! KGALAGADI

THE KGALAGADI HAS COUNTLESS STORIES TO TELL THOSE WHO STOP AND LISTEN. MELISSA SIEBERT **AND PHOTOGRAPHER** KARIN SCHERMBRUCKER **JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF THIS EVOCATIVE LANDSCAPE'S STORY.**

BIG SKY COUNTRY Giraffes lope through the veld ahead of clouds bringing rain – a rare occurrence.

Silence talks

If you stand, barefoot, amidst the rolling red sand dunes of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, which forms the Kalahari's southwestern tip, you can hear volumes. The loud hush of 40-degree heat fills the day, backed by the ubiquitous twitter of scaly-feathered finches and the wind rising from the south in the afternoons. At night, the place comes alive: jackals and hyenas cackle, lions send forth their sensuous groans, barking geckos click their mating calls. If you listen harder, you might hear the voices of the people who once roamed this ancient land: the Bushmen, as they prefer to be called, nomadic hunter-gatherers whose descendants now take you tracking in the Kgalagadi and are slowly reclaiming their culture there.

Through their eyes and ears, and endless stories, you may know this place.

"You must listen and believe," says Topi Kruiper, a Bushman tracker and son of traditional leader Dawid Kruiper. "That is what the elders told us when they took us into the bush."

You must also look. Carefully. Intently. The Kgalagadi can surprise, even fool, you. Its nearly 3.8 million hectares of arid savannah, dunes and grasslands, straddling South Africa and Botswana, appear almost empty to some eyes. Appearances deceive.

"The silence and the vastness, these are what makes the Kgalagadi special," says Christine du Plessis, SANParks People and Conservation Officer based at the park's southern gateway, Twee Rivieren.

"It's unique. The people are unique, the Mier and the Khomani San. It's a place of extremes, extreme temperatures and little rain. It's amazing anything can survive here and yet we have all kinds of life. Some people can't deal with the silence, but you get breath-stopping moments here – if your eyes are open."

Christine speaks passionately of her work with the Mier and the Khomani San communities, of environmental education workshops, field-guide and biodiversity training, of park efforts to promote co-operation and integration. "A lot of the Khomani San have died," she says wistfully. "There are few people here who speak the original language and few elders left. We're losing their knowledge."

"YOU MUST LISTEN AND BELIEVE. THAT IS WHAT THE ELDERS TOLD US WHEN THEY TOOK US INTO THE BUSH."

To the heart

We head north towards the promise of gathering some of that knowledge from the Bushmen trackers at !Xaus Lodge, the one luxury lodge inside the park, co-owned by the Khomani San and Mier peoples. It's symbolically located on the boundary between their allocated halves of the Ae!Hai Kalahari Heritage Park on a heart-shaped pan (!Xaus means 'heart' in Nama).

Driving along the dry Auob riverbed, the Kgalagadi's name rings true: Place of Great Thirst. The Auob River flows about once every 10 years with good rains; its sister river to the east, the Nossob, has flowed only twice in the past century.

It is midday and the dry-adapted, highly nocturnal game of the Kgalagadi are scarce. We pass a lone wildebeest seeking shade under a camelthorn tree and, later, herds of wildebeest and springbok nibbling the strip of green grass running down the centre of the riverbed, where water is buried. Water is precious here – the park gets only 150 to 350 mm of rain a year on average – and the 80 or so boreholes are critical. Their names all tell stories.

Place names like Monro, Dalkeith and Craig Lockhardt attest to the presence of Scotsman Roger 'Malkop' Jackson, who surveyed the region after World War I and opened it up to farmers. Leeuwdril is where a desert dweller named Matthys came face to face with a lion at the top of a dune and quaked

HOT STUFF Gemsbok are specially adapted to deal with the heat. Their blood flows through a network of veins in the sinuses, where it is cooled when the animal breathes.

LEFT: Nossob is the best area to spot the 450-odd lions of the Kgalagadi CENTRE: The dirt roads in the park attract 4x4 enthusiasts from all over. RIGHT: This harsh landscape produces great beauty.

LEFT: When the moon rises over the Kalahari, nocturnal animals such as jackal come out. CENTRE: !Xaus Lodge is perched on dunes that overlook a pan where animals come to drink. RIGHT: Pieter Retief (far right) and Elvis Swartz (crouching centre) of !Xaus Lodge show their guests tracks.

