

Sand, sisterhood *and* strafdoppe

Words by Jane Goodfellow. Pictures by Jane Goodfellow and Scarlett Steer.



Most people would agree that women are quite different from men, and some would even argue that they're a different species entirely. So we thought it would be interesting to send out two of our female staffers to experience the off-road delights of southern Namibia in order to get a feminine perspective on a typical off-road experience. SA4x4's former sub-editor, Jane Goodfellow, dishes up the dirt.



What adventurous girl in her right mind would turn down an opportunity to join a bunch of women off-roading in southern Namibia? Not me! I quickly roped in Scarlett Steer, the vibrant former editor of our sister publication, *Leisure Boating*, who's pretty nifty with a camera (Ed: Sadly, Ms Steer has since left our employ and is now working for a competitor magazine. Clearly the 4x4 bug bit her badly!)

We set off bright and early (actually, it was dark and early) in a gleaming gold Toyota Fortuna for Noordoewer and the rendezvous at Abiqua Camp, where we were to meet up with 19 other women the following day for an afternoon's river rafting. We thought we'd given ourselves plenty of time to get there, pitch the tent, relax over a sundowner and get acquainted with Cederberg 4x4's Coenie Moll, adventure organiser extraordinaire.

Then we hit a little glitch. My passport had expired and we were turned back at the border. By the incredible efforts of Home Affairs' charming, helpful Miss Arendse, the following day I was issued a temporary passport and we resumed our journey, catching up with Coenie and the convoy of ebullient girls as they were about to leave Abiqua for



the first day's 4x4 excursion. Coenie quickly set up our two-way radio for us; it was to be the source of much merriment and considerable frustration in the days ahead.

A 35 km drive along the excellent gravel road that snakes along the north bank of the Orange River brought us to the Aussenkehr resort, a lush, peaceful oasis where we picked up Beyers, our knowledgeable guide for the day, got some driving tips from Coenie, and had tea. A few of the resort's chalets appear to float on the river and are accessible only via gangplanks, and their romantic isolation prompted much fantasising among the women.

This was our first opportunity to really chat to the other teams – Girl Cub, Bush Babes, Sand Cats, *Pikkewyne* and *Witblitz*. Our moniker was the Sand Witches. We ranged in age from mid-20s to early-60s, and were mostly novices at 4x4ing.

We set off for Organ Pipe Canyon with its towering red sandstone cliffs. So far, the driving was easy on good gravel; we'd stayed in high-range and one could have driven all the way from Noordoewer to the end of this spectacular gorge in a 2WD vehicle. Emerging from the canyon we headed uphill, engaging low-range for the



A wrapped-and-ready Jane and Scarlett, dressed for an early adventure.

BORDER CROSSING INFORMATION

Check Namibia's latest regulations about taking meat, dairy, maize, tobacco and liquor into the country before you leave home to avoid fines/confiscation.

- R160 Namibian road tax is payable at Noordoewer.
- Take your vehicle registration papers and a valid passport!
- The border post is open 24 hours a day.
- Put your seatbelt on as soon as you get back in your vehicle between border posts, otherwise you're liable for a R300 pp spot fine as you enter Namibia.



Who said sand dunes were difficult to drive?

first time as we meandered along a winding, sandy, hilly road. The radio crackled into life; it was Coenie, telling us we were stopping up ahead to look at pieces of a petrified forest. These bits of fossilised tree trunk that were strewn about on a sandy hill are millions of years old. The annual rings of these ancient trees were clearly visible; we stood gazing about in disbelief, trying – and failing – to imagine this desiccated, forbidding landscape as a lush forest.

Suddenly, as we crested the plateau, the view opened up. We could see for miles across a gently undulating pastel landscape of ochre grass and grayish sand to the distant, arid mountains of the Richtersveld. A couple of springbok skittered off while a few wispy streaks of cloud teased through the sky, but the increasing heat soon dissipated them.

The scent of vanilla suddenly pervaded our cabin: it was Scarlett's vanilla-flavoured lip balm, which seemed to need frequent applications – a good indication of the dryness of the environment. It was a scent I got to know well in the days ahead, so girls, if you're heading to Namibia, take loads of moisturiser and lip balm, or your skin will do the crocodile thing in a matter of hours.

