

A Traveler's Tale

Kruger: Keeper of my Soul

by **Santi Geere**

My daughter and I leave at 5:30. We decide to enter at Kruger Gate so we can start traveling in the Park as soon as possible. As we stop on the bridge, we start crying. The African Fish Eagle greets us five times. We stand there and smile and cry. Silly women we are! As we pass through the gate, we see a Zebra and the customary Impala. I love April/May, as the rutting season is in full blast, and the humble Impala strut their stuff. A quick stop-over at Skukuza. The thatch buildings smell like Home.

We pass the low-water bridges of the Sabie and Sand rivers, and marvel at how strongly they flow. On previous occasions we've seen it with very little water at this time of year and we feel happy that the animals will have a good winter. We see bathing vultures in a pool of the Sand River next. My daughter has never seen this before, and we sit watching their behaviour for a while.



By the time we reach Tshokwane, I feel a bit tired. The lush vegetation requires a lot of concentration. At some places, the grass is so tall, it is hard to see the Impalas' legs.

We stop at Nsemani dam which is also remarkably full. The last time my daughter was there with me, we saw the sad sight of fish struggling in tiny puddles of mud. The abundance of nature is joyful.

At last we arrive at Orpen gate. I love the staff at Orpen Reception, they have warm smiles and are always ready to chat. We head for Tamboti, armed with wood and ice. As we turn into the sand road, we are met by a herd of Wildebeest and Impala. The tiredness is seeping away.

At about 17.30 we have a good shower to wash away our travel dust. We settle on the deck of our tent and watch the tree across the Timbavati where we know a troop of baboons sleep. The sounds of night start. The large trees around our tent fill with the last gossip of the day birds. And then, the familiar bark echo's across the river. Our "family" is coming in from a day of foraging. The night concert starts, the gentle prup of the Scops Owl in the Apple Leaf tree behind our tent, the chatter and scolding of the Baboons and the obstinate snorting of an Impala ram herding his harem for the night. The White Faced Owl calls from the river bank and the Giant Eagle Owl replies. On cue when the darkness finally comes, the evocative Fierynecked Nightjar sings the night song. The first movement of the bush concert over, we are reminded by the sounds of human activity that a fire must be made. We get up, mesmerized and glad to be Home. The camp is filled with delicious smells of meat roasting on coals.



and emanating from the river the beautiful fragrance of earth and crushed grass mingling with the smoky air.

From somewhere in the dark, she calls, her spine chilling Whoop! Whoooooop! No one can mistake this dark magical song of Africa. We don't see her, but hear her as she comes across the dry riverbed through the tall grass outside the fence. She pauses and look at us in the dim light. We slowly walk down to the fence and eye her through the diamond mesh. Crocuta Crocuta – a beautiful Spotted Hyena. She gives us one more look, sniffs the air, turns and becomes part of the night again.

We stumble around our tent out of sheer tiredness after a full day. One last coffee on the deck and then to bed, but there is no rest for the weary! Across the river the Zebras whinnying is followed by the roaring of lions. KILL! There's a KILL somewhere in the darkness. Did someone say something about sleep? So we sit on the stairs to the deck, sipping our coffee and listening for the intermittent roars that tear into the star-studded velvety black African night.

We hear a branch outside the fence torn off with characteristic cracking and rasping. An Ellie saunters leisurely past us a mere 30 feet away, snacking on our fence bushes. We have never been so close to a wild elephant, smelling it, listening to its tummy rumble deeply. This is Bliss. Our visitor gives us a long steady stare, and my daughter and I are thrilled beyond measure. The Ellie moves on. Our adrenalin is way up. We MUST sleep now. Another day in Africa ends amidst the chorus of lions roaring in the darkness.

We are awoken by a hysterical Francolin . It's still dark, just about 4:45. The blankets are snug and warm, the air outside, cold as it seeps through the open tent flaps The Greyheaded Bush Shrike starts calling. My spine tingles with pleasure at the sound of the alarm clock of the bush.



We decide to do a pyjama run. We brush our teeth, dampen our hair, flatten it, pull a track suit over our pyjamas, make a flask of coffee and zip out the gate when it opens. (It works very well if you share ablutions, because when you return, the bathrooms are quiet and cleaned after the first session).

In the semi-darkness we head off. We see two Hyenas returning from their nightly roving. The Impalas were at it, chasing each other and attacking the small shrubs with their overactive glands to mark their territory. The calm, morose Wildebeest just stands there, their eyes asking what all the fuss is about.

We take the S106 turn-off at Bobbejaankrans lookout after dodging the early morning Elephant sanitation works. Can anyone tell me why the elephants prefer to do it on the tar road on a wall to wall basis?

We spot a herd of Impala and drink coffee, whilst watching them. The males certainly had some "lovin" on their minds! The ram chases the ewes and they avoid him. Us two girls enjoy this intensely. "Go girl, give him a run for his money!" Soon, five giraffe stroll into our vista and enjoy a

peaceful browse. They check us out underneath their long lashes. But the Impala's are the main attraction. The snorting and grunting and displays are incredible to watch - tireless and energetic behaviour from animals who otherwise, demurely go about their business.

