

Make your Serengeti dream come true!

15 300 km, 12 big reserves, a
million wildebeest

Do you dream of clearing your diary for a month or two and driving to the Serengeti National Park to see the great migration? In your own vehicle? And how about visiting some of Africa's most beautiful reserves en route? Such as the Makgadikgadi Pans, Hwange, Selous, Tarangire, Ngorongoro, Lake Manyara, Ruaha, Mana Pools and Matobos? Do you know how to plan, how to prepare your vehicle and what to take along? Buy the next eight issues of *Drive Out*, because Villiers Steyn has just completed such a journey, and will show you exactly how to do it.



PHOTOGRAPHS VILLIERS STEYN (UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED)

Test run. The Hilux and gear that were used on the three-month trip to the Serengeti were first tested on a trial run to Sossusvlei in Namibia.

Right, here we go!

Villiers Steyn and J.I. de Wet left Pretoria on 20 January on an epic drive to the Serengeti. Along the way, they took a few detours to visit other reserves, such as the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park in Botswana.

I've always been a bush child. Even though I grew up in Pretoria, my earliest memories are of my brother, Francois, and I playing outside our green rondavel in Olifants camp in the Kruger National Park.

If we weren't playing with pebbles on the steps, we were scanning the river through binoculars looking for hippos and crocodiles.

As a teenager, while my friends were listening to Nirvana, trying to score a date with the *dominee's* daughter or watching *Dawson's Creek*, I was glued to BBC nature documentaries such as *Big Cat Diary*.

For years, I watched day in and day out as Simon King and Jonathan Scott tracked Shadow the leopard, Fundi the cheetah and the Marsh pride of lions in the Maasai Mara.

It was also the *Big Cat Diary* that made me aware of the world-famous wildebeest migration between the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania and the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya. Soon I started obsessing about it. I promised myself: "One day I'll go and see it for myself!"

Stop dreaming, start doing!

Ten years after the seed was planted, it was finally watered. In 2008, I met J.I. de Wet, a theology student who loves nature as much as I do. Small wonder – he grew up a stone's throw from the Kruger National Park!

We stated our objective to visit the Serengeti before the end of 2013 without imagining that we'd achieve that goal with two years to spare.

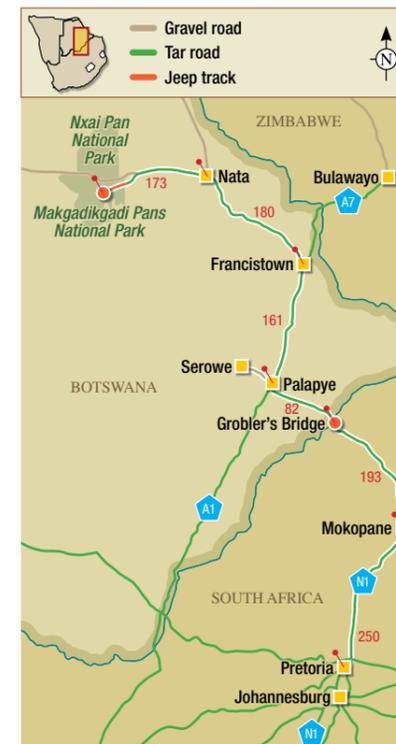
The first big step in realising this goal was buying my dream vehicle in Paarl in December 2009. I spent a lot of time looking for this spotless 2004 Toyota Hilux 2.7 petrol 4x4 double-cab bakkie.

With enough savings in the bank (and with the optimistic spirit of the World Cup Soccer tournament in the air), I decided last year to drive to the Serengeti early this year.

I had a year to plan the trip...

Planning a tour in Africa is a bit like organising a big, old-fashioned family wedding with 500 guests. You have to start well in advance, think carefully about who you're going to invite and be careful not to go overboard, because it can easily turn into an expensive exercise.

Then, of course, you have to decide on a convenient date. Since I didn't want to book, and because I prefer greenery



Villiers's planning tips

- **Start timeously.** Don't wait until the last moment to do the shopping and get the paperwork in order. The paperwork, especially, could take months.
- **Ask the experts.** Visit the AA for advice about your vehicle and border crossings, and visit a travel clinic for vaccinations and advice on medication.
- **Do research.** Use as many sources of information as possible – travel magazines, guidebooks and the internet.
- **Ask your buddies.** Other travellers who have recently travelled along the route give the best advice.
- **Be organised.** Start a file for your bookings, contact numbers and printed information. Sort it according to country.
- **The car papers!** Make a separate file for your vehicle documentation. Believe me, it's a huge pile.
- **Count the cents.** Don't underestimate the value of a thorough budget.

SERENGETI TRIP: PART 1

to a dust bowl, I decided to go in the rainy season.

I reckoned that two months would be enough to do the trip without rushing. In addition, if we were to go in February and March, the timing would be just right to see the wildebeest give birth on the Serengeti plains.

Next, I had to convince J.I. to come along. He didn't put up much resistance.

What would MacGyver do?

In the last six months last year, J.I. and I ate, slept and breathed The Serengeti Trip. We read every possible tour guide, watched every travel DVD we could find and spent hours surfing the internet for tips on accommodation and travel.

We had coffee with friends who had recently travelled through Africa and listened with trepidation as they recalled nightmare border crossings, corrupt police officers and terrible roads.

Finally, we decided to add 10 days to our itinerary just to make sure we didn't have to rush.

