

The 'home of baboons' boasts spectacular passes

Villiers Steyn spent a weekend in the Baviaanskloof. He shares what you can expect if you drive from Komdomo in the east to Kleinpoort in the west.

It's five in the afternoon in Patensie. While the rest of our group is shopping for Cornflakes and fresh milk at the Spar, I phone the Komdomo campsite at the edge of the Baviaanskloof to tell them we'll be a little late. "Don't worry, sir. The campsite's gates will always be open. You can come and pay in the morning," the voice on the other side sets me at ease.

Komdomo is one of three campsites in the Baviaanskloof run by Eastern Cape Parks and is at the eastern edge of the Kloof's nature reserve or wilderness area. There are 22 stands at the edge of the Groot River, but not all of them are as fun as the one at the edge where a guy plays Kurt Darren's "Loslappie" at full blast through his Nissan Hardbody's speakers.

We unload under a sweet thorn tree on the opposite side of the campsite and chuck a roll of Drakensberg boerie on the fire before settling into our camping chairs.

First see the dam

"Wahoo! Wahoo!" echoes through the valley in the cool early morning air. It's a baboon male breaking the silence and making it clear that he's the boss around here. "Wahoo!" he rubs it in, just in case anyone didn't hear.

After all, the Kloof takes its name from these creatures...

At 9am, after paying our entry fee at Komdomo, we decide to first swing by

the Kouga Dam before driving into the kloof. It's a detour of 10 km (3km back along the Patensie road and 7km along a side road), but it's worthwhile if dam walls are your thing.

This one, which was completed in 1967, is 365 m long. If you look carefully, you'll see rock swallows balance daringly on tiny blocks of rocks on the cliffs almost a hundred metres high. Although the dam mainly supplies water to farmers in the Gamtoos Valley, it also supplies water to residents of Port Elizabeth.

After lingering here a while, we hit the road. The plan is to cover two-thirds of the 130 km road through the Baviaanskloof to the Bakkrans cave. It's 46 km east of the Nuwekloof Pass, the western entrance to the kloof.

Passes, pools and a couple of picnic sites

As you enter the Baviaanskloof from Komdomo, the road first twists 10 km through the Groot River Poort and after that through the forested Poortjies Valley before you hit the first pass. We hear brown-hooded kingfisher, Burchell's coucal and a fish eagle, and see a bushbuck ewe quietly walking down to a stream. An Egyptian mongoose scurries across the road. >

Pull over. The narrow Combrinks Pass is filled with sharp turns but luckily also has lots of lookout spots along the way.

PHOTOGRAPHS: VILLIERS STEYN (UNLESS MENTIONED OTHERWISE)





Circus act. A rock swallow balances on a tiny block on the wall of the Kouga Dam. The wall was completed in 1967.



Wild. The Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve is 185 000 ha big, one of the largest in South Africa. You'll see a lot of game, like these red hartebeest.

Few people realise that there are far more than bushbuck and baboons in the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve. It's also home to, among others, red hartebeest, kudu, mountain zebra and a few leopards.

By eleven, about 22 km from Komdomo, we hit the Combrinks Pass, a narrow, steep path with a few very sharp hairpin corners which make you pray Sarel van der Merwe isn't coming from the other side. Fortunately the road is a little wider at the most scenic lookouts, where you can stop for pictures and the guy behind you in the Hardbody can squeeze past.



PHOTOGRAPH: FRANCOIS STEYN

Dam it. After repeated flood damage in the area there were more and more cries for the building of a dam in the Kouga river. The Paul Sauer Dam was completed in 1967 and it was renamed to the Kouga Dam in the 1990s.

At the top of the pass you drive on the Bergplaas plateau for about 6 km, a good place to be on the lookout for mountain zebra and red hartebeest. At the edge of the plateau, just before the start of the Holgat Pass, is a tiny picnic spot where you can throw away your rubbish and take a pit stop in a tidy, environmentally friendly toilet.

From here you descend quickly to the banks of the Kouga River, where one of my favourite camp sites in South Africa, Rooihoek, is situated. Unfortunately we couldn't get a site here this year, but in 2006 we spent two nights here.

Just like Komdomo, Rooihoek is managed by Eastern Cape Parks. There are only a handful of stands (six in total) with basic facilities (braai and long drop). What makes Rooihoek so special is its location.

The camp site is on a riverbed with snow-white sandbanks that look completely out of place in this mountainous landscape. It looks like a cross between Camps Bay beach and the Richtersveld. Be sure to pack a beach umbrella, sunblock, tennis ball and an old tractor tyre if you come camping here, because you'll want to spend all day in and next to the water.



Secret spot. It's easy to see why Eastern Cape locals love hanging out at Rooihoek. There aren't many facilities, but that's not what it's about after all.

'The moment you leave the wilderness area, the Baviaanskloof turns tame. The rocky mountain paths are replaced by corrugated farm roads.'

Fast facts

Best time: Come in summer (November to February) if you love swimming, because then the daytime temperatures are usually nice and high (in the 30s). However, call ahead to find out if there's water in the rivers, because some parts become impassable when the rivers come down. Winter is also great, but temperatures can drop as low as 0 °C in June/July.

