While exploring the alluring auburn wastes of the wildlife-rich Kgalagadi, *Stephen Cunliffe* uncovered a handful of intimate wilderness camps and comfortable lodges secluded deep within the rolling red dunes of this vast unspoilt conservation area.

The amalgamation of South Africa’s Kalahari Gemsbok National Park and Botswana’s Gemsbok National Park on 12 May 2000 gave birth to the 3.6 million hectare Kgalagadi Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA). Similar in size to the Netherlands, this jointly managed Peace Park is one of the larger and more scenically spectacular protected areas in all of Africa.

Although the South African sector lies sandwiched between the usually dry watercourses of the Nossob and Auob rivers, the unfenced transfrontier boundary allows animals to migrate throughout the Kalahari in search of food and water as they have done for millennia.

The conservation area takes its name from the local Tswana word ‘kgala’ meaning ‘great thirst’ and at first glance the Kgalagadi appears to be just that: an arid wasteland devoid of life and far from the ideal place for a wildlife safari. But, first impressions are often deceiving and the park’s undulating dunes are actually home to a thriving, desert-adapted ecosystem boasting an impressive diversity of wildlife and 264 bird species, including some of the best raptor and predator viewing in all of Africa.

After picking up a Toyota Hilux from Kalahari 4x4 Rental in Upington, my wife and I set off in search of the fabled red sands and black-maned lions of the Kalahari. Our plan was simple: We would bypass the traditional rest camps of Twee Rivieren, Mata-Mata and Nossob in favour of exploring some of the park’s more intimate and isolated wilderness camps and lodges.

**Kieliekrankie**

After a long day in the car, we eventually pulled into Kieliekrankie Wilderness Camp just as the sun was setting. Situated on the lower Dune Road, a mere 50 kilometres (but one-and-a-half hours’ drive!) from the Twee Rivieren entrance gate, Kieliekrankie is about as far as anyone could hope to reach in a long day’s drive from Cape Town. I was intrigued because, despite having 10 Kalahari safaris under my belt, this would be our first experience staying in the wilderness camps on the South African side of the park.

Our unit had two single beds, a bathroom with shower and toilet, gas-heated hot water, a fully equipped kitchen with gas fridge, solar-powered lights and, most importantly, a braai (barbecue) facility on our very own private deck overlooking the dunes and camp waterhole.

As the last bit of red faded from the western horizon, a million stars exploded overhead. With steaks sizzling above a glowing bed of kameeldoring coals, I grabbed an ice-cold beer just in time to see an African wildcat sneak a drink from the waterhole below. This was untamed Africa at its best and, in that instant, I knew we were in for a very special couple of weeks in the enchanting Kgalagadi.
but all that changed at Bitterpan. We took a drive toward the Auob riverbed where there had been some recent rainfall. The game-viewing gods smiled down on us and the black-maned lions – for which the park is justifiably famous – came out in full force. In one fruitful morning we were treated to viewings of spotted hyena, cheetah, lion as well as an epic encounter with a young leopard snoozing in a shady camelthorn tree!

Back at Bitterpan the action continued, with the waterhole attracting a retinue of thirsty antelope, lionesses, brown hyena and jackal, which we lazily observed from the comfort of a deck chair on our reed cabin’s verandah.

Kalahari Tented Camp

Next stop was the honeymoon suite at Kalahari Tented Camp. Situated high above the ancient Auob riverbed, this permanent tented camp comprises 14 elegantly decorated wood and canvas desert tents and a swimming pool that provided great relief after a long drive through the sun drenched dunes. The scenic Auob valley section between Dalkeith and 13th borehole is without doubt our favourite spot in the entire park, so early the next morning we set off as the gates opened and drove straight there, hoping to have the place all to ourselves as the sun rose. A couple of kilometres before Dalkeith borehole, we came across two sets of big pugmarks in the middle of the dusty road and followed them southward. The duo regularly detoured off to mark territory, but the tracks always returned to the road. Around every bend we willed the tawny cats to appear. It was a race against time as we attempted to reel in the felines before the rising sun banished them to the shade. Thankfully, it was still early; the spoor was fresh and we were quietly confident.

