



BACK TO BASICS

Hiking through Kruger on the Lonely Bull Backpacking Trail, Villiers Steyn and Tabby Mittins discovered you don't need nerves of steel to experience South Africa's favourite reserve at its wildest and uncomplicated best.

There's no explanation for why some of us are so keen to play packhorse and traipse through the wilderness for days, dodging wildlife, sleeping rough, eating freeze-dried meals and bathing only when a pool of crocodile- and hippopotamus-free water comes along. And unlike many visitors to Kruger, these people never get used to playing car tetris at good sightings or queuing for a braai at packed picnic sites.

But it's not only adventure lovers who fantasise about breaking free from the crowds and fences to experience the wilder side of an iconic national park, and they're not the only ones for whom Kruger's backpacking trails were designed. The trails are for anyone keen to experience the unadulterated essence of wild South Africa.

HIKING THROUGH UNTAMED TERRITORY

The newest of these backpacking trails, the Lonely Bull, takes place in an immense mopane-studded wilderness area northwest of Letaba Rest Camp, intersected by the winding Letaba River.

The dense, monotonous veld skirting many of the roads in this region isn't ideal for game viewing, and most self-drive visitors head further south where they're

LEFT: No fences, no vehicles, no noisy neighbours. Just you and your guides under the stars in Kruger.

KRUGER NATIONAL PARK



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Cooling off in the chilly rapids of the Letaba River; keep your eyes open for elephant, buffalo, waterbuck and a host of other animals that wander the banks of the river; it's not called the Lonely Bull Trail for nothing; guide Wayne te Brake interprets the signs of the wild for his guests.

more or less guaranteed better game sightings. On foot, however, it's an entirely different story.

Along well-worn game paths between and beyond the mopane thickets, the landscape transforms into shady lead-wood glades and grassy riverside clearings that make ideal spots to spend a night or two. Huge apple-leaf trees on the edge of the Letaba River provide shade for a lunchtime break and a refreshing splash. As for game, well, it's not called the Lonely Bull for nothing.

Apart from waterbuck and kudu foraging in the riparian vegetation and territorial hippos laughing their threats across the water, the hottest part of the day sees elephant herds leave the mopane thickets for the cool waters of the river, the ponderous bulls never too far behind. Dotted along the shady banks, you're also sure to find dagga boys, the notoriously bad-tempered old buffalo bulls who can no longer keep up with their herds.

Dangerous, yes, but unlike the dangers lurking beyond the burglar bars and electric fences of the city, wild animals are at least somewhat predictable to those who know how to read them. Two accompanying guides on every trail are fully equipped and qualified to help you experience Kruger on foot while keeping you out of harm's way.

ROUGHING IT ... A LITTLE

Guides such as Wayne te Brake and Peter Zitha know how to read the veld like a morning newspaper. They pull back the curtains on the inner workings of the bush and show visitors just how much more there is to Kruger National Park than crowded lion sightings and busy campsites.

'These trails aren't the information

overload that the day walks from camp can be,' Wayne said. 'They're all about instilling first-hand an appreciation of nature in people who might otherwise never have the opportunity to experience true wilderness.'

It doesn't get much wilder than mimicking elephants by digging for fresh water in a sandy riverbed, watching it turn from an undrinkable murky puddle to a crystal clear reservoir, or keeping an eye out for crafty crocodiles while bathing in the chilly shallows of the Letaba River. If you can handle that, the rest is pure magic.

From quiet nights around a sociable campfire and the early wake-up calls of lions roaring and ground hornbills hooting, to the thrill of following fresh buffalo tracks through a mopane forest, the adventure never ceases – and you won't want it to.

Without allocated campsites to tie you down each night, every day is played by ear. Quite literally, in fact – if those lions that called in the night are close enough, chances are you'll be able to track them to wherever they choose to rest for the day.

If your group feels at home under a shady apple-leaf tree with a gorgeous view across the river where elephants come down to drink, then you can choose to stay for a couple of nights and head out for a day of backpack-free hiking, tracking and exploring. The freedom is intoxicating.

