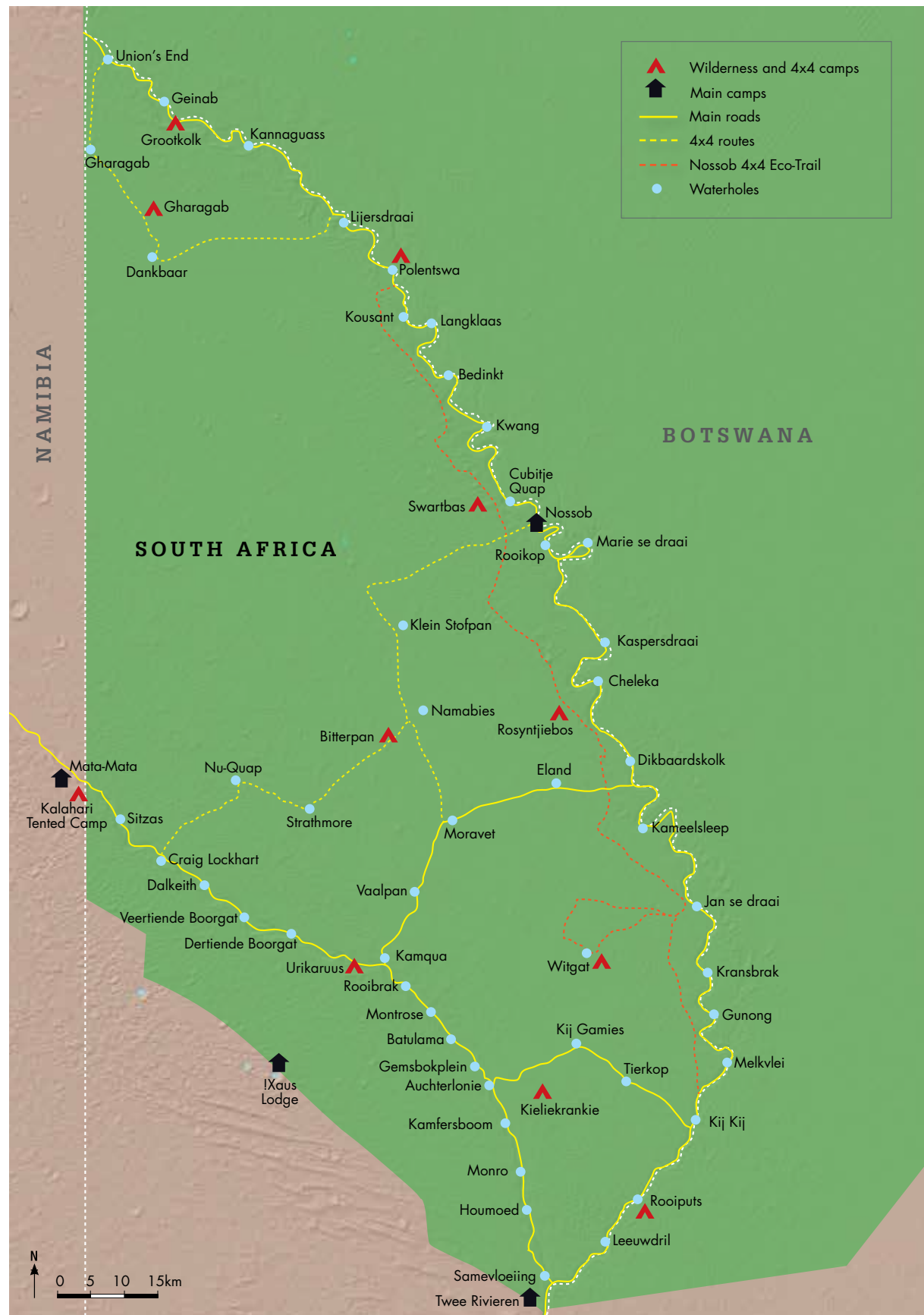




EXTREME KGALAGADI

Expectations are everything. Get them wrong and a trip to Kgalagadi, with its extreme weather conditions, great distances, challenging road conditions and low game densities, could easily turn into one filled with tribulations. Use this advice to make your next trip to the park as memorable as possible. By Villiers Steyn.





