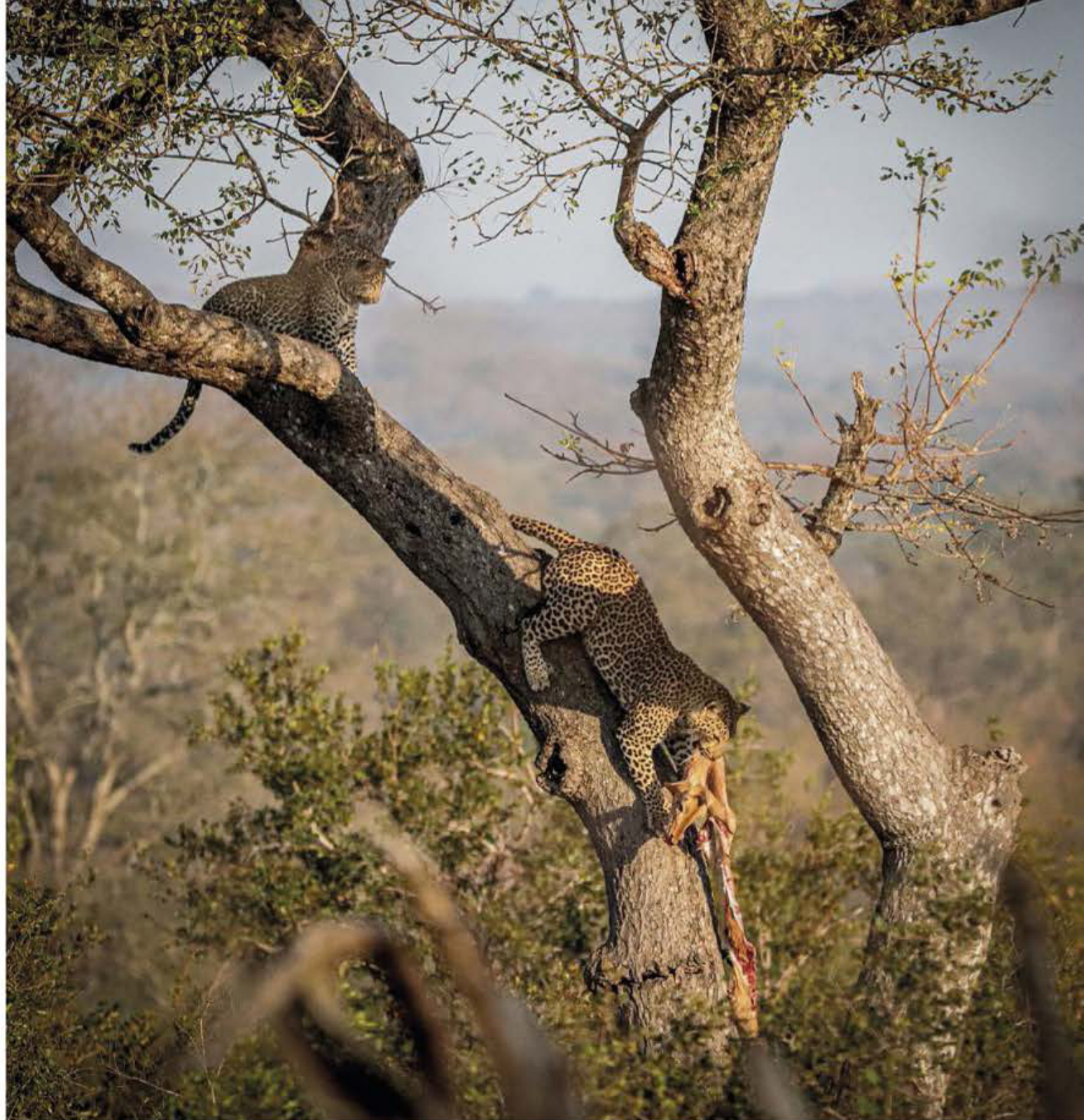
My shutter speed was 1/4 000 second, aperture f6.3 and ISO 3 200.



TOAST SAYS: When you pull over to tell someone about a nearby sighting – that’s ubuntu, reserve style! It costs you nothing and the person you help will be eternally grateful – especially if you point them towards something special like a leopard. Big shout out to the visitor who directed Nadine to this scene!

Her photo tells a story. The young leopard is wondering what his mom is doing with his lunch. I like that the head of the adult leopard is illuminated– it doesn’t really matter that the tree trunk casts a shadow stripe over her body.

I also like the horizon in the distance – it gives you a feeling of the vastness of the Kruger. The branches in the foreground don’t bother me because the rest of the scene has enough impact. And how’s that curl in the cub’s tail?



< MERVYN HARTLEY

Canon EOS 80D

Canon 100 – 400 mm lens

MERVYN WRITES: My wife and I are retired and live in East London. We just love *go!* magazine. I especially enjoy Take Your Pic as I’ve been photographing wildlife for some years now and I always learn something new.

In March 2021, we visited one of our favourite reserves, Addo Elephant National Park. We were lucky: There were exceptional elephant numbers at Hapoor waterhole while we were there. There must have been 300 visiting the waterhole every day. In all our visits to the park, we’ve never seen so many elephants there. Needless to say, my camera was working overtime!

For this shot, I used these settings: shutter speed 1/125 second, aperture f9, ISO 100.

TOAST SAYS: You were lucky indeed! Some people visit Addo and they don’t see a single ellie, especially after rain when they roam deeper into the thickets. Mervyn sent a selection of excellent elephant shots – I chose this one thanks to the cuteness of the baby with its bent knee counterbalanced by its uplifted tail, and its garden hose of a trunk. The mother elephant standing protectively close conveys information about animal behaviour, which always gives a wildlife photo some extra oomph.

Good work, Mervyn. May there be many happy returns to Addo!

✓ **MENRAD HOLM**

IG: @m.holm_photography

Fujifilm X-T30 Mark 1

Sigma DG 120–400 mm lens

MENRAD WRITES: I took this photo in the Kruger Park, just outside Olifants rest camp. The waterbuck was facing the day's final sunset rays – that's what caused the golden outline.

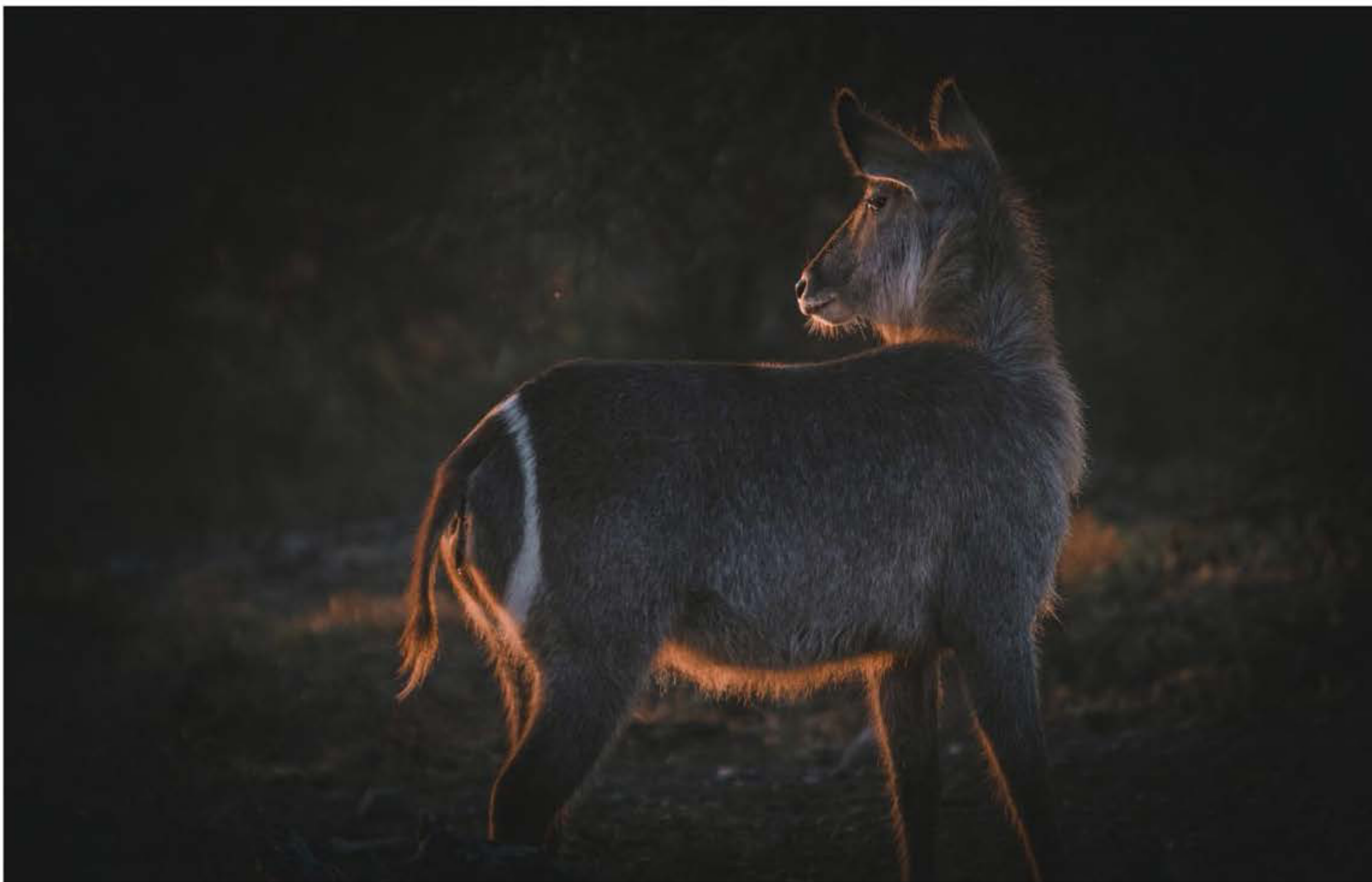
The lens I use is actually made to fit a Nikon, but I used a K&F Concept adapter to attach it to my Fujifilm X-T30. My shutter speed was 1/250 second, aperture f5 and ISO 800.

TOAST SAYS: Most people would prefer a flashier kudu, but the humble waterbuck can be just as impressive (with or without horns). There's something soft and cuddly about this one – it reminds me

of a chocolate Labrador!

I'm not always a fan of the vignetting effect (when the corners of a photo are darkened) but it works well here, placing greater emphasis on the shape of the animal and the outline created by the golden light coming from the left of the frame.

The light touches the glistening nose and eye of the waterbuck, which gives the antelope character. Menrad captured the animal in a beautiful, non-typical pose – the body is pointing one way and the head is turned the other way. It's almost as if the waterbuck knew that Menrad needed it to look towards the sun. You've got to love it when a plan comes together!





^ WILLEM KRUGER

Sony a9 II

Sony FE 200 – 600 mm lens

WILLEM WRITES: My wife and I were enjoying a coffee at Sunset Dam in the Kruger Park one morning when some African spoonbills started to feed at the water's edge. They were hunting small fish in the shallows.

I took the photo from my car. My camera and lens were mounted on a GimPro head attached to a GimPro door bracket for extra stability. I still used a fast shutter speed of 1/4 000 second, with an aperture of f8 at ISO 500.

TOAST SAYS: Willem is a regular contributor to Take Your Pic – it's always a challenge to choose which of his photos to publish. This one caught my attention because the eye of the fish and the eye of the bird are both so expressive. It's almost as if the little kurper is screaming "Help!" and the spoonbill is thinking: "Hmm, I wish you were bigger..."

If you want to capture an action shot like this, you have to be prepared. It helps if you can predict how the animal might act. Willem watched the spoonbills long enough to notice that they throw their heads back when they catch something. Herons and egrets do this, too.

Your camera also needs to be ready to roll. Use burst mode and a fast shutter speed to take as many photos per second as you can at the exact moment the bird throws back its head. Later, you can delete the shots that don't work (there will be many!) and you can send the very best one to us!

For more of Willem's photos, visit his website:

willemkruger.wordpress.com



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An unlikely oasis

WORDS & PICTURES JAC KRITZINGER



In 2019, my girlfriend Leani and I were country bumpkins living the slow life in Pringle Bay near Cape Town. We were both at crossroads in our careers and we decided we needed a change, so we applied to teach English in China. We'd never heard of Qingdao in Shandong province, but when we both landed teaching jobs there almost instantly, it felt like the stars had aligned.

Friends who had been to China told us that we were lucky. Qingdao is a laid-back metropolis, home to "only" 11 million people – small by Chinese standards. It's 650 km south-east of Beijing and flanked by the Yellow Sea, with beaches, mountain ranges and comparatively low levels of pollution. No surprise that it's a popular holiday destination.

What's more, Qingdao was under German rule in the 19th century and has retained a certain European flair (along with the finest beer brewery in China), which made us feel a little less nervous about blindly walking into the dragon's mouth.

All being said, the swatches of European architecture and abundance of Tsingtao lager did little to ease the culture shock we experienced upon arrival. It was our first taste of Asia and a full-on sensory assault. The experience might have been overwhelming but I was in photographic heaven, and I went walkabout with my trusty Nikon whenever I got the chance.

The biggest challenge by far was the language barrier – so enormous it made the Great Wall seem like a speed bump in comparison. Unlike more cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai and Beijing, very few locals could manage even basic English (hence the need for foreign teachers) and with us not being able to understand Chinese in spoken or written form, we felt that we'd landed on an alien planet. Tasks that would have been reasonably simple in South Africa, like opening a bank account or joining a gym, became nerve-racking tests of fortitude for all parties involved.

And then there's China's seamless fusion with futuristic technology that makes you feel like an extra in *Blade Runner*. In Qingdao, like in all other cities, 5G is everywhere and countless surveillance cameras and drones armed with AI face-detection track your every move. You can order almost anything online, from dodgy chow mein to a Labrador puppy, and have it delivered to your door. Cash has practically been outlawed in favour of smartphone payment apps. The kneeling beggars on Jiangxi Road don't rattle tin cups, they hold out grimy, crudely laminated QR codes...

Our two years in China were not always easy, but real adventures seldom are. I arrived as a teacher, but Qingdao taught me more than I could have imagined. If you can dodge the pavement spit balls, the delivery drivers and the locals gawking at you open-mouthed from behind their phone cameras as you run around trying to negotiate an 80-hour work week, then a Tsingtao sundowner goes down quite well in this unlikely Oriental oasis.

Visit jackritzinger.co.za to see more of Jac's work.



Dizzying skyscrapers have come to define China's urban landscape. By day, Qingdao looks like a drab concrete jungle, but at night the tall buildings are transformed by colourful light displays artfully installed into the buildings' facades. This is the view from the seaside boardwalk flanking May Fourth Square. The pulsating glow is unsettling for a foreigner at first, but the effect is hypnotic and after a while it becomes strangely comforting.



Above: China isn't exactly renowned for animal rights. Many people associate the country with the dog and cat meat trade, but that practice is dwindling and confined to only a few provinces in the south. In the cities, it's a different story – pet owners are usually extremely doting and affectionate towards their animals. Since the majority of residents live in cramped apartment blocks, it's common to see people walking and grooming their dogs in whatever open space they can find.

One winter morning, after getting hopelessly lost in the alleyways of Shibe District, I stumbled into a secluded square where a young woman was brushing the coat of her Samoyed, a popular north-Asian breed.

Opposite page, top: A summer evening along the boardwalk near Zhanqiao Pier, and two friends are spending quality time in the great outdoors, Chinese style.

Being glued to one's phone is a global phenomenon, of course, but the Chinese take screen time to the next level. WeChat – the country's alternative to WhatsApp – is a news, messaging, social media, retail and payment app all rolled into one, and it forms the backbone of modern technocratic Chinese society.

With uncapped 5G cheaply available everywhere in the city, even underground on the subway system, it's common to see people (especially the younger generation) carrying three phones at once – one for work, one for gaming and one for personal use. I dubbed it the "phone sandwich".

Opposite page, bottom: Traditional post, or snail mail, is on the decline globally and it's the same story in China. These dilapidated mailboxes in a run-down apartment block in Taidong District had clearly seen better days. Local landlords can be notoriously indifferent when it comes to maintaining the city's apartment blocks, but while the exterior of older residential complexes can sometimes seem worse for wear, the interiors of the dwellings are often surprisingly well kept and luxurious.



