

About Schmidts'

GREAT AFRICAN ADVENTURE

Story by **Theo Schmidt**. Photos by **Marie Schmidt**.

The Schmidt family – Theo & Marie, Chantelle (22) and Logan (14) – venture into Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique & Lesotho with a new Invader off-road caravan towed by a Land Cruiser.



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Expedition leader Theo begins the story.

We left Cape Town early on 7 December en route to Oranjerus on the Gariep River near Upington, where we stayed for two nights before venturing into Botswana, the first time our family had visited the country. After crossing the border at McCarthy's Rest in the Northern Cape, we spent our first night at Berrybush near Tshabong, where we scored the campsite with the biggest tree for only 75 pula (about R90) per night.

From here we drove alongside the South African border for most of the morning before turning off towards Ghanzi on the A2, where we stayed at Ghanzi Trail Blazers, with its hosts of wild animals. Here we heard the roar of a lion for the first time in Botswana. Apparently some are kept in a cage on a neighbouring property.

The road from here to Maun, the A3, was beautiful, though spoiled by all the dead cows on the side of the road – we counted at least 200 – that had died of thirst and starvation; the rains, which had arrived a week before, had come too late for them.

In Maun we filled our tanks and fridges before driving to the Okavango Delta, where we stayed at Third Bridge for three nights at Campsite No. 1, right next to the hippo pool. When we arrived we were surrounded by 27 elephants, from babies to big bulls. This was an awesome moment for all of us, an unforgettable memory. Remember, none of the campsites in the Okavango Delta are fenced in.

The first night we were enthralled by the beautiful display of stars, the like of which we'd never seen before. The next morning at around 04:30 I woke to the sound of a powerful grunt. Poking my head out the Invader's door, I saw a big male lion walking towards the ablution block, where it lay down under a bush next to the men's toilets. It stayed there until 07:30, whereupon it got up and walked into the bush, with every vehicle in the campsite following it to take photos. But it was time for us to get ready for our trip in a mokoro, a traditional dugout canoe.

The morning began slowly with a quiet cruise up the narrow channels until we spotted a wave in front of us, and the game ranger guide told us it was a hippo. After we'd followed it for a while it surfaced, and we followed it deeper into the channels until it disappeared. Then we stopped.

The next moment it surfaced under the mokoro, nearly tipping us over. Thankfully the guide reacted quickly and accelerated over the hippo's back. This was a young male that had been ejected from its group by its father. According to the guide such males are extremely dangerous, so we were lucky. The rest of the trip was uneventful: we saw some small crocodiles and plenty of birdlife.

On our third day, after breakfast, we left via a different route to South Gate. It's not my habit to drive the same route twice, but camp rangers told us that there wasn't any petrol available at Savuti, which meant we had to go back to Maun to refuel.

We tried to take the northern roads through the park, but with all the recent rains we kept on running up against flooded rivers, and as a result got horribly lost. Two gentlemen out collecting wood in a Cruiser helped us get back on the road to Maun.

After stocking up with supplies and petrol we left for Savuti, a route of about 200 tough kilometres of sand and mud. I put the Cruiser in low range, running on tyre pressures of 0.8 bar in front and 1.0 bar at the rear, and spent most of my time changing between second and third gear. It took us four hours and 90 litres of fuel to drive from Maun to Savuti.

From Savuti to Kasane it was another 200 km, during which time we saw hundreds of elephants and consumed another 90 litres of fuel. At Kasane we refilled with fuel and refreshments; we were very surprised to see warthogs all over the town, walking around freely like domestic animals.

After Kasane we rushed to catch the Kazungula ferry over the Zambezi into Zambia. This was the only border crossing out of the seven in this trip in which we were ripped off, thanks to 'helpers' and officials on the Zambian side. It cost us nearly US$250 to get the Cruiser and Invader into Zambia.