I was 15 when I first went to Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, as the South African side of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park was known back in 1997. My family camped at Nossob Rest Camp, one of the three main camps, in the middle of winter and, to be honest, I can't even recall whether we saw lions or not.

I clearly remember my uncle shivering so hard he couldn't unlock the car door, and that the thermometer read minus four when he finally started the engine. That was at eight in the morning. I recall my brother and I draping wet towels over chairs, Sunlight Liquid bottles and everything else in the campsite in the evenings; by the next morning they'd be frozen solid, maintaining the shape of whatever had been beneath them.

Even then, I found it hard to believe that a park half the size of Kruger had only four roads: one each along the Auob and Nossob riverbeds, and two through the dunes linking them. It's along these riverbeds that most of the action takes place. A string of man-made waterholes, spaced about 10 kilometres apart all the way up and down the Auob and Nossob, attracts general game such as springbok, blue wildebeest and gemsbok. While this lures predators such as leopard, lion and cheetah, the low game densities in arid areas such as the Kalahari mean sightings are usually few and far between. (That said, I once saw 70 kori bustards in one morning.)

Six years passed before I set foot in the park again, this time as a third-year nature conservation student. Three new wilderness camps had been built, with three more nearing completion. Visitors could now cross into and explore the remote Botswana side, with its sandy two-track roads and unfenced wilderness campsites, without a passport, providing

they exited the park in South Africa.

On the very first day the temperature was 50° Celsius. While this is extraordinarily hot even for the Kalahari Desert, it didn't drop much below that mark for the next two months. The air was so dry that flies sipped the moisture from our eyes and marshmallows left out at night would be as hard as wine gums by morning. I spent three months there, mostly grading roads or fixing wind pumps, but I fell in love with Kgalagadi.

Hot and cold

I've since been back a few times, exploring predominantly the South African side, which covers roughly a quarter of its 38000 square kilometres. Over and above the freezing winters and scorching summers, I've seen thick blankets of mist cover the riverbeds for days at a time, magnificent thunderstorms that deluge the desert with 100 millimetres of rain in a single night, and violent sandstorms that snatch up unsuspecting campers' tents.

It's a park of extreme weather, but it also has extreme beauty, extreme sightings, and extreme remoteness. The combination creates experiences that are etched into your memory for eternity.

One of my favourite Kgalagadi memories is of Bitterpan, a smaller eight-sleeper wilderness camp in the middle of the dunes between the Nossob and Auob rivers. I climbed the lookout tower just before sunset, the last light of day bathing the stilted camp in gold (without a doubt my favourite view in the park). I spotted a lone lioness crossing the pan in the distance and she was heading our way.

That night she and her sister serenaded us with deep-throated roars as they walked circles around camp, not

so much interested in us, but rather in the smell around the fireplace, our car tyres and tourism officer Marchell Strauss's front porch. It's exciting enough to hear a lion roar, but when you see it happening 10 metres in front of you and feel it ripple down your spine all the way to your toes, making your scalp crawl and all the hairs on your body stand on end, you feel closer to nature than ever ... in that uneasy, I-could-so-easily-be-on-tonight's-menu kind of way.

That was a particularly magical moment, but you generally have to work harder for your sightings in Kgalagadi. Days, even weeks, can go by between big-cat sightings, leaving you disheartened and doubting your game-viewing tactics (there are really only two tactics: sit patiently at a waterhole or cover some distance up one of the riverbeds, but more about that later). Go with the right expectations to avoid disappointment.

Incredible wildlife

It's true there's a limited network of roads, often in an appalling state, that game densities are much lower than in Kruger and chances are you'll either be uncomfortably hot or cold at least once during your trip. However, if you prepare for these factors, accept the park for the extremes that make it extraordinary, and wait for patience and luck to collide, you'll be treated to some of the most incredible wildlife sightings of your life, the kind that keep you going back to the Kgalagadi year after year.

