

TOP ARCHITECTURAL AWARD FOR BITTERPAN WILDERNESS CAMP

Photos

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Bitterpan, the new wilderness camp in Kgalagadi, has received a top accolade from the Pretoria Institute for Architecture. The institute's awards of commendation are made annually in recognition of outstanding architectural design. As regional winner, Bitterpan is now a nominee for the national award by the SA Institute of Architects to be announced later in 2003.

Elevated above the red sands of the Kalahari, suspended in time, lies a small and exclusive camp on wooden stilts, called Bitterpan.

Bitterpan lies in the heart of the wilderness, opening up a new route through the Kalahari dunes from Nossob to Mata-Mata. It can only be reached with 4x4 vehicles.

The camp is surrounded only by the silence of the great Kalahari. Here is the place to unwind, rest and find yourself...

The panel of judges couldn't help being touched by the unity between nature and this lovely place and the following poem spontaneously came from their hearts:

Kgalagadi

Two hours north of Upington one enters a special land flanked by ancient rivers - most often dry.

Water-retaining depressions have long since dried out leaving perfectly flat and salty pans.

Beneath the surface water takes refuge from the evaporative sun.

The landscape is parched - cohesive soils have become loose windswept sands which sculpt an ever-changing landscape.

Game and the San have mutated to survive this harsh environment.

Sun-driven pumps have raised the subterranean water to give new life to this wilderness.

Roads and tracks have given new access to this wilderness.

Bitterpan

- At the heart of it all
- Encircled by a sparsely vegetated dunescape
- A home of the desert lions
- A tented camp

Facing the pan, downhill, and the desert sunset, west

Touching the ground gently

Simple, modest and neatly detailed

An eloquent and evocative intrusion

(Please click on the photos for a larger view)



Central Facilities Look-out



Chalets front



Fireplace outlook



Fireplace



Walkways



Whole elevation

According to the panel of judges the camp was judged with these criteria in mind:

1. First impressions - the magic
2. Conformity with brief
3. Choice of materials & execution of details
4. Planning
5. Sustainability/efficiency
6. Architecture/Aesthetics/Space/Volumetric arrangements
7. Site response and integrations with context
8. Image/Identity
9. Innovation/Resourcefulness

The choice of architect was crucial to the success of the project. For those who know him, there was no doubt that Niel Crafford and his team were the best qualified for this very unique endeavour. The great success of this project can be traced back directly to the love of this architect for the wide-open spaces, which he so often visits with his 4x4. His love and dedication melts into a work of art ... capturing nature in design... bringing together facets of the Kalahari, like simplicity, and the great outdoors ... He also managed to link construction with the unspoilt Kalahari, not only blending in with, but enhancing the Bitterpan.

In the architect's own words:

"We were thrilled when we were commissioned to design and oversee the construction of the Bitterpan Wilderness Camp in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. The camp overlooks (in a north-westerly direction) Bitterpan, a seasonal pan in the Kalahari Desert. It is a place of such austere unique nature that it was obvious from the outset that we would have to extend ourselves in the execution of the project so as not to detract from the sense of place the pan possesses."

The project was financed by South African National Parks through the Industrial Development Corporation. The camp is only accessible by 4x4 and as such is used by groups travelling together. The brief called for a central kitchen/dining/lounge unit with connected sleeping units for eight, one being disabled friendly.

The camp was conceived as a central facility with sleeping facilities clustered around – a typical 'hen-and-chickens' model. It was clear that we would have to utilize natural materials as far as possible and try to limit the impact of the camp on the immediate surroundings.

The camp was constructed using poles and timber decking with walls of welded mesh covered with reeds or canvas and shade netting. Chromadek corrugated-profile roof sheeting was fixed to the bottom of the pole beams as ceiling and waterproofing. Welded mesh was fixed over the beams. Reeds fixed over this mesh shade the roof. Chromadek corrugated-sheeting was used on the interior of walls to prevent wind penetration in certain areas.

The design responds to the harsh climate in a number of ways. The lightweight construction eliminates thermal mass; the reeds over the beams shade the roof and provide a ventilated cavity. By raising the building from the ground, excellent ventilation is ensured.

A 5 000-litre water tank was required. This serves as a landmark in the desert and as an elevated lookout point for those brave enough to scale it. Electricity is provided by means of a solar installation. Hot water geysers and stoves are gas fired.

The raised deck, apart from allowing sand to fall through the floor and providing ventilation, also provides the illusion of safety in this unfenced camp in an area famous for its roaming prides of lion. Gates were provided to all entrances and welded mesh fixed between the handrails and deck. This provides a 'lion-proof' feeling to the camp, ensuring that the visitor will experience little anxiety while still being exposed to the total Kalahari experience.

The camp's realisation is obviously not only of our own doing. Without the following people's excellent contribution we would never have been able to provide a facility of this nature. Brian Heineberg and Associates acted as Quantity Surveyors while the Environmental Consultant was SANParks itself. We were in charge of the interior design aspect. Viljoens Kitchens of Upington were the responsible contractor.

As Dries Engelbrecht, Regional Manager Arid Parks says: *"Now the visitor can enjoy the Kalahari as it really is!"*

Henriette Engelbrecht
Marketing Arid Parks