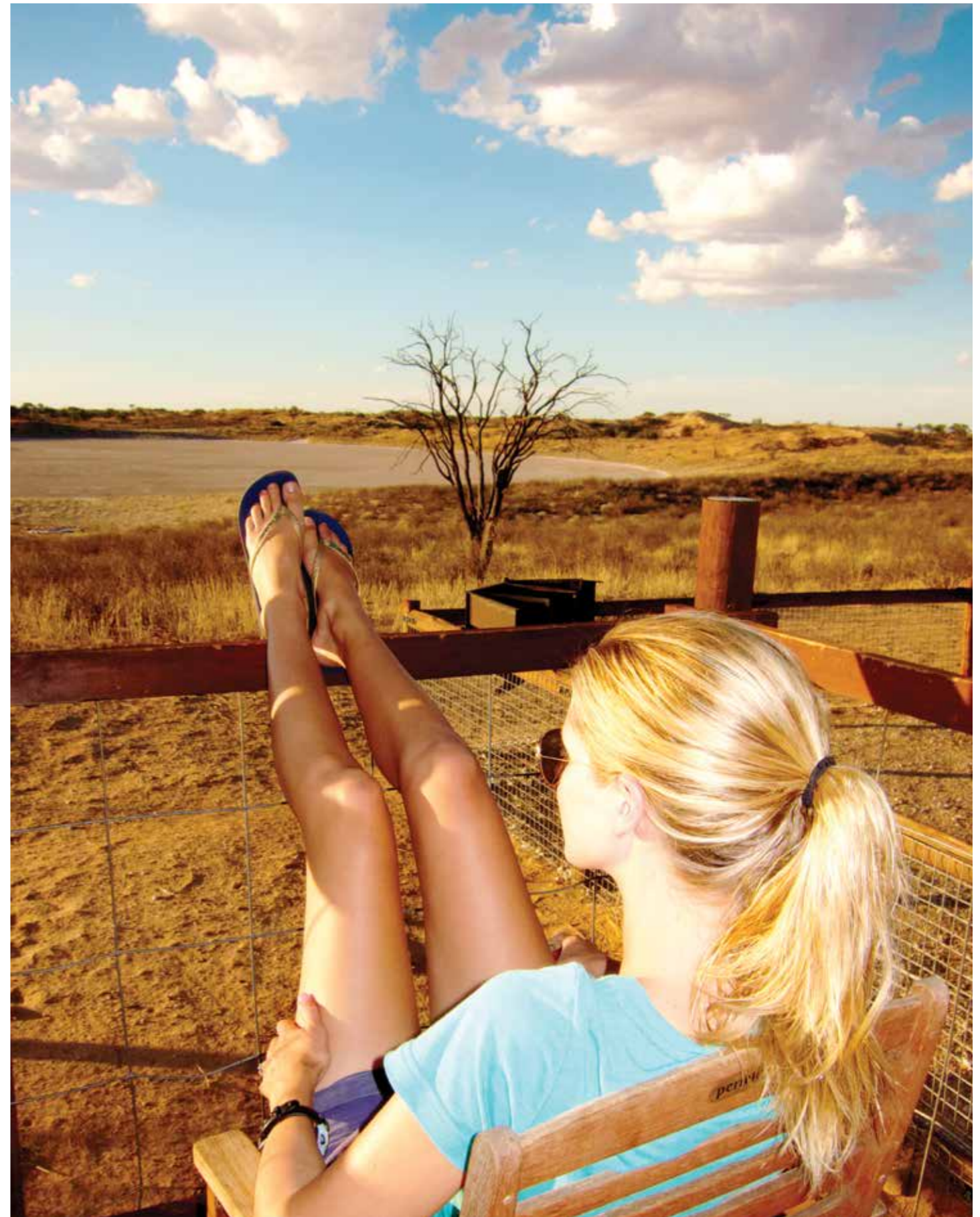


KICK BACK in the Kalahari

STEPHEN CUNLIFFE shares his insights on the thriving Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, its uniquely adapted wildlife and the expanding range of lodgings amid the red dunes of one of southern Africa's prime wilderness areas.



LEFT: The real Kalahari: off the beaten track, a 4x4 is required. **ABOVE:** Kicking back at the Bitterpan 4x4 Wilderness Camp.