Whether you're one of those Bear Grylls-style serial adventurers in search of another wild thrill, or just a Kruger lover looking for a fence-free alternative, it really doesn't get much better than four days of wandering the animal footpaths in northern Kruger. ■

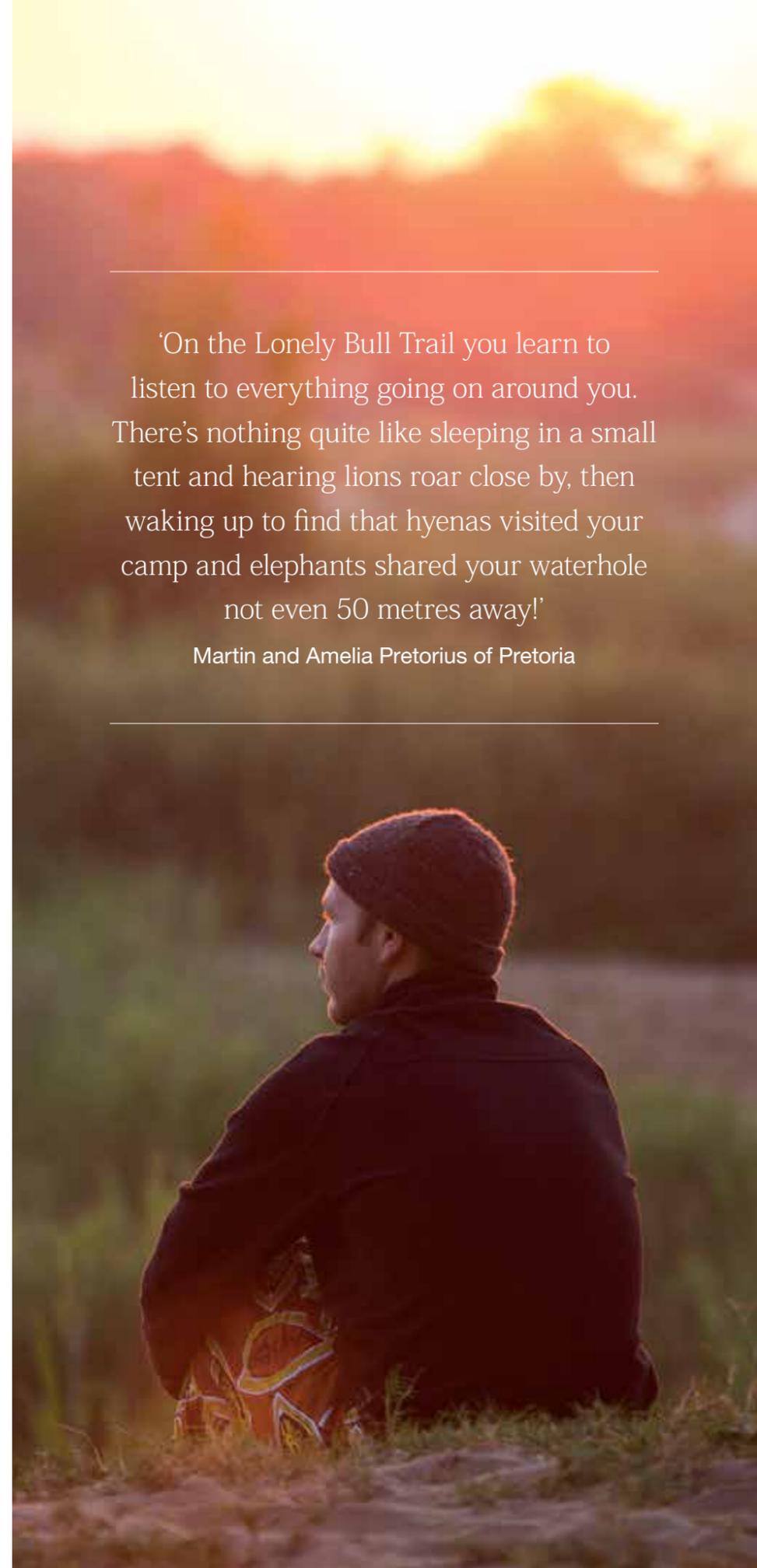
➔ [Travel planner overleaf](#)

