

## **KALAHARI LEARNING CURVE**

### **An all girl expedition into the heart of big cat territory, the Central Kalahari, a little known expanse of nothing in the middle of the map of Botswana.**

It was exactly 2am when the roars blasted through the silence of the icy night. A winter moon slammed the silhouette of a fearsome Kalahari lion against the side of the tent, each whisker outlined in silver. As his vocal display of testosterone faded away into ominous grunts I realised I had been holding my breath for the duration of his displeasure. Suddenly the tent shook. “Wind” I mouthed at a pair of eyeballs, rolling white in the moonlight from the sleeping bag next to me. At least that was I hoped it was. As the sounds of lions out on the town bombarded us, I pondered on trivia such as whether shock really does numb the pain of being eaten alive, and just how much truth there was to the “Man Eaters of Tsavo” story. Then I realised that, like all good paranoid South Africans, I had locked the vehicle, so retreat from the tent (later dubbed the ‘Green Coffin’) was impossible. “Get a grip,” I told myself as I struggled simultaneously to suppress the overpowering urge for a cigarette and an instantaneous bout of fear-induced diarrhoea.

For four long hours the lions cavorted around the tiny tent. I began to hate lions. Eventually as the grey light of morning crept into the flimsy prison, I steeled myself to unzip the tent. Silence reigned. Slowly, lying flat on my stomach with my solid Maglite torch clutched firmly in my sweaty palm, I pressed a bleary eyeball to the opening. The area appeared lion-free. Shakily I extricated myself from the tent and fumbled for that much needed cigarette. A recce of the area revealed paw prints of at least five lions, ranging in size from tiny cubs to a set of prints that dwarfed my outstretched hand. At the risk of being labelled complete bush-wimps we decided discretion was the better part of valour and spent the next night in the vehicle. This proved a fortuitous decision as around 8pm, (safely esconsed in the vehicle this time) four members of the pride returned to terrorize the tourists, materialising silently like tall grey ghosts in the bright starlight.

This was my initiation to the Central Kalahari, a large blank space in the middle of the map of Botswana that had always gripped my imagination. An area made famous by Sir Laurens van der Post in his search for connection with the nomadic San people. A region as harsh as it is beautiful. A place that can kill you.

The Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) consists of a vast, waterless wasteland of dunes and savanna and is one of the few undeveloped areas of true wilderness remaining in southern Africa. So to fulfil my lifelong dream, I had sold my Golf and put down a deposit on a 4x4, stocked up with jerry cans, water containers, compass, maps and various other assorted camping paraphernalia, borrowed a GPS and undertook a very rudimentary amateur mechanics course performed by a semi-inebriated friend, and set off for the great unknown. My travelling companion, my unflappable, practical and humorous mother, was blissfully unshakeable in her faith of my off-road and survival skills. I never did tell her I rewrote my will the day before we left!

I had been warned that it was very easy to get lost in the CKGR, and that due to the road conditions and the remoteness of the area it is advisable to travel in convoy. Very practical advice which I chose to ignore in favour of blissful solitude. I was also told that the trip we were about to undertake was tantamount to suicide - just two females in the middle of nowhere with a box of spares (most of which we hadn't a clue what to do with). It was interesting to note that the most disparaging remarks came from fellow 4x4 owners who specialised in fishing trips with 'die manne.' I wrote it off as an ego thing, probably due to the fact that all they used their off-road vehicles for were carting crates of beer to their favourite fishing spots. I endeavoured to ignore their patronising smirks and pointed technical questions about the mechanics of my vehicle. Being of part Afrikaner decent, I was sure 'a boer would maak 'n plan', even a female one. It was now or never and I was determined to prove to myself that this type of journey could be undertaken by the fairer sex. It was a decision neither of us would regret.

We entered the CKGR through Khutse Game Reserve in the south and all vestiges of civilisation rapidly faded away as we passed the tiny wooden sign that proclaimed the entrance to the park. The relatively good sand tracks deteriorated and driving became challenging to say the least. After coming to a sudden stop I realised that the suspension of the vehicle was not high enough for the towering 'middle-mannetjie'. For the past few kilometres I had ploughed up a pyramid of sand in front of the truck which defied all forward movement. Grass roots were also knotted around the propshaft and progress was impossible. The Kalahari had also enjoyed the best rains in about 30 years the previous summer, which resulted in grass higher than the bonnet. Not only did this make the track virtually invisible, but the seeds clogged the radiator and frequent 'grass details' were necessary to clear the dried grass from around the exhaust pipe to prevent the vehicle from catching fire. After grinding down this road from hell for a few hours, a dripping sound penetrated my concentration. Liquid was pouring from beneath the vehicle. A gas cooker had been flung against a 25l plastic water container and neatly slicing it open down the side. The water which had not been soaked up by our sleeping bags, bled away into the thirsty Kalahari sand.

