

Downstream





in tiger country

Pack your worries away on a three-day paddle down the Rio dos Elefantes in Mozambique's Parque Nacional do Limpopo.

WORDS & PICTURES TOAST COETZER

LAZY RIVER. Paddling is a real pleasure on the Rio dos Elefantes. Keep your eyes peeled: Pel's fishing owls hang out in the fever and fig trees that line the river bank.

It has taken us more than two jolting hours in the back of a Land Rover to get here, but finally the Rio dos Elefantes – the Olifants River on the South African side of the border – is before us.

We're downstream from Massingir Dam at the starting point of the Rio dos Elefantes Canoeing Trail. From here the river flows for another 50 km to its confluence with the Rio Limpopo. We plan to conquer this stretch by kayak over the next three days.

We were meant to get going earlier, but we were delayed and only departed Albufeira Camp (where you leave your vehicle behind) late in the morning. It's late afternoon now and we're amped to go.

I'm paddling with guide Janco Scott and the Van Tonder family: Ronelda, Tinus, Lukas (13) and Daniël (11). Ronelda and Tinus are the managers at Covane Fishing & Safari Lodge on the shore of Massingir Dam. Patrick Nokeri is our logistics man. He'll drive the Landy with our supplies to the riverside campsites.

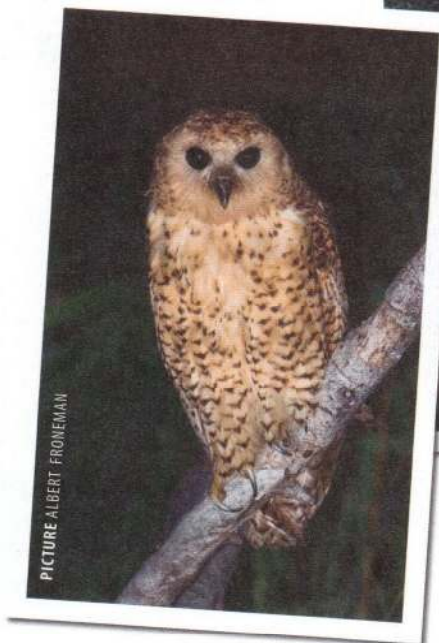
One of the great things about this trip is that it's fully catered. When you beach the kayak at the end of the day's paddling, your tent is already pitched and dinner is being prepared. All you need to do is stay upright and float downstream.

Well, that's what they always say. My last paddling trip was during a sweltering December on the Orange River. It was less "float downstream" than "paddle like a madman into a hot headwind". That wasn't fun.

Straight off the bat, though, the Rio dos Elefantes is much friendlier. It's overcast and even though it's humid, the cloud cover shields us from the sun's sharpest sting. The riverine vegetation is wild and green. We're locked in a sheltered avenue of fig and fever trees.

"Okay, guys," Janco says, beckoning us towards the boats. He's exactly the kind of guide you want on a trip like this – jovial, knowledgeable and professional. You'd follow him all the way up the Nile simply because he's such a nice guy.

I settle gingerly into my kayak. I stow my camera and raincoat in the waterproof bag in front of me, balance my water bottle between my legs and push away from the side. Right, how does this paddling thing work again?



OWLS AND TALL TALES. A Pel's fishing owl (left) is an impressive bird. The Van Tonder family tell stories around the fire at White Cliffs (above), the overnight campsite on the first night, high on the river bank under fever trees (facing page). The tents are already pitched by the time the paddlers arrive.

DAY 1: The Pel's moment

We only have to paddle 10 km today. It's an easy afternoon's work, but Janco wants to make sure we reach our first overnight camp before dark.

We wave Patrick goodbye and fall into a rhythm as we find the best part of the stream to paddle in. The river is flat, with no rapids to speak of. The water is clear – if a croc passed by underneath you'd easily spot it against the white sand on the bottom – especially if you're wearing polarised sunglasses.

