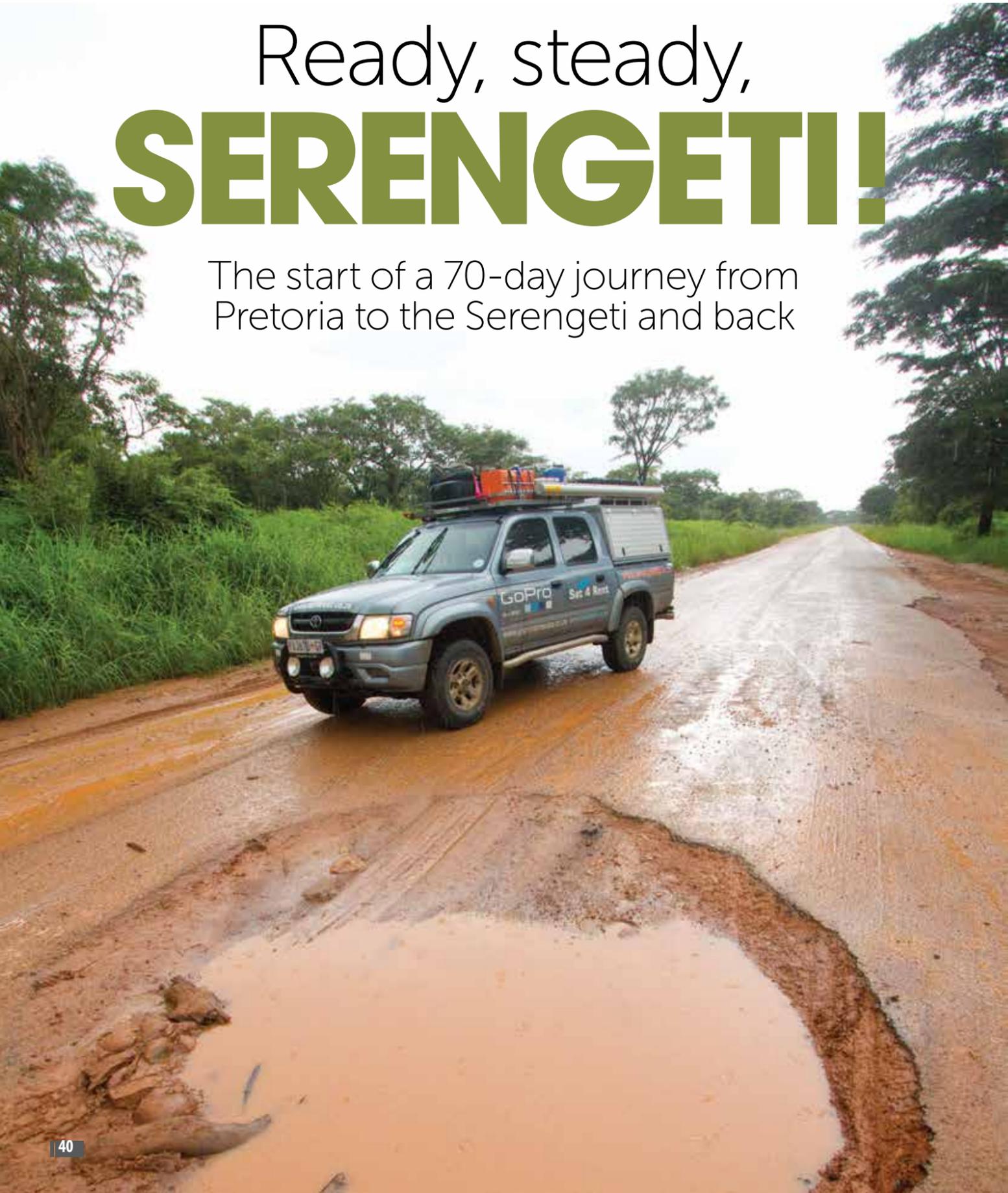


Ready, steady, SERENGETI!

The start of a 70-day journey from Pretoria to the Serengeti and back



We all have big travel dreams: for some it's standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon and for others, diving along the Great Barrier Reef. In the first of a four-part series, **VILLIERS STEYN** gives us the low-down on his dream cross-continental road trip to East Africa.

IMAGES: VILLIERS STEYN

It had always been the bucket-list dream for travel partner JI de Wet and me to see the Great Migration of the wildebeest in East Africa. Our dream became reality when we drove from Pretoria to Serengeti National Park in Tanzania in pursuit of this magnificent spectacle and back again.

