



(Photo Jaques Marais)



Enduring and persistent, the San are as much at home in the Kalahari as the oryx and the black-maned lion.

UPFRONT | Great Escape

SAN WISDOM

IN THE SUN-BAKED KALAHARI, HLENGIWE MAGAGULA SOAKS UP SOME WISDOM FROM AN HEIR TO **ARGUABLY THE WORLD'S MOST ANCIENT PEOPLE**

It was visible from 30km or more, a towering alien rising from the Northern Cape Nama Karoo veld. I was both intrigued and bewildered. Just moments before I was driving in lush fields of fruit on the levees of the Orange River and now, approaching Upington, this mirage materialised. A few minutes of phone search solved the mystery – I was looking at the collector tower of Khi Solar One, a space-age project to convert the sun's energy into electricity.

The plant has a perfect home here where the 'Green Kalahari' gives way to arid lands and rainclouds are rare. Its tower serves as both a sentinel and beacon for those travelling to visit the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (KTP), standing guard over a precious place and giving hope that we can find ways to heal a damaged planet.

A day later, I was deep in the dune lands of the park, taking shade under an enormous social weaver colony on a buffalo thorn tree. With !Xaus Lodge guide Mans Maasdorp, I'd been ambling amid grassy tussocks since the sun had peeped over the horizon, looking for meerkats, whistling rats and four-striped mice. Most of all, Mans had been telling stories about his people, the †Khomani San, and their relationship with this land. He led me away from the weaver nests and started scrambling in the sand with his hands. Handing me the small tuber of the devil's claw plant, he said it is a source of anti-rheumatic and anti-inflammatory medicines.

To be honest, I was finding it hard to focus on flora. I'd been rudely woken at 3am by the loudest and closest



A Wise Guide

Mans Mansdorp is a †**Khomani San** and his people have been here forever. Forever? Well, there are archaeological remains in the region showing evidence of 180 000 years of human activity, which is pretty much as long as modern humans have existed. This is what made chatting with Mans so fascinating. It's easy to think of the Kgalagadi park as the place to witness a cheetah hunt or wake up to a lion licking your tent. And it is that... but so much more. Mans does not wear traditional San attire, and why should he? He was born in Upington. He's not a backveld man but he's tuned into the world, and he meets visitors from all over the planet. He knows the place he loves is on the front line of climate change and at risk of becoming a barren sandscape. We should listen to him.



lion roar ever. It felt like he was in my room. I peeped out the door and could see him in the moonlight, strolling past after quenching his thirst in the large bird bath. A few days earlier he had killed a gemsbok on the other side of the pan, and his feasting required regular visits to the lodge for water.

Mans had said not to worry, 'We avoid the lions, and they avoid us'. With a full belly, the lion had retreated to the shade of a shepherd's tree a few hundred metres from where we explored on foot.

Reassured, I gave Mans my full attention again as he showed me a handful of seed pods from a camel thorn. What a magical all-rounder of a tree it is: the pods are a rich source of food for the browsing antelope, the seeds

can be roasted for a sort of coffee, the powdered pods can be used to treat infections while the tree roots can make an infusion to cure TB and toothache. The bark is used to fashion arrow quivers, and – as I was later to discover in the craft kraal – the pods are included in attractive traditional necklaces.

If the morning felt like outdoor school, the afternoon was devoted to pure pleasure. We drove past the snoozing lion to the other side of the pan, where Mans produced chairs and cold drinks. As the Earth turned, the sky darkened to shades of purple, and the last rays of light made the grasses glow. For the second time that day, I was able to look at the sun as it dropped into the dunes. I asked Mans what he thought about the solar energy plant and he waved his hand. 'Look around you', he said. 'None of this would be here without the sun's energy.' He pointed at the pan, the gami grasses, the blackthorn bushes with the whistling rats beneath, the oryx browsing in the distance and the ranks of solar panels that feed the lodge. He is completely comfortable in the modern world with all its tech, while holding tightly to the traditions and knowledge of his people. We stayed until the stars filled the canopy and the night chill crept upon us. Tomorrow, the sun would be back, recharging the Kalahari. **G**



ABOVE Like an arboreal haystack, sociable weaver nests are the work of countless generations.

TOP LEFT On foot amid the dunes, Mans Mansdorp is in his happy place.

LEFT Let's talk kori bustard avionics.

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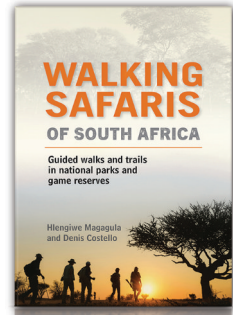
By the light of the Milky Way, the Kalahari seems kinder.



UPFRONT | Great Escape



!Xaus Lodge



Hlengiwe is co-author of *Walking Safaris of South Africa*, to be published by Struik Travel & Heritage in February 2021.

BELOW The author learns how to create art from ostrich egg shells.



GETTING THERE

From Joburg or Cape Town, it's over 900km to the park entrance. Capetonians travel via the N7 to Springbok, then the N14 to Upington and north along the R360. From Gauteng take the N14 to Upington.

Stay Here

It's SANParks land so there's a daily conservation fee of R101 for adult South African residents, R50 for kids – or get a Wild Card. Once inside the gates, you'll find a large range of SANParks accommodation in the three rest camps – Twee Rivieren, Nossob and Mata-Mata – and six wilderness camps. It makes sense to plan a night at Twee Rivieren on arrival and before departure. Prices start from R305 for a camping spot for

two, while cottages are R1 635 for two. Campsites in the park are discounted during the summer furnace from 12 January–18 March. **012 343 0905**, sanparks.org

!XAUS LODGE I stayed at !Xaus Lodge as I like to support community owned properties and wanted to meet the San. It's also the only place in the park for guided walking, a must for me. Walks are included in the overnight rate and

are not too long or tiring. In addition to afternoon drives we did a night drive, which is highly recommended. We spotted several African wild cats, hyena, bat-eared foxes, spring hare and spotted eagle owls. !Xaus is offering special rates for South African residents: **R2 500 pp** sharing, including all meals and activities, until the end of February 2021 (when it becomes R2 700 pp). **021 701 7860**, xauslodge.co.za



More about the San

- A recent study in *Nature* magazine said that the Khoisan have mitochondrial DNA markers that indicate they're from the world's most ancient human lineage, dating back an amazing 200 000 years.
- Maasdorp's †Khomani San is just one of many distinct groups. It's okay to use 'bushmen' as a general term but San or Khoisan is better. When meeting San it's polite to ask for their subgroup identity.
- While San rock art is expressive, Khoisan languages are spoken not written. When San need to write down a Khoisan word they use † and ! signs to show a click consonant sound.
- The San are not only renowned trackers, they are specialists in persistence hunting, and can literally run their prey to exhaustion.
- Traditional hunters kill animals with a bow and arrow, or a spear tipped with a poison made from beetle larvae.

PHOTOGRAPHY DENIS COSTELLO, JANIEK ALHEID, JACQUES MARAIS