LEFT: Ground squirrels screen themselves from the fierce sun by holding their tails over their heads. CENTRE: Hoodia was used by the Bushmen to stave off hunger. RIGHT: Tracks in the sand tell a story if you know how to read the signs.

in his boots. Jan se Draai is where a trekking Nama who was venturing into the Kalahari decided to turn back. The land was presumably too harsh, too unforgiving. Other stories, other names accompany us as we search for the Kamqua picnic site where the !Xaus Lodge people are meeting us to guide us over the 90 dunes and 30 kilometres to the lodge.

An hour and a half out of Twee Rivieren, along the barely trafficked road, we find the !Xaus vehicle, its welcoming driver Arne Muller and the only other guests, David Barlow and Agustin Puente, from London. As a gemsbok, the icon of the Kgalagadi, flashes over a dune, we take up the rear of our small caravan.

The dunes before and around us are like a rollicking sea. There's a track, but it feels like surfing. Our Pajero is in its element. The colour is startling. Iron-oxide covering each sand granule leaches out in some places so sand is a lighter colour, turning peach or golden. But here the dunes are deep orange. On their crests, 360-degree views. "One of the world's last pristine wildernesses," brochures say, and you can believe it.

Up and over the umpteenth dune and there, suddenly, is !Xaus, a gathering of what at first looks like 12 ochre, stone teepees on a slope overlooking the heart-shaped pan, with more dunes in the distance. Some cheerful Mier women (who comprise most of the hospitality staff) and Elvis Swartz, a young Bushman tracker, help us with our bags, offloading them onto the expansive wooden deck surrounding the lodge. We stare off to infinity. "Mind-blowing, isn't it?" asks lodge manager Pieter Retief, a towering man seemingly dusted with ruddy sand.

Life in the soil

This is not traditional Big Five country, but there is so much to see and to learn. You must give yourself over to it.

We watch the moon rise over the red dunes. A night drive yields small, poignant scenarios of predators chasing prey: African wildcats after spinghares, a spotted eagle owl pouncing on a mouse, lone steenbok avoiding being eaten. Later the hoot of a barn owl patrolling the lodge, back and forth, is the only sound, with the wind. Up early in the morning for a walk, dozens of bats swoop around us in the dark.

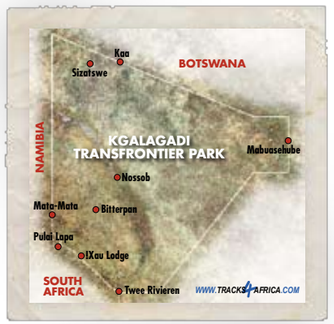
As the sky lightens, Agustin is pensive: "This is a place to dream, to get your mind and body in order."

Pieter and Elvis drive us into the dunes for a walk – the best way to know this place. "Watch out for the most dangerous game," says Pieter, meaning Cape cobras and puff adders (see page 40), and fills us in on the miraculous adaptations life makes here. "With very hot summers and very cold winters, 80 to 90 per cent of the biomass is underground. Life is under the soil."

Surface water is scarce in all of the Kalahari, which runs from north of the Gariep River to the Equator.

"All the animals living here are adapted. The gemsbok, especially, has an amazing cooling system in its body and will often bypass water to graze. The wildebeest is least adapted and needs the waterholes, the boreholes. Predators like lion can go without water for days because they get moisture from meat."

Mostly we walk in silence over the red sand, stopping when our guides point with their *knopkieries* and crouch to show us the small things. The spoor of wildcats, jackals, cheetah, hyena, gemsbok, spiders, scorpions, owls and mice. The silk-lined trap of a buckspoor spider; the hole to a termite compound; a peeled branch which a raptor has chosen for a perch.



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In 1999, a land claim settlement gave the Mier and Khomani San/Bushman communities each 25 000 hectares in the newly established Ae!Hai Kalahari Heritage Park, on the Kgalagadi's southwestern rim. The Mier – subsistence farmers who moved into the area in the 19th century from the Cape – and the Khomani San, there for eons, were displaced when the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park opened in 1931, and the Kgalagadi's Botswana side, the former Gemsbok National Park, opened in 1938. Today, in spite of a tangle of protocols and differences in communication and decision-making styles, the park and the communities are working towards "rekindling their culture," says Christine du Plessis, SANParks People and Conservation Officer.

TEATIME The red dunes make a spectacular setting for any meal.

