

# camping

## AT ONE WITH THE KGALAGADI

FRANSJE VAN RIEL

THE streets of Cape Town are uncommonly quite shrouded in the grey pre-dawn light, there is barely any traffic on the road as we head out on to the N1 at 5.30am to start our Kgalagadi adventure.

Once we're on the N7 to Malmesbury, directions for our first part of the trip are a piece of cake; keep straight, turn right at Springbok on to the N14 and head for Upington. Anyone can do the 900-plus kilometres in his or her dreams.

Still, it's a long road to travel, and my travel companion Frank and I stop for a simple lunch of toasted sandwiches and salad at a modest restaurant in Springbok before carrying on.

Eventually reaching the outskirts of Upington at about 5.30pm, we check into one of the town's many B&Bs before driving to the shopping centre to stock up on water and food. After grabbing a pizza, we are back, turning in for an early night.

It's already quite warm at 7am the following morning as we prepare to leave. And hot by the time we have done the last 265km to check in at the Kgalagadi entrance gate at Twee Rivieren.

After purchasing some cool drinks at the shop, filling up on petrol and releasing pressure from the car tires we drive leisurely on the grave road across the dunes for the odd 20km until stopping momentarily at its crest, we take in the stunning view of the dry Auob River.

It's a sight I have been fortunate to behold a number of times, but it never fails to excite or impress me.

The Kgalagadi Gemsbok Park was established in 1931 to protect



THE LOCALS: Lions stroll along the road to Mata Mata camp.

large herds of migratory game and to curb the indiscriminate slaughter that was taking place. During the mid-1990s, the Kalahari's 900 000 hectares merged with the adjacent Gemsbok Park on the Botswana side to form today's gargantuan 3.6 million hectare Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

The main attraction factor are the two dry rivers, the Auob and Nossob, both of which originate in the Anas Mountains near Windhoek until they merge at Samevloeing, about 6km north of the Twee Rivieren Rest Camp.

Laden with suitcases, cooler boxes, water drums and several boxes containing fresh and tinned food, we meander north across the sandy gravel road towards the Kalahari Tented Camp. Although the



BATHTIME: A female cheetah grooms her cub.

distance is relatively short, about 71km, it takes us a good couple of hours before we reach the camp.

With more than 14 tents, the camp is quite a bit bigger than the park's other five unfenced



IN THE SCENE: Staying at the Kalahari Tented Camp is camping in style.

wood fire indicates that some of the camp's other guests have already got their braais going. We do the same; after all, is there anything better than sitting by the fire with an orchestra of barking geckos as the sun goes down?

Settling down with a chilled glass of Sauvignon Blanc as the coals sizzle slowly grey, I notice some movement from the corner of my eye. "Look, there's a lion," I inform Frank, rather passively. Focusing in the direction of my hand, he jumps up and heads for the safety of the tent.

Sure enough, a large black-maned male calmly saunters up the dune, straight towards us. Strangely enough, I feel entirely dispassionate; there is no fear, no elation. As if hypnotised, I simply keep still as the huge lion comes closer, stride by stride, until he has drawn exactly parallel to where I stand.

There are perhaps only 4m between him and the low wall that acts as the perimeter area of the kitchen and braai area. He could jump it before I could even say lion, but all he does is turn his head to face me as he walks directly past.

For the briefest of moments, our eyes meet; a *samevloeing*, if you like, of two opposite worlds. There are no words, no thoughts, and no feelings until he disappears behind the kitchen wall and vanishes into the Kalahari night. Only then, my hands begin to shake and I let out snorts of nervous laughter.

To me, the incident is indicative of the Kgalagadi magic, where at one moment, nothing happens, while the next leaves you breathless.

● See [www.sanparks.org/parks/kgalagadi/](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kgalagadi/)

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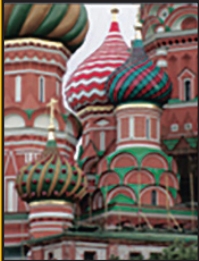


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