



# BUSH WISE

With more and more Kruger visitors lacing up their hiking boots, trail guides are rising to the challenge to share not only their vast guiding expertise, but inspire a profound understanding of the wilderness.  
By Stephen Cunliffe

PARADISE FOUND  
Looking out over the confluence of the Olifants and Letaba rivers on the Olifants Wilderness Trail.

Walking trails offer a much-needed escape from 'the real world'.



“A TRULY EFFECTIVE TRAIL GUIDE should not only display 'hard skills' such as rifle proficiency, dangerous-game competency and near-encyclopaedic bush knowledge, but also 'soft skills' such as understanding and communicating the importance of wilderness. Because trail guides are essentially ambassadors and facilitators of true and meaningful wilderness experiences.”

It is the annual Kruger Park Backpack Trail Guides workshop. The speaker is Brenden Pienaar. Part of a dedicated team of passionate backpack trail guides actively driving the revival of a wilderness philosophy on Kruger trails, the insights Brenden is sharing will make the difference between a mediocre and a life-changing trail.

Wilderness appreciation is a personal journey, with the ultimate outcome being a deeper awareness of our emotional and spiritual dependence on natural areas. The spiritual element of the wilderness has the power to transcend all faiths and religions, enabling Kruger's hiking trails to bind nature lovers together in awe and respect of the Earth's wild places.

**“Because trail guides are essentially ambassadors and facilitators of true and meaningful wilderness experiences.”**

Increasing numbers of tourists want to connect intimately with the wilderness and Kruger trail guides are well aware that walking trails offer a much-needed escape from 'the real world'. They offer a reconnection with nature, a rejuvenation of body and soul far from the nearest tourist road.

Of the varied portfolio of trails on offer, it's definitely the primitive backpack trails that steal the show. These four-day trails where you carry your own food and equip-

ment, camping wild on the riverbank, offer the ultimate in wilderness connection and appreciation. If hiking in the wilderness is new to you, you might start out gently, with a morning walk from one of the rest camps or embark on a multi-day base camp trail such as the Olifants Wilderness Trail.

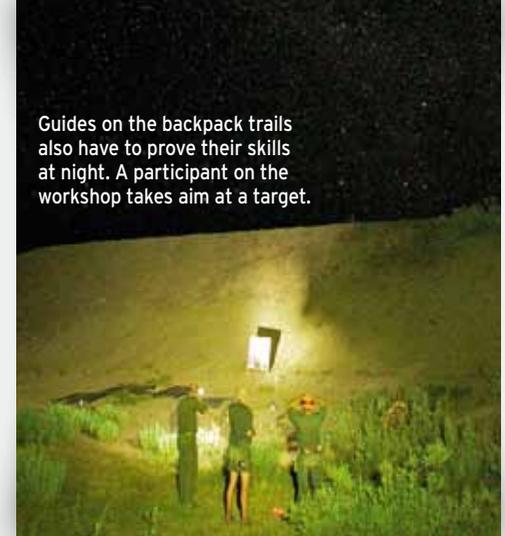
#### IN THE TRACKS OF GIANTS

“Look how the grains of sand are still plastered to the grass stalks within these tracks. Soon the sun will dry them out and they'll drop off. And can you see the difference in colour between the imprints and the surrounding earth?” enquired Sean Patrick, experienced wilderness trail guide on the Olifants Wilderness Trail.

To the well-trained eye, the fresh spoor scribbled a detailed story across the wet mud before us. Our skilled guides scrutinised the dinner plate-sized tracks as we walked. Twenty minutes later they halted and whispered: “It won't be long now. We're getting close.” The words had barely tumbled off Sean's tongue when the tell-tale flap of an elephant's ear alerted us to its presence not far ahead. Co-guide Aron Mkansi motioned for absolute silence as we crept slowly forward.

Sneaking stealthily around a white-berry bush, the first grey giants popped into view, scattered along the Hlahleni watercourse. The breeding herd was relaxed. I counted over 30 of the behemoths across the shallow stream. Some drank in long draughts, while others devoured trunkfuls of fresh green grass. Carefree calves cavorted around their mothers completing an idyllic wilderness scene. Suddenly the wind swirled and a couple of trunks shot up to sniff the breeze. When the periscopes lowered, a low rumble emanated from the matriarch and the herd regrouped and rambled off in unison.

“Let's leave them be,” whispered our ever-alert trail leader before adding with a knowing smile, “after all, we're privileged guests in their wilderness realm.”



Guides on the backpack trails also have to prove their skills at night. A participant on the workshop takes aim at a target.

