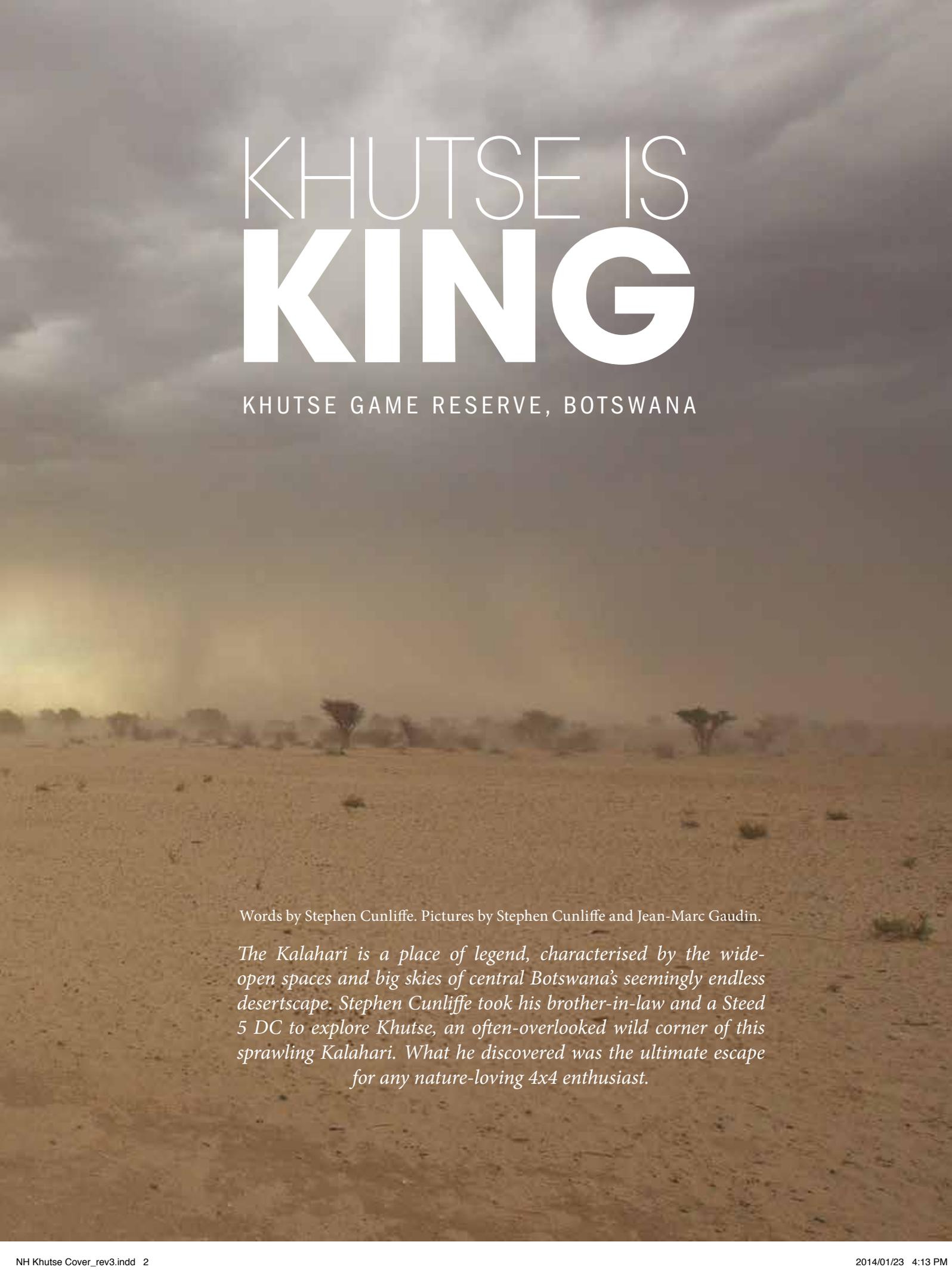




Huge dust clouds give way to isolated thunderstorms as the first rains unleash their fury on a thirsty Molose Pan.



KHUTSE IS KING

KHUTSE GAME RESERVE, BOTSWANA

Words by Stephen Cunliffe. Pictures by Stephen Cunliffe and Jean-Marc Gaudin.

