

WILDLIFE WANDERLUST



While Kruger National Park was the out-and-out winner for your favourite park in South Africa, here are the runners-up.



KGALAGADI TRANSFRONTIER PARK, NORTHERN CAPE

There are few other protected areas in Southern Africa that can match Kgalagadi's size, sense of wilderness and range of accommodation options. Spread across two national parks in South Africa (9591 square kilometres) and Botswana (28400 square kilometres), this cross-border conservation area is larger than most small countries. Contained within it are Southern Africa's last migrating herds of springbok, as well as hundreds of wildebeest and eland and large indigenous lion and cheetah populations.

'The palette of natural colours Kgalagadi has to offer is a photographer's dream,' adds Capetonian reader Anton Lotz of the park set within the Kalahari Desert, a three-hour drive north of Upington. Its landscape is defined by endless dunes, which are fixed in position by the vegetation despite strong prevailing August winds. Cutting through these dune fields are two ephemeral rivers – the Auob and the Nossob – which flow only every few decades when rainfall is particularly good.

The two main roads follow these dry riverbeds, as do most of the animals, which congregate around 120 man-made waterholes tapping into ground-water reserves more than 50 metres below. Along with fences on the western and southern borders of the park, these boreholes are people's only real influence in this massive conservation area; the rest of the park's ecological system operates pretty much unhindered, as it has done for tens of thousands of years.

Another reason Anton and others love Kgalagadi is that it's less well known than some other parks. 'The wildlife experiences are more intimate and the enjoyment of nature more personal.'

It's one of Africa's last great wilderness areas, yet visitors can choose from a variety of comfortable accommodation options, including eight small, unfenced wilderness camps (each with eight fully equipped self-catering chalets), as well as campsites and chalets at the three larger camps of Twee Rivieren, Nossob and Mata-Mata. Privately owned !Xaus Lodge is a community-run luxury concession in the southwest of the park.

TOP TIP: Visit in November or December. Although temperatures are high, the first thunderstorms would have transformed the semi-arid landscape into a wonderland of life. You'll also miss the busy winter season and get a 30 per cent discount if you visit between 1 November and 15 December.

TOP ACTIVITY: A morning walk with a ranger at Twee Rivieren, Nossob or Mata-Mata gives you a chance to stretch your legs and learn about the survival strategies of plants and animals.

TOP ACCOMMODATION: Get away from the busy southern region and head to the wilderness camps of Grootkolk or Gharagab, near Union's End on the Namibian border.

CONTACT AND PRICES: Tel 054-561-2000, email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org. Accommodation rates in the park range from R170 for a campsite to R1 135 for a wilderness camp chalet (sleeping two people) and R1 600 a person a night sharing at !Xaus.



RICHTERSVELD, NORTHERN CAPE

The desert mountains and vast valleys on the southern border of Namibia may be South Africa's most inaccessible wilderness area,

and it's a magnet for seasoned 4x4ers and self-sufficient nature lovers who enjoy stark yet stunning landscapes.

The Richtersveld is part of the greater !Ai-!Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, which covers more than 6000 square kilometres of conserved land across southern Namibia and northwestern South Africa. About 27 per cent of this area – 1600 square kilometres – makes up the South African portion, through which the Orange River runs like a vein of coolness, bringing much-needed relief to visitors. At night, silence reigns supreme as the sparkling stars twist in a dreamy circle above your campfire.

Don't come here expecting to see wildlife, although incredibly there are some hardy residents such as klipspringer, gemsbok, Hartmann's zebra and leopard. Rather, the rewards of the Richtersveld lie in its utter remoteness and imposing atmosphere. Out here you're truly very small and, more than most other national parks, this cathedral of nature imparts a

sense of wonder that is hidden by the humdrum of modern life. Marie van Rensburg of Gordon's Bay says, 'I love the barren, wide-open spaces, the loneliness, the absolute silence and the unique plants.'

The Richtersveld contains some of the rarest desert flora, including the three species of quiver tree which have adapted to handle searing summer temperatures, minimal rainfall and cold winter nights. The region to the south of the park was declared a World Heritage Site in 2007 because of its botanical and cultural significance, and there are plans to eventually include the !Ai-!Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park itself, which is also South Africa's first national park to be owned by the local community (South African National Parks rent the land). Visitors are often surprised to see Nama shepherds, the last nomadic people in the country, moving their goats through the park.

