

A line of safari vehicles, including a white SUV and a grey truck with a canopy, is parked on a dirt road in a savanna landscape. The foreground is filled with tall, dry grass. In the background, there are several trees, some with bare branches and some with green leaves, under a clear blue sky.

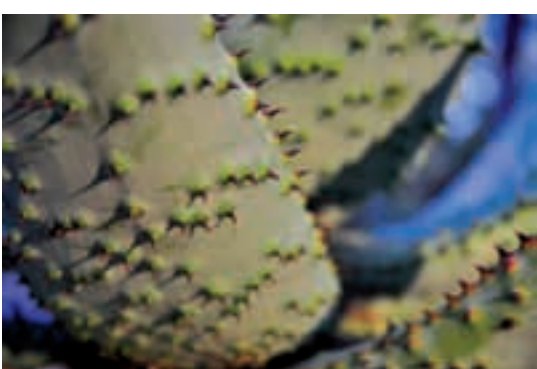
BEAUTIFULLY BARREN

SHINGWEDZI 4X4 ECO-TRAIL

While the Kruger National Park appeals to many holidaymakers, to some, the reserve fails to offer the very thing that many off-road adventurers seek: an escape. We visit Kruger's unruly neighbour for a chance to drive a little-known trail lost in solitude.

Words and pictures by Grant Spolander.





I hate the Kruger National Park. Okay, maybe “hate” is a bit strong, but I can’t help but feel grumpy about the unnaturalness of it all. Firstly: the roads. Nothing takes the bush out of a bush experience quite like a tarred road. Secondly: traffic jams. A wilderness holiday shouldn’t be spent in gridlock or hooting at the guy blocking your view of the wildlife. And lastly: adventure. For me, camping behind a steel fence is about as thrilling as putting up a tent in my backyard; at least at home there’s the possibility of an energetic tussle with the local housebreakers.

Of course, Kruger does offer the off-road adventurer a five-day adventure trail - the Lebombo Eco-Trail. No tourists, no tarred roads and no traffic jams. However, even this option has its drawbacks: there’s a one year waiting list and the drive itself is a bit boring – you trace the park’s eastern border for five days, monotonously watching 500 km of wire fence pass you by.

Scramble over that fence and you’ll find yourself in Mozambique; more specifically, you’d be in the Limpopo National Park, a place so wild and woolly it makes Kruger look like an over-coiffured country club.

We recently joined our sister magazine, *Caravan & Outdoor Life*, for a trip along the Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail, the Limpopo National Park’s version of the Lebombo Eco-Trail.

Technically speaking, the two trails aren’t competitors in the Steers vs. Wimpy sense as both form part of the transfrontier alliance, linking the Kruger National Park, the Limpopo National Park and Gonarezhou National Park.

The Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail is approximately 380 km long, it starts at Pafuri and ends at Giriyyondo. It’s guided by an experienced field ranger and there’s a minimum / maximum vehicle requirement of three / eight

4x4s. The trail takes six days to complete so there’s no need to rush to each camp.

In terms of terrain, most of the trail comprises of *tweespoor* tracks and occasionally you’ll come across a badly eroded road or a tall *middelmannetjie*. The rainy season can produce a lot of mud and create several water crossings, so only vehicles equipped with low-range are permitted.

The Limpopo National Park may sound like the perfect off-road getaway but there’s one significant problem facing this reserve: you’ll find more animals at Chernobyl. Like many wildlife parks in Mozambique the game here was so severely hunted during the country’s civil war that there ain’t much left to see, and what there is doesn’t want to see you.

On our final night in the reserve we camped at the Bona Kaya camp, stationed high on a cliff face overlooking the Shingwedzi River. It’s the perfect place for game viewing, about 40 metres up and ideally located above the one of few water sources for game. It was the peak of the dry season, so much of the river was reduced to small concentrated pools on the river’s edge, one of which was just below our camp.

In the late afternoon we placed our chairs on the cliff’s edge and waited for the wildlife to arrive. After several long hours a duiker peeped out from behind a bush; he cautiously approached the pool of drinking water but each time someone coughed, moved in his chair or opened a beer, he scampered back to the bush.

