

Motoring up the N1 highway and heading via Bela-Bela (Warmbaths, in less than three hour leisurely drive from a shivering, smoggy Johannesburg, we turned off the quiet R101 just south of Mokopane towards Sterkwater.

In a region where there are a baffling number of private reserves, lodges and conservancies, word-of-mouth recommendations that can help me decide that the Waterberg Wilderness Reserve would be ideal for a family-friendly 4x4 bush experience that would also keep my wallet comfortably plump.

As it was late afternoon when we turned onto a sandy road that leads to the Wilderness Reserve through a neighbouring farm, the game was plentiful on the road side and we were further delayed by stunning scenery at a small stream crossing. So that mark of most of my inept attempts exploring awesome Africa, namely to always arrive after dark (despite having left a few hours before sunrise), remained with us, and we arrived at the tented camp just as the sun left.

Jeanette, the young and friendly reserve manger, was driving out to take one of the camp assistants home, and she welcomed us like family before showing us our tent.

Luke, my resident accommodation critic-cum-son, soon found the “awesome” bathroom, claimed the double bed and insisted that we ignore the solar-powered lights in favour for paraffin lanterns. The well-equipped kitchen is in separate adjacent tent and while I sat on the patio and paid my respects to the fading light on the western horizon, Luke and Dan investigated what was in the cooler box and insisted that a braai was way overdue.

When Jeanette returned I couldn't help mentioning that I had to be expected to be camping rough for our two nights in the reserve, and she explained that due to a sudden cancellation, the luxury self-catering tent camp had become available to us.

Now that is just the way we intrepid adventurers in Mazda bakkies should be treated – all other lodge owners south of the equator, take note!

While munching on his sixth lamb rib, Daniel (who had just turned 13 and is growing like a St. Bernard puppy), suddenly stopped eating and hurried down the path, mumbling that he needed to ask the manager about something.

When he came back he announced that the nearest place where we could watch the soccer on TV was “only two hours' drive away” and that we needed to leave now or miss the kick off.

Not even a rampaging buffalo with a sore tooth could have chased me away from the fire, the calls of the jackal, the peace, the space...so fortunately Dan settled on listening the game on the BT-50's radio.

Don't let anyone convince you that it never gets cold in the bushveld. Not even the dawn's chorus of the birds and something large munching on your front lawn could get me out of my warm bed until the sun had made some serious inroads into the nights temperatures that had dropped below zero.

After our usual “health express” breakfast of braai leftovers and muesli, I remembered that Jeanette had suggested a walk down nearby leopard gorge, cut into the landscape down the years by a busy stream.

When Luke said he wasn't so sure about going where there were leopards, I (of course) replied that I was sure there were no leopards and that it was just an interested name.

Just how wrong a daddy can be was to be demonstrated dramatically later that day. The water in the kloof is drinkable and so all we packed for lunch was some pizza bread, cheese, oranges and a tiny camping gas butane stove (tea tastes special when brewed with real water).

We followed a game trail (the wildebeest were only about 50m ahead of us), down to the stream and then boulder-hopped for a couple of kilometres in search of a stunning waterfall that Jeanette had told us about.

Leopard gorge reminded me a bit of the Magaliesberg but I don't remember seeing any of the fiery red bushwillows (*Combretum apiculatum*) that decorate the Waterberg in any of the Magaliesberg gorges.

By the time we reached the edge of a black shale ledge, where the water starts to drop down a long set of playful cascades, it was just about warm enough to brave the inviting pools for a refreshing swim. I settled for splashing my face and cooling my feet.

This waterfall appears to remain unnamed and the boys agreed that leopards leap falls would suit this unspoiled spot very well. Later that afternoon, on a winding and interesting track that certainly has stretches where any vehicles off-road capabilities can be out to test: we headed into the hills in the Mazda Bt-50 for a game drive.

We stopped at a small dam and spent an hour sitting in the shade admiring a fish eagle that was apparently teaching its fledgling how to catch one of the largest carp we could see in the shallows – unsuccessfully during that afternoon, anyway.

Winter days are very short and we an organised game drive waiting or us , so i selected a low-range and third gear, and let the Mazda trundle and haul itself up the long hill without touching the accelerator, back to the camp.

We grabbed jackets, drinks and snacks and climbed into the game drive land Rover. Jeanette drove us past herds of Burchells zebra (*Equus burchelli*), blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), Impala *Aepyceros melampus*), Eland (*taurotragus oryx*) and – uncommon in other areas of the Waterberg = mountain reed buck (*Redunca fulvorufula*).

At a place called viewpoint, where the view goes on (just about) without end in every direction, we stopped. Under similar conditions a Spaniard may have said: "*Que beuno es no hacer nada y descansar despues!*" (How beautiful is it to do nothing, and then afterward, to rest).

Okay, so we tried our hardest to do nothing but it was difficult not to look, and be humbled by the vast emptiness of this part of Africa.

Driving back in the dark, Jeanette stopped down a rough side track, saying that she wanted to show us something that she was researching. She shone a spotlight into a Leadwood tree where long, deep scratches were clearly visible on one of the branches. "What do you think did that?" she asked, and quickly Luke exclaimed that he knew all along that there were lots of leopards watching us.

Jeanette has set up bait and motion-sensitive cameras at various spots in the Waterberg Wilderness Reserve, and he has been able to confirm that there are at least three roaming leopards in the area. Efforts are being made to fit radio collars to them to ascertain their territorial and hunting ranges that certainly cross the boundaries of surrounding farms and reserves.

We joined Jeanette at the manager's house for a braai that evening, and exchanged tales from the African bush until the cold froze the stars and jackals stopped crying.

The nice thing about sleeping in someone else's tent is that in the morning you don't have to lever pegs from rock hard ground and try to fold the darn into a bundle small enough to fit into the chi little bag that it came in.

All we had to pack was our pyjamas and toothbrushes so that, at an unusually early hour, we were humming along the R101 before thick frost had even started to thaw.