A LAND OF THIRST
WITH BOUNDLESS WILDLIFE

by
Anton Crone
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South Africa is shaped like the head of a rhino. This pendulous nation at the very bottom of Africa bows under the weight of an immense continent. Its eye is the landlocked mountain kingdom of Lesotho; its ear: the Swazi nation, listening in on the wild sounds of Kruger National Park; its square mouth is the Western Cape drinking lazily at the Atlantic ocean. Heading north along its long grey lips, baked tarmac whisks you over a thousand kilometers of salt pans and scrub until you reach the white gravel and red sand of the Kgalagadi where the rhino’s horn splices the nations of Namibia and Botswana.

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in the Kalahari is like no other. The Kgalagadi were some of the first people to penetrate this part of the northern Kalahari. Kalahari is derived from the Kgalagadi word Makgadikgadi, meaning saltpans or great thirstland, and the name Kgalagadi remains long after the inhabitants have left.
Defined by two ancient rivers, the Nossob and the Auob which stopped flowing over forty years ago, it is a harsh and dry landscape. The thirsty rhino no longer lives here, but the hardier animals do, and they are bounteous in number.

I had always been drawn here by the images of creatures thriving in this harsh landscape. Kgalagadi is famous for its black-maned lions against red sand dunes, cheetahs sending up plumes of dust, oryx at war, mischievous meerkats and adorable Cape foxes. African wildcats are also often seen, reminding us of the hardy roots of their domestic cousin.

“Jumper” the lion sniffs the Kalahari air. He got his name for jumping the fence and causing havoc with farmer’s live stock.

Meerkats young and old will keep you entertained for hours in the Kgalagadi.

An African wildcat tom rests on the red sand.

All images ©Corlette Wessels
These cats were one of the highlights for my partner and I when we travelled there in the cool month of August. We watched wildcats dozing in the trees or parading on the red sand as the sun passed lazily overhead. We did it for hours. It was wonderful to observe, in its wildest form, a creature that often sleeps upon our laps. I guess it tugged at a longing in me that many humans have for returning to a simpler existence.

The sightings of wildcats punctuated our stay here beautifully as we moved from camp to camp over sandy and corrugated tracks that slowed us down so much that we saw more. Cape foxes had us enthralled as they dozed at the mouths of their burrows, meerkats entertained us like jesters, oryx always seemed ready to perform like gladiators as they lanced at one another and cheetah and lion added a royal veneer to the sparse landscape. For the first time in our lives, we even saw a leopard.
Our car was second in line at the Twee Rivieren Camp gate as we waited to be released into the park one chilly morning. Ahead of us was a professional photographer in his pick up. We had schemed on following him, knowing he would give us the best chance of seeing the more charismatic creatures.

We had spotted the photographer at Twee Rivieren campsite where he kept to himself. I admired his camera equipment and the ease of his solitude. He had obviously been here a long while as his camp routine was polished: everything within reach, ready to use and pack up in an instant.
That morning we followed him as he drove slowly into the park. We watched him scanning the scrub on either side of the track, looking left, looking right; pausing in some places and picking up speed in others. At one point he moved ahead quite rapidly, seemingly giving up on this area, and there on our left, just after the photographer disappeared, a beautiful leopard emerged from the scrub and ambled into the road ahead of us. It was as if it was hiding from the photographer, weary of all the attention. But now the coast was clear and we were seemingly insignificant with our measly point and shoot camera.
Our failure to carry a decent camera forced us to observe the leopard with our own eyes, and we relished this, watching its every step as it ambled beside our car for hundreds of metres. Then it went to ground and disappeared in some thickets. It will always live in my mind, that proud cat.

We saw the photographer later and told him about the sighting. He introduced himself as Hannes Lochner, laughed and said he knew that wily cat, and made off for the spot. As we returned to Twee Rivieren that evening, there Hannes was parked along the side of the track, reunited with the leopard which gazed at him from beneath a tree – the communion of photographer with the wild. I realised then that Hannes’ solitude wasn’t loneliness at all.