The trick, I've learned, is to stay calm and stay together, because the 'helpers' or 'runners' set out to cause confusion by rushing you in one direction and the rest of the family in another. It also didn't help matters that we were the last vehicle onto the ferry; in future I'll make sure that we get there in plenty of time, with everybody relaxed and together, which would make for a more pleasant crossing. ▶



We drove to Livingstone, where we stayed in a chalet at Maramba River Lodge, as we'd arrived too late to pitch the Invader. The next morning we visited Victoria Falls: the river wasn't 100 percent full, but it was nevertheless absolutely memorable and we're very happy to have seen it.

We hit the road to Lusaka at midday, taking the T1 via Kalomo and Muzoka. Just before the Moorings campsite, we pulled off the road to buy litchis and got a piece of wire stuck in the Cruiser's rear wheel. We stayed at Moorings for the night: it's a very well-run English farm, complete with school and church, and offers nice, clean ablutions and shady campsites, each with its own braai, electricity and grass lapa.

The next morning it was on to Lusaka, a very busy place with far too much traffic for my liking, so we didn't tarry – just refuelled and then took the T4 to Chipata. Now this is definitely not a road to travel at night: it's very narrow, with big potholes next to the road, and you have to pull over for every oncoming big truck, thus risking damage to your trailer or vehicle.

Thanks to that ordeal, we arrived very late in Chipata and couldn't find any accommodation, so we simply pitched the Invader next to the main road and set off very early the next morning, getting to the Malawi border before 06:00. This meant we were first through the gates, and therefore crossed without any hassles.

We entered Malawi at Mchinji on our way to Lilongwe. I stopped to buy charcoal at the side of the road, only to find out afterwards that it's illegal to sell charcoal in Malawi – part of the government's efforts to prevent deforestation. We were about to strap the bag to the Invader but were warned that the police would fine us 1000 Malawian kwacha (about R30). Tiring of all this bother, I tried to give the bag back to the woman I'd bought it from, but she'd already done a runner.

In Lilongwe we had lunch at the Spur before buying provisions and refuelling. Then we took the M1 south to Blantyre, and at Lizulu turned onto a very steep and winding road down to Lake Malawi, where we saw a strange thing: all the road signs were full of holes – deliberately put there by the authorities so that the locals couldn't use the signs for building materials!

For 10 days we stayed at Chembe Eagles Nest Campsite, where we were joined by relatives of ours from Pretoria, Jacques and Lucia. This was by far the most beautiful place on the whole trip: I would return anytime – and actually plan to do so in the not too distant future.

We kayaked, snorkelled among the most beautiful fish, and dived, using the kayak as a base. There are always locals around who are willing to take you diving, feeding the fish eagles and waterskiing. We did a 20-minute 38-metre dive at the local dive centre, the first time I'd dived in water as clear as this: 38 metres down I could count the blades on the boat's propeller above us.

The day before Christmas, I began planning our route from Malawi into Mozambique with Jacques and Aubrey, the owner of Eagles Nest – but not before enjoying a fantastic Christmas lunch at the venue. The next day we left for Mozambique.

From Monkey Bay we drove to Zomba. On our way to Blantyre on the M3, we were caught in a speed trap, 500 Malawian kwacha (about R15) each. But this being our last day in Malawi, we had no kwacha left, and we definitely weren't going to pay them in US dollars. So, after a long argument, we handed over R100, which covered both fines.

In Blantyre we stocked up with as much food and refreshments as possible, as we knew there wasn't going to be much on offer in northern Mozambique. Later that day we crossed into Mozambique at the Milange border post.

Chantelle reports on the Schmidts' experiences in Mozambique.

Entering through Milange on our first day in Mozambique was a joy for me: you see, I'd learned to speak Portuguese in Brazil. My mom is a social butterfly, not your typical outdoors person – in fact, she used to camp with high heels and gold necklace. So by this point in the trip, she was longing for a hot bath and a soft bed. As the sun was starting to set, we decided to ask the great and powerful GPS where to go for the night. One of the options that came up was 'resort or spa'. Excited at the prospect of a relaxing massage, we followed the GPS up the mountain.

As we climbed, the stars began to emerge one by one. The higher we drove, the narrower the path grew, the thicker the bushes became and the more stars appeared.

