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On the 10th of May 2014 my wife Corné and I left Cape Town at 05h00 for the CKGR. We were planning to spend the first night in Katu and then cross the border at McCarthy's Rest to fill up with petrol and draw money at Tshabong. We planned to spend the next night at Kalahari followed by one night somewhere on the cutline before entering the Park at Xade. Our bookings were 2 nights at Xade 2, two nights at Piper pan 1, two nights at Passarge Valley 3 and two nights at Kgori 1. Leave the park at Matswere sleep over at Itumela in Mahalapye. The next day cross the border at Ramatlabama stop at Strydenburg and then the last stretch home.

Visiting the CKGR was something I have planned many times before but each time I felt that we were not ready yet and then postponed it to the next year. This time it was different. Stan Weakley's informative reports provided all the missing info and made planning this so much easier.

We mostly travel alone, as it makes decision making so much easier. We love the bush and we enjoy the company of our friends but each time we end up feeling responsible for everyone else's wellbeing so when trying out new places, we prefer doing the first trip on our own as both of us are easy going and can adapt easily in difficult circumstances.

The road works on the N7 up to Citrusdal have been completed and it was easy going. From Citrusdal to Van Rhynsdorp we found 3 stop and goes. The R27 carried very few cars, mostly farmers going into town. We made good time and reached our first destination, Katu much earlier than planned. Katu not only has the most beautiful golf course in South Africa, some say, but they have the highest bed occupancy rate guest houses in the country. Our only offer at a B&B was at the staggering amount of R1420 for the night so we pushed on to Hotazel. Here we stayed at a super guest house called Kalahari Cottage. It has a restaurant and ladies bar and very reasonable rates.

On the 11th, after a very good breakfast, we were off to McCarthy's rest and to fill up at Tshabong. I know that there is an urban legend that Tshabong is unreliable as far as fuel is concerned, but I have never experienced that. What I have found is that you need Pula to pay for the fuel. In Botswana only Visa Cards are accepted at ATM's so we usually draw money here as well as you need Pula in cash when traveling in Botswana as some smaller towns and petrol stations don't have card facilities.

McCarthy's rest Border Post must be one of the most friendly border posts I know. The Police and immigration officials are very friendly and on the Botswana side they also make you feel very welcome. The ATM and Petrol station in Tshabong went without hiccup. I've even managed to get a short piece of hosepipe as I left mine behind in Cape Town.

Next point of reference was Sekoma as I did not want to waste time on the shortcut from Khakhea to Kokong. Then to fill up, and I mean fill up in Kang. I took two extra 20 litre containers with fuel to make sure all will go well on venturing into the unknown and all the horror stories of deep sand. Well 165 litres later I was off to our overnight stop at Kalahari Rest camp. Interestingly, they don't charge a standard fee per campsite but charge P100 pppn. Here we also bought wood for the CKGR at P40 for a wheelbarrow.

The next day we have 47km on tar, then 35km on the cutline before turning north for another 120 km on the cutline. This is where the real adventure starts. My tyres were on 3 bar for the tar road,

but my vehicle was heavily loaded so I let it down to 2,2bar. The first km of the cutline were deep sand, but I could easily negotiate it in High Range 3 gear. Then the surprise, the rest of the road, except for very small patches, were in good condition and not as sandy as I have expected and I could easily travel at 50 to 60 km per hour without ever using low range. I am of the opinion that the 155km can easily be done in 4 hours.

After driving about 100km on the cutline we found a suitable place where we camped for the night. At last we were in the bush. Corné was very concerned about us sleeping on the cutline, as one can't help to relate to the situation in our own country, but as the kms went past she became more relaxed. We realized that we were the only humans in a 50km radius and what a wonderful feeling it was. I did not want to make a fire that night as the grass was dry and we had a bit of a wind blowing. We rented a Satellite Phone for peace of mind and I must tell you that my mind would have been much more at ease if the money stayed in the bank.

The next morning we were eager to complete the last 55 km to the Xade gate. The sand became a bit thicker and I was traveling mostly in 3rd gear but still at +40km per hour. We met up with two vehicles leaving the park for Kang. We stopped and chat a bit about the road conditions and they told us they had just seen 3 lions as they were leaving the park.

