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Field Sports (pg 112/3)

"How to Heal your Soul."

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If you travel enough, sooner or later you are bound to cross one or more of the frontiers. Depending what happens at the border, this can drive you up the wall. Especially in peak holiday times when endless queues can test your patience or when travelling in a group and there is someone whose documents are not complete, delaying you for hours, if not days.

However, a fortnight ago I had the fastest border-crossing I've ever experienced. It was at the Giryondo border-post on the eastern border of the Kruger Park. It lies north of Letaba Camp and gives access to the Parque Nacional do Limpopo in Mozambique, which together with Kruger Park and Gonarezhou in Zimbabwe forms part of the vast 3,9 million hectare Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park between the three countries. Although small, it's the most attractive border-post I've ever seen. It resembles a tastefully designed game reserve entrance gate which it actually is.

But what impressed me more was the speed with which you could pass through it. Through the years my wife and I have learnt that to speed up things at an African border-post, you should arrive shortly before tjaila time. Then everything goes chop-chop.

So I took my time photographing animals as we drove leisurely through Kruger. We however misjudged our pace and with the border closing at 3 pm, we realised that we were cutting it close when we arrived at the SA side only 15 minutes before shutdown. As expected, *emigrations* and *customs* went like well-oiled machines. We were however chomping at the bit while the very friendly, but utterly

thorough police officer checked all the engine and serial numbers of our vehicle, trailer, quadbike, outboard motors and other equipment and then checked them on the computer.

As soon as he released us, my wife, who was the driver, jumped on the accelerator and shot through the gate towards the Mozambique border post. At some borders these posts can be kilometers apart and you can get stranded for the night between them. It was the last thing we wanted, but after we sped along the rough and bumpy track for about 3 km, while no border-post or flag pole came into sight, this seemed our inescapable fate. As my wife drove like a real bush-whacker and my grandson and I hung on for dear life, suddenly all hell broke loose behind us. Howling sirens and hooters shattered what was left of the peace of the surrounding bush.

In a cloud of dust and my nose against the windshield, she brought the car to a standstill. The anti-blood-pressure pill I had swallowed earlier that morning had lost all remaining effects, while I watched the flashing blue light of the police vehicle slowly emerge from the thick dust screen behind us. It was the friendly young policeman who had checked the numbers. I feared the worst, but then he leaned out of his window and spoke, *“Tannie, you missed the Mozambique border post. It’s in the same building as ours!”*

One border post, another universe

Although Giriyondo is the border gate, it is primarily a two-way entrance between two game reserves. With considerable embarrassment we had to return to the post of the *Serviços Provincias de Migração* under police escort, but fortunately the people in these parts are very friendly. Never before have we been met with so much laughter by the entire staff of a border post, standing in front of their building waiting for our arrival. The generators and computers had already been switched off and with a quick stamp and glance at our papers they sent us on our way. It was already way past tjaila-time.

The 30-odd kilometers to our destination were not really enough to settle our nerves after our attempted border jump and we were still edgy when we arrived at Machampane. But that soon changed.

Machampane: a paradise in Africa

Machampane is a wilderness-camp, consisting of five permanent luxury safari tents on stilts, nestled beneath huge trees, overlooking a deep, rock-lined pool in the river with the same name. Unfortunately nobody could tell me the meaning, but that didn't matter much. To my city-weary system its meaning took the shape of words: "*Machampane – The place that heals your soul*". Seldom have I experienced a place in the wild that is so serene and so peaceful.

The camp is actually a wilderness hiking camp and is managed by Pieter Retief, whom I have known since he was a little boy. The accommodation is very comfortable and the food is good. Many of the lucky ones that are privileged to linger here merely use it as a refreshing stop-over on their way to or from the coast at Xai-Xai, but the ultimate experience is to go on a hike with Pieter. He is very knowledgeable and communicates with great enthusiasm. The camp is situated inside the Limpopo Park and virtually all the species that occur in Kruger can be encountered here in stunningly beautiful and interesting surroundings. We sighted or observed signs of many species including elephant, lion, buffalo, giraffe and a huge variety of antelope.

Although I'm unable to take part in hikes, some of the other hiking guests encountered lion, hyena and civet during the last few days. Hikes are adapted to the ability of the participants and are done at a leisurely pace with frequent stops. Pieter plans to cater for hiking fly-fishermen who would like to go on sleepover hike to the spectacular Olifants River gorge. Apart from hippos and huge crocodiles, the river is inhabited by tigerfish, tilapia, Lowveld yellows and big barbel. It should be a wild experience.

Although there is a fair amount of game, Machampane is a birdwatcher's paradise. Last night we lay in our beds, listening to lions roaring upstream along the river. But later I was lulled to sleep by the calls of scops and pearl-spotted owlets, mingling with the hauntingly beautiful songs of three species of nightjars, one just behind the tent. At daybreak this morning I was roused by the call of two fish eagles in the fever tree above us. And that was just the beginning. Sitting now quietly on the deck, trying to write this, I'm literally engulfed by bird-song. I'm surrounded by so many seldom-

seen birds, that I hardly know where to look or which one to photograph. Few of them notice me and many approach me so closely that I make little use of my binoculars. I scarcely have time to watch the shy duiker browsing across the pool, or the impala and waterbuck coming down to drink. I'm not a doctor, but if you are weary and stressed, this place is the medicine that can heal your soul. I could live here forever.

*Visit Machampane at www.dolimpopo.com
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