The Kalahari is a place of legend, characterised by the wide-open spaces and big skies of central Botswana's seemingly endless desertscape. Stephen Cunliffe took his brother-in-law and a Steed 5 DC to explore Khutse, an often-overlooked wild corner of this sprawling Kalahari. What he discovered was the ultimate escape for any nature-loving 4x4 enthusiast.

Orion and Taurus dominate the night sky above Moreswe campsite in southern Khutse. **Below Right** Midway through a morning game drive is a good time to stop and fire up the skottle for a hearty fry-up. **Below Far Right** Draping shade cloth from a conveniently-located tree is one way to keep things a bit cooler if you're visiting during the heat of summer.



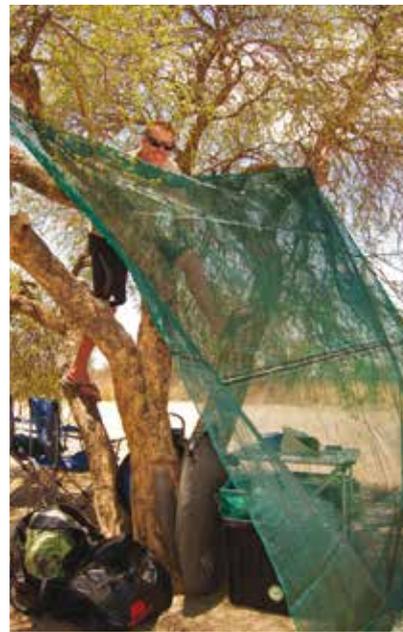


Situated a stone's throw off the gravel road to Khutse entrance gate, Khutse Kalahari Lodge offers the only real accommodation in the entire Khutse region. After a long drive from Gauteng, we were thankful that we'd opted for the sensible option of overnighting at the lodge located conveniently just outside the reserve.

Nudging our bakkie through a herd of obstinate cattle, we entered the parking lot, and were warmly greeted by Irene Phetlhadipuo (chef) and Keabetswe Ngwaga (waitress). They led us through their airy restaurant, past an inviting swimming pool, and down to an attractively-furnished en-suite rondavel. I didn't waste any time before cracking open a cold beer, and the warm shower that followed rinsed away all the dust from the long journey, instantly bringing me back to life.

Although the sun-bleached thatched buildings appeared a little shabby from the outside, the linens were crisp and clean, ensuring a good night's rest. The place could use a little TLC, but the friendly staff and handy location more than made up for the lack. I would strongly encourage every Khutse visitor attempting the long haul from Joburg to make use of this well-located gateway establishment as an overnight stop before entering Khutse refreshed the next morning.

Although only a short hop from Gaborone, Khutse Game Reserve remains surprisingly remote and uncrowded, especially outside school holidays and the peak safari season. One of a chain of parks that together protect vast swathes of the Kalahari, Khutse is a small reserve by Botswana standards, yet it embodies everything that makes the Kalahari so special: expansive landscapes, desert-adapted wildlife, secluded wild camping spots and a potent sense of wilderness. An exploration of this small southern extension of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve known as Khutse had been on my bucket list for years; so, when we drove ►





Upon reaching the large Khutse Pan – from which the park takes its name – we swung south on the first leg of a 120 km clockwise loop through the reserve. Savannah scrubland dominated a landscape of deep, sandy soils interspersed with the occasional rocky patch. The sand varied in colour from a burnt orange – reminiscent of the Kgalagadi – to glaring white. With our progress being monitored by a stretch of curious giraffe and the occasional steenbok, the dusty route took us along the edge of Gwia Pan and past a couple of smaller unnamed salt pans before terminating, three hours later, at the spectacular Moreswe Pan.

through the park entrance gate, I was as excited as my son on a Christmas morning.

The name Khutse, which means ‘where one kneels to drink’ in Sekwena (the local dialect of Setswana) reveals that the area was once part of Africa’s largest inland lake. Today, however, the sun-baked reserve experiences drought-like conditions for most of the year, giving rise to a distinctive terrain of low dunes, sparse grasslands, thorny scrub and the occasional scraggly tree; and peppered with more than 60 shimmering salt pans.

