

# Where in the world?

## WHY TOUR HERE?

Gary Blake and Wendy Johnson truly turned a dream into a reality when they made a bespoke motorhome tour of fabulous South Africa: along the way they encountered giraffes, canyons, jungles and welcoming locals. You'll find their inspirational story starting on p 26 of this issue.

## WHAT MOTORHOME?

Bobo Campers' six-berth Discovery 6

## PHOTOGRAPHED BY

Gary Blake

WHERE IN THE WORLD?  
Kruger National Park, South Africa



WINTER  
SUN



**GRAND TOUR**  
South Africa

**DISTANCE**  
650 miles

**BOHO CAMPER**  
Discoverer 6

**DURATION**  
9 days

**The almost out-of-this-world scenery**  
populated by large rare animals and birds

# GOING WILD IN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

To photograph some of Earth's most dangerous animals, Gary Blake and Wendy Johnson indulge their spirit of adventure on a fly-drive tour of South Africa

No guns?' said the Kruger National Park ranger looking down at my telephoto lens. He nodded and waved us through the electrified gates into an area the size of Wales, where a three-metre electrified boundary fence contains a high density of wild animals.

Just 10 minutes later, and without warning, two giraffes emerged from the bush and walked in front of us on the Tarmac-sealed road. A little further on we stopped again to let three elephants cross the road. By nightfall, on a sunset game drive from our camp in Satara, we had seen lions, leopards, rhinos, elephants and buffalos – the Big Five!

We were on the first leg of a great African adventure, in the Rainbow Nation of South Africa, a country the size of France and Spain combined, where they drive on the same side of the road as in the UK. Our home for the tour was a six-berth 6.7-metre 'Discovery 6' from Bobo Campers.

Preparations had begun with the 'Destinations' exhibition in London, where we learned from travel health consultants, MASTA, that malaria tablets were needed for our trip and rabies injections were advisable, as we gathered do's and don'ts from various stands. We accumulated a lot more as our trip progressed: our first in Kruger was wind the window down for photographs at your own peril.



From the top Checking the itinerary in Bobo Camper's office. Wendy keeping cool in the motorhome. Bobo Camper's Discovery 6 on the Merry Pebbles site

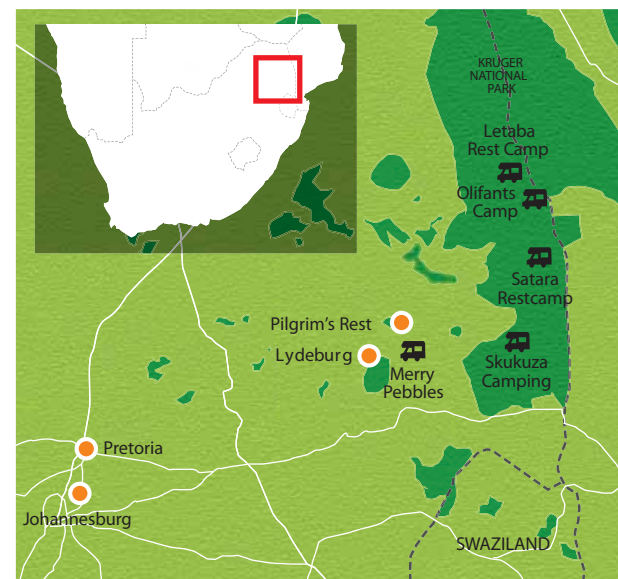
Predators were preying on other animals just beyond the comfort of our motorhome windows.

Our journey began around the office table at Bobo Camper's base in the eastern suburbs of Johannesburg, where its helpful staff checked our maps and the itinerary for our route to see if it was feasible. The 1900-mile (3000 km) circular trip was loosely based on a Camping and Caravanning Club's Worldwide Motorhome Holidays route, but in reverse. It would encompass game parks, starting with Kruger, one of the largest game reserves in Africa; then Swaziland, with horse riding among wildebeest; Hluhluwe, with its successful white rhino population; the wetlands of St Lucia further south for crocodiles and hippos; plus Zulu culture and a glorious swim in the warm Indian Ocean at Cape Vidal.

### Anticipating Big Game

Day one took us no more than 30 miles east of Johannesburg to our booked game park campsite, east of Pretoria, up a red dirt track with high electrified fences. Once through the security gates and checked in we were hooked up and asleep within 20 minutes.

Many campsites are game-park themed and have their own Big Game drives. It is also part of the South African psyche to 'go bush', which means getting closer to nature by camping with 4x4 trailer tents or roof tents in off-road cars.



