

Follow the leaders. The convoy drives through the Kalahari duneveld on their way to the Kameeldoring Camp along the Nossob 4x4 Eco Trail. The camp is no longer in use.



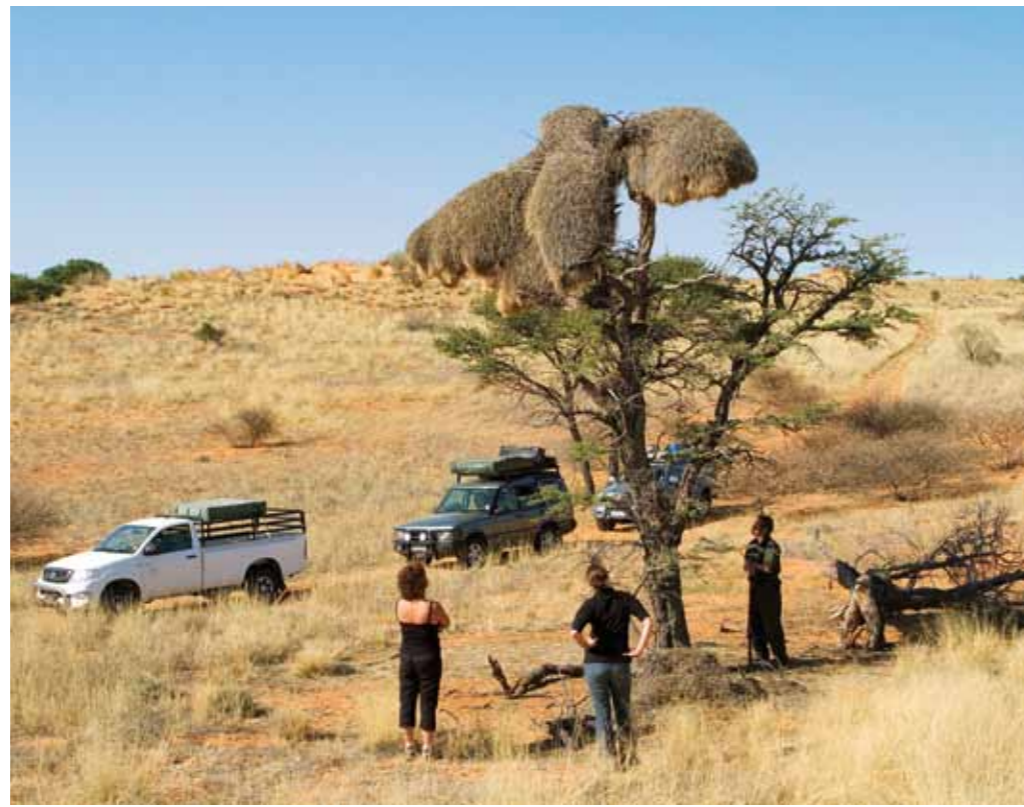
Lion-spotting in the dunes

Ever wondered where the lions go when they disappear over the crest of a dune alongside the Nossob river bed in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park? **Tabby Mittins** and **Villiers Steyn** found out on the Nossob 4x4 Eco Trail.

PHOTOGRAPHS VILLIERS STEYN



Randy's Landy. Apart from a couple of tricky dunes, the scenic drive from north to south is mostly effortless.



Sociable weavers' nest. Every stop on the route becomes an introduction to a new intricacy of life in the Kalahari. Here a massive weavers' nest dominates the landscape.



Mmmn melon. Our guide, Robert, cuts a sliver of delicate Tsamma melon for us to taste.



DESTINATION | K GALAGADI

Enjoying the campfire at Swartbas. Life doesn't get much better than good company around a crackling campfire in the absolute wilderness of the Kalahari duneveld. But make you take enough wood with along.

“So, who’s up for seconds?” asks Randy, owner and manager of the Cedar Park Hotel and Conference Centre in Woodmead from the other side of the fire.

We’re at Nossob camp site, nursing our happy bellies full of Balti butter chicken curry (yes, curry!). And, for the first time in weeks, the icy desert air isn’t creeping in between our layers upon layers of clothes.