Moreswe Pan, in the far south-west of the reserve, felt a million miles from civilisation – and we had the idyllic place all to ourselves. In fact, the friendly DWNP staff at the gate had informed us earlier in the morning that we were currently the only visitors in the entire Khutse Game Reserve, making it our own private park for at least a day!

We proceeded to the waterhole – one of only three permanent water points in Khutse – where a herd of springbok and a few skittish gemsbok loitered nearby on the sun-baked pan. As we sat, drinking in the wild and desolate scene, Jean-

Top Left Newly-born red hartebeest calves are perfect prey for a hungry cheetah. **Top Right** A male cheetah searches for his next meal as he stalks across Moreswe Pan. **Above** Lions are top of the food chain in Khutse. **Right** A thirsty giraffe ambles his way down to Molose waterhole for a drink.





Marc suddenly raised his binoculars and yelped, “Hey, what’s that over there?”

Barely fifteen metres from the water’s edge, a young female leopard lay dead still out in the open, under a roasting midday sun. But something was wrong; this was not normal behaviour for a secretive, nocturnal feline. Closer inspection revealed that lions had ambushed the unfortunate cat: the bite marks on its neck and spine hinting at the brutal cause of death and a violent end. In a harsh wilderness where food is scarce, competition between large carnivores can be fierce. (See panel on Khutse Leopard Research).

With the potent sun approaching its zenith, and the temperature soaring, we decided to head off in search of our designated campsite and some shady respite. We had been assigned Moreswe No. 2, and this proved a fine place to put one’s feet up, relax – cold beer in hand – and enjoy the site’s fabulous vista over the pan. In keeping with all Khutse’s campsites, the site’s well-maintained facilities consisted of a private bucket shower atop a concrete screed, a clean long-drop toilet and braai pit. I must add that the four basic stands that constitute the less-frequented ▶



KHUTSE LEOPARD RESEARCH

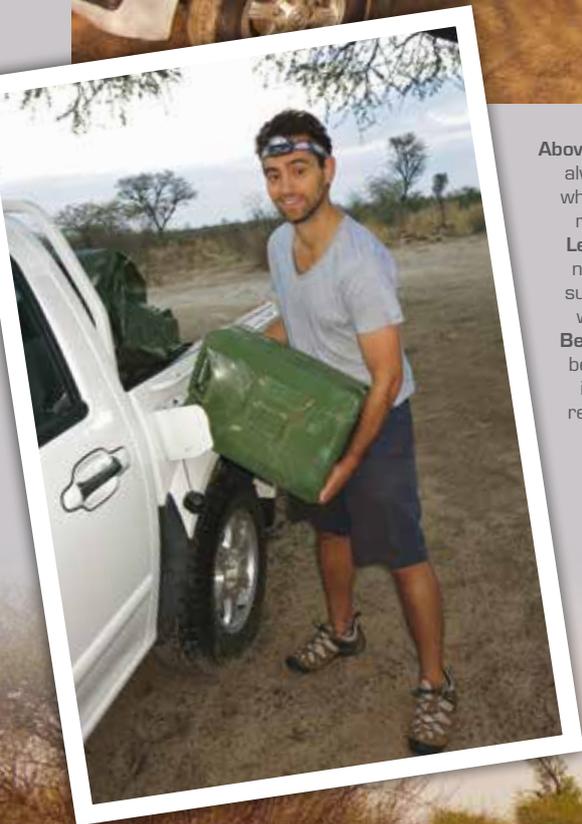
Swiss researcher Monika Schiess-Meier, a research associate at the University of Zurich, established the Leopard Ecology & Conservation Project (LEC) in September 2000. With the help of a dedicated team of research assistants and trackers, Schiess-Meier continues to lead the ongoing leopard and lion research in Khutse Game Reserve and its surrounds.

LEC is dedicated to understanding and conserving leopards and lions as an integral component of a healthy Khutse ecosystem. The study aims to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of the population dynamics, behaviour, genetics and health status of the leopards living in and around the Khutse Game Reserve. As apex predators, these large carnivores play a key role in shaping the structure of an ecosystem. By understanding their habits and monitoring changes over time, researchers gain insight into the mechanisms driving a dynamic system, thereby enabling wildlife managers to make more-informed management decisions.

