

BURNING WOOD AT TENTED CAMP **APRIL 2009**

"4 tin plates, 4 forks, 4 knives, 4 spoons, sauce pan, water kettle, gas bottle, bottle opener, can opener, toilet paper..."

Around November 2008, my youngest sis, Carla, surprised me – she and her boyfriend, Jan, were coming to South Africa for a 3-week visit, arriving on Wednesday, 29 April 2009. We haven't seen each other for 3 years.

They wanted to spend 3 nights with us, so I've booked us into a tented camp in the Borakalalo Nature Reserve (www.borakalalo.co.za) – 60 km North of Brits – about 2 hours' drive from Johannesburg, with no cellphone reception at the camp. *More info at end of review.*

And so my lists started – on post-it notes, on my computer, in my notebook. Lists of what to take along, when to book the trailer, reminders to fill the gas bottle, etc. And wood – lots and lots of wood. Because of the tragic fires in Australia, fire bans made it impossible for them to braai with wood.

Tuesday, 28th April dawned crisp and clear. Nobody knew that we're leaving for Moretele Camp today – I wanted it to be a surprise for Carla & Jan. Hein still had some meetings to attend the morning, so I started to pack our plastic crates. It was quite daunting, having to pack all the basic kitchen necessities. Frying pan, saucepan, cast-iron pot, herbs, chopping board – things you normally take for granted.

Halfway through my packing, Hein phoned and told me he'll leave early. He still had to buy the booze and fetch the trailer, so now we might be leaving before 12! In a rush, I finished my packing, showered and waited. When Hein arrived, he was quite angry at the Rent-A-Venter guy. First the guy gave him a Venter with an expired license disc. Then we were given a Venter with the spare wheel *inside* the Venter – which meant less space to pack. And it was dusty and dirty inside. Luckily, we had some carpet off-cuts which fitted nicely. Our crates were traveling 'softly'.

We left home just after 12 with a chock-a-block full trailer. Rissiepit (our Pajero) was empty to fit in Carla & Jan's luggage. At the Petroport on the R28, we stopped for fuel and lunch. Hein had a cheeseburger-pie and I had some lovely spaghetti bolognaise.

When you've passed through Brits, the driving becomes slow – speed bumps prevent anyone from speeding through the small villages. We arrived at Borakalalo gates at 2pm.



2 Tents were booked next to each other. Sadly, we saw some deterioration in the tents. Zips weren't working, shade nets were broken.... And when we checked everything, the gas fridge at Carla's tent didn't work, the rubbish bin wasn't emptied and the shower had no hot water. (Sigh.) Oh dear! But otherwise, the tents are very comfortable and the river view.....

While Hein drove back to the gate to report the broken fridge and fetch the much-requested wood, I unpacked and settled down. Moved the 2 single beds together, secure the mattresses with a king-size fitted sheet and settled down with a cold drink. On the island across the river, I saw this HUGE bird – a crane. (pic centre) Later the afternoon, we noticed this school of fish, just below the water-surface. (pic right)



Hein came back with 16 bags of wood! Will this be enough?

Gazing over the river, we felt the city-stress slowly dissolving. And then we heard it – the fish eagle. Aaaaah! What a sound!



Before sunset, we lit the fire. The smell of burning wood and river-water were so intoxicating. When the hunger cramps started, we moved the grid onto the coals.

But there was a hitch – the grid had no 'stop', so the height could not be varied. Hmmmm, what to do, what to do ... Hein improvised and took 2 of his empty beer cans and voila! We had a braai grid at perfect height.



(When our beer cans were thrown away, Hein & Jan just had to empty 2 more cans for the braai grid.)

Dinner was boerewors with rolls and a tin of Spanish Style Tomatoes – heated in the tin. When I took my second bite of my boerewors roll, we heard this 'hallo' out of the darkness behind me. I swirled around, nearly dropping my roll – but it was only Robert, the security guard. He walked around every night, checking everything's fine. After a busy day, we went to bed early – because the next day was Wednesday – the day Carla & Jan arrived at the airport.

Our battery alarm clock went off at 03:00. After a quick shower, we left the reserve at 04:00. The plane was due to land at 05:00 and Borakalalo is about 2 hours' drive from the airport.



On our way, Hein and I both saw a green shooting star – and made a wish. While we were driving, the smoke smell was quite strong. I looked around, but couldn't see any fires or villages. Hein said it probably was because every village hut has a charcoal heater...

I pondered this for a few moments ... and then asked him ... so how does a charcoal heater works? I could feel him shaking as he laughed – 'konka' he said. Jeez, sometimes I'm really quite blond. A 'konka' is a drum with holes in the top half. Then they use wood or charcoal to make a fire inside the drum – a 'charcoal heater'. (pic left) Most villagers uses it for heat.