Clockwise from top left The breathtaking Blyde River Canyon Reserve. The Mac Mac Falls. Gary taking advantage of Kruger's spectacular bounty of scenery and wildlife. Bourkes Luck Potholes, Sabie. The Pinnacle Rock, near the striking Drakensberg escarpment

We'd been concerned to see so many black South Africans having to walk home along the motorway hard shoulder while we were travelling in our shiny mobile home, but had been warned by Bobo never to offer lifts to anyone or stop at roadside stalls.

Next day, we set off on the N4 tolled motorway leading to Kruger Park, an eight-hour drive. Because Kruger's gates close at 6pm we decided to motor up from the N4 to Lydenburg, to travel the Panorama Route, taking the R37 through the Long Tom Pass for a stop at Sabie and the summit (almost 2000m) of the Drakensberg plateau. It's here that a famous battle in the Anglo-Boer War took place, and a replica of the Long Tom breech-loading cannon stands at the Devil's Knuckles in the pass to remind tourists why the pass is named Long Tom.

The temperature was 34C most days, pleasant for this time of year, but soared to 42C in Kruger's arid Savannah basin. We would turn on the air con for occasional blasts but more often in the game parks where the windows had to be closed.

Once inside Sabie's Merry Pebbles campsite, we might have been in the New Forest except for baboons calling out from the trees of the steep-sided jungle-clad hills on the other side of the river, which runs through the site.

Sabie is a tranquil, attractive and malaria-free town situated in



Mpumalanga Province. Patches of indigenous forest survive in some of the valleys, and the banks and streams are covered with beautiful wild flowers and fern, all in the centre of one of the largest man-made forests in the world. It's the gateway to the Panorama Route and one of South Africa's major tourist attractions, so it's best to get ahead of the bus tours by setting off early.

**A little bit of Paradise**

The Mpumalanga Province – the name means 'east', or literally 'the place where the sun rises' – is a place of waterfalls. We began with the Mac Mac Falls, then made the short hop to the historic village of Pilgrims Rest, where visitors can relive the days of the Transvaal gold rush, then on to Graskop, the town of the gourmet pancake.

Situated on the Drakensberg escarpment in Mpumalanga is God's Window. Just one look down and you begin to understand why it has this name. With magnificent views of rock formations, canyons and waterfalls, God's Window is truly an area of breathtaking scenic splendour. It is no wonder that Mpumalanga is known as Paradise Country. Nearby is the Pinnacle, a single quartzite column rising out of the deep, wooded canyon that will feature in the new Steven King film *The Dark Tower*, which was being shot on the day we visited.

Lit by a red sunset at the culmination of the Panorama Route were the Three Rondavels.



The three rocky massifs, with slightly pointed tops, are named after the traditional round or oval African homes. They look down on the Blyde River canyon, the largest 'green' canyon in the

world and a truly spectacular sight. We had covered just 50 miles in one day, but what a day it was!

Our overnight stop was at The Blyde River Canyon Forever Resort. The 30-pitch site was clean and neat, with a swimming pool, horse riding, guided walking trails and a supermarket. The washblock was good, as was the case at Merry Pebbles; it was a standard we

had come to expect – we hadn't tried 'basic' yet. Best of all was the on-site restaurant. We had stocked up the ample cupboard space and full-size fridge, but while we were getting such good value with our pounds against the rand, why cook?

We joined a group after supper for a lecture from Gail Robinson, the resort's resident herpetologist (studies reptiles

and amphibians), who rears many dangerous species at her home. She waved a fully grown Black Mamba in front of us, telling us that following a strike, death would be inevitable in 20 minutes. I didn't wear open shoes again but socks, sturdy boots and trousers.

The Reserve extends along the Blyde River Canyon's winding path, which at every turn offers impressive views over

sheer edges dropping 800m into the riverbed. With its fresh mountain scenery and panoramic views, the Klein Drakensberg escarpment is one of the continent's great wonders of nature, supporting a large diversity of life, including hippos and crocodiles,

Our route around the top of the escarpments eventually took us alongside the private game reserves at the western side of Kruger and, after entering at Orpen Gate, we paid the daily fee and made a booking for the Satara Restcamp.

**Don't get locked out!**

We were touring during South Africa's autumn and, with fewer tourists, we found no problem finding a pitch for our motorhome. All the sites in Kruger Park are managed by Sanparks, a Government concern and efficiently run by friendly and helpful staff. Each site within the park closes from 6pm to 6am, with a substantial fine imposed on anyone lingering outside the rest camps after 6pm.