Randy Moniez and Andra McCabe, first-time visitors to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, have joined Villiers and me for the Nossob 4x4 Eco Trail, a four-day, three-night, 204km drive through the dunes from Polentswa all the way down to Kij Kij.

This is the deal: if we find them big cats they keep us fed and happy. “If you find us lions, you’ll get pancakes for breakfast,” Randy promises.

Anyone who’s ever visited the Kgalagadi knows that it’s a pretty tall order, not because there’s any shortage of big cats, but because of the sheer expanse of roadless wilderness they occupy.

You’ve got a decent chance in the Auob and Nossob river beds where waterholes and prey are plentiful, but in the dunes we’re scheduled to tackle tomorrow, it’s like trying to find unleaded petrol in northern Tanzania.

However, after eating nothing but soup for the past two weeks, we’re determined to get some good food, no matter what the odds.

Day 1:
Nossob to Swartbas (100km, 7 hours)
Boys with their toys

It’s 09:00 on Monday morning and our guide, Robert Wylde, welcomes us in front of Nossob’s reception. Behind him are three 4x4s – his 2005 Hilux 2.5 D4D single cab, Randy and Andra’s 2005 Discovery II TD5 and our 2004 Hilux 2.7 petrol double cab – filled up with wood, water and pancake ingredients, ready to hit the road.

First Robert hands out handheld radios. “Just hold in this button, wait a moment and speak”, he explains. Andra looks at theirs as if it’s a bent spoon, and I stare at ours as though he’s just handed me a live grenade. Randy and Villiers, on the other hand, practically snatch them from our hands with excitement. Then the convoy heads up the riverbed towards Polentswa waterhole, the official starting point of the Eco Trail.

Robert leads the way and Randy and Andra bring up the rear as we bump along the corrugated gravel road. The 60km drive to the turn-off feels long when you’re prepared for undulating dunes, but there’s nothing like a bit of friendly radio banter to hurry the time along. “How often do you see lions on these trips?” asks Randy.

“Well, every trip for the past four trails. Sometimes Monday night, sometimes Thursday morning, but of course there’s no guarantee.” Robert replies.

“I’ve heard they can sometimes cause problems by biting tyres and bumpers?”

“Don’t worry, they usually only go for the middle vehicle, passenger side. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Roger that.”

The practice dune

Finally, 90 minutes later, we reach the trail’s starting point. Driving just far enough off the road not to be seen by the public, we stop for a short briefing.

Standing with his “girlfriend,” an old .303 rifle, resting on his foot, Robert explains the rules (no messing with his girlfriend) and toilet etiquette (ladies at the back, gents at the front) for the trail. He also mentions that, short of a couple of tricky dunes and one particularly treacherous one (nicknamed Bertha), the trail isn’t a particularly challenging drive from north to south.

Today is going to be a comfortable drive. We’ve got between 50 and 60km of driving per day to look forward to for the next four days and we’re all ready and raring to go.

Robert and Randy stay in low range for the entire trail, but only for the convenience of not having to constantly stop and change over when we hit a steep dune. The two-track winds lazily between the low dunes and driving in high range 4x4 feels effortless.

About 18km into the drive, however, we reach the “practice dune.” It doesn’t look like much, but we soon discover that

it’s essential to listen carefully to Robert’s advice crackling over the radio.

“It’s a bumpy slope, and there’s a slight S-curve just before the top that can kill your momentum if you’re not prepared.”

Randy revs his loaded Landy up in low range third gear and glides over without any trouble. We choose the same gear, but approach the dune too slowly resulting in an abrupt loss of momentum.

“Uhm, guys, we just need to pull back and try that again. We’ll be with you in just a second.”