KRUGER'S OTHER TRAILS

Backpacking Trails. The Olifants River Backpacking Trail (fixed distance of 42km, minimum age 16) follows the course of the river and is the toughest of Kruger's three backpacking trails. The Mphongolo Backpacking Trail follows the scenic riverbeds northwest of Shingwedzi Rest Camp. Cost and bookings procedures are the same as the Lonely Bull (see Plan Your Trip on page 54).

Wilderness Trails. There are seven wilderness trails spread across Kruger, from the Bushman Trail near Berg-en-Dal in the far south to the Nyalaland Trail near Pafuri in the north. They work on a similar format to the backpacking trails: three nights out, with Wednesday and Sunday departures from the nearest camp. However, these trails are fully catered and hikers sleep in a rustic base camp with A-frame huts or tents and proper ablution facilities. No electricity. Costs R3900 a person (increases to R4000 from 1 November 2013). Email bridgetb@sanparks.org.

Day walks. Most camps offer two- to three-hour day walks (usually in the morning) with an armed guide leading a maximum of eight guests. These often include a short game drive to and from the walking area. No children under 13. Costs R390 a person (increases to R420 from 1 November 2013). Tel 012-428-9111.



'On the Lonely Bull Trail you learn to listen to everything going on around you. There's nothing quite like sleeping in a small tent and hearing lions roar close by, then waking up to find that hyenas visited your camp and elephants shared your waterhole not even 50 metres away!'

Martin and Amelia Pretorius of Pretoria



ABOVE: You'll need to be reasonably fit to make the most of Kruger's backpacking trails. **BELOW:** Guide Wayne te Brake shows how to dig for fresh water the way elephants do.



PLAN YOUR TRIP

ABOUT THE TRAIL

The trail starts at Shimuwini Bushveld Camp in central Kruger and stretches over four days and three nights, with departures every Wednesday and Sunday. Hikers meet at 13h00 at Shimuwini on the day of departure and return to camp around 10h00 on the final day. Two armed guides lead four to eight hikers through an unspoiled wilderness area with no set routines or fixed campsites. Hikers must be reasonably fit and prepared to rough it a little (bathing in the Letaba River and digging a hole when nature calls). There's no predetermined distance to be covered daily, but you can expect to hike between seven and 10 kilometres a day. No children under 12 are allowed on the trail and over 65s need a medical certificate.

WHAT TO TAKE

Hikers have to be completely self-sufficient. Take food, tents, sleeping rolls and cooking and eating utensils. Also pack a headlamp, insect repellent, bio-friendly soap, sun-screen and water purification tablets or drops (add Game to your water to hide any unpleasant taste). Keep irritating grass seeds out of your socks by wearing long

trousers or gaiters with shorts. If your backpack weighs more than a quarter of your body weight, the lead guide may ask you to leave a few items in camp before departure. Pack a beanie, thermal underwear and a warm jacket if you plan to hike in June and July; the Lowveld can be extremely cold in winter, especially along the river.

WHEN TO GO

The trail is open from 1 February to 31 October. The best time for animal sightings is late in the dry season between August and October when large numbers of game converge along the Letaba River and the drainage lines that feed it.

WHAT IT COSTS

R2 050 a person (increases to R2 200 from 1 November 2013). Conservation fees are from R50 an adult a day (free for Wild Card holders).

WHO TO CONTACT

Email bridgetb@sanparks.org or call Bridget Bagley on 012-426-5117. The trail can't be booked through SANParks central reservations. Visit www.sanparks.org for more information. For specific questions on the backpacking trails, phone guide Wayne te Brake on 084-360-8772. ■



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