This went on for hours and it surprised me how important it became for me to see that duiker drink water. It was a duiker, for crying out loud, and I was treating it like a white rhino! This sums up the Limpopo National Park’s wildlife experience – you see almost no animals for five days and when ►

“ Limpopo National Park, a place so wild and woolly it makes Kruger look like an over-coiffured country club. ”





Night four is spent at Tamboti, a shaded camp that boasts running water, showers and a lekker braai area.

you do finally see something – even a common antelope – it takes on Big Five status.

To give you an idea of how deserted this park really is, in 2008 I came here on a game-counting expedition; in the four days that we were on the job I personally saw an impala, a tortoise and a dead elephant. It could be that the animals here are so shy they disappear long before you see them, but the point I'm trying to make is that you don't come here for the wildlife, you come here for the scenery.

What you'll like most about the Shingwedzi Trail is the diversity of the landscape; open flood plains, mopani shrub, an incredible forest of luminous-green fever trees, sandveld and open stretches of tall yellow grass... and that's just on the first day's drive. The vegetation ►

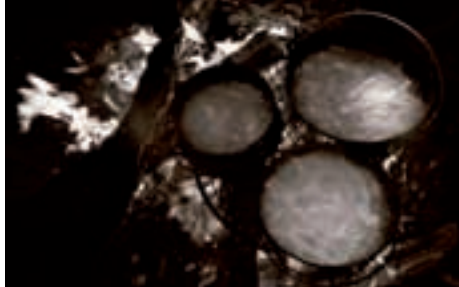


here is so wild and varied it feels like you're in several places at once.

There are also numerous villages to explore within the Limpopo reserve. Officially they're not supposed to be there, but park officials are having a tough time relocating them. It's a tricky subject as many of the villagers have been living in the area for quite some time and they're obviously not keen on leaving.

Unfortunately, the existence of these small settlements is one of the factors delaying the removal of the fence between Kruger and the Limpopo park. Currently, only a small portion of the fence is open – the original plan was to remove the entire fence to promote the free movement of wildlife.

I had mixed feelings on the subject; on one hand it would be great to see more game in the Limpopo National Park, but at the same time what's an



Cooking slap chips on an open flame creates quite a pyrotechnical show, be sure to stand back when adding the raw potato to super-hot oil as this causes it to spill over and ignite on the coals.

African experience without its people? Personally, I like driving through traditional mud hut villages with chickens in the road. What's more,

I've yet to come across a settlement in Mozambique where you can't buy *Deuce M* beer – in itself a convincing reason to visit Moz. ►





Our convoy of intrepid explorers keenly embraced the idea of 'local is lekker'... some would say maybe too much so. Before leaving for this trip it was suggested by our co-travellers – the folk from Conqueror Campers – that each vehicle be responsible for one night's grub, thereby simplifying our shopping lists and reducing the chance of wasted food. Great idea.

On one particular night our chefs for the evening arrived late into camp after buying a freshly-slaughtered goat from one of the local settlements. The idea of braaing a village animal that forages on... well, you never know with goats... was a new concept for me. Turns out that other than it being tougher than an old jockstrap, village goat actually tastes pretty damn good.

“ other than it being tougher than an old jockstrap, village goat actually tastes pretty damn good. ”

The trail boasts five campsites, one for each night of the trip. Of those five, just two have running water with showers and wash basins, so for the other three nights you have to be fully self-sufficient as far as water's concerned. Regardless of their facilities, each campsite offers a true in-the-bush experience. Although I've never seen





Above Remnants of Mozambique's civil war can still be found in the Limpopo National Park, just a few metres from the main track.

a predator in the Limpopo reserve I've heard that they do exist, but I'd rather camp with fairytale lions than pitch my tent behind a steel fence.

The Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail exits the Limpopo reserve via the Giriyondo boarder post. Within 30 minutes after re-entering the Kruger National Park we saw leopards, cheetahs with cubs,

hippos with calves, giraffes with calves, crocodiles, elephants, a lion kill just metres from the road and countless antelope more submissive than valium-injected lab rats. The contrast between the two parks couldn't be more obvious.