A kilometre further on, the tracks detoured off the road and failed to return. Gazing wistfully off to the left, we spotted them resting: a handsome black-maned Kalahari lion and his blonde sidekick. The brawny beasts soon returned to the road and for an unforgettable half-hour we drove right alongside them. It was just the three of us: two kings of the Kalahari and their queen on the loose.

After completing our Bitterpan check-in formalities at Nossob reception, we set off on a stunning three-hour drive along the first half of the 120km Bitterpan 4x4 Trail. Like Gharagab this one-way route is strictly reserved for overnight visitors and, with a maximum of four vehicles per day, it is unlikely you’ll see anyone else during your dune-driving extravaganza.

Overlooking a picturesque salt pan in the heart of the Kgalagadi, the eight-bed wilderness camp is a truly magical place to spend a few nights.

The scenic Auob valley section between Dalkeith and 13th borehole is without doubt our favourite spot in the entire park, so early the next morning we set off as the gates opened and drove straight there, hoping to have the place all to ourselves as the sun rose. A couple of kilometres before Dalkeith borehole, we came across two sets of big pugmarks in the middle of the dusty road and followed them southward. The duo regularly detoured off to mark territory, but the tracks always returned to the road. Around every bend we willed the tawny cats to appear. It was a race against time as we attempted to reel in the felines before the rising sun banished them to the shade. Thankfully, it was still early; the spoor was fresh and we were quietly confident.

A kilometre further on, the tracks detoured off the road and failed to return. Gazing wistfully off to the left, we spotted them resting: a handsome black-maned Kalahari lion and his blonde sidekick. The brawny beasts soon returned to the road and for an unforgettable half-hour we drove right alongside them. It was just the three of us: two kings of the Kalahari and their queen on the loose.

Leaving Gharagab, a roller coaster drive took us across a mesmerising martian landscape of endless waves of red sand as we headed back toward the Nossob riverbed. Suddenly a hundred-strong herd of eland thundered across the sandy track ahead; a few minutes later, our noisy Hilux sent a pair of bat-eared foxes and their pups scampering for cover in an underground den. The sun had only just begun creeping above the horizon, but already the desert pulsed with life.

After completing our Bitterpan check-in formalities at Nossob reception, we set off on a stunning three-hour drive along the first half of the 120km Bitterpan 4x4 Trail. Like Gharagab this one-way route is strictly reserved for overnight visitors and, with a maximum of four vehicles per day, it is unlikely you’ll see anyone else during your dune-driving extravaganza.

Overlooking a picturesque salt pan in the heart of the Kgalagadi, the eight-bed wilderness camp is a truly magical place to spend a few nights.

The scenic Auob valley section between Dalkeith and 13th borehole is without doubt our favourite spot in the entire park, so early the next morning we set off as the gates opened and drove straight there, hoping to have the place all to ourselves as the sun rose. A couple of kilometres before Dalkeith borehole, we came across two sets of big pugmarks in the middle of the dusty road and followed them southward. The duo regularly detoured off to mark territory, but the tracks always returned to the road. Around every bend we willed the tawny cats to appear. It was a race against time as we attempted to reel in the felines before the rising sun banished them to the shade. Thankfully, it was still early; the spoor was fresh and we were quietly confident.

A kilometre further on, the tracks detoured off the road and failed to return. Gazing wistfully off to the left, we spotted them resting: a handsome black-maned Kalahari lion and his blonde sidekick. The brawny beasts soon returned to the road and for an unforgettable half-hour we drove right alongside them. It was just the three of us: two kings of the Kalahari and their queen on the loose.

Leaving Gharagab, a roller coaster drive took us across a mesmerising martian landscape of endless waves of red sand as we headed back toward the Nossob riverbed. Suddenly a hundred-strong herd of eland thundered across the sandy track ahead; a few minutes later, our noisy Hilux sent a pair of bat-eared foxes and their pups scampering for cover in an underground den. The sun had only just begun creeping above the horizon, but already the desert pulsed with life.

After completing our Bitterpan check-in formalities at Nossob reception, we set off on a stunning three-hour drive along the first half of the 120km Bitterpan 4x4 Trail. Like Gharagab this one-way route is strictly reserved for overnight visitors and, with a maximum of four vehicles per day, it is unlikely you’ll see anyone else during your dune-driving extravaganza.

Overlooking a picturesque salt pan in the heart of the Kgalagadi, the eight-bed wilderness camp is a truly magical place to spend a few nights.

