

—  
Article image caption do  
lupta testis simi im litatu  
rit as estias isc im isolles.  
Exetur aut ime

# SEEKING IN THE WILD

WHILE TAKING IN SOME OF THE KAROO'S HARSHTEST TERRAIN, **DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS** DISCOVERS A DEEP CONNECTION TO NATURE THAT KEEPS PEOPLE COMING BACK TO EXPLORE THE !KHAMAB TRAIL

feel like this is the find of the century,' said Guide Brenden Pienaar. We were sitting on the edge of a large calcrete pan somewhere in the almost 100 000 ha !Khamab Kalahari Reserve, watching hundreds of gemsbok, eland and wildebeest congregate around drying pools of water. There were also springbok and zebra. Then, a herd of buffalo arrived. We were the still points in this reel of unfolding life. When the glare softened, we walked onto the pan and set up camp for the night.

We only had what we could carry in our backpacks – sleeping mats and bags, hiking stools, small gas cookers, basic supplies, clothes and torches. At the start of the trail, Brenden had cautioned us: Forget your electronics. Leave no trace. Use your resources sparingly. This was our final night of the four-day trail, and we'd made friends with these pared-down versions of ourselves.

Gemsbok stared. Wildebeest snorted. A zebra rolled in the dust. The wildlife isn't used to seeing many humans in this remote part of South Africa's North West Province. There is just one small lodge for visitors to the reserve. We watched the animals watching us and chose a spot a reasonable distance from the water so that we all had space to feel comfortable.

While some of the land was used for cattle and game farming in past decades, this was a short chapter in the area's long history. There is no evidence of flowing water here in the past 12 000 years. Before the '40s, when the first boreholes were drilled, the area was considered too dry for commercial farming. 'It's isolated and harsh. That's what saved it,' said Brenden.

The cattle were almost all gone by 2007, when !Khamab was established as an ambitious private conservation venture to restore the historic migration routes of many species that moved west, following the Molopo River course – before humans occupied the area and fences changed everything. Since then, the reserve has reintroduced the species that would have occurred, such as eland, gemsbok, red hartebeest, steenbok, springbok, wildebeest, zebra, buffalo, lion, wild dog, cheetah, elephant, black,

white rhino, and more.

'We're the latest reintroduction,' quipped Brenden as we sat around a small hardwood fire at Magic Vlakke, an idyllic spot in an undulating landscape of silver grass and camelthorns where we slept for the first night. Lowveld Trails Co, which he owns and runs with Tamsyn Pienaar and Wayne Te Brake, trains trail guides and takes small groups of guests on immersive, primitive trails through wild areas. He's personally logged over 15 500 hours on foot in Big Five environments. 'Think about it: we're walking in the footsteps of our earliest ancestors. They evolved in landscapes not dissimilar to this. They would have been a small band of hunter-gatherers carrying what they needed. They had to be tuned into this environment to survive,' he said.

Having thought long and hard about why he's out here, week after week, year after year, he believes these trails jog a genetic memory of a deep connection to nature and an intuitive empathy with its wild inhabitants. He can't live without them. And many of his clients are repeat guests who have felt a similar pull as they walk through wild landscapes with just what they can carry on their backs. We may have jet boilers, down jackets and gourmet dehydrated food, but we're still out here, Brenden noted, 'hunting for meaning and gathering values'. He tosses out these nuggets of wisdom with as much ease as he recognises the call of the northern black korhaan or smiles in anticipation of an ice-cold post-trail beer.

Primitive, multi-day experiences have undergone a tremendous boom in the Lowveld and KwaZulu-Natal in the last 10 years. The Kalahari is perhaps the ultimate destination for seekers of the wild. 'There aren't many places where people can connect with space like this,' said Brenden. There are few roads. No light or noise pollution. And you can see desert-adapted wildlife like aardwolf, bat-eared fox, or brown hyena on foot. !Khamab is also the Nama name for the only true fox in sub-Saharan Africa – the Cape fox. Although not as famous as charismatic, large predators, its shy, nocturnal habits make it the perfect little creature to represent what's unique about this beautiful, arid reserve.