Crocs? Well, there are crocs and hippos on this stretch of the river, but not many. It's a far tamer paddle than the Zambezi, for example. Which is the way I like it. My idea of a holiday doesn't involve getting into a tango to the death with a gnarly reptile or standing between a hippo bull and his favourite splash pool.

A holiday means rest. And I want to see pretty things.

The trail follows the southern border of the Parque Nacional do Limpopo, but there isn't a lot of game to see. It's a populated area and you see people and settlements on the river bank from time to time – fishermen, farmers, children.

Janco tells us that they do sometimes encounter elephant and buffalo. The big herds are not afraid and move through the settled areas to drink at the river during the dry season.

Right now I'm not fussed about what I can and can't see; I'm just trying to get the hang of paddling again. Graeme Pope-Ellis made it look so easy on the *TopSport* Dusi highlights package back in the '80s. Slowly I rediscover my paddling mojo. Thanks to the fast-flowing stream we make good progress.

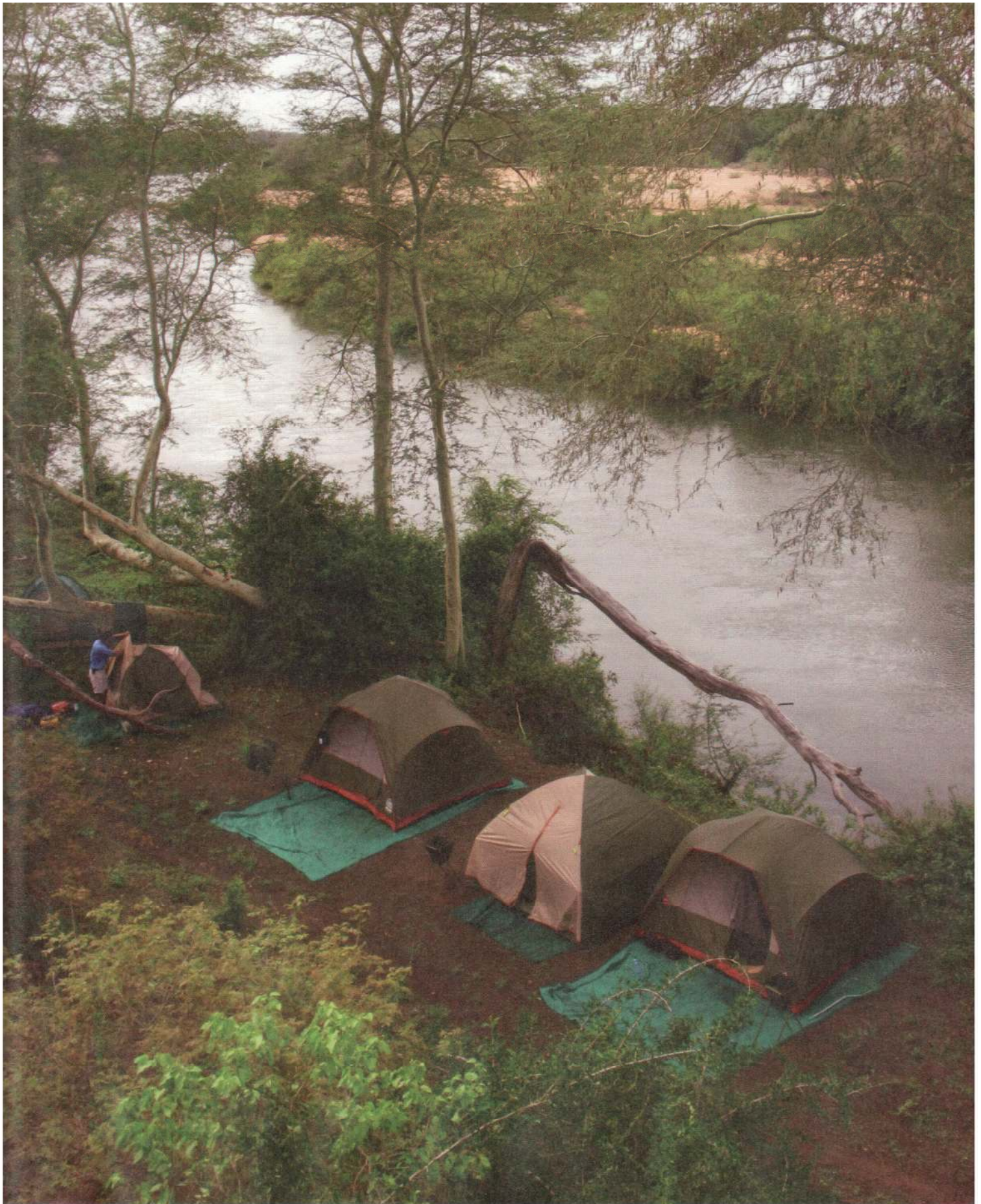
However, when we set out again after a quick lunch break on a sandbank (leftover braai, energy bars and fruit), I feel a bit ill. Can you get seasick while paddling on a river? If anyone can, I can. I really am a landlubber of the worst order. It also starts to drizzle.