ABOVE: Visitors to the area aim to see one of many predators – the Kalahari lion with its black mane.

For decades, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (or Kalahari Gemsbok National Park as it used to be known) was regarded by many as nothing more than an arid wasteland, a place of extreme temperatures, seemingly without life and far from the ideal area for a wildlife safari.

After all, this dunescape is an environment devoid of buffalo, elephant and rhino, where leopards can be elusive and the majestic Kalahari lion may well be the only member of the Big Five you encounter during your desert sojourn.

But a growing band of discerning Toyota enthusiasts are discovering that the Kgalagadi expanses are home to a flourishing desert ecosystem – a beautiful auburn landscape with a surprising variety of wildlife and some of the best raptor and predator viewing on the continent.

CARNIVORE CENTRAL

With its diversity of carnivore species, the Kgalagadi is developing a deserved reputation as a magical safari destination for once-in-a-lifetime wildlife encounters. Safari-goers stand an excellent chance

of observing a wide array of predators – leopard, cheetah, caracal, African wild cat, spotted and brown hyena, aardwolf, black-backed jackal, Cape and bat-eared fox, and honey badger – while marvelling at the desert terrain.

But the park is undoubtedly most famous for its regal black-maned lions: these impressive “kings of the Kalahari” should feature on the bucket list of pretty much every safari fanatic. Researchers have deduced that the transfrontier park is home to about 450 lions, split among 40-odd prides.

In addition to the iconic Kalahari lion, visitors will also more than likely spot cheetahs – the park boasts the highest density of these sleek felines in South Africa. Thanks to the exceptional work of Dr Matthew Schurch and the Kgalagadi Leopard Project (see sidebar, page 43), we now have a much better understanding of these mysterious big cats and their dynamics.

BACK TO NATURE

Choosing where to stay in the Kgalagadi can make or break your desert odyssey and, unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. Prospective visitors need to take into account their soft-sand driving experience, the type of vehicle they own and how cushy or rustic

they would like their experience to be. For those who possess a fully kitted-out Toyota off-roader and some dune-driving experience, the 214km Nossob 4x4 Eco Trail might be a good fit. On this guided four-day trip, vehicles travel through the dunes between Twee Rivieren and Nossob on the South African side of the park. Led by an experienced field ranger, a small convoy of 4x4s departs along this restricted access route every Monday.

Where better to reconnect with nature than alongside a crackling fire below a star-strewn sky, listening to the roar of a distant lion?

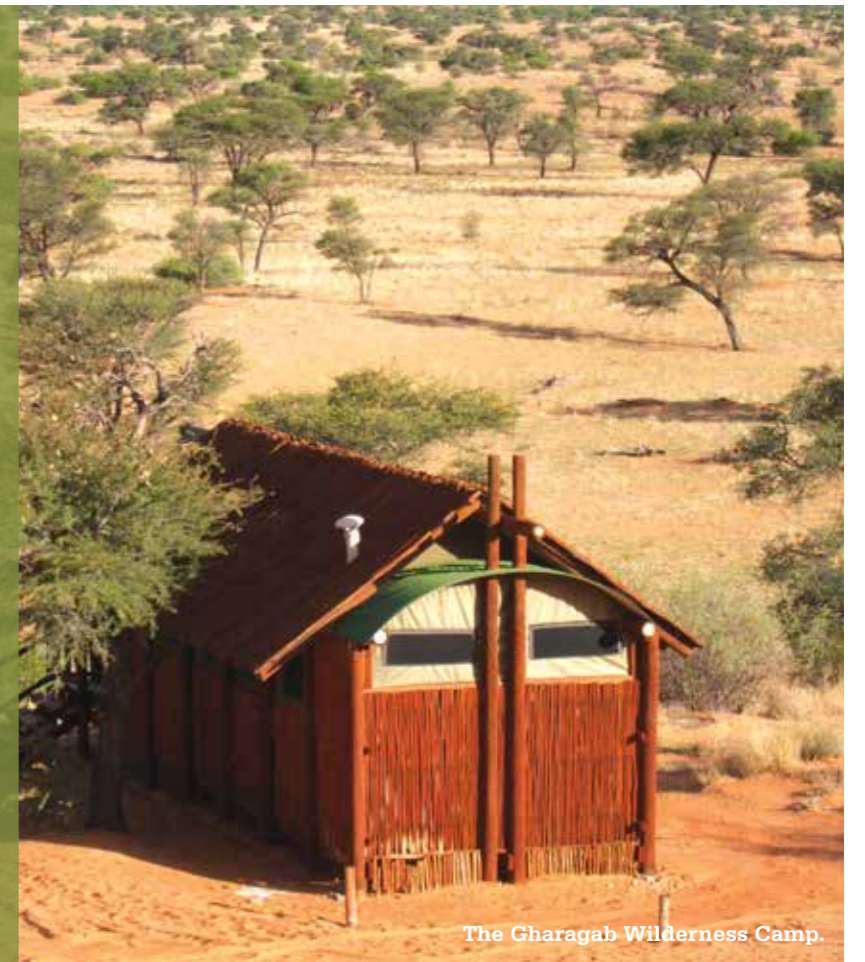
Rustic campsite facilities are limited to a long-drop, bucket shower (no water provided) and fire pit (without grid). Visitors need to carry all their own food, fuel, firewood, water and camping equipment for the duration of their trip. Experienced off-road drivers who enjoy the Nossob Eco Trail will likely gravitate towards the 4x4 trails on the Botswana side of the transfrontier conservation area. >

