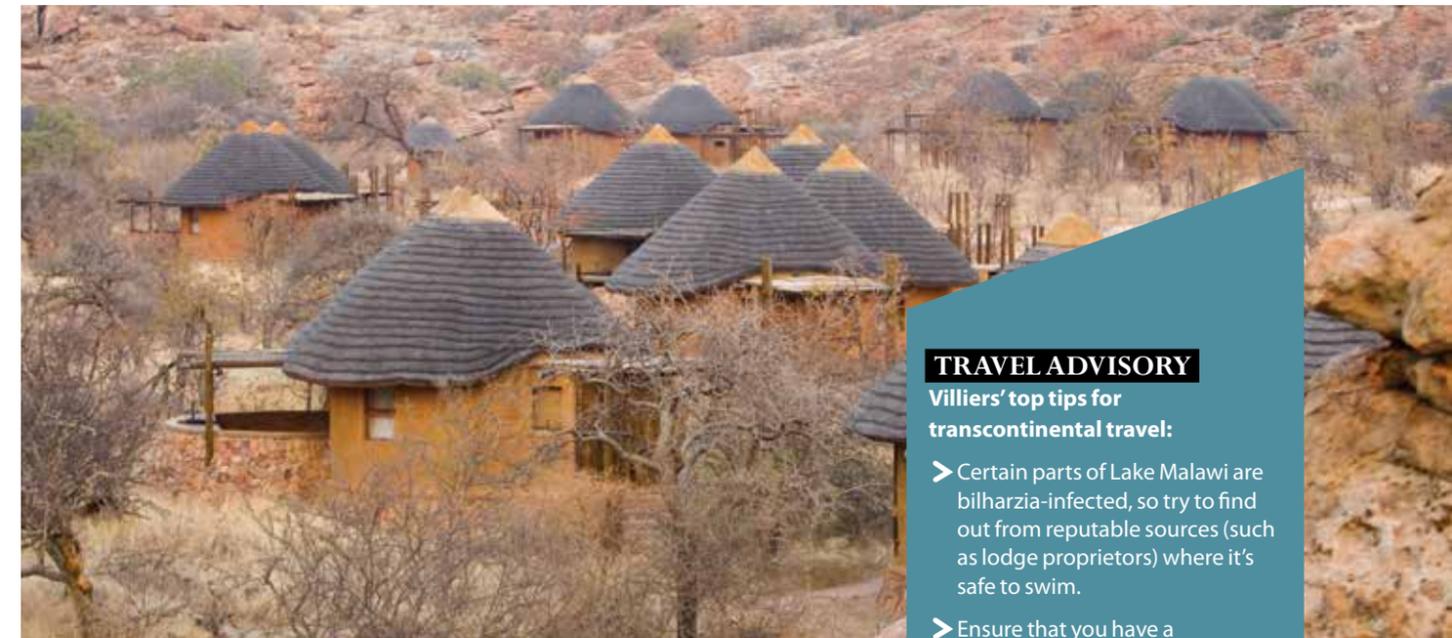


# MALAWI TO MAPUNGUBWE

and all the Ms in between...



On the final leg of their epic 15 354 km-long journey, **VILLIERS STEYN** and **JI de Wet** visited the last few iconic parks and reserves on their list, including Mana Pools, Mashatu and Mapungubwe.

IMAGES: VILLIERS STEYN

**Ending a journey is never easy,** especially after 50 days of non-stop travel. At this stage it's less of a road trip and more of a lifestyle, with morning chorus wake-up calls, elephant roadblocks and campfire cooking more the norm than a novelty.

The thought of returning to the complicated normality of the city, with its televisions, microwaves and traffic circles, had become rather depressing. Despite the fact that we still had 20 days and nearly 5 000 km left to get from southern Tanzania to Pretoria, we knew that crossing the border south into Malawi would signal the final leg of our epic Serengeti trip.