We arrived at a big notice board welcoming us to the park and were a bit unsure at that stage if we perhaps missed the entrance gate by travelling on in the cutline. Eventually we realized that the gate is still some distance off. The road was now getting a little bit more challenging with deep sand and the damage from the wet season, but still no need for low range. Eventually we arrived at a waterhole on our left with a spectacle of bird activity. Every tree and bush was heavily weighed down by queleas, and about 4 Lanner Falcons were having the time of their lives diving into these masses with a high success rate. There were also Tawny Eagles, Lappet-Face and White-Backed Vultures as well as lots of Burchell's Sandgrouses present. Corné was in her element and her camera went off like a machine gun, taking the one photo after the other.

Also carried away by the spectacle at the waterhole, it took me a while before starting to look around, and there it was, the "king of beasts", a beautiful male lion no more than 20 metres away from the vehicle lying in the tall grass. There is nothing that gets the adrenaline pumping like the sight of a male lion. They show so much power, and have such a majestic attitude that one can accurately name them "King of Beasts".



Xade campsite 1 is located about 1 km from the waterhole and about 3km from the gate. This in my opinion is the best campsite and I will try to stay there if I ever have the pleasure of visiting the park again. At the gate they have fantastic ablution facilities with hot water. The water at Xade has only the slightest salty taste and one can easily drink it. They provided a tap outside the ablution where one can fill up your water containers.

Xade campsites 3, 4 and 5 are very close to the gate and 3 and 4 are within walking distance from the ablution facilities. Campsite 5 is about 500 meters away from the ablution.

We stayed at Campsite 2, which is 10 km away on a deep sandy track. Being spoiled by the cutline where the road was cleared from vegetation, this narrow two track roads were overgrown by vegetation and the Nissan received some serious scratching. In the beginning you don't notice it but at the end of the trip it was quite worrying.

Xade 2 was very quiet except for the birds. We had White-Browed Sparrow-Weavers nesting in the tree above our tent. They were the last ones to go to sleep in the evenings and the first ones singing in the morning. Cornè became quite upset with them as they chased away all the other birds. We saw Gemsbok and Koedoe from the campsite. The 2 days at Xade 2 was just what Cornè and I needed to recharged our batteries after a hectic 6 months at work.

At this I was still a bit worried about the fact that I might not have enough fuel. To make packing a bit easier I've pored the petrol in the round 20 litre container into the tank and decided to keep the other one till we are about left with a quarter tank. That should then be enough to get me to Rakops.



Xade Campsite 2



Full Moon at Xade

Our next camp was Piper 1 and we had to do the 10km back to the gate. We decided to first visit the waterhole and then take a shower at the ablution at the gate before we set off to Piper. This was a very good decision as we again had a great time at the water hole watching the interactions between the Lanner and Queleas. For a quelea, it is all about timing when drinking water. They have to watch the Lanner, and once he has passed, they dashed off to the water to drink as fast as they you can and flew back to the bushes before the Lanner comes back for another round. At some stages we had birds flying straight through the car past our noses, in one window out the opposite window, in their panic to get away.

The warm shower at Xade was wonderful. I had the opportunity to fill all my water containers once again. A big bonus was that the water did not taste salty at all, definitely good enough for making coffee.

We were refreshed and ready for the 83 km to Piper 1. Apart from the scratching the drive were not challenging at all. Occasionally, mostly while crossing a dune, the road was sandy but mostly the road follow the edges of pans where it was smooth and rock hard. The people who we've met on the cutline also excitedly told us about lions in the area and we were looking forward to our stay at Piper1. On arrival at the waterhole we found the same scenario with the queleas and lanners than at the Xade waterhole but to a much lesser extent.

We did not find the lions or any other feline species on our drive around the pan, but saw jackal, Blue Wildebees, Oryx and Springbuck. That night we hear 2 lions roar, but the roars were coming from different directions. One was coming from the waterhole and the other one some distance away to the back of our camp. The next morning we were up at 5h30 making coffee and getting ready to go to the waterhole, and there he was, a male lion in excellent condition drinking water. We could still hear the other one roaring some distance away, but the one at waterhole became silent on our arrival. We stayed with him for at least an hour before he disappeared into the bushes and lay down to sleep for the rest of the day. We found him at the same spot at 17h30 on his way to the water once again. The next morning we again found him at the waterhole and followed him to where we think the rest of the pride was. However this time we could see that he was limping on his left front leg. Stan, this must be the injured lion you saw during your visit, but we can report that he is still in very good condition and he most probably still feed with the rest of the pride. Birding wise, the waterhole also produced a single Marabou Stork, a Saddle-Billed Stork, Black-winged Stilt, Red-Billed Teals, 3 species of Vultures, Lappet-Faced, White-Backed and White-Headed as well as lots of Tawny Eagles and a big flock of Crowned Plovers. We were also lucky to witness a Tawny Eagle catching one of the Crowned Plovers. Now Crowned Plovers are usually very vocal and will make a use the smallest opportunity to disturb the entire neighbourhood. Some of those Plovers looked as if they were having heart attacks. That was a commotion you cannot explain to any- one else and must witnessed yourself.