HISTORY OF THE CONSERVATION AREA

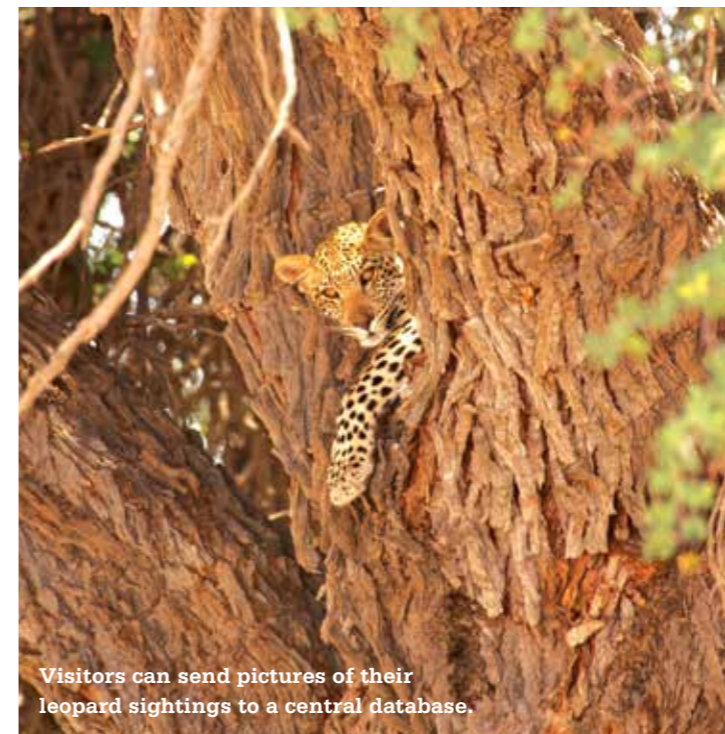
With support from Peace Parks Foundation, Africa's first transfrontier park came into being when South Africa's Kalahari Gemsbok National Park merged with Gemsbok National Park in Botswana on 12 May 2000 to create the 3,6-million hectare Kgalagadi Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA).

This jointly managed Peace Park is one of the largest and most scenically spectacular protected areas in Africa. While the South African sector of the sprawling wilderness lies sandwiched between the seasonal Nossob and Auob watercourses, the unfenced transfrontier boundary allows animals to migrate throughout the Kalahari region in search of food and water, as they have done for millennia.

Taking its name from the local Tswana word *kgala*, meaning “great thirst”, the Kgalagadi appears to be just that: devoid of life. But first impressions can be deceiving and the park's sparsely populated dunes are host to a thriving desert-adapted ecosystem with an impressive diversity of flora, fauna and birdlife.



The Gharagab Wilderness Camp.



Visitors can send pictures of their leopard sightings to a central database.

