



# At home in the wild

Scott Ramsay loves the great outdoors. And he has a particular fondness for South Africa's national parks and reserves, which is why he has dedicated the last couple of years to visiting these wonderful wildlife destinations. *Leisure Wheels* recently spoke to him about his Year in the Wild project

Text: GG van Rooyen Photography: Supplied by Scott Ramsay

**Not long ago** Scott Ramsay, like most people, had an office job. And like most outdoor enthusiasts, he hated every minute of it, and counted the days until he could again leave the city and venture into the wilds.

"I love being away from everything. That's when I am happiest. I don't have a problem being on my own in the middle of nowhere," says Scott.

As staring at a computer screen for eight hours a day became increasingly hard to bear, an idea started forming in Scott's mind. What if he could make a living travelling to southern Africa's wilderness spots? And what if he could use his travels to educate South Africans about their country's world-renowned parks and reserves?

Scott had worked as a photo-journalist for *Getaway* magazine, so he knew that photography would form a big part of the project. He was inspired by the example of Ansel Adams, an American landscape photographer who had travelled through the country's national parks, capturing striking images in the process. Scott wanted to do the same.

"My aim was to show people the beauty and diversity of our parks," says Scott. "I really believe that biodiversity is Africa's greatest asset, and the only way to truly take advantage of this asset is to foster tourism. Of course, the converse is also true – if we don't take care of our biodiversity, tourist numbers will dwindle."

It took Scott about two years to turn his dream into reality. Lining up sponsors was a critical aspect of the preparation, but eventually everything was in place and he was ready to hit the road.

The project was named Year in the Wild, and Scott's aim was exactly that – to spend a year in SA's national parks.

"The first project ran from 2011 to 2012, and I visited 31 protected areas throughout SA. It was a very positive experience. SANParks supported the project, and in general I found that the parks were well managed.

"Some of the places I visited were truly amazing. The biodiversity of iSimangaliso, (St Lucia) with its corral reefs, was wonderful. Mountain Zebra National Park was another fantastic protected area that I really enjoyed, but it does not attract enough visitors."

But the trip wasn't all fun and games. It was tiring at times.

"My friends and family tended to laugh at me when I said I was working, but it really was work. I spent a lot of time away from my family, and drove about 70 000km. The whole year was planned in advance, including time with experts and rangers at the various parks.

"The experience brought home to me SA's enormous diversity, which few countries can rival. In fact, SA is the third most bio-diverse

country in the world," says Scott.

"Unfortunately, though, the trip also showed me that we don't do enough to protect our natural resources.

"The biggest threats to our parks are financial and sociological. Every year, government's subsidies to the parks are being cut. It's a great mistake, because our protected areas are our most important long-term assets. They are not only critical to our survival – for instance, as a source of much of our fresh water – but they are storehouses which ensure that our crops are pollinated and that our soils remain healthy so that we can withstand the ecological changes that will inevitably occur with global warming.

"And of course, foreign visitors come to SA specifically to see our wildlife and wonderful scenery. The challenge, therefore, is to create eco-tourism that is sustainable and creates jobs in the long term. The best way South Africans can contribute to conservation is to visit the parks, which rely heavily on income earned from visitors to finance conservation."

Scott says the lack of awareness about the need to protect the environment is a threat in itself.

"We should make it as easy as possible for our people to visit the national and provincial parks and reserves, because these wild places belong to everyone. More than 90% of the land has already been transformed in some way, and about 50% of the once natural, pristine habitat has been irretrievably lost. The wild places that remain are by far the most important and

valuable parts of our country.

"Children of all races and social backgrounds should be given the opportunity of encountering a lion or elephant or rhino in the wild – not in a zoo, or on TV, but out in the bush. If we don't give them such opportunities, we will have only ourselves to blame if one day our remaining wild areas are turned into housing estates, farms or shopping malls. That would be a tragedy, and I certainly don't want to be around to see that happen.

"So here's my challenge. Next time you go on holiday to a national park, take someone from a disadvantaged background with you. It could be a life-changing experience for that young person."

Following the success of his first Year in the Wild, Scott has decided to continue with the project.

"My plan is to visit 35 protected areas this year, especially some of the smaller reserves that aren't well known. I'll also be going back to some of the main parks at a different time of the year, and visiting the transfrontier parks."

Scott is a lucky guy. He has not only figured out a way to do what he loves, but to use the venture to educate South Africans about their precious wildlife and natural resources. The way things are going now, Scott's Year in the Wild could eventually become a Decade in the Wild.

He has no plans of stopping soon.

"I'd like to expand the project – perhaps visit parks in neighbouring countries such as Namibia and Botswana. We'll see what the future holds."



## SCOTT'S KIT

What pieces of gear would you be unable to live without while on your travels?

- 1. My Ford Everest, of course!** Without it, I couldn't get anywhere. It's very adaptable to different surfaces, and is tougher than it looks. I have driven more than 100 000km over some of southern Africa's toughest terrain, and it has come through largely unscathed. I love this vehicle!
- 2. My Goodyear Wrangler tyres** have been very reliable and perfect for my needs. I always make sure they are correctly inflated according to the road surfaces. They have been tough and comfortable.
- 3. My EeziAwn roof-top tent.** I sleep more soundly in it than in my own bed at home! It's extremely comfortable, easy to erect and dismantle, and has huge windows, with mosquito netting. This means I'm always cool, even in the hottest conditions. It has a tarpaulin that helps keep the rain off.
- 4. My National Luna fridge.** Everyone knows that a cold beer is the most important item on any expedition to a wild place in Africa. National Luna makes a range of fridges which run off a dual battery system, and mine works really well.
- 5. My Tracks4Africa GPS software.** This should be your first purchase for any overland trip. I rely on this software to direct me safely and quickly to my destination. It's a community-based set of waypoints collected from thousands of overlanders, and it's updated regularly.