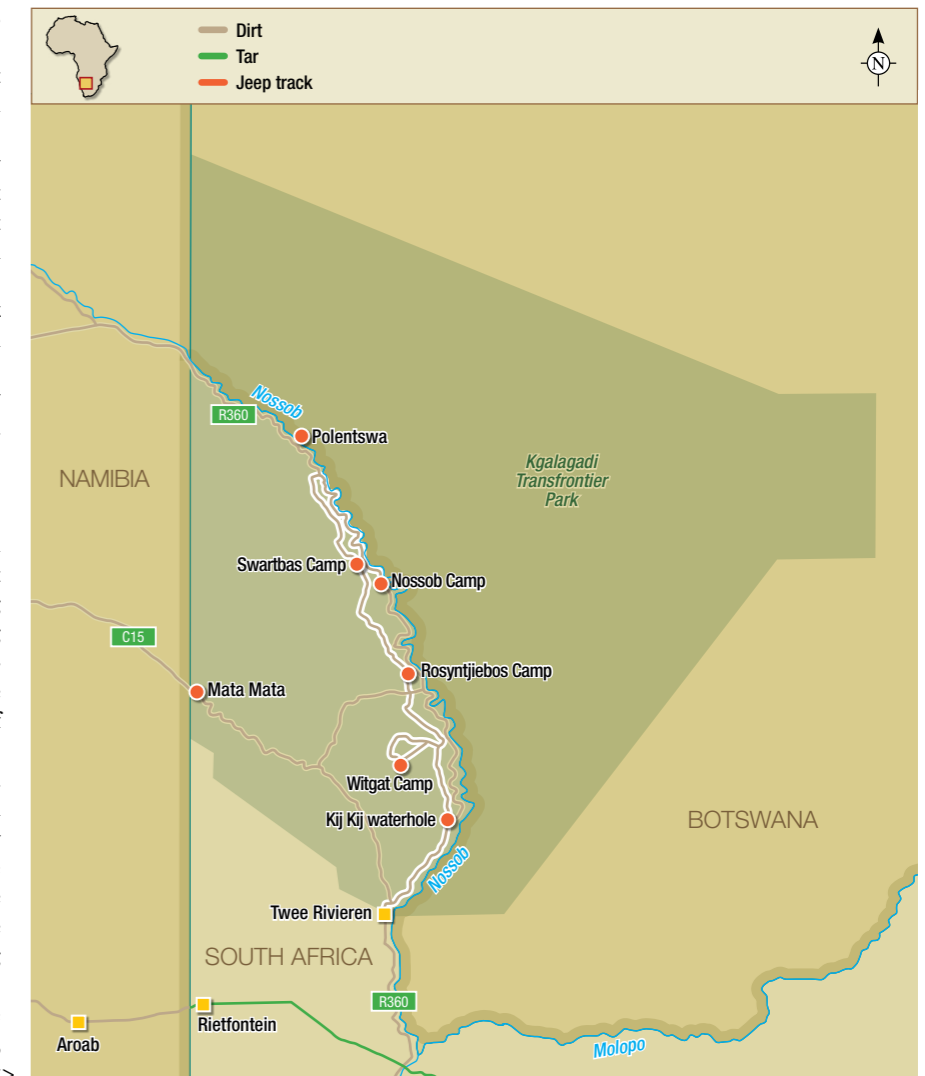
One more attempt, this time in low range second gear, and we’re up. It’s a practice dune after all.

Lions after lunch

The Kalahari 4x4 Eco Trail isn’t all about driving. In fact, it’s more about exploring the dunes and experiencing the magic of the Kalahari than testing your vehicle in the sand. We stop regularly to stretch our legs and learn about the inner workings of the flora and fauna of the dunes.

Robert shows us how to make a Bushman-whisk from a three-thorn bush, and where to find the empty cocoons of the lunar moth which are used by the locals to make musical ankle bracelets. He explains the reason for the different coloured soils and the varying vegetation in the dunes.

We learn about the habits of the Bushmen and taste the delicate tsamma, a bitter, watermelon-like plant that



provides life-saving, thirst-quenching water in this arid landscape.

Shortly after lunch we spot two young male lions and a lioness, just metres off the road, radiating aloofness as only the kings and queens of the Kalahari can. As we play paparazzi to our feline stars, the ever-vigilant Robert outlines an escape plan in case they feel like a rubber snack.

Our stomachs rumble in anticipation of our reward for such an easy and unexpected sighting. "I'm looking forward to those pancakes, Randy," chuckles Villiers over the radio.

Two quiet hours later we arrive at Swartbas, our long-drop and bucket-shower camp site for the night, just in time for Randy to whip up a mound of home-made beef burgers dripping with prego sauce, piled high with all the trimmings.