But then something so wondrous happens that all my woes are instantly forgotten.

About 30 m ahead, sitting on a low branch of a wild fig tree, I spot a bird. Not just any bird, a Pel's fishing-owl. A serious birder would kill for a sighting like this. Even if you can only identify a hadeda and a guineafowl, you'd be amazed.

The owl is big – about 63 cm tall, weighing up to 2,1 kg. It's kind of like seeing your Maltese poodle in bird form. Pick up little Maxie over there and feel how heavy she is. Now, if Maxie were orange-brown, had wings and giant claws with which she could catch fish – at night! – wouldn't you get excited?

I'm so overwhelmed I almost drop my paddle. Before I can get my camera out of the waterproof bag, Maxie leaves her perch, unfolds her wings and silently flaps away. >





TIGERS ON THE LINE. Even Daniël (11) and Lukas (13) van Tonder managed to catch some small tiger fish. The pace is slow on the paddling trail, so there's plenty of time to fish. You can fish from the kayak or cast a line from a sandbank when everyone stops for lunch. Watch out for those nasty teeth! A Leatherman is handy to remove the hook safely. Be kind to the fish. Let it go once you've taken your photo.

DAY 2: Perfection on the water

I wake up in the tent that Patrick pitched for me last night. This camp is called White Cliffs – after the steep, whitish river banks downstream.

The tents are lined up under enormous fever trees. Below us, the river makes a wide, lazy bend.

Although it rained last night, our campfire kept us warm. Patrick put the gazebo over it. Through the smoke, a couple of hilarious campfire stories were told. It's a fact: A story told around a campfire has much more gravitas than one told around the coffee machine at work.

Janco told us how he ran out of petrol near Warden in the Free State one night. He saw grain silos in the distance and knew that there would be a co-op where he could buy fuel, so he struck out across the dark landscape. It was only when it got light the next day (he had to sleep in the car, as the co-op was closed) that he realised he had walked through a camp patrolled by ostriches.

Ronelda remembered an old couple that had to drive across the country. When the old man got tired, he pulled into a lay-by... on the opposite side of the road. He woke his wife and once they had swapped seats he promptly fell asleep.

His wife drove on, but in the wrong direction. She hadn't registered that he made a U-turn before he stopped!

Thankfully, on this river, you'd know it pretty quickly if you were trying to paddle in the wrong direction...

Last night's rain has abated, but it's still overcast. After coffee, rusks, yogurt and fruit for breakfast, we walk down to where we left our kayaks last night. Patrick will break camp and drive to our next overnight spot.

Lukas and Daniël are trying their luck at fishing. The river is full of tiger fish and you can cast from the kayak. Apparently the tigers hide out in large pools or where the sandbank drops off steeply.

I've had no luck yet, but Janco, Ronelda and Tinus have caught a few small fish. Like me, the boys are struggling. They're forever getting stuck on a branch or getting their lines tangled. It's like Laurel and Hardy in a kayak.

We have all day to paddle 19 km, so fishing is high on everyone's agenda. The kilometres slip past as if in a dream. The paddling is easy, the temperature is cool, and the landscape is pretty. Large trees come and go in patches, reed beds whisper their song, fish jump, birds skittle off when we get too close. Some days spent in nature are so perfect that pictures can't tell the story properly.

