

FOLLOW MY LEAD
Kruger's backpacking trails are led by armed guides who reveal the secret lives of the park's wild residents.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

Yes, you can get out of your vehicle in Kruger! Sign up for a backpacking trail and feel the pulse of bush life like nowhere else.
By Hlengiwe Magagula

Stay in the vehicle. Anyone who has visited Kruger National Park knows that's the first rule. There are frequent reminders and, in a mini traffic jam, on the tar road near Phalaborwa Gate, we were getting one. A gleaming leopard was strolling our way. She paused, turned and walked directly to our open-sided vehicle and looked up, exploring our scent. After a moment, with a slightly bored demeanour, she continued her walk. A little giddy, we continued our own journey, in the knowledge we would soon be breaking that first rule. We turned from the tar, past a "no entry" sign, and bounced off-road for an hour.

It was the first day of four on Kruger's Olifants Backpacking Trail, and our little group was already one down. A participant had phoned to cancel even though she was already in the park. Our guide, Francois van der Merwe, was disappointed for her. "If I'd had the chance to talk to her, I'm sure I'd have changed her mind." Any apprehensiveness I had about leaving the protection of the vehicle was soon assuaged by Francois and his assistant. It's not so much the heavy rifles they carry, but their calm confidence, based on many years of bush life. With our kit assembled, we listened intently to their safety talk. Stick together, single file, be quiet, be alert.

The Backpacking Trails are a step up from the hugely popular Kruger Wilderness Trails. As the name hints, the difference is that walkers carry everything needed for four days in the bush, including tent, stove and food. One of three trails in the northern part of South Africa's greatest park, the Olifants follows the eponymous river, and water is sourced by scooping a hole in

the sand and adding a dash of purifier.

After an hour's walk, we got our first view of the river, a deep section sheltering dozens of hippos from the strengthening sun. Following a couple of years of poor rain in the region, it couldn't be said that the river surged or flowed. It seeped, trickled, endured, creating a green corridor of life. A hundred metres before, the stillness had been oppressive. But now on the Olifants's banks, nature was thriving. Storks and spoonbills, solitary fish eagles and little flocks of green pigeons. Raucous Egyptian geese sharing pools with stealthy crocodiles. Elephants materialised in the middle distance, then melted away.

Staying alert was not a challenge. The people who sign up for the Backpacking Trails tend to be the curious types, so there are frequent excuses for a pause and a query. Who made that track? Is that burrow occupied? What's that strange call? We examined a terrapin shell, a hippo incisor.

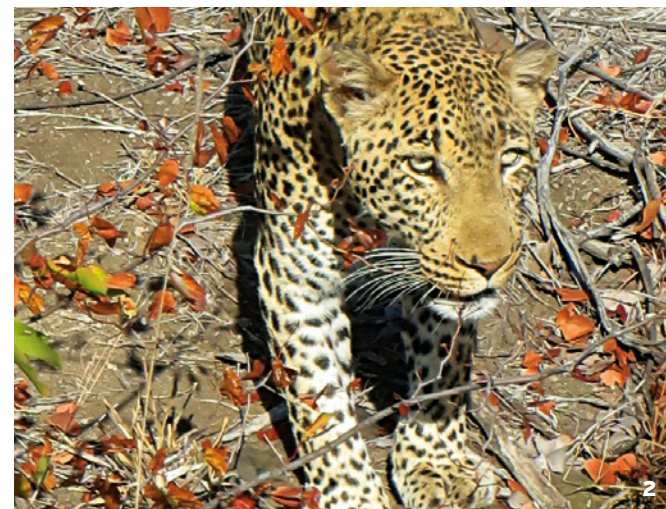
Francois says he loves the questions as, even after over half a century in the bush, he is still learning. From a vehicle, this part of Kruger is a blur of mopane forest in shades of brown. But on foot, the complexity is revealed. By the end, with the help of a tree specialist in the group, we'd counted nearly 40 types, including magnificent figs and glossy Natal mahogany, rough-barked tamboti and ancient leadwood.

On the first day, we walked for only three or four hours. The pace dial is set for enjoyment, not endurance, and there's consensus on the best time and place to make camp. For Francois, the key is picking a place where it's safe to dip in the river. Even in the cooler time of the year, late August, walking on sand in the sun is ▶

1 The Olifants Backpacking Trail offers magnificent views. Against Kruger's vast backdrop even elephants seem diminutive. **2** The leopard seen on the way to the trail's start. **3** Pitching camp in a mostly dry riverbed ensures fresh water and soft sand for sleeping. **4** Trails guide Francois van der Merwe demonstrates the action of a hippo incisor.



Walkers carry everything needed for four days in the bush, including tent, stove and food.