PHOTO ESSAY



Far left: A crate of discarded jackfruit husks outside a traditional restaurant in the city's trendy Shinan District. This huge, bizarre-looking fruit with a tough, spiky skin is a local delicacy and is sometimes used as a meat alternative in noodle broths and stews. Exotic fruit is cheap and readily available in the city, thanks to China's vast, semi-tropical southern region that produces massive indigenous and non-native crops throughout the year to sustain the nation's growing appetite.

Left: Given its scenic surroundings and colonial architecture, Qingdao is a hotspot for wedding photography. Photographers, make-up artists and couples take it so seriously that they camp out in tents and vans during the summer months to make the most of dawn and dusk light. The famous Red Wall in the Zhongshan area — lined with oak trees and stately European facades — is a sought-after location for lovebirds to be snapped before tying the knot.



Bottom: A shopkeeper stares at his phone during a slow spell in Taidong's night market. Qingdao is famous for seafood, which is mostly farmed, and it doesn't come fresher than this. Apart from the giant crab and oysters pictured, you can select live lobster, fish, eels, abalone and sea snakes from endless rows of saltwater tanks before it gets prepared for your plate. These markets are cramped, slippery and smelly — definitely not for the faint of heart...

Like most Chinese cities, Qingdao has an extremely high population density, but there are lots of public spaces like parks and garden commons that provide a welcome break from the concrete confines of everyday life.

This is the recreational area on Maida Island, in the south-east of the city, on a summer afternoon, with Shinan's skyscrapers in the distance. As people leave work, it fills up quickly with dog-walkers, joggers and cyclists. Even in winter, when snow and sub-zero temperatures are the norm, Maida is crammed with young and old alike, all stretching their legs.







Two women salute the sun in unison as they perform tai chi at dawn in the historical square in Tianjia (an old neighbourhood near Shibei District).

While this ancient Oriental discipline has its roots in martial arts, it's mostly practised today as a form of focused movement and meditation. Said to promote physical strength, circulation and mental clarity, it's a popular pastime among Qingdao's older generation.

Throngs of faithful devotees, in groups or alone, practise every morning in parks, squares and gardens, each one with a trusty radio at their feet blaring soothing music and incantations.



Peri-peri chicken kebabs with tzatziki

Plan a picnic!

Spring is finally here and the weather is mild enough for a Saturday spent outdoors. Whether you're heading to the beach, the mountains or an open-air concert, pack these delicious goodies into your picnic basket.

RECIPES & STYLING **JOHANÉ NEILSON**
PICTURES **SHELLEY CHRISTIANS**



Baguette with meatballs and coleslaw

Peri-peri chicken kebabs with tzatziki

Serves 6

Preparation time **30 minutes, plus time to marinate overnight**

Cooking time **about 15 minutes**

You need

- 12 chicken thigh fillets
- salt and black pepper, to taste

For the marinade

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon chilli flakes
- 2 bird's-eye chillies, finely chopped
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh garlic
- juice of 1 lemon or 2 limes
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano

For the tzatziki

- 1 big cucumber, in small cubes
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 clove of garlic, finely chopped
- 1 cup thick, plain yoghurt
- 8 fresh mint leaves, chopped
- juice and grated zest of 1 small lemon
- black pepper, to taste

Here's how

1 Combine all the ingredients for the marinade and rub the mixture into the chicken. Marinate the chicken in the fridge overnight. Soak four long skewers in water so they won't catch fire over the coals.

2 Use two skewers per kebab and thread six chicken thighs onto each set. Season with salt and pepper. Braai over medium-hot coals until nicely charred and cooked through. Let the kebabs cool down completely.

3 Prepare the tzatziki: Mix the cucumber with a teaspoon of salt. Transfer the mixture to a colander and set aside in the sink for 30 minutes. Lightly press down on the cucumber to get rid of any excess liquid. Mix the cucumber with the rest of the ingredients. (This step is optional but will prevent your tzatziki from

becoming watery.) Serve the tzatziki with the chicken. Cherry tomatoes also work well as a side dish.

TIP *The secret to serving chicken cold is to make sure you add extra seasoning so it has flavour.*

Baguette with meatballs and coleslaw

Serves 6

Preparation time **25 minutes**

Cooking time **5 minutes**

You need

- 8 thick, fresh pork sausages
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon sweet chilli or sriracha sauce
- 2 tablespoons oil
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon boiling water
- 1 teaspoon light brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon soya sauce or to taste
- 1 cup shredded cabbage
- ½ cup shredded snap peas
- ½ cup shredded spinach
- small bunch of fresh coriander
- 2 tablespoons pickled ginger
- ½ cup almond slivers, roasted
- 2 medium-sized baguettes with a crisp crust
- 4 tablespoons French mayonnaise

Here's how

1 Remove the meat from the sausage casings and roll four small meatballs from each sausage. Heat the olive oil in a pan and fry the meatballs until golden brown and cooked. During the last minute of cooking, drizzle the sweet chilli sauce over the meatballs for a glaze. Remove from the heat and set aside to cool down.

2 Whisk the oil, vinegar, boiling water, sugar and soya sauce together in a bowl. Microwave on high for a minute. Stir until the sugar dissolves. Pour the hot



Mini quiches

mixture over the cabbage and stir through. Add the snap peas, spinach, coriander, ginger and almonds and mix well.

3 Cut a third off each baguette lengthwise and remove the crumb from the bigger piece to hollow it out. (You can eat the crumb with butter or freeze it to use as breadcrumbs later.) Spread mayonnaise inside each loaf and fill them with coleslaw and meatballs. Replace the tops of the loaves like a lid and press down firmly. Wrap the baguettes in wax paper and secure with kitchen twine. Once you're at the picnic site, simply cut each loaf into three big portions.

Mini quiches

Makes 12

Preparation time **25 minutes**

Cooking time **20 minutes**

You need

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 200 g button mushrooms, sliced
- big handful of baby spinach
- pinch of freshly ground nutmeg
- salt and pepper
- 12 round slices of gypsy ham
- 4 eggs
- ½ cup cream

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C. Heat the oil in a pan and fry the mushrooms until golden brown



Cheese and jalapeño wheels

and cooked. Add the spinach and season with nutmeg, salt and pepper. Close the lid and steam the spinach for a minute or two until wilted. Remove the pan from the heat.

2 Grease the cups of a shallow muffin pan with cooking spray and line each cup with a slice or two of ham. Work carefully so you don't tear the ham.

3 Divide the fried mushroom and spinach mixture evenly between the cups. Beat the eggs and cream until smooth, and season with salt and pepper. Pour the mixture over the filling in each cup.

4 Bake the quiches for 10 minutes or until cooked. Let the pan cool

down, carefully unmould the quiches and store them in an airtight container. They are delicious at room temperature.

TIP *You can add cheese, but be careful not to make the quiche too rich. There should be a nice balance with the other food in your basket.*

Cheese and jalapeño wheels

Makes about 12

Preparation time **10 minutes**

Baking time **20 minutes**

You need

- 1 roll (400 g) puff pastry, thawed

- 1 tub (175 g) medium-fat cream cheese with chives
- 200 g strips of bacon, fried and crumbled
- 3 pickled jalapeños, chopped or to taste
- 2 cups grated cheddar

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Roll the puff pastry out on a clean work surface and spread the cream cheese over the entire sheet.

2 Scatter the bacon bits and jalapeño evenly over the cream cheese, followed by the cheddar. Roll up the pastry tightly.

3 Use a sharp knife to cut the roll

into 1 cm-thick wheels. Place the wheels on a baking sheet lined with baking paper. (You might have to reshape the wheels into circles again after cutting them.)

4 Bake the wheels for about 15 minutes. Lower the heat to 180°C and bake for another 5 minutes, or until the pastry is cooked and the cheese starts to brown. Let the wheels cool down completely and store them in an airtight container.

TIP *These cheese wheels are also great for school lunchboxes and padkos. Add a flask of butternut or tomato soup and you have a meal!*

Chicken pasta salad



Chicken pasta salad

Serves **about 6**

Preparation time **20 minutes**

Cooking time **15 minutes**

You need

- 400 g penne pasta
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 4 chicken breast fillets, in strips
- 1 medium-sized aubergine, in slices
- 200 g baby marrows, thinly sliced
- salt and pepper
- 2 wheels of creamy feta
- 100 g green olives, pitted and chopped
- handful of rocket, watercress and basil, mixed
- ¼ cup grated parmesan

For the salad dressing

- 4 anchovy fillets, drained
- 1 clove of garlic, bruised
- ½ cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Here's how

- 1** Cook the pasta in a big pot of salted water until al dente.
- 2** Prepare the salad dressing by blitzing all the ingredients, except the pepper, in a food processor until smooth. Add a pinch of pepper to taste.
- 3** Heat the oil in a heavy-based pan and fry the chicken, aubergine and baby marrows until browned and cooked. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
- 4** Drain the pasta and add to the hot chicken mixture. Mix in half the salad dressing and set aside to cool down. Add feta and olives and spoon the salad into six even-sized jars. Combine the fresh leaves with the parmesan, and spoon it on top of the pasta. Seal the jars. Store the remaining salad dressing in a bottle.
- 5** When you're ready to eat, each person can add salad dressing to their taste.

TIP The different layers in the glass jar look attractive, but they also prevent the leaves from getting bruised and wilted. Store the salad in an airtight plastic container if you don't have jars.

Chocolate cupcakes

Makes **at least 24**

Preparation time **15 minutes**

Baking time **about 20 minutes**

You need

- 2 cups self-raising flour
- 2 cups sugar
- pinch of salt
- 1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 cup boiling water
- 250 g butter
- ⅓ cup cocoa, sieved
- 2 large eggs
- ½ cup buttermilk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla essence
- 200 g milk chocolate, melted
- M&Ms or Smarties for decoration

Here's how

- 1** Preheat the oven to 180°C. Place cupcake liners in the cups of two muffin pans. Grease with cooking spray.
- 2** Sieve the flour, sugar, salt, bicarbonate of soda and cinnamon together. Add the water, butter and cocoa to a pot and bring to a boil. Stir until the butter has melted. Set aside to cool down slightly.
- 3** Use an electric mixer to beat the eggs and buttermilk. Add the dry ingredients as well as the warm butter mixture and beat until combined. Pour the batter into the cupcake liners and bake for 20 – 25 minutes or until done. The cupcakes will deflate a little when they cool down – just fill the depressions with chocolate later!
- 4** Put the cupcakes on a cooling rack. Decorate with melted chocolate and M&Ms or Smarties. Store in a tin or an airtight container.

Chocolate cupcakes





NOBODY CAN

like a



SOUTH
AFRICAN

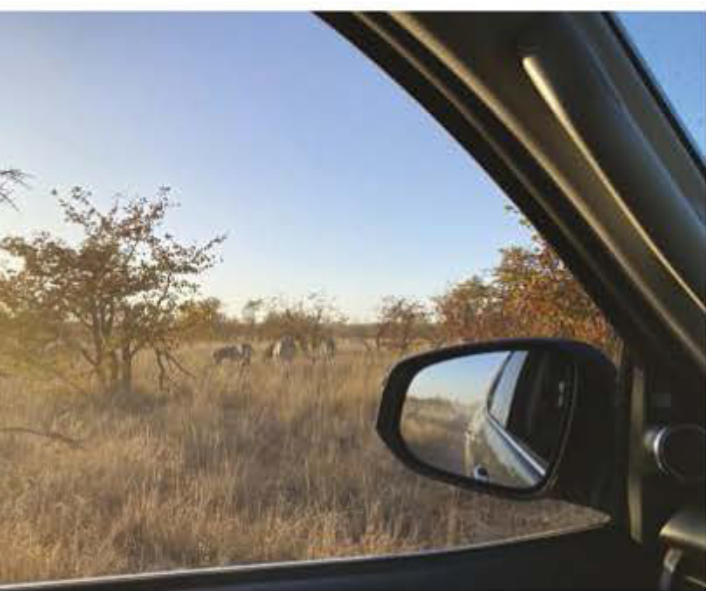
SPAR



Fame and Fortuner



The Toyota Fortuner is the king of South African SUVs, equally at home in the city or in the bush. It's the perfect family vehicle to explore our vast country and learn more about its rich history.



The ancient Kingdom of Mapungubwe was once located on our country's northern border, at the confluence of the mighty Limpopo and Shashe rivers where Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa converge.

Today, the area is home to Mapungubwe National Park, but a thousand years ago this was the site of the subcontinent's first indigenous kingdom. Established on fertile lands, blessed with gold and ivory, its strategic location enabled trade with India and China for almost 400 years – from 900 AD to 1300 AD.

On our way to ride the Tour de Tuli – an iconic 270 km cycling tour – we took some time to explore this Unesco World Heritage Site in the upgraded Toyota Fortuner. We drove the flagship 2.8 GD-6 VX Fortuner 4x4, which could comfortably swallow all our luggage and cycling kit after we latched the two seats in the third row. The cycling tour begins and ends in Mapungubwe and includes

long stretches through Zimbabwe and Botswana.

To get to Mapungubwe, we had to do a tiresome six-hour, 520 km drive from Johannesburg. Luckily the going was made easy thanks to the 2.8-litre GD-6 engine, delivering 150 kW of power and 500 Nm of torque. The stretch of N1 between Joburg and Polokwane is notorious for its speed traps and traffic cameras, so we simply engaged the radar-equipped cruise control to stay within the speed limit. When the radar system detects a car slowing down in front of you, the Fortuner automatically reduces speed to maintain a safe following distance.

On the inside, things are just as comfortable: The spacious cabin with its leather upholstered seats has recently been upgraded to dual-zone climate control and an 11-speaker JBL Premium Audio system on the flagship model. Apple CarPlay/Android Auto functionality allows you to use all your smartphone apps like navigation and music via the

TOYOTA FORTUNER ADVERTORIAL



8-inch entertainment system.

With an 80-litre fuel tank and fuel consumption of just over 8 l/100 km, we could cover about 900 km on the open road before needing to refuel. When it came to the off-road jeep tracks in the national park, the Fortuner proved its 4x4 credentials during game drives. It's easy to toggle between 2WD, 4WD and 4WD Lo, and the rear differential can be engaged with the press of a button when things get steep and rough.

Our VX model has been further enhanced with a Blind Spot Monitoring system and Rear Cross Traffic Alert, which is particularly useful when you have to reverse out of a parking spot and there are pedestrians or other cars crossing behind you.

A tough, reliable yet comfortable and stylish vehicle like the Toyota Fortuner certainly takes the stress out of a long road trip. No wonder it remains the top-selling vehicle in its segment.



TOYOTA FORTUNER 2.8 GD-6 4x4 VX 6AT

Engine	2799 cc turbo-diesel
Power	150 kW @ 3 000 – 3 400 rpm
Torque	500 Nm @ 1 600 – 2 800 rpm
Transmission	6-speed automatic
Fuel consumption	7.9 l/100 km
Ground clearance	279 mm
Towing capacity (braked)	3 300 kg
Approach angle	29°
Departure angle	25°
Warranty	3 years/100 000 km
Service plan	9 services/90 000 km
Service intervals	10 000 km
Price	R870 900



All style, all substance



Some vehicles leave a lasting impression on the driver without having to show off. The new **Mitsubishi Pajero Sport** is one of those vehicles.

BY TOAST COETZER

There are some non-negotiables when you climb into a luxury SUV like the Mitsubishi Pajero Sport. The seat must be comfortable, and it should feel as if everything – from the gear shift lever to the indicator paddle – was designed with you in mind.

So far, so good. The stitching of the Pajero Sport’s leather steering wheel feels good under my hands, and the big touch screen is sunk into the control panel – it doesn’t look like it was slapped on later. My phone connects without a hiccup. The Pajero Sport gets all these details right and it gives you enough oomph on the highway. The 2.4-litre diesel engine accelerates with confidence (but without fanfare) when you put your foot down.