Exhausted, we pitched camp where we were. In the CKGR there are demarcated campsites, which one should, if possible use. As they consist of nothing at all, they are often easily missed unless one has a GPS bearing on the locality. This remote reserve does not offer much (nothing in fact) in the way of creature comforts, but I have discovered while travelling through Africa that no facilities at all are often better than some facilities, particularly toilets. (An interesting phenomenon which I contemplated notifying the medical profession of, is that constipation can be cured instantly merely by crouching over a hole in the ground amongst shoulder high grass in lion country, armed only with a toilet roll and spade!)

A welcoming party of starlings and weavers soon gathered around our makeshift camp and peered with interest at our soggy sleeping bags hung over a bush. The setting sun silhouetted a herd of giraffe as they strode across a

nearby pan with an elegant, measured gait. As jackals yapped eerily at a sliver of moon, showers of stars crackled across the inky sky. The San were right, the stars could sing, you just needed to be in the right place to hear them.

It was our first night back in the Green Coffin after the lion incident and sleep was somewhat elusive. As I tried without success to banish all thoughts of big cats, the tent suddenly bulged inwards, knocking over the gas lamp. My mother was snoring loudly, blissfully unaware of my predicament. I jabbed her with my torch without response. Something large and hairy appeared to be licking the tent. After yet another traumatic night we discovered our nocturnal visitor had been a brown hyaena who had slaked his thirst on the dew that formed on the outside of the tent.

The dawn was pink and frosty, the long grass white like snow. Larks were everywhere and exploded in front of the tyres as we drove along. The Kalahari seemed to be literally crawling with lions. That morning we spotted a lioness with two tiny cubs as she crossed the road, while a honeymoon couple fornicated vociferously and quite brazenly beneath a bush a few metres away. During the afternoon we watched two more lionesses with teenage cubs as they unsuccessfully chased guinea fowl. Often, due to the height of the grass, all that could be seen were the tops of their manes as they bobbed along, a sight that completely destroyed all enthusiasm for the frequent 'grass details' we had to perform.

We passed several San villages in the southern part of the CKGR, each settlement dwarfed by enormous green water tanks. We marvelled at the sheer tenacity of their grasp on their arid homeland as they eked out a fragile existence in the face of civilisation's ambivalent march towards technological sophistication. Their hunter-gatherer roots all but forgotten, these people have adopted a more sedentary, but no less precarious lifestyle. Their skin shelters swapped for simple grass and mud huts, their ostrich egg waterbottles now multicoloured plastic drums and their nomadism now rooted in humble villages. I felt saddened that these cheerful denizens of the Kalahari would roam the wilderness no more, but then I supposed that some happily trade places with me to live in the city and join the rat-race, while I spent thousands of rands trying to escape it. It seemed too contradictory for simple explanation.

We waved goodbye and the tiny families shrank in the rear view mirror, swallowed up by their vast thirstland. The San have been allowed to remain within the boundaries of this great park after its proclamation, for although they have for the most part abandoned their traditional lifestyles, their psyche remains very reliant on their natural environment. I was deeply concerned to learn that the Botswanan Government was intending moving them from their birthplace, due not to unsustainable hunting or farming practices, but to appease certain tourists who blindly object to the presence of human beings, however inconsequential their impact, in game reserves. When this happens it will indeed ring in the cultural death of one of the last races of true innocents left on this earth.

As we drove deeper into the Kalahari the road became a nightmare. Due to our water shortage, washing was at a premium, a luxury to be enjoyed every other day or so. Fine sand soon clogged our eyes, thickened our hair and formed a film over our skin. It became increasingly hot and the promise of a much-needed bath loomed in the thunderclouds on the horizon. However, when it did eventually rain, the icy drops sent us running for the vehicle, thoughts of soap quickly banished.

Late that afternoon as the sun dowsed the Kalahari in stormy, sulphuric light, the vehicle sank, axle deep in sand as we struggled up a particularly taxing dune. After digging frantically I managed to coax the vehicle forward another few metres, only to bog again, this time for good. My mother had been heaving from behind and not noticing any discernable effect, I yelled "Are you pushing!" irritably from behind the wheel. I was answered by a string of muffled expletives (quite unbecoming for someone her age I thought) from where she lay, flat on her face in the sand. "Yes," I was tartly informed, she had indeed been pushing, hard!

We took turns holding the torch and digging, much to the interest of a Cape fox. Finally, exhausted, we gave up and retired to the vehicle with a reassuring bottle of whisky. I decided I must have masochistic tendencies. Who in their right mind would pay over R200 a day to travel on roads that a camel challenge entrant would find taxing, and then spend the night bogged down in a truck in the middle of nowhere, halfway up a sand dune?