ALL THE OPTIONS

Few places in Africa compare with Kruger for the range of opportunities to get on foot with wildlife. *The Guide to Walking in Kruger National Park* by Hlengiwe Magagula includes every SANParks offering from must-do dawn walks to the immensely popular wilderness trails, as well as tempting trails from private concessions in the park. It even describes some hard-to-find options such as gate walks and SANParks Honorary Ranger trails. It tells you how to plan and book, the best time to go and what to bring. Find the e-book on amazon.com.



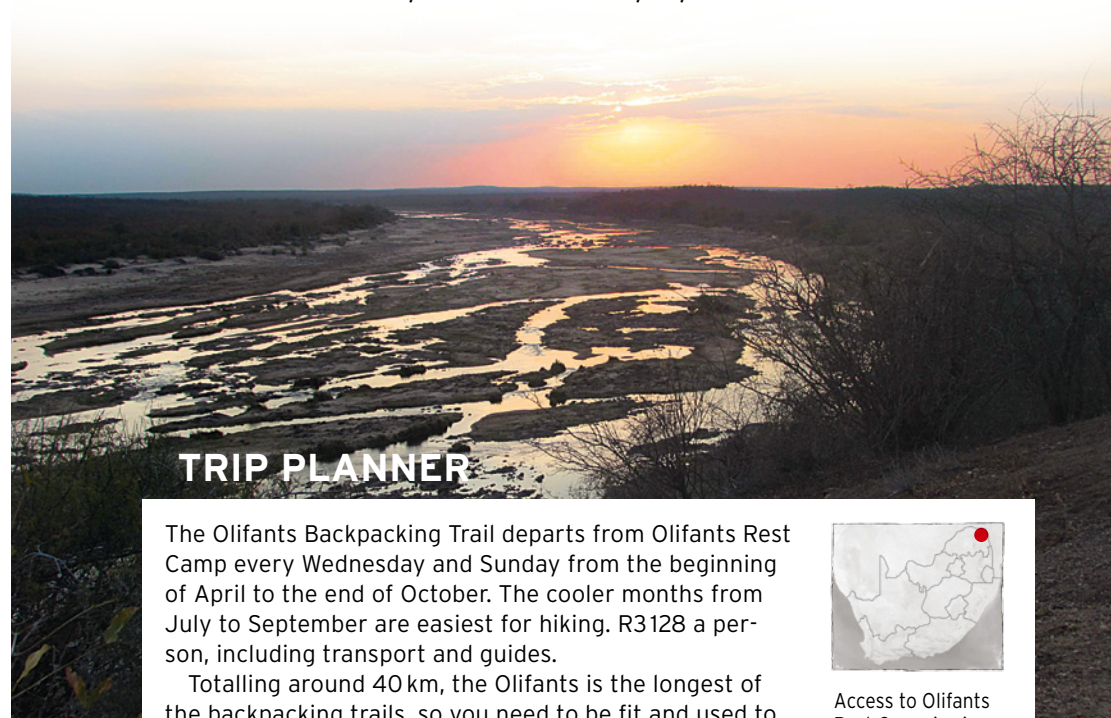
tiring. We were happy to drop packs and clear a little patch of ground of stones and sticks for the tents.

The twilight hours were full of movement. Birds coming in to roost, bats going out to hunt. Bushbuck and kudu taking on water. The aural landscape was transformed, as cicadas faded and nocturnal animals announced their presence. Soon, a little circle of stoves was bubbling, and we swapped stories. The night sky was distracting in its brilliance. Francois pointed out the Southern Cross and gave us a beginner's lesson in celestial navigation. After a while we were content to sit in silence, tired and happy, mesmerised by firefly dances.

It's fair to say we're a little spoilt by the drama of nature documentaries and videos shared on the internet. In reality, casual visitors are not likely to see lions

doing battle with buffalo or tackling a giraffe. But leaving your vehicle behind opens up an experience that will never make good television yet connects us to our ancestors, from the time humans first walked in Africa. Scrutinising a leopard print, teasing out the clues that it's fresh. Finding the right spot to fill a water bottle, safe from crocodiles. Shaping the sand for maximum comfort, as you recline and recall the wonders of the day.

The second day was like the first; the third like the second. It's hard to remember now which day we saw the Verreaux's eagle-owl, or when exactly we ate lunch while sitting by a little waterfall. But does it matter? Leave your watch behind, forget your phone, not that there's a signal anyway, and next time you visit Kruger, choose the option that means you don't stay in your vehicle. 🐾



TRIP PLANNER

The Olifants Backpacking Trail departs from Olifants Rest Camp every Wednesday and Sunday from the beginning of April to the end of October. The cooler months from July to September are easiest for hiking. R3128 a person, including transport and guides.

