



ENJOY THE RIDE

SPENDING 10 DAYS IN THE PARK IN A CAMPERVAN OFFERED DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS A NEW TAKE ON A CLASSIC SOUTH AFRICAN FAMILY HOLIDAY

Photos **XXXXXXXXXX**

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We were home: 10 days of exploring the Kruger National Park in a campervan meant 1 000km and six camps, with two young children in the back.

Sanne (7) may have had a blue waxbill nesting in her hair. Bram (5) trailed bits of stick that he'd collected throughout our trip. There was a mountain of washing. A couple of insect bites of unknown origin. So many memories made. And I wasn't exhausted.

Okay, maybe I was a little exhausted. But that's parenting, right? Our children have been to the Kruger dozens of times. We make regular day trips from Hoedspruit, where we've lived for 12 years. We've camped and stayed in everything from SANParks tents and chalets to the largest guesthouses and private lodges. But we'd never travelled in a campervan. The children had watched enough Peppa Pig and Barbie (which feature a lot of campervan fun) to put this high on their agenda.

I'd helped pitch and dismantle enough tents to put this high on my agenda, too.

And I was ready for a proper break. With a campervan, you only have to pack and unpack once, even if you plan to cover a lot of ground. You have everything with you, all the time. And I wanted to try something new. Something that would make the familiar – Kruger, kids, camping – feel new.

I booked the van for 10 nights. Historically the domain of overseas travellers (South African campers like their tents, trailers and caravans), Covid-related lockdowns, the #vanlife movement, and competitive pricing seem to have inspired more South Africans to try travelling in motorhomes.

As we plugged it in for the first time at Maroela Camp, I thought – is that it? The lights worked. The water from its 60-litre tank ran hot and cold. The spacious fridge and freezer held enough for 10 days in the park. The inside and outside gas hobs were convenient. The pots and pans all had their place. It almost seemed too easy.

That night, we feasted on Bram's dinner of choice (sausages, mash and peas) while lions roared in the Timbavati riverbed. Showered and teeth brushed by 7.30pm, we slept like cosy squirrels in our drey.



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TOP TIPS

Travel with Children

- For the campervan specifically, spend time packing well.
- Show the children how everything works so they don't experiment en route.
- Involve them in the menu planning.
- When braaing, always make starters because it always takes longer than you think.
- Toy animals let children act out all kinds of stories based on what they see.
- Air drying modelling clay provides hours of entertainment.
- Temper your itinerary to keep the distances small.
- Pack bags of toys, books and games to rotate.
- Make sure the children have binoculars too, and a camera or old cellphone to take pictures.
- Respect other travellers, but don't apologise for your well-behaved children.
- Keep diaries, lists and maps.
- Give the children regular campervan and campsite chores. We tried. And will try again.



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The next morning we went east along the H7, heading for Berg-en-Dal. We planned more or less to reverse the route my husband and I took on our first trip to the park when we travelled north to south. Pre-children we took as many dirt roads as possible and filled our time with birding, photography and botany. This trip, we'd stay on the tar (our van wasn't designed for dirt roads and corrugations) but we'd still travel slowly and deliberately. See nature through new eyes. Show our children how vast Kruger is. Keep a family bird list. Share the chores...

And then the children had their first fight. A cupboard flew open because we'd forgotten to close it properly. I banged my head climbing through to the back to fix it. There were already crayons all over the floor.

I adjusted my expectations a bit, and we carried on.

Somewhere between Tshokwane and Skukuza, we saw a sable – the first the children can remember seeing in the Kruger – and we were back on a high. 'Let's draw it!' said Sanne, looking it up in her copy of Struik Nature's My First Book of Southern African Mammals and scrambling for a few of the scattered crayons. Bram made faces at the people in the cars behind us. I hoped they didn't notice.

Berg-en-Dal was heaving, and it was stressful looking for a good spot amid the school holiday mayhem. We found one, though. And even better, we found friends from Gauteng. The cry of 'Joshie and



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Isla' was as refreshing as the large G&T I poured as the children ran off to play.

Pre-children, I thought nothing could be worse than a packed and noisy camp. But kids plus kids while camping equals more fun for everyone. We immediately altered our itinerary to spend an extra night. The next day, we didn't even go on a drive. My husband did a 9km run around the camp. I cleaned the van. We walked the Rhino Trail. We swam and bought ice creams and hung out with some hippos and buffalo near the dam.

The colouring competition from birding guru Faansie Peacock's website kept all four children busy while the grownups shared a

potjie and bottle of Kanonkop Paul Sauer (2017). By the time we'd left for Skukuza, we'd spotted elephants, impalas, hyenas, nyalas, waterbuck, bushbuck, monkeys, baboons, squirrels, buffalo, hippos, crocodiles, bats, genets, honey badgers, civets, porcupines and bushbabies without a single game drive. We'd also tracked civet, genet, jackals, bushbuck and warthogs.