We drove off with ease the next morning after jacking up each tyre individually and packing branches underneath. The sight of two wild dogs loping down the track further enhanced our buoyant mood. We travelled west and around midday passed through the Xade settlement, sprinkled with fields of yellow tamma melons. Our route traversed the courses of several fossil riverbeds and their hard surfaces rendered driving pleasurable. The largest of these ancient watercourses, Deception Valley, was several kilometres wide and once fed the Makgadikgadi Lake system. The area was bewitchingly beautiful. The excellent rains had pushed up nutritious grass on the pans which in turn attracted large herds of gemsbok. Secretary birds stalked about like supermodels on a catwalk and during the night the vehicle was surrounded by the ghostly faces of hundreds of springbok as they trekked down the riverbed.

We spent several days in the northwest of the park and it grew progressively hotter. Heat bounced off the fossilised banks of the shrivelled riverbed and the glare was blinding. Mirages wobbled on the horizon and ostriches floated above the heatwaves, distorted blobs on spindly legs.

We were greeted at the campsite where we had intended spending our last night, by the longest, most belligerent looking black mamba I have ever had the misfortune to meet. It struck viciously at the vehicle, the black interior of its mouth clearly visible. We beat a hasty retreat, poison dripping from the bullbar, and relocated to a more attractive, reptile-free spot with a panoramic view of Deception Valley.

That night, over a roaring fire, we listened to a cacophony of jackals and yet more lions, and I reflected on the journey. It had been an intensive exercise in self-discovery. I had achieved a goal I had long ago set out to achieve, that of total self-reliance. No longer would I be content to be a passenger on someone else's journey. Although the road had been long and difficult, I knew the trip had restored something that we, as part of modern society, lose over time due to the impositions of social norms while striving for the trappings of success. I felt I had returned to a life more ordinary, where simple things like rain were cause for celebration. I was deeply thankful for having experienced all the trials and tribulations and the opportunity for independence and personal growth. See you on the road.

### **Visitors Information**

Visitors to all these reserves must be totally self-sufficient. A 4x4 vehicle is essential and trips should be undertaken preferably in a convoy of two vehicles. It should be remembered that these areas are extremely remote and a breakdown could result in death. Visitors should keep to the road AT ALL TIMES, not only to avoid damaging the environment, but so that in the event of a breakdown, you will be visible to passing vehicles that they may render assistance. Thick sand in the dry season and glutinous mud during the rains render driving challenging at all times in the Kalahari. These roads are NOT for novice drivers or 'macho' types wishing to test drive their vehicles. All rubbish must be taken out with you and if no toilet facilities exist a hole must be dug and the waste burnt and then buried as hyaenas dig up excrement. All camp fires must be carefully extinguished as fires in the dry grasslands of the Kalahari can be devastating and life threatening. A good map of the area (the Shell Tourist Map of Botswana by Veronica Roodt) is essential and a Global Positioning System advisable. It must be stressed that getting lost in this region is a very real possibility. Sufficient fuel and water must be carried for the duration of your visit as fuel stations, waterpoints and shops are not only unreliable, but nonexistent in some areas. Other essentials include a comprehensive medical kit (malaria occurs throughout the region), all your camping gear, spares for your vehicle, two spare tyres, fire extinguisher, spade and high-lift jack. Grass seeds after the rainy season can be a problem and cause the engine to overheat. A screen should be placed in front of the radiator to prevent clogging and a sturdy piece of wire carried to clear grass caught in the protection plates under the vehicle, particularly around the exhaust. Heat from the exhaust can cause the grass build-up to ignite resulting in your vehicle going up in smoke before your eyes. Camp ONLY at designated areas and NEVER disturb animals at water sources.

### **Contacts**

Bookings may be made through Botswana Parks and Reservations Office, PO Box 20364, Boseja, Maun, Botswana tel: (09267) 661 265 or fax: (09267) 661 264.

### **LIST OF CAPTIONS**

1. The road to Khutse is a veritable sand highway
2. Campsite in Khutse – notice our feeble attempts at keeping the lions away with logs!

3. My mother points out the spoor of lion at our campsite at Mabuasehube – way to close for comfort.
4. A dozing lioness.
5. The sign is the only indication you are entering the Central Kalahari Game Reserve.
6. The semi-desert svanna of the Central Kalahari with a storm brewing in the background.
7. We were bogged down for eleven hours here and spent the night in the truck.
8. The attractive sesame bushes around Piper's Pans are only found in this location in Botswana.
9. A typical campsite in the Central Kalahari.
10. Mabuasehube Pan – a rarely seen signpost.
11. The attractive sesame bushes around Piper's Pans are only found in this location in Botswana.
12. The attractive sesame bushes around Piper's Pans are only found in this location in Botswana.
13. Sunset behind a heavily browsed shephard's tree.
14. A herd of springbok with a welcome rain storm in the background.
15. Due to the nutritious grasses on the pans, springbok were seen in great abundance around Piper's Pans.
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17. A picturesque herd of gemsbok gallop off behind a termite's mound.
18. Deception Valley – a large expanse of nothing – just the place to lose yourself in.
19. These 'tree islands' in Deception Valley provide important food and shelter for a variety of small creatures. It is inadvisable to use them as a campsite as you will disturb the wildlife.
20. A typical Kalahari sun sets behind a camelthorn tree