Totalling around 40 km, the Olifants is the longest of the backpacking trails, so you need to be fit and used to hiking with a pack. Check the packing list from SANParks carefully, and carry only what you really need. Purification tablets or drops are essential and a portable filter is worth bringing.

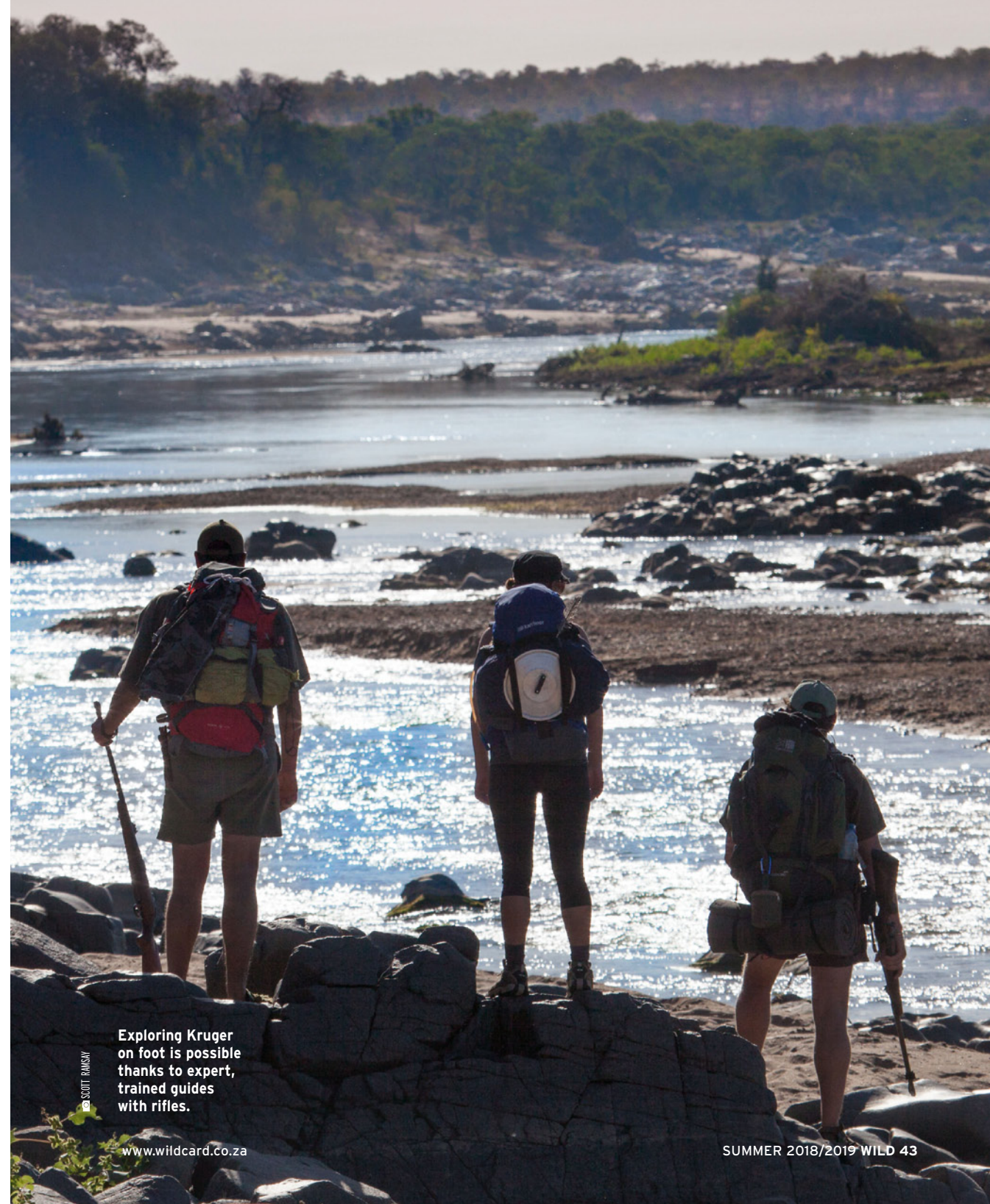
For bookings, contact SANParks on 012 428 9111 or 082 233 9111, email reservations@sanparks.org or book at sanparks.org.



Access to Olifants Rest Camp is via Kruger's Phalaborwa Gate, around 500 km from Johannesburg.

© HENRIQUE MAGALHAES

Staying alert is not a challenge. There are frequent excuses for a pause and a query.



Exploring Kruger on foot is possible thanks to expert, trained guides with rifles.

© SCOTT RANSKY

www.wildcard.co.za