## BEST OF THE BEST

Kruger's trail guides undergo rigorous, long-term training before qualifying to lead nature enthusiasts on foot through the bush. Aside from being required to sit exams and undertake practical assessments to ensure their book knowledge and bush-lore are up to scratch, candidates need to log at least 200 hours walking in dangerous-game areas, obtain a Viewing Potentially Dangerous Animals qualification and participate in a Wilderness Workshop. They must also pass a stringent Advanced Rifle Handling assessment and complete a Level 2 First Aid course, qualifications which must be retaken every two years.

Once aspiring Kruger trail guides have all these under their belt, they walk 'back up' under a fully qualified and well-practised lead guide, who will mentor them over no less than 10 multi-day walking trails. But it is not just the onerous qualifications requirements that make Kruger's well-trained trail guides so special. It is their ability to sum up each new group and flexibly deliver a tailor-made wilderness trail to perfectly match the group's aspirations.



During an Advanced Rifle Handling assessment, trail guides are required to lead 'guests' through the bush while remaining alert to the presence of dangerous animals. In this simulation a lion had popped up and the guide immediately raised his rifle.

**POWERHOUSE**  
Nature's pristine places, like this cliff on the Olifants River, allow you to recharge your batteries.

A palpable energy and excitement radiated from the group as we retreated. There was no denying the power of nature and its charismatic creatures to rejuvenate the flagging human spirit.

After a refreshing shower back at the rustic trail base-camp, we hungrily tucked into another of Shadrack Nobela's delectable meals, a delicious brunch of fresh bread, eggs, bacon and savoury mince to restore our strength. With full bellies we retired to our A-frame huts for a siesta to ensure we'd be recharged for the afternoon hiking session.

The walk began with everyone, even our usually sure-footed guides, slip-sliding down mud-slick riverbanks and sloshing through shallow streams before the route veered off to slowly ascend along a rocky rhyolite ridge. After a couple of hours of sweaty toil, the game trail we were following petered out at a cliff-top viewpoint and we found ourselves perched above the confluence of two of Kruger's premier rivers.

Below us the dark chocolate water of the swollen Letaba mixed with the milky brown Olifants. Hippos bobbed in the shallows while crocodiles lined the riverside sandbanks like two columns of ancient sentries. It was an inspiring sight that demanded we drop our packs and take a time-out to savour the sprawling, wild landscape below.

Aron checked the area was safe while Sean selected a well-positioned rock, overlooking this vast tract of pristine wildland, for each of us. For the next half-hour we were left to reflect on the beauty of nature and imbibe the wilderness spirit on our own. The vista was nothing short of sensational. To be alone with your thoughts in the wilderness, almost sacred. 🐾

✦ *Stephen Cunliffe qualified as a FGASA Level 3 SKS DA guide, the highest walking qualification in South Africa.*



Trailists tread where few other tourists go.

# 10

## WILDERNESS WALKS IN KRUGER

**NEED TO KNOW** Wilderness and back-pack trails last three nights and depart Sundays and Wednesdays in season. Maximum of eight guests per trail, no persons under 12.

Hikers should be reasonably fit as up to 20 kilometres may be covered in a day. Pack good hiking boots and clothing in neutral colours. Binoculars, field guides and sunscreen won't go amiss.

Camera batteries should be fully charged as there is no access to electricity on the trail. Cellphones and other electronic devices should be switched off.

### BOOKINGS

Bridget Bagley on 012-426-5111 and [bridget.bagley@sanparks.org](mailto:bridget.bagley@sanparks.org)  
Hesther van den Berg on 012-426-5117 and [hesther.vandenberg@sanparks.org](mailto:hesther.vandenberg@sanparks.org)

### Olifants Wilderness Trail

**DEPARTURE POINT** Letaba.

**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** Varied terrain, plentiful raptors and good general game on the open plains away from the river. The confluence of the Letaba and Olifants rivers as well as spectacular Bangu Gorge in the Lebombo Mountains are favourite spots.

**ICONIC SPECIES** Elephant, hippo, crocodile, lion, Pel's fishing owl.

**HABITAT** Rugged veld with open, mixed acacia woodland.

**FACILITIES** Rustic trails base camp.

**OPERATIONAL** 16 Jan. to 15 Dec.

**COST** R3900 per person. ➤

### LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

 Easy to moderate  Moderate  
 Moderate to strenuous  Strenuous

## ■ KRUGER'S WILDERNESS TRAILS

### LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY



MARIUS SWART

**On backpack trails you may set up camp in a different place every night.**

### **Lonely Bull Backpack Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Shimuwini.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** A very flexible backpack trail exploring a diverse wilderness area and pachyderm paradise along the Letaba River. By taking advantage of the area's prolific hippo highways, trailists can access tranquil tributaries, inland springs and elevated vantage points away from the river.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Elephant, buffalo, Sharpe's grysbok, collared pratincole.  
**HABITAT** Riparian and rugged mopani veld.  
**FACILITIES** Primitive wild camping.  
**OPERATIONAL** 1 Feb. to 31 Oct.  
**COST** R2050 per person.

