

WALK of FAME

On an epic cross-country circuit, Oscars of the Wild were awarded for the most memorable park experiences.

By Denis Costello

When South Africans talk about adventure holidays, the Kruger park exerts a gravitational force that is hard to escape. Have you seen the wild dogs near Skukuza? Have you done the Mphongolo Trail? And what about the Pafuri area, tucked up in the borderlands? I knew there were other parks in South Africa to be explored, but there was never time.

I decided to make time. With some holidays saved and maps consulted, it looked like I could manage eight parks in four weeks, so a mega road trip beckoned, some 6500 km through seven provinces. True to form, I would start in Kruger and make my way from there on an anticlockwise route. Travelling on empty 'R' roads that run against the grain of the major highways, I linked up national parks from Augrabies Falls to Mountain Zebra. ▶



THE *Wild*
PARKS
CHALLENGE

Marakele National Park is the setting for an unforgettable drive.

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Eight parks in four weeks,
a mega road trip beckoned:
6500 km through seven provinces.

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The journey was broken in farm-supply towns such as Vryburg in North West Province and Hanover in Northern Cape, their hotels an echo of better times.

The beauty of a road trip is how the habitat variations unfold in subtle degrees. At Mopani Camp in Kruger, I spotted the first baobab tree. A day later I was in a forest of them. In the arid northern Cape I pulled over to examine an artful sociable weaver nest on a telegraph pole, not realising it would be the first of hundreds to come.

The biggest revelation was the other parks are not just smaller versions of Kruger. Yes, there are some constants, such as cheeky vervets and busy guinea fowl, and knowledgeable guides in each, but every park has distinctive characteristics and endemic species. South Africa is known as the rainbow nation for its diversity of peoples but the expression can equally apply to its natural attractions.

Now I know that Kruger is but one star among many.

Most scenic park drive

In Marakele National Park, the road to Lenong Lookout climbs amid thornveld browsed by mountain reedbeek and klipspringer. It passes beneath dramatic sandstone bluffs, and winds to a 2100 m peak on Kranskop. Cape vultures ride the warm updrafts, while views of the Waterberg massif disappear into the haze. It's even better on the way back, facing into the sunset. What a drive.



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From the valley floor you'll make your way up and up, to the top of Kranskop.



BALANCING ACT
The rock formation known as Policeman's Helmet in the Drakensberg.

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Finest hike

Not just my favourite walk of this tour, but perhaps the best anywhere in South Africa is the trail to Policeman's Helmet, a rock feature in Royal Natal National Park, through grasslands, tree ferns and flowering proteas. Lasting three hours, it was perfect for an afternoon outing and I had it completely to myself.

SCOTT RAMSAY



Cheetah cubs on the scene of a springbok kill.

Best wildlife sighting

Naturally there are plenty of candidates in this category, and not just the big beasts. On the Mphongolo Backpack Trail, it was fascinating to watch a spider hunting wasp prey. On a dawn drive in Kruger, a pack of African wild dogs hunted impala under the noses of giraffe. But the standout was finding a cheetah with her two cubs at a springbok kill in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, an encounter missing only a voice-over from David Attenborough.

The Kgalagadi delivers dramatic encounters just calling out for a voice-over by David Attenborough.

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THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS
It's a race for survival when a cheetah sprints after a springbok.





An unforgettable visit from an elephant at Pafuri Walking Trails Camp.

