

# Professor Kalahari

Next time you're on your way to Nossob, pop into the Kalahari Trails Nature Reserve where you can meet Professor Anne Rasa, a true Kalahari legend who probably knows more about this arid wilderness than anyone else.

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Professor Anne Rasa squints into the wintry sunlight and points to a distant sand dune. "Oh, look – gemsbok spoor," she says.

If I concentrate I can see the tracks she's talking about, but for all I know they might have been made by a stegosaurus. Such an observation is routine, however, for this 72-year-old Kalahari veteran. Her astonishing knowledge of the landscape and its inhabitants, coupled with her wizened appearance, makes her seem like a desert oracle, which she is. In her softly spoken way, she brings the veld to life before a visitor's eyes.

Although it's obvious that the Kalahari is her natural habitat, it hasn't always been. Born a world away in damp, drizzly Wales, Anne's family moved constantly when she was a child, depending on where her RAF father was posted. She always knew she was destined for an academic life and after school she set about furthering her expertise in the field of ethology (animal behaviour), earning degrees from universities in Hawaii, London and Germany.

In the process, she studied everything from aggression in reef fish to the social interaction of elephant seal pups before setting her scientific sights on the animal that would make up the bulk of her life's work: the mongoose.

In 1986, after a stint in Kenya's Taru Desert studying dwarf mongooses, she took up a position at the University of Pretoria and began researching yellow mongooses in the Kalahari. By chance, the mongoose studies also led her into the mysterious realm of the world's most social beetle – the toktokkie, or darkling beetle.

When I ask her about the toktokkie, she smiles. "The mongooses weren't around one day," she says. "While I waited for them to come back, I watched a beetle carry food to a hole where another beetle came up and took it. The rest is history."

Now well and truly hooked on the Kalahari and its creatures, she returned to her favourite desert as often as her lecture schedule at Tukkies, and later Bonn in Germany, would allow. In time she became a student of master Kalahari tracker Vet Piet Kleinman and she set her sights on purchasing a 3 500ha farm called Alpha, 37 km from the Ggalagadi Transfrontier Park, with plans to rehabilitate the veld and turn it into a nature reserve.

It took nearly a decade of negotiation but finally, in 1997, the farmer agreed to sell. These days, unaffected by Bushman land claims (the reserve is fondly known as "Prof se plek") Kalahari Trails is the only privately owned land between Andriesvale and Twee Rivieren.

And, most importantly, visitors are



welcome. "I enjoy sharing my knowledge," Anne says. "But I really want people to have the opportunity to go out into nature and just be. It changes you."

**The playful scrabbling** of two young meerkats interrupts our conversation as they take up a game of hide-and-seek around my legs. Kasper and Kirri are the latest of many rescued *stokstertjies* brought to Anne. I mimic their purring call and their game ceases abruptly. They stand up and scan the sky.

"You made the sound that alerts them to aerial predators," Anne says. She goes *prrrp* and the meerkats calm down and resume playing.

Clearly, hand-raising these creatures is not all fun and games. A baby meerkat might be a double scoop of adorable, but it comes with a generous dollop of trouble.

Anne tells me how it works: "They're

extremely social creatures, so having people around doesn't interfere with the way they think. They don't see us as individuals, rather as different members of the group. Heads, hands and feet are just family members fulfilling various roles within the clan."

Kasper leans against my leg, exposing his belly to the sun, and Kirri does her best to remove the grouting between the tiles on the stoep.

Anne sighs and gives Kirri a stern stare. "They need to dig for at least five hours a day for their psychological wellbeing," she says.

Before the meerkats can do any serious structural damage, however, Anne leads us up a nearby dune. It's the wrong season for bugs and beetles, some of which only come to the surface to breed for three weeks a year, but she points out the spoor of a northern black korhaan and shows me a buck spoor spider, which Kirri quickly devours.

We find a comfortable spot at the top of the dune and Anne tells me about her future plans for the reserve, including photographic tours and a hide, plus a camera-trap project to follow the movements of the elusive and endangered small spotted cat.

Clearly an eternal student, I ask her if she ever takes a break. "I have no need for holidays," she says. "I've seen all the places I want to see. Short of paddling down the Amazon in a canoe, there's nothing I feel like I'm missing out on." She thinks for a while then adds: "Except seafood. Fresh fish is not easy to find around here."

When Kirri's excavations threaten to bury us, we take a slow walk back down the dune. After a day in Anne's company, I feel like I've tripled my knowledge of this fascinating desert, and there's still so much to learn. Maybe next time I'll come back with an extra notebook... and a box of frozen yellowtail.

## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

At the Kalahari Trails Nature Reserve you can camp or stay in a guesthouse, a chalet or a safari tent. Visitors can go for walks on their own or take part in a guided activity like a bush walk (during the day or at night) or a game drive. You can even sip a sundowner on a dune to the soundtrack of barking geckos.

**Rates:** Camping R50 per adult; free for children under 10. Guesthouse accommodation from R400 per twin room. Four-sleeper chalet R800 per night. Twin safari tent R400 per night.

**GPS:** S26.77500 E20.63394

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