

big sky

COUNTRY

The Kalahari Desert is world-famous as a great thirstland, with its red dunes, unique wildlife, shimmering horizons and, of course, the ever-shrinking San Bushman community, whose ancestors first settled here some hundred thousand years ago. Today, new initiatives are being developed to restore viable lives to these desert inhabitants. **Kate Turkington** investigates. ▶

TEXT BY KATE TURKINGTON





!XAUS LODGE



KATE TURKINGTON (2)

ABOVE Built on ancestral land that has been returned to the San people after being appropriated for inclusion into the then Kalahari Gemsbok Park, !Xaus Lodge enables visitors to experience both the unspoiled landscape and the culture of the ancient communities. !Xaus means 'heart' in the San language, and refers to the shape of the salt pan at the edge of which the lodge stands.

OPPOSITE, MIDDLE A San crafter at work.

OPPOSITE, RIGHT The grave of tracker Vetpiet Kleinman.

PREVIOUS SPREAD San men are renowned as formidable trackers and hunters. Their children, however, have succumbed to the lure of the modern world, signalling the demise of their parents' way of life. The South African San Institute is determined to preserve the culture and identity of this ancient people.

Some historians claim that there are no San left. In the central Kalahari, those few who were clinging to their disappearing lifestyle have been scattered by mineral prospecting. For many others, schools, a clinic and steady work offer attractive alternatives to hunting and gathering.

However, the South African San Institute (SASI), whose headquarters are in Upington in the Northern Cape, believes that identity is not something you can take off or put on like a jacket. San identity, the institute maintains, is deeply rooted in a way of life, in an oral culture of great antiquity and a heritage that is closely tied to the curves of a familiar sand dune, the shade of a camelthorn tree or the sound of lions roaring in the night. And it's that identity that they are trying to preserve in the Northern Cape.

Many years ago, there was a famous Khomani San tracker called Karel 'Vetpiet' Kleinman, born in what was then known as the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (now the South African portion of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park). Having learned his skills from another great master tracker, Regopstaan Kruiper, Vetpiet became so well known that people came from all over the world to learn from him.

Vetpiet Kleinman also had a dream and, before his death in 2004, he had

begun to fulfil that dream – to train a new generation of San master trackers. After lengthy consultations with the San elders, Vetpiet's ethno-ecological training team named its project IlUruke, which means a path used by animals and trackers. Today, traditional skills merge with 21st-century technology, and the trackers learn cyber-tracking, sharing their skills on bushveld adventures and walking trails.

Nanette Fleming, who gave up a successful career as a film director to work with the San, has lived in the Kalahari for eight years and is the project manager for SASI. 'We have two main thrusts. One is the tracking project; the other is a craft initiative. Originally, when I started working in the Kalahari, the older people still knew the culture – the medicinal plants, the spiritual knowledge – but the youngsters didn't. We are trying to keep that culture alive, not in a touristy way, but in a living, meaningful way.' Today, young San people are working on their traditional oral history, researching and writing down their stories in their own languages and setting up projects such as community gardens, a health centre and art and craft initiatives.

Ironically, my arrival coincides with the making of a local TV commercial at the SASI centre outside Andriessvale. All the actors are San, wearing traditional

FOOTPRINTS OF THE SAN

The San people of the Kalahari have been linked with their counterparts at Platfontein, on the outskirts of Kimberley in the Northern Cape, in a unique way. Footprints of the San is a tourism route that connects the two communities, taking in numerous attractions and points of interest in this remote area. Ownership of the route has been placed in the hands of the !Xun, Khwe and Khomani San communities, and SASI assists them with management and marketing.

The route captures the turbulent history of the San communities that were forced to flee from constant tribal conflict and the influx of western cultures. They scattered across southern Africa, leaving traces of their rich cultural heritage in shards of shell and pictures etched on rocks. The Footprints of the San route aims to help preserve San culture and to stamp out prejudice. It crosses the Kalahari's red sand dunes, follows the banks of the Orange River and penetrates places linked with Kimberley's rich diamond-mining history. It is designed to give tourists an authentic cultural experience while bringing much-needed benefits to these marginalised communities. Funds generated are used to address the issues of poverty and unemployment in the area. For more information about the Footprints of the San route, go to www.openafrica.org

leather aprons, beads, necklaces and thong sandals, and are being watched by their families and friends dressed in T-shirts and jeans. Some women are in curlers. Nearby, two ostriches wait in two small pens. Beyond the 'traditional' village built for the commercial, big, powerful 4x4s are parked. One of the big-city creative team, dressed in designer labels, comes to me.