*Find practical information on Kgalagadi beneath the advert*
What to see and how to see it

Kgalagadi is famous for its black-maned lions, cheetahs, leopards, meerkats and Cape and bat-eared foxes. These are animals adept at living in an arid environment, but if you are desperate to see water dependent elephant and rhino, or large herds of zebra, this is not the place for you.
The game density is lower than the likes of Kruger National Park where almost every corner reveals a new creature. Here it is best to sit patiently at waterholes during the day combined with driving slowly in the morning or late in the afternoon.

The best thing to do is check the notice boards in the main camps like Twee Rivieren and Nossob where visitors often record their most recent sightings. Professional photographers and Kgalagadi specialists Hannes Lochner and Corlette Wessels do just that to keep track of wildlife and get the best opportunity for a great shot.

**When to go**

**Ideal times:** March to May – the end of the rainy season when animals are drawn to the riverbeds, or August to October, when the park is so dry that animals congregate at the waterholes.

**Best weather:** May to August when it is cooler – but it is cold at night. (Avoid school holidays – the busiest time of
year, unless you want to take the sprogs)

**Worst weather:** November to February which is extremely hot.

## How to get there

### Air

The closest domestic airport is in Upington: 265km by road from Twee Rivieren.

Tween Rivieren has a tarmac runway for light aircraft.

### Road

Most visitors from South Africa arrive by car at Twee Rivieren, or Mata Mata from Namibia. If arriving from Botswana via Mabuasehube gate, a 4×4 is essential as the track is very sandy.
A 4×4 is not essential for self-drive safaris along the main tracks in Kgalagadi, but it is advisable as the tracks are gravel with long stretches of corrugation and regular sand patches. It is advisable to deflate tyres to no less than 1 bar for an easier ride. The upside of the corrugation is that it slows you meaning you will spot more wildlife.

A four wheel drive vehicle is essential for all 4×4 trails (these must be booked in advance).

- **Cape Town** to Twee Rivieren: 1,076km
- **Johannesburg** to Twee Rivieren: 1,090km
- **Keetmanshoop** to Mata-Mata: 280km
- **Maun** to Kaa gate: 797km
- **Maun** to Mabuasehube: 787km
- **Gaborone** to Mabuasehube: 533km
- **Tsabong** to Mabuasehube: 115km
- **Tsabong** to Twee Rivieren: 310km

*Find out about booking and accommodation beneath the advert*
Booking and accommodation

To make the most of the park it is recommended you spend no less than 5 nights. There are so many aspects and accommodation options in the park, and the pace at which you can explore is slow.

Accommodation fills up months in advance, so book early. It is wise to book a year ahead for wilderness camps such as Urikaruus and Grootkolk. Camps are far apart and sandy and corrugated road conditions make travelling very slow. Make sure to book camps in a circular order to avoid criss-crossing the park. Staying at fewer camps is advisable to make the most of your experience.
Recommended Camps

There are a large variety of accommodation options and the key SanParks camps, namely Twee Rivieren, Nossob and Mata Mata, all offer camping and chalets.

**Twee Rivieren**
Twee Rivieren is great for families as it has a well stocked shop with food, beverages and everything for your camping needs, a swimming pool and information centre where informative slideshows are presented by guides during the school holidays.
Camping and chalets and family cottages are available.

**Nossob**
Nossob has a shady campsite – especially welcome in the summer months. It is also the end point for the Mabuasehube
Wilderness 4×4 Trail and the Bitterpan 4×4 Trail. Camping and chalets are available.

**Kalahari Tented Camp**

Kalahari Tented Camp, near Mata Mata offers luxurious yet reasonable self-catering accommodation in well appointed Bedouin-style tents. It is also the only wilderness camp with a swimming pool.

**!Xaus lodge**

![Image of !Xaus lodge](image)

©Scott Ramsay

This is a completely unique luxury camp owned by the local ‡Khomani San and Mier communities.