But first, our Toyota Hilux (dubbed the Hyena) needed some TLC. We had driven more than 10 000 km through muddy swamps, over chalky two-tracks and along some of the worst corrugated gravel roads I'd ever seen, so **JI** decided to give it a thorough service the

following day. Coincidentally, the next morning we woke up to the first flattie of the whole trip but, just two hours later, with a repaired tyre, nuts and bolts tightened, and oil and filters replaced, the Hyena gave a trusty purr and we were on our way once again.

## ZOOMING TO ZIMBABWE

Since our main objective was always to see wildlife, we didn't spend much time in Malawi. We cruised south for a few days, buying beautifully sculpted curios from friendly locals, playing roadside football with energetic children and camping in lush gardens within spitting distance of Lake Malawi. Before we knew it, it was time to cross into Zambia.

Anyone who's undertaken a lengthy road trip will know that you're forced to count your pennies on the home stretch, especially if you've spoiled yourself with white-water rafting on the Zambezi and hot-air balloon rides over

**OPPOSITE:** It's worth finding out from lodge owners or at campsites which areas of Lake Malawi are safe from bilharzia. **ABOVE:** Leokwe Camp's well-camouflaged self-catering chalets in Mapungubwe National Park.

## TRAVEL ADVISORY

### Villiers' top tips for transcontinental travel:

- Certain parts of Lake Malawi are bilharzia-infected, so try to find out from reputable sources (such as lodge proprietors) where it's safe to swim.
- Ensure that you have a police clearance certificate for your vehicle when you cross over into Zimbabwe.
- Just because you are allowed to walk in Mana Pools without a guide doesn't mean it's safe. Lions in the park have been known to kill people, even in the campsites, so always walk in groups and never at night.
- Keep a few US dollar notes handy for toll fees while you are crossing Zimbabwe. Traffic police in Botswana have cameras in their patrol cars, so always stick to the speed limits, even if you don't see officers or cameras next to the road.
- Spare parts and breakdowns: African back roads can be merciless on your vehicle and have the potential to damage every part. Carrying spares for everything, however, is impossible, so we took as little as we could and relied on local bush mechanics as we went. We took oil and spare air and petrol filters for the Hilux's 10 000 km service, as well as an extra fan belt and spark plugs. We also packed in a comprehensive set of tools, Pratley Putty, duct tape and an array of cable ties. Our recovery crate also contained a tyre repair kit and a towing kit (including a tow rope, snatch rope, U-bolts and protective gloves).

the Serengeti, or underestimated the price of petrol in rural Africa.

Zambia's exorbitant park fees rival those of Selous and Serengeti, so we scrapped our original plan to visit South Luangwa, Zambia's premier safari destination, deciding instead to spend a couple of extra nights in one or two of Zimbabwe's cheaper counterparts.

And so, before long, we crossed the border from southern Zambia into Zimbabwe, and made for Mana Pools and Matobo National Park.

