

to the Kgalagadi . . . and back



An entirely necessary stop at the aptly named Brandvlei, in what is known locally as Boesmanland



Gazing across the wheatlands of the Swartland towards Piketberg



Clanwilliam Dam stretches into the Cederberg

An invitation to join a small, foreign group on an expedition to the **Kgalagadi** was too much to turn down. At short notice I had some basic clothing stuffed into a bag, and my essential camera in my hands.

First stop, once the party had assembled and boarded the small bus, was the Piekenierskloof Pass to take in the vista: sprawling wheat fields leading to the Piketberg, Kasteelberg standing prominent on the horizon, and in the very far distance a haze around Elands Bay.

Over the pass we turned down into the valley and to the **Citrusdal Baths**. The hot springs were originally utilised by the *San* and *Khoehoen* in the area but it was taken over by the VOC mid-18th century and a stone building constructed. The site alternated between periods of neglect and maintenance until bought by James McGregor in 1913. From that time it has been continually improved and is still in the hands of McGregor's descendants.

That evening we camped on the shores of **Clanwilliam Dam**, surrounded by towering views of the **Cederberg**, which seemed to clasp us in their majesty.

The following morning we departed early, for the long journey, up onto the escarpment via **Calvinia**, then directly north through the harsh lands of the country. Deep in this brittle landscape, at **Brandvlei**, we paused to refresh before making for the lush environment of the **Orange River** banks.

It could not escape any member of the group just how the landscape and environment had changed within two short days. Dining on the banks of the mighty *Gariep* as the sun descended into an African sky was a culmination of these contrasts.

noboundariescape

The plan was to spend the following night just outside the **Kgalagadi**, at Molopo Lodge, so that there would only be a short last leg.

Unknown to us an overland motorcycle rally was due to stay over, so in the midst of this landscape we were surrounded by roaring bikes and riders winding down after a hard day on the road.

Early the following morning we entered the transfrontier park, and immediately felt that this is what we expected of 'real' Africa - the colour of the soil, sparse vegetation, camelthorn trees - something inbuilt in us let us relate. The roads were smooth and although in no hurry we made good time to **Mata Mata**, and set up camp.

I saw plenty of wildlife but must make it clear, no lions. It became a party joke. In the evening I drove out looking for the big cat predators, and although I saw plenty of other fauna, no lions. When I returned to the camp everyone was a buzz – a pride, with cubs, had come right up to the waterhole at the fence and drank their fill, before sloping away over the hill. I never saw one.

Filled with the vastness of the landscapes, we next headed off to the **Augrabies Falls**, camping near the sound of water thundering down the deep chasm. Enclosed by dense vegetation and observed by vervet monkeys it was an immediate transformation from the previous vista.

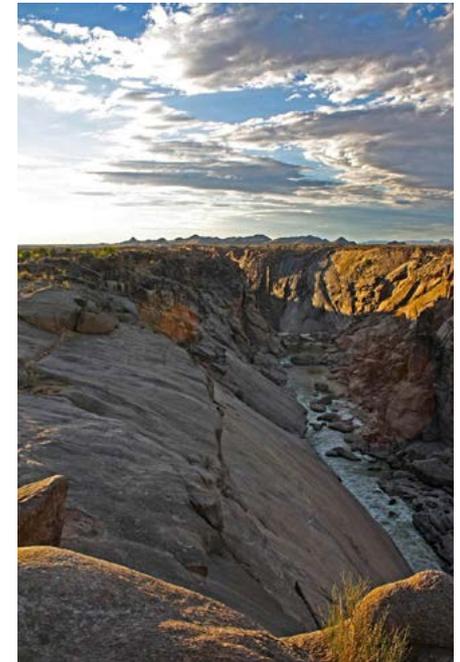
Our last inland stop was near **Violsdrif**. Here the party could go white water rafting but for me it was enough to take in the now placid Orange River, the third encounter with this formidable barrier on the trip. Across the water lay Namibia, an even more imposing, near barren landscape.



The mighty Gariep River at sunset



The red sands of the Kalahari – entirely lion free



The formidable gorge at Augrabies, forged by the Orange River



A placid Orange River at daybreak with a view into Namibia



Verlorenvlei at Elands Bay, with its endless beach

Then south again, to the final stop, **Elands Bay**. It made me realise that water, and sometimes its scarcity, had pretty much been a constant theme, from hot springs, to a huge dam, dry river beds and salt pans, the might Orange in different guises and the sea. Everywhere this lifeblood seeped into the experience.

And the land too encompassed the greatest variety: sun drenched savannah, bitter, dry salt pans, soaring mountains, gorges and endless beaches. The western part of South Africa contains the most astonishing contrasts.



The sun sets on the last day of the trip