

Sleep with one eye open

At the bottom edge of Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve, like a rudder beneath a sailing ship, is Khutse Game Reserve, a place where the lions don't adhere to personal boundaries...

WORDS **TABBY MITTINS**
PICTURES **VILLIERS STEYN**



QUIET TIME. The campsites in Khutse Game Reserve may lack the usual amenities, but you'll have the luxury of space and solitude.



THE LIONS ARE WATCHING. Khutse is vast and empty so you won't see animals around every bend like you might in the Kruger. But the animals are there, and there are no fences around the campsites to keep them out...

IT'S ABOUT THE SMALL THINGS. In the harsh Kalahari environment, you'll find unexpected beauty like flowering Crinum lilies (below) or a tiny Kalahari tented tortoise (bottom) crossing the road.



Purple lightning flashes, followed by a peal of thunder. Villiers clings to one of the support struts of our gazebo as a stray blast of icy wind snatches the canopy away. Then the angry sky unleashes its deluge. Minutes later the storm has passed, leaving in its wake a twisted canvas wreck, the fresh smell of rain and a shimmering double rainbow. Welcome to Khutse. Grinning like idiots and dripping from head to toe, we set to work repairing our shelter in the unfenced campsite, Molose 2. With two nights at Molose 2 and another two at Moreswe 2, I wonder what else Khutse has in store for us.

Directly translated from Sesarwa (a Khoë dialect spoken in parts of the Kalahari) Khutse means "going down on one knee to rest". You might think it's just a sleepy little reserve in the shadow of its enormous neighbour, but Khutse has an unpredictable charm all its own.

A sudden thundershower might wreak havoc on an unsuspecting awning, but it makes for easy tracking. Bumping along in the thick sand the following morning, we come across the spoor of a big male leopard heading in the opposite direction. Instead of turning around, we decide to follow his route backwards towards the Mahurushele campsites. After yesterday's rain, the sandy road is lined with emerging Kalahari Crinum lilies as we count the kilometres the unseen leopard walked in the night. The tracks go on and on! After an impressive 10km, they finally duck into the grass and we push on to Mahurushele 3, a campsite next to Sekushuwa Pan and just the place for a leg stretch and a cup of Nescafé.

Get on the satphone

Thanks to our GPS loaded with Tracks4Africa maps, we eventually reach the entrance road to Mahurushele 3, where we stop briefly to let a lemon-

sized Kalahari tented tortoise cross the road. Khutse is so sparsely populated with other tourists that we don't only check for animals before we alight – we also check for other campers. We'd hate to intrude on their privacy.

Luckily there's no one here. Mahurushele 3 has the same long drop and bucket-shower cubicles as Molose 2, but it's also home to a sprawling tree that casts a nice circle of dappled shade.

"What do you think? Should we change our booking?" Villiers asks.

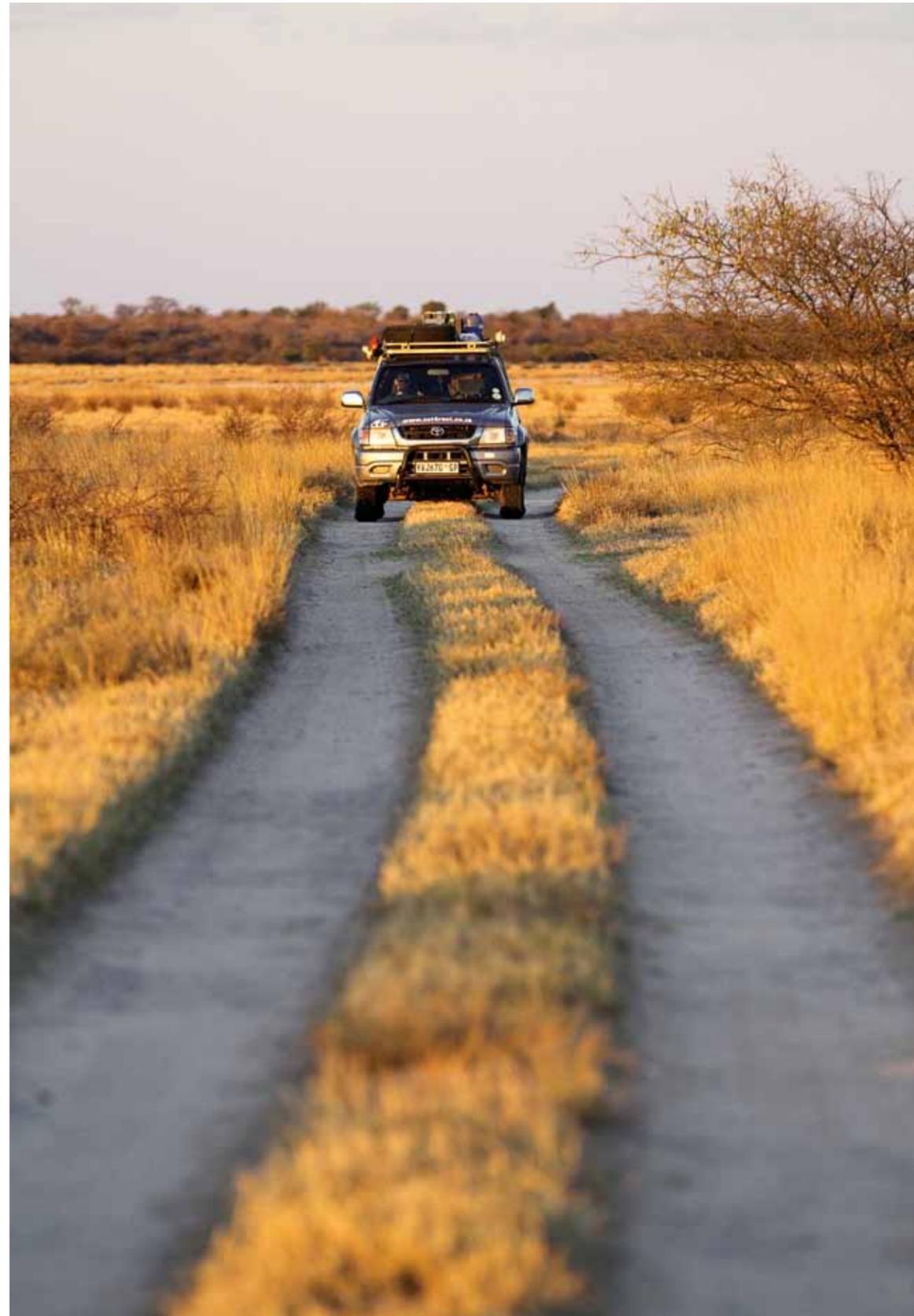
Just then we notice a pair of young lions a couple hundred metres from the tree, ogling a newborn hartebeest calf. I watch the action, hoping impossibly for both a kill and a safe getaway for the calf. A shift in the wind saves the day and the hartebeest beats a hasty retreat.