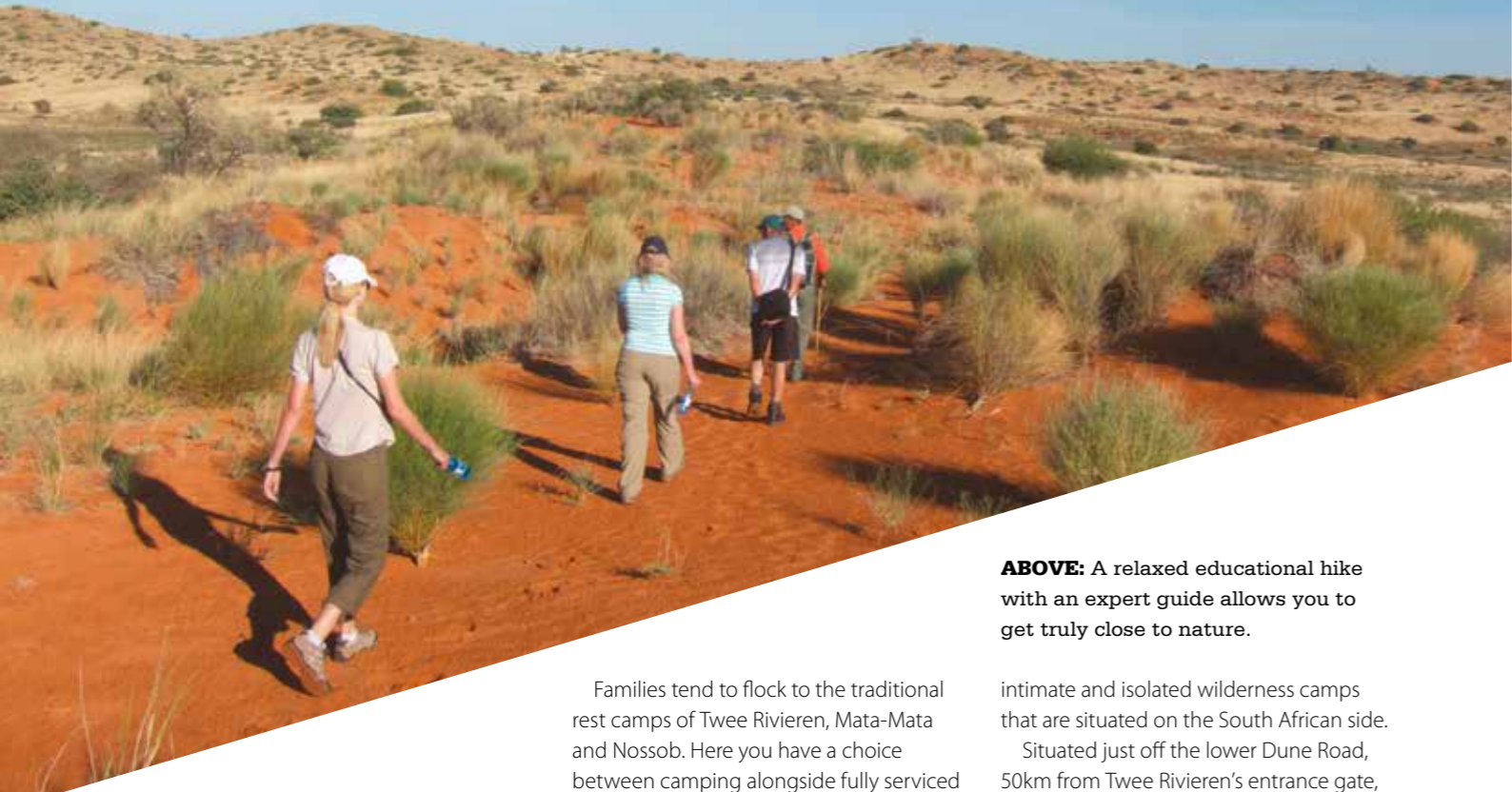
KGALAGADI LEOPARD PROJECT

Initiated in 2011 by Dr Matthew Schurch, the Kgalagadi Leopard Project is focused on building a comprehensive Kgalagadi-leopard-sightings database and producing an accurate identification guide (which can be downloaded off the project website or picked up at the Twee Rivieren entrance gate).