OPPOSITE: The shocking state of Zambia's Great North Road, where vehicles are more often than not forced to the side of the road. **BELOW:** The trip from Pretoria to the Serengeti included stopovers at several iconic parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

PLANNING IS EVERYTHING

You can't plan a big African road trip overnight. I'd bought my first East Africa guidebook exactly a year before we departed on our adventure. Firstly, we had to decide where we wanted to go, and for us, this was the easy part – the great plains of the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. Secondly, we had to decide when to go. In order to avoid the rush of tourists that flock to the Mara River around September and October to watch the famous annual river crossings, we elected instead to arrive at the park in February, when the wildebeest herds give birth on the southern short-grass plains.

The only other thing that we were sure of in these early stages was that we would travel in my trusty 2004 2,7-L petrol Toyota Hilux double cab 4x4.

And then the planning got tricky. How many days would we need? Which route should we take? Should we tow a trailer? What would it cost us? With each passing day, the list of questions grew. Thankfully, I had a year to find the answers.

Between guidebooks, park websites, online forums and countless cappuccinos with people who had conducted similar trips successfully, we managed to put together a detailed budget and a rough itinerary.

We gave ourselves 70 days to complete the 15 000-odd-kilometre trip, with the luxury of visiting a

TRAVEL ADVISORY

Villiers' top tips for transcontinental travel:

- Choose a travel partner (or partners) who has the same expectations as you do.
- Avoid unnecessary bookings: they often cause you to rush and may prevent you from staying longer at enjoyable places.
- We found the Bradt travel guides to be most informative.
- Try not to drive more than 500 km a day.
- Make sure you include a few weekday city stops in your rough itinerary to stock up on supplies or recuperate at a guest house, should the need arise.



string of other iconic national parks and game reserves, such as Hwange, Mana Pools, Ruaha and Selous along the way. Towing a trailer only seemed like a good excuse to haul a lot of unnecessary supplies, so we decided against it. Everything would have to go either inside or on top of the Hilux. Subsequently, JI named it 'The Hyena' because for the duration of the trip its backside was always slightly lower than the front due to all the weight it carried.

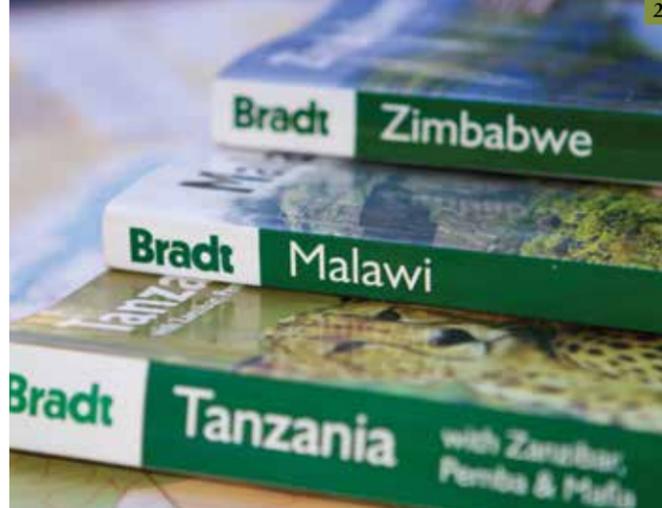
ALWAYS ONE STEP BEHIND

Our journey began on 11 January 2011. By the end of Day 1 our little dome tent was pitched at the Khama Rhino Sanctuary in Botswana.

From there we drove through the palm-studded flats of the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park before heading to Zimbabwe's largest national park, Hwange. It quickly became clear that this was going to be a wet trip, as we waded through ankle-deep pools of rainwater to get to roadside picnic sites, and skidded from side to side on muddy gravel roads in search of lions that always seemed to be one step ahead of us.

For a week we were tormented by nightly roars, and tracks that seemed fresher every day, until we made peace with the fact that, against all expectations, a lion sighting was not on the cards for the first leg of the trip. >

1. Planning an overland route requires that meticulous research be done well in advance. / 2. The Bradt guides proved particularly useful. / 3. Locals enjoy a lesson in modern technology. / 4. Much adventure included white-water rafting on the Zambezi River. / 5. The hot springs and campsite on the banks of the Manshya River proved a welcome break. / 6. The author ankle deep in a pothole of the type that makes travel slow.