That's it – decision made. We'll only spend one night at Moreswe 2 and we'll come here to hang out with the lions for our last night in the park. Villiers unpacks the satellite phone to make the necessary calls.

Everybody needs good neighbours

We surf back through the sand to Molose 2 and spend a simmering afternoon in the shade of the McGuyvered gazebo. The campsites in Khutse are entirely unlike those in South Africa's national parks. Fences? Flush toilets? Running water? Pah! Those are all unnecessary luxuries. In Khutse you must bring absolutely everything you'll need, including water, power, fuel and food. The trade-off is that you're almost guaranteed not to see another soul for days at a time.

That's why it's a bit of a shock when we bump into another vehicle at the waterhole close to the campsite. It belongs to our neighbours, Dawie Jacobs and Yosta Zandfliet, who are camping at Molose 1



ON TRACK (above). Tabby and Villiers followed leopard prints in the damp sand of the road for 10 km one morning.

SOLO EXPLORERS (left). Because Khutse lacks facilities, only true adventurers venture here. You'll usually have the roads all to yourself.

IN OTHER WORDS



Dawie Jacobs & Yosta Zandfliet, Gauteng

"The area around Molose 1 attracts a lot of game because it's located near a permanent water source. It's also far enough from the Khutse Pan campsites near the entrance gate, which can become very crowded and noisy especially during school holidays."



Kristina Kesch, Maun

"Moreswe 2 is my favourite campsite because it's close to a waterhole and has a great view over the pan. Make sure you book way in advance because it's extremely popular."



tonight. You'd expect people who camp in Khutse to be crazy loners, but not Dawie and Yosta. Within minutes they invite us over for dinner.

While a pasta pot bubbles over the coals, Dawie shows me the mangled plastic mess that is the campsite's toilet. In March 2011, a photo of a grinning man standing next to a pride of lions went viral online. And this is where it happened! (*See the box on page XX – Ed.*) The lions shredded two spare tyres and had a good chew on the toilet. Thankfully, that's all they managed to sink their teeth into.

Dawie, who has been coming to Khutse with his family for nearly a decade, tells us it's not just lions that come calling when the sun goes down. In between tending dinner and clambering onto the roof of his Hilux to scan the nearby waterhole with his spotlight, he recounts stories of brown hyenas and even leopards in camp.

In search of the phantom giraffe

The next morning, having successfully avoided the attempts of a pair of luminous yellow scorpions to join us, we track the spoor of a lone lion and what looks like a giraffe all the way to Moreswe 2, deep in the heart of the reserve.

The giraffe tracks lead across Moreswe Pan, flat and wide, and a thought strikes me: Where could a giraffe possibly hide out here?

Moreswe 2 has an exceptional view of the pan. Ashy tits and scaly feathered finches hop around on the ground, watched by fork-tailed drongos in the branches of the trees. A herd of springbok

and a couple of gemsbok graze their way towards Moreswe's waterhole as the late afternoon sun turns the grass around the pan into a rippling golden lake.