Elvis digs like a porcupine ("that's how I learned to dig, watching them") and unearths various roots used in Bushmen medicine. *Ghamma ghou* (devil's claw) and gemsbok cucumber, food and moisture sources for the game as well. Pieter tells of the value of the shepherd's tree (*witgatboom*), how its shade can reduce the heat by 20 degrees, how delicious its fruits are in a drink, how both the Bushmen and the Trekboere made 'coffee' from its roots.

We inspect a sociable weaver's nest, a communal, conical thatched structure in a thorn tree, home to 300 weavers, an owl and a couple of pygmy falcons – and a hungry snake on occasion. We see burrows other creatures share, including an antbear's hole shared with a hyena.

The Bushmen know this, too. To survive in this land, you share.

"THE BUSHMEN DON'T TEACH NATURE; WE ARE THE DOOR TO NATURE, ITS INTERPRETERS."

It's rain

The rains come, in a slight drizzle, the next morning. Tokar 'Topi' Kruiper is here to guide us, along with Elvis again. Topi learned tracking from his father, oom Dawid, who learned it from his father, Regopstaan Kruiper, who learned it from his father before him. Topi is now teaching Elvis, his stepson.

"*This* is my school," Elvis says proudly, as we step into the dunes again.

The rain has made the spoor harder to see, but not for Topi. He stops on the dunes every metre or so, offering a litany of information in hushed Afrikaans. "A gemsbok was lying here," he says of a slight depression in the sand. "Here's several hyenas walking together; they were being naughty! This is an aardwolf, a scorpion, here a gemsbok started running …"

"Most people always want to see the bodies of the animals," says Pieter. "When the Bushmen go out, they want to see the tracks. They read the sand like a newspaper, and they see more action than we'll ever see."

Topi confirms this: "*Die stories op die sand* – that is what I love here. Nature's got a lot to teach us. The older you get, the more you learn.

"The way I lay the table for guests to come here is that I want them to go away wilderness-orientated. They must know the smallest insect tells you a story. Their hearts must take this with them wherever they go – you must protect nature and the earth.

"The Bushmen don't teach nature; we are the door to nature, its interpreters. Both of us, nature and the Bushmen, must be conserved."

Back at the lodge, while Agustin is racing up and down the deck in delight at spotting several yellow mongoose, Topi tells us a story handed down through the centuries about a conniving jackal and an owl. "We are the jackal and the jackal is us," Topi says, laughing.

The story ends; it is time to leave, back over the 90 sand dunes. We are reminded of what Pieter said upon our arrival, overlooking the heart-shaped pan: "No journey to the heart is an easy one."

Into lion country

Without Topi and Elvis to focus us on the small things, we become obsessed with seeing lion and head for 'lion country', Nossob Camp. We reach it after about five hours on the road, not seeing any on the way. A few herds of gemsbok, like masked Kabuki dancers; giraffe sleepwalking through the veld; dunes covered with driedoring and old tsamma melons, a vital water source when ripe; fields of poisonous pink nerine lilies and the yellow blooms of devil's thorn. But no lions.

At Nossob it pours, and pours – 54 millimetres of rain in one night and morning. The roads are rivers. Section Ranger Charles Trennery is delighted. His main concern is making sure there is enough water in the park, tending to the boreholes in his region.

"I love the wildness," he says, cleaning up his desk in his office perched at the top of the camp. "It's one of the last few undeveloped places. Most people who come here come just to *be* in this place."

On the way back to Twee Rivieren, we again look for lion. It seems all the other guests in the park have seen them. Wish granted, not far from where Charles said we'd find them, just past Kaspersdraai. A pride of 10: two males, four females and four youngsters, scent marking, sleeping, the young ones pulling pranks. Glorious.

At Twee Rivieren, Park Manager Nico van der Walt appraises the Kgalagadi's value. "It's the remoteness and tranquillity, a true wilderness area," he says. "You can drive around and feel alone. It's the small things – the click of a ground gecko, a scorpion catching a moth, an ant pulling a piece of dry grass – that make you so aware of life.

"To have such a big conservation area like this under management is a good thing. So much of what we do impacts globally. I see these conservation areas as a link to human survival."