Leaving at gate opening time on the day we changed camps became a bit of a pattern. The commute became our drive. Then we hung out in camp. Setting up was easy: take the table and chairs out of their compartment and hammer in the ground sheet so a little less dirt ended up in the camper. Some people may want to do more game drives, but we saw plenty this way. And in the afternoons the children could run and play and squabble outside the van, instead of in it.

En route to Skukuza, we had the best bacon and egg roosterkoek at Afsaal, our only "restaurant" meal of the trip. We stopped at the indigenous nursery, and Sanne and Bram each chose a plant, which we stored in the same compartment as the van's gas bottles. At the shop, we picked up Kikipop's Kruger trip diaries with their stickers, checklists and maps. We checked out the station precinct, made flapjacks with honey, cinnamon and bananas for dinner.

Our children didn't help with the dishes. But Bram washed the van's windscreen and helped to refill the water tank. Sanne sharpened her crayons. They travel according to their characters, and we took the small wins. We left at dawn through a misty, moody landscape.

Punda Maria Camp was a long haul. Bram was still wailing that he missed Josh and Isla and Berg-en-Dal. There was some whining. We played a little music en route. But given time, children fill it. We did quizzes from the African Wildlife Quiz Book by Clive Gibson and Patrick Flood, and coloured-in (Struik Nature also does a series of colouring books).

About 10km north of Satara Camp, a pride of lions unsuccessfully tried to hunt a zebra and then sauntered by while I made bowls of muesli and yoghurt and brewed fresh coffee. You don't have great manoeuvrability in a camper van, but I hate the jostling at sightings so that's no loss for me. We sat there for at least half an hour, out of the maelstrom. We had snacks on demand. Great height and broad views. Golden-maned countryside.

Punda Maria was a joy, the mopane an underappreciated treasure filled with crested guinea fowl, crowned hornbills and adventure. We had another camp day; the children built a fort and roamed like wild dogs. We hiked the Flycatcher Trail with its giant euphorbia and new (to the children) trees such as Lebombo ironwood.

Sanne became a committed reader, sitting in the camp's well-loved hide devouring pretzels and a story about magical unicorns while we watched impala, waterbuck, kudu and warthogs. Bram took photos with my phone and irritated another photographer with his chatter. My husband took him on a walk, and I texted when the grumpy man was gone. By then, Bram had made up 10 new bird species and drawn them. My favourite was the scribble bird, which eats scribbles and poops words. That night, we silently watched about 50 elephants drink and vanish into shadows.

Heading back south, pyjama-clad Bram was our martial eagle-, bateleur- and vulture spotter. He'd also had a talk at school about ground hornbills: 'Mommy, look. You can tell the boy because his throat is all red. The girl has some blue,' he lectured as we stopped to watch a group of five. A bird word search kept him busy for

*Entering the **WATERBERG MASSIF** is like parting the curtains on a stage who's actors are a **MENAGERIE OF MARVELS AND MISFITS** set among wild beasts*

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THE GOOD AND THE BAD

What We Loved About the Camper

- A spacious, efficient fridge and freezer made catering easy.
- Convenient to pack and go.
- Inside and outside hobs.
- Generous storage.
- Can't leave anything behind (and don't have to think about flasks, snacks, hats, sunscreen, etc. It's all with you as you need it).
- Good battery and 60-litre water tank. Load shedding wasn't an issue for us. We filled the water tank and the fuel tank twice.
- Easy to clean, but must stay organised.
- Good height and views out of the van.
- The top bed above the cabin was long enough for my 1.85m-tall husband.
- Well-kitted out (wine opener, lighter, grater, trays, electric and stovetop kettles, toaster etc.)
- Awning for shade on camp days.
- Plenty of charging points, including USB.
- Private even in a busy camp.
- Quite soundproof (if you struggle with noisy neighbours).

And Not So Loveable

- Manoeuvrability: this wasn't an issue for us at sightings, but you do need to get used to how much space you take up.
- Not ideal for a quick game drive: we preferred not to go out again after setting up, but you can do them.
- You can't take the dirt roads.
- In the Kruger, the toilet and shower are redundant. Having them also restricts your view out that side of the vehicle. I used the space for extra storage and laundry.

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We stopped for a long time for two big bull elephants. Then there were thousands of buffalo crossing around us, lowing and grazing and swishing through the grass. Sanne asked: 'Why is everything so massive in the north?' The air smelt of dung and milkweed and smoke from a distant fire.

