



More than **meets**
the **eye**

For some of the best predator-viewing in all of Africa, explore the arid Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park.

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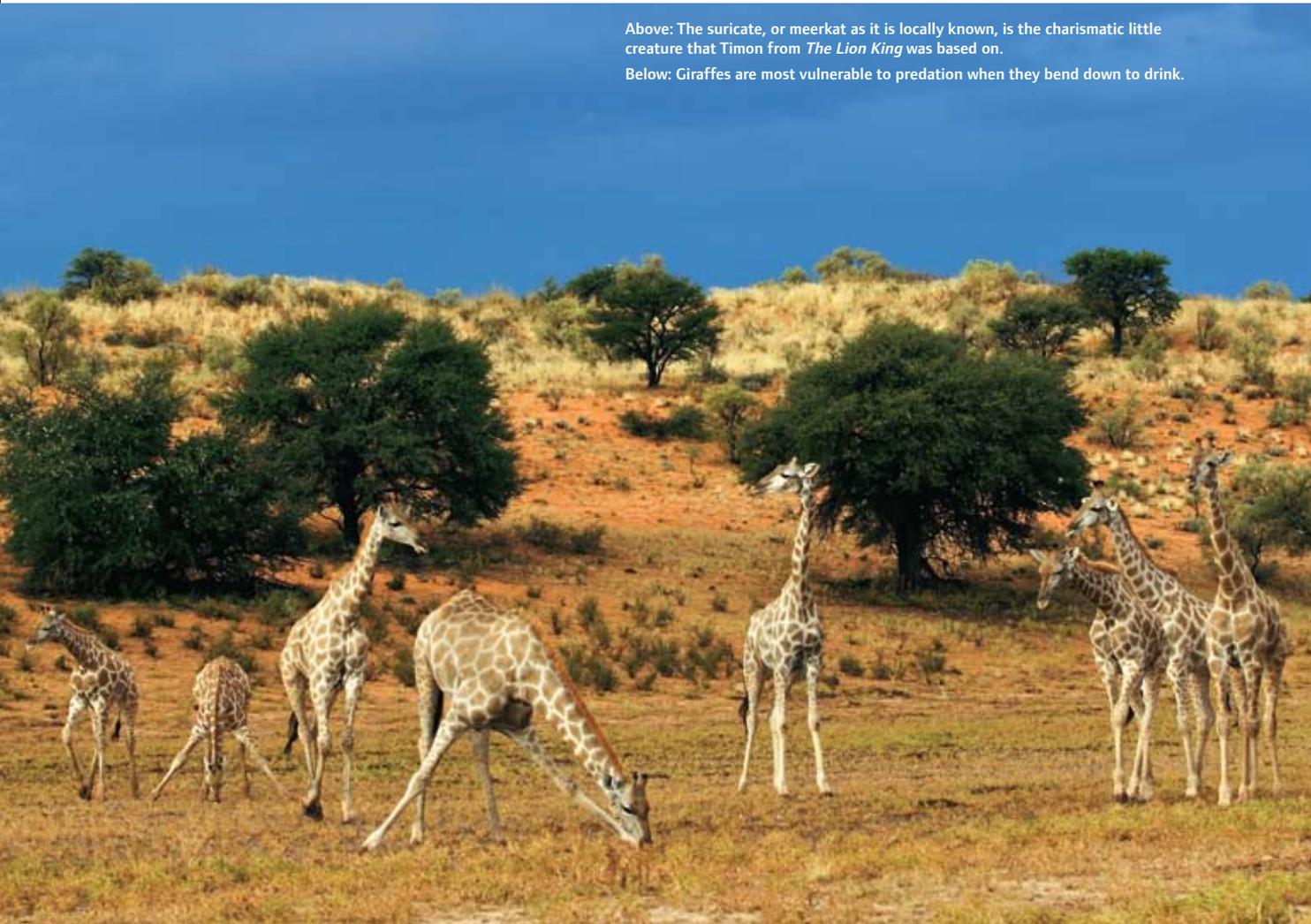
The aptly named springbok is the national animal of South Africa.



At first glance the Kalahari Desert, or Kgalagadi as it was recently renamed, appears to be an arid wasteland seemingly devoid of all life and far from the ideal place for a South African wildlife safari. But, first impressions can often be deceiving. Sure, if you're after the stereotypical Big Five African safari experience, then the Kgalagadi will no doubt prove disappointing. After all, this parched dunescape is a harsh dry environment devoid of buffalo, elephant and rhino, where leopards are few and far between and the majestic Kalahari lion is probably the only member of the Big Five you're likely to encounter while on your desert safari.