Earlier this year, I drove the Pajero Sport 4x4 Exceed (the top model in the range) on a 2 000 km trip from OR Tambo Airport to Kosi Bay and back. I side-stepped potholes on tar roads and tackled muddy 4x4 trails in Ithala Game Reserve (the Pajero Sport has a ground clearance of 218 mm), as well as short stretches of sand in the coastal forests around Kosi Bay. The Pajero Sport handled all these challenges with ease. The 8-speed automatic transmission does its work without you noticing – you hardly even feel the changing of gears.

Down uneven slopes, the Hill Descent Control system kept my momentum in check, and the sophisticated Super Select II 4WD system offers four options that will make you feel in charge no matter the road conditions – from relatively fast on wet gravel to a crawl over rocky terrain.

In a vehicle like this, you also want to feel secure. Mitsubishi has always had a good reputation for safety, and the Pajero Sport continues the tradition: It has seven airbags, anchor points for a child seat, and features like Active Stability and Traction Control (ASTC), as well as a variety of brake systems that run in the background to keep you safe while you enjoy the view.

Speaking of the view: The Pajero is also nice to look at. When you compare it to its competitors, the Pajero Sport wins the style category. It stands out in the parking area. Everywhere I went, people came up to me to ask if it was a new Pajero, followed by an eyebrow raised in admiration.

The Pajero Sport has seven seats – two foldable seats in the back – so you can do the school run for your kids and their friends. It has enough luggage space for a long-weekend trip, and the off-road capabilities to take you anywhere in South Africa. I have a feeling we’ll be seeing more of them on our roads in the future.



MITSUBISHI PAJERO SPORT 4X4 EXCEED	
Engine	2 477 cc bi-turbodiesel
Power	133 kW @ 3 500 rpm
Torque	430 Nm @ 2 500 rpm
Transmission	8-speed automatic
Consumption (claimed)	8,1 l/100 km
Warranty	3 years/100 000 km
Ground clearance	218 mm
Service plan	5 years/90 000 km
Service intervals	10 000 km
Price	R769 990

Travel light with your camera

Half the fun of travelling (okay, more than half) is documenting the journey. Here's the gear you need to take beautiful photos and videos whether you're kayaking rapids or stalking leopards.

BY JON MINSTER

Photography has changed completely in the past decade. You can now take a photo using your cellphone that trumps anything the best compact camera could manage in 2012. DSLRs – you know, real cameras that go “click” when you press the shutter – are also on their way out, being replaced by smaller, lighter cameras with mirrorless shutters and digital viewfinders.

Editing and sharing has also changed. You can take a photo of a purple-crested turaco at the Pafuri picnic site, transfer it from your camera to your phone, touch up the colours and contrast and send it into the world while the bird is still perched in the tree.

Unsurprisingly, choosing which camera to buy has also become extremely complicated, so we've put together a short guide to help you out. We've chosen seven cameras for different kinds of travellers, and we've highlighted a few awesome accessories and some photo-forward cellphones to consider when your MTN contract comes around for an upgrade.

But always remember, as cool as an upgrade is, the best camera is the one you have with you when the rainbow appears above the Valley of Desolation – whether that's your current phone or your trusty old DSLR.

Happy snapping!



FOR THE
SERIOUS
AMATEUR

▲ **FUJIFILM X-S10**

Fujifilm makes dozens of mirrorless cameras at various price points. Most of the more compact ones have beautiful retro styling reminiscent of rangefinder film cameras from days gone by. (See the X100V on p 86.) The problem with that kind of styling, however, is that the camera lacks a real grip and it becomes quite tricky to hold and operate.

The X-S10 is different. Although it's still substantially smaller and lighter than a DSLR, it has a proper hand grip and a simplified button system, which means you can grab it and shoot without having to think too hard about what you're doing. With 26 MP of resolution, the image quality is excellent – both stills and video – and the built-in stabilisation helps to keep everything crisp.

One of the criticisms of mirrorless cameras in the past was the limited choice of lenses. That has changed, too: Fujifilm now offers focal lengths from 16 mm wide-angle to 150 – 600 mm zoom and everything in between.

In short, the X-S10 is a superb all-rounder if you want to take your photography hobby to the next level. It excels at all kinds of travel photography, from portraits of your kids to landscape and nature shots, with beautiful, shareable JPEGs straight out of the camera. No fuss, just results.

R16 995 (body only)



FOR THE
GAME-DRIVE
FUNDI



▲ **NIKON D500**

This camera is a few years old now and – scandal! – it's a DSLR, which we've just told you is about to become redundant. Ignore that, because when it comes to wildlife photography, the D500 is still one of the best cameras that money can buy, especially if you've invested in quality Nikon lenses over the years.

Because it uses a DX-format sensor, which is smaller than Nikon's FX full-frame sensor, you get something called the "crop factor" when you shoot with lenses designed for full frame. In other words, a 400 mm full-frame lens effectively becomes a 600 mm lens without any effect on aperture or image quality. Combine this magnification power with rock-solid autofocus and burst shooting at 10 frames per second, and you have a camera that wildlife (and especially bird) photographers dream about.

The ergonomics of the camera are spot-on, the buttons and dials are all where they should be, and the body is weather sealed to deal with the real-world challenges of rainstorms and dirt roads.

Also, as mirrorless becomes exponentially more dominant, you'll start to see deals on the D500 that will be very hard to ignore. Shop around and treat yourself for your next visit to the Kgalagadi. **R34 995 (body only)**

FOR THE
ADVENTURE
FREAK



▲ **GOPRO HERO10 BLACK**

Expensive electronics don't generally enjoy being dunked underwater, dangled off cliff edges and mounted to your bike helmet as you careen down a single track. If your holidays involve any of the above, then a GoPro is the only camera you should be considering.

The Hero10 Black improves on its predecessor with a new processing chip and better image stabilisation for cleaner, sharper pics regardless of the outside conditions. It can shoot 4 K video and up to 23 MP RAW stills, and there's a whole range of mounts and brackets that allow you to attach it to just about anything.

You'll be amazed at how much fun it is to take pictures where you really shouldn't be taking pictures – when you're snorkelling, swimming in a river, playing in the snow, rock climbing... The Hero10 is also tiny – it won't take up any space nor add any weight to your hiking pack.

R9 795

FOR THE
HIPSTER
TRAVELLER



▲ **FUJIFILM X100V**

Disclaimer: This is the camera I use, so I might be a little biased... It's a compact mirrorless camera with a fixed prime lens. In other words, you can't zoom in or out, so you have to move your feet and think carefully about your composition before you press the shutter button. I love that. I also love that the lens is fast and bright, with a maximum aperture of f2, which allows you to take beautiful portraits with great depth of field.

Fujifilm is renowned for their "film simulation" modes, which deliver JPEG images that look like Velvia, Provia, Astia and others. (You can flip through the modes at the touch of a button.) As digital photography becomes ever more glossy and hyper-realistic, there's something very pleasing about technology that enables you to return to the roots of photography instead.

The X100V is expensive, make no mistake, but it's the perfect camera if you enjoy documenting the little things on a road trip: a chameleon in a tree, your child's smile in a bird hide, thunder clouds over open plains... It's also unobtrusive, which makes it great for street photography, and it's smaller than a mirrorless camera with interchangeable lenses, so you can take it with you wherever you go.

R19 195

FOR THE
INSTAGRAMMER



▲ **SONY ZV-E10 WITH SHOOTING GRIP**

This powerful little mirrorless rig is designed for travellers who live their lives on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. It has a couple of super-powers: an articulating touch screen that can flip out and turn forward, allowing you to film yourself as you swan around Ha Long Bay or Cappadocia; and a built-in directional microphone with its own fuzzy windscreen for excellent audio recording even when there's lots of background noise.

The camera ships with a useful 16 – 50 mm lens and a shooting grip that also doubles as a (small) tripod, which can be controlled wirelessly.

Of course, if you want to take pics of something other than yourself, it does that with aplomb. The 24.2 MP sensor delivers sharp, detailed images at ISO speeds of up to 32 000. (You can carry on shooting until long after sunset, in other words.)

Like Fujifilm, Sony has also expanded its range of lenses for mirrorless cameras and there are now more than 60 in the line-up.

R12 995 with 16 – 50 mm lens and Sony shooting grip



^ **DJI AIR 2S**

Drones are a thing! When you're travelling, they open up an entirely new creative world. Rock pools in the intertidal zone become abstract splashes of blue along the beach; a long road unspools and your car is the only thing on it; your campsite in the Karoo at sunset looks positively cinematic as you do a slow flyover...

Obviously, you need to know what you're doing and there are laws regarding how you can use a drone. They're banned in all national parks, for example, and you're not allowed to fly them near aircraft or within 50m of any person or group of people, or over private property without permission from the owner.

The DJI Air 2S folds up small and weighs only 595 g, yet it's equipped with a quality 20 MP sensor for great still shots and scarily high-res video. Flying it is relatively straightforward, and it has obstacle-avoidance sensors to make sure you don't accidentally bring it down on top of the gazebo.

R21 399

✓ **CANON EOS R6**

Nikon or Canon? Years ago, you chose Canon and you've been building your lens collection with every 13th cheque since. But now the world has gone mirrorless. Crisis! Don't stress – Canon realised that they'd be alienating thousands of dedicated supporters, so they created an adaptor (R2 195) for their latest mirrorless camera bodies, which allows you to still use all your beautiful EF and EF-S mount DSLR lenses.

The R6 is an exceptional camera. It's intuitive to use, it feels great in your hand, the autofocus is immediate, and low-light performance is superb thanks to its 20 MP full-frame sensor. It's a fair bit smaller and lighter than its D6 DSLR cousin, which makes it more friendly to carry on your travels, especially when paired with a compact lens.

When you start playing in the full-frame space, you've left the amateurs behind and you're dabbling in pro territory. The R6 offers the kind of performance that will allow you to take your photography passion into competition judging rooms and even the walls of a gallery.

R45 995 (body only)



go!
**Take better
photos**

Do you want to improve your photography but you're not sure where to start? Enrol for our online course, which has been specifically developed to help amateurs find their way around the myriad buttons and menus on a camera and gain the confidence to experiment with different techniques, all with a focus on nature, wildlife and travel photography. R950 one-off fee takebetterphotos.gomag.co.za

BEST PHONES FOR PHOTOGRAPHY**SAMSUNG S22 ULTRA**

This is one of the best camera phones available right now. The five – yes, *five* – lenses on the back use all sorts of software trickery to simulate zoom and wide-angle effects with surprisingly minimal impact on image quality. It's also great in low light and shoots video like a boss. It's a big slab of glass, though, that's probably better suited to a bag than a pocket.

R19 500

**HUAWEI P40 PRO**

When you have a lens system designed and built by Leica, you know this phone has photography at the top of its priority list. Unlike most other smartphones which “zoom” by just magnifying the image (leading to quality loss), the Leica on the P40 Pro uses mechanical wizardry to offer a 5x optical zoom and it even has built-in image stabilisation. There's plenty of support from the software, too, and various modes that turn the phone into a do-anything stills and video device.

R18 000

**IPHONE 13 MINI**

Apple's software does amazing things to reality – turning relatively ordinary scenes into perfectly lit dreamscapes. The big daddy when it comes to camera capability is the iPhone 13 Pro Max (in the same WhatsApp group as the Samsung S22 Ultra), but it's a hulking thing and it's pricey. We like the Mini because it's teeny enough to slip into your pocket on a hike or a bike ride and you still get most of the same functions, including portrait and panorama modes and a very useful wide-angle setting.

From R16 800

TRAVEL ACCESSORIES**JOBY GORILLAPOD 3K TRIPOD WITH BALL HEAD**

The original and still the best. You can stand this flexy-legged tripod on just about any surface or even hang it from the branch of a tree, and the ball head allows you to get your shot level in no time.

There are various GorillaPods available depending on your camera – this model can accommodate a camera-and-lens combo up to 3 kg. Pack one on your next trip and you'll be able to take long-exposure shots of starry skies and waterfalls, and snap nighttime scenes around the campfire without having to lug your full-size tripod around.

R1 750

**LUNAR CAMERA STRAP**

This local-is-lekker product will give your camera a dash of personality, with nine funky designs to choose from. Each strap is made from quality materials, with a universal attachment that can also accommodate binoculars. Most importantly, it's super comfortable around your neck – far more comfortable than that horrible, narrow pleather strap that shipped with your camera.

R399 📞 lunarstraps.co.za

**KILLAT WAX MOON**

This locally made bag is padded to protect your gear and it has two moveable dividers inside to help you stay organised. It's big enough for a mirrorless camera and a couple of lenses, plus an extra battery and charger, but it's a lot smaller than a backpack and easier to carry, too. You can wear it around your waist like a moon bag, over your shoulder as a sling bag, or you can attach Velcro loops to the reinforced strap at the top or bottom and mount it on the handlebars of your bike.

R950 📞 killatgear.com

A note on prices: We priced all the cameras featured at 📞 ormsdirect.co.za. There are many other photography stores, so shop around. All prices are subject to change.

YOUR PERFECT

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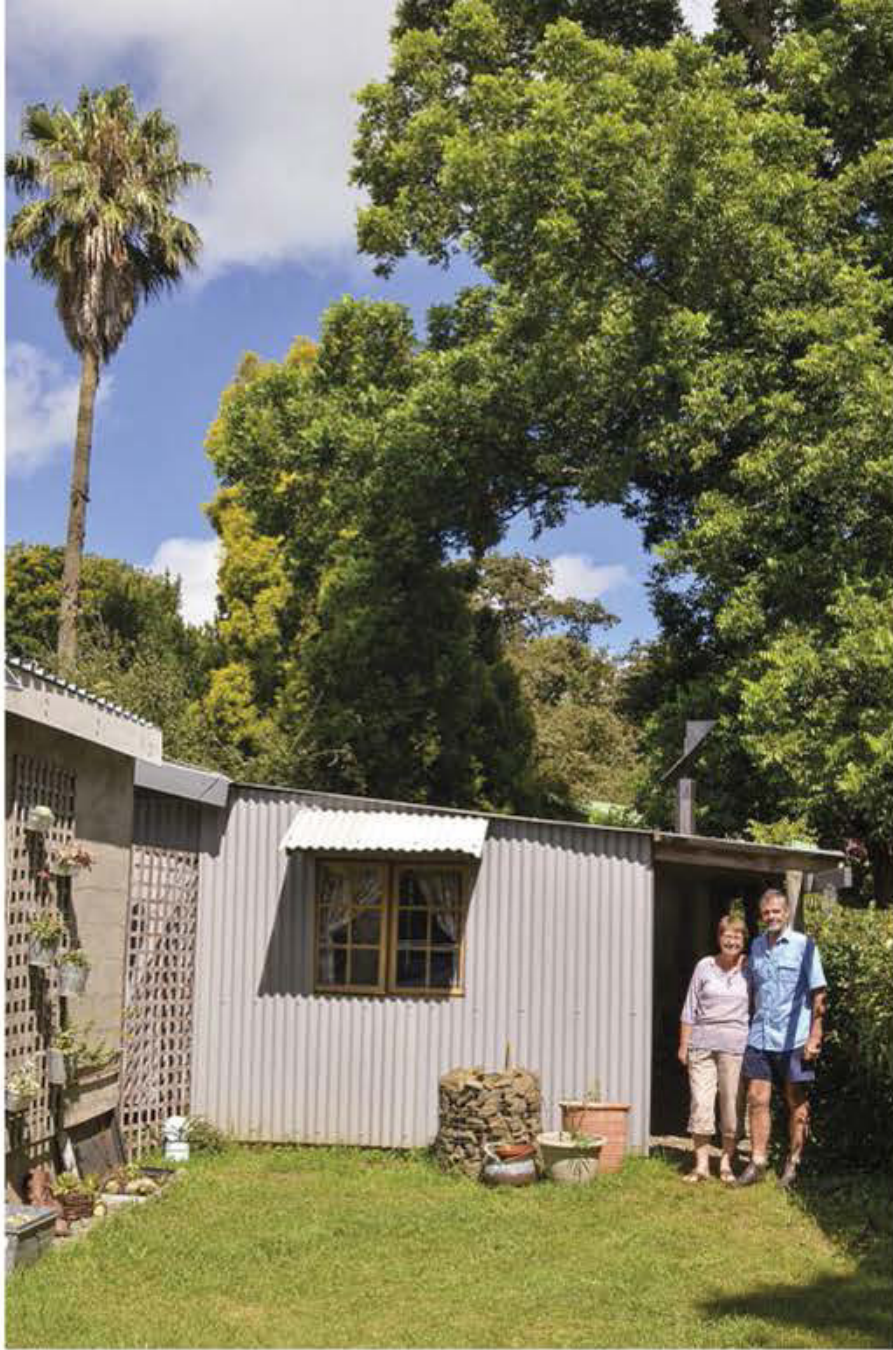
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INDWE FARMSTAY, VRYHEID, KZN

In mid-summer, the landscape around Vryheid is green – up on the grass-covered mountain slopes and down in the shallow valleys where maize fields bask lazily in the sun.