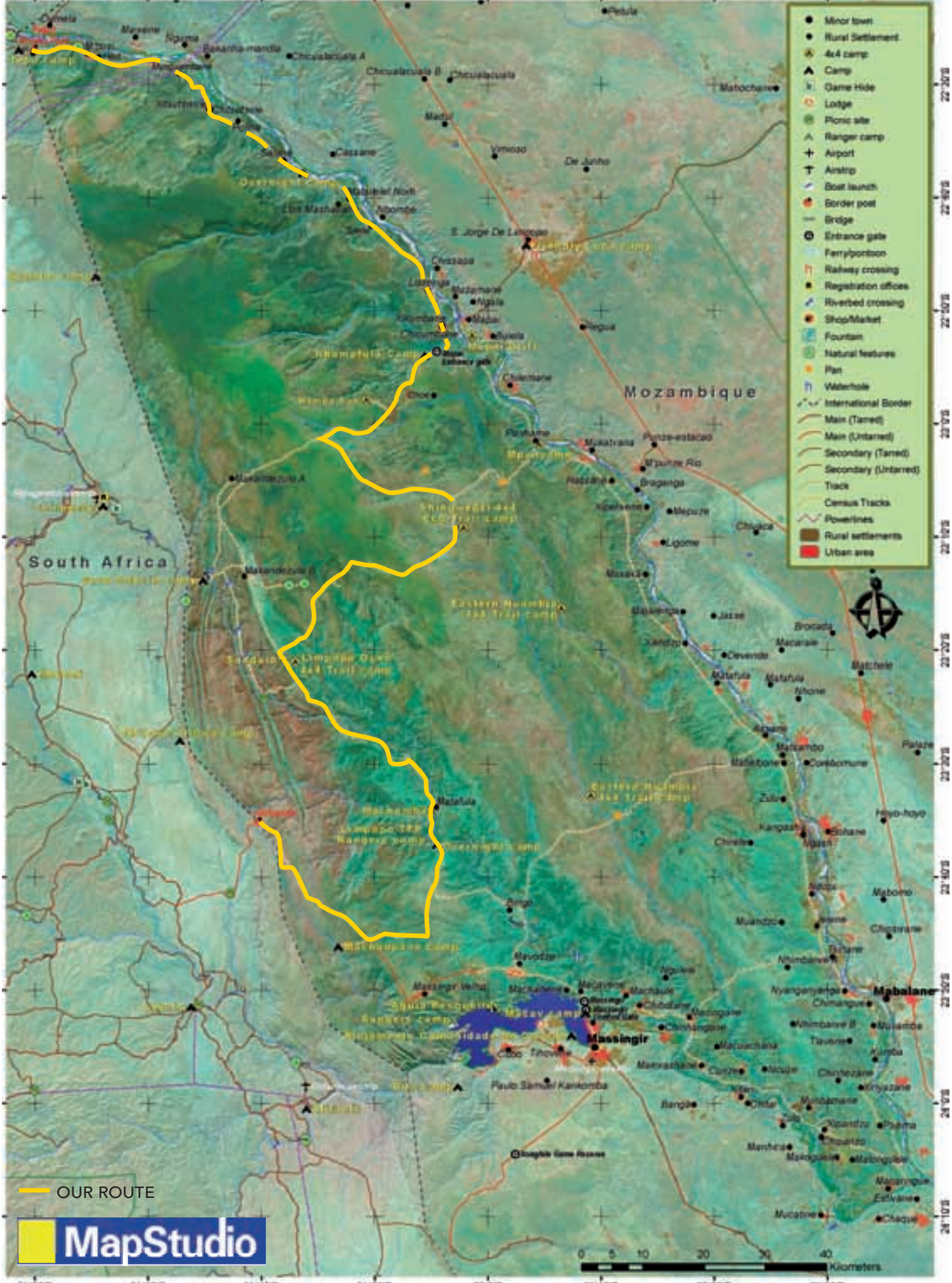
But you know what, within that first half hour we also spotted a speed cop

behind his camera, a traffic jam around the lion kill and a couple of tourists giving each other the finger.

So while it may not offer much in the way of game viewing, the Limpopo National Park is a bona fide safari experience, one that involves bush camps, bonfires and sometimes even braaied goat. ▶

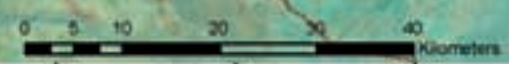
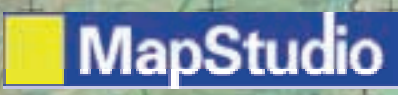


Left The Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail boasts a wide variety of terrain types, much of which will leave its mark on your paintwork. So if you're precious about this, fit VPS film to your 4x4 (for more info go to www.vpsprotection.co.za).