As part of an open, arid system, with limited prey prone to seasonal movement, Khutse’s leopards and lions occur at relatively low densities and move over large home ranges – one female leopard was found to have a territory of 770 km² – to secure the resources they need. While Khutse’s leopards do not form a discrete population, LEC field coordinator Steve Henley estimates that there are currently six resident males and at least seven adult females with territories in the park.

Sadly, whenever leopards and lions stray outside the park, they are vulnerable to being in conflict with people, so the project also engages with the rural communities living alongside the reserve – to search for a better understanding of the nature of the conflict that exists between leopards and neighbouring livestock owners. LEC also introduced an education – and community-development programme to promote conservation values and responsible livestock-management, in an attempt to mitigate the adverse human impact on the Khutse leopard population.

Visitors can assist LEC in growing its database by submitting photos and reports of any leopard and/or lion sightings in Khutse. Reports should include the sighting date, location, a description (number, sex, age,) of the animals, observed behaviour, and your contact details so that researchers can follow up. Photos and reports can either be dropped off at the LEC research camp close to the main entrance – get directions at the gate – or emailed to photos.leopardecology@gmail.com. (Photos are downloaded monthly). For further details on the valuable work of this dedicated international NGO, or to donate, visit www.leopard.ch



Above A tyre compressor always comes in handy when travelling through remote desert areas. **Left** Visitors to Khutse need to be totally self-sufficient with plenty of water and spare fuel. **Below** Firewood cannot be bought or collected inside the reserve so remember to stock up before you enter.

Moreswe Pan Campsite were undoubtedly my favourites in all of Khutse.

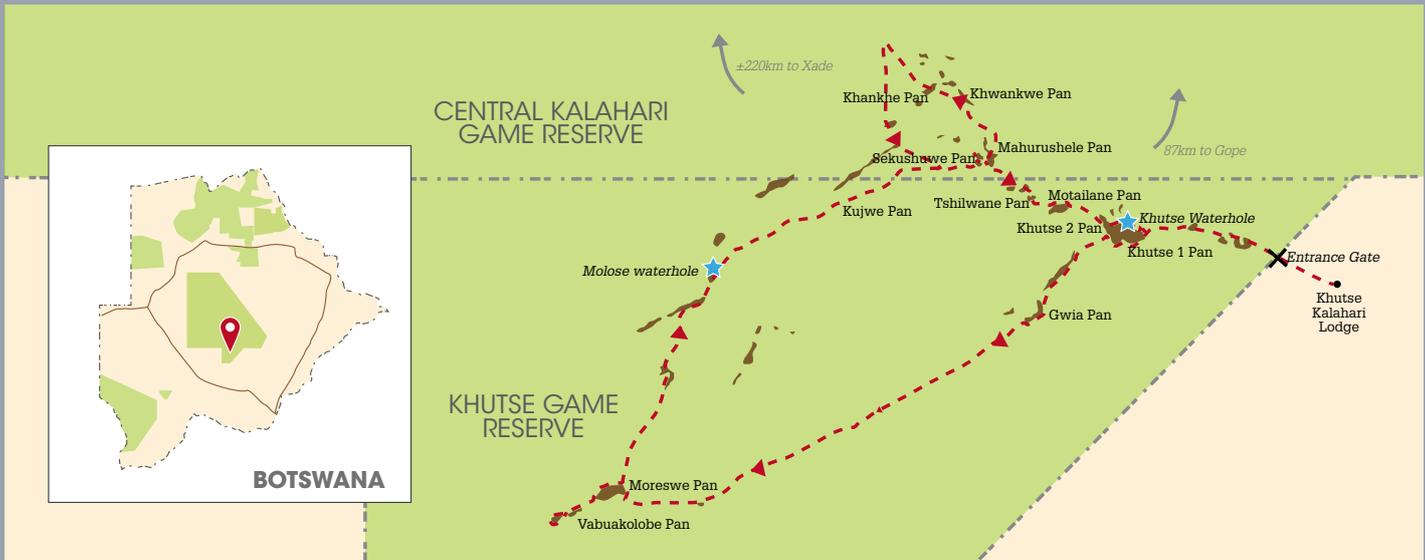
Later that afternoon, with the sun having lost some of its sting, we climbed back into the bakkie and retraced our steps to the waterhole – where a spooked herd of eland thundered off across the pan and vanished. As we debated what might have frightened the gigantic beasts, a couple of thirsty giraffe arrived. They drank hurriedly, keeping an ever-watchful eye on the prone leopard and surrounding vegetation. Something was bothering all these parched herbivores and we weren't convinced that it was the dead leopard lying near by.