The project enhances the trip by providing tourists with the means to identify any leopard they see, and furthers scientific research of leopards in the park. Every visitor with a camera can effectively become a mobile camera trap with their leopard sightings and images, helping to expand the project database, and facilitating a better understanding by researchers of the ecology of the Kgalagadi leopard.

SANPark's Scientific Services have approved an expansion of the leopard project to include all large carnivore species.

For more info, email ktp.leopards@gmail.com or go to www.ast.uct.ac.za/~schurch/leopards/.



ABOVE: A relaxed educational hike with an expert guide allows you to get truly close to nature.

For many, the epic Polentswa Wilderness 4x4 Trail tops this list.

Remember to clear all immigration and customs formalities in Twee Rivieren before proceeding north. These soft-sand trails offer challenging driving conditions that enable off-road aficionados to pit their vehicles against some of the best dune-driving conditions in the Kgalagadi. They provide true desert solitude and the opportunity to reconnect with nature.

Where better to do this than alongside a crackling braai fire below a star-strewn sky, listening to the primordial roar of a distant lion deep within the Kalahari?

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Not everyone has the vehicle, experience or inclination to take on a rollicking, multi-day journey across the Kgalagadi 4x4 trails. For travellers whose stomachs turn at the thought of bouncing over dusty dunes day after day (not to mention those whose partners raise their eyebrows and a frying pan at the mention of endless days camping under a hot sun with nothing more than a long drop for company), do not despair. The park has something for everyone.

Families tend to flock to the traditional rest camps of Twee Rivieren, Mata-Mata and Nossob. Here you have a choice between camping alongside fully serviced ablution blocks or staying in a range of self-catering chalets, cottages and canvas cabins.

Many of these units include air conditioning, a godsend during the scorching summer months. The swimming pools prove perennially

The regal black-maned lions or “kings of the Kalahari” should feature on the bucket list of pretty much every safari fanatic

popular with the kids, while filling stations, shops and a restaurant at Twee Rivieren provide all the other necessities.

Each of the fenced rest camps has 24-hour access to a raised hide overlooking a waterhole (Nossob’s hide can be particularly rewarding), as well as guided night game drives.

WILDERNESS COMFORT

Most Kgalagadi stalwarts agree that nothing beats exploring the park’s

intimate and isolated wilderness camps that are situated on the South African side.

Situated just off the lower Dune Road, 50km from Twee Rivieren’s entrance gate, Kieliekrankie Wilderness Camp is the furthest south of the park’s five wilderness camps and it’s also about as far as anyone could possibly hope to reach in a long day’s drive from Cape Town or Joburg. Based at Kieliekrankie, the amiable tourism assistant Jacques Moss is on hand to show you to your dune cabin. When we pulled in, exhausted after a long day in the car, he greeted us with a warm smile. “Your unit has 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 lekker braai on your own private deck overlooking the dunes and camp waterhole,” he said.

In addition to Kieliekrankie, the elegantly decorated wood-and-canvas tents of Kalahari Tent Camp, along with Urikaruus and Grootkolk wilderness camps, can all be visited in a 4x2 soft-roader. Urikaruus has developed a reputation for its lion sightings, and it’s not uncommon to see the big cats drinking from the camp waterhole or even bringing down a hapless antelope right in front of your raised cabin. By contrast, Grootkolk is the most remote

WIN

Stand a chance to win a three-night stay for two adults sharing at Kagga Kamma Nature Reserve worth **R16 566**. The prize includes full board in a Deluxe Hut or Cave Room and two standard excursions per person.

ENTER HERE

You dream of adventure. You long to be spontaneous. And you need to escape the monotony of everyday life...

What you deserve is a trip to Kagga Kamma Nature Reserve. Located in the untouched wilderness of the peaceful southern Cederberg mountains, it is the place to escape to when you wish to get away from traffic, highways and city lights. At Kagga Kamma Nature Reserve, spectacular scenery, majestic mountains and phenomenal night skies will embrace you.

Adventurers, take an open 4x4 or guided quad-bike safari to reach the otherwise inaccessible parts of the reserve. Kagga Kamma offers exhilarating 4x4 routes, hiking trails and camping facilities.