Coenie pointed out a *witgatboom* – one can apparently brew a coffee-

like beverage from its roots. After negotiating a few rollicking sandy hillocks with flair in low-range second gear (the Fortuner seemed to love this sort of terrain), Coenie stopped the convoy at the top of an incredibly ▶

GIRL TIPS

Take loads of moisturiser, sunblock, lip balm, eye drops (if you use them), and a good bra!



Girl power and great attitudes made getting stuck fun for all.

SAND DRIVING TIPS

- Deflate tyres to around 0.9 bar.
- Diff-lock will help in deep sand.
- Know your vehicle – low-range third worked for us.
- Walk the dune before you drive it to get an idea how it drops off on the other side.
- It's momentum that'll get you up a dune, not low gears.
- Try not to change gear in thick sand; the lower the gear, the greater the chance of wheel spin.
- Follow the tracks of other vehicles; the sand will be compacted.



steep sandy hill and told us to deflate our tyres to 0.9 bar.

This hill looked almost impossible to walk down, let alone drive, which we were to do one at a time. And when Coenie warned that we were to glance out of our windows and check that the sand wasn't slipping down faster than we were travelling (if it was, we were to accelerate – and on no account were we to swerve or turn sideways because the vehicle would roll) we knew this was serious stuff. With hearts in mouths and with much encouragement from the other women and Coenie on the radio, we inched and slid our way down to the lunch spot.

That afternoon we encountered a few saltpans – which of course we didn't drive on – and lots more sand. Some vehicles got bogged down, but not seriously. Coenie taught us how to reverse slightly to compact the sand under the wheels before trying again, and it worked like a charm. The road back to Aussenkehr meandered along a mostly dry riverbed with occasional sulphurous pools of stagnant water; it didn't do to breathe too deeply.

Back at the camp the braai fires were lit, friendships were forged, and I got

firsthand experience of *strafdroppe*. It seemed I had to be penalised for our late arrival, and this involved imbibing several tots of *witblits*. Scarlett had retired early with a bad head cold, but her punishment was merely delayed. A hilarious game called "Pass the cucumber" kept everyone awake till late. And I thought a ladies' trip was going to be relaxed and quiet!

It rained heavily that night, which kept the dust down for the first part of our 110 km drive to Klein Aus Vista next day, made shorter by the girls' continuous chirping on the two-way radio. The road followed the Orange, and we stopped right on the water's edge for lunch. The vehicles that were towing trailers got seriously stuck here, and we all helped push them out – with the exception of brave Hannelie from Grahamstown who was five weeks pregnant, so we wouldn't let her push.

Then it was onwards to Rosh Pinah, where a fantastic Spar in the middle of pretty much nowhere came as a big surprise. It was a great place to refuel and stock up on essentials like chocolate cake. ▶



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Enthusiasm and quick reflexes were as important as Coenie's instructions.

Klein Aus Vista's fabulous campsite is surrounded by granite koppies which turned pink in the setting sun as we pitched camp. And the ablution block was great: each shower had its own little dressing room and enough hooks on which to hang clean clothes and dirty clothes separately, plus shelves for toiletries and a special towel hook. They were pretty much the best-designed shower blocks I've ever used.

That night the weather turned cold, the temperature dropped to 5° C, a bit too cold for camping, and we looked longingly at the chalets near the resort's restaurant. Coenie disappeared in his bakkie to camp

alone a few kilometres away; I guess the previous evening's campfire taught him that he was probably safer with the local wildlife than with this crazy group of women.

As this was the first time most of us had done a trip like this, I asked the girls what they were sorry they hadn't brought along, suggesting anything from a tin opener to a wheel spanner. Here were some of the replies:

Angelina: "My family. I miss them!"

Molly: "My bed and TV."

Anita: "My cat Tigger who sleeps with me and keeps me warm."

Anonymous: "A good bra, these roads are seriously bumpy!"