Our last night in the park we spend with the Wilderness Leadership School, a Durban-based non-profit organisation running wilderness trails around the country, walking and sleeping in the dunes with two Bushmen guides. "We have the same ethos as the Bushmen. We live deliberately on the land, as they do," says trail guide Richard Gordon as we drive out to the dune we'll sleep on. "To experience the Kgalagadi with people whose ancestors were born here – they can immerse you in this place."

Camp is a few sleeping bags under tarpaulins, a small fire and a few coolers of food. Topi is back with us, along with a younger tracker, Dion Noubitsen. Wilderness School's Lee Dormer and Doric Holmes complete our motley band.

After supper, with a thick grey sky and dark descending, I am on first watch, part of the experience. I shine my torch and look for eyes, green lion ones, especially. Thirty minutes pass, half of my watch, when the fire fizzles out. Almost simultaneously, I hear a moan that sounds like lion.

"They're all going to die," I shudder, looking at my comrades' sleeping bodies. After a few minutes of kicking the coals and shuffling the unco-operative wood around, I am saved by Topi. He leads me to get some kindling in the bush and we get the fire going again (or he does, mostly, blowing on the coals). He tells me I heard an ostrich, not a lion. We definitely live through the night.

Driving out the next morning, we find oom Dawid Kruiper, Topi's father and the Khomani San's leader with friends around a fire. Born in the park more than 70 years ago, Dawid is very wily. Holding forth under a camelthorn, he waves towards a dune in the distance.

"I want to make that dune my special place, to live here and bring the children here," he says. "It's a place where you can heal your soul."

WELL SPOTTED Giraffe are usually seen near Mata Mata.

"It's one of the last few undeveloped places. Most people who come here come just to *be* in this place."

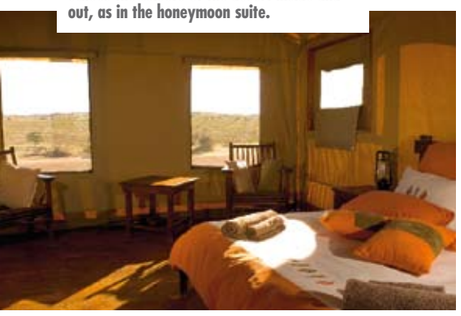
SWEET – NOT! The devil's thorn or *duwweltjie* has pretty flowers, but painful thorns.

VELDSKOOL Spend a night in the veld with the Wilderness Leadership School.

PIT STOP Rain brings unexpected bounty to the Kgalagadi – for animals and visitors alike. These lionesses enjoy water pooled on the road.

TOP: The deck at !Xaus Lodge overlooks the heart-shaped pan.

ABOVE AND BELOW: The Kalahari Tented Camp is 3 km from Mata Mata but feels a world apart. Situated on a dune, the camp echoes the colours of the desert inside and out, as in the honeymoon suite.



GREAT TREK Game drives from !Xaus Lodge are led by an expert tracker.

TRIP PLANNER

GETTING THERE

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is at the tip of the Northern Cape, about 260 km from Upington, 1 090 km from Johannesburg and 1 075 km from Cape Town. If you don't want to drive so far, you can fly to Upington and hire a vehicle. The park's dirt roads are bermed and a 4x4 or high-clearance vehicle is recommended. Trailers are not allowed on some roads.

You don't need a passport unless you're planning to exit the park into Namibia or Botswana. All immigration controls are at Twee Rivieren and you have to spend at least two days inside the park before leaving South Africa.

WEATHER

There are three seasons: hot and dry (September to January), hot and wet (February to May) or cold and dry (June to August). The best time to go depends on your preference for heat or cold. Temperatures get into the 40s during summer and drop to -10°C on winter nights.

ACCOMMODATION

On the South African side of the park, you have nine options: three main camps with cottages and campsites (Twee Rivieren, Mata Mata and Nossob) and six unfenced wilderness camps with cabins or tents (Kalahari Tented Camp, Bitterpan, Gharagab, Kieliekrankie, Urikaruus and Grootkolk). The Botswana side of the park offers only camping. Prices range from R130 a night for two people for a campsite to R790 for a desert tent.

SA Reservations 012-428-9111, www.sanparks.org

Botswana Reservations +267-686-1265, dwnp@gov.bw

Travelling time between camps is long. The closest wilderness camp to Twee Rivieren is Kieliekrankie, 1,5 hours away. Nossob is 4,5 hours from Twee Rivieren and Grootkolk up north 7,5 hours.