My cousin and his wife, Jacques and Lucia, began to get anxious: there were neither signs nor any other ▶







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PLANNING

It took at least three or four months of research and fine-tuning, starting early in 2012, to make this trip a reality. I used Tracks4Africa (T4A) and paper maps to plan the route.



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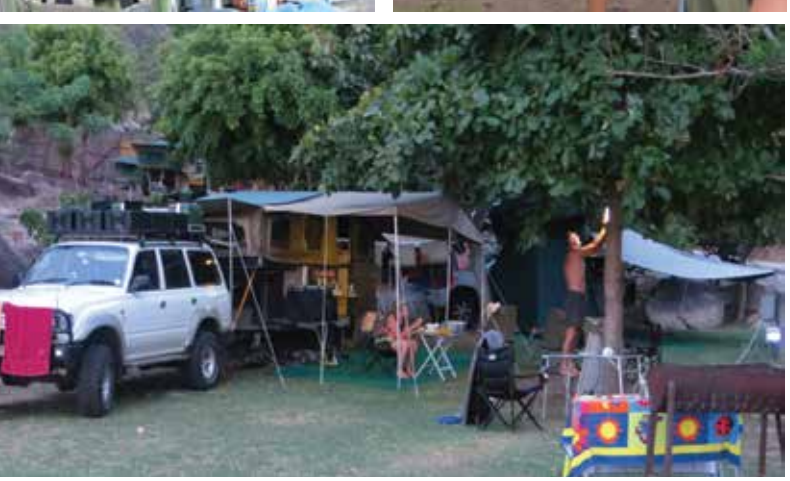


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indications that we were heading for a resort of any description. And yet we passed a private airstrip. Perhaps we were on the back route to the spa? Perhaps it was a *really* exclusive spa?

Then suddenly we drove into a ditch. And eyes started emerging from the dark and converging on us. Unknowingly, we had driven right through a village and were now stuck in their … um … sewage pit. They had no English at their disposal, but were very friendly and willing to try to help us. Our cousin helped get us out of the ditch. We thanked our new friends for their help and we were on our way again … but not for long.

An angry (policmen/ soldier – Theo pleas advise) on a motorbike stopped us and climbed off, swinging his AK-47 in our direction. Frantically trying to keep up with his Portuguese, I translated for the men in our group. Refusing to shake hands, he demanded to know why we were on his territory. 'Senhor, nos queremos termas.' (Sir, we want the spa.) 'Termas? O que termas?' (Spa? What spa?) He had no idea what we were talking about. He didn't even know what a spa was. Or a GPS, for that matter.

There were no two ways about it: we were lost. About to turn around and head back to the main road, we were blocked again. Though we were clearly no threat to his people, he still didn't trust us and we were placed under house arrest – or rather, caravan arrest.

We set up camp by the police station, with two armed guards in charge of us for the night. Once the tension had been defused, we shared a whisky and spoke about daily life in the village, while villagers peeped around the corners of the Cruiser corners to see what was happening.

Before we left the next morning, we gave the locals vegetable seeds for the lands, and colouring pages for the kids. With an AK-47 in one hand and three live chickens in the other, the guard escorted us to the main road.

After our adventure up the mountain, my mom eventually got her stay at a luxury lodge at Muera near Gorongosa. Here we kissed our cousins goodbye, as they had to return to work. ▶





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Then we camped for three nights at Hotel Seta in Inhassoro, a beautiful town where you can enjoy the fruits of the sea. Just be careful, when you buy prawns from the fishermen who walk past your camp, that they don't palm shrimp off on you instead.

The full moon, Portuguese music by the campfire, great food, making friends, laughing over rum and raspberry and exploring the local fish market: these all became pages of our adventure history.

From Inhassoro we drove to Vilanculos for lunch at the Beach Bar before leaving for Tofo, where we stayed at Fatima's Nest, a great camp for backpackers. I made friends with a group who'd driven up in a vintage surfers' Kombi. Turns out they live one kilometre from my house in Cape Town.

For New Year's we went to a rasta party. I never thought I'd ever see our parents jamming to reggae! It was the best new year ever. We'd paid for four nights, but by day three we'd had enough of reggae music – it never stopped the whole time we were there – so we swapped our last night for a family breakfast and hit the road to Xia Casa for one night, where we had rain for the first time on the trip.