Despite all the late nights spent planning, we were still worried that we might have forgotten something. But my dad reassured us: "In the army the rule was always: Plan an attack as carefully as possible, but be willing to adapt immediately when things don't go according to plan. You've now done everything you can. When the paw-paw strikes the fan – and you can be sure it will – you just make a plan."

"Plan, but adapt," became our mantra, and ultimately it contributed greatly to the success of the tour. No wonder my dad looks just like MacGyver!

On two practice runs to the Hwange National Park (August 2010) and Sossusvlei (December 2010) we established what gear was unnecessary. This gave us so much confidence that we decided to post daily diary entries on a blog via satellite phone on top of gathering video material for a potential documentary. Talk about biting off more than you can chew!

At 9 pm on 19 January everything was packed. Before sunrise, we were off to the Serengeti!

Pretoria – Njuca Hills, Makgadikgadi Pans (3 days, 1 307 km)

**Day 1
Botswana looks lush**

It's 4.45 am, Thursday. After a restless night, we finally hit the road. >



Cooling down. After a good rainy season, the pans between Nata and the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park were flooded.



La-La land. Growing straight up, lala palms break the monotony of the flat landscape of the Makgadikgadi here and there.



Finger on the trigger. J.I. de Wet tries to photograph a dragonfly in flight at a flooded picnic spot next to the main road between Njuca Hills and Nata.

It feels as if I'm on my way to a job interview. More than 15 000km of unknown African roads lies ahead of us, and so much can go wrong: malaria, car troubles, even an accident...

I don't know if it was a premonition, but just last night I realised I had forgotten to close the water tank's lid after filling it up in the morning. Only a few litres shook out, but it was enough to wet my sleeping bag in the back of the canopy.

At 10am we stop at Grobler's Bridge, the first of nine border posts we would have to go through in the next 70 days. I have to list all our electronic gear on a SARS customs form: four cameras, seven lenses, two video cameras, two laptop computers and an iPod. It uses up all the lines on the form.

I get the feeling that the form will cause us considerable grief on the journey... "Bam! Bam!" With passports and the customs form stamped, we drive into Botswana.

The grass en route to the Khama Rhino Sanctuary, our first overnight spot, is so lush you can barely see the herdsman-less cattle and donkeys.

I lie in bed thinking, well, at least the first day was a success, even if my sleeping bag is damp and we battled to get reception on the satellite phone. Our tummies are full, it's not raining and our first web journal entry has been published to boot.

Perhaps tomorrow our heart rates might also return to normal.

Day 2
Just stay calm

Our second day starts disastrously. While we repack the bakkie, I realise all our money is gone – 4460 US dollar in cash. Without a trace.

The previous day, just before reaching Grobler's Bridge, I locked the moneybag in a drawer in the loading system in the back of the bakkie. Now it's gone.

Like two bloodhounds looking for drugs, we unpack everything and inspect every nook and cranny of the Hilux. In desperation, we unscrew the entire drawer system to see if the little bag didn't perhaps slip under one of the drawers. Nothing.

It starts raining. After two wet, wasted hours, we give up.

That money is either lying on the roadside after Grobler's Bridge, or it was swiped yesterday afternoon while we were taking an afternoon nap. The tour is over. On the second day.



Ready to roll. After preparing for a year, the Serengeti Trip team – J.I. de Wet (left), Villiers Steyn and the reliable Hyena – are ready for the long haul.

Then it hits me like a Dale Steyn bouncer. Yesterday, when I stowed the money in the drawer, I put it in a small backpack so it wouldn't lie around. Meanwhile, we've put the backpack in a crate on the roof.

It feels as if the weight of the world has been lifted off my shoulders. Tears of joy and relief run down my face.

Just before sunset, we hit a snag between Nata and the Makgadikgadi Pans – everything is flooded. The entrance road to Planet Baobab looks like a river in flood. You need a canoe to reach the tables at the picnic sites.

However, to our surprise and great relief, the road from the Makolwane entrance gate to Njuca Hills is bone dry.

En route, we see a lone red hartebeest and a family of bat-eared foxes.

A small herd of gemsbok welcome us at the campsite. We camp in the middle of nowhere.

Day 3
There be lions

The next morning we head for the Boteti River in the west of the park. The night was surprisingly quiet – we didn't even hear a jackal squeek.

Ten kilos from the camp we find fresh lion tracks. It's a lioness with a cub. They must be the reason we're not seeing any other game, since not even a steenbok is to be seen this morning.

The dramatic landscape of the Makgadikgadi Pans makes up for the quiet game drive. The countryside is as green as Lord's in cricket season, and practically just as flat. The sky looks bluer >

Makgadikgadi Pans National Park

What are the roads like? Between Njuca Hills and Kumaga and next to the Boteti River you drive in sand, but you don't need a 4x4 for it.
When should I go? In the rainy season (November – April) the park is at its most beautiful, and you have a chance to see up to 25 000 migrating zebra. During the dry season (May – October) there is a good chance that you might see game on the banks of the Boteti River.
How long? At least two nights
What can I experience? A feeling of complete isolation at Njuca Hills
How far is it? From Pretoria via Grobler's

Bridge to the park it's about 1 000 km, whether you're travelling via Nata or Orapa.
Sound like a boffin: The wisecracking *Top Gear* presenters – Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond and James May – are said to be the first people to have driven all the way across the Makgadikgadi Pans. They did it in a 1981 Lancia Beta Coupé, a 1963 Opel Kadett and a 1985 Mercedes-Benz 230E.
Drive Out says: Don't expect the Moremi – you're on the world's biggest salt pans. Animals and game-viewing roads are rare, but the sparse landscape is dramatic.