

Back on track

For the first time in 300 years, Bushmen return to Kruger so that hikers on a wilderness trail may join the continent's best trackers.

By Scott Ramsay



BREATHING FIRE
Humankind's use of fire changed the world. /Ui-G/aqo knows how to make it.



From left to right: Relaxing at Nyalaland Wilderness Trails Camp; lion spoor (this one is easy to spot!); /Ui-Kxunta is one of the remaining active Bushmen hunters.

We're standing somewhere in the Nyalaland wilderness in northern Kruger. There are two lions

around but we can't see them. Our group has been following their tracks on the sandy earth. At first it had been easy enough, with plenty of open ground and a rare cool, misty morning. Then the lion spoor disappeared over rocky ground, the mopane trees closed in on us, and the sun came out.

Now the lowveld heat is beginning to cast its strangling fingers around our necks. We stop and listen. The air is tinged with tension. The possibility of a lion encounter on foot is scary for good reason.

We have grounds for a bit of confidence. First because of our guide Christopher Muthathi. Over the past 20 years, he's taken thousands of people out to walk in what many consider the most beautiful of Kruger's landscapes. But the big Shangaan man isn't alone. On this trail, the first of its kind in Kruger, he is joined by two of Africa's finest trackers.

Their names are /Ui-G/aqo and /Ui-Kxunta, and they are Ju/'hoansi (pronounced roughly "Jukwasi", but with a click in the middle), a people from the Kalahari of northeastern Namibia. Bushmen or San are the collective names that

the rest of the world use to describe the descendants of the first people of Africa; however, they prefer to be called by their group names.

The Luvuvhu River cuts a lithe trail through a land of mopane forests, baobabs and sandstone hills. Breeding herds of elephant and grumpy Cape buffalo are regularly encountered. And, of course, there are lions. As we stand silently in the mopane thicket, the Ju/'hoansi men point at the rocky ground just ahead, not a drop of sweat on their brows. /Ui-G/aqo leads us to a patch of rocks, then points at a few mopane leaves on the ground. That's all we see but, according to him, the lion tracks are vividly on display. A male and a female. The Ju/'hoansi point out the depressions on the leaves to us. I strain to see them and, yes, sure enough, I can just make out the faint lion tracks.

If Christopher is a seasoned professional who has honed his craft through years of practice, then /Ui-G/aqo and /Ui-Kxunta are born geniuses. "These men embody the collective wisdom, knowledge and skill of 100 000 years of hunters-gatherers in southern Africa," explains Clive Thompson, an independent trails guide from Discovery Trails who linked up last year with the two Bushmen in northeastern Namibia to

gauge their tracking prowess. Thoroughly impressed, he promptly contacted SAN-Parks and had little difficulty persuading them to invite the Bushmen to demonstrate their skills in the Kruger wilderness.

“With the arrival of /Ui-G/aqo and /Ui-Kxunta, the Bushmen have returned to Kruger to actually walk the land for the first time in probably 300 years,” says Clive. “For millennia before that, their ancestors roamed the Lowveld, as hundreds of their rock paintings in the park attest.”

Bantu people settled in the Lowveld around 1000AD, then European colonial forces pushed in from the south and east in the 1800s. The original Bushmen lost their land and their way of life. Not just in the Lowveld, but across almost the whole sub-continent. Now only remnant populations remain around the Kalahari Basin.

/Ui-G/aqo (or Gideon) and /Ui-Kxunta (or Dawid) live in the sizeable Nyae-Nyae conservancy in Namibia. The Ju/'hoansi are the last of the Bushmen who have meaningful control over some of their historic land and who are legally allowed to hunt using traditional methods and weapons, even if many now don't. Until the mid-20th century, they were among the most isolated of all Bushmen communities.

“/Ui-G/aqo and /Ui-Kxunta have never been taught by anyone. They grew up doing this, surviving by tracking and hunting. It's in their DNA. They are naturals, the best of the best,” says Clive, as we take a break from tracking lions to sit in the shade of a jackalberry tree. “These men are two of only six accredited indigenous master track-

ers in southern Africa.” The accreditation was done by the internationally renowned Louis Liebenberg of CyberTracker and is acknowledged by FGASA.