### **Mphongolo Backpack Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Mopani (as long as Shingwedzi is closed)  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** The largest, wildest and most remote of Kruger's 10 wilderness zones boasting high concentrations of big game and hot springs. Hiking routes are flexible and you can experience a completely new area whenever you visit.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Elephant, buffalo, sable, eland, Arnett's chat.  
**HABITAT** Varied (riparian to mopani) alluvial floodplains.  
**FACILITIES** Primitive wild camping.  
**OPERATIONAL** 1 Feb. to 30 Nov.  
**COST** R2050 per person.

### **Olifants River Backpack Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Olifants Camp.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** Covering a challenging 42 km along the Olifants River, this backpack trail is ideally suited to fit, goal-oriented people who enjoy hiking. Camping on sandy beaches or hippo-manicured lawns, wallowing in the river shallows and wilderness siestas are highlights.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Elephant, hippo, leopard, Cape clawless otter, Pel's fishing owl.  
**HABITAT** Olifants River rugged veld surrounded by mopani veld.  
**FACILITIES** Primitive wild camping.  
**OPERATIONAL** 1 April to 31 Oct.  
**COST** R2050 per person.

### **Bushmans Wilderness Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Berg-en-Dal.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** The Bushman's Wilderness Area boasts a cache of well-preserved San rock art, deep gullies, serene gorges and rocky outcrops to discover. The ubiquitous koppies provide breathtaking vantage points from which to spot wildlife and appreciate the magnitude of the surrounding wilderness.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** White rhino, mountain reedbeek, klipspringer, red-throated wryneck.  
**HABITAT** Mixed combretum woodland interspersed with granite outcrops.  
**FACILITIES** Rustic trails base camp.  
**OPERATIONAL** 16 Jan. to 15 Dec.  
**COST** R3900 per person.

### **Napi Wilderness Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Pretoriuskop.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** The Biyamiti and Napi rivers, along with a host of seasonal rhino-frequented pans, provide ample opportunity for scenic walks through a productive game-viewing area. Napi highlights include regular rare antelope sightings and periodic wild dog encounters on foot.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Black and white rhino, Lichenstein's hartebeest, sable, wild dog, narina trogon.  
**HABITAT** Undulating broadleaf woodland and sourveld with granite inselbergs.  
**FACILITIES** New tented trails base camp.  
**OPERATIONAL** 16 Jan. to 15 Dec.  
**COST** R3900 per person.

### **Nyalaland Wilderness Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Punda Maria.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** The diverse sandstone terrain, baobab forests, dinosaur fossils and Makahane cultural site make this one of Kruger's most sought-after trails. Dramatic Lanner Gorge is well worth the trek.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Elephant, eland, nyala, leopard, Pel's fishing owl, Böhm's spintail.  
**HABITAT** Diverse sandveld with baobab forests.  
**FACILITIES** Rustic trails base camp.  
**OPERATIONAL** 16 Jan. to 15 Dec.  
**IMPORTANT** Closed until 30 June 2013 due to flood damage.  
**COST** R3900 per person.

### **Metsi-Metsi Wilderness Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Skukuza.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** A geologically diverse and prolific wildlife-viewing area with high densities of general game, and their attendant predators, concentrated on the productive Lindanda Plains. The scenic N'waswitsonto Gorge exudes a strong sense of wilderness, while the river attracts hordes of thirsty animals.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Black and white rhino, cheetah, lion, black coucal.  
**HABITAT** Open basalt plains and knob-thorn savanna.  
**FACILITIES** Rustic trails base camp.  
**OPERATIONAL** 16 Jan. to 15 Dec.  
**COST** R3900 per person.

### **Sweni Wilderness Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Satara.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** Sweni is home to the highest game and predator densities of any wilderness area in Kruger. The Sweni River gives way to expansive, flat plains covered in large herds of buffalo and general game with prides of lions ranging in close attendance.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Buffalo, zebra, wildebeest, lion, pallid harrier.  
**HABITAT** Open basalt plains and thorn-tree savanna.  
**FACILITIES** Rustic trails base camp.  
**OPERATIONAL** 16 Jan. to 15 Dec.  
**COST** R3900 per person.

### **Wolhuter Wilderness Trail**

**DEPARTURE POINT** Berg-en-Dal.  
**UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS** Kruger's first wilderness trail takes place in a scenically spectacular, undulating landscape peppered with towering granite koppies and cut by deep valleys. Trailists are drawn by attractions as diverse as Bushman paintings, archaeological sites and prolific plains game.  
**ICONIC SPECIES** Black and white rhino, sable, wild dog, freckled nightjar.  
**HABITAT** High rainfall sourveld with granite intrusions.  
**FACILITIES** Rustic trails base camp.  
**OPERATIONAL** 16 Jan. to 15 Dec.  
**COST** R3900 per person.