We get moving and pass the Rabelais Hut – it is being renovated. We wonder if the elephant bull who used to hang around there has moved on, but find his calling cards a kilometre or so onwards. Old habits die hard. We wonder if he still likes to surprise you and step on it ever so slightly...

Later in the day, ablutions done and picnic packed, we head for the S39 – the beautiful road that meanders along the Timbavati. On our way we see an elephant bull and a few meters from it, a lone dagga boy grazing. Two old lonely bulls, magnificent and sad at the same time. The road has small loops with river lookouts and where the dense vegetation on the banks allows, many pools of water are visible. I am sure that the winter season will provide spectacular viewing. We encounter small herds of Impala, Giraffe and quite large herds of Zebra. Seems that the boys of this kind also have itchy pants, and they are up each others noses all the time.

The afternoon sun releases the herbaceous smell of the potato bush and we stop to finally do a proper identification. Out with the tree book and the search is on. After many years, of smelling it, I can now correctly identify this plant so unique to Africa. Close to the Timbavati picnic site, we see a small family of Waterbuck. The road is long and the porcelain throne a vivid image. The grass is too tall to risk a “veldtie”.

The resident Bushbuck is still up to its tricks at the picnic site. We have a quick bite and head off on the S40. All we see is a solitary male baboon that eats termites off the tree trunks. We stop over at Satara for a supply of Amarula and some wood that burns quickly – the Tamboti shop only had leadwood which at best of times, works when you want a slow fire. We look at the sightings board and see that there were cheetah and wild dog seen close to the turn-off we took earlier the morning on our pyjama run! It starts raining on our way back, and the smell of rain mixed with dust wafts through the air. A large flock of guinea fowl decides that they need to have road-block. We take some incredible photos.



Back towards Orpen, we see a large herd of Zebra where we spotted the two bulls earlier on, and giraffe a few kilometres from there. Close to the Tamaboti turn-off, we see seven ground hornbills in a dry tree. The Wildebeest and Impala are still grazing in little groups along the road.

The sun sets, and we start marking off our bird sightings, downloading photographs and going about dinner. I bought yet another bag of leadwood, albeit smaller pieces this time. We are prepared for a long night. Our troop returns and start their noisy night-time settling in the tree across the tent. We sit on the stairs of the deck, watching the small flames dancing on the wood. The Scops starts to pruuup. The night concert officially starts....

The next morning that nutty Francolin starts at 4:45 sharp again, and continues until the Arrowmarked Babbler begin to protest. This morning is bit cooler than yesterday. My mobile rings

at 5:00. "Happy BIRTHDAY!!!! Why are you a morning person when you are in the bush and not in the city? What's your birthday wish?"

"Someone at SANParks telling me I can stay in Tamboti for mahala for a year to finish writing my book...or maybe just a lion sighting today..." I reply.

The ghost bird starts to call. Long drawn out notes fill the air with melancholy. The Greenspotted Dove joins in. I sit on the side of my bed in ecstasy. This is how a birthday should be. My birthday cake is a bun with a candle in, compliments of my daughter and a cup of steaming coffee. The hyena whoops from across the river and the baboons start their day in their hysterical baboon way. A lion roars from far away, a gentle calling roar. Silence fills my soul and it is more precious than any gift I had ever received.

We head for N'wanetsi. It's really cold this morning. At Nsemani dam, we stop and scan. Three grey headed seagulls sit at the brim of the water. We look in disbelief. We check our Sasol and Sinclair bird books and sigh, they are found inland, but it's first for us to see GULLS in the middle of KNP! So we speculate that they must be from Mozambique. We also spot a tern, another mega tick for us.. Excited we travel on, and find two Bateleur Eagles as soon as we pass the N'wanetsi river bridge.. After the rain, a lot of grasshoppers and ground crickets cross the road, with consequent road kills that provide a feast for the hornbills and starlings. That might also be reason for yesterday's guinea fowl road-block.



The H6 present a few sightings of Zebra and Wildebeest. We turn off at Sonop and have a wonderful sighting of a breeding pair of Saddlebilled storks. It is very cold and windy at the picnic site. A small family of Waterbuck were grazing on the opposite bank. The river is the fullest I have ever seen it, and there is a noticeable absence of water birds, except for a crane or two. We drive to Sweni bird-hide and sit there with chattering teeth for a while watching two crocs and a large family of Hippo's with three very small calves. I have never seen the water so deep at Sweni, and never seen Hippos there before.

We take the Gudzani road and aside from a few Impalas, we see a lone Ellie bull. Gudzani dam is filled to brim. There are no water birds in sight. We turn back to the S100, and are entertained by masses of Zebra and Giraffe. The one herd we sit watching, are antsy, biting and kicking and generally horsing around. Slowly, the Giraffe start to appear and as soon as they started to cross the road to the other side, the Zebras line up in single file and start to follow them. This is fascinating to watch. We also find a Longbilled Crombeck, which is a first for my daughter. On our way back, the gulls are still there.



