

**Cars and people:**

Isuzu 280 Turbo Diesel pick-up (Eduard and Leon)  
Nissan Hardbody Double Cab 3.0 Turbo Diesel (Willie)  
Mitsubishi Pajero 3.5 v6 Petrol (Anton and Arno)

**Photos at:**

[http://www.flickr.com/photos/anton\\_matthee/sets/72157607628674505/detail/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/anton_matthee/sets/72157607628674505/detail/)

**The story:**

Our journey started with an idea to try and cross the Sua Pan from West to East in 4 wheel drive vehicles. Sua pan is one of the two pans that make up the [Makgadikgadi Pans](#) and is also sometimes referred to as Sowa Pan. The pan crossing was meticulously planned by using satellite photographs and a dry channel were identified for the crossing. Our base camp would be at Kubu Island which is in the middle of the Makgadikgadi pans. The Makgadikgadi pans are considered as the largest salt pans in the world.

The bush feeling hit in all earnest at Khama Rhino Sanctuary in Botswana. Khama Rhino Sanctuary has +- 30 Rhinos and the community run facility breed the animals before they are placed back into the wild. We left Khama on the morning of 25 Sept 2008 and headed for our base camp at Kubu Island on the shoreline of Sua pan (translated as Salt pan from Setswana). We arrived in the vicinity of Kubu at about 12:00 on 25 Sept 2008 and made a decision to use the afternoon to drive around before settling in at Kubu Island.

We found that the surface was quite hard around the edges of the pan and an idea started taking shape that a visit to the [Degree Confluence S21E26](#) might be possible. This was completely unplanned and the last time that anybody in the group looked at the status of this point it was still "incomplete". A sense of adventure filled the air and we started driving towards the point. The pan's surface started getting progressively softer as we travelled into the middle of the pan towards S21E26. Before 14:00 all three vehicles were severely stuck in the Cotton clay that lurks under the hard salty crust of Sua pan.

Plans were made, plans were changed, recoveries done, rest breaks taken and further plans made but to no avail. The cars remained stuck. The group decided to call it a day and pitched camp at about 19:00 on the pan. A fire was lit and plans were made regarding the menu for the night. At about 20:00 radio contact was made with another group that were in the vicinity (Ons Jaco van der Merwe was deel van hierdie groep).

The group that was in the vicinity was led by Thorsten and Louwrens so let call them TL's group. TL's group volunteered their help to recover us. We broke up camp and waited. At about 21:00 Louwrens arrived in a Land Cruiser bakkie with some people on the back but unfortunately got stuck as well. Several attempts were made to push the car out of its stuck position but to no avail. Louwrens' highlift jack showed promise but

after several attempts to throw the Land Cruiser out of its tracks this was abandoned. The highlift was used on my Pajero and we managed to throw the car out of the tracks to a limited degree. After about 2 hours (23:00) we halted the recovery attempts and set up camp again. We were dirty, tired, hungry and thirsty.

An Isuzu in TL's group also tried to approach us during the recovery but got stuck about two kilometers from us. Some of TL's group walked to another vehicle that took them back to their HQ on Kubu. Louwrens, Jaco, Travis and Mike stayed with us. A fire was lit and Eduard "braaied" a Bloubul steak with some "braaibroodtjies". The group had a nice meal and debriefed each other on the day's adventures. This carried on till the early hours of the morning and a most enjoyable "kuier" was had by all.

Some of the people slept in cars other in tents and the rest under the magnificent star-filled sky of a near new moon on Sua pan. Sleep did not come easy as everyone was anxious to get the cars un-stuck. The chilly wind over the barren pans did not help to make restless sleepers less restless. During the night a gust also blew some coals onto two camping chairs that caught alight with some spectacular fireball effects. I think it is fair to say that the guys that slept on the "grondseil" got quite cold throughout the night.

Sunrise saw people with renewed energy and new plans. The previous night's efforts were continued by using the highlift on the Pajero. We used a ground sheet under the wheels of the Pajero to give it some traction on the snot-like cotton clay that was a bit more stable as result of the lower water level (same as tide shifts) in the morning. After a throw or two and a healthy push the Pajero was free. Louwrens' volunteered their recovery gear as well making the total length of the recovery strap more than 150m. This was necessary in order for the car doing the recovery to be able to be on solid ground whilst doing the snatch recovery of the other cars that was bogged down in the soft mud.

Eduard was recovered first and then Willie's car. One could smell the Pajero's clutch and for a short while we thought that we had further troubles but the smell subsided after leaving it to cool down a bit. Doubt fill a few of the bystanders minds (including mine) about the possibility that the Pajero would be too light to recover/snatch Louwrens' Land Cruiser bakkie as it was lying on its chassis in very soft mud. Anton took a healthy run-up and snatched the Land Cruiser from its "mooring". The snatch was so violent that one of the front tyres of the Land Cruiser got pulled of the rim but Louwrens was standing on solid ground again. Louwrens quickly fitted the spare wheel and we were all good to go.

After collecting all of the recovery gear and bits and pieces that were lying around we headed for HQ. The glorious sight of Kubu Island and its idyllic camp sites under the large Baobab trees greeted tired and dirty travellers. A well deserved rest was taken by the group after seeing off Louwrens and his group. I hope Louwrens found the bottle KVV that I hid in his jacket!!!

The energy seeped back into the group during the day and the S21E26 confluence lay shallow in our thoughts. It was decided that another attempt to reach the point is a

must. At least we know where not to drive this time. Alarms were set for 04:00 the next morning and the plan would be to drive as far as possible and then to walk the rest of the way to S21E26.

We left the camp at Kubu Island at about 05:00 on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> Sept 2008 and headed out on the tracks that run into the pans. The tracks stopped at a point and we had to revert to walking the rest of the way to the confluence. Three liters of water per person was mandatory and the walk started. Twelve kilometers of walking rewarded us with beautiful sights in all directions. The thick salt crust cracked under our feet as the group moved along and mandatory rest and water breaks were announced after every 15 minutes of walking.

Remnants of the flamingos that congregate in this area was seen on a few occasions in the form of old eggs and flamingo tracks. It is good to know that all signs of any man made tracks and footsteps will be eradicated from the pan after the rainy season starts in October. The pans start to fill up with water in October to form the largest breeding ground for Lesser and Greater Flamingos in Southern Africa with over 100 000 birds being counted during some years.

The glorious event of standing on the S21E26 confluence created an air of excitement amongst the group members. Photos were taken and a feeling of achievement were evident in the middle of Sua pan.

Back at Kubu there were ten tired legs and five happy faces. We achieved what we set out to do although S21E26 was not our original plan. The general feeling was that not even a pan crossing over Sua pan would have been so rewarding as what we just did.

That evening we slept like babies.....

Moral of the story: Sometimes plans change for the better.

On the way back to South Africa we were informed that the point was already discovered by a previous group. Despite the fact that we were not the first visitors the group agreed unanimously that it was an experience of a lifetime and would not have had it any other way. Our consolation prize is the knowledge that we were the first group to use cars and be able to visit S21E26. We salute the previous group that visited the point with motorbikes and quads – well done!!!

Thanks to Louwrens, Jaco, Thorsten, Travis and the other brave souls that came to recover us on our first day on the pans. Hope we can return the favour one day.

**Confluence report at:**

<http://www.confluence.org/confluence.php?visitid=15455>

**Photos at:**

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