On a long, slow evening drive, we witness as a frenzy of little swifts, glossy starlings and grey-headed sparrows annihilate a swarm of beetles spawned after the rain. A couple of bat-eared foxes laze in the middle of the pan, too full to move after a similar feast. But the cunning giraffe is nowhere to be found. Later, back in camp, a rufous-cheeked nightjar clears its throat in preparation for a night of engine-like churring.

Ah, there you are...

An early morning drive to the waterhole finally reveals the phantom giraffe, which lopes off into the sunrise followed by a small herd of gemsbok and a shy African wildcat. We're tempted to follow, but instead we pack up quickly and head all the way back to the dappled shade of Mahurushele 3 for our final night in Khutse.

Khutse might be over the border and far away, not to mention frustratingly expensive for what you get, but there's a feeling here that's impossible to find in South Africa's bustling national parks.

Perhaps because camping in Khutse feels a bit like tiptoeing around a dozy lion: Nothing much might be happening right now, but you know exactly what could happen.

It's the gamble, that prickly tingle of anticipation, that makes the Khutse experience so extraordinary.



SUN BLASTED. Shade is scarce in Khutse, which is why the Mahurushele 3 campsite is so special. You can hide under the boughs of this big tree during the heat of the day.



THE STORY BEHIND THAT PHOTOGRAPH

Photoshop? No way, what you see is real: a smiling Stefan van der Walt surrounded by lions, their eyes glinting in the light from the camera flash. We went to visit him at his home in Pretoria to find out what happened.

"Over the past five years I've visited Khutse at least twice a year. On most trips you see very little game, but the isolation makes every trip worthwhile. That said, Khutse has a way of surprising you. This pride of lions woke us up at midnight when they decided to make toys out of our spare tyres.

"By the time this photograph was taken, the two adult lionesses had disappeared leaving a relaxed group of youngsters behind. We had been watching them for three hours from the cars and felt like we'd formed a bond with them. Most people who see this photo think I don't know about the lions behind me. Of course I knew they were there!

"I took a calculated risk to get this photograph, but I didn't feel like my life was in danger. The lions stayed in the campsite the whole night and they were still there, chewing on the toilet seat, when the sun came up the next morning."

i KNOW BEFORE YOU GO



When should I go? Khutse's climate is extreme – baking hot in summer and very cold in winter. For that reason it's probably best not to visit at the peak of summer or winter. Game viewing is relatively slow throughout the year, but the reserve is at its most scenic during the rainy season (December to April) when wildflowers decorate the landscape.

How do I get there? It's about 600 km from Pretoria to the southern entrance gate into the reserve (GPS: S23.36601 E24.62017) via the Skilpadshek Border Post (open 6am – 12pm). The drive should take 9 – 10 hours. If you want to break your journey, stay in Gaborone.

Where should I camp? There are a host of campsites to choose from, but some have little privacy or shade. These three are the best:

• **Moreswe 2, for scenery and isolation.** This campsite looks out over the Moreswe Pan. If you stand on the roof of your bakkie you can see the nearby waterhole.

GPS: S23.56194 E24.09685

• **Molose 1, for wildlife.** This campsite is spacious and

located a stone's throw from a permanent waterhole that often attracts lions and other animals.

GPS: S23.38425 E24.18688

• **Mahurushele 3, for shade.** Khutse can become scorching hot in summer. No other campsite offers as much shade as this one.

GPS: S23.28445 E24.38987

What should I pack? You must be totally self-sufficient, so bring your own food, drinks, water and extra fuel. If you're worried that some of your food may be confiscated at the border post, buy your groceries in Gaborone. The last reliable place to fill up is at Letlhakeng, approximately 100 km from the park's southern entrance gate.

Do I need a 4x4? Yes, preferably one with low range.

Rent a satphone. There's no cellphone coverage in the reserve and a satellite phone is the only way to contact the outside world in the event of an emergency. Rent a phone from Sat4Rent. Rates from about R40 per day; airtime from about R18 per minute. **Contact** Shana Coetsee ☎ 011 023 4290; 📧 sat4rent.co.za

What does it cost?

Camping rates: You pay your camping fees in advance to a private company called Bigfoot Tours. If you're an SADC citizen, it costs R185 per adult per night, R93 per child aged 8 – 15, free for children under 8. The rate is cheaper if you're a Botswana citizen and more expensive if you're an international visitor.

Entrance fees: R134 per adult, R66 per child aged 8 – 15, free for children under 8; plus R55 per vehicle per day. Entrance fees to be paid at the gate upon arrival.

How do I book? Contact Bigfoot Tours ☎ 00 267 395 3360; ☎ 00 267 391 0927; 📧 bigfoottours.co.bw

GOTCHA! You'd think it would be difficult for a giraffe to hide in such a flat landscape, but this one managed to avoid Villiers' lens until sunrise on his final morning in the reserve.