## ADVICE FROM SCOTT

Here are some tips from Scott Ramsay to help you plan your next trip:

**1** Many South African are pretty familiar with the Kruger National Park, but what are some interesting or different ways to enjoy the park? What would you suggest to readers who want a "different" experience there?

Kruger offers a lot more than just driving around all day. I particularly enjoy the seven hiking trails, such as the Nyalaland Wilderness Trail. You sleep in a small tented camp for a few nights, and every day two armed rangers

take you on guided walks. Because you are in a designated wilderness area there are no other people, and no other camps, so you get to see parts of the park that are usually off limits.

The three backpack trails, like the Olifants trail, are even wilder. You are dropped off with two armed rangers who guide you for four days through the bush, with no specific route. You carry your own food, clothing and tent, sleep out in the open around a fire and wash in the river (careful of the crocs!).

The guides for both the wilderness and backpack trails are some of the most experienced and knowledgeable in the park, so you're in safe hands if you do encounter any of the Big Five, which you may well do!

**2** What are the three quietest or most remote parks, where you can really get away from the crowds?

Richtersveld National Park in the Northern Cape, on the Namibian border, is one of the most impressive protected areas I have visited. You feel really isolated in this true wilderness. Visitors need a fully-equipped 4x4, and although

even better than those in Namaqualand, and the accommodation, especially Elandsberg Wilderness Camp, is brilliant. Tankwa is becoming more popular, but it's still largely unknown.

The community-owned Tembe Elephant Park in northern KwaZulu-Natal, on the Mozambique border, is my favourite wildlife destination because it is home to some of the largest tuskers left in Africa. For this reason alone it should be recognised as one of the continent's most valuable parks. I'm amazed that more people don't know about it, because the sand forest habitat is unique and very beautiful, and there's also a thriving lion population.

iSimangaliso Wetland Park, also in northern KwaZulu-Natal, is very diverse, and offers something for everyone. You can go scuba diving with whale sharks in the morning, and by lunchtime you can be photographing white rhino. It has more species of animals than any other protected area in Africa.

Kogelberg Nature Reserve in the Western Cape near Betty's Bay is astounding, not only because of the mountain scenery but because it has more species of plants per hectare than anywhere in the world. And the self-catering eco-friendly accommodation is the best I've seen.

#### 4. If you were forced to visit only one SA park for the rest of your life, which one would it be? And why?

Great question! I'd have to say Kruger, because it is basically its own country – its own world, even. There is always something going on, and always something new to see. The animals

would become like brothers and sisters to me. I don't think I could ever be lonely in Kruger, because I'd always be surrounded by the most marvellous array of wild animals. I feel at home there, perhaps more so than in any other park.

I also love Table Mountain National Park, because I live very close to it and never tire of exploring it. The marine protected area around it is fantastic, too. To me, this park provides an excellent example to the rest of the world of how man relies on nature for many things, and

it can be relatively busy during mid-year school holidays, at other times it is very quiet.

Anysberg Nature Reserve south of Laingsburg in the Karoo is another remote park. There are only a few cottages in a relatively large area, and the space and silence is mind-bending. It's one of the best places to view stars because there is no light pollution.

The Drakensberg is special, too. Although the popular camps like Thendele and Didima are busy, if you hike into the upper mountains you can be all alone for weeks on end. You may encounter the odd Basotho herder or dagga smuggler, but these mountains are seriously wild, and quite dangerous in bad weather, so always be prepared.

#### 3. Which of our parks – say five of them – are the most underrated?

Mkambati Nature Reserve on the eastern Wild Coast, in Pondoland, is certainly one of them. This community-owned reserve is one of the most beautiful and least known of our parks. It's a truly special place at the centre of the Pondoland Marine Protected Area, where the sardine run occurs each year. It deserves to be one of the country's premier protected areas but has been largely forgotten because it lies in such a remote part of the Wild Coast.

Tankwa Karoo National Park, on the border of Northern and Western Cape, is one of my all-time favourites. The spring flowers are

how protected areas can add real value to a city.

#### 5. What are some of the best places for people with specific interests? For example, which parks would you recommend for hikers/birders/4x4 fans/etc?

For hikers, I'd say either Cederberg wilderness area in the Western Cape or the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg World Heritage Site, although hikes like the Otter Trail in Garden Route National Park are amazing, too.

For birders, it really does depend on your interests, but iSimangaliso is special, while places like De Hoop Nature Reserve and Wilderness Lakes on the Garden Route attract lots of water birds.

For 4x4 fans, Richtersveld and Kgalagadi are the ultimate. For star-gazing, I'd say Anysberg or Tankwa Karoo National Park. For divers and snorkellers, iSimangaliso is superb, while Table Mountain National Park offers incredible wildlife experiences with seals and sharks.

For photography, well, any national park or provincial reserve is great! **LW**

#### Year in the Wild 2013-14

Following on from his first Year in the Wild, Scott Ramsay is travelling from July 2013 to October 2014 to some of the same parks (but in different seasons) as well as to many new parks and nature reserves in SA and the transfrontier parks in southern Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Again, his goal is to create awareness about protected areas, and to inspire others to travel to these natural wonderlands.

Partners include Cape Union Mart, Ford Everest, Goodyear and K-Way, with support from WildCard, EeziAwn, Frontrunner, Globecomm, National Luna, Outdoor Photo, Safari Centre Cape Town, Tracks 4 Africa, and Vodacom.

>> [www.yearinthewild.com](http://www.yearinthewild.com), and visit the Facebook page.