Gail and Dieter Muhl's farm is called Oldeani, a name that harks back to Dieter's maternal family who lived on a coffee plantation near Ngorongoro in Tanzania during the German colonial era. Dieter's paternal family came to South Africa from Germany in the late 1800s as missionaries, and by the 1920s his grandfather had started farming in the Vryheid district.

Gail and Dieter opened their guest cottage to visitors midway through 2021, and in early 2022 they set up a campsite.

The cottage is small and cosy, but it has everything you need for a comfy stay. The bathroom for the campsite is built onto the one side of the cottage, and both cottage and campsite are in the garden of the main farmhouse, with beautiful flower beds, huge trees providing shade, and soft grass. You can relax all day in the garden with a book, or do some birding. The Blood River Vlei – adjacent to the farm – is one of KZN's largest inland wetlands and supports rare species like southern bald ibis, grey crowned crane and red-chested flufftail.

Indwe Farmstay is good for a quick stopover (I stayed here on my way from Joburg to Ithala Game Reserve) or a proper weekend retreat. On the farm, you can tap into whatever the Muhls and their son Kelvin are busy with: feeding the chickens or harvesting maize or soya, the farm's chief crops. You can go for walks, ride your mountain bike on the dirt roads or fish for black bass in their 80 ha dam. You can sail or paddle on the dam, or braai on its banks. The dam was built in 1982 by Dieter's father but had to be rebuilt only two years later after it was washed away by floods that came with Tropical Storm Demoina.

Indwe Farmstay is also well positioned as a base to visit nearby historical battlefields like Blood River (about 48 km south), or Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana (about 70 km south). Keen landscape photographers can take a scenic drive via back roads through the mountains to Wakkerstroom (90 km north).



Facilities: The cottage has a bath, toilet, fridge, small four-plate stove, microwave and a fan for when it's hot. There are two single beds and a daybed where a young child can sleep. The campsite is small and suited for a single group of no more than three or four vehicles. There's a shower (with a cute old watering can for a shower head), a toilet and fridge. Both cottage and campsite have braai facilities, and the cottage also has a covered stoep with a fireplace. The two places are adjacent – people often book them together. If, however, two separate groups want to stay here, Gail will first check with both parties that they're happy to do so.

Where? A kilometre down a gravel road off the R34 tar road, about 36 km from Utrecht and 34 km from Vryheid.

Rates: Camping R100 per person without power or R150 per person with power. The self-catering cottage sleeps two people at R300 per person sharing, or R400 for a single guest. Meals are available upon request.

Contact: 📞 083 301 3244 (Gail, WhatsApp); 🌐 indwefarmstay.co.za

– Toast Coetzer



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TAKE A HIKE

Wander around Welvanpas

BY IAN MCNAUGHT DAVIS

Get some country air into your lungs on a 300-year-old farm near Wellington.

On the slopes of Groenberg outside Wellington, beneath some even more imposing peaks, is a farm called Welvanpas, which has been in the same family since 1704.

The lay of land is as intricate as its history: There's indigenous forest, a river, a waterfall, flurries of fynbos, hills bristling with vines, and a coffee shop with the best carrot cake in the Boland.

If you're into genealogy, history, photography, mushroom foraging, cycling, tasting wine, birding... or if you're just in the mood for a walk, then Welvanpas is the place for you.

The farm was originally owned by Pierre Mouji, a French Huguenot from Calais, whose eldest daughter Marie married Francois Retief in 1700. Francois and Marie became the founders of the Retief family in South Africa. The farm was bought by a neighbour, but three generations later it returned to Retief hands when Jacobus Retief bought it in 1780. Jacobus and his wife Deborah raised a son Piet, who would go on to become a great Voortrekker leader. Piet Retief lived on the farm for 26 years. Since then, it has been passed down in the Retief family for over three centuries.

Before you set off from the parking area, grab a coffee and a koeksister from Die Ou Meul coffee shop, where the farm's mill once stood. The first stretch of the hiking trail is flat – it soon splits from the mountain-bike trail and follows the Krom River. Wellington can get very hot in summer, but there's no shortage of shade: This first of many forested sections has yellowwoods, poplars and stands of bamboo to provide cover from the sun.

You'll meander along the stream for a while before a brief climb to a contour and a dip into Shady Valley again. This stretch in the dappled

light has plenty of fungi swelling among fallen logs.

Shady Valley flows into Lower Forest, which is full of ferns and feels like the forests of the Garden Route. As Lower Forest ascends into Upper Forest, you'll walk along another stream with water darkened from the tannins of fallen leaves. It's the perfect spot to stop for a snack.

After Upper Forest, the trail opens onto Dan Retief's vineyards on the slopes of Groenberg. You'll walk up a hill with hanepoot growing on your left. You'll briefly link up with a jeep track, which has views of the Sneekop mountain rising like a wall above the vineyards and forests.

I watch a duiker and her lamb slink out of the fynbos and nibble on the cover crop between the vines. They skeddaddle into a thicket when they see me coming.

There's a short stretch of uphill on the jeep track, and at this point you'll be at the halfway mark. The top of the hill offers a good view of Wellington and surrounds.

From the top of the jeep track, the path veers off into Pine Tree Walk. Keep an eye out for edible pine ring mushrooms peeping out from the forest floor. *(But don't eat anything unless you're absolutely sure what it is! – Ed.)*

The shade gives way to a single track that winds through thick swathes of proteas. You'll tack down the hill, up to your neck in all manner of indigenous plant life, until you reach a floodplain at the bottom of the valley. From there, you'll walk another flat section until you'll find a short detour to a waterfall – good for a picnic before the final stretch.

Beyond the waterfall is private property, so you'll double back onto the River Walk path and complete the circuit back to Die Ou Meul, where a slice of carrot cake awaits.





Where? Welvanpas Family Vineyards is 6 km from Wellington via the R301 and the Bovlei Road. It's about an hour's drive from Cape Town.

Hiking distances: The Welvanpas Hiking Trail is a circular route of about 7,5 km. It should take around two and a half hours to complete. You can do the River Walk on its own (2 km) – out to the waterfall and back. The trail is neat and well marked – pick up a free map from Die Ou Meul, which is open from 8 am to 5 pm Tuesdays to Fridays and 8 am to 3 pm on weekends. Closed on Mondays.

Permit fee: R50 per adult, free for kids under 12, available at Die Ou Meul.

More info: ☎ 021 864 1239; ☎ 082 393 6268
✉ welvanpas@gmail.com; “Welvanpas Family Vineyards” on Facebook

What else? You can buy Welvanpas wine at Die Ou Meul. Whites from R60; reds from R95. There's a network of mountain-bike trails on the farm, some of which are closed at the moment. The 15 km trail is open – it mostly follows jeep tracks but there are some technical sections. MTB permit R60 per day.

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GARDEN ROUTE *Eco camping in Plett*

The Garden Route, and in particular Plettenberg Bay and surrounds, is one of South Africa's most popular holiday destinations – for good reason. This is an adventurer's paradise with lots on offer: from mountain-biking (Trail Lynx trails are available on Trailforks and Strava) and hiking (trails available on Komoot), to kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding. Or simply relax on one of the six premier Blue Flag beaches.

The Garden Route National Park includes wild coastal areas, indigenous forests and fynbos, while Robberg Nature Reserve is a marine protected area and national monument, as well as a World Heritage Site.

So where better to base yourself? The Bhejane/Bactrac eco camp is situated 7 km outside Plettenberg Bay on the banks of the Bitou River. Stay here for an off-grid glamping experience, which includes meals around the campfire. The camp provides easy access to all of the above places and the activities are suitable for the whole family.

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THE DEAL

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- Use of our kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and the bird hide – a great sundowner spot!

DECEMBER BOOKING BONUS

Get 50% off a guided half-day, self-drive tour into the Diepwalle section of the Knysna Forest.

Bookings for the 2022 holiday season are open! Contact Paul Wigley ☎ info@bactrac.co.za

☎ 072 678 6273 or Mary Jane ☎ bookings@bhejane.com ☎ 082 724 0442



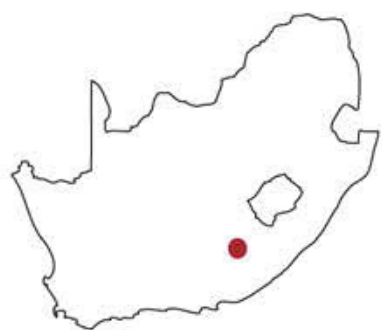


A full-page photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a bright yellow quilted jacket and light blue trousers, standing on a large log in a rocky stream bed. She is looking up at a tall, dark rock face with a waterfall cascading down it. The scene is lush with green foliage and moss, creating a sense of being deep in a forest. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of the rocks and the vibrant color of the jacket.

Hang out in Hogsback

Come explore one of the Eastern Cape's most eccentric towns, hidden in the forest high in the Amatola Mountains. You might never want to leave...

WORDS & PICTURES **EVAN NAUDÉ**



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: In between Hogsback's indigenous forests are numerous pine plantations. To clear your head, walk the labyrinth at The Edge Mountain Retreat. The tiny St Patrick-On-The-Hill chapel is a popular place to get married. Ask Kurt Andersen of the farm Glenara to teach you how to fly-fish.

From Alice in the Eastern Cape, the R345 turns north and starts climbing into the Amatolas. The higher you go, the closer the forest creeps in. At the top of Hogsback Pass, the canopy barely lets any sunlight through. Soon the tar fades to dirt at a sign with a bush pig on it – welcome to Hogsback's Main Road.

You won't find cute shopfronts or traffic lights here. The pavements are overgrown and you have to park somewhere between the blue gum, pine and stinkwood trees.

In fact, you can't tell the guesthouses from the restaurants or the shops, because the driveways to most of Hogsback's residences vanish even deeper into the forest. It's all so mysterious... and that's what makes it such a fun place to explore.

My girlfriend Sam and I roll in on a Sunday afternoon in July, as a queue of vehicles snakes back out – a wedding party retreating from The Edge, one of Hogsback's most popular function venues and accommodation spots right on the edge of the escarpment. From a viewpoint on a cliff, you look out over the Tyume Valley below. Oh, look! There's the road we arrived here on, disappearing into the forest...

Sam and I head back to the town centre and walk through the Arboretum, an assortment of trees planted by the British colonial government in the late 1800s to determine which trees would grow here for forestry purposes. Later, it became a public park. We stroll under centuries-old oaks, Japanese cedars, maple trees and Californian redwoods, which rise above azaleas and hydrangeas in the flowerbeds.

The 39 Steps Waterfall is nearby. High up in the forest canopy, samango monkeys pick berries for dinner and Knysna turacos croak their prehistoric call. Cape parrots are sometimes seen here.

Dusk arrives and the cold sets in. Time to go find a restaurant with a fireplace...

Hello, Hogsback

"We had snow about three weeks ago," says Glenn Naude, owner of Woltree Coffee Shop. "It snows most winters and sometimes during summer, too. The only month we haven't had snow before is February."

Glenn and her husband Tony moved here permanently from Gqeberha three years ago, but they've been regular visitors to Hogsback for nearly two decades. The information office closed during lockdown and Glenn is currently

volunteering as the local tourism officer.

She unfolds a map of the town. "We're here," she says, pointing. "There's the bowling green, the adventure centre, the chocolate shop and the brewery. You should definitely visit the brewery. Start at St Patrick-On-The-Hill at the top of Main Road and walk back towards us. And you can't come to Hogsback and not see a waterfall..."

With a strong caffeine buzz and a map full of notes, we head for St Patrick-On-The-Hill – a little chapel built in 1935 by a school inspector called Kenneth Hobart Houghton for his wife Cherrie. Houghton donated the property to the Anglican Church in 1963 and the building was extended in the 1990s by adding a second rondavel, giving it its characteristic butternut shape.

Many people use the chapel for wedding ceremonies – on weekends, the town fills up as families, friends and in-laws arrive.

We meander down the street, past houses barely escaping the undergrowth. In Main Road, signs decorated with gnomes, fairies, mushrooms and crystals beckon us to various shops. When you're done browsing the shops, cross the dirt road and walk through the pine plantation. The town and forest are basically one.

Trout nibbles

I'm on a lawn the next morning, struggling to free my fishing line from a tree root. The farm Glenara is a 15-minute drive from Hogsback. Here, on top of the mountain, the forest opens into grassland, with dams and rivers full of rainbow trout. Kurt Andersen is showing me how to cast a line on dry land, but I'm not covering myself in glory...

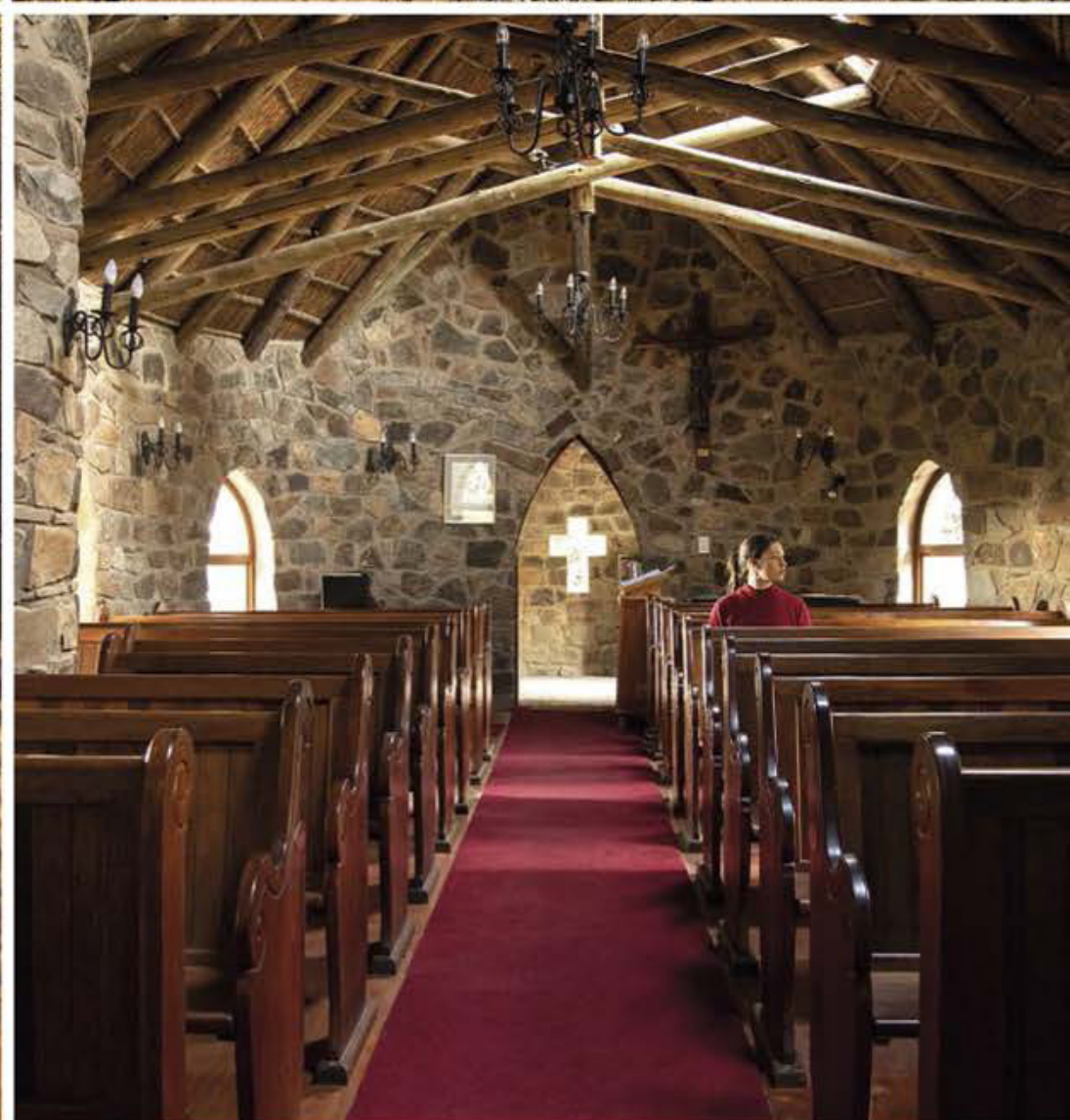
Kurt is an ichthyologist; he offers fly-fishing lessons and also breeds trout for fly-fishing farms in the area.