Kruger Siebrits of Franschoek, who camped next to me at Nossob in July 2012, said it best: 'I lost something in the Kgalagadi in 1989. Since then I've come back every year to look for it ... and fortunately I haven't found it yet.' >

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50 TIPS FOR A MEMORABLE VISIT

Gathered over 15 years of exploring Kgalagadi, the tips on the pages that follow is the sort of advice you won't find in a guide book. They'll expose you to the best the South African side of the park has to offer and prepare you to make the most of the region's extremes.



BOOKING

1 Accommodation fills up months in advance, so book early. You may have to book a full year ahead to get space in wilderness camps such as Urikaruus and Grootkolk.

2 Camps are set very far apart and road conditions make travelling difficult. Because of this it makes sense to book camps in some sort of logical, circular order, rather than criss-crossing the reserve back and forth. The road to Bitterpan is a one-way running west, so stay at Nossob the night before and somewhere along the Auob riverbed the night after a visit to this wilderness camp.

3

To make your trip worthwhile you need to spend at least a week in the park. Stay at fewer camps for longer rather than trying to experience every camp for only a night each.

4 Cancellations are common. If you weren't able to book every camp in the order you'd hoped to, keep calling SANParks' central reservations office (tel 012-428-9111) leading up to your trip to enquire about openings.

EN ROUTE

5 Take along all your food supplies. The small shops at each of the three main camps stock very limited groceries and are expensive. Wickens Vleismark at 4 Kowen Street in Upington, the closest town to the popular Twee Rivieren Gate, is a great butcher. Order in advance and your meat will be vacuum packed and frozen, ready for collection. Tel 054-331-2267.

6 If you're stopping overnight on your way to the park, book somewhere as close as possible to the park entrance. If you're not sleeping over, book your first night at Twee Rivieren Rest Camp as you might not reach the camps deeper into the park before their gates close.



9



7 If you're struggling to choose one of Upington's countless guest houses, look no further than Libby's Lodge. This comfortable, three-star stop offers seven spacious double rooms with en-suite bathrooms and air conditioning, as well as three self-catering family units (each sleeps three or four). Tel 054-332-2661 or 082-924-7605, www.wheretostay.co.za/libbyslodge.

8 If you'd like to experience the wilderness of the Kalahari Desert without the constraints of national park rules, spend a night or two at Kalahari Trails Nature Reserve, 37 kilometres south of Twee Rivieren, on the way to or from Kgalagadi. Here you have the luxury of exploring 3500 hectares of dunes on foot on your own or with a guide (owner Professor Anne Rasa is an expert tracker of everything from tok-tokkie beetles to pangolins). Tel 054-511-0900 or 072-277-2377, www.kalaharitrails.co.za.

ROADS

9 You'll get by on the park's roads with a town car, but for the ultimate experience I recommend a 4x4. It will handle the road conditions best and the extra height provides better visibility.

10

Deflate tyres to 1,5 bar to make driving over the corrugated roads more comfortable. Limit further corrugation by driving in 4x4.

11 Expect to cover about 25 kilometres an hour on average and even less if you stop frequently to view and photograph animals. Give yourself ample time to get from point A to point B and stick to the speed limit of 50 kilometres an hour.

CAMPS

12 Twee Rivieren Rest Camp is best for families. It has a well-stocked shop (with treats such as ice cream), a swimming pool and, later this year, a new information centre where guides present informative slideshows about the park and its wildlife during school holidays.

13

There's no better place to camp than at Nossob. Its campsite is shady and attracts more birds than any other rest camp in the park.



14 Josias and Antoinette Beukes of

Grabouw enjoy the raised units at Urikaruus Wilderness Camp, which offer great views over a waterhole that attracts plenty of predators. 'During

our last stay we saw eight lions, four cheetahs and six spotted hyenas here.' It's arguably the best-located camp in the park. It's a comfortable two-and-a-half-hour drive from the entrance at Twee Rivieren, the surroundings are known for predator sightings and, from the camp, you can drive in two directions along the Auob riverbed (north and south).