**BELOW ALL EXPECTATIONS**

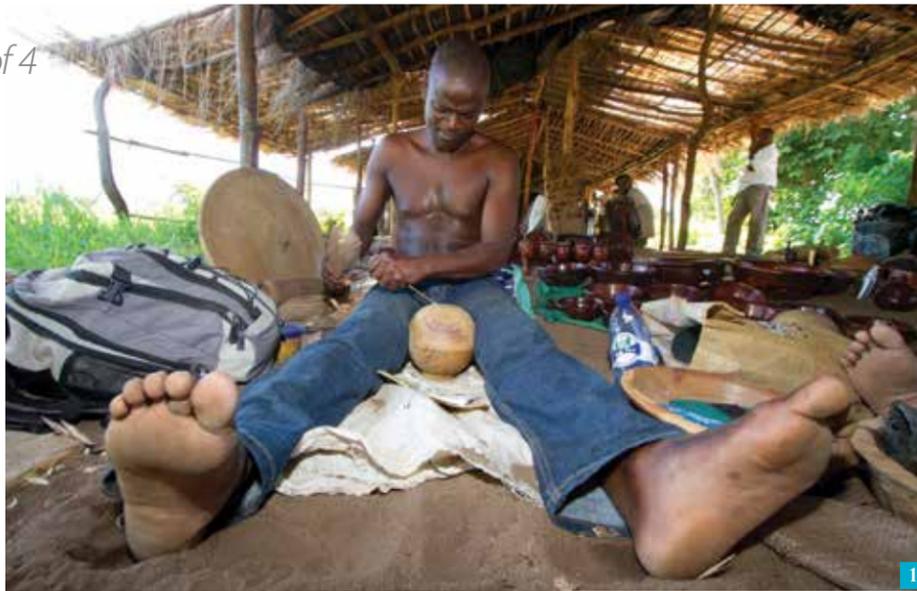
Ever since childhood, I had associated Mana Pools with pure wilderness, a place where animals and people could wander wherever they pleased. It was this freedom in a national park that I'd been looking forward to for the entire trip. Ji, on the other hand, was eager to cast a few lines from the comfort of a camp on the bank of the Zambezi River.

And so, driving east from Kariba border post, we daydreamed of catching 5 kg tiger fish and of laid-back lion prides strolling past the camp.

Our daydreams disintegrated abruptly just a few hundred metres from the entrance gate, where a loudspeaker the size of a small coffee table was reverberating to the beat of a Jay-Z song blaring into the wilderness. A young official gestured that we should enter, then turned the music down, issued our permit, and pointed us in the direction of Nyamepi Camp, where we would stay for the next five days. We drove on through, hoping the worst was behind us.

Unfortunately, Jay-Z was only the first of a few nasty surprises. The 70 km-long access road to Nyamepi was so badly corrugated we felt like a tin of jelly beans on a jumping castle full of kids. It was so awful that by the time we got to reception we were thankful to still have all of our teeth and full use of our spines.

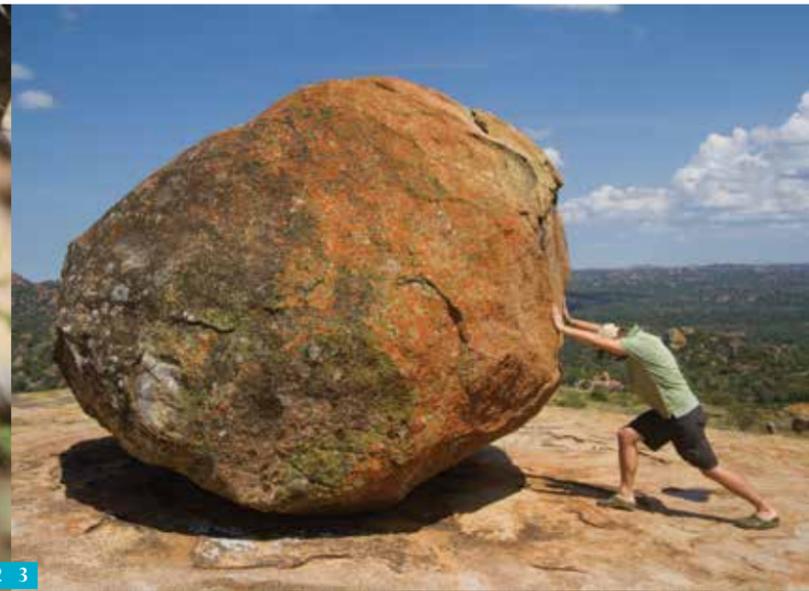
We then learned at reception that the riverside campsites we'd so been looking forward to staying at cost US\$100 a stand instead of the US\$20 a person that we'd



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1. A Malawian crafter. / 2. Mashatu elephant. / 3. Matobo Hills. / 4. Mama Rula's campsite at Chipata. / 5. All smiles in Malawi. / 6. Game abounds at Mashatu. / 7. Ji services the Hilux. / 8. Common flat lizards. / 9. Ji (left) and Villiers (right) with a sports fan in Botswana.