The giraffe seemed to be devoting an inordinate amount of time to staring across the pan at one particular bushy thicket. We decided it was worth checking out, and took the track around the far side of the pan, which – with the help of our herbivorous friends – led us straight to a pair of mating lions resting in the shade. We had no doubt that these had caused the young leopard's untimely demise. We spent the rest of the afternoon parked with the lazy lovebirds, watching the light soften and the shadows lengthen across the pan.

Back in camp we threw some lamb chops on the braai, cracked open another cold St Louis, and reclined beneath a brilliant star-studded sky. We were in agreement: life didn't get any better than this. Just then a rustle in the bushes alerted us to the arrival of an unexpected nocturnal visitor. I flashed my torch, and as if on cue, an inquisitive brown hyena stepped into the beam. After a cursory inspection of the campsite, he ambled off down the road towards the waterhole – where our camera trap later revealed that he had scavenged the carcass of the dead leopard. The bush was suddenly alive with the sounds of a desert that truly comes to life only at night. As we packed up and crawled into our tents to the sound of amorous lions grunting and groaning near by, we agreed that it was going to be very hard to top one helluva first day in Khutse.

We had thought of having a recuperating rest day, ▶





but our plans of recumbent relaxation were upset the next morning when I spotted a graceful cat stalking across the distant pan in front of our camp – possibly a lioness on the hunt. We wasted no time jumping in the Steed and shooting off to investigate. Our vigilance was rewarded with a phenomenal two-hour sighting of a big male cheetah. This sleek speedster had cornered a grouchy honey badger under a bush and an epic stand-off ensued. As the sun heated up the shadeless pan, these two became increasingly begrudging sparring partners, spitting and snarling at each other while the shade shrank; and the cheetah eventually gave up on the honey badger and moved off towards a small herd of red hartebeest. He had his eye on a couple of newborn calves within the herd, but, with the temperature climbing, and realising that the hartebeest had seen him, the wily cat gracefully admitted defeat and soon melted back into the surrounding savannah scrubland. We were all smiles as we trundled back to camp, enthusing about an incredible cheetah encounter that would prove the top sighting of our entire trip.

With its great location, fantastic views and obliging wildlife, it was hard to leave Moreswe. We agreed that we would happily have stayed longer, but adventures of

a different kind awaited us at Molose Pan. Perennially popular Molose No. 1, which sits in a wildlife-rich region in close proximity to the local waterhole, is a spacious campsite – but without much shade and only limited views, conforming to the adage that ‘location is everything’. Despite its having a reputation for being Khutse’s busiest campsite, we saw not another soul during our two-day stay at Molose.

What we did witness was the truly awesome spectacle of the first Kalahari rains approaching across the parched African savannah. We heard the wind before we saw it. A dust cloud around three kilometres tall raced across the desert landscape engulfing everything in its path, before unleashing the first drops of rain Khutse had felt in nearly a year. An eerily orange light filtered through the dust and clouds, painting the landscape in colours such as I’d never seen before. With only a couple of giraffe for company, we watched double rainbows melt and re-form across a brooding sky while big raindrops pelted the thirsty earth. It was an awe-inspiring spectacle that gives me goose bumps just thinking about it.

The timely arrival of the rains was a godsend with regard to the heat. Cool days followed, and the desert climate could ▶

The game reserve has only three permanent water sources with Khutse Pan waterhole in the far north being the newest addition.



almost have been called temperate for a while! The downside to the arrival of the rains was that the animals dispersed and our wildlife sightings all but dried up. On the 25 km drive up north, past Kujwe Pan and on to Mahurushele Pan where we would spend our last two nights in Khutse, there was only a family of skittish kudu and the ubiquitous steenbokkie that graced us with their presence.