The scenic Auob valley section between Dalkeith and 13th borehole is without doubt our favourite spot in the entire park, so early the next morning we set off as the gates opened and drove straight there, hoping to have the place all to ourselves as the sun rose. A couple of kilometres before Dalkeith borehole, we came across two sets of big pugmarks in the middle of the dusty road and followed them southward. The duo regularly detoured off to mark territory, but the tracks always returned to the road. Around every bend we willed the tawny cats to appear. It was a race against time as we attempted to reel in the felines before the rising sun banished them to the shade. Thankfully, it was still early; the spoor was fresh and we were quietly confident.

A kilometre further on, the tracks detoured off the road and failed to return. Gazing wistfully off to the left, we spotted them resting: a handsome black-maned Kalahari lion and his blonde sidekick. The brawny beasts soon returned to the road and for an unforgettable half-hour we drove right alongside them. It was just the three of us: two kings of the Kalahari and their queen on the loose.
morning walks soon became a daily ritual for the duration of our stay. Strolling through the seemingly endless dune fields was a special experience, but the productive night drives were when we found the most action. Our experienced guides introduced us to all the usual suspects – jackal, wildcat, springhare and steenbok – while the rare aardwolf and striped polecat were two unexpected and especially memorable nocturnal sightings.

But an authentic Kgalagadi wilderness experience involves more than great game viewing and comfortable lodgings. The quintessential desert safari conjures up images of rolling red dunes, twisted camel thorns, gnarled shepherd's trees, colossal sociable weavers' nests, stately oryx, sparring springbok, curious giraffe, regal black-maned lions, marauding black-backed jackals, sun-bleached salt pans, roaring silence and crackling fires below star-strewn skies.

It’s a tranquil environment of timeless solitude that promotes spiritual growth, inner peace and a much-needed reconnection with nature.

!Xaus Lodge
With our wildlife wish lists done and dusted, the cherry on the top was spending our final three nights at !Xaus Lodge. Offering the only fully catered and professionally guided safari experience in the Kgalagadi, the community-owned lodge seemed the perfect place to splash out for our final days in the desert.

In the wake of the historic Aehai Kalahari Heritage Agreement – which transferred ownership of 50 000 hectares of land within the Kgalagadi TFCA to the Khomani San and Mier communities, who then leased it back to South African National Parks – the reinstated landowners received funds to build a luxury lodge on their ancestral lands.

The lodge name ‘!Xaus’, which means ‘heart’ in the local Nama language, was chosen as a symbol of reconciliation between the traditional communities who jointly own the lodge. Transfrontier Parks Destinations operates !Xaus on their behalf, with the vast majority of lodge employees drawn from the impoverished villages just outside the park.

Unfenced, !Xaus Lodge accommodates up to 24 guests in dune-top chalets overlooking a brackish waterhole on the fringe of a faded salt pan ringed by low dunes and grasslands. The central viewing deck and swimming pool enjoy a magical setting perched high above the waterless pan and the shaded pool loungers soon became the preferred place to while away the daylight hours with a book and ice-cold beer.

Taking it easy in the relaxation capital of the Kalahari, we became very lazy, very quickly. Initially, only the delicious Mier cuisine could rouse us from our daybeds, but the following morning we felt ready to stretch our legs. Under the watchful eye of Andries ‘Grukie’ Thys and Koos Visser, the informative morning walks soon became a daily ritual for the duration of our stay. Strolling through the seemingly endless dune fields was a special experience, but the productive night drives were when we found the most action. Our experienced guides introduced us to all the usual suspects – jackal, wildcat, springhare and steenbok – while the rare aardwolf and striped polecat were two unexpected and especially memorable nocturnal sightings.

But an authentic Kgalagadi wilderness experience involves more than great game viewing and comfortable lodgings. The quintessential desert safari conjures up images of rolling red dunes, twisted camel thorns, gnarled shepherd's trees, colossal sociable weavers' nests, stately oryx, sparring springbok, curious giraffe, regal black-maned lions, marauding black-backed jackals, sun-bleached salt pans, roaring silence and crackling fires below star-strewn skies.

It’s a tranquil environment of timeless solitude that promotes spiritual growth, inner peace and a much-needed reconnection with nature.

+27 (0)21 437 9700 | stay@vlife.co.za | villageandlife.com