15 If you plan to drive up the Auob riverbed from Twee Rivieren early in the morning, don't waste time by driving too slowly over the southernmost dune road. There's usually little to see here. Rather get to Houmoed Waterhole when the sun is still low and the animals more active.

16

Mata-Mata Rest Camp visitors are allowed to walk across to Sitzas farm stall on the Namibian side without a passport. Just a stone's throw from the border, you can buy all sorts from home-made fudge and crunchies to sundried tomatoes and various chutneys, but the real drawcard is the fresh and affordable meat and delicious droëwors.

17 It's worthwhile spending some time in Nossob's hide, which overlooks a small manmade waterhole, at night and again early in the morning before the gates open. Lions are frequently seen drinking here and there's usually a spotted eagle-owl and a black-backed jackal or two hunting insects attracted by the floodlight.

18 Don't leave your shoes outside at night if you're camping in Nossob or Mata-Mata. Black-backed jackals won't think twice before carrying them away.

19 Kieliekrankie Wilderness Camp's biggest advantage is its location. Drive 10 minutes west to the Auob riverbed and 30 minutes east to the Nossob riverbed.



18

20 Leopard and brown hyena visit Grootkolk's waterhole with remarkable frequency, especially early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Instead of going out on a game drive, get comfortable on the veranda with binoculars in hand.

21 Climb to the top of the tower at the back of Bitterpan camp just before sunset for one of the best views in the park. Take along a pair of binoculars and your camera.

23 Don't expect to see much game around Gharagab, which is deep into the dunes where game densities are even lower than in the riverbeds. Rather drive up to this remote wilderness camp to enjoy the peace, quiet and isolation of the far northern dune fields of the park.

CONQUERING THE COLD



24 Amanda, Louw, Dewald and Werner Engelbrecht of Melkbosstrand reckon the secret to staving off the cold is to dress warmly before the chill sets in and to wear layers. 'Also make sure the bottom layer is the one you're going to sleep in. If you're still cold, open the Jägermeister,' said Louw.

25 Wash your vehicle's windows at night before it gets too cold. Spraying them down first thing in

the morning at subzero temperatures will result in a layer of ice covering it and, believe me, it doesn't come off easily.

26 Keep a small pot of Ingram's Camphor Cream in the cubbyhole. The Kalahari air is very dry, so a twice-daily dose of cream on your hands, arms and legs will keep the cracks away. I use Camphor Cream so often I've come to associate its distinctive smell with Kgalagadi game drives.



27 Elmiem Turner and De Jongh and Cecile van Zyl of Lambert's Bay had this tip for campers: 'Heat a firebrick in the coals, then wrap it in newspaper before slipping it into a sleeve made from an old towel. It works like a hot water bottle, but doesn't cool down as quickly.'

28 Boil water at night (it's quickest on the fire) and put it in a thermos flask. The next morning, it will take just a few minutes to reboil before you head out on a game drive.

29

Taking on the Kgalagadi winter without some sort of head warmer is a bad idea. A Polar Buff provides enough warmth during the day and when you sleep, but you'll need a proper woolly beanie for freezing evenings around the campfire. In winter I wear my Von Zipper skiing beanie – that's how cold it gets!



27

Bitterpan is in the middle of the dunes and is the ideal camp for a small group or family. For one of the best views in the park, climb the tower at sunset.



21

FINDING GAME

30 Read through the sightings books (each room in the wilderness camps has one) to determine game-viewing trends around camp. You may find that a specific cheetah mother and her three cubs are often seen on a certain stretch of road nearby, or that leopards come down to drink at the waterhole shortly after sunset. The more you know about the region's game movements, the better your chances of seeing them. Don't forget to record your sightings.

31 Don't expect to see water-dependant species such as zebra, buffalo, waterbuck or elephant in the dry Kalahari. There are also no rhinos in the park.