The next day we left for Maputo, where we stayed at the Blue Anchor Inn 10 km outside the city. For a day trip I'd recommend the town's market – especially on Saturdays – churches and restaurants.

TOW VEHICLE

A 1992 Land Cruiser 3.9-litre petrol that's covered more than 285 765 km, with the following modifications:

- Five 32" BFGoodrich MT tyres fitted at First Alignment Centre in Bellville just before we left.
- Burnco front and rear bush-breaker bumpers with spare wheel carrier (2011).
- A Burnco drawer system with built-in 100-litre fresh-water tank (2011).
- A Hannibal roofrack with eight ammo cases bolted down for packing space, and a 40-litre water tank for showering and washing up. We kept our drinking water separate (2011).
- Four 20-litre jerrycans on the roofrack.
- A 90 W solar panel on the roofrack to charge my high-cycle 105 Ah auxiliary battery in the back of the vehicle for the National Luna Weekender fridge-freezer (2011).
- Two heavy-duty airbags inside the rear coil springs to help carry all the weight and keep things level (2011).
- A decent sound system with good speakers inside, plus a Uniross universal charger for cellphones and camera equipment.
- A six-tyre monitoring system from Cymot fitted just before we left. This unit paid for itself when it detected a flat caravan wheel on the dirt road between Loeriesfontein and Brandvlei. Without it I would have lost this tyre.

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If you're queuing for the ferry to Catembe, you can go shopping while you wait – sarongs, handbags, CDs and local art – all without leaving your car. From Catembe to Ponta Malongane we experienced the worst road on the trip, sand and potholes de luxe. Then we stayed for four nights at Ponta Malongane campsite.

This is one of the biggest scuba hotspots, where people from all walks of life come together. Even though the waves were rough, it was the most spectacular dive of my life! I swam with two turtles and a shark.

On our last day we went to Ponta do Ouro for one last market visit before going back to South Africa. Even though our trip wasn't over yet, I already felt sad to be leaving. I can't wait to return to the land of palms.

Dad Theo describes the final stages, as the Schmidts find themselves back on South African soil.

On our way to the Kosi Bay border post we broke both of the Invader's leaf springs. Luckily I had a spare and could use the unbroken leaves of the first to repair the second, and we managed to get to Empangeni, where we replaced both 1200 kg leaf springs with 2000 kg units.

We stayed at beautiful Zinkwazi River mouth for one night, and from there we took the R614 to Underberg, where we refuelled before Sani Pass. We reached the top in about two hours and stayed at the campsite there.

Driving in Lesotho is a experience in itself, thanks to both the road conditions and the height above sea level. We reached 3218 metres near the Afriski resort, where not much was happening as it was midsummer. We stayed at Oxbow Lodge just past Afriski.

From here we travelled to Gariep Dam for our last night. Nobody really wanted to go home, except Logan, who's going to a new school. Finally we were safely back.

Thanks to my family for making this trip the most awesome ever. Next year we plan to do the Central Kalahari, Caprivi, Angola and northern Namibia, down the west coast as close to the sea as possible, and then back to Cape Town.

INVADER OFF-ROAD CARAVAN

I ordered my caravan in 2012 from Invader owners Hannes and Dan Pierre Louw in Brackenfell, a father-and-son business that makes the most awesome off-road caravans. We'd first seen this model at the Kam'Bati outdoor exhibition in March that year. I received my unit in June and took it to Hartenbos with my two sons for two weeks in the worst weather conditions imaginable. The Invader passed this test with flying colours.

I modified the Invader from a single room two-bed four-sleeper to a three-room six-sleeper. I installed a 90 W solar panel on the lid of the unit that charges the Invader battery while towing, meaning that when I'd reached my destination, the batteries would be fully charged. This, plus the other 90 W panel on the Cruiser, was enough to supply our electricity needs indefinitely.

The Invader has a built-in 100-litre water tank, meaning we had 200 litres of potable water between the Cruiser and the Invader for our six-week trip. We returned to Cape Town with about 20 litres left.