But for adventure at its best, guests should try the newly launched mountain bike track, where riders of all fitness levels can spend two

to three hours in the saddle, completing either the 10km or 30km route while taking in the wonderful landscape.

For unique accommodation, why not sleep in one of our Cave Rooms? Or, for the ultimate adventure holiday, try our Outcrop Open-Air Room. No need for sleeping bags – you will doze off in a beautiful bed, next to a glowing fire. With the crisp, clear night skies of Kagga Kamma, who wouldn’t want to fall asleep beneath the stars?

Spoil yourself to a few of the luxury treatments at the reserve’s health and beauty spa, relax next to the pool, or enjoy a sundowner while taking in the spectacular views of the unique Cederberg rock formations.

Kagga Kamma has something for everyone – luxury, adventure and awe-inspiring experiences for nature lovers. Allow yourself to be enchanted by Kagga Kamma Nature Reserve.

To stand a chance of winning, answer the following question:

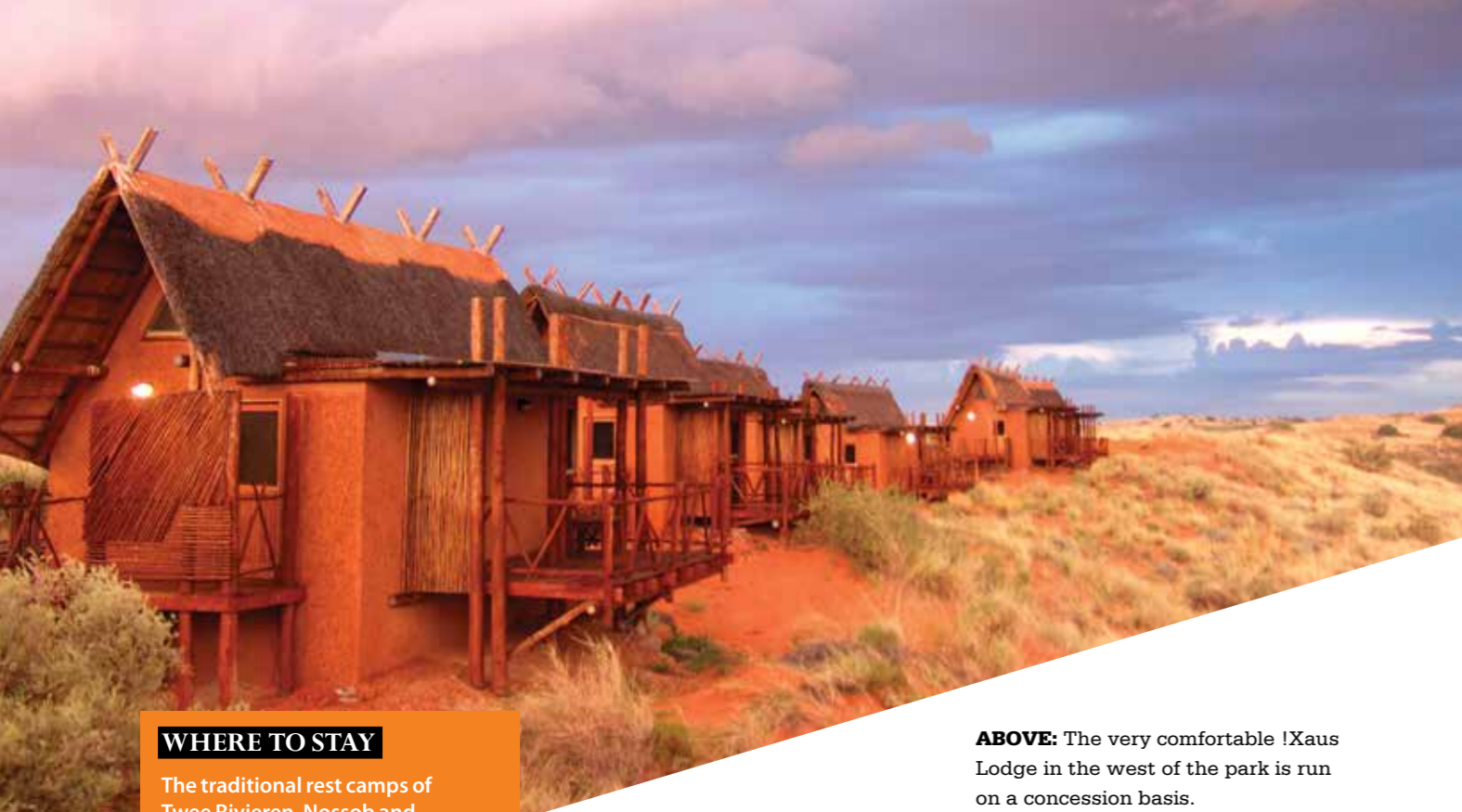
Where is the Kagga Kamma Nature Reserve situated?

