

A Traveler's Tale

The Olifants Back-Packing Trail

by Joep Stevens

The Olifants Backpacking Wilderness Trail is aimed at the hiking market and differs from the traditional wilderness trail in that there is no single fixed base camp. The group overnights at different spots as they walk from close to where the Olifants River enters the park south of Phalaborwa, to the end a few kilometers upstream of where the Olifants runs next to the main tourist road between Olifants and Letaba camps. This concept obviously requires the participants to carry all their belongings, as no amenities will be provided at the overnight spots along the way. This would include a tent (compulsory), sleeping bag, food and water for the three days and three nights that make up the trail. What follows is a day by day trip report...we hope you enjoy walking along with us...

We commenced the trail at 15h00 on Friday 20 May 2005 after being dropped off near the Mamba Weir a few kilometers east of the western boundary, where the Olifants enters the Kruger National Park. The group of 6 was lead by experienced guides - Andrew Desmet and Hein Grobler, who had previously undertaken the trail in order to broadly plan the duration and possible overnight spots. The weather was mild and partly cloudy with some dark clouds looming on the eastern horizon. All were a little tense and excited about the prospect of going into the bush for three nights with everything one requires on your back. We were still within sight of the vehicle when Mari's sole came off her shoe and this was subsequently sent back with the drop-off vehicle to be repaired in Phalaborwa and she continued on sandals for the 4,5 kilometres until the first overnight spot. The first few kilometres run along a management track leading to a cul de sac, which provides an opportunity for participants to adjust and get used to their backpacks. The landscape is undulating with outcrops of quartz and clear signs of mica visible in the area. Tents were



erected in a suitable area between a large Weeping Boer-bean (*Schotia brachypetala*) and a large Leadwood (*Combretum imberbe*) next to the river, yet away from any game paths, especially those used by hippopotamus. The evening was about as perfect as one would require for a night in the bush, no wind, the moon close to full and a comfortable temperature. We enjoyed dinner and

with all the excitement and preparation of the day we retired at about 21h00 to a light drizzle, which only lasted for a short while. It took some getting used to sleeping on the thin roll-up mattresses that we used in the tents.

We arose early and Andrew and Howard left to pick up the repaired boots for Mari which had been left in a tree by the guide, Phillip Zitha (who dropped us off the previous day) and who had kindly arranged for their repair in Phalaborwa. As a result, we departed a little later than planned, about 07h30. The weather was quite overcast for most of day, making it ideal for walking. We had breakfast at about 09h30 at the base of the koppie with white quartz outcrops and orange coloured lichens growing on them. We proceeded to the Tshutsi mouth for our lunch break where we were then able to wash and



swim in the safe shallows of the Olifants River. It was just before our departure, at about 15h00, when we were surprised by a breeding herd of

elephant that approached from the southern bank. The wind was in our favour and we were able to get a great view of the estimated 40 to 50 animals as they drank and proceeded in our direction. We were eventually compelled to make our presence known, resulting in them charging off, back in a southerly direction. Certainly a fabulous experience! We proceeded along the bank until about 17h00, when we chose an overnight



spot next to some rocky outcrops adjacent to a pool with about a dozen hippo. They kept us entertained throughout the evening and the night with their obstinate honking at our presence on the bank of their pool. It was full moon and the night remained quite cloudless, making it, once again, a superb

night to sleep out in the bush.



We arose quite early, as soon as it became light enough, about 05h30, and departed camp at about 06h30. As it was appearing to be less cloudy than previous days, we attempted to get some distance behind us before the bushveld started heating up. We combined the lunch and breakfast breaks with a long siesta in the mouth of the

Misumani from about 10h30 to 14h00. We also washed and swam in the rapids near

there. We then walked until about 16h30 and crossed to the southern bank near the mouth of the Nhlalalumi River, as the riverbed was very wide and water flows closer to this bank. We chose a spot next to some Feverberry trees (*Croton megalobotrys*), and also a medium sized Nkhuhlu tree, *Trichilia emetica* (Natal Mahogany). We retired at about 21h30, once again in a bright, full-moon and cloudless night. We were awoken at about 23h40 by the snort of a large animal very close to camp. We were to find out in the ensuing, very tense minutes that it was a black rhino that had approached the river from



the south and was surprised to find these alien structures set up in her territory. Fortunately, the rhino decided on the better option, namely to walk off, much to all of our



relief. Upon investigation the next morning, it was found that he had stood six meters from Mari's tent. Needless to say, Mari (and others) experienced some very anxious minutes. The very distinctive snort, the heavy breathing and the feeling of absolute vulnerability (tucked into a small, light canvass tent of 1x1x2m) will remain with me for a long time. Well done to all, in particular Andrew and Hein, for choosing to remain still, resulting in the animal moving off. Big congratulations also to Mari for enduring the anxiety, yet remaining dead still! Needless to say the remainder of the night was spent quite sleepless with the all the adrenalin in the veins.



It was with a sense of accomplishment, yet nostalgia that we embarked on the last short day. We left camp at 06h30, crossing over to the northern bank before undertaking the last six kilometers to the finishing point of the trail. We had a sense of accomplishment because we had virtually successfully completed the first trial run of what is hoped to become a huge success in the future. Nostalgia because of the short window, of three

odd days in paradise, that was about to come to an end. We had a brief breakfast stop two kilometers from the finishing point where Julias Mkansi was expecting us at 10h00. We were, however, afforded a few more exciting moments at the finishing point as a breeding herd of elephant, of unknown number, had chosen that area as their feeding place for the morning. As they had already sensed the guide at the finishing point, they were already nervous. Needless to say, our approach from the opposite side added to the alarm amongst the herd, which fortunately quickly moved off to the north and away from the river. After this moment of raised heart beats we thoroughly enjoyed the cold drinks that



Hein had arranged to be brought along in the pick-up vehicle.

During the two middle days we walked approximately fourteen kilometres per day, with an approximate walking time (excluding meals and stops) of seven hours per day.