Satara, located in the centre of the Kruger National Park, stakes its reputation on being one of the best spots in the world for viewing lion, leopard and cheetah. The area comprises mostly grassy plains, so is preferred by zebra, wildebeest and antelope, which attract the predators. Game drives are the only vehicles allowed out after 6pm (and the 'van was not happy being driven on the corrugated side roads), so we took as many game drives as we could afford during our six nights in Kruger.

During our three-hour sunset drive at Satara we saw lions, zebra, giraffe, impala, rhino, hippo (with a tiny baby), elephants with calves, porcupine, eagles, young owls, ↻



jackals, southern ground hornbill and the ferocious hyena.

We drove 53km northwards, where the scrubby, open savannah gave way to green bush, ideal for elephants. From a designated high point, where it was safe to step out of the vehicle, it was something to see a magnificent herd of elephants crossing the Olifants (Afrikaans for elephants) River. Another safe place to exit vehicles was on bridges with yellow lines marking the safe zone: safe meaning there should be time to get back into the vehicle should a predator approach. At last we felt we were in the Africa we had imagined: huge expanses of open space, with occasional glimpses of wild animals revealing themselves in the greenery.

Olifants camp, although not offering camping, has some of the best views of the park from the Mug and Bean restaurant that overlooks the river. After lunch we continued to Letaba restcamp and during the safari night drive, among other things, watched two cheetahs – a mother and young – chasing one another in a dry riverbed. The vehicles carry searchlights, directed off the side to catch the red eye reflection of the animal's eyes to locate them. Then we stop to look. Everyone is expected to join in with the spotting, which helps the experienced guide/drivers.

### They even have Wi-Fi

Skukuza Camp is a day's drive south from Letaba Camp (the maximum speed is 50 kmph and allow plenty of time between camps to take in viewing stops along the route). It's the largest camp in the park, with a swimming pool and even a post office and bank, all behind high, electric fencing. Considering that you are in the wilderness, it is almost too good, with Wi-Fi zones, a good bar and a great restaurant. We took a night drive and it's here that I did a 5am bush walk.

On a bush walk you leave the high-electric-fenced campsites in long-wheelbased Land Rover Defenders that are open-sided with a canvas canopy on top. Surprisingly, wild animals don't see individual shapes inside, they only see the vehicle's overall form, with its two eyes (headlights), larger than theirs, and hear a loud roar, when the engine is revved.

Until now, we have been the ones in 'cages' – it's the reverse of a zoo. We step out of the vehicle and set off – a single-file party of eight, dressed all in dark clothes for camouflage (no bare



On the Lower Sabie Bush Walk with open-sided, canvas-roofed vehicle



Stall selling vegetables en route to the Kruger gate (stopping is not recommended)



legs, and rifles on the perimeter – with two riflemen up front. If one misses a charging animal then the other might fell it – that's the theory.

Rhinos are surprisingly light-footed and can run as fast as 35kph and did when spooked by us. Even though we were down wind of them they ran off like stubby, muscular-legged rugby players. Walking on we saw a leopard lounging in the branch of a large tree. Elephants crossed our path, giraffes and zebra and the roar of a lion in the distance touched a nerve as to where we were. It is a dangerous nature walk.

We drove our motorhome around each day on specified routes. Animals see the Tarmac roads and dirt roads as

tracks. At night they get warmth from the tarred surfaces and a predator animal, a lion maybe, knows other animals will use them as well.

Kruger is probably most famous for its large carnivores, the big flesh-eating cats – lion, leopard and cheetah – and wild dogs and hyenas. During the day we would often park around a water hole to watch zebras, giraffes, hippos, crocodiles and so many species of birds, all drinking cautiously together.

Kruger surpassed our expectations with its concentration of animals and exotic birds, which could be seen easily either from our own vehicle or on a game drive. There were other cars around, particularly where animals congregated, but this did not spoil our enjoyment of this great destination.

We exited through Crocodile Bridge, the southern entrance gate, relieved to be able to stretch our legs again outside of the motorhome before setting off across the border to Swaziland.

See our April issue for part two. ➔

# TOUR ESSENTIALS

## Way to go

Gary and Wendy used the Camping and Caravanning Club's Travel Service for their South Africa trip. The Club runs two escorted tours, or can arrange bespoke travel. Visit [www.worldwidemotorhomingholidays.co.uk](http://www.worldwidemotorhomingholidays.co.uk) or call 024 7647 5340.