The campsites at Sendelingsdrif, Potjiespram, De Hoop, Richtersburg (all on the Orange River) and inland at Kokerboomkloof are basic, with communal ablutions. For those wanting a bed and kitchen, there are fully equipped self-catering chalets at the park entrance of Sendelingsdrif, and at the wilderness camps of Tatasberg and Gannakouriep. >

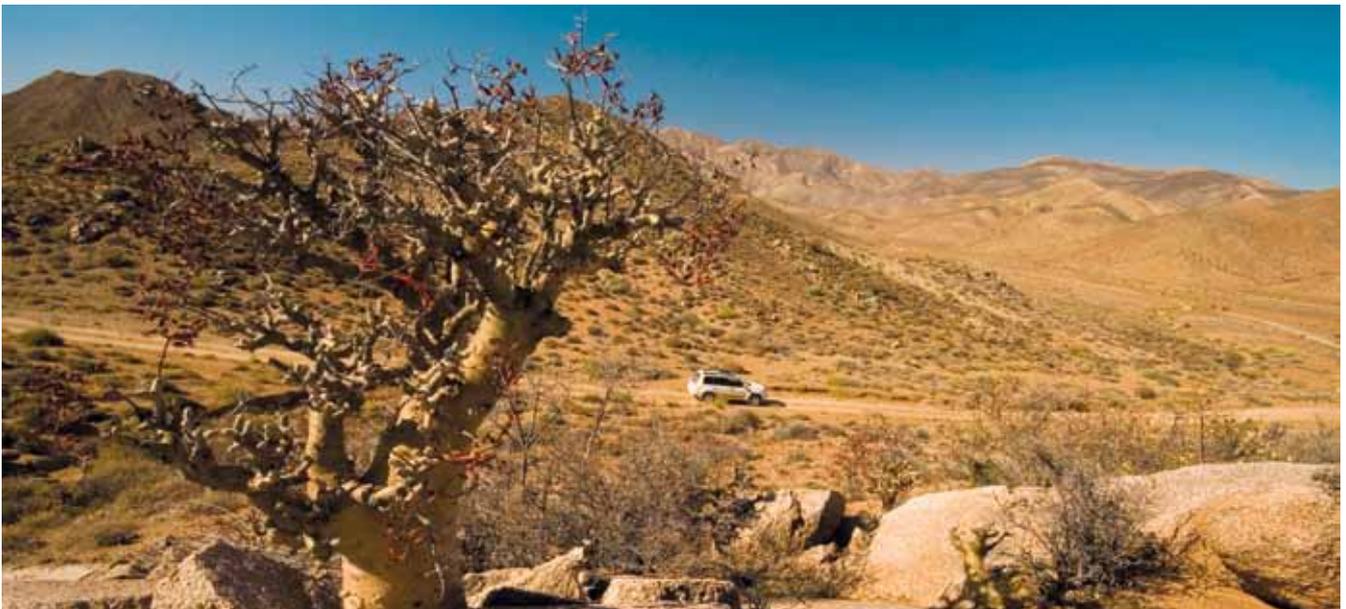
TOP TIP: Visitors should come fully prepared with all the food, water, camping equipment and first-aid kit they need. Once inside the park, there's no cellphone reception and a few kilometres of rocky jeep track can take several hours to traverse. The summer heat reaches 45° Celsius in the shade, so most visitors prefer to travel between April and October.