Here you can join guides on morning wilderness walks through the dunes, meet the legendary bushmen and learn about their way of life, and gaze at the stars in this, South Africa’s first protected dark-sky area. To make the most of the night sky, they have installed a telescope for astrology and cultural talks so that both the ‡Khomani San and the Mier can share their own distinct sky lore with lodge guests.
Ta Shebube Camps at Rooiputs on the Botswana side

Ta Shebube’s luxury camps are unique in the luxury they provide and their location on the Botswana side of the Nossob riverbed. Rooiputs is the more luxurious option and is constructed of a mix of wood, thatch, canvas and glass. Each chalet consists of a sleeping area with double or twin beds, a sitting area, en-suite bathroom an outside shower and an expansive veranda screened from the next door neighbour.

Ta Shebube Camps at Polentswa on the Botswana side
Polentswa differs in that it is a classic tented camp. Each tent has a sleeping area, a desk, en-suite bathroom and outside shower open to the desert and to the stars. The family unit and the desert suite/honeymoon suite are bigger and allows for a small sitting area.

**Campsite at Mpayathuthlwa Pan on the Botswana side**
This is pure wilderness. The camp is spartan and all supplies must be brought in. Like its sister camp Mabuasehube to the north, it is open to the elements and and it is common to see lions wandering through the camp at night. This is the ideal place for the self sufficient 4×4 wanderer and fantastic when combined with the Mabuasehube Wilderness trail to take in the rest of the incredible Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

About the author
ANTON CRONE quit the crazy-wonderful world of advertising to travel the world, sometimes working, sometimes drifting. Along the way he unearthed a passion for Africa’s stories – not the sometimes hysterical news agency headlines we all feed off, but the real stories. Anton has a strong empathy with Africa’s people and their need to meet daily requirements, often in remote environmentally hostile areas co-habitated by Africa’s free-roaming animals. His journey brought him to Africa Geographic where he is now Editor in Chief, and custodian of Africa Geographic online magazine.
**CORLETTE WESSELS’** passion for photography started as a child, influenced by her father “who took photos of everything”. Corlette’s husband gave her her first camera, a Minolta that changed her life. As Corlette’s interest grew she upgraded to new and better equipment. She aims to elicit an emotional response in the viewer. Her favourite place in the world is the Kgalagadi. Hers is a deep connection to the animals and bush – quite simply the love of her life. You can read more about Corlette’s adventures and see more of her photography on her [website](#).

**SCOTT RAMSAY** is always feeding us great images, stories and insights through his Africa Geographic blog series, taking photographs of the wild and interviewing the experts who
work in the protected areas he loves. Through his work, Scott hopes to inspire others to travel to the continent’s national parks and nature reserves, which Scott believes are Africa’s greatest assets and deserve to be protected at any cost, not only for their sake but for our own survival. Scott’s takes us on wonderful journeys, but if you haven’t yet been on one with him yet, this is the place to start: THREE YEARS IN THE WILD. You can read more about Scott’s travels and see more of her photography on his website.
I’m on my way to Nossob when suddenly this badger appears in the road with something in its mouth. I stopped
I’m on my way to Nossob when suddenly this badger appears in the road with something in its mouth. I stopped immediately, as they are very shy animals. I thought it was eating something. It put whatever it had down and then picked it up again and then walked off into the dunes. I only got 6 photos. Once back at camp while downloading my images I realised it was a baby badger! The most precious sighting I have ever seen in the Kgalagadi in 22 years.

View more of Corlette Wessels’ photography here
At Marie-se-Draai in Kgalagadi, there was a pride of lions with cubs. When I took this photo all the adults were out
I arrived at an empty waterhole at Kannaguass. I waited a bit, then this male arrived and went to the waterhole only to find
Life in a Land of Thirst
Cape fox pups playing close to their Rooiputs den.
Leopards in the Kgalagadi are always a very special sighting. Following the leopard research project, I always keep a copy
Life in a Land of Thirst
Aub River early morning following a cheetah on the hunt. I watched her stalk but she missed. I took note of where she
It was hot day in December and not much rain had fallen yet in the Kgalagadi. At Polentswa waterhole there were two
Early morning at the social weaver nests looking for the very special pygmy falcon. This guy, who shares his house with
Honey badgers are very shy and you are lucky if you see them. Close to Marie-se-Draai, this badger was so relaxed that I