Later, when my technique no longer poses a danger to humans (and plants), we walk to a farm dam to test my skills. Kurt shows me what to do when I get a bite, but I don't even get a nibble. The fish can spot an amateur.

It doesn't really matter. A breeze tickles my neck, the grassland shimmers and mountains are reflected in the water. The silence is only broken by the whirr of my fishing line.

"My dad always said he liked fly-fishing not because of the fishing, but because it takes you to such beautiful places," Kurt muses.

I'm daydreaming when something tugs at my line. The shiny body of a trout squirms in the



TOWN



Clockwise, from top left: Browse the colourful collection of crystals and gemstones at Crystal Corner. Organic Origins has cosy cabins where you can hide from the world for a few days. The owners of Organic Origins, Jaco Kotze and Dayle Comins.

shallows for a moment, but I'm too slow to snag it.

"Almost!" Kurt says encouragingly.

Now I understand why people get fishing fever. I'm determined to catch something. "Can I try again?"

Later that afternoon, Sam and I end up at Crystal Corner, a shop and art gallery on the outskirts of Hogsback, where Liza Kuypers shows us a collection of crystals and gemstones. A self-proclaimed nomad, she moved here four years ago and tell us how it felt like a home-coming: "It was late September and the spring blossoms were in bloom. I had never come across a place that looked and smelled so good.

"Many people come to Hogsback for their mental health – they do yoga retreats or receive treatment for addictions," she says. "After the First World War, people apparently came here to recover from exposure to mustard gas. And after the Second World War, Hobbiton-on-Hogsback – the school camp outside town – was established to take care of orphans. Then there's Gaika's Kop, north-east of town, which is a sacred place for the Xhosa people, where traditional leaders still pick veld medicine."

Has Hogsback cured Liza of her nomadic tendencies? "Every time I feel like I might want to move somewhere else, I read the news and I feel grateful to be here. Hogsback is a close-knit community full of open-minded people. It's refreshing to live here."

Jaco Kotze and Dayle Comins from Organic Origins also decided that Hogsback was the right place for them to put down roots.

"Ever since I was a child, I wanted to build a cabin in the woods," Jaco says. He worked as a chef at several luxury lodges for 15 years, where he met Dayle, a masseuse. The couple moved to Hogsback six years ago.

The three self-catering units on their property were built to be as organic and sustainable as possible. "It took about five years because we did everything ourselves," Jaco says.

He and Dayle live in a renovated farmhouse nearby. "The fireplace works hard," he says. "Power outages don't bother us because the kitchen runs on gas and we always have coffee. Our lifestyle isn't driven by technology any more, and that's a good thing."

Sam and I drive down the pass the next morning, as a light drizzle falls softly on Hogsback. The forest is quiet and dark, and I can't help but wonder what secrets remain hidden in its damp recesses.

I zip my jacket to my chin, pull a beanie over my ears and turn up the car's heater. Next to me, I catch Sam looking at Hogsback property listings on her phone...

5 things to do

1 *Explore on foot*

Hogsback has an abundance of trails, from short walks to multi-day hikes. Some of the trails are connected and you can combine them depending on how far you want to go.

For an easy stroll, pack a picnic basket and walk to the **39 Steps Waterfall** (15 minutes) in the Arboretum off Oak Avenue. For a longer waterfall walk, find the trail to Madonna and Child Falls, Bridal Veil Falls and the Big Tree (about 4,5 km).

The **Military Path** (40 minutes) and **Bluff Trail** (45 minutes) in Red Coat Lane take you through indigenous forest on the escarpment to the west of town.

Experienced hikers can do the six-day **Amatola Trail** (100 km). Rates from R2 200 per person. Visit amatolatrails.co.za

More info? Visit Hogsback Adventures (see #4) for a free trail map. If you don't want to hike alone, you can go to the various waterfalls with a guide.

2 *Visit a tiny chapel*

Everyone is welcome at St Patrick-On-The-Hill – it's an interdenominational church, which seats 70 people. Entry is free and the chapel is always open. The Sunday service starts at 10 am.

Where? At the top of Main Road.

More info? stpatrickonthehill.blogspot.com

3 *Fish for trout*

Kurt Andersen offers fly-fishing lessons on his farm Glenara. Experienced anglers can hire rods or arrange for the private use of a dam on the farm – prices on request. Catch-and-release only. Kurt also guides outings to the best fishing spots and dams in the area.

Where? Glenara is about 12 km north of Hogsback along the R345.

Cost: Lessons from R300 per person for about three hours.

Contact: 071 065 0847;

kurt99andersen@gmail.com

4 *Play outside*

Hogsback Adventures offers several outdoor activities: Hire a mountain bike, abseil down Madonna and Child Falls, ride a horse in the forest... Never done archery? Now's your chance!

Where? On the corner of Main Road and Wolfridge Road.

Contact: 074 275 2667; hogsbackadventures.co.za



THE ARBORETUM



HOGSBACK ADVENTURES

5 *Take time to contemplate*

The Eco-Shrine is an art installation featuring sculptures, oil paintings and mosaic work, built in 1995 by artist Diana Graham and bricklayer Dagamnyama Wara. It's a place of contemplation – Diana will guide you through the garden herself and discuss how the space represents the relationship between humanity, science and nature. The view alone is worth a visit. You can also look at other sculptures in the garden and see her art gallery.

Where? Summerton Drive

Cost: R30 per person.

Contact: 045 962 1136; ecoshrine.co.za

TOWN



HOGSBACK BREWERY



THE MAGICAL TEEPEE EXPERIENCE

EAT HERE

Woltree Coffee Shop

This spot near the southern entrance to Hogsback serves a good cup of coffee. The menu features breakfast options and light meals like sandwiches, burgers, soup and pancakes. It's currently the unofficial tourism office.

Where? Main Road

Contact: ☎ 071 873 4500 (Glenn)

Happy Hogs

Happy Hogs is a local favourite. It often has a weekend market, live music and karaoke evenings. On the menu, you'll find burgers, steak, pizzas, oxtail and curry.

Where? Main Road

Contact: ☎ 082 447 8425

The Lighthouse Ranch

Enjoy pub grub like burgers, pizzas, steak, pork ribs, schnitzel and eisbein around a big fireplace. On hot days you can sit outside in the garden.

Where? Main Road

Contact: ☎ 045 962 1101

Red Clay Café

In the Hogsback Adventures building. Grab an espresso or a hot chocolate to go with your tramezzini or filled pancake. Cheesecake for dessert!

Where? Corner of Main Road and Wolfridge Road.

Contact: ☎ 066 350 7485

Hogsback Brewery

Taste a selection of craft beers in the garden, with a cheese platter, wild mushroom pâté and hummus on beer bread. There are also different gins to try.

Where? Wolfridge Road

Contact: 📞 hogsback.beer

IN OTHER WORDS



Janice Adlam

Owner, Hogsback Adventures

Keen hikers can do the Kettlespout Falls route or the Contour Path – both have great views. The lesser-known Military Path might not go past a waterfall, but it takes you through one of my favourite parts of the forest.



Liza Kuypers

Manager, Crystal Corner

Not many people know about the Three Waterfall trail that starts next to Wolfridge Road. You'll see one of the biggest waterfalls in the area – it tumbles over three terraces.



Liyanda Mafika

Potter, Starways Arts

In my free time I like to visit The Edge or the Eco-Shrine – both have excellent views.



Glenn and Tony Naude

Owners, Woltree Coffee Shop

We like to hike to the Big Tree near Away with the Fairies. We also sometimes drive out to Robinson Dam or have a braai next to the Wolf River, but you need a 4x4 to get there.



STAY HERE

The Magical Teepee Experience

Four teepees, each on its own deck with a double bed, a couch and a fireplace. Each teepee has a private bathroom next to a communal kitchen with power points. There's also a big communal braai area.

Rate: R650 per night.

Contact: 079 087 917;

ahogslife.co.za

Organic Origins

Sleep in a cottage or in one of two cabins overlooking a valley of pine trees. All three units sleep two people and are self-catering, with a fireplace. A breakfast basket is included, and you can arrange beforehand for owner and chef Jaco Kotze to prepare a two-course dinner (R350 per person).

Rate: From R800 per night (minimum two nights).

Contact: 078 238 9116;

organicorigins.co.za

The Cabins

Four self-catering cabins (each sleeps two) on stilts in a pine forest, about 2 km from town. The cabins are situated around a communal deck – the perfect place to hang out with family or friends. Each cabin



THE LANTERN



THE EDGE MOUNTAIN RETREAT

also has its own deck with a braai and a fireplace inside.

Rate: From R400 per person sharing.

Contact: 083 200 8619;

reservations@thecabins.co.za or

"The Cabins Hogsback" on Facebook

The Edge Mountain Retreat

One of the oldest and most popular spots in Hogsback. Overnight in a twin-sleeper, self-catering cottage on the edge of the cliff with a view of a valley. There are also other accommodation options available. The Retreat has a restaurant, a weekend market, a labyrinth and beautiful gardens.

Rates: Cliff-side cottage from R1 600 per night for two people. Garden cottage from R450 per person

(sleeps 2–6). Double room from R720 per person B&B.

Contact: 082 603 5246;

theedge-hogsback.co.za

The Lantern

One of the most interesting places to stay in Hogsback – it's an old reservoir that has been converted into a luxurious double-storey, self-catering "glass house". The kitchen and living area are on the ground floor, with a fireplace and underfloor heating. The en suite bedroom upstairs (with its own fireplace) has a copper bathtub – a treat on winter nights!

Rate: From R1 300 per night.

Contact: Search "The Lantern, Hogsback" on airbnb.co.za

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Best time to visit? Year-round.

Summers are hot and wet, and it can snow in winter. Hogsback is busy over weekends and during holiday periods, but calm during the week – many of the restaurants and shops are closed from Monday to Wednesday.

How to get there? Hogsback is about 30 km north of Alice along the R345.

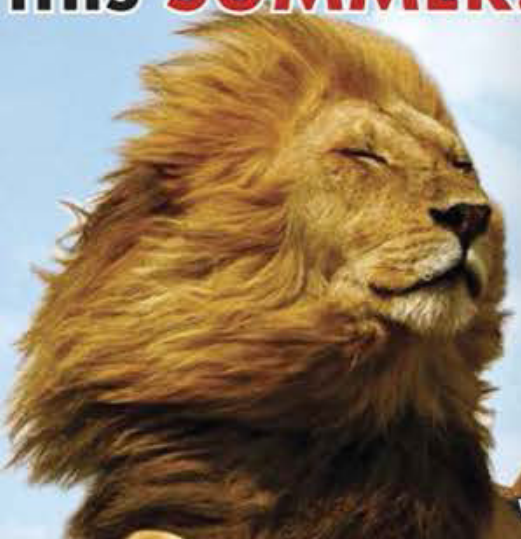
Supplies? There's a supermarket, liquor store and a filling station in Main Road.

More info? At the time of going to print, the official tourist information office was closed. Visit Woltree Coffee Shop or hogsback.co.za

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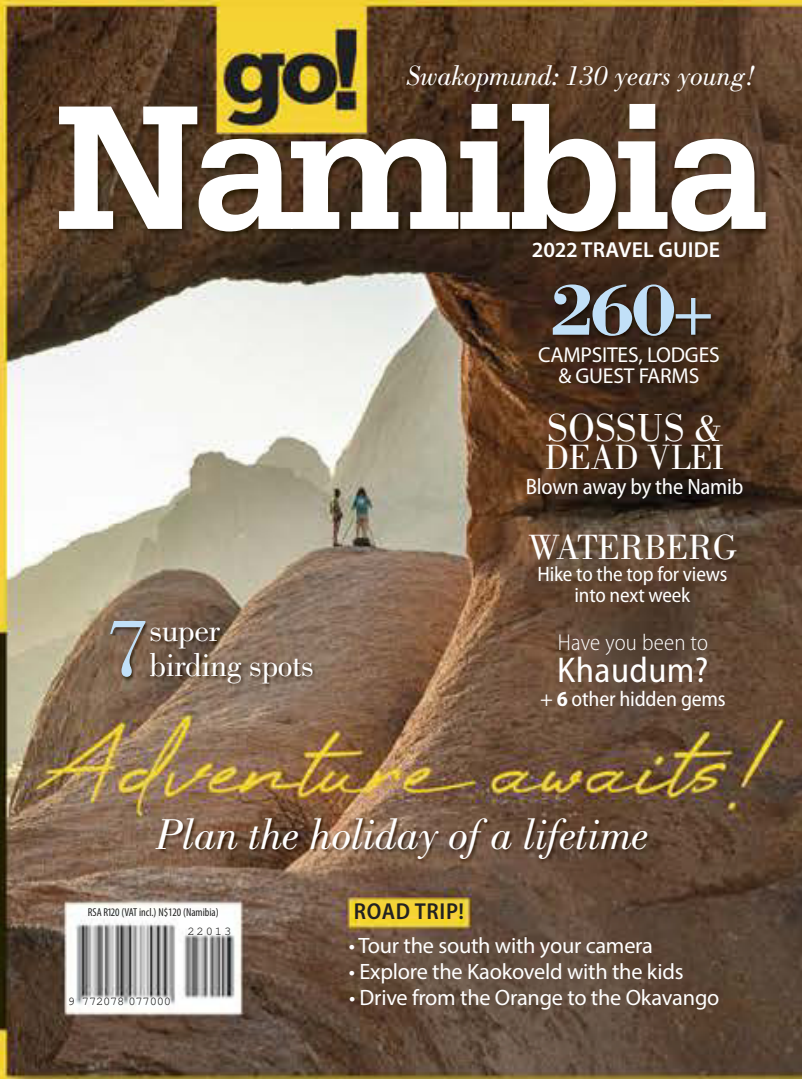
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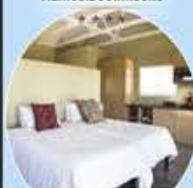
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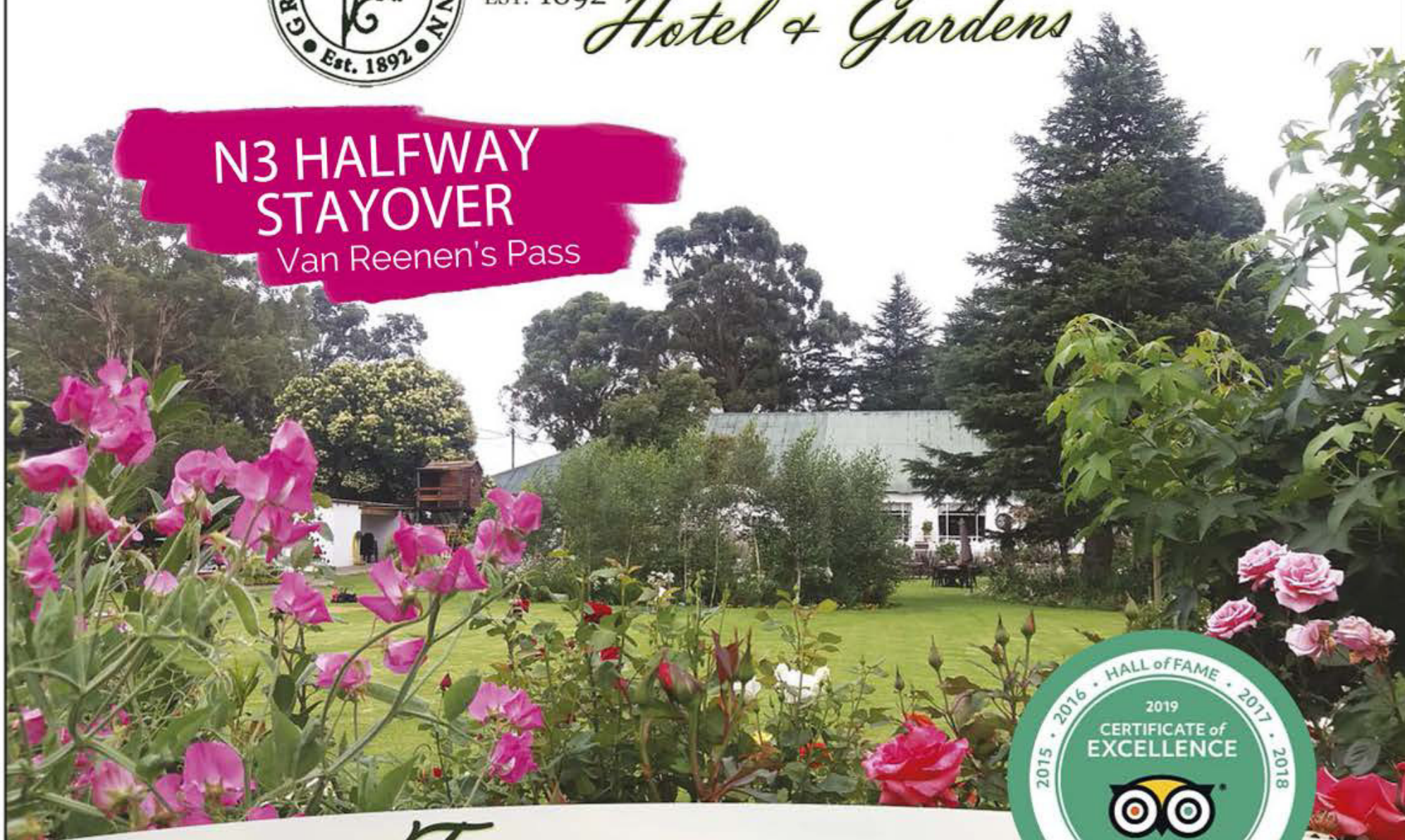


