SOUTHERN AFRICA

Tarmac sailors

From his car catching alight in the Kalahari to getting up close and personal with big cats, Yusuf Omar spent three weeks exploring Southern Africa in his VW beach buggy. And he didn't get the story he went to write

Broken down on the road side, somewhere deep in the heart of Botswana.
Pictures: Yusuf Omar

SUNDAY Tribune journalists go to great lengths to get their stories. For me that meant driving 10 000km across four countries in a 1979 VW beach buggy.

The story in this case? The Namibia seal cull. Every year 90 000 baby seals are brutally clubbed on Namibia's coastline. Few journalists have dared to document the culling because the Namibian government doesn't take kindly to the foreign press. The last journalist who photographed the event was arrested and detained for three months.

Posing as a fanny-pack bearing tourist, I drove to the Skeleton Coast with close friend and vet student Max Barot.

The adventure had begun in Durban. The car first broke down just before Pietermaritzburg with a gaping fuel leak. Ten hours later I reached Gauteng.

After leaving a chilly Joburg, our first stop was Gaborone. Arriving in rush hour traffic as the sun set, we edged our way through the city. It was clean and orderly with an unusually high number of shoppers.

We drove west, breaking the number one rule of overland African travel on our first night: never drive at night. But the roads in Botswana were in good condition and since there were more animals on the road than cars, our only concern was avoiding stray cows. Hitting cattle in a beach buggy would be like colliding with a brick wall.

The next day we reached Windhoek. Nestled in the mountains, the city was German in every sense. The streets were clean, the people orderly and buses ran like clockwork. The people spoke a blend of Afrikaans and old German. The over-indulgent parliamentary buildings and pristine gardens paid tribute to a bygone German era.

From there, it was all desert as we started the epic journey across the Kalahari. We slept around a fire on the salt pans with no fear of predators. I'd never seen such a brightly lit sky and so many shooting stars. I made 50 wishes that night. When I woke up to an icy sunrise the drool had frozen to my cheek and we couldn't feel our toes until noon.

Namibia's Skeleton Coast has a year-round resident population of thousands of seals.

We arrived at the infamous seal culling spot of Henties Bay on the eve of the cull and the car broke down in sympathy of the horror that awaits baby seals, which they club for their coats and the bulls, which they shoot.

On the morning the cull was scheduled to start, we walked up and down the coastline, visited the inconspicuous seal factory, and spoke to locals, but the cull had not begun.

No blood-stained sands or cries of seal dams (females). It was just us and a healthy stock of thousands of seals.

Despite their promises, no activists or journalists showed up either. The locals all knew about the cull, and for the most part approved of it. They said there were too many seals and too few fish, and that many seals died of starvation. The seal skins are turned into rich, black fur coats and their fatty omega rich oils are used for cooking.

As for the Skeleton Coast, it's almost as if you go back in time, to a place where man's footprint tried and failed to make a permanent imprint – long, desolate stretches of coastline, waves crashing and pounding on kilometres of beach.

Such is the haunting beauty and allure of Namibia's Skeleton Coast, where you find old ships wrecked 60km from water or herds of elephant frolicking in the surf. Seals by the thousand also call this place home and the fishing is said to be without equal in the southern hemisphere.

As for the name, the beach was paved with fossilised seal skeletons and other marine life.

We stayed for a few days but the seals appeared to be safe. So we decided to head north-east to the Africat Foundation. We later found out the cull begun two days after we left.

Along the way the car fuel pipe loosened and the engine in the rear caught fire.

"Is the car supposed to be on fire?" Max asked casually.

After extinguishing the blaze and making some minor repairs, we continued

Nestled between a row of tranquil hills lies Okonjima, home of the Africat Foundation. Formed in 1991, the centre is reputedly the largest cheetah and leopard rescue-and-release programme in the world, helping local farmers deal with their predator problems.

We were put up in a secluded camp site with electricity and running water, both luxuries in the wild.

The area was remote and untouched, with herds of oryx and eland common, not to mention the thrilling sight of big cats in their natural element.

AJ, a seasoned game ranger, picked us up the next morning and we tracked three young cheetahs that had been missing for three days. The 4x4 could take us only so close; so, using radio collars, we went on foot and found them safe and well, with full stomachs thanks to a recent kill.

It was an incredible, yet frightening experience being within five metres of the beasts. They growled and bared their fangs when we got too close.

That night we went out with some local men on a shebeen crawl in Otjiwarango. We had a fantastic night. I couldn't help but think we wouldn't have had the same welcome in South African townships.

Then we drove east through the Caprivi Strip, a thin slice of land between Namibia, Angola and Botswana, to the town of Maun, gateway to Botswana's prized possession, the Okavango Delta.

It is strange how a river that starts thousands of kilometres away in Angola shapes and influences the lives of so many in Botswana. From the thousands of tourists who flock in from all over the world to the locals who have lived there for centuries, there is no doubt northern Botswana is dominated by the Okavango Delta.

There is surely no other place in the world like it – vast plains of swamp forest interspersed with gorgeous lagoons and winding rivers. It is in this lush environment that you find concentrations of game. From hippo foraging at night to the roar of a lion pride at dawn, you never forget you are deep in the heart of the African wilderness.

In Botswana, you don't need to enter a game park to see wildlife. The highways are traversed by everything from giraffe to zebra.

No wonder they nickname the road to Zimbabwe the Elephant Highway.

One night, when our alternator stopped charging our battery and the headlights died, we drove 200km with Max hanging out of the window and guiding me with a torch. We came to a screeching halt 5cm from a giraffe.

It took us four hours to drive 150km.

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