I manage to catch three tiger fish. It's such a beautiful fish, for those few seconds it lies in your lap: the sleek, striped body and the incongruously violent teeth. Once you've carefully removed the hook, you lower it back into the water and with a silver jolt it's gone.

One of the small tigers Janco caught got injured by the hook, so he decided to keep it. When he spots a fish-eagle downriver, he calls us over. We huddle together in our kayaks and watch as he puts the dead fish on the water.

It floats slowly towards the fish-eagle and the bird notices it immediately. Just like in the whisky ad, it flies towards the fish and plucks it

from the water. One movement – as natural as scratching your ear.

Again I think of the fishing-owl – Maxie does this at night. Mind-boggling.

Speaking of Pel's fishing-owls, during the course of the day we see two more. We also see a saddle-billed stork with its red, yellow and black bill. Wearing those colours and standing 1,5 m tall, it reminds me of a German Olympic skier.

We also see water thick-knees, whistling ducks, goliath herons and kingfishers.

The final hour on the water is almost sacred. There is no wind and the water surface is so still that you feel bad when you have to disturb it with your paddle.

I finally feel at home on the river, here in the golden calm. The world of offices and cars has disappeared. I feel like paddling all the way down to Xai-Xai on the coast. The Rio dos Elefantes joins the Limpopo, which goes all the way there.

We pull out of the water at Fig Tree, our last bush camp on the route where we'll spend two nights. Patrick's campfire is crackling away already; soon, chicken, onions and potato will be thrown together in a flat-bottomed pot.

The camp looks out over a drift that is used by villagers to drive their cattle from one side of the river to the other. The river is just deep enough to force the cattle to swim part of the way, but they all make it.

Later – while fireflies dance around my tent to the deep notes of a fishing-owl booming from the fever tree forest and the intermittent chirring of a Mozambique nightjar – I sleep the sleep of contentment.



STOP-AND-GO. If a hippo or five blocks your path, you need to beach the kayaks and make a wide portage around the beasts. Luckily this doesn't happen often.

DAY 3: A cruise down hippo alley

Until now we haven't seen a single hippo (or croc), but Janco knows where the resident hippo crew usually hangs out. Over the course of the last two days he has quizzed local fishermen as to their whereabouts. We know we'll encounter them today and we're all a little nervous.

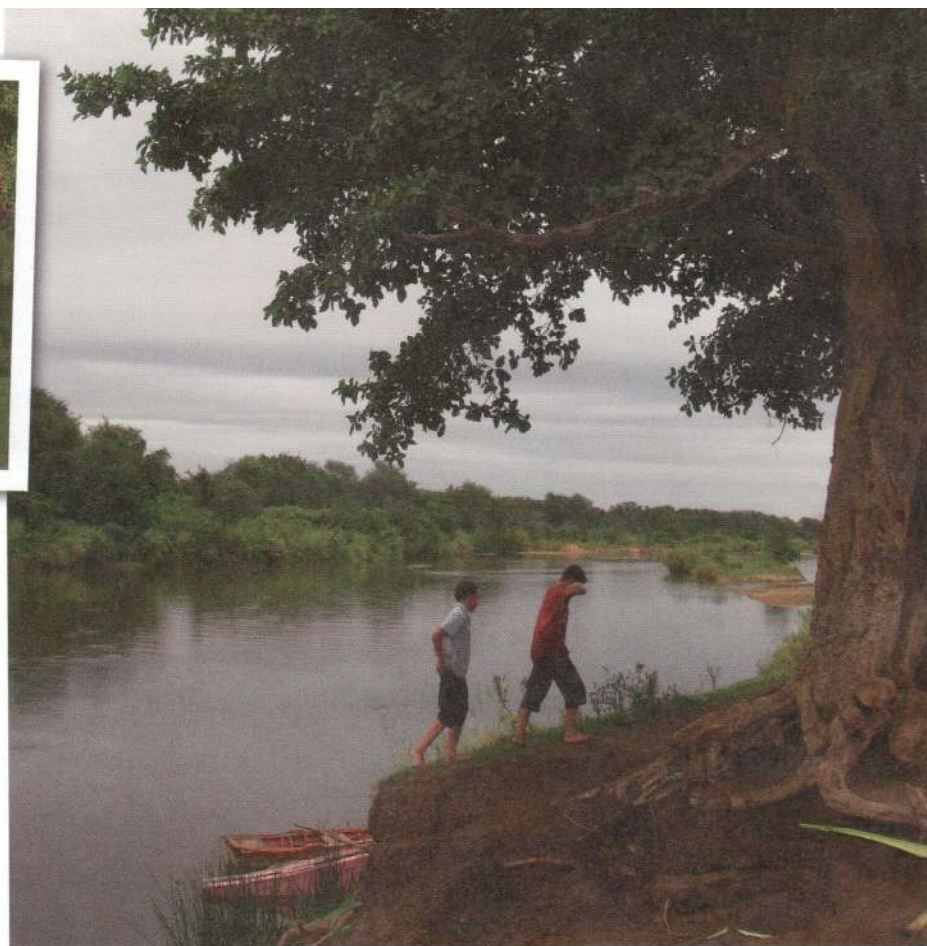
Everyone is at ease on the water by now. It actually feels weird to be on solid ground. We see more houses, pump stations and people on the river banks – the area around the confluence of the Elefantas and the Limpopo is more densely populated.