We stop at Orpen to book a night drive and are told that someone saw Cheetahs about two kilometers from the gate. So back we travel, but after searching for a while, we decide to call it a day. Then, in Kruger's nonchalant way, the bush offers us another amazing sighting. Lions. A huge male and four females, passed out on a sandy patch, looking like balloons with tails. This confirms

the kill, because these animals were inches away from bursting! I silently say “thank you” - my birthday wish granted.

That evening, we board the game drive vehicle. It is just us two and our guide. I don't care what we see, I just want to be in bush in the dark night and see a million stars and know...that there are things out there, alive, hunting, hiding, making noises . There is this incredible silence that I can smell, taste, hear and put away in my heart like a precious gift to be opened when I am in bad need of sustenance.

We learn about the stars, we see the Giant Eagle Owl, the Nightjar, a Bush Baby and a Chameleon curled up like a luminescent banana in a thorn tree. I feel the cool night air on my face, and the dark blanket of Mama Africa folds around me. I wish I could just sit there on one spot the whole night and look at the path of the stars until daylight comes to put away night's beautiful gems.

The next morning we head off early to Muzandzeni with full picnic regalia. A bush breakfast of note coming up! We keep the raw eggs close at hand, as there used to be a gregarious Ellie who hung around there and I read about a ranger who tossed raw eggs at Ellies and they didn't like it one bit. I won't be tempted to try this though, as I would not get that close to an Elephant. We see a Bateleur eating a snake on the side of the road in two minutes flat. It makes us hungry...

At the picnic site, we are alone. I'm starting to like this illusion of being alone in the park. A huge Jackalberry tree has been unearthed but part of its roots are still in the ground and it continues to grow. At the base of the uplifted roots, there is an elephant skull and a large bone underneath it. We unpack our stuff not far from it and walk over to look. There is still flesh on the skull and bone. We are both a little uneasy with this reality. The giant old tree with the skull of the elephant at its base...life, nature and cycles.

We start breakfast and I guiltily turn my back to the skull when I crack the eggs open to fry. The old man at the site told us that they found the elephant dead at the drinking hole at the back. It was ill.



We take the S126 after we've enjoyed our bush-brekkie. We see a lot of Giraffe and Zebra. This is the first time we have traveled on this road and it's a new adventure. I like the roads turning off from the S36, I find all of them beautiful and have been fortunate to see “kitties” on most of them. However, I make peace with the fact that this trip would not yield easy sightings. It's a good opportunity to expand our knowledge of flora to. We even explore our book on South African Grasses. The last 5 km's are filled with Lala palms on the river bank, one of my favorites.

The road to Orpen yields a small herd of Buffalo, 'piggies' (a.k.a. warthogs) and a baboon road block. Let's just say that things are surely going 'bump' in the Park...

Our last day... The crazy francolin alarm clock goes off...and as the Timbavati is painted in hues of shimmering gold, the rest of the bird chorus follows suit. My being tells me that this is how I would like to wake up every morning for the rest of my life.

We head for Olifants. About 10 km's from Satara, we see two African Hawk Eagles in a dry tree. The Ngotso dam yields two Woollynecked Storks which we haven't seen in while. Much of the rest up to the Olifants river bridge had small groups of plains game. Another chance to explore the different vegetation in the varying ecozones.

At the N'wamanzi lookout we "caught" a tourist feeding the Vervet Monkeys, sitting with them scattered all over the bonnet of his car. Big eyes and white faces.

From Olifants we travel to Balule, and as we drive out, we pass a tree with a creeper in full bloom, filled with butterflies of all kinds and sizes.

On the S89 we sit watching another herd of raunchy Impalas, and lo! behold, a beautiful Kudu bull chases a cow across the road and back. You go girl! We also found a set of Wildebeest horns lying on the side of the road which indicated a kill earlier on as there was still wet flesh on it.

We took the S39 that goes past Roodewal, and almost bumped into an Ellie as we drove around a corner. I don't know who got the biggest fright! A troop of baboons and more giraffe, and more Zebras and even more Impalas. Even in these dense conditions, we have seen duiker and kudu as well as leopard tortoises, Ellies (though not as much as we saw in December in the South), oodles of mongooses, even rabbits in the riverbed at night.



It's time to leave. We start moving before crazy francolin wakes. I think we cheesed it off, because it does not make a sound this morning. As we start the car, we are crying. "Mom, can we travel to Skukuza instead of going out at Orpen gate?" Skukuza it is. Seven kilometers from camp, we see the cars and there they are. A pride of three females, four cubs and two male lions. The lioness calls and the cubs come running. They linger, sniff the air. The males draw behind and then as the females move away into thicket, they follow. What a great way to say goodbye...

My ode to Kruger...

"Take me to the places on the earth
that teach you how to dance,
the places where you can risk
letting the world break your heart.
And I will take you the places
where the earth beneath my feet
and the stars overhead
make my heart whole
again and
again"

Oriah Mountain Dreamer : The Dance