WHERE TO STAY

- > **Njuca Hills**, Makgadikgadi Pans National Park, Botswana: facilities include two basic campsites in the middle of nowhere, each with a neat long-drop toilet and bucket shower. Campers must be completely self-sufficient, *tel +267-318-0774*, *dwnp@gov.bw*.
- > **Robins and Main Camp, and Masuma and Ngweshla picnic sites**, Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe: Robins and Main Camp have tidy chalets as well as campsites (no electricity), but ablution facilities are neglected. Don't expect hot water. Main Camp also has a restaurant and small shop. Masuma and Ngweshla picnic sites act as exclusive campsites at night and both have showers and flush toilets. Only Masuma has hot water, *tel +263-470-6077/8*, *reservations@zimparks.co.zw*.
- > **Mlibizi Zambezi Resort**, Lake Kariba, Zimbabwe: the resort has a lush campsite with power points and clean ablutions as well as chalets, swimming pools and a small supermarket outside the entrance, *tel +263-713-065-198*, *galaxy@gatorzw.com*.
- > **Vic Falls Rest Camp**, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe: the camp is within walking distance of the falls and has a large, shady campsite with power points, a variety of chalets, a swimming pool and a restaurant with Wi-Fi facilities, *tel 021-685-9808*, *info@vicfallsaccommodation.com*.
- > **Kapishya Hot Springs**, north-eastern Zambia: visitors can stay either in the lodge or a lush campsite that has ample shade and clean ablutions, but no electricity, *tel +260-97-697-0444*.



HILUX TRANSFORMATION AND PACKING

I replaced the Hilux's original fibreglass canopy with an aluminium one that includes side flaps, allowing easy access to everything inside. To simplify packing even further, I had a double-drawer system fitted in the back, and a roof rack on the front, which held a second spare wheel, two gas bottles, two jerry cans of fuel, a toolbox and wood. Food, spare parts and other supplies were divided between 11 plastic ammunition crates – six strapped onto the top of the aluminium canopy, three inside each drawer and two loose in the back. After a couple of days of shuffling and repacking, everything had its place in the car. The most important thing was to always put everything back exactly where we'd found it.



ABOVE: Sticking to one vehicle and not towing a trailer was smart. Talk to your Toyota dealer about the best options to kit out your vehicle for a long journey.

But then, on our last day in Hwange, we got word of a pride that had taken down a giraffe near Main Camp. Minutes later, sitting and watching round-bellied cubs frolicking in the lush green vegetation, I realised that, despite the wet weather, planning this trip for summer was the right call. The bush was alive and colourful, lifting our slightly dampened spirits and elevating our excitement to new levels for the rest of the trip.

En route from Hwange to Mlibizi in Zimbabwe, where we hoped to hook a few of Lake Kariba's fierce tiger fish, we stopped to play a game of roadside football with a group of friendly curio salesmen. We had brought 30 deflated balls along for exactly this purpose – to make new friends along the way.

Their football skills were outshone only by their carving skills and, despite the joyful encounter, we left with heavy hearts knowing that, in recent

years, these young lads had struggled to make a living with fewer and fewer tourists stopping to buy their simple masterpieces. From Kariba we drove to Victoria Falls, which was bursting at the seams when we got there. So heavy was the spray from the water mass that thundered over the edge of the falls that, by the time we had walked the 1,7 km from one end to the other, it looked as though we had been caught in a torrential downpour.

The next day we took on the white waters of the mighty Zambezi River below, tackling rapids aptly named Commercial Suicide, The Devil's Toilet Bowl and The Overland-Truck Eater (among other equally disconcerting names) in our little raft.

THE (NOT SO) GREAT NORTH ROAD

On Day 13, having survived the turbid waters of the Zambezi mostly unscathed, we crossed into Zambia and headed for Lusaka, where we stocked up on fresh veggies and drinking water before heading towards the Tanzanian border on the Great North Road. Although it headed north(ish), it could hardly be classified as a road because it was barely driveable. Potholes from the size of a small TV to that of an eight-seater dining room table forced us to drive alongside the road instead of on it.

Nearly 800 km north-east of Lusaka we pulled over at Kapishya Hot Springs at Mpika, an unexpected sanctuary for two wet and weary travellers.

We camped on the banks of the Manshya River which, after the perpetual rain we'd experienced, was surging violently. This didn't worry us because a couple of hundred metres from its banks lay the treasure that gives this popular stopover its name – a natural hot spring with crystal-clear water and a year-round temperature of 40°C.

We spent the next couple of days happily amphibious, bobbing around in the revitalising water like two pale-skinned hippos.

The only thing preventing our bodies, minds and souls from relaxing completely was the knowledge that our next stop was Tunduma – Africa's worst border post.

Read more about the second leg of Villiers's adventure in the August/September issue of Toyota Zone, when he crosses the horrendous Tunduma Border Post, visits Africa's largest game reserve and battles a stomach bug in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro. **▶**

THE ROUTE



ABOVE: The first leg of the journey from Pretoria to northern Zambia and into Tanzania took the travellers 17 days over a distance of 4 104 km.