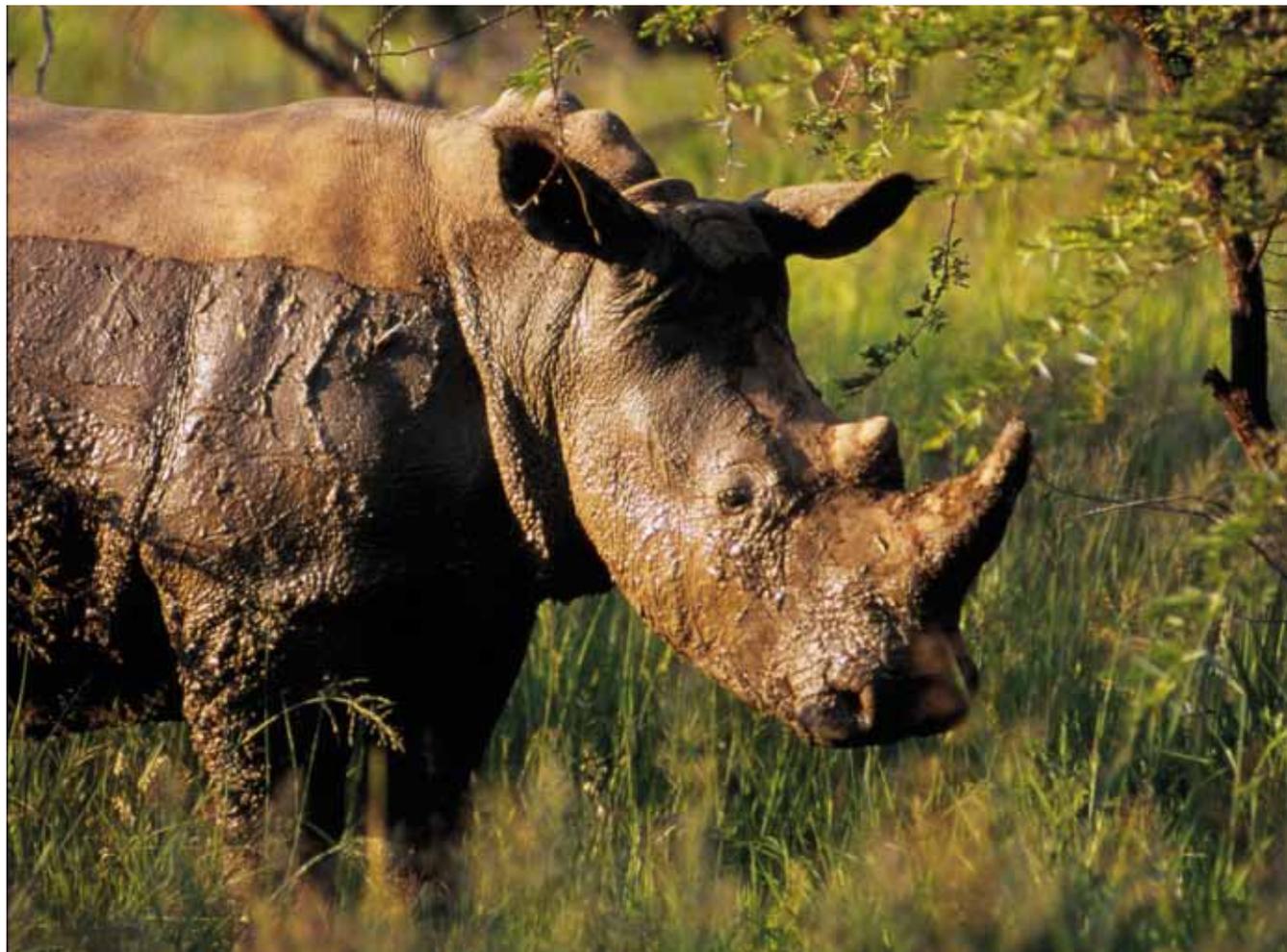
TOP ACTIVITY: There are no guided walks or game drives in the Richtersveld, but this is part of its charm. Visitors are free to explore where they wish and it can feel as if you have the park to yourself. One of the best day hikes, albeit strenuous, is to the top of Tatasberg, a mountain of boulders that gives mind-bending views

over the whole region. Ask the ranger at Tatasberg Wilderness Camp for directions to the start of the hike and remember to take water, snacks, sunscreen, a hat and a GPS unit.

TOP ACCOMMODATION: Although camping is the best way to appreciate the essence of the Richtersveld, rustic Tatasberg gives visitors the chance to dust off and freshen up; there are five rustic two-bed chalets, each with a kitchen and bathroom.

CONTACT AND PRICES: Tel 027-831-1506, email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org. Accommodation rates in the park range from R180 for a campsite to R665 a night for a two-sleeper chalet.





**PILANESBERG GAME RESERVE,
NORTH WEST**

For Highveld desk slaves, the Pilanesberg offers an ideal weekend bush break: it's a two-hour drive from Johannesburg, malaria-free, and offers a range of accommodation from affordable family-friendly self-catering to luxury lodges.

Pilanesberg fan, reader Amelia Byrne of Durban says, 'The wildlife is fairly used to vehicles and because it's not a huge reserve, the game is concentrated, so you can see a lot. You can easily spend a week there.' Big Five sightings are frequent. Because of this and the amazing panoramas, Pilanesberg is a delight for photographers and point-and-shoot happy snappers.

Most recently, wild dogs have made the wilderness area their new home and sightings have been common. (In the past few years they have stayed along the fence, only rarely being seen.) Also watch out for less common species such as brown hyena and sable.

Pilanesberg is home to more than 350 species of birds, because of large dams such as Mankwe, making it something of a twitcher's paradise.