**WHERE TO STAY**

- **Chitimba Camp**, Northern Malawi, on the shore of Lake Malawi, has a lush little campsite with communal cold-shower ablutions, a restaurant and Wi-Fi at a reasonable price *tel +265-888-387-116, camp@chitimba.com, www.chitimba.com.*
- **Mama Rula's** at Chipata in Zambia is one of the neatest campsites with green lawns, shade and clean communal ablutions with hot water. There's also a bar and restaurant. *tel +260-977-790-226, mamarula@iwayafrica.com, www.mamarulas.com.*
- **Nyamepi Camp** at Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe. This unfenced public campsite on the Zambezi riverbank has elephants, hippos and lions wandering through it at will. Communal ablution facilities are basic but clean and usually have hot water. *bookings@zimparks.co.zw, www.zimparks.org/index.php/parks-overview/national/mana-pools.*
- **Maleme Dam Campsite**, Matobo National Park, Zimbabwe. Unfortunately this scenic campsite in the rocks has deteriorated in recent years, with unusable ablutions (shower at the main camp). Bring enough water for drinking, cooking and washing up. *bookings@zimparks.co.zw, www.zimparks.org/index.php/parks-overview/national/matobo.*
- **Mashatu Main Camp**, Northern Tuli Game Reserve, Botswana. This luxurious lodge overlooks a busy waterhole and is in the heart of Northern Tuli, known for its elephant and leopard sightings. Expect air-conditioned rooms, guided 4x4 game drives and four delicious meals a day. *tel 011-442-2267, reservations@malamala.com, www.mashatu.com.*
- **Leokwe Camp**, Mapungubwe National Park, South Africa. Leokwe consists of a cluster of well-camouflaged self-catering chalets among the splendid sandstone outcrops of Mapungubwe. Each unit has a well-equipped kitchen, air-conditioned rooms and outdoor braai area, as well as a shower. *tel 012-428-9111, reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org/parks/mapungubwe*



**ABOVE:** Mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes is buried at Matobo Hills in Zimbabwe, an often-frequented tourist site.

budgeted for. Disheartened by the news, we decided to book only three nights at one of the less desirable and mostly overgrown campsites further away from the river.

Over the next few days, we realised that Mana Pools is a seasonal area, especially when it comes to game viewing. We'd arrived during the wet season when the animals move away from the river and disperse deep into the park. It's only when the natural pools in the heart of the reserve dry up that the game moves back towards the Zambezi.

In two days we saw only one buffalo and a curious elephant bull that walked nonchalantly through our campsite. A bite or two from the tigers would probably have saved the day, but, sadly, there were none. Disappointed, and without any of the memorable

moments we'd banked on, we left Mana Pools and headed for Matobo National Park further south-west, hoping for anything to lift our spirits.

The shocking state of Maleme Dam campsite did just the opposite. Litter lay scattered everywhere between overfull dustbins, and the water from the bathroom taps resembled fetid, two-month-old tea. Apparently, the taps hadn't been opened in months, allowing the water in the pipes to become stagnant and undrinkable. We contemplated bathing in the dam but opted to go for hot showers at the main camp instead.

**BURIED BETWEEN BOULDERS**

Fortunately, Zimbabwe wasn't all bad. Matobo Hills is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and at its heart is a place

called View of the World, so named by the English mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes. He loved the place so much that he asked to be buried there.

We hiked up to the lookout point, not so much for its historical significance but rather to admire the view that Rhodes had so enjoyed. The 360° panorama from atop the enormous granite outcrop revealed endless hills and valleys complete with remarkable rock formations. Most bizarre were the colossal free-standing boulders that surround Rhodes' grave like gigantic breadcrumbs, dwarfing gobsmacked visitors such as ourselves. (We couldn't resist a futile attempt or two to shift them.)

