

Kalahari in Summer

by Peter Sumner

There are some daft people who do daft things, but not many can top going into the desert in mid summer. To make things worse, my wife and I gave my game park crazy father - celebrating his 80th - his first trip to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (formerly Kalahari Gemsbok Park) in our old faithful *unairconditioned* station wagon. After all, there is no point in messing up the family car in the rugged terrain that the "old girl" conquered in 2000.

The trip up there gave us a foretaste of the heat to come, although it rained in Pofadder, and the locals came out into the streets to soak it up! You cannot say you have toured the country until you have been to Pofadder. Overcast Upington was steamier than Durban, as we headed into the 40s.

After 60 km of dirt road, following the other 1100 of excellent tar, we arrived at Twee Rivieren, the southern most camp and only entry gate. We unloaded the vehicle into the adequate accommodation. There was still time to "hunt" for the famed Kalahari Lion.

The South African part of the Park is situated between two prehistoric dry riverbeds - Aub to the west and Nossob, which converge 5 km north of the camp, hence its name, and the major roads follow the riverbeds, with trunk roads crossing the red dunes, linking its rivers. Recent trails for 4 wheel drive vehicles have been added. The lower Nossob road was closed because of flooding (in the desert!!) so we crossed the dunes into the Aub canyon. Alas no lion.

Sunsets are stunning in the desert, and a pair of spotted eagle owls on the roof watched the evening braai. This part of the world is insect heaven, and so it was maybe a blessing in disguise that our stoep light didn't work. Even after sunset the heat did not abate too much, and the swim under magnificent starlight at 23h00 was warm.

You have to get to the gate very early to beat me out of the camp. In past visits to game parks we have hit the jackpot on numerous occasions very early on, which only makes me more determined to be out first. This was another success, as we were soon rewarded by the sight of the largest specimen of lion majesty that we had ever seen. He had eaten recently and was sprawled out under a tree near to his smaller pal. These two were the first of 22 that we saw in a four-night stay. The excitement had hardly died down, when an African wild cat strolled uncharacteristically across the road during the day.

One of the anticipated highlights was spending a night at Grootkolk, the unfenced northernmost camp. It did not disappoint. Overlooking a waterhole, this camp consists of four two-bed units constructed from cemented sand bags up to waist height, topped by canvas. A communal kitchen for groups and the ranger's hut complete this gem of a hideaway. One is advised to be alert at all times, as anything could suddenly appear - my wife never really made friends with the ground agama lizard that played Russian roulette inside the cupboard

doors. A colleague who also stayed here recently, was awakened by snoring on Christmas morning, and after ascertaining that it was not his partner, investigated outside and beat a hasty retreat into his cabin as two male lions strolled through the camp towards the waterhole. Maybe I should reconsider my haste to be first out of the gate! One suggestion for the authorities. Beef up the solar power capacity and install a night ride type torch in each unit. At the asking price per night, this would not be out of place and would be another unique feature!



This camp is 20 km from Union's End - the name changers forgot this one - where three countries converge at an unspectacular point. This 20 km strip seemed to be the most fertile in the park and was certainly blessed with an abundance of game. There were large herds of the three major food sources - springbok, blue wildebeest and red hartebeest, as well as our first ever sighting of bat eared fox and another huge, full-bellied lion on the roadside. He was not impressed with our presence three metres away and tried to scare us off by growling and making as if he was getting up, but since he was on the passenger side of the "old girl", there was no urgency in my moving.

Between Grootkolk and Nossob, there was not much to see, even the eagles took shelter in the trees in the consistently 40+ heat. Nossob is a lovely camp. The accommodation had a shower and a fast fan. My wife and I developed a novel way to cool down. Shower using the "warm" tap only - the one marked C - and dry only face and feet. Then stand under the fast flailing fan. Evaporation causes cooling says the science teacher. It worked for a few minutes.

The new camp manager, section ranger and the local staff were very friendly and helpful and came out tops when assisting us as amateur birders. We saw crimson-breasted shrike, golden tailed woodpecker, violet-eared waxbill, scimitar-billed woodhoopoe, shaft tailed whydah and other more common species all inside the camp. The largest flying bird in Africa, the kori bustard is

abundant, as is the ungainly secretary bird. Our raptor count of 19 out of 56 species identified makes the park a must for bird lovers. There were more little fellas that would not sit still long enough to be identified, but we had great sightings of lanner & pygmy falcon, tawny, martial, black breasted snake and bateleur eagles, along with pale chanting goshawks and our first ever gymnogene.



It is an odd sight to see giraffe in the Aub canyon. They have been reintroduced since our 2000 visit. We were told then that they were easy prey for lions, but the two youngsters among them seemed to be thriving.

Although we did not stay at the Kalahari Tented camp, it looked a bit like Grootkolk, except that it was much larger and close to Mata Mata, but being unfenced, it would also generate excitement from time to time.

When the time came to leave, it was with a heavy heart, because we had survived the heat, although the lion's share of our expenses had been on (pricey in the park) liquid intake, and we had missed seeing the usually visible cheetah, which we saw in abundance last time. There is a saying that goes "there must always be something to come back for", and there certainly is. The "old girl" is now resting, recovering from a puncture or two, but she mastered the challenge. My wife, a school secretary, who cannot go anywhere without being recognised, was not "disappointed" - pupils in the adjoining bungalow. My dad saw his lions, and I saw my first ever, brown hyena. Did I start off saying we were daft? Daft but satisfied.

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