Just before 06:00 we parked the car at the airport. While looking around for Carla & Jan, I rushed to the Mugg & Bean for some coffee. Walked to the terminal, didn't see them there. Our arrangements were to meet them at the Mugg & Bean, if not at the gates. They didn't have a simcard and airtime yet for their phone, although they had a R10 note for a quick call.

(I told Carla that R10 note is unusable now – we now have a R10 coin, silver one side, bronze the other. She believed me for 2 seconds. Hee-hee.)

Returning to the Mugg & Bean, I saw them there. It was great to see them after 3 years! Greeting their friends, we walked to our car. When Hein paid for the parking, he paid with a R20 and told them to watch out for the 'new' R10 coin. (Usually the change is given in coins.) So we're standing, waiting for the 'cling' of the coin – when Jan noticed the R10 note, hanging out of the 'note slot'. Well, that was a first.

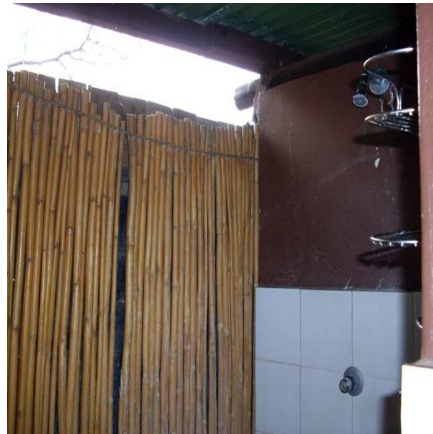
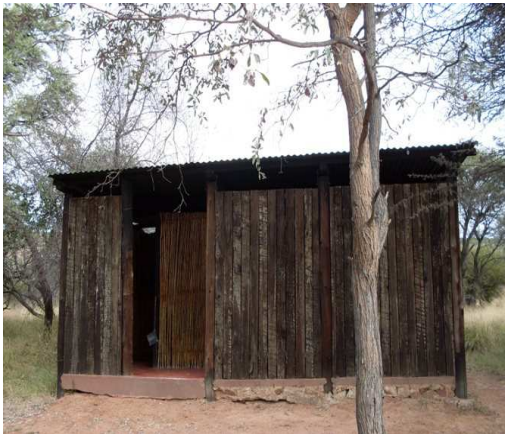
All their luggage fitted nicely in the back of Rissiepit. We told them we had to pick up the trailer. And continued with that story all the way back. Carla is used to a few small meals a day, so although they had breakfast at 03:00 on the plane, we stopped and bought them orange-chocolate muffins.

Stopping at the tents around 9am, Carla asked about the tents. I promptly took out their key and told them: "We've been here since yesterday, and yes, everything's unpacked."



A fire was promptly started – Carla & Jan (pic left) couldn't get close enough – although that meant smelly clothes, of course. Brunch was boerewors rolls with Castle beer for Hein & Jan and 'Klippiess & Coke' for Carla. (A glass bottle with a mixture of Klipdrift brandy & Coke).

My system was dipping, so when Hein took them for a game drive, I had a nap. The weather was hot with no wind, so I awoke sweaty and went for a shower. The geyser had to be lit every time and I didn't pay close attention when Hein described the procedure to me – so I just had a cold shower. Undressing and dressing is a bit tricky.



The entrance of the ablution block (top pic left) faces the area right in front of the shower – so I tried to dry and dress in the shower area (top pic centre). The area has a gap between the reed walls and roof, so you can see the leaves and branches while you shower. There are no doors – only a chain with a 'no entry' sign (top pic right). Can snakes read?

Marinated chicken pieces, smash and tinned peas were the dinner menu. They arrived back, having seen giraffes, 'klipspringers', baboons, warthogs and all kinds of buck. They took lovely photos and were thrilled to bits.



Carla showed us her party trick. She bought Savanna to drink and showed us how to open it – with her flip-flop. When she bought the flip-flops in Perth, the lady asked her about the bottle opener. Carla thought she meant she'll get one for free. Then she was told to turn her flip-flops upside-down.



Stoking the fire, we listened to the fish jumping out of the water. Huge ones. They would try fishing the next day. From jet lag and excitement, Jan developed a massive headache. I suggested that instead of chicken, we made some cowboy food – quick and filling.

Hein fried onions, heated up tins of bully beef and added baked beans. Sliced bread was toasted on the 'improvised' grid and soon our plates were filled – and emptied. Everyone agreed on an early night.

Waking up with a start in the middle of the night, Hein and I was frozen stiff – what was that sound? It sounded like a herd of animals splashing through the river. Going from right to left. You could hear a slap, branches snapping and lots of gurgling. It went on for quite a while. Did we zip the flaps properly?