My highlight was the local wildlife: scores of rainbow-coloured male flat lizards and their comparatively dull mates scurrying from one person to the next, catching midges attracted by our perspiring bodies.

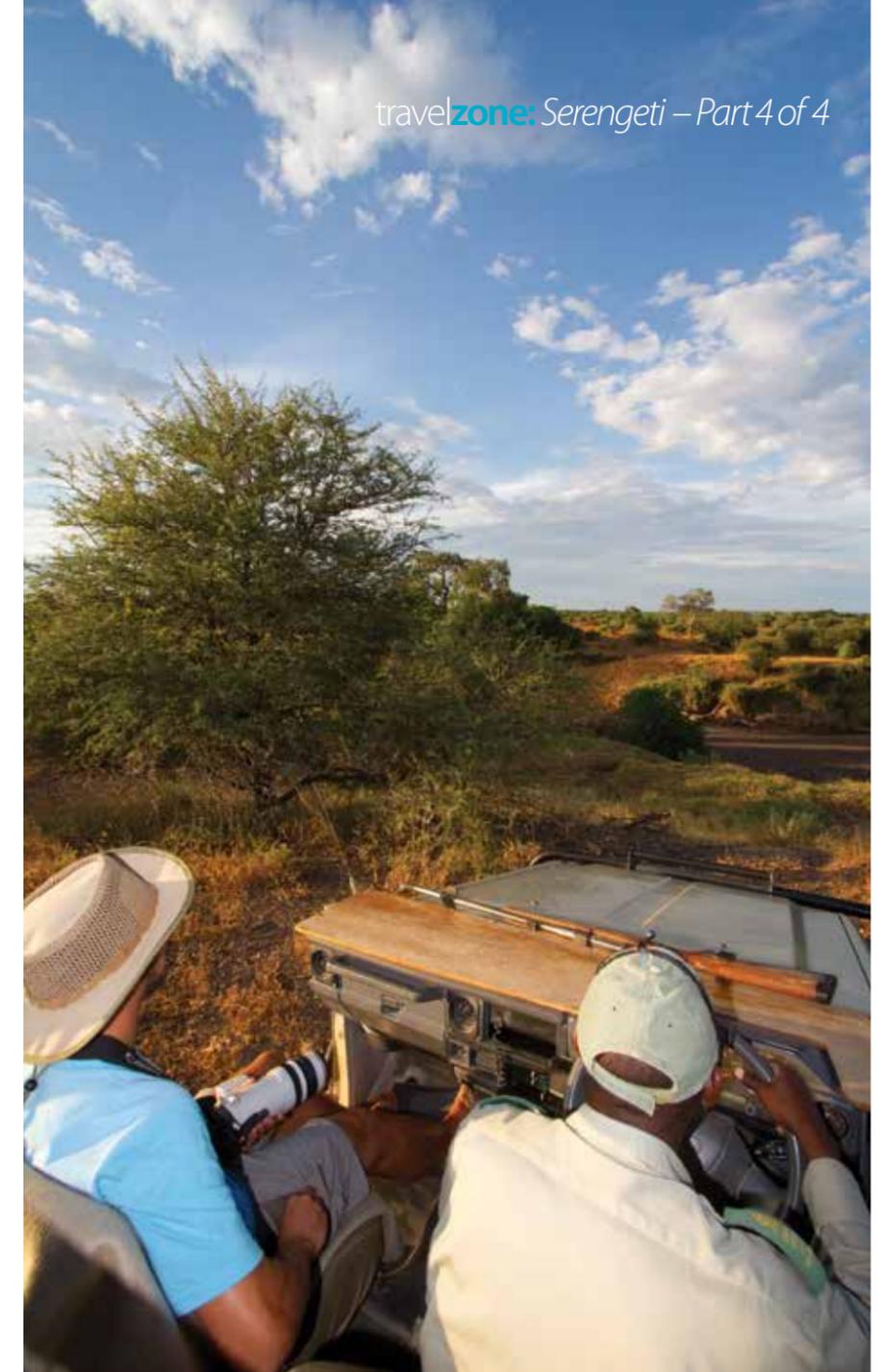
**MASHATU MAGIC**

By the time we crossed Plumtree border post into Botswana, it had been 16 days since we'd last seen lions. With only four days left of the longest and most productive road trip either of us had ever been on, we had only one place in mind to get our final predator fix: Mashatu Game Reserve in Botswana's far-eastern tip.