Situated midway along a string of sizzling salt pans that runs from Galalabadimo near the park entrance gate to Khankhe in the northwest, Mahurushele Campsite lies sandwiched between Mahurushele and Sekushwe pans. The huge multi-stemmed camelthorn tree that dominates stand No. 3 provides plenty of welcome shade during the scorching summer months. But, when a truly thunderous storm struck the following evening, I was worried that our impressively tall tree might instead provide an all-too-obvious target for the angry lightning bolts that split the skies all around us.

Lying in our tents, weathering the storm, we could often feel the thunder before we heard it. Every time lightning illuminated the night sky, we simultaneously felt the shockwave hit inside our tents, and a second later an explosive thunder blast followed. It was a terrifyingly magnificent experience. The driving rain was relentless, and next morning we learnt that an incredible 60 mm had fallen in the space of two, intense, hour-long storms. In the lull between these dramatic downpours we'd somehow even managed to quickly braai a couple of lekker steaks!

While sightings of the 'big and hairies' evaporated in the aftermath of the deluge, the desert revealed a lesser-known and seldom-witnessed side to its character. Insects and scorpions emerged en masse, previously unseen tortoises drank from rain puddles in the road, and a nightly chorus of frogs serenaded us. Black-backed jackals prowled the sodden landscape in search of rodents flushed from their ►



A thunderous overnight rainstorm turns arid Mahurushele Pan into a fiery lake at sunrise.



Above Left: Why not make the most of a passing rainstorm to grab an impromptu shower. **Above Middle:** Beware of scorpions around the campsites after the rain has passed. **Above Right:** The rain gauge at Khankhe in northern Khutse doesn't lie with its reading of 60 mm! **Below:** At the end of a long dry season a thirsty tortoise slurps his fill from a puddle of rainwater in our tracks.

flooded burrows, and bat-eared foxes skulked around devouring the emerging insect bounty. Flowers sprang forth and splashed colour

across the landscape, as the harsh desert briefly revealed its feminine side.

Amazingly, during the week we spent exploring Khutse, we never saw another person or vehicle. As we reluctantly prepared to leave the park, Jean-Marc summed the place up well: "I love Khutse for its solitude, but scratch the surface and you find there's actually so much life here. And after experiencing those insane desert storms, I'm totally in awe of what Mother Nature can do. For a week, Khutse has

been our own private national park, and I almost don't want to tell anyone else about it so that we can keep it all to ourselves."

Although the desert is home to a plethora of wild animals, animal densities are low and game viewing can be highly variable, making Khutse far from the premier place to view wildlife. However, with its thunderous skies and potent sense of untamed nature, the timeless Kalahari is a genuinely wild place of soulful solitude. Boasting the ultimate get-away-from-it-all vibe, Khutse is a desert-wilderness experience bar none and it completely rejuvenated our city-stressed souls. So, if your thing is remote desert wilderness, self-imposed isolation and the sound of lions roaring in the night, then Khutse will undoubtedly also become one of your favourite 4x4 destinations in all of Africa. ■



GWM STEED 5 VGT 2.0 DOUBLE CAB 4WD

When we told friends and family that we were taking the new GWM Steed 5 bakkie into the Kalahari, pretty much everyone responded in the same way. Raised eyebrows and incredulous looks of disbelief were followed by: “You’re really planning to take that Chinese car into the desert? Good luck, pal; rather you than me! You’re sure you don’t wanna borrow my Cruiser?”

Boasting GWM’s independently designed 110 kW turbo-diesel engine, the 6-speed Steed dominated on the open road. We kept the fully-laden bakkie at 120 km/hr during the two-day trip from Cape Town to Botswana, and still managed an impressive 8 l / 100 km. The cab was spacious and comfortable, and the long road north whizzed by.

The real test began across the border when we left the tarmac at Lethlakeng. We lowered the tyre pressure to 1.5 bars and the Steed cantered easily along the gravel road to Khutse entrance gate. We engaged four-wheel-drive upon entering the park and, despite long sections of relatively innocuous two-track, we kept it that way for the duration of our visit to avoid corrugating the reserve’s sandy roads.