32 You'll be amazed with what you see if you drive slowly and look carefully between the rocks, broken tree branches and tufts of grass. Small predators such as slender mongoose, caracal and African wild cat are easily overlooked if you don't pay attention.

33 Because the game density is much lower than in Kruger, you're unlikely to see lion and cheetah around every corner. You have to work for sightings by sitting patiently at a waterhole or covering a great deal of ground early in the morning or late in the afternoon. No matter where you're staying, vary these two tactics from day to day to give yourself the best chance of spotting predators.

34 Leopard, lion and cheetah often look for prey from elevated positions. Instead of limiting your search to the riverbeds, carefully scan the dune slopes and calcrete ridges too.

35 Listen out for the warning calls of red hartebeest, wildebeest and especially springbok. When a herd spots a predator, individuals usually group together



35

tightly, all facing the same direction (towards the culprit), and make it known that they have spotted the enemy by giving loud snorts.

36 Give yourself a good chance of seeing a brown hyena by parking at Houmoed Waterhole at the southern tip of the Auob riverbed in the late afternoon. They often drink there at dusk.

37 Professional photographer and Kgalagadi expert Hannes Lochner says it's all about knowing where to look. 'If you want to see a leopard in Kgalagadi, check the sightings board in Twee Rivieren for recent sightings in the southern Auob riverbed. Then use a pair of binoculars to carefully inspect the ridges, caves and large trees early in the morning or late in the afternoon.' Hannes's new book, *The Dark Side of the Kalahari*, will be out

in July this year (R550, www.hanneslochner.com).

38 Cape foxes den in the ground and give birth in October and November. Ask one of the guides in camp to direct you to the nearest den site and visit early in the morning to see pups playing outside.

39 Mischievous Kgalagadi lions have been known to damage tyres by biting or slashing through them with razor-sharp claws. Don't allow curious lions to get close to your vehicle. Rather pull off slowly and stop further away.



37

BIRDING

40 The park is known for its high raptor numbers. Make identification of these and other birds easy by downloading the Roberts VII Multimedia Birds of Southern Africa application. It has a comprehensive set of pictures and photographs for each species (compatible with Apple and Android and costs R579,99).

41 Most waterholes attract sandgrouse, doves and a variety of finches, canaries and sparrows early in the morning. However, raptors such as bateleurs, secretary birds and tawny eagles prefer to drink in the middle of the day.

42 Southern white-faced and African scops-owls are commonly seen in Nossob and can easily be viewed and photographed during the day.

PHOTOGRAPHY



43 Keen amateur photographer Geoff Miles of Pretoria says a 600mm fixed lens is great for raptor photography. 'But not everyone can afford to buy such an expensive piece of camera equipment. Rather rent one and split the cost between a group of friends.'



41

Cubitje Quap waterhole near Nossob is great for secretary birds, which are most easily photographed when they come down to drink.



46

44 There's a great variety of birds and animals to photograph in the main camps. Lie on your stomach near a tap to capture eye-level images of yellow canaries, red-headed and scaly-feathered finches and white-browed sparrow-weavers, among others. If you stay very still, the resident ground squirrels and yellow mongooses will be obliging models. However, resist the temptation of feeding them to lure them closer.

45

The cold, dry winter months provide the best light for photography. Many animals head into the warmer dunes, but the waterholes along the riverbeds still attract everything from springbok and red hartebeest to caracals and black-maned lions. Some of the most productive waterholes are Dalkeith, Samevloeing, Cubitje Quap and Polentswa. Pick one and sit there for the whole day.

46 Kgalagadi is the perfect place to take star-trail photographs on a new moon or at least to try to. You'll need a wide-angle lens, tripod and cable release. Learn how to set up the shot at <http://tiny.cc/startrailphotography>.



47 Go Yamagata of Japan named Sitzas as his

favourite waterhole. 'It's less than 10 kilometres from Mata-Mata and has excellent afternoon light for photography.'