Swartbas camp site lies between a clump of False Umbrella Thorns (Swartbas trees) just two kilometres as the crow flies from Cubitje Quap, a bustling water-hole just north of Nossob restcamp. It seems strange to have driven 100 km into the dunes, only to end up a stone's throw from where we started out.

Tomorrow we look forward to putting some distance between ourselves and anything remotely civilised. For now, we feast to the whoop and cackle of spotted hyenas somewhere in the moon-lit distance.

Day 2:

Swartbas to Rosyntjebos (50 km, 7 hours)

Of birds and butter

Waking to the *chopchop-kizzzee-chopchop* of a pair of crimson-breasted shrikes, we crawl out into the chilly morning air to find our camp site brimming with various birdlife.

Chestnut-vented tit-babblers hop around beneath our chairs in search of treats as Marico flycatchers duck and weave in the low branches up above.

Swallow-tailed bee-eaters swoop and circle round between their favourite perches and fork-tailed drongos whistle their copycat tunes to anyone who will listen.

After devouring our breakfast of pancakes dripping with butter and honey we pack up quickly, eager to get on the road, but anxious at the thought of tackling Bertha, the highest and most challenging dune of the trail.

Throughout the morning, while exploring an abandoned aardvark hole,



Biiiiiiig yawn. Young male lions, such as this one, are one of the things that makes this trail so remarkable.



Watch where you walk! The Devil's Claw plant has a nastily efficient seed-distribution system and will stick to your clothing like nothing.



PCG. Another Pale Chanting Goshawk – or is it?

Andra encounters a devil's claw, the dry fruit which has nastily efficient hooked "fingers" that she discovers are near impossible to detach once they've claimed you.

By the time we reach Eileen Pan at mid-morning we're ready for a break and some coffee.

Eileen Pan is one of many flat, circular, salty pans scattered throughout the dunes of the Kalahari like alien landing pads, the perfect stop to stretch our legs and gather our wits one last time before tackling Bertha.

Are you a man or a mouse?

An hour later, at the bottom of the sandy giant, we talk strategy.

"You get three tries, that's it. Then you've got to take the "Mouse Route." Robert warns us, and I can tell that none of us is keen to go down in that particular book.

"You've got to build up enough speed to take you to the top, but what looks like the top from here is actually a false flat."

We look up at Bertha and, though the idea of a false flat is daunting enough, what worries us most is getting round the almost 90° corner near the base with enough speed to carry us all the way over.

"I use low range fourth gear at 60 km/h," says Robert before he lowers his tyre pressure to 1.2 bar. A minute later he glides up seemingly without any effort.



Ready to rumble. Villiers with his 2.7 L Toyota Hilux double cab gets ready to tackle Bertha. It was third time lucky for him.

Randy drops his Disco's tyre pressure to 0.9 bar, gathers enough speed to get into low range fourth gear, whips round the sharp corner and flies up Bertha with reckless abandon. With a well-earned grin on his face he breaches the crest, surfs up and over the false flat and comes to a standstill safely on the other side.

Next it's Villiers's turn in the Hilux double cab, tyres 1.2 bar all-round. Also opting for low range, 4th gear he takes a growling run-up to the corner at 50 km/h, but, as Robert warned, it turns out to be too slow.

Randy, Robert and Andra position themselves at Bertha's top for encouragement as Villiers reverses back down to the starting point for attempt number two.

Again the Hilux growls a high-pitched whine, this time at 60 km/h, taking Villiers to the top... where the false flat claims another victim. Conceding defeat, Villiers backs down all the way again for his third and final attempt.

Villiers drops his tyres to 0.9 bar and hurtles round the bottom bend at 65 km/h, making it all the way to the deceptive false flat and just before it bogs him down he downshifts to first and shoots over the top and comes to a rest behind Randy's gloating Landy.

Relief radiates off him as he steps from his vehicle. "I'm carrying much more weight than you guys!" he gushes his excuse.

A rather relaxing drive to Rosyntjebos

Far too soon, Robert hurries us back into our vehicles and we realise why when, only a couple of minutes later, we reach a 360° lookout point.

If reaching Bertha's peak wasn't enough of a reward then this view certainly is. Standing at the top of the dune, we bask in the winter sunshine and relish the adrenaline lingering in our veins.