We found the procedure of pressing buttons on the dash to electronically select the desired 4x4 mode – 4X4 (High Range) & 4X4 (Low Range) – to be user-friendly and convenient. We did, however, find it extremely frustrating that whenever we switched off at a sighting, the 4x4 automatically disengaged. This sometimes led to a nasty surprise in the first patch of really soft sand further down the road!

Our overall Khutse driving experience was very favourable, with the Steed performing well in most departments – although we did encounter issues at times with the gearbox. Reverse proved temperamental and at times difficult to engage, while both of us found first and third to be too close together. When you’re churning through soft sand in second gear and wanting to downshift quickly to first without losing momentum, accidentally selecting third could spell hours of digging under the hot African sun! Of course, it’s entirely possible that more time with the vehicle would help one familiarise oneself with these quirks.

The factory-issue Komho Radial 235/70 R16 tyres handled the tar, gravel and soft sand with equal aplomb – and only one slow puncture. Although the suspension wasn’t soft, the fully-laden vehicle did bottom out when the road became really bumpy. The ground clearance of 198 mm ensured that we didn’t run aground on the middle-mannetje too often, although this was probably due as much to the mild nature of Khutse’s roads as to the Steed’s clearance.

The Steed 5 2.0-litre turbo-diesel double-cab is available from R245 900, and it almost goes without saying that there’s not much that can compete with it in this price bracket. While most would agree that GWM’s latest Steed represents a gallop forward for the Chinese car manufacturer, it was our onward journey deep into the real Kalahari that I eagerly awaited, as this would no doubt answer the big question: “Does the new Steed 5 now merit consideration on more than price alone?”



Khutse lies right on the Tropic of Capricorn and ‘the crossing’ demands an obligatory photo for posterity

SA4x4 ROUTE GUIDE

WHERE WE STAYED

Khutse Kalahari Lodge



Built on Bakwena tribal land in the buffer zone outside the park, Khutse Kalahari Lodge's 24 en-suite thatched chalets (including two family units) offer the only 'non-camping' accommodation in the region. The comfortable lodge, situated three hours from Gaborone and 10 km short of the reserve's eastern entrance gate, also boasts a swimming pool, restaurant and upstairs bar. Visitors can choose between packages that include all meals and activities, or accommodation only. Visit www.khutsekalaharilodge.com to find out more; call +267 318 7163 or +267 7336 1112 with enquiries.

Campsites

The choice of where to stay in Khutse is restricted to a string of five ultra-rustic and gloriously wild campsites scattered across the reserve. Bigfoot Tours – www.bigfoottours.co.bw – operates all 25 designated stands in Khutse and these must be booked and paid for in advance. You will not be allowed to enter the park without a valid campsite reservation voucher. Call Bigfoot on +267 395 3360, or email reservations@bigfoottours.co.bw, to make the necessary arrangements. We dealt with Kay Mokwaleng – kay@bigfoottours.co.bw – and found her to be extremely helpful and ultra-efficient.



With an enviable location in the north of Khutse, Mahurushele Pan Campsite is ideally positioned for game drives along Khankhe Pan loop, or to Khutse waterhole. We stayed – under an enormous camel-thorn tree – at

the KHMAH03; this is undoubtedly the best of the three Mahurushele stands and quite likely the shadiest campsite in all of Khutse.



Renowned as the best place in Khutse to see lions, Molose Pan Campsite has four stands. We stayed at the popular KHMOS01, which is closest to the waterhole, but the other three spots – strung out along a low dune – offer more shade and superior views.



Wonderfully removed from the real world and in the furthest southern reaches of the reserve, Moreswe Pan is the most secluded of the five camping areas within Khutse. It comprises four separate stands, with KHMOR01 and KHMOR02 standing out with attractive locations close to the Moreswe waterhole.

Mokolodi Backpackers, Gaborone



When passing through Gaborone, we stayed at the excellent Mokolodi Backpackers – www.backpackers.co.bw – which

lies 10 km south of the capital alongside the Mokolodi Nature Reserve. You can camp next to their swimming pool, but we opted for a comfortable en-suite chalet with fully equipped kitchenette. Drop Sonne Gerber a mail at admin@backpackers.co.bw or call +27 72 043 6255 (in South Africa) and +267 7411 1165 (in Botswana) to make a reservation.