Thursday morning we awoke at 5.30 am. While boiling water for coffee, Carla said they got up and had a look with their torch. It was fish!!!!!! Apparently huge ones, jumping out of the water (slap sound), swirling around in hundreds. Wheeeh, what a relief. Although we were quite disappointed we didn't see it.

I searched on the Internet for an explanation and mostly myths and possibilities could be found – no definites. A few funny ones were: *a) They are trying to loosen the eggs in their skeins prior to spawning or 2) They are trying to rid themselves of sea-lice or 3) To check the time by the angle of the moon to see if their coffee break is over yet. In the end, it was decided by scientists that fish jump because they can. Because it feels good. It's that simple.* We shall wonder no more!

Hein and I had quick showers, then had coffee and rusks. Now – I LOVE my coffee. If you've read my previous reviews, we normally pack our coffee machine for weekend breaks. With no electricity, that's not an option. My mom used to make coffee by dropping 2 coffee bags (Koffiehuis) into a flask, filled it with boiling water and let it steeped for a while. I browsed the coffee shelves for coffee bags with the least amount of chicory in it. The chicory has a taste I'm not crazy about. Pronto bags were the winners, with the least amount of chicory and our flasks were packed. I decided however to get myself some sachets that's 3-in-1. Real coffee, creamer and sugar. Not ideal, because I normally drink my coffee black, but better than the Pronto bags.

And then Carla made a very simple remark: 'Why didn't you pack a coffee plunger with real ground coffee?' I stared at her for quite a while – absolutely stunned and speechless. Well I never! It just didn't even occurred to me – and yes, we do have coffee plungers. My camping list has now 2 more 'must-have' items.

The previous day, Carla asked a guy for a pamphlet on buck. They didn't have any. And I didn't think of packing one. We saw a big number of bucks – wildly guessing if it was an impala, waterbuck, kudu or bushbuck.

Arriving back at the camp around 10, we were all starved. It was decided that we'll braai the chicken pieces meant for the previous night, 'braaibroodjies' (sandwiches filled with cheese, tomato & onion) and 'skilpadjies - of lewer in netvet'. This is calf's liver covered in caul fat (which is the fatty membrane that surrounds the kidneys.) Normally the size of a meatball, it has to be grilled and is very rich, but so yum!!! It was one of Carla's requests.

When we opened the chicken pieces, they were bad. So we ended up eating the 'skilpadjies' and 'braaibroodjies'. Delicious!!!

Relaxing in our tents, I started to read a book called 'Twilight' by *Stephenie Meyer*. Not usually my style, but it has taken the teen-world by storm and I thought I'll see what the hype's all about. The story is a 'teenager-vampire-love story'. I did finish the book, but sold it back to our secondhand bookstore. Not worth keeping.

For dinner, we decided on a lamb knuckle-curry pot. Hein bought these amazing herbs – 'Curry Rub' from Melissa's Shop (available at some Pick 'n Pay stores.) Only 5 tomatoes were left to use for the pot. Not quite enough. I offered a tin of tomatoes, but was stopped with a 'cookers frown'. How dare I suggest that? We offered him 36 tomatoes (in a plastic bottle – All Gold), he just ignored us.

While Hein started the slow potjie process, Carla & Jan were fishing. Or trying. They caught branches, leaves and hats – no fish. For a cocktail, I bought a big Consol jam jar. Filled it with vodka and Mixed Berry juice, plopped 4 straws in and Carla & I quenched our thirsts. It's quite a novel idea, 'stolen' from Primi Piatti Restaurant. They normally mix in Cane, Rum & Vodka and fruit juice. And it's normally 1 jam jar per person.

Some of the camp staff arrived and brought us a small book on different buck species, complete with pictures and footprints. We thanked them and could immediately identify some.

The smell of the curry pot was swirling all around our camp. Hein usually starts a pot with hot oil and then onion slices. Chopped tomatoes next (usually more than 5!!!!) and then the meat, in this case lamb knuckles with the 'curry rub' spices. The pot simmers slowly to entrap all the flavours & juices. Then he will add the potatoes (if baby potatoes, whole, with the skin on – if big potatoes, cubed with the skin on). Next the carrots and lastly some large green broad beans (or sometimes baby cabbage and/or asparagus.) He doesn't add any water or sauce.



Not wanting to bother with cooking rice, I bought some KOO tins of Somp & Beans. Cut them open and warmed them in a pan. I've found that somp is a lovely 'soaker-upper' for potjiekos.

Our stomachs were growling with hunger and when we finally dished up, we almost 'inhaled' the food. Oh my gosh! It was sooooooo good!!! And the Somp & Beans were nicely heated and soaked up all the curry gravy. The curry wasn't overpowering, but subtle enough to make a thick, flavoursome gravy. The beans were still slightly crisp, the meat was oh-so-tender and the potatoes & carrots soft and filling. We went for seconds.