One of the extremely upset Crowned Plovers. Notice how the feathers on his head are raised.

Arriving at Piper from the south we never realized that there was a 3rd pan behind the campsite as it was not visible from the road or campsite and only saw that on departure to the north. We then realized that this was where the roaring was coming from and the rest of the pride most probably was. Next time we will know better.

On our way to Passarge campsite 3 we saw a leopard in the road but it disappeared into the long grass before we could get any photos. What we thought was ostrich necks on the horizon turn out to be our first giraffes. It was a group of 5, and most probably the same ones mentioned on the forum. We saw giraffes on 3 different occasions during our stay in the park. The Passarge waterhole was a bit of a disappointment, especially comparing to the Xade and Piper waterholes, and despite visiting it twice we merely saw more than a few Turtle doves, and our second sighting of a lone giraffe bull.



A lone Giraffe bull at the very quiet Passarge waterhole.

During the night we heard lions and jackals in a distance. Early the next morning we left for the waterhole. About 1km from the camp we found two lionesses, walking in the road towards the waterhole. This we thought were very good news as we will be able to follow them all the way to the waterhole. A roar came from the direction of the waterhole and these 2 reacted completely different as we would expect. The one immediately started walking off into the complete different direction with a “backing off” attitude. They then lay down in the road, about 50 metres in front of us, staring intensely into the direction where the roar was coming from. The next moment both of them jumped up and started running straight into our direction. Corné was in two minds whether she should take photos or close her window, but luckily she made the right decision and got a couple of good shots. What we found amazing was that the lionesses turned their ears around to listen what is happening behind them. The next moment 4 “angry” lionesses appeared in the road, sniffing around where the other 2 lionesses have been. The most agitated one had an old injury to her mouth leaving a black scar, and we immediately started to refer to her as the “black mouth lioness”. We must have surprised them with our presence but it took them only a minute to access the situation before they followed the fleeing two in hot pursuit. They all disappeared in a distance and unfortunately we did not know what the outcome of this was.



Look at the ears pointing backwards towards the danger zone.



2 of the 4 lionesses before starting the chase.

Again the waterhole was extremely quiet and fails to deliver any kind of excitement. We spent the afternoon birding in the camp. Birding was very good and included a very noisy group of Southern White-Crowned Shrikes. We were in a sense sad to leave Passarge no 3.

Our last camp was Kori no 1. We were quite excited to see what the Passarge valley looks like and we were really impressed with the number of animals on the pans. Big herds of Oryx and Springbuck were everywhere to be seen. We were entertained by 4 Bat-eared foxes, the happy animals of the CKGR. We saw 4 different families in the park and every time they entertained us with their playfulness and antics. I believe that every campsite in the park holds its own magic and one is no better than the other. We have looked at them all and in hindsight I am very happy with the ones we stayed in.

Arriving at Sunday Pan we were shocked to find the waterhole bone-dry and we could not understand why the maintenance people could not repair the fault.

Kori Pan Campsite 1 was a magical place with enough shade for our ground tent. Kori 1 was definitely saving the best for last. Bush camping on the cutline on our first night was very exciting but it was just getting better. We made a good fire for our braai that evening and were planning to enjoy a good time around the campfire that evening. We started the holiday with a near full moon but now it was well into its second quarter. So ja, it was quite dark when two lions started roaring not very far from our campsite. This stopped me from worrying about how well the steak was done. All you want to do is to get this piece of lion bait safely into your stomach and move into the "safety" of your tent.

The lions were roaring the entire night from close to our camp, and it is amazing how your imagination can start playing games with you. Are the roars coming closer? I just hope that they do not come into camp and so on. Then your bladder starts playing its own game. Eventually you know that you are most likely to die tonight, if not from the lion attack, then surely from a burst bladder. Calculating my survival chances I've decided to take my chances with the lion. But I really made certain that there was no lion outside my tent before I stepped outside. This makes one realize how small and insignificant you as a human are in the greater scheme of things.