Along the way, the width of the river has varied from about 100m to as little as 10m, especially when it splits into canals. It's in one of these narrow canals that we find the hippo. Janco has been scanning ahead with his binoculars, so we see them in good time.

There are five or six, including a baby. We paddle to the bank and pull out our kayaks. Janco walks ahead to find a portage route through the reeds.

We wait, the hippos snorting barely 50m away. A big bull is moving upstream in our direction. Janco reappears and beckons us to come. No second invitation is necessary. We drag the kayaks over a sand bank for about 150m and then we're back on the water. Relieved. The danger is behind us.

Just after 2pm we reach the end of the trail at the village of Macaringue. Patrick helps pack the kayaks onto the trailer and then we drive into town for lunch. Tourism is not very developed in this part of Mozambique.



As a result there's nothing that feels forced or "touristy" about the Rio dos Elefantas trail. Lunch is prepared by a couple of local women. There is no restaurant here, so a table, chairs and crockery (seemingly borrowed from different households) are set out for us in the dusty square behind some houses.

Our curry chicken and pap is served and it goes down a treat with an ice-cold 2M beer on the side. Lukas and Daniël are a hit with the women – they each receive a handful of marriage proposals.

After lunch we drive back to Fig Tree Camp for the night (I spot a Sharpe's grysbok on the way) because it's too far to drive all the way to Albufeira.

It's fine with me. I can do with another night of campfire stories and the sounds of Mozambique at night.

Late in the afternoon the sun breaks through the clouds for the first time in three days. A soft orange glow lights up the trunks of the fever trees near the camp. Janco and I walk there, hoping for one last lucky glimpse of a Pel's fishing-owl.

We don't see one, but the mellow, golden light is reward enough.

GOODBYE, RIVER. The paddling route ends at the town of Macaringue near the confluence of the Elefantas (Olifants in South Africa) and Limpopo rivers.

POT OF PLEASURE. Paddling can be hard work, but the guides rustle up a hearty meal every night. They also set up a bush shower (that's the hot water supply at right in this photo) and a camp toilet.





KNOW BEFORE YOU GO



GEAR TO KEEP WITH YOU ON THE KAYAK. 1 If you want to fish, take your own rod and reel. A light rod like this Shimano Spinjoy (200 cm) will do the trick. 2 Even if it's cloudy, the sun is lethal. Wear a good hat. Mine has a strap to stop it from blowing off and becoming crocodile bait. 3 A knife or multitool like a Leatherman is handy, especially when removing the hook from the mouth of a toothy tiger. 4 Use water-resistant sunscreen with a high sun protection factor. 5 You can't drink the river water without purifying it first. Keep at least 2 ℓ with you on the kayak. 6 Stash your camera, binoculars and rain jacket in a waterproof bag. 7 If you're serious about birding, don't forget a pair of binoculars. 8 Take a pair of slip-slops, Crocs or other shoes that can get dunked.