PARK AND VEHICLE FEES

Rates are subject to change but, as SADC residents, we were charged a daily park fee of BWP120 (ZAR145) per person and BWP50 (ZAR60) per vehicle per day. These fees can be paid in advance to the DWNP in Gaborone or settled in cash at the entrance gate.

FUEL

Both petrol and diesel are cheaper in Botswana, so wait until you've crossed the border to fill up. Fuel is not available in Khutse, and the nearest place to fill your tank is at the Total in Lethlakeng, 100 km from the park; but, as supplies can be erratic, it might be safer to fuel up in Gaborone or Molepolole and then top off the tank on your way through Lethlakeng.

WHERE TO BUY PROVISIONS

Meat is often confiscated at the border, so rather wait and stock up on steaks, boerewors and fresh produce, along with other supplies, when passing through Gaborone en route to Khutse. We made use of the excellent Riverside Mall in the capital. Nearer the park, Lethlakeng and Salajwe have a limited range of basic provisions. Firewood can usually be purchased alongside the road as you approach Khutse entrance gate; remember that collecting wood inside the reserve is prohibited.

ESSENTIAL GEAR

Although the road conditions in Khutse aren't overly taxing, anyone attempting the challenging Khankhe-Bape-Xaka-Xade route north into the Central Kalahari should expect long, fuel-guzzling sections of deep, powdery sand. Nonetheless, Khutse visitors should have a tyre repair kit, air compressor and pressure gauge, along with a spade, sand tracks, high-lift jack and extra fuel. Also carry plenty of drinking water when driving in the desert, and watch your fuel consumption carefully because – if you get into trouble – it might be a while before someone happens upon you in this forgotten corner of the Kalahari.

CONVOY OR SOLO

Convoy would be the safer option, as other vehicles can be few and far between in this off-the-beaten-track reserve. Experienced overlanders opting for a solo sojourn should

carry all the necessary recovery gear and emergency equipment, including a satellite phone.

MAPS & DIRECTIONS

With the latest version of Tracks4Africa loaded on the GPS you really can't go wrong, although we found their Botswana paper map (with distances and travelling times) to be very useful as well. A decent A4 photocopied map of Khutse is also available, free of charge, at the park gate.

ROAD CONDITIONS

We came across the occasional patch of fairly thick sand, but, for the most part, Khutse's roads tended to be easy-to-negotiate two-tracks in good condition. The arrival of the rains compacted the loose sand and actually improved driving conditions.

VEHICLE REQUIRED

We travelled in a GWM Steed 5 4WD 2.0 VGT. The 6-speed 4x4 double cab bakkie handled the relatively mild sand tracks of Khutse without incident and we never even found it necessary to engage low range, so I would say that any four-wheel drive with reasonable clearance should be more than capable of handling the sandy roads in Khutse.

RISK

Khutse is considered a low risk malaria zone. Watch out for the searing Kalahari sun and keep well hydrated at all times. In remote places like Khutse, overlanders should always travel with a comprehensive first aid kit and plenty of extra drinking water.

BORDER CROSSING

Overlanders approaching from Kimberley via Mafikeng will make use of the Ramatlabama border post (06h00 – 22h00), while those travelling from Gauteng have the choice of three convenient crossings: the tried-and-tested Skilpadshok/Pioneer Gate (06h00 – 24h00), the trucker's choice of Kopfontein/Tlokwenk Gate (06h00 – 24h00) or the comparatively serene Swartkopfontein/Ramotswa Gate (07h00 – 19h00).

We found both sides of the border to be friendly and efficient. Remember that all foreign-registered vehicles entering Botswana will be charged Botswana Road Tax of BWP140 (ZAR168) at the border, and this fee cannot be paid in Rand. Credit cards are sometimes accepted (if their machines are online), but it pays to have some Pula cash on you to avoid unnecessary delays.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Check out www.botswanaturism.co.bw or get hold of Lonely Planet's recently updated Botswana & Namibia travel guide (3rd edition). ■