The whirring clatter of compressors slice through the midday silence of the dunes like a well-sharpened blade as all three vehicles' tyres are inflated back up to 1.5 bar before we retreat to the shade of a shepherd's tree for a brief lunch of leftovers.

With Bertha behind us, we set out on the tame drive to Rosyntjebos, our second camp site.

The veld around Rosyntjebos and Swartbas camp sites are completely different. Ok, they both have sand. It is the Kalahari after all, but that's where the similarities end. Where Swartbas is gently undulating, shrubby, and shaded by false umbrella thorns, Rosyntjebos is flat and covered in hip-high golden Kalahari sour grass.

There's a marked drop in the temperature tonight, so Randy whips up a warming and aromatic lentil curry to keep the chill at bay.

We huddle by the fire until the cold breeze sends us to bed early.

Day 3:

Rosyntjebos to Witgat (64 km, 7 hours)

A leopard in the loo

"Leopard," whispers Villiers in the dark before sunrise.

I know a jackal when I hear one, but I know better than to doubt him. Four years studying leopards in Botswana seems to have given him an almost supernatural ability to know when one is about.

"He's being taunted by the jackal." The frantic yelping continues into daylight, but the jackal is gone by the time we're up and about.

A quick investigation of the camp site reveals the fresh tracks of our silent visitor's movements from the long drop, around the shower block and along the path up towards the camp site. Thankfully the only casualty is a mangled roll of toilet paper.

It's 07:00 and an icy breeze keeps the temperature hovering around the zero mark, preventing the butter from melting on our waffles. We break camp early, packing up is routine by now, and set off before 09:00 for the longest dune-leg of the trail.

Pale chanting goshawks around every corner

With Bertha behind us and the quiet dunes yielding nothing but pale chanting goshawks (or, since they are so numerous out here, PCGs), our radio chatter turns into silence.



From the horse's mouth



Nossob 4x4 Eco Trail guide, **Robert Wylde**: "Winter mornings are freezing and summer days scorching, so I suggest people book the trail for autumn (April and May) or spring (August and September). Bring at least one bag of wood per vehicle per day."



Randy Moniez from Johannesburg: "I love the constant change of scenery as you drive along: a two-track road winding through a sea of grass, large camel thorn trees and red sand dunes. You just have to stop regularly to soak it all in."



Andra McCabe from Pretoria: "I can't believe we saw lions twice on the trail. The two males and lioness near Swartbas were almost too close for comfort."



Camping in the Kgalagadi. The Witgat camp site is the only one in the area with a waterhole.

"Randy, there's a Pricey Call Girl in the tree at 3 o'clock," Villiers prompts. Silence. "Are you sure it isn't a Pretty Cool Guy?" he replies, catching on quickly.

The winding road doesn't seem quite so endless now, and before long we find ourselves only a couple of kilometres outside Kameeldoring, a disused camp site from the days when the trail used to be four nights long. A long line of springbok take the lead and stay there until we reach the camp site, less than eager to leave the road and risk the scratchy sour grass on either side.

Vultures in a tree nearby keep us alert for predator activity, and before long Robert slows to a standstill.

"Right guys, there's an eland carcass here on the left, about five metres from the road. It seems to be a couple of days old so keep an eye out for whoever caught it."

"There!" shouts Villiers at the same time as Robert points out a perfect example of a black-maned Kalahari lion in his prime heading towards us.

We watch the well-fed lion lope over to a dense shepherd's tree, where two lionesses peek out to yawn and greet him.

"So, we've paid off this morning's waffles, right?"

"Nah, Andra thinks you deserve penne carbonara tonight for this one."

Our stomachs rumble in anticipation as we press on towards our next stop, the irregular dunes.

Three cars in the duneveld. Robert leads the way on one of the many scenic stretches through the Kalahari duneveld.

Dunesurfing to Witgat

Driving over the dunes has been much like floating on the regular swell off the coast of Umhlanga, more so now as we turn west on the loop towards Witgat camp site.

Just 5 km out, we skirt the edge of a steep dune until Robert brings us to a stop and beckons us from our vehicles, traipsing up the almost vertical slope. Thick sand sucks at our shoes and fills our socks, but once again the view from the top silences all complaints.