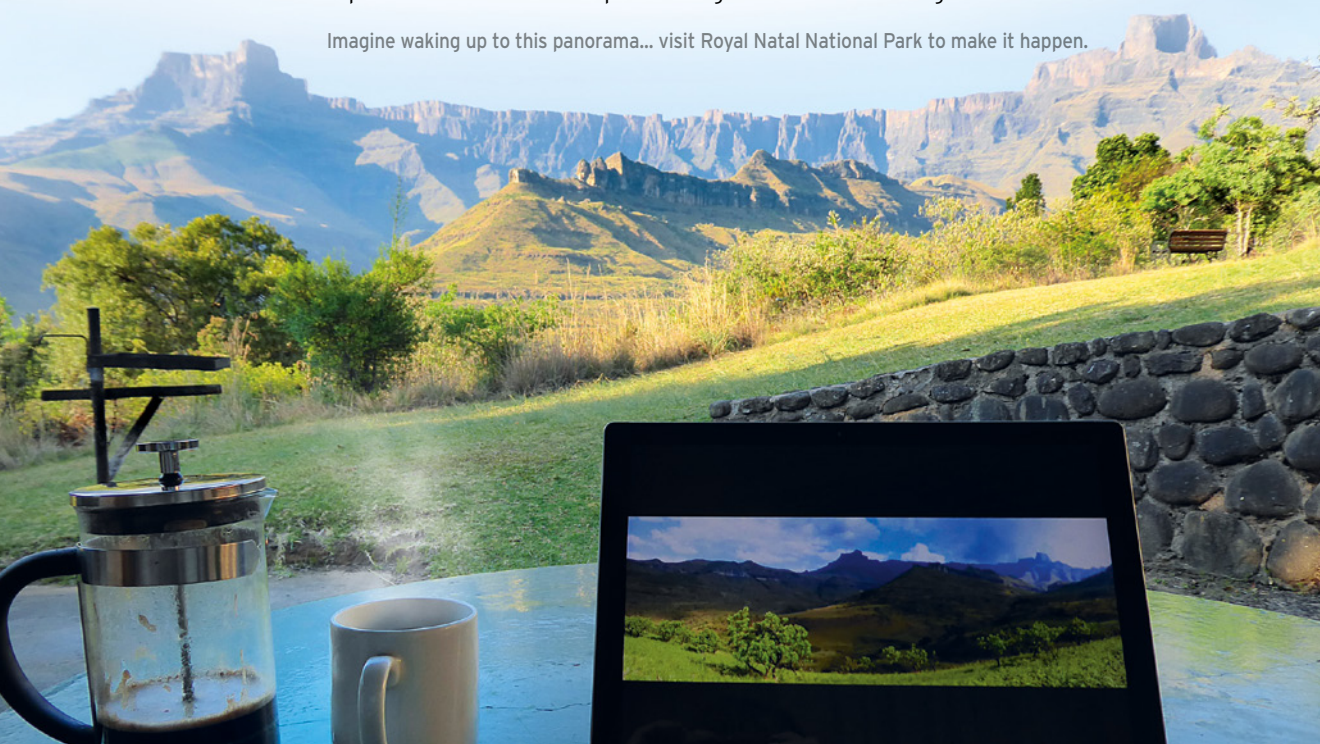
Closest camp **wildlife encounter**

Camp life is immersive, from flocks of red-headed finches and cheeky ground squirrels in the Kgalagadi to a pair of civets sitting politely by the braai stand in Mopani Camp in Kruger. For sheer drama, unfenced camps notch it up a level as proved by the elephant that came to feed on ana trees in Pafuri Walking Trails camp in the Makuleke Concession of northern Kruger. Everyone gave him plenty of space.

5 Best **breakfast view**

Every park probably has a candidate, from the pans of the Kgalagadi to the baobabs and sandstone koppies of Mapungubwe. But the winner has to be the majestic Amphitheatre of Royal Natal National Park. A panorama that lifts the spirits as high as the Drakensberg.

Imagine waking up to this panorama... visit Royal Natal National Park to make it happen.



A chessboard used by British soldiers more than 100 years ago.

Top **history monument**

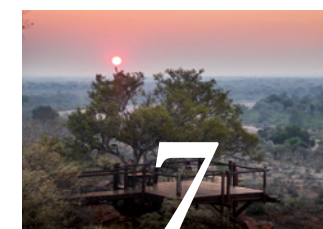
The museum and ancient stone ruins at Mapungubwe are amazing, but my best moment from history was more recent. During the South African War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War) the area around Mountain Zebra National Park in the Eastern Cape was contested and today contains the graves of soldiers who died in the conflict. Park rangers lead climbs to the top of Salpeterkop mountain, where a surprise awaits: a chessboard neatly incised in the rock by British soldiers, who played against neighbouring lookout posts using signals.

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www.wildcard.co.za



Stunning sunsets await in Golden Gate (top), Augrabies (middle) and Mapungubwe (bottom).



Coolest **sunset spot**

There's no shortage of candidates for this one. Perhaps sitting amid the cooling mist and soothing sounds of the chasm in Augrabies Falls National Park? Or the deck of the Golden Gate Highlands Hotel, in the eponymous Free State park, with a grandstand view of the splendid Brandwag Buttress which is a giant, multi-hued geology lesson. In Mapungubwe, when the heat of the day subsides, it's as if the whole park exhales and relaxes, especially at the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers, with its choice of viewpoints on wooden decks. As the sun dipped, light filtered through the sandy haze and reflected from the waters, where elephant, cattle and buffalo waded.

Lions are regular visitors to !Xaus Lodge (see page 32).