- Minor town
- Rural Settlement
- ▲ 4x4 camp
- ▲ Camp
- ▲ Game Hide
- Lodge
- Picnic site
- ▲ Ranger camp
- ✚ Airport
- ✚ Airstrip
- ▲ Boat launch
- ▲ Border post
- Bridge
- Entrance gate
- ▲ Ferry/Porton
- ▲ Railway crossing
- ▲ Registration office
- ▲ Riverbed crossing
- Shop/Market
- ▲ Fountain
- Natural features
- ▲ Plan
- ▲ Waterhole
- International Border
- Main (Tarred)
- Main (Untarred)
- Secondary (Tarred)
- Secondary (Untarred)
- Track
- Census Tracks
- Powerlines
- Rural settlements
- Urban area

— OUR ROUTE



31°20'E 31°30'E 31°40'E 31°50'E 32°0'E 32°10'E 32°20'E 32°30'E

22°30'S
22°40'S
22°50'S
23°00'S
23°10'S
23°20'S
23°30'S
23°40'S
23°50'S
24°00'S
24°10'S

SA 4x4 ROUTE GUIDE

FUEL

Don't expect to find fuel within the Limpopo National Park; surprisingly, there isn't a fuel station at Pafuri gate so be sure to top up before you enter the Kruger National Park. If you do desperately need fuel once over the border your best bet is at Massinger Dam, which is beyond the park's perimeter and a considerable detour off the Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail.

As mentioned before, the trail itself is only 380 km long and the terrain isn't very taxing, but if you're towing an off-road trailer it would be a good idea to carry one or two jerrycans as a precaution.

WHERE TO BUY PROVISIONS

Many of the local villages do sell beer, ice and a few other products, but I wouldn't rely on this so be sure to stock up with enough supplies before you start the trail.

ESSENTIAL GEAR

During the dry season the Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail is not a difficult drive, but you may have to deflate your tyres for the odd sand stint, so be sure to carry a compressor and tyre pressure gauge. What's more, some of the stones here are like natural spearheads, so a puncture repair kit is an absolute must. A radiator seed net is also worth packing.

Fortunately, despite being in Mozambique there's no need for third-party insurance when travelling within the Limpopo reserve, but if you intend on leaving the park you will need vehicle insurance as well as a reflective jacket, ZA sticker and two hazard triangles.

CONVOY OR SOLO

The Limpopo National Park can be explored solo but if you want to drive the Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail you'll have to be accompanied by a guide and at least two other 4x4s – see TRAIL INFO panel.

VEHICLE REQUIRED

Depending on what time of year you visit, the roads within the Limpopo National Park can vary from easygoing to muddy mayhem, but nevertheless, all vehicles joining the Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail must have low-range and at least 200 mm of ground clearance.

RISK

Like most of Mozambique, the Limpopo National Park is a malaria area so precautions should be taken. ■



TRAIL INFO

The Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail is operated by Transfrontier Parks Destinations, the only concession holder within the Limpopo reserve. The trail starts at the Pafuri picnic spot within Kruger National Park where you meet your guide and listen to a short description about the trip, the Limpopo park's history and what you can expect to see. Once you cross into Mozambique the trail takes six days to complete, exiting again via the Giryondo border post.

Currently, the Shingwedzi 4x4 Eco-Trail costs R6 150 per vehicle, but as of March next year that price will climb to R6 700. For more information on this trail contact Transfrontier Parks Destinations on (021) 701 7860 or visit their website at www.dolimpopo.com.

GPS POINTS

Pafuri picnic spot

S 22° 25.387 E 31° 14.849

Trail camp night one

S 22° 57.988 E 31° 49.219

Trail camp night two

S 23° 11.684 E 31° 55.773

Trail camp night three

S 23° 20.882 E 31° 41.917

Trail camp night four

S 23° 29.180 E 31° 52.544

Trail camp night five

S 23° 45.913 E 31° 49.392