!Xaus Lodge offers luxury accommodation in two-bed chalets, all-inclusive, at R2 500 a person a day. Discounts available for SADC residents. Reservations 021-701-7860, info@xauslodge.co.za, www.xauslodge.co.za

ACTIVITIES

Game drives and nature walks can be booked at the three main camps, but not necessarily every day. Various 4x4 trails can be booked at Twee Rivieren, including the four-day 214 km Nossob Eco Trail.

On the Botswana side, 4x4 trails include the Mabuasehube Wilderness Trail and the Wilderness Trail from Polentswa.

Wilderness Leadership School has started trails in the Kgalagadi. Contact Richard Gordon 082-331-9865, richard@earthethics.co.za, www.wildernesstrails.org.za

There are swimming pools in Twee Rivieren and Kalahari Tented Camp, Mata Mata and Nossob.

BE PREPARED

Bring all your food, wood and water (it's brackish in most of the park). Twee Rivieren, Nossob and Mata Mata have small shops selling basic commodities, but only Twee Rivieren has debit/credit card facilities and a restaurant. Fuel is available in the three main camps, which take petrol cards, too.

Printable park map www.sanparks.org/parks/kgalagadi/images/maps/full_parkmap08.jpg

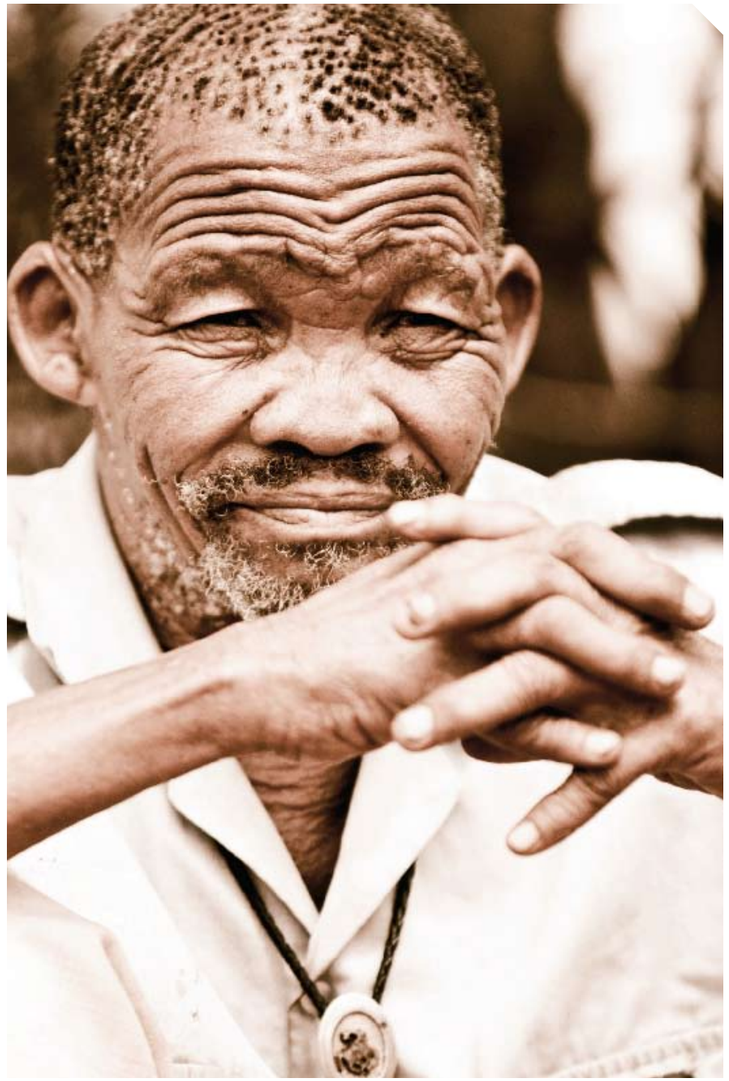
Get a Wild Card and swing through the gate without the hassle of paying daily conservation fees. Kgalagadi forms part of the Arid Cluster, along with Richtersveld Transfrontier Park and Augrabies Falls, Mokala and Namaqua National Parks. The All Cluster Wild Card provides access around the country. **Turn to page 60 for more information and an application form.**

KGALAGADI mystic people

"Nature's got a lot to teach us. The older you get, the more you learn."
TOPI KRUIPER, TRACKER

Descendants of Southern Africa's 'first people', small groups of hunter-gatherers, the Khomani San have lived in the Kalahari for thousands of years. There are roughly 300 of them left; they belong to the wider Khoi-San or Bushmen peoples, numbering about 100 000 in southern Africa.