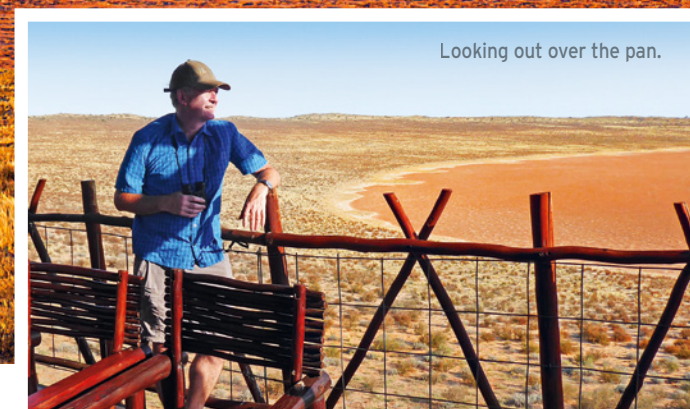
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Most alarming **wake-up call**

At Bontle camp in Marakele National Park, the tents have doors with glass panes, and at five in the morning I heard a sharp tapping. I looked out to find a yellow-billed hornbill picking a fight with his reflection, a battle that was to go on for 30 minutes. But the winner is the handsome lion in residence for the duration of my stay at !Xaus Lodge in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Nothing says you're in Africa like the sound of a lion cough on the other side of canvas.

Nothing says you're in Africa like the sound of a lion cough on the other side of canvas.

DESERT DREAMS
!Xaus Lodge in Kgalagadi looks out over a vast pan frequented by wildlife.



Looking out over the pan.

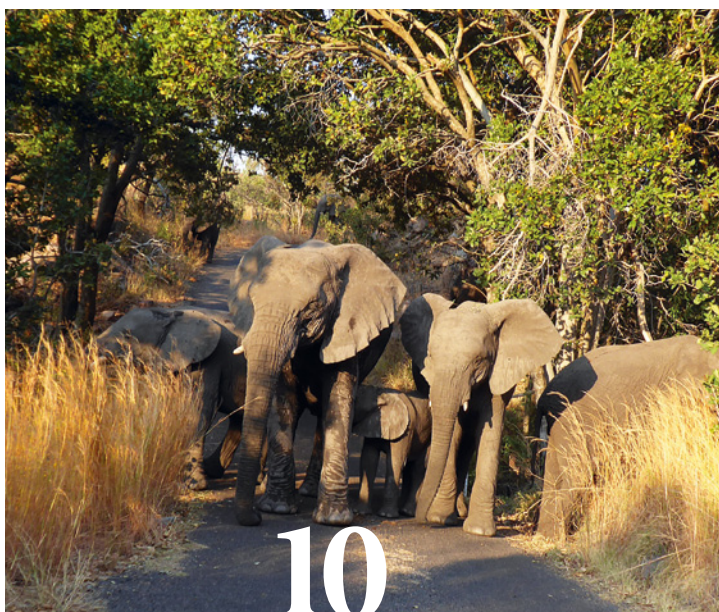


ROAD TRIP

A picture of colour: the friendly crafters at Royal Natal National Park.

Best craft shopping

At !Xaus Lodge in Kgalagadi, the local San community shows traditional skills in working with local materials including knobthorn, seed pods and ostrich shells. For sheer colour and friendliness, it's impossible to beat the basket weavers at Royal Natal National Park.



This is one road block you won't mind: elephants in Marakele National Park.

Biggest wildlife road block

It was endlessly fascinating to see how animals ignore humans in vehicles. In Marakele, I met a herd of mother and calf elephants feeding by the roadside. With no way to pass, it was time to turn off the engine and listen to their munching for an hour. They rightly reminded us it's their place and we are but visitors. 🐾

Self-drive tips

- In the parks, many roads are dirt but well graded. Routes that are 4x4 only are clearly signed.
- Don't be tempted to drive non-stop in parks. Pull up at a waterhole, turn off the engine and just sit.
- Self-driving in parks can be productive, but it's more relaxing to go on the guided drives from rest camps.
- All of the parks mentioned offer guided walks, a great way to recover from a long drive and get close to the smaller natural wonders.

BUDGET

- To keep costs down, pack a cooler box and take the self-catering option.
- For accommodation costs and booking, see kznwildlife.com for Royal Natal and sanparks.org for all other parks mentioned.
- On a multi-park trip, a *Wild Card* quickly pays for itself.
- Allow R4 000 for fuel for a 6500 km trip by sedan.
- Make sure to budget for activities such as cheetah tracking in Mountain Zebra (R400 a person) or the cultural tour in Mapungubwe (R260 a person).

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