This isn't the regular swell we've been floating on. The irregular dunes are a stormy sea of sand and grass, choppy and erratic. We're thankful for being led around rather than through it.

We arrive at Witgat just before 16:00 and are delighted by what we see. The only camp site with a waterhole nearby, Witgat is perched in the thick nutmeg-coloured sand between two dunes.

A massive shepherd's tree marks the middle of the camp, separating the camping area and the bucket shower.

"I didn't want to step in devil's claws so I followed a set of lion tracks," says Villiers after an exploratory walk to the open-air ablutions. "I think I'll be using a bottle if nature calls late tonight."

We fill our bellies first with warm chorizo with ciabatta, then creamy pasta. In the spotlight of a full moon a couple of unusually friendly pygmy gerbils hop around beneath our chairs looking for scraps, while a few steenbok and a jackal visit the waterhole.

Just as we settle into our sleeping bags a lion roars in the distance. Life doesn't get much better than this.



No rush. For the most part of the trail that runs through undulating dune veld, you'll be able to use high-range 4x4.

Day 4:

Witgat to Twee Rivieren (92 km, 5½ hours)

The wind hides a visitor

We awake to the wind buffeting our tent like Baby Jake Matlala in a winning round, and we're not keen to leave the warmth of our cushioned cocoon. It's our last day on the road so we pack up slowly, hunkering down over our steaming coffee and nibbling on rusks, trying to put off our departure from this magical spot.

Robert's morning rounds reveal another silent visitor in the night, this time a brown hyena skirting the camp site as we slept. The knock-out blows of the wind drive us into our vehicles sooner than we'd like and we set off before 09:00.

All good things come to an end

"On your right at about 2 o'clock there's a Pretty Clever Geek," Robert pipes up, and the drive has officially begun. Herds of gemsbok and eland watch us as we ride the rolling dunes back to the Nossob river bed.

Just before midday we stop for our last educational instalment. Robert waits for us beneath another huge shepherd's tree on the side of a dune, his ever-present 'girlfriend' balancing on his toe.

"We must be close to the Nossob river bed now?" asks Villiers. Robert leads us up to the top of the dune. "We're closer than you think." And then we see the Nossob, gleaming in abundance.

Back in our vehicles and with only a few kilometres left before we reluctantly have to hand over our radios and say goodbye,

Robert picks up the radio. We expect a formal "ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us on the Nossob 4x4 Eco Trail."

But instead he says: "This might be an odd time to ask, but I have a question." A fitting end to our four days gourmet meals, he asks: "Randy, how do you make a white wine sauce?"

We laugh our way back to the Nossob riverbed to the accompaniment of Randy's cooking class, already salivating in anticipation of our return trip, next time south to north, through these enchanting dunes.

"Over and out."

Drive Out tip: Visit <http://www.sanparks.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=38&t=59856> to read recent trip reports written by the Nossob 4x4 Eco Trail guides. ✉

I want to go too

What vehicle? A 4x4 with low range is necessary. No trailers are allowed.

How are the roads? For most of the trail you drive on sandy two-tracks through the undulating duneveld, which can easily be done in high range 4x4. Every now and again, however, you have to cross a steep sand dune in low range.

Trail details: The trail runs between Twee Rivieren and Nossob rest camps, starting at Twee Rivieren in even months and Nossob in uneven months.

The duration is three nights, four days, departing every Monday. Total distance: 306 km (204 km in the duneveld and 102 km in the Nossob river bed) Minimum two vehicles (excluding guide), maximum five. Guests have to cater for themselves. Remember to bring your own firewood and enough water for drinking, showering, cooking and washing dishes.

Accommodation: The three trail camp sites, Swartbas, Rosyntjebos and Witgat each have a braai-area, long drop and bucket shower and are

not fenced. In order to accommodate travelling times and distances you are advised to book the night before and after the trail at either Twee Rivieren or Nossob depending on the direction of the trail.

Cost: R2340 per vehicle plus the daily conservation fee of R48/day (for SA residents) if you don't have a Wild Card.

Bookings: Phone Twee Rivieren reception at ☎054 561 2000 or send an e-mail to ✉jan.kriel@sanparks.org