The next morning we were eager to go and meet the two fellows who kept us awake for most of the night. As it sounded as if the roars were coming from the direction of campsite 2, we drove into that direction but we could not find them. Back at the camp we had breakfast and coffee before we went for a game drive. We then discovered how close our camp was from the pan and we saw the lion tracks in the road leading away from the campsites. We followed them for about 4km before we saw them in the long grass. I have seen many lions but these two were magnificent. The one a bit darker than the other and the second one a bit longer in its body, but in their prime and in excellent condition. We followed them for at least 5 km passing an oryx herd with two young calves. It was interesting to watch how the herd constantly moved the calves around to be away as far as possible from the passing lions.

I could now understand why they named this campsite Kori, as Kori Bustards were everywhere and at one spot we saw at least 12 together. Up till now we have seen very few other cars and people in the park, but here we now saw tour operators with clients and more cars as well. It is wonderful to think that people from all over the world want to experience this remote part of Africa.



One of the culprits that kept us awake during the night.

We've decided to take a slow drive towards the Letiahau waterhole where we are going to have lunch. Arriving at the waterhole our theory of seeing lions in the early morning and late afternoon was blown out of the window. Here we found another magnificent male drinking water. We notice another male a two females in close proximity but not coming to drink. There were also flocks of queleas at the waterhole, but we then saw hordes of dead ones lying on the edges of the waterhole and a disgusting smell coming from the waterhole. A research vehicle arrives to test the water. After talking to them for a while we summarised that the salt levels in the water became so high that the water actually become toxic. The dry Sunday Pan waterhole also started to make sense to us and we were wondering if they did not do that on purpose to clean the waterhole and pump fresh water in it again. The only way I think that they can lower the salt content of the waterhole is to dry it, remove the salty contaminated sediment, and then pump water in it again. If some-one on the forum have more knowledge of the problem and scenario, please let us know.



A peaceful scene on one of the pans in Deception valley.



Letiahau waterhole. Lion drinking where fresh water is pumped into dam.

Knowing that we left the two patrolling male lions 12 km away from our camp that morning, and that they will soon do what lions do, which is sleep for the entire day somewhere in the shade of a tree, we were expecting a peaceful evening and night. In the early evening we could hear the Bat-

Eared Foxes barking and all the other wonderful sounds of the night. This was also our last night in the park and we still had a bottle of red wine to enjoy. Life just could not get better. We still had a ¾ tank of petrol left and 4 litres of drinking water, so everything worked out perfect.



Kori Campsite 1

While busy packing our vehicle the next morning, a loud roar came from exactly the same spot than 2 nights ago. The lions were back! With our eyes constantly in all directions we finished packing and were ready to go at 07h30. Driving out of camp, we saw one of the males in the shrubs between the camp and the pan, looking intensely into the direction of our camp. Maybe he has booked Kori 1 for the next night.

The road towards Matswere gate was badly damaged by some vehicles struggling to get through during the wet season. I can just imagine what it must be like during the wet season when all these muddy holes are filled with water as well. Some of them are almost a metre deep.

The last animals we saw before leaving the park were 3 African Wild Dogs, about 10km from the gate. I have such a special interest in these dogs and they have eluded me for more than 20 years until I eventually had brilliant sightings of them last year in both Hwange and Mana Pools and seeing them again was very special to me. None of them were collared so they are most probably not the same ones that Stan Weakly saw about a month ago near Letiahau.

It was now the long road back to Cape Town. We still had half a tank of fuel left, so we did not need to go to Rakops to fill up. At Mpipip we just inflated the tyres to 3 barr and carry on to Lethakane where we found a new modern filling station. Arriving at Mahalapye at 15h30 where much too early

for staying over, so we pushed on, fill up in Gaborone and eventually slept in a guesthouse in Mafikeng.

We departed early the next morning and the Nissan was going very nicely with a tail wind and a few hundred kg's lighter. We only had to fill up at Three Sisters again and the freedom of traveling on our own made it easy to make the quick decision to drive home to Cape Town without staying over another night. At 22h30 we were safely back home after another fantastic holiday.



One of the numerous beautiful sunsets.