Alternatively, Bobo Campers, which is on the spot, can provide an itinerary and book campsites and excursions for you. Visit [www.bobocampers.com](http://www.bobocampers.com).

Booking in advance during the high season and working out the logistics to be in campsites before dark is highly recommended. The Government-owned SANParks sites – it runs Kruger National Park – are very efficient.

We travelled off-season but it was still hard planning 'on the hoof' although we had no problems getting into sites. The main issues were our new South African road map was out of date, as was Bobo's sat nav, and English/African names changing to Zulu. Use co-ordinates instead.

Roads are very good, often dual carriageway, and sometimes motorways.

It's worth changing your phone card to a local sim card to get data and Google Maps as well as phone top-up.

## Where to stay

Stay in secure, gated campsites (for protection from wild animals).

Campsites are called rest camps and have washblocks, kitchen/washing-up areas, and hot water. All sites have BBQs.

• **Monateng Caravan Park**  
[www.monateng.co.za/Caravan-Park/index.php](http://www.monateng.co.za/Caravan-Park/index.php)

• **Merry Pebbles, Sabie**  
[www.merrypebbles.co.za](http://www.merrypebbles.co.za)  
Tel: 00 27 13 764 2266/764 1502

• **Blyde Canyon** A Forever Resort  
[www.foreverblydecanyon.co.za](http://www.foreverblydecanyon.co.za)

• **Satara Camp** Kruger National Park  
[www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/satara](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/satara)

Tel: 00 27 13 735 6306

• **Letaba Camp** Kruger National Park  
[www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/letaba](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/letaba)

Tel: 00 27 (0)13 735 6636/7

• **Skukuza** Kruger National Park  
[www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/skukuza/](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/skukuza/)

Tel: 00 27 (0)13 735 6056

• **Lower Sabie Rest Camp**

Kruger National Park  
[www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/lower\\_sabie](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/camps/lower_sabie)

Tel: 00 27 (0)13 735 6056/7



Main and inset  
Lower Sabie rest camp,  
Kruger National Park



## Food and drink

Eating out was cheap so we treated ourselves rather than cook in the 'van. In Kruger Park most of the campsite restaurants overlook the game parks. Most supermarkets had a good choice of food, fruit and vegetables.

## Find out more

*Tourist Offices*

• **South African Tourist Office (UK)**

<http://country.southafrica.net/country/us/en>

• **SANParks – South African National Parks**

[www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/Books](http://www.sanparks.org/parks/kruger/Books)

• **DK Eyewitness Travel guide – South Africa**

<http://bit.ly/2hlhsGL>

Exhibitions

• **Destinations Travel Show London/Manchester: the South African stand**  
[www.destinationsshow.com](http://www.destinationsshow.com)

Health

• **NHS doctor for vaccinations and malaria tablets or a MASTA travel clinic.**

[www.masta-travel-health.com](http://www.masta-travel-health.com)

Safety

• **Foreign Office Travel advice**

[www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/south-africa](http://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/south-africa)

General tips

• **Motorhome insurance**

We paid extra to Bobo for collision damage waiver insurance, which covered all situations except for problems with all wheels not on the ground.

## Wild Card Programme

South African National Parks charge a conservation levy on a daily basis but if entering the parks for more than a few days it's worth buying a bulk ticket in advance (cheaper on line) or at the park gates. For membership pricing, visit [https://www.sanparks.org/wild\\_new/](https://www.sanparks.org/wild_new/)

## Sat nav systems

Take your own sat nav and load South African maps and be sure you have updates.

## Staying safe

• Keep windows up and doors locked at crossroads. Don't stop at roadside stalls. Don't wild camp. Take care using credit cards – ensure numbers are shielded from onlookers, even from the smartly dressed just behind you.

• Extra care is needed on crossroads even if you think you have the right of way.

• Always wear stout, closed-toe shoes in the countryside and in campsites – at night there could be snakes or scorpions.

• Close all windows when going out – a full burst from the air con unit soon disperses the heat on return. Carry a torch.

## Costs

Air fares for two .....	£1300
Airport transfer .....	£22
Motorhome hire (9 days) .....	£944.67
Motorhome insurance.....	£320
Food and drink.....	£104.50
Game park fees.....	£265
Site fees .....	£133
Fuel .....	£64.66
TOTAL .....	£3153.83