'Shh!' he cautions. 'Ostriches are delicate and sensitive creatures. Please lower your voice.' I picture the huge birds lashing out at a lion in the Kalahari, running for kilometres through the sand, or pecking for food under a blazing noonday sun, and the word 'delicate' seems inappropriate. But I 'shh!' anyway.

Leaving the lights, camera and action, I proceed to Klipkolk, where Hendrik and Gertruida Bott run a very successful guesthouse. A peripatetic builder for many years, Hendrik, who is originally from the Mier community, decided to bring his skills back to his birthplace in the Kalahari, where he lives with his family. He is proud of the school he has built, with its computer room, library and classrooms. 'Each family planted a tree when the school was finished and is responsible for looking after it,' he says. The school grounds are immaculate and its trees are tall and healthy.





Oom Jan van der Westhuizen, a Khomani San elder and medicine man, whose focus is to ensure that the interests of his people are well protected.

In Andriesvale, I meet Oom Jan van der Westhuizen, one of the Khomani San elders who is a member of the Community Property Association. He makes sure that the interests of his people are well protected in all their dealings with outsiders. In a tiny room in the same settlement, Elias Festus shows us his wall hangings and necklaces fashioned from ostrich-egg beads, seeds, seed pods and small pieces of burnt wood. I can't resist. I buy a papier-mâché meerkat.

Another Kalahari resident intent on keeping the San culture alive is internationally renowned zoologist and animal behaviourist, Anne Rasa. She was the first scientist to research and publish on the social behaviour of dwarf mongooses – the only mammal that cares for its sick and lame. She now lives and works at her Kalahari Trails Nature Reserve, some 35 kilometres from the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. She learned her tracking skills from Vetpiet himself, and, on early morning or night walks with guests, she interprets the tracks and explains the ecosystem, the origins of the sand and rocks, and the adaptations of the plants and creatures to the surrounding desert.

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, the first cross-border park in Africa, covers 3.9 million hectares of South Africa, Namibia and Botswana. If you penetrate the park's depths, you'll find not only dramatic landscapes, stark beauty, bountiful game and two-thirds of the raptors that occur in South Africa, but also a place where community aspirations and self-help seem to be coming together in a successful and sustainable way.

!Xaus (pronounced Kaus) Lodge, the first fully catered luxury tourist destination in the park, perches high on great red dunes overlooking a 1.3-kilometre, heart-shaped salt pan. Remote and extraordinarily beautiful, the lodge is a two-hour rollercoaster drive from Kgalagadi's main Twee Rivieren/Aub road. *!Xaus* means 'heart' in the San dialect, and the name is a symbol of the spirit of reconciliation that engendered the historic 1999 land settlement agreement between the South African government, SANParks and the Khomani San and Mier communities to whom the land originally belonged before it was incorporated into the then Kalahari Gemsbok Park.

The road to the lodge (you leave your vehicle at Rooibrak waterhole) winds up and down through the red dunes. The rains have been excellent this year and the desert is uncharacteristically lush and green. Kori bustards take lumbering flight into the clear air; small indeterminate brown birds flit through the sweet and sour grasses; a scrub hare crouches silently; a steenbok has a quick look at our vehicle before scampering away into the bushes; and a southern pale chanting goshawk surveys its territory from a camelthorn tree. It's all about space – the horizon seems boundless.

At dawn, I sit on my wooden balcony at !Xaus and watch Venus. It's a dazzling sight. It pulsates with golden-red light as the swathe of the Milky Way and the countless bright desert stars begin to fade. Then, as the sun rises, I watch a herd of 50 gemsbok wander across the pan, stopping to nose its glowing red surface. A cool wind blows the tall silvery grasses surrounding the depression, and everywhere is sprinkled with purple and yellow flowers. A peregrine falcon stoops to drink at a small waterhole. A tiny skink scuttles past my feet and disappears over the edge of the veranda. Fluffy white clouds drift slowly across the turquoise vault above. This is Big Sky country. The space and vastness wrap themselves around me. That night, barking geckoes, yipping jackals and the far-off roars of lions form the evening chorus.

The lodge manager at !Xaus encapsulates the experience: 'You can listen to your heart. You can listen to your mind. But here, in the Kalahari, you listen to yourself...'

INFOTRAVEL

For more information about the South African San Institute and its work, tel. (+27-54) 339 1366, e-mail sasi@iafrica.com or go to www.sanculture.org.za

To find out more about the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, visit www.sanparks.org For Klipkolk Lodge, e-mail klipkolk.bott@gmail.com

To contact Kalahari Trails Nature Reserve, e-mail kalahari.trails@intekom.co.za, or go to www.kalahari-trails.co.za

To enquire about !Xaus Lodge, e-mail glynn@dolimpopo.com, or go to www.xauslodge.co.za