NOSSOB 4X4 ECO-TRAIL

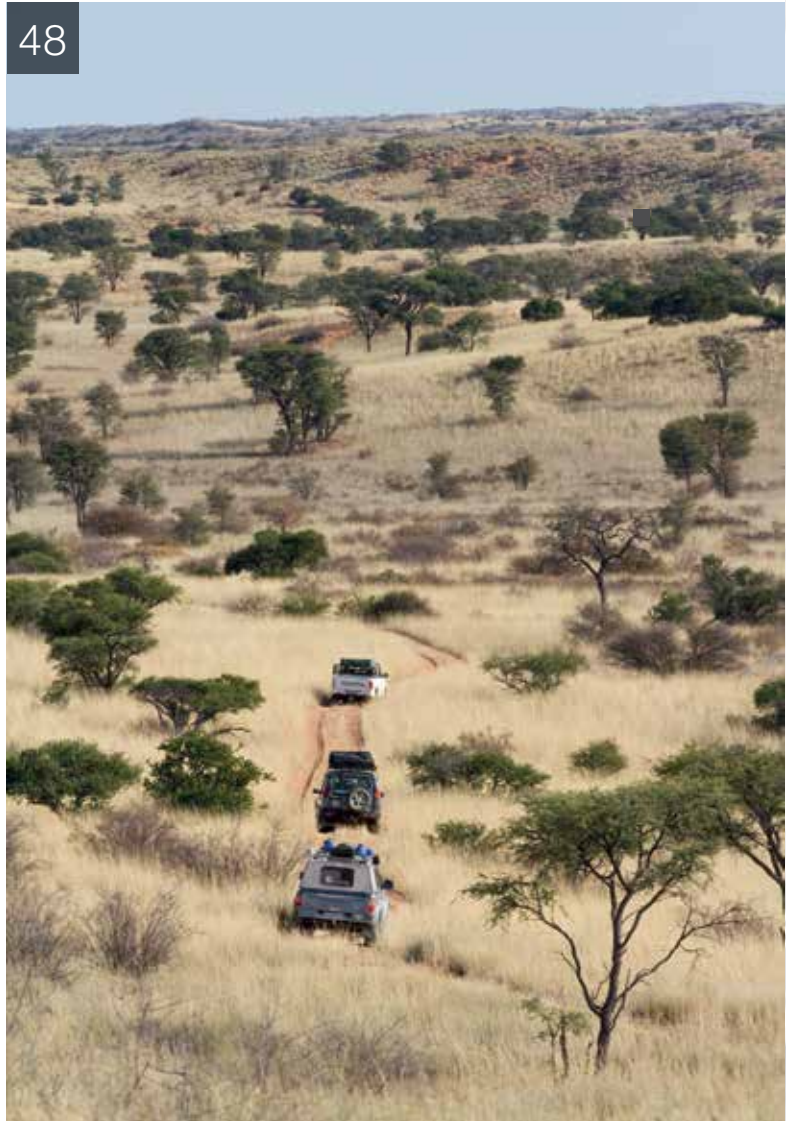
48 The Nossob 4x4 Eco-Trail is a four-day guided trail through the Kalahari dunes, parallel to the Nossob riverbed between Twee Rivieren and Nossob Camps. Trail guide Robert Wylde explains you can drive it in two directions. 'North to south is a bit easier because you have gentler dunes to cross.' He adds that while a low-range vehicle is a prerequisite, the trail wasn't designed to test

your vehicle's off-road capabilities, but rather to explore and appreciate the ever-changing scenery. Each of the three nights is spent at a different unfenced wilderness campsite with only a bucket shower and long drop.

49 Ideally, book the trail as a group of friends (minimum two vehicles, maximum five, excluding the guide) because for four days you camp together, cook together and talk over two-way radios to one another.

50

Carry at least one bag of firewood for each vehicle per day, enough drinking, cooking and shower water for three nights, as well as a compressor and pressure gauge to manage tyre pressure.



48