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BACK IN THE DAY

COMPILED BY **KYRA TARR**

130 YEARS OF SWAKOPMUND

In 1892, Captain Curt von François sailed into a protected curve of coastline north of Walvis Bay. He placed two beacons on the deserted beach. Over the years, the town of Swakopmund would take shape around these two points...

Why here? In 1884, after the colony of German South West Africa had been declared, there was a hunt to find a suitable harbour. Walvis Bay was out – the English had already staked their claim. After Von François' recce, it was decided that a new harbour would be built on Swakop Beach. The route to Windhoek wasn't obstructed by any large dune belts, and there was relatively reliable fresh water from the Swakop River. (The water wasn't very nice, old Swakopmunders will tell you. When they visited Windhoek, they'd add salt to their coffee because that was what they were used to...)

In 1893, the first inhabitants from Germany were offloaded: 40 civilians and 120 soldiers. A barracks had been built for the troops, but the settlers initially lived in caves and hollows dug into the sand.

Because the bay had no natural harbour, one had to be created. The Mole was completed in 1903, but it kept filling with silt, making the bay unusable.

A wooden jetty was built in its stead, but the wood was infested with *Teredo navalis*, a marine borer mollusc. In 1912, the wood was replaced with iron. The original plan was to build a jetty 640 m long, but construction halted in 1914, at 262 m, when World War I broke out.

Despite the challenges, Swakop was still the main port in the region. That changed in 1919 when Namibia was handed over to the South African government who opted to use the harbour at Walvis instead.

The town's function slowly shifted from working port to picturesque seaside escape. In the 1950s, the residents joked that at 9 pm, all the lights went out and the sidewalks were rolled up.

That changed in the 1960s, when mines started springing up in the region. First came the Rio Tinto Mining



The wooden jetty (top) was completed in 1905. The tower to the left is part of Woermann Haus, also completed in 1905. From the tower, people looked for incoming ships as well as ox wagons coming from the interior. These days the building houses a public library. Visitors can get a key to the tower from the small shop in the courtyard.

Company, who built a whopping 300 houses for their workers – today's Vineta neighbourhood. Then came the Rössing Uranium Mine in 1976, which gave rise to the nearby town of Arandis.

The city's German heritage can still be felt in its street names, its local newspapers like the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, and the large portion of German-speaking residents.

Since Namibia gained independence in 1990, the story of Swakop has become more inclusive, acknowledging the history of the area before apartheid and colonial rule, and the Damara and Nama people who called this region home for centuries prior.

In fact, its name comes from the Nama word *tsoakhaub*, which means "excrement opening" – a phrase that refers to the debris and animal carcasses the Swakop River carries to the ocean when in flood.



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Sources: namibweb.com; worldpopulationreview.com



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BIRDS

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

SCOPE IT OUT



LITTLE STINT

FAANSIE PEACOCK

Getting your first pair of proper binoculars opens up a whole new world – it's like getting glasses when you've been half-blind all your life. But one day you'll end up in a hide with your binos, straining to make out distant, hazy blobs, while the bloke with the scope rattles off a litany of feathery features. Yup, if the birding bug has bitten then the next logical upgrade is investing in a spotting scope.

Most binoculars magnify what you're looking at by 8–10 times. A scope pushes that to 20–60 times! When I was a teenager, I somehow managed to convince my parents to let me go on a mad twitching dash from Gauteng to the West Coast and back in *one weekend*. I had never used a scope, but one member of our twitching team brought one along. There, magnified in glorious detail, framed in a little black circle, was our quarry: a rare wader called a dunlin. Without that scope, the whole mission would have been in vain.

At first, you might only use your scope in open habitats and when you're standing still. But with practice, a scope can be invaluable in any habitat. I've had a few pokes in the ribs for carrying my scope into the depths of a forest, until there's something interesting perched 60 m high in the canopy...

A scope is also a boon if you spend a lot of time birding with others. Instead of launching into the usual, "It's behind the third green leaf to the left of the diagonal fork of that branch with the lichen on" saga, you just say, "It's in the scope, have a look." If the eyepiece can rotate, even better. It means the tallest lad and the shortest tannie can both have a squiz without having to change the height of the tripod's legs.



10X



20X



30X

I've found that people can be a little intimidated by scopes. Maybe they worry they'll damage something or turn the wrong knob, but scopes are actually really tough. On a recent expedition, mine spent two weeks bumping about on the back seat of the vehicle. Whenever we screeched to a halt for something flying past, whoever was closest would grab it and set it up. It's been manhandled like that for a good 20 years and has endured quite a few tumbles.

One time, a colleague bought the same make and model as my scope. He took it out of its protective case and lovingly set it up next to mine. We compared them, and guess what? His might have looked better but there was absolutely no difference in optical quality.

Don't forget about the tripod. The best scope is only as good as those three metal tubes supporting it. It's always a trade-off between weight and stability: You want a tripod that's sturdy and sufficiently balanced to withstand the wind, but you also want it to be light so you can travel with it.

A tripod can come in handy in other, less traditional ways, too. I once spent a few minutes poking mine in a muddy canal that I had to cross

in Namibia's Zambezi Region, just to make sure there weren't any reptilian predators waiting for me...

It takes time to learn how to use a scope. Because the field of view is so much narrower than binoculars, you can only see a tiny section of veld, vlei or sky at a time. (Finding a raptor in a cloudless sky is quite a feat.) But with sufficient practice, it becomes second nature – you'll get locked onto your target as quickly as a cowboy in a showdown.

I've even pioneered a way of carrying a scope hands-free on the shoulder. You keep the tripod's legs extended, find the balance point where everything is in equilibrium, and voilà. Just don't turn quickly, or your birding buddy might get smacked by the legs...

I've run out of column space but remind me to chat about the joys of digi-scoping at some point – essentially turning your scope into a telephoto lens by holding your phone camera at the eyepiece. You won't take any award-winning photos, but you'll be able to document special sightings and prove you really did see that narina trogon in Grootvadersbosch.

And that's all we have scope for this issue!

Small but mighty

Size isn't everything in the wild – here are the 10 teeniest raptors in South Africa, with some tips on how to tell them apart.

COMPILED BY SOPHIA VAN TAAK



▲ **Taita falcon**

Weight: 315 g* | Length: 27 cm

The taita falcon occurs in several African countries. Locally, it's a critically endangered species: Scientists know of only about 50 sites in Mpumalanga and Limpopo where this falcon breeds – usually against a high cliff in riverine forest.

The falcon is named after the Taita Hills in Kenya, where researchers first recorded it.

It usually hunts at sunrise and sunset and prefers smaller birds – it catches them in the air!

**The weight of a can of Coke after you've taken a sip.*

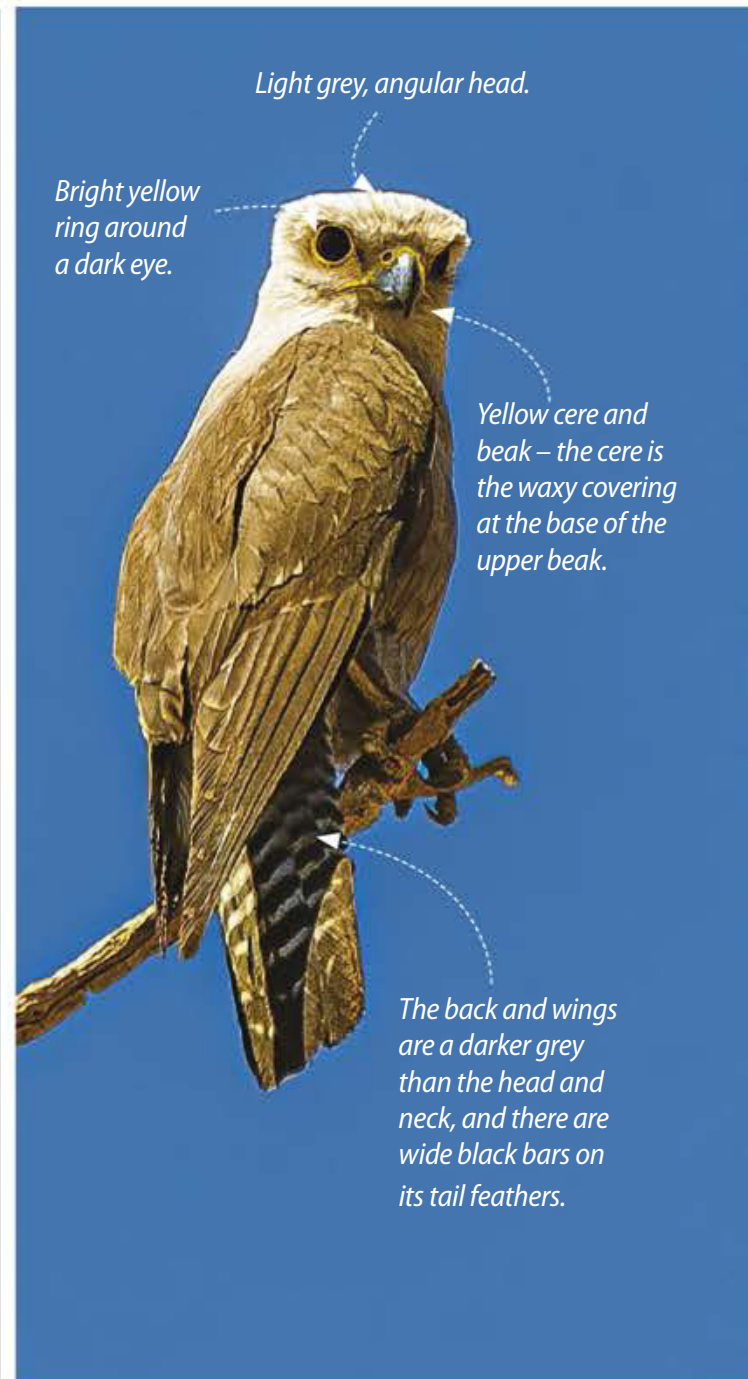


▲ **Black-shouldered kite**

Weight: 248 g | Length: 30 cm

Black-shouldered kites often gather in big flocks and they nest in trees or in reedbeds. When it sits on a branch or a telephone pole, it wags its tail up and down – apparently this scares away other raptors.

It mostly hunts small mammals like mice and rats – these kites are welcomed on farms where rodents can be a pest.



▲ **Dickinson's kestrel**

Weight: 220 g | Length: 29 cm

This kestrel is found in Limpopo. It likes to nest on top of dead palm trees or in the cavities of baobab trees.

It eats anything from insects and frogs to mammals and crabs. It always hovers nearby when there's a veld fire or when a field is being ploughed, hoping to swoop down when a small creature flees.



^ **Rock kestrel**

Weight: 215 g | Length: 32 cm

This kestrel is widespread and relatively common. You'll often see it hovering in the air while looking for prey.

It nests against cliff faces and will sometimes move into a crow's nest.

> **Red-footed falcon**

Weight: 170 g | Length: 30 cm

This species breeds in northern Asia and eastern Europe and is seen locally from spring to autumn, especially in Gauteng.

It often hunts insects in big flocks. It's not yet an endangered species, but their numbers are falling.

✓ **Gabar goshawk**

Weight: 194 g | Length: 32 cm

The gabar goshawk sometimes snatches up the nests of certain spiders and takes them to its own nest. The spiders and goshawks (and later, their chicks) live together in harmony. No one is sure why they do this – the spider webs might strengthen the goshawk's nest.

It usually hunts birds and sometimes catches big prey like spurfowl. It also rips open the nests of weavers and quelea to eat their chicks.



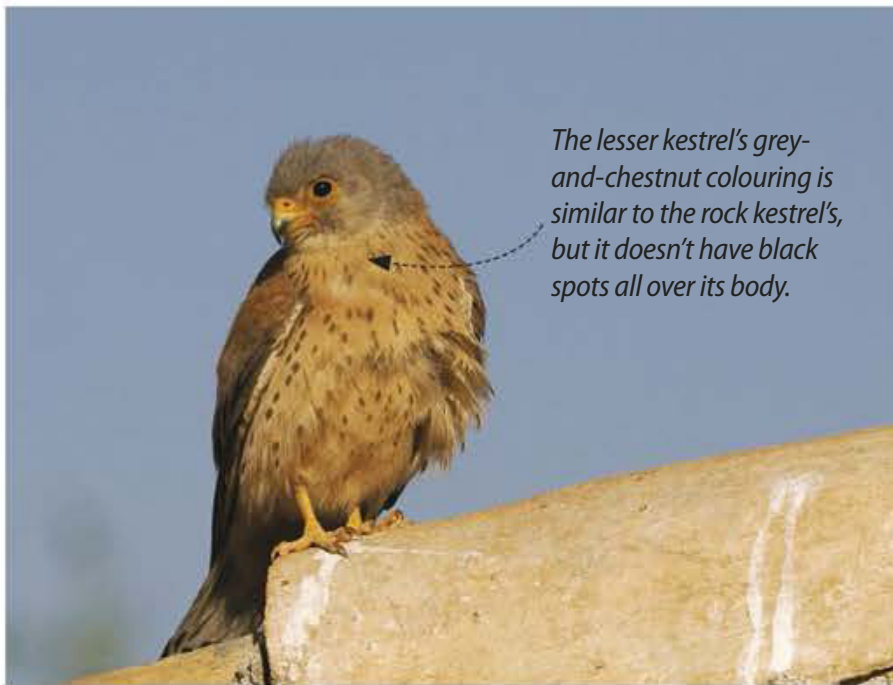
^ **African hobby**

Weight: 183 g | Length: 29 cm

The African hobby occurs in the northernmost parts of Limpopo, on the border with Zimbabwe.

It usually hunts at dusk and mostly eats insects (especially dragonflies), but it will also prey on small birds and bats.





The lesser kestrel's grey-and-chestnut colouring is similar to the rock kestrel's, but it doesn't have black spots all over its body.