Stay for at least: Two nights
Experience: Crystal clear rivers, remarkable geology and deathly silence.

Distance from: Port Elizabeth to Patensie (eastern entrance of the Baviaanskloof): 85 km

Sound like a boffin: The ranges of leopard males in the Baviaanskloof can span up to 25 000 ha.

Allowed Allowed



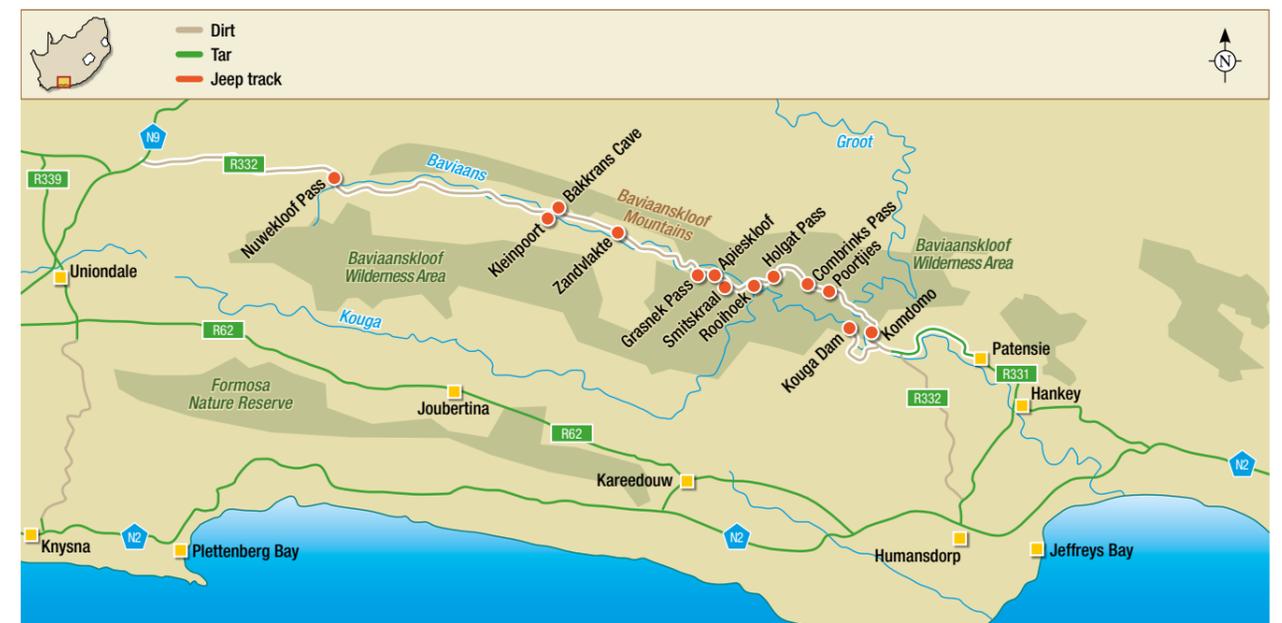
A river runs through it. The Baviaanskloof is synonymous with river crossings. There are apparently 42, but this is only really important during rainy season. Then a decent ground clearance and 4x4 are a must.

Because we haven't booked, we drive past the Rooihoek turnoff looking for an alternative place to swim. But first we have to drive through a few rivers. Apparently there are a total of 42 river crossings in the Baviaanskloof, but some are so tiny (or dry) that you don't even notice them. These crossings are probably one of the main attractions of the Kloof.

Most of the crossings are shallow with a solid bottom and you can drive through slowly, without having a nervous

breakdown and appreciate the sensation of water all around you much more than, say, a side channel in the Caprivi during the rainy season... However, be warned, after a lot of rain in the Baviaanskloof some of these river crossings are impassable.

At lunchtime we stop at Smitskraal, a public campsite about 45 km from the Komdomo campsite. It's slightly neglected and the last visitors were clearly a troop of baboons, because yoghurt containers, banana peels and Fanta tins are strewn everywhere except in the dustbins.>





What a find. Just a kilometre away from the slightly neglected Smitskraal picnic area, there's a smaller and nicer picnic place with a swimming spot that you'll give your eye teeth for during summer.

According to Slingsby's Baviaanskloof map there's a great place for swimming around the corner, and we decide to turn off onto a jeep track. A kilometre further we find a smaller, neater picnic site within walking distance from the Kouga River.

The cool water is refreshing under the scorching summer sun and, like a bunch of crocs with white tummies, we soak in the shallows for half-an-hour before moving on.

The road from Smitskraal to the western edge of the wilderness area is another 26 km and includes the Grasnek Pass and a long crossing of the Baviaanskloof River at Apieskloof. Here you drive through the river bed for almost 100m and you can cool down nicely in summer.

The moment you leave the wilderness area, the Baviaanskloof turns tame. Now the rocky mountain paths and red hartebeest are replaced by wide corrugated farm roads and donkeys carting locals to and fro.