The Kgalagadi Bushmen now live outside the park, but a 1999 land claim settlement restored some of their land for traditional and conservational use and allocated other park areas for cultural and symbolic practices. Though much of their culture and language have been lost, many still retain an uncannily intimate and insightful relationship with nature.

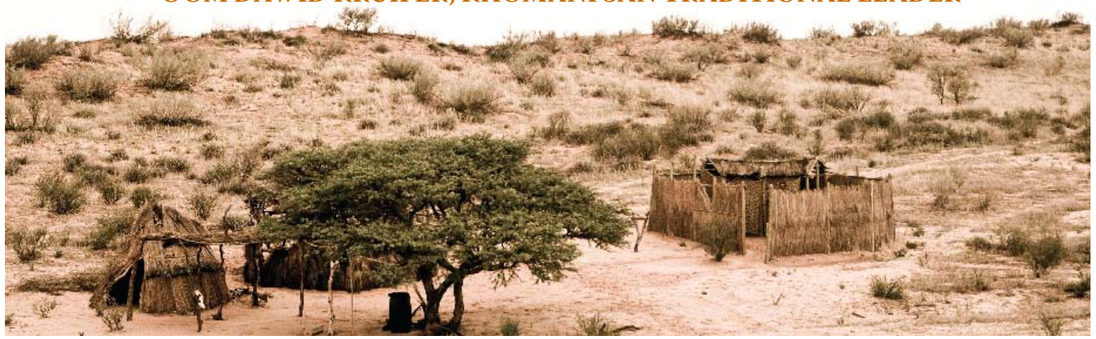


LEFT Tokar 'Topi' Kruiper, one of the best trackers in the park.

RIGHT Oom Dawid Kruiper, Topi's father and son of the legendary Regopstaan Kruiper, a former tracker and now the Khomani San's traditional leader.

BELOW The craft village at !Xaus Lodge where Bushmen make crafts and preserve traditional skills.

"I WANT TO MAKE THAT DUNE MY SPECIAL PLACE AND BRING THE CHILDREN HERE – THIS PLACE IS FREEDOM FOR ME."
– OOM DAWID KRUIPER, KHOMANI SAN TRADITIONAL LEADER



"Tracking is in their DNA ... they almost become the animal, and display a connectedness to the earth which we have lost."

– DORIC HOLMES, GUIDE, WILDERNESS LEADERSHIP SCHOOL

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bushman necklaces and bracelets are crafted from bone, wood, ostrich eggshell, horn and porcupine quills. **Oom Dawid entertains friends and family on a dune in their ancestral lands.** The root of devil's claw, or *ghamma ghou*, is used for a variety of medicinal purposes, usually boiled as a tea. **Topi Kruiper, in his rooikat *xai* (loincloth), leads a tracking expedition in the Ae!Hai Kalahari Heritage Park.** Topi can get even the most stubborn fire burning again – for cooking, craftmaking or protection against predators. **A sculpted piece of camelthorn wood is cleaned before it becomes the top of a Bushman hanging mobile.** Sanna Kruiper is one of the Khomani San working at the !Xaus craft village.

We build our environment to fit in with us; the Bushmen fit in with the environment. They are great conservationists.

– PIETER RETIEF, MANAGER, !XAUS LODGE

Andre Jacobs makes traditional bows and arrows at the !Xaus craft village and, with a little persuasion, offers visitors archery lessons.

"I FIRST START WITH THE SPOOR – I READ THE SAND. THE SPOOR LEADS YOU TO THE PLANTS, WHAT THE ANIMALS ARE EATING. THE SPOOR TELLS YOU IF IT'S A DAY OR NIGHT ANIMAL, HOW FAST IT'S MOVING ... I LEARN SOMETHING NEW EVERY DAY."

– TOPI KRUIPER

Push me and I'll admit the Kgalagadi is my favourite park. I spent many days at Nossob working with a friend of mine on meerkats when I was at university. Since then I've grabbed every assignment going to get back there, so you can imagine how tough it was to commission Melissa Siebert and Karin Schermbrucker for this story. Considering the words and pictures, I'm glad I did. They've captured the soul of the Kgalagadi just as I remember it. – Ed. 🐾