^ **Lesser kestrel**

Weight: 155 g* | Length: 29 cm

The lesser kestrel occurs in noisy flocks and lives in open savannah and grassland. Hundreds of these raptors can roost together in trees. It usually hunts insects.

*The weight of a hockey ball.

> **Amur falcon**

Weight: 142 g | Length: 29 cm

Every year, the amur falcon flies all the way to Africa from northern Russia. It stops to rest along the way, until it reaches India. Then it has to fly for three or four days straight over the Indian Ocean, until it can land again in Africa.

It mostly eats locusts, dragonflies and flying termites.



When perched, this falcon looks like the red-footed falcon, but the male's cheek and chest are a lighter grey than the rest of its body.

Rufous underparts.

When the falcons are in flight, the difference between them is clear: the male Amur falcon has white underwing coverts; the red-footed falcon doesn't.



White breast and face.

Grey head.

Orange-red cere, eye ring and legs.

The male has a grey back and the female a chestnut back.

The bigger feathers on the tail and wings are black and white. These longer, wider feathers are called flight feathers.

< **Pygmy falcon**

Weight: 60 g* | Length: 20 cm

This is the smallest raptor found in southern Africa. The pygmy falcon lives in open grassland with camel thorn trees and mostly occurs in the Kalahari and Namibia.

It likes to breed in the big nests made by sociable weavers or buffalo weavers. A breeding pair can easily take over a quarter of such a nest, with several rooms and an entry tunnel below. The other birds don't mind because the falcons keep snakes and other predators away!

The pygmy falcon mostly hunts insects and lizards. Although it's so small, it's a voracious hunter and will spend all day on a branch scanning the ground for something to eat.

*The weight of one chicken egg!

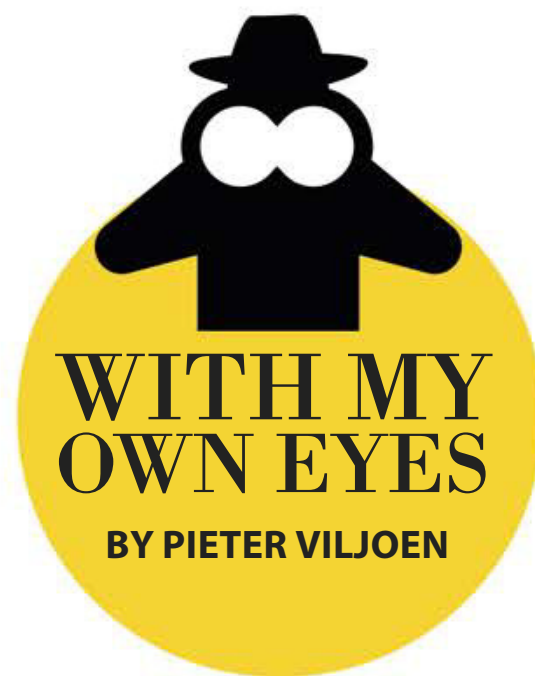
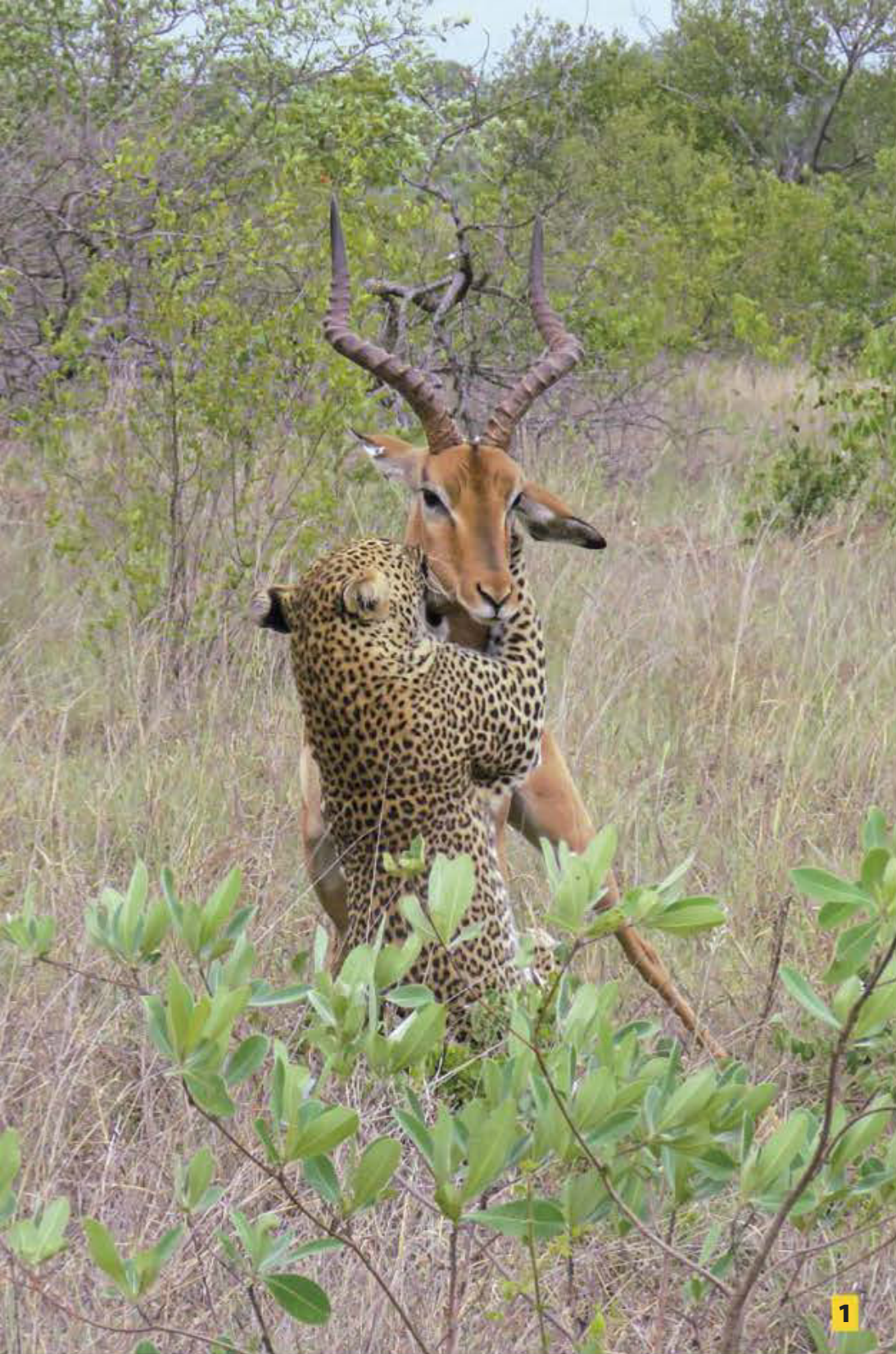
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IMPALA TAKEDOWN, KRUGER PARK

On the morning of 2 December 2020, my son Pieter and I were travelling west from Lower Sabie along the S21 in the Kruger Park. Another visitor to the park pulled over and told us there were lions next to the S65 and wild dogs next to the S1 – both nearby. We decided to head for the S65, which connects the H1-1 with the S1 south-west of Skukuza.

Pieter was behind the wheel and I was sitting in the back on the left. We're both keen wildlife photographers – he was using a Nikon D750 with a Sigma 60–600 mm lens and I had a Canon PowerShot SX60 HS.

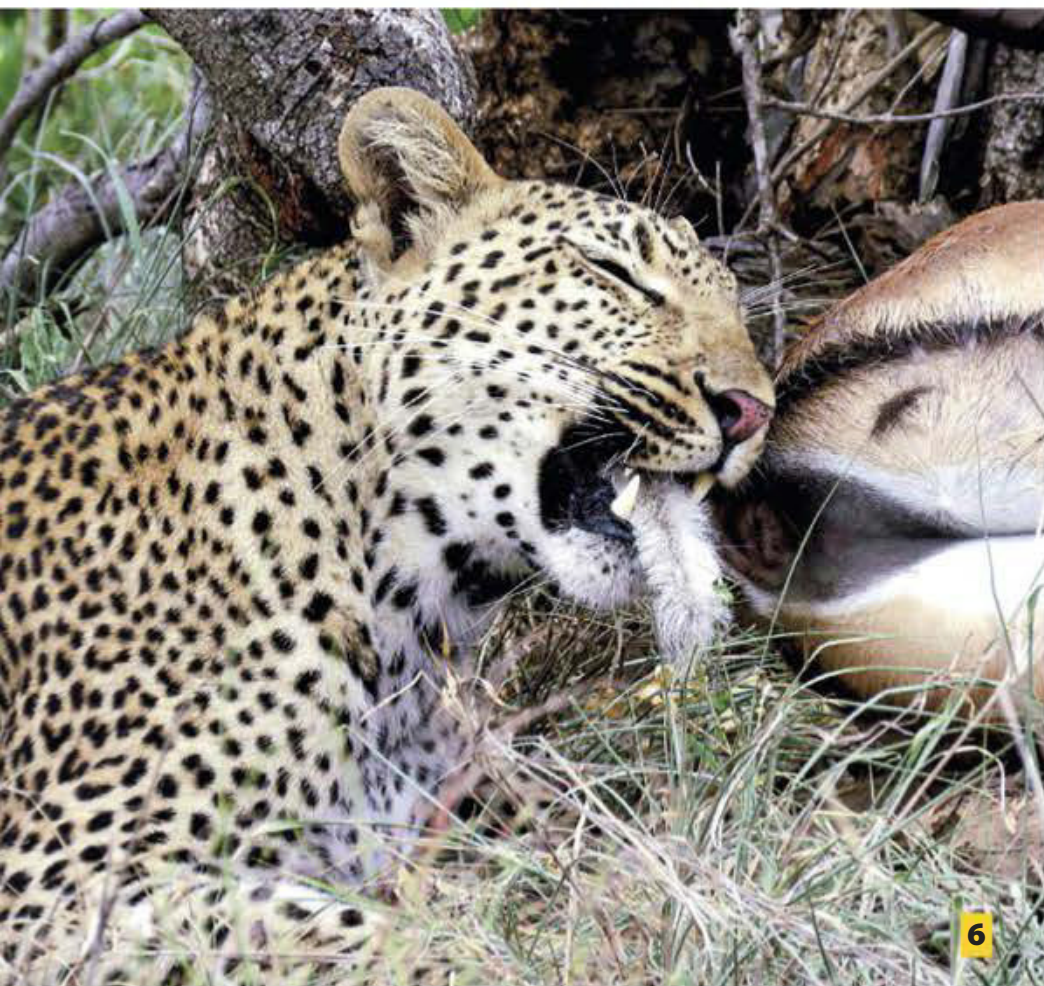
We were on the S65 when something burst from the bushes and crossed the road right in front of us. It happened so fast – at first we thought that two impalas were locked in battle, but we soon realised it was a leopard trying to bring down an impala. The leopard had clamped onto the impala's throat **1** and they were now to the left of us in a clearing. They were on my side of the vehicle so I had a great vantage point to take photos.

Besides the action right next to us, the veld was quiet – there were no other impala in the vicinity. The leopard (it was a female) dragged the impala away towards bushes to find shelter, but the antelope was still on its feet **2**. Then the impala lost its balance and the leopard gained the upper hand **3**.

In total, it was about 10 minutes from the moment we came across the incident until the moment the impala died and the leopard looked up for the first time **4**. The leopard dragged her kill away and settled under a tree. We were the only vehicle at the scene, but the leopard was uneasy and got up regularly to check the area around the carcass **5**.

She finally started to feed. It was interesting to note that she first bit off the impala's tail and ate the soft flesh between the buttocks **6**.

Pieter and I were both stunned. I've been visiting the park for 60 years and I've never seen anything like it. We watched the leopard for about an hour, and later the same day we also saw the lions and wild dogs. Jackpot!



PIETER VILJOEN SNR AND PIETER JNR, VENTERSDORP

I visit the Kruger as often as possible, and I try to go with my son at least once a year. I also hope to celebrate my 75th birthday in the park in 2023. If you love nature as much as I do, there's no better place than the Kruger.

The southern parts of the park are my favourite. There are beautiful trees next to the rivers and a variety of birds and animals to photograph.



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AFRICA

Part 4

TRAVEL JOURNAL

Stuck in a Nigerian soap opera

On her 20 000 km road trip from Europe to Zimbabwe, **Dot Bekker** navigates two of the toughest countries so far: Nigeria and Cameroon...



The main road from the Benin border to Lagos in Nigeria had "a few" potholes.

Opposite page, from the top: The Methodist Boys' High School in Lagos was founded in 1878 and its alumni include many top Nigerian political and business figures, and the well-known soccer player Sunday Oliseh.

The Cathedral Church of Christ Marina (established in 1869) in the Lagos town centre stands out amid the modern buildings and informal shops.

A mural at the Benin City National Museum. The museum houses artefacts from the Benin Empire (roughly 11 AD to 1897).

The traffic was insane. Whenever it ground to a standstill, I amused myself by chatting to the hawkers who wove up and down the lanes trying to sell their wares.

I decided to enter Nigeria in convoy with my American friends Laurie and Bruce Heimbigner. Our vehicles made an odd couple: my blue Ford Transit panel van, aka BlueBelle, and their huge Ford F-550 camper called Livingstone.

It was April 2019 and we'd spent most of our energy in the preceding week trying to get Nigerian visas. In the end, I managed to get a Visa on Arrival (VOA), which is really meant for passengers arriving by air; it would not be valid until it was endorsed by immigration at the airport in Lagos.

We got to the border early, forgetting that it was Palm Sunday. Several staff members were at church and we had to wait. I decided to get my Temporary Import Permit (TIP) organised so long.

The woman behind the counter was not very friendly, so I turned on the charm offensive and soon had her smiling. But I'd forgotten to check the cost of the TIP beforehand, and when I asked her, she quickly asked what I'd paid to get into Benin. I couldn't remember so I just said CFA 1 500. She said it was the same for Nigeria. I sensed something was amiss, but I paid her anyway.

Once I'd left the office, I realised I never got a receipt, so I turned back. My suspicions were confirmed when she told me there was no receipt for the TIP. She insisted that I wouldn't be asked for proof of payment at any checkpoint. Well, of course not, because no receipt was required – this TIP was supposed to be free! I had been duped...

Since CFA 1 500 equates to only about R40, I decided not to push the matter. I simply smiled and left.

Once our visas had been printed, we had to get to the airport, 90 km away. To ensure we didn't abscond, we were given an escort called Freddy, who would require refreshments and payment. He opted to drive with the Heimbigners: It was steaming hot and they had air conditioning. I was advised to follow closely behind so he could "keep an eye" on me.

The drive from the border to the airport took four hours in pouring rain. The water only added to the drama of potholes the size of swimming pools in a dual carriageway. There were checkpoints aplenty and Freddy regularly had to jump out and earn his keep to prevent them from holding us up.

At the airport, Freddy requested that we pay him before we got to the final office, supporting my suspicions about the payment being illegitimate. Nevertheless, we eventually crossed the final hurdle in a small area set aside for VOA applicants, and with stamps in our passports we breathed a sigh of relief.

By now it was late, and we were exhausted, so we coughed up an exorbitant amount to park in the open

airport parking lot for the night. This was probably yet another illegal payment, because we were told we had to be gone by 6 am...

Lagos traffic chaos

While staying at the Songhai Centre in Benin (*See issue #183. – Ed.*) I met a very kind man – the vice principal at the Methodist Boys' High School, Lagos. He invited us to park on their school grounds when we arrived in the city. It was a school holiday so we wouldn't be disrupting anything. The offer was a welcome one, since Lagos has no official campsites that cater for overlanders. On our way there, we stopped at the Cameroonian embassy to apply for more visas. The process went smoothly, and we were told we could return in the afternoon for our passports.

We decided to top up our supplies at a big mall with familiar shops like Shoprite and Game. Lagos is Africa's most densely populated city. The official population count is 27 million, but in reality there are probably far more people. The traffic was insane. Whenever it ground to a standstill, I amused myself by chatting to the hawkers who wove up and down the lanes trying to sell their wares. They had a great capacity for banter, and a good sense of humour – I even succumbed to a couple of impromptu purchases like a charging cable for my phone and some books.