While the rest of us plod along, they seem to float across the earth. Both are in their 50s but their gait is effortless. They don't look down at the tracks near their feet. They look 20, 30 metres ahead for tracks and signs. As we follow a seemingly random path of lion tracks, they point out how the lions stopped and lay down. In another place, how they came across a lone buffalo and chased it, unsuccessfully. Through /Ui-G/aqo and /Ui-Kxunta, the lions come alive for us, even though we haven't seen them.

By midday, temperatures have climbed and although the two Ju/'hoansi look like they could walk all day, the rest of us are tired and sweaty. As the lions are still on the hunt, moving, we break off the chase and make our way back to our off-road vehicle and to camp. A bare kilometre later we are rewarded by the sight of the male lion prowling just off the road.

Come Fire!

That night the presence of /Ui-G/aqo and /Ui-Kxunta around the campfire is equally captivating. They show us how to make fire with two Namibian-sourced manketti sticks and a clump of dry grass. We watch as they call out “/oah-khoe, /oah-khoe” (Come Fire! Burst forth! Come Fire!). When a small ember comes alive, /Ui-G/aqo picks up the clump of grass and blows the grass into a roaring flame. Soon our wood fire is ablaze and we are warm, feeling a bit safer. ▶



1 /Ui-Kxunta and /Ui-G/aqo above the Luvuvhu River gorge. 2 Heading off on the trail with SANParks guides Christopher Muthathi and Vanessa Strydom. 3 This Iron Age tool was found in northern Kruger. 4 The master trackers explain the nuances of tracking to the trailists. 5 The latrine of a civet, with shongololo (millipede) exoskeletons. 6 Taking in the views of northern Kruger, where Bushmen walk the land once again.

Walking along the Luvuvhu River in the Nyalaland Wilderness Area.

While the rest of us plod along, they seem to float across the earth.



TOUCHING NATURE
Connecting with an ancient baobab - and one another. That is what a wilderness trail is all about.



As we gaze up at a blazing Southern Cross, we listen as they tell us about their lives back in the Kalahari. /Ui-G/aqo speaks in Ju/'hoansi and /Ui-Kxunta translates for him into Afrikaans.

According to folklore, lions and Bushmen have a pact not to hunt one another. Once /Ui-G/aqo found himself out in the Kalahari at dusk after a failed giraffe hunt, obliged to take refuge for the night in the middle of a spiny acacia thicket. He woke up to find a pride of lions around him, sniffing and scratching at the bush. /Ui-G/aqo gripped his spear in readiness. The lions grunted to one another. To his mind, some of the lions were saying to the others, "Leave this one alone, we are his ancestors." The lions moved on.

Quietly spoken but with animated expressions, they tell us how they can run all day in searing midday temperatures, tracking down an antelope until it collapses from hyperthermia. Probably practised

for thousands of years by Bushmen, some argue this was the original way of hunting on the African savanna, even before the advent of bows and arrows.

They speak of how their society is deeply egalitarian and almost everything is shared. They once chased off a pack of wild dogs from a kudu kill, took half the meat and left the other half for the ranging predators, so that they, too, would have something to eat.

Later, as we go to bed, I hear /Ui-G/aqo and /Ui-Kxunta talking in whispers to each other outside their tent, standing under the night sky. It is a strangely comforting sound, and their language of clicks fits seamlessly into the night sounds of Kruger, along with the nightjars and hyena howls. Somehow, it seems right that they are here.

Then I hear lion roar several times. Perhaps they have come to welcome the Bushmen back to Kruger. 🐾

1 /Ui-Kxunta and /Ui-G/aqo alongside SANParks guide Vanessa Strydom, all three of them dwarfed by a massive baobab. 2 A pearl-spotted owl on patrol. 3 Tracking lions with Bushmen in Kruger is an essential African experience. 4 See the lion tracks? If you're a Ju/'hoansi hunter, then it's easy. 5 The huts of Nyalaland Wilderness Trails Camp are shaded by large trees. 6 Dinner time at the trails camp.



Admiring the rock art found in northern Kruger.

WALK WITH BUSHMEN

Kruger has excellent guides but in future guests may also have an opportunity to walk with the subcontinent's original savanna hunter-gatherers. Following up on this pioneering Nyalaland trail, SANParks will explore further customised wilderness trails involving the Ju/'hoansi master trackers in the Kruger National Park. Since this activity is still in the concept phase, those interested in learning more should contact Vanessa Strydom at SANParks on vanessa.strydom@sanparks.org.

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At the foot of a towering baobab the guides explain the tree's many uses.



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