TOP TIP: Keen birders and photographers should be sure to spend a few hours at one of the seven hides within the park. East-facing Mankwe, Ruighoek and Malatse boast beautiful afternoon light, while Rathlogo is equally as striking in the morning light.

TOP ACTIVITY: If heights don't make you queasy, take a hot-air balloon flight over the park at sunrise. For queries and bookings, email adventures@pilanesberggamereserve.com.

TOP ACCOMMODATION: Bakgatla and Manyane have campsites and chalets available in the south and southeastern parts of the park, close to Sun City. You can also choose to get away from the crowds (Pilanesberg is particularly busy over long weekends) by visiting the more remote lodges, luxurious Shepherd's Tree Game Lodge and the Black Rhino Reserve, which are both situated in an exclusive-use zone in the north-western portion of the reserve.

CONTACT AND PRICES: Accommodation rates in the park range from R150 a campsite a night to R1 300 for two-sleeper chalets to R2 250 a person a night at a luxury lodge. For information on various accommodation and activity options in the reserve, go to www.pilanesberggamereserve.com.

Justin Fox, Scott Ramsey



HLUHLUWE-IMFOLOZI GAME RESERVE, KWAZULU-NATAL

One of the three oldest protected areas in Africa, the amalgamated provincial parks of Hluhluwe and iMfolozi were proclaimed in 1897 to protect the last 50-odd white rhino left on Earth, survivors from the butchery of colonial hunters who wiped out several hundred thousand in less than a century.

Most visitors today will find it hard to believe that rhinos were – or are – in any danger of extinction; Hluhluwe-iMfolozi has such large populations of white rhino, you're almost guaranteed to see them.

There's so much more to this park than rhinos, though. Lion, leopard, cheetah and wild dog are often spotted preying on impala, nyala and kudu, which thrive in the hills and valleys of northern Zululand. Elephants, once hunted to local extinction, were reintroduced in the 1980s from Kruger National Park and today there are more than 600.

At 90000 hectares, it's a relatively small park but hugely diverse in habitats. The Hluhluwe section comprises dense scarp forest on hills at an altitude of 500 metres, while nearby in iMfolozi, the rolling grasslands and bushveld alongside the White Umfolozi River are just 60 metres above sea level.

It's also among the most accessible of South Africa's Big Five reserves. 'I live in Pietermaritzburg,' says reader Simone Gray, 'so Hluhluwe-iMfolozi is only a three-hour drive away. There seems to be fewer tourists compared to, say, Kruger, so game-viewing doesn't become a competition.'

TOP TIP: Despite being a relatively small park, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi's diversity means visitors should spend at least a week here. Any shorter and you're bound to leave feeling like you should have stayed longer.

TOP ACTIVITY: A wilderness trail offers unparalleled experiences of South Africa's wildlife heritage. Lasting two to five days, the trails in the iMfolozi section are guided by an experienced, armed ranger, who imparts his knowledge to hikers. Be prepared for a life-changing adventure; sleeping under the stars, walking alongside wild animals and listening to lions roar while keeping watch around the camp fire will recalibrate your spiritual compass. The four-night Primitive Trail costs R2770 a person, including food.

TOP ACCOMMODATION: Hilltop Camp in Hluhluwe has a range of rondavels, bungalows and luxury chalets, as well as perhaps the best restaurant of all parks and reserves in the country, with views on a clear day to Lake St Lucia on the Indian Ocean coast. The unfenced Mpila Camp in iMfolozi is more rustic and caters for the purist bush lover (while braaing at night watch out for lion, hyena and leopard on the edges of camp, but during the day you're more likely to get a visit from nyala, zebra or impala).

CONTACT AND PRICES: Tel 033-845-1000, email bookings@kznwildlife.com, www.kznwildlife.com. Accommodation rates in the park start at R385 a person a night for a two-sleeper self-catering chalet at Mpila and go to R5400 for the exclusive Gqoyeni Bush Lodge, which sleeps eight.





ADDO ELEPHANT NATIONAL PARK, EASTERN CAPE

Reader Nigel Roach of Bedfordview loves Addo because it offers ‘an abundance of

unforgettable experiences every few kilometres’ and one of these has to be close encounters with the majestic pachyderms that give the park its name.

Originally established in 1931 to protect the last few elephants of the Eastern Cape region, one of only three remaining indigenous populations of elephants in South Africa, Addo has expanded considerably and today is one of the country’s most diverse, both in terms of wildlife and scenery.