Our first wild night was cold and frightening at times. We took turns sitting watch for an hour to alert Brenden and fellow guide Jared Dell'Oca to any dangerous animals nearby. Lions become less afraid of humans at night. Hyenas can be curious. Rhinos might not notice we were there. But we didn't have a clock or a phone, just the range of our torch and the darkness, where everything else began. We asked Brenden how we'd know when our hour was up. He answered with an enigmatic smile. Time is the universal background to life, but out in the darkness, with lions roaring, stars falling, bat-eared foxes foraging, and barn owls swooping, it seemed more malleable and less

**RIGHT** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime



**BELOW** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime



**ABOVE** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime

**TOP** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime

fundamental. 'I've seen people ask, "Am I hungry? What's the time?" Or I've asked them if they slept well, and they say, "I don't know. How long did I sleep?" It's not just the measurement, but also the security we find in it,' said Brenden as we worked through our unease. A couple of bat-eared foxes foraged on the periphery of our sleeping circle. Stars wheeled around the Earth.

Soon after sunrise, we tracked the lions whose roars had ripped through the early morning hours. Their enormous paw prints marked the red Kalahari sand not far from where we had slept. While it's always rewarding to find the animal, tracking alone is all-consuming. Brenden and Jared sometimes seemed more animal- than human-like as they moved lightly through the bush, finding signs the rest of us missed. Our ancestors tracked to survive, and the practice became institutionalised as scientific reasoning over time. 'The only way to learn it is by doing as much dirt-time as you can,' said Brenden, a patient and generous teacher.

With Jared, he sketched in what we couldn't see: the black-maned beauties walking into the wind, using all their senses on a primal level. 'They're trying to get all the odds in their favour, to see or smell animals or prey before they're seen or smelt. Think about the evolutionary race between predator and prey and who will be seen and who will go unnoticed. It's a pretty intense battle,' Brenden said. While human senses are dull compared to almost any other animal, trail guides hone a similar awareness as they move through wild spaces. 'We receive all this input and create a picture of opportunity and risk. You can only move through the landscape as quickly as your circle of awareness can follow you. When you need to recentre yourself, just slow down,' said Brenden while Jared scouted ahead for more tracks.

The lions had taken a convoluted path and outwalked us. Still, we felt privileged and fulfilled as we left their tracks and headed for Western Pan, our second camping spot. That evening, the sunset held us hypnotised in its glow. The change from light to dark is impossible to ignore out there. It has a powerful effect on people's circadian clock, sleep and alertness. This is something wilderness trail guides know from experience, but that science affirms. A 2020 study published in *Current Biology* identifies a cell in the retina that sends signals to photosensitive cells that affect our circadian brain centres. The researchers said these special cells provide 'the missing component of an evolutionary ancient colour vision circuit capable of setting the circadian clock by encoding the spectral content of light'.

'We're somehow wired into the sequence and spectrum of colours of the sunset, but as modern humans in an industrialised world, we've lost touch with this. What else have we lost touch with?' mused

Brenden as the last orange glow on the horizon faded to indigo. Stars wheeled across the sky, and the moon rose while pearl-spotted owlets sang. That night, Brenden shared stories from his childhood in nearby Botswana, where his mom worked as a teacher at a mine. 'I would just harass any adult close to me to go camping,' he said, alive with the memories of sounds and smells that shaped his consciousness. Since then, the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA) scout has earned the qualifications – and reputation – as one of Africa's best guides and mentors. Sightings with him can be spectacular, even intense, but he's also pretty good at banter. There was lots of laughter around the fire that night.