Mashatu Main Camp was a luxurious treat for two weary (and atypically bearded) travellers who had been sleeping on the ground in a tiny dome tent for 48 of the previous 65 days.

Knowing Mashatu's reputation as a predator hotspot, I was confident that a couple of game drives would produce sightings of at least one last leopard and a pride of lions.

We spent most of the first day recuperating in our lavish room, popping out only to order a cold beer from the bar, take a splash in the swimming pool, or eat chicken wraps and fresh scones for high tea on the terrace.

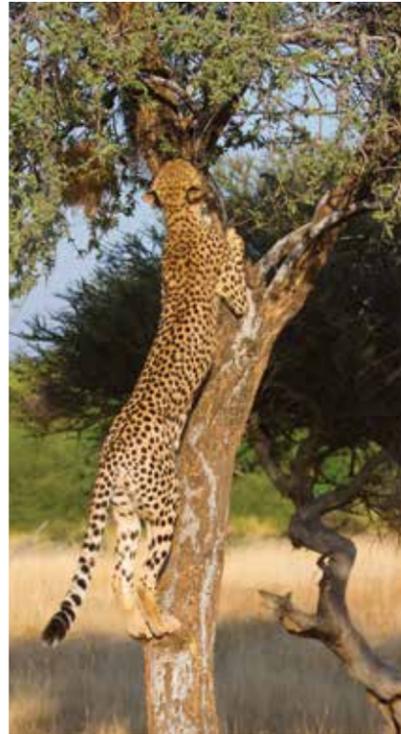


**ABOVE:** A game drive at Mashatu Game Reserve in Botswana's far-eastern tip, which has a reputation for being a predator-rich area, was a luxurious treat.

Nothing could have prepared us for what lay in store the next day. We left Main Camp at sunrise and bumped into five spotted hyenas squabbling over a decaying impala carcass in the Majale riverbed just below camp. They paid about as much attention to us as they did to an equally curious saddle-billed stork that watched the commotion from its fishing pool on the other side. Later that morning, after watching a herd of

elephants stroll casually down to the river to quench their thirst and take a quick mud wallow, we found a male lion feasting on the remains of a zebra foal.

He had consumed most of the carcass and looked as though he'd swallowed a bag of cement. It probably felt like it too, because after he took his last bite, he didn't even bother to move before flopping down for a customary midday nap. ➤



patriotic song, singing “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrica” all the way to Mapungubwe National Park, our final stopover before tackling the home stretch to Pretoria.

Rather than searching for game, we decided to spend our last full day taking in the breathtaking views from Mapungubwe’s treetop walkway and wooden decks instead.

LEFT: A leopard searches for prey.

Overlooking the Limpopo-Shashe confluence, reminiscing about all we’d seen and experienced over the past 69 days, it dawned on us – we had realised a lifelong dream. Beyond all expectations, travelling all the way to the Serengeti and back was actually quite easy.