Above: The suricate, or meerkat as it is locally known, is the charismatic little creature that Timon from *The Lion King* was based on.

Below: Giraffes are most vulnerable to predation when they bend down to drink.





Above: The red hartebeest translates into English as 'red heart animal' and this desert-adapted antelope gets its strange sounding name from its peculiar heart-shaped horns.

Right: This juvenile pale-chanting goshawk is just one of a plethora of raptors that thrive in the arid Kalahari with its regular and reliable thermals.

However, if you consider that the Big Five is actually originally a hunting term – the five most dangerous and desirable trophy animals for big game hunters in Africa – then the huge emphasis and marketing-hype placed on the Big Five suddenly seems unfounded and more than a little ironic, especially considering that safari-goers tend to be conservation-orientated people who are interested in a much wider variety of attractive South African wildlife. So, as soon as people can get over their Big Five indoctrination, they'll quickly discover that the arid expanses of the Kgalagadi are actually home to a unique, thriving ecosystem boasting an impressive diversity of wildlife species, including some of the premier predator-viewing in all of Africa.

IN THE BEGINNING

The Kalahari was originally designated as farmland and carved up into big plots, which were allocated to prospective farmers. However, it is a harsh

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environment and settlers struggled to make a profitable living, so they resorted to hunting to survive and in the process denuded the region of its wildlife. Finally, in 1931, the government stepped in and bought back all the farms, relocated and resettled the indigenous people and proclaimed the entire area between the Nossob and Auob rivers as the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park.

The present day Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park was formed only 10 years back with the signing of an historic agreement to amalgamate the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park in South Africa with the Gemsbok National Park in Botswana.



A UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park is situated in a large sand-filled basin, known as the Kalahari, in the west of the southern African subcontinent. The name 'Kalahari' was actually derived from the Kgalagadi word 'makgadikgadi', which translates as 'the great thirstland': a very apt description for this hauntingly beautiful waterless environment. It's a sparsely vegetated land of wide vistas and big blue skies where scorching sunshine beats down on a seemingly endless sea of rolling red dunes that fade into a shimmering mirage on distant horizons. However, life not only survives in this vast semi-arid savannah, it thrives. A paltry 200 mm of rain per year sustains a wide array of desert flora and fauna, such as oryx, springbok, eland and wildebeest. Herds of these specially-adapted antelope trek vast

Wildlife

distances as they follow the seasons in search of water and grazing.

The 38,000 sq km Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is one of very few conservation areas of this magnitude left in the world. This huge protected area allows wild animals to migrate throughout the Kalahari in search of food and water as they have done for millennia. The South African sector of this massive wilderness area lies sandwiched between the usually dry watercourses of the Nossob and the Auob rivers, which converge 6 km north of Twee Rivieren near the main entrance gate to the national park. These ephemeral rivers run only for short periods in the wake of abnormally high rainfall and neither has flowed since way back in 1974. The lack of perennial surface water can cause problems, even for hardy desert-adapted wildlife, so park authorities took the decision to recommission a string of old farm boreholes in the dry riverbeds to help persuade animals to remain inside the park, thereby reducing poaching. Today these water sources afford lucky visitors an unparalleled wildlife-viewing opportunity.

MORE THAN THE BIG FIVE

Almost without exception, first-time safari-goers are far more enthralled by animals such as the gangly giraffe than boring old bovines like the

Cape buffalo; yet the buffalo is a member of the Big Five – the supposed Holy Grail of any African safari experience – and the giraffe is not. Slowly it dawns on visitors that the unnecessarily strong emphasis placed on the hunters' favourite animals is ludicrous ... after all, there is so much more for the open-minded safari-goer to see and appreciate while on a South African wildlife safari. And, with no vegetation to obscure your view, and formidable concentrations of animals to be found at the waterholes in the dry riverbeds of the Auob and the Nossob, nature enthusiasts are treated to one of the best mammal-viewing destinations on the planet.

As you trundle around the park's dusty roads, you will come across a great array of exciting desert wildlife, but be sure to keep a sharp eye out for six sensational desert sightings: the Kalahari is home to the ubiquitous springbok, South Africa's national animal, along with the stately oryx or gemsbok. The gigantic eland is the only other desert antelope to rival the striking oryx for sheer size and magnificence. The bizarre-looking wildebeest, humorous hartebeest and, of course, the inquisitive giraffe are three of the more comical herbivores on view and they're sure to provide much merriment to safari enthusiasts while out and about on a game drive. All these animals share one common trait: they are superbly well-adapted to overcome the harsh desert conditions and flourish in this challenging environment.