About 7 km past the Zandvlakte guest farm we decide to take a break and stop at



Recycle it. At the Baviaanskloof Country Shop between Zandvlakte and Kleinpoort an ancient Corona gets a new lease on life. You can also buy homemade sweets and griddle cakes here.

the Baviaanskloof Country Shop. Outside the tiny brown building are a few garden chairs under a red-and-white umbrella and an ancient Toyota Corona bakkie with a painted sunflower and an aloe where the engine was. We drink slightly-chilled Cokes and eat homemade sweets. There are also fresh griddle cakes on the menu.

A great place to spend the night

Just after four, almost seven hours after pulling out of Komdomo, we stop at a tiny shop at Kleinpoort. Aletta Smit, owner of the Bakkrans Cave, gives us directions and promises to deliver three bags of wood before sunset.

You cannot drive through the Baviaanskloof without sleeping in the Bakkrans Cave, located in an enormous crevice in the mountains. Imagine you put a pawpaw on its side, cut it in half lengthwise and remove all the pips. If you put the two pieces close together, you get an indication of the cave's layout – on the one side is a big hollow where you cook, sit by the fire and sleep, and on the other is a smaller hollow turned into a bathroom. During daytime light filters into the cave through the crevice.

This is not your average mountain cave – it feels more like a house. In the bigger cave the living area's floor is filled in with cement to form three terraces and a braai area.

The top terrace, where you sleep, has 24 comfortable single mattresses; the middle one a kitchen cupboard with every piece of cutlery and kitchen gear you can think of; and the lower one a gas stove and plastic dining room table. There are also paraffin lamps, potjies, braai grids, a few wooden stools and even a set of Uno playing cards.

You literally only have to bring your sleeping bag and food, and perhaps a few extra camping chairs if you're a big group. We keep our drinks cold in one of the potjies with ice we bought across the road at the Kleinpoort shop.

After a few rounds of sevens we braai lamb chops and chicken sosaties while listening to the shrill sounds of dassies deeper up in the crevice.

The next morning a southern boubou wakes us, and from our Christmas bed we see a cheeky Cape rock thrush on the table, pecking at last night's bread crumbs. It still feels early, but it's almost ten. Here it's easy to hide from the sun. We have such a good time that we decide to stay another day. Who wants to go home when time stands still, after all?



Natural architecture. At the one end of the Bakkrans Cave you cook, sleep and chill out, while the bathroom is located on the other side.

I want to go too

What did you drive? 2004 Toyota Hilux 2.7-litre petrol double-cab 4x4

How far did you drive? 197 km from Patensie to Willowmore.

Road conditions? The road conditions on the passes have improved considerably since the last time I drove through the Baviaanskloof in 2006. Parts on the steep slopes that had been badly eroded in earlier years, have now been cemented up. The Combrinks-, Holgat- and Grasnek Passes in the eastern part of the kloof are, however, still very narrow and rocky and should be driven slowly.

The gravel road to the west of the nature reserve, between the Nuwekloof Pass and the Zandvlakte, is wide and level, but badly corrugated in parts. Be on the lookout for farmers driving this road at very high speeds.

Chances are that you'll have to cross quite a few rivers and streams. These are usually shallow with a solid bottom. However, get out and establish how deep it is after recent rain.

Do you need a 4x4? Yes, only on steep slopes to prevent wheelspin. If you drive carefully, you should get through the kloof in a 4x2 in the dry

season, especially now that the roads have been upgraded slightly. But I would feel more at ease in a 4x4.

Highlights? The views over the twisty paths at the top of every pass and the Bakkrans Cave.

Low points? The facilities at Smitskraal's main picnic site.

Best place to stop? The swimming place at the end of a short jeep track next to Smitskraal

Best map? Slingsby's Baviaanskloof map.

📍www.slingsbymaps.com

Is there fuel? You can only get diesel at the Kleinpoort shop. We suggest you fill up in Patensie or Willowmore.

Where did you stay?

Komdomo campsite. It's the perfect place to start your weekend in the Baviaanskloof. The nature reserve's reception office is situated here and if you have questions, you can ask the staff.

The camp site has green lawns, shade and tidy ablution facilities with hot water and flush toilets.

It costs R50 p.p.p.n. (maximum of 6 per camp site) and includes your entry permit into the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve.

☎043 701 9600 (Eastern Cape Parks), ☎042 283 7912 (Komdomo reception); 📧reservations@ecparks.co.za. Bookings for the Rooihoek- and Doodsklip camp sites can also be made through Eastern Cape Parks.

Bakkrans Cave. The Smit family owns and runs this cave in the western part of the Baviaanskloof and it could not be better equipped. They also run the Kleinpoort shop. You can book for up to 36 people, but even if you only book for one, the cave is yours exclusively. There are mattresses for up to 24 people, as well as hot water and flush toilets.

It costs R140 p.p.p.n. and R70 per child younger than 15. Wood can be ordered at R30 per bag. Call Ankie Smit on ☎049 839 1010/12 or send an e-mail to 📧bavkleinpoort@tiscali.co.za

Other information? If you just want to drive through the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve for a day, the permit will cost you R20 p.p. The nature reserve's gates close at 5pm. Remember to take drinking water, toilet paper and food along – there are no supermarkets in the Baviaanskloof.