As the sun set over the Limpopo Valley, JI asked, in all seriousness, “So, when are we doing it again?” 🚩

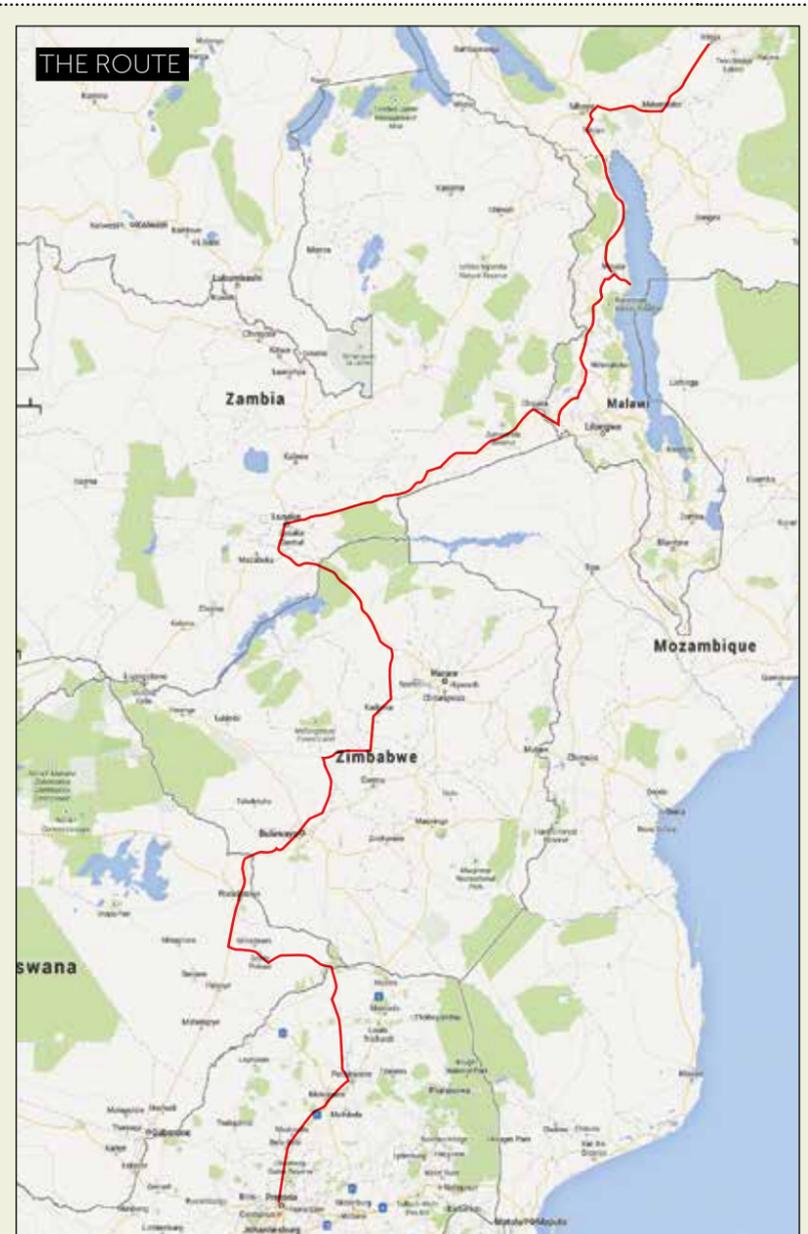
Our first sighting during the afternoon game drive was an uncharacteristically playful cheetah female. Adult cheetahs are usually extremely wary, constantly on the lookout for danger, but this individual was walking across the plain as if there were no lions or hyenas around. She dashed between shepherd’s trees, running up the trunks and flipping herself backwards, indulging her inner cub, unconcerned about us or anything else around her.

Before nightfall we found two leopards, one on the riverbank and one on a branch in a colossal nyala tree, as well as a pack of wild dogs just outside camp. It was the first and only time I’ve seen all five large predators – spotted hyena, lion, cheetah, leopard and wild dog – in one day.

### WELCOME BACK TO SOUTH AFRICA!

Although the end of our long-awaited journey was just days away, after more than two months on foreign soil, it felt great to be going back home.

As we crossed the low-water bridge into South Africa at Platjan border post, JI and I spontaneously broke into



ABOVE: The home stretch, from Malawi through Zimbabwe and Botswana back home to Pretoria – the end of a 15000 km journey to the Serengeti and back.



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