It works like this. You enter the Parque Nacional do Limpopo via the Kruger Park at the Giriyyondo border post. Drive through the park and stay over at Albufeira Camp near Massingir Dam. Leave your vehicle here and depart for the start of the trail early the next morning. The trip usually starts on a Friday at 7.30 am. Groups of four to eight are preferred, and no children under ten are allowed. You use double kayaks.

The guides set up camp – they provide a tent and sleeping mat, food and 1 ℓ of drinking water per person per day.

What to pack. A watertight bag for a camera, binoculars and other small items to keep with you on the kayak, and extra water or purification tablets. Your overnight bag is transferred by vehicle to the next camp. A quick-dry, long-sleeved shirt with a collar is useful. Also take your own drinks and extra snacks (although you get fed so well you'll never be hungry).

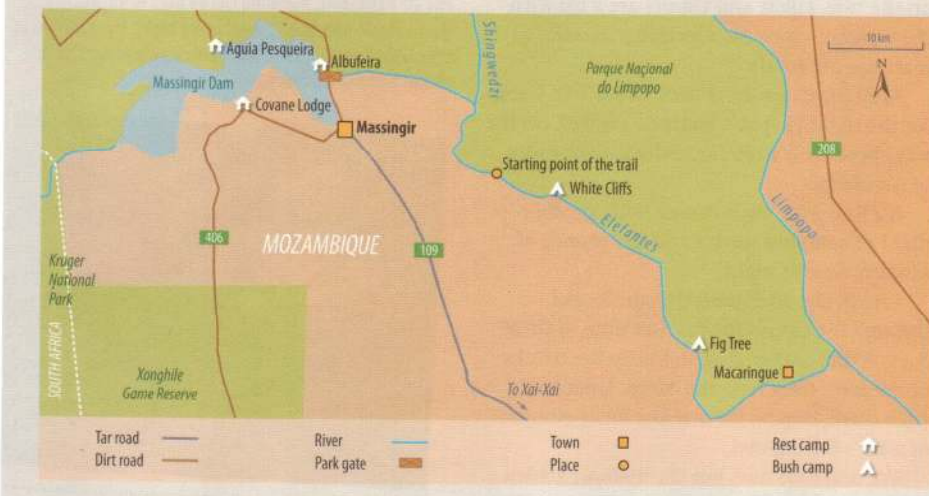
Malaria? Yes, take precautions.

At the border. South Africans don't need a visa when visiting Mozambique, but you pay R10 per car at Giriyyondo. Giriyyondo's gate hours are 8 am – 3 pm from April to September and 8 am – 4 pm from October to March.

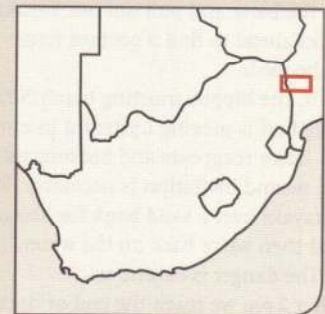
Cost. R4 500 per person (phone to enquire – they are running specials until the end of February 2012). This includes guide fees, all meals and use of gear. The Parque Nacional do Limpopo park fees are for your own account: MT200 (about R50) per adult, MT50 (R15) per child aged 13 to 20 and free for children younger than 13; MT200 (R50) per car; and MT50 (R15) per trailer. Also factor in the Kruger conservation fee of R45 per person (free with a Wild Card).

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Find out more. Read a special report about Parque Nacional do Limpopo in the May 2011 issue of *go!*



go! travelled independently and covered all costs.



ON THE WEB Visit www.gomag.co.za/multimedia for video footage from the paddling trip.