Email your answer, name and contact number to toyotazone@ramsaymedia.co.za and put the words “Kagga Kamma” in the subject line.

Prize-winners will be required to contact the Reservations Office at tel 021-872-4343 or info@kaggakamma.co.za to confirm their reservation.



*Terms and conditions: All transportation will be for the guests’ own account. The resort reserves the right to refuse admittance if the booking confirmation letter is not produced, or if the number of persons exceeds that shown on the confirmation letter. Unit configuration includes children of all ages. All meals, beverages and outside activities not stipulated in this voucher will be for guests’ own account. Vouchers are not transferable or redeemable for cash. No amendment or addition to this voucher will be accepted. No pets allowed. Upon cancellation or amendment of a confirmed reservation, this voucher will be forfeited. This voucher is valid for six months from date of issue.



WHERE TO STAY

The traditional rest camps of Twee Rivieren, Nossob and Mata-Mata offer a wide range of accommodation options and camping facilities. The attractive Kalahari Tent Camp has 14 furnished desert tents overlooking the Auob riverbed. There are also intimate wilderness camps: choose between the dune cabins of Kieliekrankie, riverside cabins at Urikaruus, or desert cabins of Grootkolk. The log cabins of Gharagab and reed cabins of Bitterpan are only accessible to 4x4s.

➤ **SANParks** accommodation reservations can be made online at www.sanparks.org or by email to reservations@sanparks.org or calling tel 012-428-9111.

➤ **!Xaus Lodge** comprises 12 concessionaire-run luxury chalets in the west of the park, and offers the only fully catered and guided safari available on the TFCA's South African side. Visit www.xauslodge.co.za or email info@xauslodge.co.za.

➤ **The Ta Shebube desert circuit** includes three new lodges on the Botswana bank of the arid Nossob riverbed: Rooiputs, Polentswa and Union's End Camp. See www.tashebube.com for further details.

of the sedan-friendly wilderness camps. Its claim to fame is leopards. More have been sighted at this camp's waterhole and surrounds than anywhere else in the park. Sadly, the high incidence of leopard activity has resulted in park authorities' decision to fence off the camp. Visitor safety is paramount, and it's not hard to see SANPark's point of view, but it's a development that will inevitably erode some of this idyllic camp's potent wilderness vibe.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

To the north of Nossob, the remote Gharagab Wilderness Camp lies on a short one-way 4x4 track that's only open to the camp's eight guests. These shorter 4x4 trails with their isolated wilderness camps are the perfect compromise for first-timers looking to launch their new Toyotas into the dunes without biting off more than they can chew.

Eric Bezuidenhout, the tourism assistant stationed at remote Gharagab, oversees the tiny camp and escorts new arrivals to their log cabins. Although the unfenced camp doesn't enjoy the same elevated outlook as Kieliekrankie, it nestles in a wildlife-rich tract of thornveld savannah with a floodlit waterhole that plays host to a procession of nocturnal wildlife. One

ABOVE: The very comfortable !Xaus Lodge in the west of the park is run on a concession basis.

evening, I counted 18 jackals and three brown hyena at the water shortly before a herd of gemsbok arrived and chased off the loitering scavengers.

The other secluded wilderness camp whose access demands a 4x4 is Bitterpan Wilderness Camp. Although the fully equipped, self-catering 4x4 camps might be more rustic than their sedan-friendly counterparts, both are well worth a visit.