Then I asked them what they were glad they'd brought, and they said:

Rhenda: "Wyn en vleis (in that order)."

Mercia: "My fantastic fold-up basin."

Anita: "Mercia! She's so sorted, she thought of everything."

One of them said, with an ironic grin, "Don't expect us to say anything profound, we're women!"

And at last it was Khoichab Dune Trail day. Smiles were a bit tight and the chatter subdued; we were all unsure what to expect, but knew we'd be putting into practice everything we'd learned about sand driving at Aussenkehr.

We set off for the Namib Naukluft Park, with Coenie driving up front with Piet Swiegers as guide. He's co-owner of Klein Aus Vista and was an endless source of interesting information about the area.

I thought sand was sand, until he told us "the red sand dunes are easier to drive in than the white dunes of the Namib, having coarser granules with a high iron content, which makes them slightly heavier. And dunes are easier to drive on in winter than in summer, or early in the day rather than late, because the extra moisture holds the granules together."

We headed imperceptibly downhill towards the dunes, traversing a serene landscape with the occasional koppie. Piet told us they were granite gneiss and were about 1.2 to three billion years old, and that this vast, tilted plateau was a catchment area, at the bottom of which was a subterranean aquifer that kept Lüderitz supplied with water. It was hard to believe that there could ever be enough run-off to fill a bath, let alone keep a town going. We saw a few springbok and the first of many gemsbok; they seem to have ▶

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This vehicle was loads of fun off-road and I had to try really, really hard not to feel smug when most of the other vehicles got stuck in the sand and we didn't. At all times I was absolutely confident of the vehicle's ability to get me safely wherever I wanted to go.

Space-wise, the Fortuner was more than adequate. We'd removed the third row of seats before we packed all our gear and there was ample packing room for all our goodies, including a fridge, tent, table, chairs, water bottles, all our food boxes and personal belongings etc., without a roofrack.



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a mysterious compulsion to gallop towards vehicles rather than away from them, and the convoy had to stop to allow a long line of these elegant antelope to canter across our path. Talking of paths, Piet made sure that we never ventured off the one existing track, thus limiting our impact on the pristine environment.

And then we were among the dunes, surprisingly camouflaged with pale yellow grass from last summer's heavy rains. One vehicle at a time, we attempted the first dune with enthusiasm, and one vehicle at a time we ground to a halt and tried again. And again. And again. Just when I was about to start seriously letting rip with a few choice expletives and blaming the vehicle, Piet told me to drop the tyre pressure right down to 0.9 bar... and hey presto! We made it!

This was the start of 40 km of dune driving, which the Fortuner purred through with ease. We were told to put it in *tweede rat laag*, but found our vehicle preferred third gear and a bit of speed. We discovered that momentum gets you up a dune, not low gears. The trick is to go fast enough downhill so that your momentum gets you up the next hill, and knowing just when to let up on the accelerator near the top so you don't become airborne as you crest the dune.

I was driving alone, Scarlett was taking photographs, and Angeline was ahead of me. Thanks to the radio, she could tell me when it was safe to start each tricky section. The other



Angie lets her tyres down yet again.



The owner of this Prado – not on our trip – learnt the hard way not to stop a vehicle atop tufts of dry grass.

vehicles were out of sight behind me, awaiting their turn. At this stage our radio worked sporadically; on the final day it died completely. The friendship, camaraderie and chirps of the other women made this day loads of fun. Each time someone got stuck, and most of them often did so, all of us would rush to help push them out. And Coenie was a gem, patiently teaching us his sand-driving tips. We were all very impressed with the plucky Fortuner; after deflating the tyres correctly at the first dune, we didn't get stuck again. By the end of the day a couple of the ladies were considering swapping their more expensive marques for this Japanese star.

We got back to camp many tiring hours later, after dark, far too tired to braai, and were only too happy that Klein Aus Vista's warm, welcoming restaurant had a scrumptious buffet. The following day we visited eerie Kolmanskop, the ghostly settlement that arose after diamonds were discovered in 1908, only to be abandoned some 35 years later. A few kilometres further west is Lüderitz, with its unusual Jugendstil architecture. Scarlett and I picnicked here next to the sea, and it was lovely to paddle in the ocean after being in the desert for days. We both found Lüderitz a bit strange, positioned between the totally arid desert and the sea, with nothing green growing anywhere.