The Nama karoo scrubland of the Darlington section in the north of the park is a good place to spot black rhino; further south are the fynbos-clad mountains of the Kabouga and Zuurberg sections, with a beautiful 4x4 route, guided horse-riding trails and breathtaking views.

But it’s in the subtropical thickets of the main section where most of the wildlife can be seen, including elephant, lion, buffalo, hyena and black and white rhino. At the southern end of the park, huge coastal dune fields contrast with the emerald temperate forest and pale-blue Indian Ocean. A marine protected area includes the largest Cape gannet colony in the world on Bird Island, while one of the largest breeding colonies of African penguins can be found on St Croix island.

Wildlife purists may be frustrated by the lack of ‘wildness’, but Addo needs to be seen in context. Surrounded by agriculture and towns, including Port Elizabeth just an hour’s

drive to the southwest, the park is perhaps the most accessible, authentic Big Five destination in South Africa and is a rewarding stopover for the traveller visiting the nearby Garden Route. It’s also one of the few protected areas in Africa that con-serves both elephants and whales, the most common being the southern right.

Accommodation is equally diverse, ranging from the small, remote and rustic Narina Bush Camp in the Zuurberg section and traditional chalets at Addo Rest Camp, to the luxury of the privately run Gorah Elephant Camp and finally the Langebos Hiking Hut on the two-day Alexandria Hiking Trail in the south of the park.

TOP TIP: To fully appreciate Addo, be sure to explore all its sections, starting in the dry northern Darlington section and ending on the dune fields in the southern Woody Cape section.

TOP ACTIVITY: Unique among the national parks, you can explore the mountains of Zuurberg or spot the Big Five the main wildlife section on horseback.

TOP ACCOMMODATION: While the chalets at Addo Rest Camp are comfortable and close to the main wildlife section, Narina Bush Camp along the Wit River is a wilder option, with just four two-bed tents and a boma for braaing.

CONTACT AND PRICES: Tel 042-233-8600, email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org. Prices range from R190 for a campsite to R2985 a night for the four-sleeper Hapoor Guest House.



TANKWA KAROO NATIONAL PARK, WESTERN AND NORTHERN CAPE

Capetonian Julie Velosa says, 'Tankwa Karoo seems an unlikely place to love, considering it can be barren, dry and dusty in summer. However, therein lies its charm. As you enter the region, you lose cell reception and you could be on another planet. The air is still and the silence is breathtaking. The night sky is ink-black, studded with more stars than you could think possible. No smog, no skyscrapers, no city noise...'

This relatively unknown yet increasingly popular park holds an indefinable charm belying its starkness. Here you'll find big skies, distant horizons and never-ending views. Freedom and space are in almost limitless supply and there are few places that rival its simplicity, serenity and silence.

Named after the seasonal Tankwa River in the south of the park, it lies in the valley between the Cederberg mountains and the Great Karoo escarpment and incorporates three distinct biomes: pure desert in the west, open grasslands in the centre and the Roggeveld mountains in the east.

The park was proclaimed in 1986, but wasn't opened to the public for 20 years, giving the veld time to recuperate from a century of overgrazing by livestock. Today it's more than 140 000 hectares and famous among botanists for its endemic succulent plants – about 70 per cent of the region's plants are

found nowhere else in the world. In July and August, early winter rains add vitality to the arid landscape, which bursts into a kaleidoscopic carpet of spring flowers rivalling the more famous Namaqualand.

Animals are few and far between because of the arid climate, but thanks to the low-growing vegetation and endless vistas, visitors are able to see herds of springbok, hartebeest and gemsbok, while kudu can be found in the kloofs of the Roggeveld mountains.

TOP TIP: Spring flowers seem to arrive here a few weeks before those in Namaqualand, so if you're a flower fan visit in late July, when the arid veld turns into a palette of colour.

TOP ACTIVITY: The 4x4 route to the top of Elandsberg will reward with a panoramic view incorporating the Cederberg, a vast valley of table-topped koppies and the start of the Great Karoo's escarpment.

TOP ACCOMMODATION: All the places to stay here are sensitively situated and designed. The old farmhouses have been restored to their former glory and the superlative Elandsberg Wilderness Camp is among the finest in the SanParks system.

CONTACT AND PRICES: Tel 027-341-1927, email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org. Prices range from R95 for camping to R1 185 for the four-sleeper family cottage at Elandsberg.