In the morning, steam from our coffee mingled with our breath. Like the ground squirrels, we waited for the sun to warm us. The area was a warren of holes. A lot of action takes place under the ground in the Kalahari. Things don't like the sun and choose to shelter in the soft sand (including tampans, treacherous ticks you need to guard against). Little

—  
**BELOW** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime



—  
**RIGHT** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime



**LEFT** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime

night creatures had left their tracks in the soft substrate: black-backed jackal, caracal, honey badger and bat-eared foxes. We saw the sandy mandala made by a predatory katydid laying her eggs, savoured the cutting freshness of a green camelthorn pod, and watched grey-backed sparrow larks being hunted by gabar goshawks.

Picking up rhino tracks, we followed where they fed, stopped at butterfly-covered middens, and found tufts of grass dislodged by a right front foot. Where a rhino had rested, we could see the folds of its skin in the powdery substrate. It was harsh terrain, stripped-down and without much shade. Known as Molopo Bushveld, it's grassier than dune veld, with a fairly low variety of plants. We spent some time with the typical tree species: camelthorn, shepherd's tree, false umbrella thorn, blackthorn, and silver cluster leaf, and found tsamma melons and gemsbok cucumbers. These are important food and water sources for animals during dry periods and would have helped sustain early humans, too. The land is flat with few landmarks and little elevation, but it sings – the birding was phenomenal, and we picked up more than 60 species over four days.

We were still on the tracks, moving with the slow purpose of the rhinos, stopping often. 'I feel we chase landscapes more than we chase animals. But if you can get on to tracks and if you have enough water, you can, you'll find that animal,' said Brenden. And sure enough, when the signs couldn't have been any fresher, there they were in the distance. Jared and Brenden briefed us on how we'd approach them, and we spent precious minutes watching them without them ever becoming aware of us.

And then, we were at Marapo a bato (the bones of the people), part of the pan network left when the Malopo River changed course 2-5 million years ago. Once we'd acclimatised to the relentless abundance of mammals, we looked at the smaller things dotting the pan: a double-banded, Burchell's and Teminck's Courser. Sandgrouse collecting water for their young. A praying mantis. As the darkness settled around us, we heard the leviathan sounds of fighting rhinos and whooping hyenas.

'We were hot. We've been cold. We've been scratched by thorns. We've been a little sunburnt. We've tasted the different water. We've felt the extremes,' said Brenden looking at our dirty, happy faces lit by the setting sun. We'd also expanded our definition of comfort. Recalibrated our internal compass. Stepped out of time. Then, we made fire using friction, with just some dry elephant dung and the wispy remnants of a blue waxbill's nest and felt part of something ageless. **G**



**BELOW** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut ime

**BOTTOM** Article image caption do lupta testis simi im litatu rit as estias isc im isolles. Exetur aut

## Trip Planner

### Where is the trail, and when does the next one take place?

This trail takes place in the remote !Khamab Kalahari Reserve in the North West Province. Sharing its northern boundary with Botswana, this protected area covers almost 100 000 ha.

[Lowveldtrails.co.za](http://Lowveldtrails.co.za)

### Overnight before and after the trail?

Accommodation en route to !Khamab is limited. Lowveld Trails Co provides some suggestions for accommodation and transfers as needed.

### Cost?

The trail can only be booked by a group of eight for three or six nights at R60 850 per group per three nights.

### How fit should I be?

All clients sign an indemnity form. You need to be moderately fit.

### Logistics: Food, drink, sanitation and loo?

The lighter the pack, the better. Lowveld Trails Co will send you a recommended kit list. Mama Alles, Trail Food Co and Forever Fresh offer a great range of freeze-dried and dehydrated meals. There aren't toilet or shower facilities, but Lowveld Trails Co will provide a spade. Due to the lack of available water, there are water drops where you can refill your bottles twice a day.

### Tips

This is an environment of extremes. It's cold at night. It's warm during the day. When it rains, it buckets down, accompanied by lightning and thunder. And when it's dry, it's extremely dry. Be aware of this when you are packing. Use sunscreen and insect repellent. There are ticks called tampan in the Kalahari, so take precautions for these.

PHOTOGRAPHY ALEX SHAPIRO