At Letaba, we found another friend, Henry, and a fantastic programme of children's school holiday activities, run out of the Elephant Hall. We did the camp treasure hunt. And the Elephant Hall bingo. The children played an impromptu soccer match. We braaied early so we could watch the open-air cinema while sipping hot chocolate. Later, wandering among the massive Natal mahogany, apple-leaf and false marula trees interspersed with the mopani trees, we looked for the pearl-spotted owlets we'd heard calling and thrilled to the haunting calls of a lone hyena. We found a scorpion in a tree with our UV torch. In the morning, beautiful white-fronted bee-eaters hunted insects in the riverbed and bathed in the sand.

Heading to Satara, we spent time at Ngotso North Waterhole looking for bird 150 on our trip list. I thought we saw a red-headed weaver (rare in the park) but in the end, bird 150 was a quailfinch and we ended with our list on 155. Not bad for winter. I was obsessed with the light. At camp, a Natal spurfowl strutted around possessively. We ate Sanne's menu choice: burger with homemade chips and caprese salad. Then, as the embers burned low, we listened to thick-tailed bushbabies and lions calling close to camp. A red glow hung in the sky for ages after sunset.



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At the end of the trip, I asked Sanne and Bram: 'How should I start this story?'. Bram shrugged and rolled his eyes: 'Are you working again?'. Sanne replied quite unhelpfully that she'd loved everything. But they had cried when we'd unpacked the van and devised crazy schemes to pool their pocket money and buy it. 'I don't want to leave. This van feels like home,' said Sanne, who has hidden something in the van that only she will find when we rent it again, as she expects us to. They loved the novelty of a familiar-but-new home each night. And all being together.

There had been cries of 'what the flip' and 'holy mackerel'. Bad knock-knock jokes. There was a bold charge by a knee-high elephant. Leopards in trees. A baby honey badger. Delicious smore-making (Easter eggs, Aero, and Tennis biscuits). Senegal lapwings. Breathtaking sunsets and moonrises. Dodgy campsite showers and blocked drains. Dishwashing queues. Cheeky monkeys. Stories. Swims. Siestas. There had also been some moans of 'I'm bored'. Some tears. There were some expletives from parents (us) trying to bird or read, when the children had other plans. They weren't super helpful around camp, and this didn't improve as the trip went on. But mostly, they were curious, enthusiastic, and happy. Sometimes enchanted.

Would I do it again? In a heartbeat. And for longer.

Campervan Specs

- Engine** 2.8-litre turbo diesel engine
- Max Speed** 90 - 95 km/h
- Transmission** 6-speed manual gearbox
- Fuel consumption, combined** 10 litres per 100km
- Fuel tank** 70-litre
- Extras** Cruise control, Full air-conditioning with heat pump, Power steering, Electric windows, Electric mirrors, Dual airbags, CD player, Fully equipped for four or six, including outdoor furniture

We travelled in winter and so didn't test the aircon. We also didn't drive it on a freeway or in the city. We rented our campervan from K2P Motorhomes. k2pmotorhomes.co.za



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GOOD TO KNOW

Curious about Campervans?

A caravan is towed behind your car while a campervan is something you can drive. The first self-converted campervan dates to 1935 and was commissioned by a naval aristocrat by the name of Captain Dunn, according to Van Clan. By the 1960s, two camper brands dominated: the Ford Thames 400e and the Morris J4. The Dormobile brand rose to the top of the ranks and had to look for bigger premises for its work with the VW Microbus and the VW Kombi, creating the quintessential camper van that's still inspiring #vanlife today.

Behind the Scenes

- We did test the chemical loo once (research) and emptied it at the designated point in the Letaba campsite (not the ablution block). We wouldn't use it though except for the occasional emergency.
- The same applies to the shower, because the campsite ablutions are more spacious.
- We found the six-sleeper converted for four-person use ideal. Once children hit the teens, we think even that may feel quite small.

COSTS

The Rands and Cents

R1 950 pd for four-sleeper, R2 150 for six-sleeper, plus SANParks daily conservation fees (R330 for two South African adults and two South African children) and camping fees, which vary from camp to camp. We paid R489.35 at Berg-en-Dal and R470.16 at Punda Maria, booking online. We have a family Wildcard (R1 520) that pays for itself in under five days. sanparks.org

- 200km pd (If booked for seven days or more, unlimited mileage).
- Local transfers within Hoedspruit.
- Safe storage for your vehicle.

- Standard Excess insurance cover (for damage to our vehicles and/or third party property).
- One driver per contract.
- Emergency assistance.
- Fold-out maps.

The total cost is comparable to booking chalets for four people. For the cost, I preferred the campervan, given the amount of ground we wanted to cover, and the convenience of not having to keep repacking cars, coolers, cases, etc. We managed the whole trip on one shop, with a few extras bought at the camp stores (wildebeest steaks, some fresh milk and some extra pears). **6**

PHOTOGRAPHY SUPPLIED

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