



CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL: Lions stroll in front of Polentswa Lodge in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, above; and an agama lizard surveys its domain, below
Pictures: CLARISSA HUGHES

BEYOND THE FENCES

“IT’S pretty obvious that Hettie isn’t confident in the bush, even if you are,” said Keitumetsi Mogale, our guide at Polentswa Lodge in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

The park straddles South Africa and Botswana and the lodge was our launch point into the wilds of the latter, where there are no fences, very few people and lots of wild animals.

As a gentle introduction to the bush, Polentswa was ideal. Hot showers, good food, comfy beds and staff who were genuinely concerned about the fact that two women were heading off alone into a vast wilderness without communications or backup.

“Have you deflated your tyres?” asked Kefilwe Joel, the manager. “Have you got enough water?” asked Mogale as they fussed around us and the 4x4 on the morning of our departure.

We assured them we had enough provisions to wait out the Third World War, should it erupt in our absence, and our tyres were as pap as they could go without damaging the rubber.

Putting on a brave face, Hettie bade them goodbye, fastened her seatbelt, and clutched the grab-bar above the passenger seat for the drive across the dunes to Kaa.

At a top speed of 30km/h, the 70-odd kilometres would take at least three hours factoring in stops (for animals and calls of nature) and slow-going dunes.

Clarissa Hughes has an encounter with wilderness in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park



This part of the Kgalagadi consists of undulating red dunes covered in grassland. The gentle roll of the golden landscape soothes and strokes. It wasn’t long before Hettie released the grab-bar to point out a Pee See Gee (Pale Chanting Goshawk) and then another and another. About 20km in, a quartet of charcoal eland galloped across our path into the wind.

I knew the Kgalagadi had started to work its magic when, after reporting to Kaa gate, we headed west towards Swartpan. “Look,” Hettie said, “this map says it’s 84km and this one says it’s 90km. Oh well, we’ll see.”

I smiled. That evening, the Kgalagadi treated us to one of its delights — a full-blooded thunderstorm that moved in from the west and yielded cherished rain before driving east and evaporating in the great thirstland. There’s nothing like the tumult of lightning and thunder against a copper sky to get the heart rate up.

and spacious tent.

The next morning, as the first crack of light widened to dawn, we set out in search of the felines. The rain made tracking easy and we soon picked up and followed the spoor of two very large lion. Out on the pan they lay, two magnificent black-maned specimens, replete from a gemsbok feast.

Satisfied, we watched their contentment. And this was only day two.

After packing up my tent the next morning, we headed back towards Kaa gate, obtaining vague directions for the track to Mabusehube (another section of the park) in the process.

“Turn right after the water tank” might sound precise when the only other choice is a track before the water tank, but when you’ve been going for 45km and the trail is still heading in the wrong direction you begin to wonder.

“We’re definitely going south. Look at the moon. Look at the shadows. We should be going east by now.”

“Well, what’s the worst thing that can happen?” Hettie asked.

“That we end up where we started — at Polentswa,” I replied.

“Oh, well. What are you worried about then?” She laughed. “We’ll see.”

And so we sailed along through a pristine wilderness of acacia trees, rolling grasslands and a sky so vast all the daydreams of the world couldn’t fill it.

Finally the track turned east and we decided we hadn’t actually been lost but merely temporarily unsure of our position.

Mabusehube is a derivative of the Kgalagadi word for red dunes — mabu means sands, shebube means red — and a favourite for 4x4ers. Many of the campsites were occupied so we weren’t completely on our own as we had been in Swartpan. 4x4ing is a serious business and we saw many canvas castles around the pans that make up Mabua.

Not that the lions cared.

We followed their spoor right into a campsite of some middle-aged South Africans. Have you seen the lion? I asked. A burly man got up from his breakfast of boerie and eggs and swaggered over. “They were here last night,” he grumbled. “Right in camp. Look, they chewed the wiring from the solar panels.”

“Looks like there was a big male in this lot,” I commented.

“Two huge males,” he countered, his voice rising an octave, “plus two younger males.”

Hettie’s eyes flew wide.

The Kgalagadi isn’t only about big cats, though. For birders it’s raptor heaven and there are all the little creatures such as meerkats, ground squirrels and three-striped mice that can entertain for hours on end.

Nonetheless, its real magic lies in the fact that it is one of the few wildernesses left on the planet. There’s something revitalising (as John the Baptist knew) about an encounter with wilderness. Something hard to put your finger on, yet so compelling it beckons again and again.

Even Hettie will return, she says. — © Clarissa Hughes



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Drama dogs ‘Postman’ celebrations

Bickering, threats and intimidation surround the 20-year anniversary of ‘Il Postino’. By **Nick Squires**



WIT TO WOO: Massimo Troisi and Philippe Noiret in a scene from ‘Il Postino’, above; and right, a view of Pollara village on Salina Island in the Aeolian Islands
Pictures: GETTY/ALAMY

... the celebrations have nothing in common with the simplicity, the rigour and the poetry of the film

involved in the alleged assaults and threats.

Il Postino catapulted to stardom Maria Grazia Cucinotta, who played a barmaid whom the postman woos with poetry that Neruda helps him write. Her co-star, Troisi, died of a heart attack just a day after filming ended, at the age of 41.

The anniversary has also exposed rivalries between the three main villages on the 26km² island, which is dominated by two extinct volcano cones.

In a country notorious for its

multiple and overlapping layers of bureaucracy, each tiny settlement has its own council and mayor.

They have been squabbling for a year over the legacy of the film, after the mayor of Santa Marina di Salina, the island’s miniature port, renamed a seaside promenade after Troisi. Not to be outdone, the mayor of Malfa, on the other side of the island, said he had plans to rename a street in his village after the actor.

“The setting of the film is my municipality — the streets that

Troisi rode through on his bicycle, the pink house,” Salvatore Longhitano said last year.

Scattered across the Tyrrhenian Sea, the seven Aeolian islands are named after Aeolus, the Greek god of the winds.

They were settled by the ancient Greeks, then the Carthaginians followed by the Romans.

They underwent massive depopulation through emigration in the early 20th century before becoming popular with tourists. — © *The Daily Telegraph*

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