After lunch, Laurie hopped in with me and we returned to the Cameroonian embassy while Bruce went off to find some oil specific to Livingstone's engine.

When we arrived at the embassy, we were told we had to wait for a meeting with the ambassador. This was a surprise... We were admitted to his office where he sat us down and told us that we *must not, under any circumstances*, attempt to cross the border into the region called the Southern Cameroons. The long-running civil war between English- and French-speaking Cameroonians (often referred to as the "War of Words") had been escalating in that part of the country. We'd have to make our way further north and cross to the town of Banyo through a tiny border post at Kan-lyaka on the Nigerian side.

I confess that I'd been thinking about the southern access route as it would save hundreds of kilometres, but we weren't getting our passports back until we gave the ambassador our word.

Back at the school, which is near the sea, we met the vice principal and other staff members who all addressed us with the customary "You are welcome" greeting. Knowing we had several days of tough driving ahead of us, we decided to do some laundry

and repairs. BlueBelle had a long-overdue oil change, right there in the yard.

On the day of our departure, I left early while it was still cool. The Heimbigners wanted to leave later, so we agreed to meet in Benin City, about 330 km away. I tried Google Maps for the first time. I hadn't used it since arriving in Africa, and Laurie had mentioned how great it was. But it lagged as I was trying to get onto the highway, meaning I missed my turn, and for the next 45 minutes I got snared in Lagos peak hour traffic.

I had an altercation with the police about traffic lanes and just as I got going again, I missed another Google turn and got stuck in the worst traffic jams I had ever experienced in my life – it took me more than seven hours to cover 20 km.

I arrived in Benin City late and exhausted.

A sleep did me good and I felt okay in the morning. Laurie, Bruce and I decided to visit the museum at the Royal Palace of the Oba, in the heart of the old part of Benin City. It was certainly worth the visit, but having read about the city's pre-colonial glory, I was disappointed to see so little of it was preserved.

At midday, we pressed on to Onitsha, 145 km away on the Niger River. The roads varied from good tar to a potholed mess. Along the way, I sensed that something wasn't right with BlueBelle. We negotiated permission to park in the compound of a local hotel and Bruce and I spent the evening trying to see if we could identify the issue with the van. But nothing jumped out at us.

It was an uneasy night. I woke early and managed to summon someone at the garage across the road. We discovered that my clutch was shedding bits of plastic – big trouble. By the time I had waited for someone to call someone to get someone else, Bruce arrived and we decided to try and get to Enugu, 112 km away in the Biafra region, where there was a Ford dealership.

BlueBelle didn't make it. Several kilometres short of Enugu, I lost my clutch completely. The Heimbigners came to the rescue and towed me into town, where we eventually ended up at a Radio Nigeria compound on top of a hill where their radio tower stood. The people we met were very helpful – they called a mechanic who arrived a couple of hours later and took out the old clutch. I paid him for a new one and he told me he'd return the next day.

I was miserable, and to top it off, the chill I'd caught a fortnight before had turned into a full-blown cold. But the mechanic was true to his word and returned the next day to fit the clutch allowing us to set off again the following morning.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: These volunteers helped Dot cross a bridge outside Banyo in Cameroon.

Dot and BlueBelle eye up the safest route through a gnarly section of road near the Nigeria/Cameroon border.

On their way to the Nigeria/Cameroon border, Bruce Heimbigner and Dot check the structural integrity of a makeshift bridge.

This was one of the better bridges they encountered on that same road.

Kidnap Alley and a panic attack

We were now heading for a stretch of road with a fearsome reputation among overlanders. The dirt track from Nigeria into Cameroon was so bad – we only had GPS co-ordinates to follow as there were no other signs to direct us. I had read all the horror stories about this road, none of which told of its successful navigation by a two-wheel-drive vehicle like BlueBelle. . .

But first we had to get safely through a section nicknamed Kidnap Alley, after its infamous history of criminals taking hostages for reward. We checked in with the police in Katsina-Ala to assess the situation. What ensued was something akin to a Nigerian soap opera. The police chief wouldn't let us pass as there had been a family dispute that had resulted in a shooting, and the culprit hadn't been caught. I was confident that this presented no problem to us since we weren't related to anyone in the dispute, but he disagreed with me.

We waited – for three days! During this time, there was an incident with a drunken police officer being chased about the grounds and another police officer who suggested I marry his brother. The Heimbigners got the US Embassy involved to further complicate matters into an almost international incident. We even had to take an armed police escort to buy eggs and bread at the local market. Eventually we were permitted to leave, but with a 14-man armed escort in two big 4x4s!

This was definitely overkill, especially as we were obliged to fuel the vehicles and pay for the guards to be fed and watered. . .

Oh well, at least the drama was done and Kidnap Alley was behind us. We had one final overnight stop, at the local national park offices, before we'd leave the tar and find the notorious dirt track to the border.

At this point, I had a panic attack. I took some natural flower remedies to calm down and gave myself a stern talking-to. I was petrified of the road ahead, but there was no other alternative.

So, we set off. We were out of Internet range and drove for two days through the most pristine landscape with almost no habitation. The only other vehicles I saw were motorbikes and huge six-wheeled machines, which served as taxis.

We decided to take it very slowly, stopping at every obstacle to inspect it before driving through. We walked the rutted and rocky terrain, and tested several bridges made of cobbled-together planks.

BlueBelle was lighter and nimbler than Livingstone and she did a sterling job, but one stretch was so bad that I had to leave the track and cut through a field, scaring some cows as I did. The slippery grass

was tricky, but with a push from Bruce and a helpful motorcyclist, I made it.

Approaching the Cameroon border post was nothing short of miraculous. Thankfully, both border offices were functional and processed us without a hitch.

But we soon discovered that our travails were not over. . . When we assessed the maps at our overnight stop next to the border police station, we discovered that there was still a 40 km section of dirt road to navigate before we got to tar again, and *three* rivers to cross – none with bridges!

Cameroon and jolly expats

Each river was a massive challenge. The banks had turned to slushy mud where vehicles had driven into or out of the water. We spent a long time checking and double-checking the approaches and discussing how crucial momentum would be, and lo and behold I managed to conquer them all. Only when I arrived in Banyo and saw tar again did I realise that I'd done it.

At this point, I parted ways with the Heimbigners. We were happy to travel together but also happy to be on our own. I had so much to thank them for, and we remain friends to this day.

After all the stress of the previous weeks, I relaxed for a while at a sweet monastery in a coffee plantation near the town of Foumban. I listened to the evening matins in the cool shade of trees, cleaned a tonne of red dust out of the van, washed everything, and rested.

My next stop was Douala, about 350 km away, where I met an ex-Zimbabwean called Eric, who was in charge of a big oil and gas corporation. He arranged accommodation, took care of my medical needs (a filariasis-infected mosquito bite had led to a worm eating its way through my elbow) and fixed a slow puncture on my front tyre, all the while generously plying me with food and drink.

He and his group of expat buddies were great fun, although I had some trouble keeping up with the drinking. . .

I set off again after five days and made a brief stop at a Christian orphanage in the capital of Yaoundé, before deciding to head for the border. I hadn't enjoyed my time in Cameroon much: The police had harassed me constantly about my right-hand drive vehicle, which was apparently illegal despite my valid TIP. Each harassment was probably an attempt at bribery, but I'd been too incompetent at French to understand – much to their irritation.

Each river was a massive challenge. The banks had turned to slushy mud where vehicles had driven into or out of the water.



LAURIEHEIMBIGNER





The rainforest closed in the further south I drove. The road was narrow and there were lots of motorbikes on the road and many large trucks passing at great speed. On my way to the border, I watched in horror as a truck overtook me and pushed a motorbike off the road – the man and his bike flipped into the air like matchsticks.

I immediately pulled over, grateful that there were people in the field nearby, and everyone ran to the man's aid. I have no medical training and I found that everyone around me only spoke French or the local dialect. I did manage to understand that there was no hope of an ambulance, and the nearest hospital was some 40 km back.

I indicated that I would take the bleeding man to the hospital. BlueBelle had originally been a community ambulance – she fulfilled her role once again as we belted back the way I'd come.

At the hospital, they wouldn't take the injured man out of the van without someone buying gloves for the hospital staff. This was understandable, but the injured man was in no condition to speak and probably didn't have any cash (nor did the man who had accompanied me), so I handed over some coins to get the job done.

He was finally admitted, assessed, and we were told that he would be okay. It was still only 9am, so I dropped my guide back at the village and continued to the border with Gabon.

The last checkpoint in Cameroon offered a surprise. There were a couple of vehicles ahead of me and it was taking some time to process them, so I sat back, knowing there was no point getting annoyed.

As I waited, a very smart-looking officer approached me from a building and I prepared myself for the usual routine: papers, questions, proposals, propositions... But instead, he asked if he could invite me for a drink.

This was a first for me at a checkpoint! I was dubious but curious, so I pulled over and we walked to a shop selling cold drinks, beer and food. I declined the beer but agreed to a Coke. I was uncertain of his intentions, but it was all quite innocuous and we had some interesting discussions about Cameroon and Zimbabwe and Africa in general.

About 45 minutes later, I confessed that I needed to leave if I wanted to cross the border and get to my overnight stop. I took a souvenir photo of us and continued on my way, bemused at what had just occurred.

Yup, Africa always had a surprise up her sleeve!

Next instalment: *Gabon, Republic of Congo and DRC. For Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal, see issue #181. For The Gambia, Guinea and Ivory Coast, see #182. For Ghana, Togo and Benin, see #183.*



Opposite page, from the top: BlueBelle and Livingstone parked at the border post between Nigeria and Cameroon. On her journey through Africa, Dot met Laurie and Bruce Heimbigner, and their Ford F-550 truck. Together, they travelled through Nigeria and Cameroon. The entrance gate to the Royal Palace (built in 1917) in Foumban, Cameroon. It depicts the insignia of the Kingdom of Bamoun: a double-headed snake encircles two cow bells and a spider in the centre.

This page: BlueBelle negotiates a causeway on the border route, Cameroon. At the end of her trip through Cameroon, Dot had a chat and a drink with a friendly official at a checkpoint.



COUNTRY GUIDE



NIGERIA

Capital: Abuja

Languages: English, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulfulde, Ibibio, Kanuri, Tiv

Population: 216 million

DOT SAYS: *The people were funny, kind and generous.*



CAMEROON

Capital: Yaoundé

Languages: French, English, Camfranglais, Fulfulde, Chadian Arabic

Population: 27,5 million

DOT SAYS: *A country at war with itself, split down Anglophone and Francophone lines.*

MEET DOT BEKKER

Dot Bekker is a business coach and author. Her almost nine-month, 20 000 km journey started just before her 60th birthday and took her from Spain through 17 African countries until she arrived back in her native Zimbabwe in August 2019. Her memoir, *Going Home to Africa*, is available from goinghometoafrica.com for R350 plus courier cost.

Follow her on Facebook and Instagram: [@goinghometoafrica](https://www.facebook.com/goinghometoafrica)

TRIP COSTS

Note: *Dot travelled in 2018 – 19 and this should be treated as a rough guide. Prices would have changed.*

VISAS: You have to apply for a Nigerian visa in your home country. I couldn't, which made securing this visa a very stressful process. I paid for a service that organised the VOA (US\$100, about R1 640), but I also paid for an online VOA (US\$70, about R1 150), which never came through. I got a visa for Cameroon at the embassy in Lagos for US\$75 (R1 230).

BORDER CROSSINGS: Neither Nigeria nor Cameroon charge for a Temporary Import Permit (TIP) for a vehicle. (I got duped into paying for one upon entering Nigeria.)

ACCOMMODATION: There were hardly any formal tourist campsites on my route through Nigeria and Cameroon. I stayed at a school, in hotel compounds, outside a national park office, in a small village, at the border, at a monastery, with friends, and at an orphanage. Overnight rates were in the region of US\$5 – 10 (R82 – R164).

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Why do people want to get so
sweaty in the Kruger Park?

Jon Minster momentarily
steps back from his braai.

Late afternoon in Letaba is a special time. An elephant strides down to the river in front of the rest camp, trunk swaying. A croc slips silently into the water. A hippo grunts. A heron wades in, looking for a frog. There's no wind: It's so still that you could drop a mopane leaf and it would land right at your feet. Everything is golden – that special kind of Kruger gold that seems to exist nowhere else on earth.

Beep! The silence is broken as a middle-aged man in Lycra pants bursts around the side of our chalet. His shoes thump and he gulps great mouthfuls of Lowveld air. He sounds like a buffalo bull on the run from a pride of lions. He swipes his hand across his forehead – there's a wet slap as sweat hits the sand. He pauses briefly to consult his beeping sports watch. "ONE AND A HALF KAYS!" he yells over his shoulder. Moments later, another runner bursts forth. Her face is as purple as the beetroots I'm busy wrapping in foil for the braai.

A grazing bushbuck lifts its head and a vervet monkey pauses the raid it's planning. Both animals seem as bemused as I am by the strange sight of these hyperactive humans.

Sports Watch and Beetroot disappear down the lovely brick path along the river, their shoulders bouncing, shedding perspiration. "SORRY! SORRY!" they shout as they dodge the regular sunset traffic of birdwatchers and late afternoon strollers.

Look, I'm a huge fan of a fitness routine. At home in Cape Town, I try to ride my bicycle three times a week. I understand the health benefits of regular exercise. But here in nature? When you're in a busy rest camp? On holiday? The behaviour of these devotees is so surprising that I assume they're eccentrics, as rare and strange as secretarybirds high-stepping through the veld.

But no. There are more. Here they come now, emerging from caravans and dome tents, rooftop tents and bungalows, chalets and rondavels. A mom and dad with two little runners in tow,

all wearing matching headbands. Another couple, slightly less sweaty. A lone stomper. Dusty Nikes, mirrored Oakleys, lumo shirts, hydration packs, compression socks, ear pods. Runner after runner hurtles around the side of our chalet and bobs away down the river path.

I start noticing patterns: There's the headband family again – starting on lap two. And there's the lone stomper again. He's overtaken Sports Watch, who seems to have lost Beetroot. No, there she is. She skids around the side of the chalet. "TWO POINT EIGHT KAYS!"

It's pandemonium in Letaba! Am I imagining it, or is the vervet monkey giggling?

The sun sets and the fitness fever subsides. Showers hiss and the runners emerge. They're damp and pink, hair steaming, wearing puff jackets and armed with braai tongs and Savanna Lights. Venus twinkles above the river and the Kruger breathes out slowly, settling into night.

They say you can learn everything there is to know about an animal by studying its behaviour. Scientists in the Kruger Park have spent decades decoding the habits of everything from aardvarks to zebras. We know why a warthog enters a burrow backwards (so it can fend off anything that tries to enter the burrow after it) and what that pile of white poop is (hyena). But when it comes to understanding the ways of *Homo sapiens*... Well, I feel like I still have a lot to learn.

There is another way. Some scientists like Jane Goodall attained enlightenment by immersion, literally living among her subjects, eating what they eat and doing what they do.

I think I'll have to pack my running shoes next time I visit the bush.

*At home in Cape Town, I try to ride
my bicycle three times a week.
I understand the health benefits of
regular exercise. But here in nature?
When you're in a busy rest camp?
On holiday?*

AFRICA AT ITS BEST

Cape Peninsula? Tsitsikamma? Nope, this is the Orange River, late in the afternoon as it meanders past Geelkrans, a popular sunset spot near Vioolsdrif in the Northern Cape.

The camps along this stretch of river – like The Growcery, Fiddlers Creek, Orange River Rafting Lodge and Oewerbos River Camp – are best known as starting points for river rafting trips, but they're also great overnight stops if you're travelling to Namibia. And if you're 4x4-ing into the deep wilderness of the Richtersveld World Heritage Site around Eksteenfontein, well, this is the perfect place to catch your breath.

PICTURE TOAST COETZER



A man wearing a brown beanie, a brown jacket, and grey trousers is sitting inside a green tent. He is looking out towards a rocky, snow-dusted mountain. A small stove with a pot and a yellow gas canister is on a table in front of him. A large black backpack is on the ground next to the tent.

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