Watching the bright stars in the sky, we talked about Australia and their life, about camping and about LIFE. To live life to the fullest ...

The nights were balmy. Although I've taken extra duvets, we only needed one.

We only woke up at 5.30 am.

After coffee and rusks, we went for another game drive. The rhino's were nowhere to be seen, although armed with the little book, we now could identify the different bucks.

At the little kiosk, we bought more wood and ice, some ice creams and headed back to the camp. Hein and I went for a nap, Carla & Jan kept the fire going and lazed on the grass. They had instant noodles for lunch and we snacked on Rice Pringles.





Carla bought several gifts along with them. For us, an Aussie CD & DVD. For my Pretoria sister & husband, also an Aussie CD & DVD. For their 3 kids, soft toys. Are these toys not too cute?



For my mom she bought a Kangaroo purse (forgot to take a photo) and for my dad a Didgeridoo (pic left). A wind instrument of the Northern Australian Aborigines. We've tried to make a sound, but failed miserably.

People arrived at the camping site, about 30 metres away from our camp. They were quite noisy. The weather also threatened to rain, so we decided to braai lamb chops early. We haven't even finished eating the chops from the braai, when a few raindrops came down. But they were over quick.

When Robert, the security guard, made his rounds, we asked him why the fish didn't bite. He asked what we used for bait. When we said 'honey corn', 'banana corn' and 'flavoured bread', he replied: 'The fish like super white bread.' When he walked away, we just giggled. Super White indeed.

With the mature steak on the braai, we opened tins of Peas, Kernel Corn & Kidney Beans. Again, after we've finished dinner, a few raindrops plopped down. The campers played very loud music and we were pleased to leave the following morning. All of a sudden we heard the clank of bottles behind us. With our torch, we saw a small 'nagapie' or 'bush-ape' or 'night-ape'. It's a very small ape with huge round eyes, jumping (I kid you not!) from tree to tree. Unfortunately, we didn't take photos, but it was so cute.

The music continued till 11 that night – (sigh), why do people bother with nature if they can't keep their music down? We went to bed early.

Adamant to find the rhinos, Hein took Carla & Jan for a last game drive. While packing, a soft rain cooled down the morning hours. With everything packed into the crates, I went for a shower. Realising too late that I still didn't know how to light the geyser. So I just showered with cold water. Halfway through, I heard voices – a man with 2 children. Scared that they'll pop into the ablution block, I was relieved when they passed by. The man explained to the children that this (the ablution block) is a bush bathroom. The boy exclaimed: 'Cool, a bush bathroom. Does the animals come and poo here?' I just giggled.

Waiting for them to return, I realised that we'll get hungry on our way back. With 1 packet of frozen boerewors left, I pondered how to cook it. The frying pan was at the bottom of the crate. Then I spotted our water kettle. Normally used either on the fire or gas bottle. Washing the ice from the boerewors, I broke it in smaller pieces, put it inside the water kettle with some water, closed the lid and put it on the gas. Some cheese was left, so I made some cheese sandwiches. The boerewors came out very nice. Carla was just wondering how my next cup of coffee will taste – well, boerewors and coffee go very well together.

After we've packed everything, we drove back to the gate, scanning the bushes for rhinos. Nothing.

We dropped Carla & Jan at my Pretoria sis & family, had a quick cuppa and headed home.

There were 2 bags of wood left ...

Borakalalo Nature Reserve: (Tshepe – 012 252 0131)

There are 3 types of accommodation –

Moretele Tented Camp (where we went) – 10 tents right on the river's bank. R290/tent/night during the week, R350/tent/night during weekends. (Although it only has 2 beds in each tent, there's enough space for another bed.) This camp has no electricity, but it does have a gas fridge, paraffin lamps, food cupboard, clothing cupboard, table and 2 chairs, bedding and ablution facilities. Own towels and crockery & cutlery to bring along.

Phudufudu Tented Camp – 10 tents in a wooded area. 4 are luxury tents equipped with small bathroom & kitchenette. There's also a communal dining area and conference area for 10-20 people. Ablution blocks are well-looked after and a small splash pool for hot days. The communal kitchen is fully stocked with cutlery, crockery, fridge and oven. The luxury tents are R670/tent/night during weekends, R490/tent/night during the week. The standard tents are R500/tent/night during weekends and R370/tent/night during the week.

There's also a ***camping site***, R80/person/night during weekends, R60/person/night during the week. It's okay-ish, but not great.

Cellphone reception only at certain spots in the reserve.

The owners of the Moretele Camp are in Brits. It seems that this camp is privately owned, separate from the nature reserve. I've sent them an email, detailing all the points of neglect.

Hopefully, they'll make an effort and we can continue to unwind there.