Scott Ramsay



GARDEN ROUTE NATIONAL PARK, WESTERN AND EASTERN CAPE

The Garden Route National Park works its magic on everyone who visits what is arguably the country's most photogenic protected area. Stretched 150 kilometres along the temperate Southern Cape coast, between the town of Wilderness in the west and the Groot River in the east, this rather fragmented area is an amalgamation of the former Wilderness, Knysna and Tsitsikamma parks. Reader Daniella Hayman of Cape Town says, 'Every time we go we experience new things. We enjoy lounging on the beaches but also the tranquil forests. It's the perfect weekend escape.'

There is so much to admire: the thick, luminous green jungle around Knysna, where 50-metre high, 1 000-year-old yellowwood trees stand guard over the biggest tract of indigenous forest in the country and where the last free-roaming, unfenced, wild elephants in South Africa survive (recent studies suggest there could be five remaining). Despite the pressures of urban development, the Knysna Estuary is still among the most important – and beautiful – in the country, providing a crucial nursery for ocean fish.

In Wilderness, bird lovers will find joy on the coastal lakes of Langvlei, Rondevlei and Swartvlei: these sustain the highest number and concentration of waterbird species on the Cape's southern and east coasts. If you stay at the Ebb & Flow Rest Camp, be sure to paddle up the forested Touw River Gorge, and keep your eyes peeled for the scarlet flashes of Knysna turacos.

The Tsitsikamma coastal forest and the adjoining marine protected area (the oldest in the country, declared in 1964) is the dreamscape through which hikers on the famous Otter Trail saunter (or suffer). The rewards far outweigh the efforts, though; hikers sleep in spectacularly positioned huts and the

sea views are more marvellous than fiction. Visit the Storms River Rest Camp and restaurant if you want an easier way to appreciate the natural beauty and the walk over the suspension bridge at the river's mouth is not to be missed.

■ Turn to page 48 to read more about Knysna, which was voted our readers' favourite holiday town.

TOP TIP: It's impossible to do everything on offer in this national park, but visit the following places to get a good sense of what it entails: the restaurant at the Storms River Mouth, the elephant museum at Diepwalle in the Knysna forest and the Touw River Gorge where you can kayak from Ebb & Flow Rest Camp.

TOP ACTIVITY: There are so many worth mentioning, including walking and mountain-biking in the Knysna forests, paddling up the Touw River Gorge with Eden Adventures (www.eden.co.za), exploring the languid Storms River with Untouched Adventures (www.untouchedadventures.com), birding on the lakes, sunset cruising on the Knysna Estuary, or paragliding with Cloudbase (www.cloudbase-paragliding.co.za). Still, the Otter Trail takes the cake; it must be done by everyone at least once in their lives.

TOP ACCOMMODATION: Ebb & Flow and Storms River rest camps are among the most popular in all national parks, as both are spectacularly situated, but to get away from the masses stay at either the luxurious, isolated Knysna Tree Top Forest Chalet in the Harkerville Forest, or the rustic Diepwalle camping decks in the forest north of Knysna.

CONTACT AND PRICES: Tel 044-302-5600, email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org. Prices range from R180 for a campsite at Nature's Valley to R2565 for the four-bed guest cottages at Storms River Mouth Rest Camp. ■

Opulence Personified

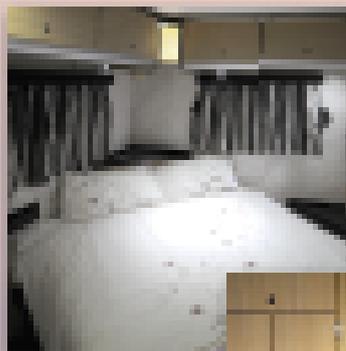
The new Power has all the luxury and convenience. Power has roomed you out behind the wheel, which helps taking your long trips, you are comfortable being in the driver's seat. A large glass window, a large mirror, a microwave, a refrigerator, a sink with hot and cold water and a spacious open space.

The driver's seat is the most comfortable. The driver's seat is tilted by tilting it through the seat mechanism, and all these amenities that are available will be for you.

The sleeping area is ideal for both and sleeping. The Power has your full size bed and sleeping facility system - you can play like an adult in the Power.

On the road you get the ride of your life as the comfortable double bed has been specially designed for your comfort in the Power. The Power is the most comfortable you ever sleep.

You enjoy the better things in life, the new Power is for you.



The Power has all the luxury and convenience of a motorhome. The Power has roomed you out behind the wheel, which helps taking your long trips, you are comfortable being in the driver's seat. A large glass window, a large mirror, a microwave, a refrigerator, a sink with hot and cold water and a spacious open space.