After completing check-in formalities at Nossob reception, a three-hour drive along the first half of the 120km Bitterpan 4x4 Trail awaits. Like Gharagab, this one-way route is strictly reserved for overnighters, so it's unlikely you'll see anyone else while on it.

Bitterpan's four reed cabins overlook a shimmering salt pan in the heart of the Kgalagadi. It's a truly memorable spot to spend a couple of days decompressing, especially as the local waterhole tends to attract a retinue of thirsty antelope, lion, hyena and jackal, best observed from the comfort of a deck chair on the camp's spacious veranda.

DESERT LUXURY

Offering the only fully catered and professionally guided safaris on the South African side of the park, the community-owned !Xaus Lodge is the ideal destination for those in search of



KEY TO THE K GALAGADI

➤ Best time to go

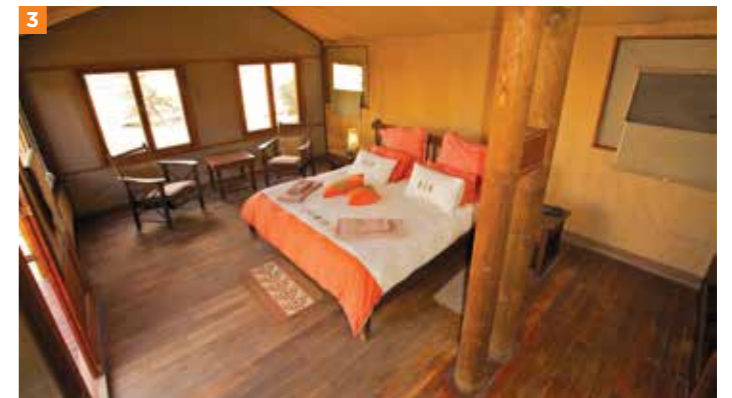
The cool, dry winter months from May to September are the most popular time to visit. For those undeterred by the heat, the summer months from November to April are quieter and greener.

➤ Getting there

There are five entry/exit points to the TFCA. In South Africa, the main Twee Rivieren entrance gate is 265km north of Upington along the R360. Make use of the Mata-Mata tourist access facility for travel to or from Namibia. On the Botswana side, there are gates at Two Rivers, Mabuasehube and Kaa.

➤ Fuel and supplies

Dune driving is heavy on fuel, so fill up whenever you get the chance. Petrol and diesel are only available at Twee Rivieren, Nossob and Mata-Mata on the South African side of the park. Supplies and limited fresh produce can be found at these three main rest camps, but it is advisable to stock up in Upington.



1. A local Bushman makes San curios deep in the desert. / **2.** Some accommodation offers a swimming pool and viewing deck from which to enjoy the scenery. / **3.** The honeymoon suite at Kalahari Tented Camp.

pampering. Unfenced, it accommodates 24 guests in dune-top chalets overlooking a waterhole on the fringe of a sprawling salt pan ringed by low, grassy dunes. The central viewing deck and swimming pool enjoy a magical setting high above the waterless pan, and the shaded pool loungers became the preferred spot to while away the daylight hours.

The delicious Mier cuisine (the surrounding district of Mier has its own rich culture and history), guided dune walks under the experienced eyes of Andries "Grukie" Thys or Koos Visser, and action-packed night drives are all well worth the visit.

Expect your guides to introduce you to all the usual suspects: jackal, wild cat, springhare and steenbok. The rare aardwolf and striped polecat were unexpected and notable nocturnal sightings during my last visit.

In keeping with Botswana's ideals of high-quality, low-impact tourism,

an exciting addition to the ecotourism accommodation offerings on its side of the reserve is the recently established Ta Shebube desert circuit. Ta Shebube has established small, exclusive camps that promote a visitor experience centred on the peace and solitude of this wilderness. It includes three new lodges that overlook the arid Nossob riverbed: Rooiputs, Polentswa and Union's End Camp.

THE REAL KALAHARI

Whether you're fortunate enough to encounter the park's black-maned lions or not, an authentic Kgalagadi safari involves much more than great game viewing and comfortable lodgings. Dominated by sand, sun-bleached salt pans, boundless horizons, big blue skies and twisted camel thorns, the Kgalagadi is a tranquil environment of timeless solitude that promotes spiritual growth, inner peace and much-needed reconnection with nature. 🏹