That evening we followed Piet in convoy to an awesome mountaintop viewpoint to watch the sunset, and stopped on the way to look at a strange succulent called *Euphorbia Namibiensis* ("Elephant Foot") that's endemic to the region.

After another companionable and lively campfire (yeah, that's a real understatement), where it was Scarlett's turn to be *strafdoopped* to a standstill, it was time to head for Abiqua Camp via Holog, Sesheim, and Canon Roadhouse. Fun prizes were handed out at the last evening's campfire for leadership, for glamour, for being a good rookie and more.



Interesting paint effect – Kolmanskop.

WHERE TO STAY

Abiqua Camp

Abiqua Camp is 16 km downstream from Noordoewer. The road to it is tarred most of the way – there’s a 2 km gravel section from the turn-off down to the camp itself. The campsite is grassed and under shady trees next to the Orange River. Most sites have electricity, and ablution facilities are spotless. There are braai places, a dishwashing facility and a boma for gatherings. Wood and ice are available. Camping costs R50 per adult per night and R30 per child. Day canoe trips can be arranged when booking. Contact www.amanzitrails.co.za/abiqua.php or (021) 559 1573, 072 229 4672

Klein Aus Vista

Klein Aus Vista is 3 km west of Aus on the main B4. This family-run resort, part of the Gondwana Sperrgebiet Rand Park, nestles against the Aus Mountains and overlooks vast desert plains. It has an excellent restaurant and bar, and serves great breakfasts. Diverse accommodation at various locations is available:

Campsites from N\$55 pppn.

Hikers’ cabin (sleeps up to 20) from N\$125 pppn

Desert Horse Inn’s *en suite* rooms with lounges – from N\$445 pppn

Eagle’s Nest chalets – from N\$645

Go hiking, visit World War One fortifications, enjoy guided sunset drives, half- and full-day guided trips, or simply do your own thing. It’s a great base from which to explore Kolmanskop and Lüderitz, and nearby are the feral horses of the Namib, and Namib Naukluft Park’s Koichab Dunes. Discounts are offered to South Africans at certain times of year – check before you book. For further details 00264 (0)63 258 021/116, email ausvista@namibhorses.com or www.namibhorses.com



Canon Roadhouse

The Canon Roadhouse in the Gondwana Canon Park is 20 km from the main Fish River Canyon viewpoint. We stopped here for an excellent lunch. Accommodation is also available. Tel 00264 (0)61 230 683111 or www.gondwanapark.com.

TOUR ORGANISERS

Cederberg 4x4’s Coenie Moll leads 4x4 adventures full-time; many of them are women-only trips. He’ll give you tips on what to bring along and how to pack, and is a fount of useful information. Call him on 021 913 4632 or visit www.cederberg4x4.co.za

GENERAL INFO

Most of this trip was on gravel (and some sand dunes), and Namibia’s roads are all excellent. The only problem we encountered was the dust, caused by travelling in convoy. We refuelled at Noordoewer, Rosh Pinah, Aus and Lüderitz.

THANKS

A huge thank you to 4x4 MegaWorld Cape Town for lending us a variety of camping gear, to Toyota, Cederberg 4x4, Abiqua Camp, Aussenkehr Resort and Klein Aus Vista for making this trip possible, and to Girl Cub and Nissan for their contributions to the awesome goodie bags.

My overall impressions of the trip? If you enjoy peaceful evenings, a quiet gin and tonic at your tent and loads of spare time, this is not for you. A few of us would’ve enjoyed having a bit of time to explore. It was busy, and we stuck – more or less – to a tight time schedule. Other than that, this trip was amazing, and the camaraderie fabulous. I started off pretty much a sand-driving novice and learned a huge amount about a number of things: my vehicle’s abilities, good off-road driving tactics, the perils of *strafdooppe* and a beautiful corner of Namibia that I hadn’t visited before. ■