An absolute highlight of a Kalahari safari will undoubtedly be spending some quality time with Timon from *The Lion King* – who is actually a suricate (known locally by its Afrikaans name of meerkat). These hyperactive little omnivores live in

Below (left):
The ubiquitous Springbok makes an impressive silhouette against the breaking dawn.

Below (right):
The gemsbok or oryx is a superbly well adapted desert antelope that can go many weeks without drinking water.



In addition to the iconic Kalahari lion, visitors also stand an excellent chance of seeing the graceful cheetah.

Right: Giraffes quench their thirst from a puddle of rainwater left behind after a rare thunderstorm in the Kalahari Desert.

Below: The Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park boasts some of the best predator-viewing on the African continent, including the highest density of cheetah to be found anywhere in South Africa.



groups with a wonderfully intricate family structure. Meerkats and ground squirrels are two of the park's more prominent and entertaining species and their frantic foraging behaviour provides hours of amusement to enraptured safari-goers.

The Kgalagadi is also a haven for birders, especially those interested in birds of prey, because the hot dry conditions produce soaring thermals: the ideal flight conditions for raptors. One of the park's more impressive birds of prey is not a large eagle or vulture, but rather the smallest falcon in Africa. The pygmy falcon can often be seen preying on unwary sociable weavers as colonies of these busy little birds go about building their colossal communal nests.

CARNIVORE CENTRAL

The Kgalagadi is world-renowned for its incredible diversity of carnivore species and unbeatable predator-viewing is arguably the ultimate attraction of this unique safari destination. The park is home to an estimated 450 lions in about 40 different prides with an average of 11 lions per pride. The black-mane lion – the king of the Kalahari Desert – is a physically impressive subspecies. In addition to the iconic Kalahari lion, visitors also stand an excellent chance of seeing graceful the cheetah, as this desert park boasts the country's highest density of these rare felines. The caracal is an elusive medium-sized nocturnal cat that can be spotted if you opt to join a park-sanctioned night drive using spotlights after dark. Finally, for those who are really lucky, even leopard is on the predator-watching menu.

Solitary brown hyena and clans of larger spotted hyena roam the sand dunes and riverbeds in search



Above: The omnivorous black-backed jackal is the most visible of the predators in the Kgalagadi.

Top: A herd of blue wildebeest gather at a waterhole to slake their thirst.

of carrion, ostrich eggs or an easy kill. Smaller carnivores and omnivores, such as the bat-eared fox with its huge radar-dish ears, the abundant black-backed jackal, attractive Cape fox and aggressive honey badger abound, ensuring safari-goers have an excellent chance to observe a wide array of African predators – both big and small.

A FINAL WORD OF CAUTION

The Kgalagadi is a rare place of spectacularly large landscapes and astounding sun-baked beauty. As you explore its vast expanses and view its uniquely adapted wildlife, the red desert gets under your skin and penetrates your soul. Without you realising it, the archaic Big Five become inconsequential and once you leave, you'll find the wide-open spaces of the picturesque Kgalagadi haunt your dreams, luring you back in search of a regal lion or graceful cheetah on the prowl. ■

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QUICK FACTS

BEST SEASON TO VISIT

Although wildlife sightings are usually at their best during the late winter months (July to September), Kgalagadi safaris are available throughout the year if you can withstand the summer heat (November to February).

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways operates daily non-stop flights between Mumbai and Johannesburg. The Kgalagadi is a full-day drive from the international airport. Connecting flights to Upington are available, which is the nearest domestic airport to the park.

WHAT TO DO

The premier attractions are the twice-daily game drives to view a unique array of desert-adapted wildlife. Guided night drives in specially converted safari vehicles afford adventurous safari-goers a chance to spot rarer nocturnal creatures, while energetic visitors might opt to take an escorted morning walk to track down and view wild animals on foot.

WHAT TO BRING

Binoculars, camera, sun hat, sunglasses, sunscreen and unobtrusive neutral coloured clothing for walking safaris.

ACCOMMODATION

Visitors have a choice between three traditional rest camps and six smaller wilderness tented camps; further information, rates and reservations at: www.sanparks.org/tourism/bookings/ or send your email request to SANParks at: reservations@sanparks.org. Xaus Lodge (www.xauslodge.co.za) is the only luxury accommodation option within the park.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.sanparks.org/parks/kgalagadi/ or visit www.southafrica.net