

High-water mark



What happens when the game lodge you're working at becomes marooned by a raging river? **Nick Dall** remembers the floods of 2000, which turned everything in the Timbavati upside down.

ILLUSTRATION NICOLENE LOUW

Just after I matriculated, I wangled my way into a job at a private game lodge in the Timbavati. I had no qualifications, other than a keen interest in the bush and a body that had not yet been ravaged by the excesses of university.

I arrived towards the end of January 2000. The camp was strung out along a dry riverbed; a line of jackal-berry trees and sycamore figs the only hint that there was water nearby. "Do you think I'll see the river flow?" I asked the manager.

"Not a chance," he chuckled. "We've had our rain for this year."

My bedroom was Tent 12, technically a guest room, but – being furthest from the camp – one that was seldom occupied. Sometimes, after dinner, I forgot to take a torch and I had to follow the path by feel. One such night I inadvertently walked through a herd of 400 buffalo without even noticing. A ranger had noticed, but he'd decided it would be safer not to panic me. I guess he was right, because when he told me about it the following morning, I got a real *skrik*.

I didn't have a defined job description. I manned the bar, I trimmed the long grass around the waterhole with a panga and I lugged enormous American suitcases from car to tent and vice versa.

A few days after I'd arrived, it started to rain. There were big black clouds in the north and lightning all around. I lay in my tent, wondering whether the roof would be able to support the weight of all that water. It was hard to tell over the cacophony of frogs, but I thought I could hear water flowing.

When I awoke, what had been a giant sandpit was now a proper river, with a proper name: the Nharalumi.

The guests were as incredulous as I was and the staff were excited. The river usually only flowed every second year; now it was flowing for the second time in a month. A startled cobra swam to safety on the bank.

"It won't get higher than this," said Grant, one of the rangers. "The water will be gone in a few days."

I was dispatched with a team of labourers to fix up the roads. We cut down branches and laid them in the potholes before filling the holes with sand and stones, which we stomped down with a heavy log.

Now that the river was flowing, the camp was on an island. Self-drive guests had to park at a ford and be ferried across by Land Rover. This was another one of my chores.

The rain kept up and the river swelled. This was the year (2000) of the massive floods in Mozambique, where a woman was forced to give birth in a tree and had to be airlifted to safety. The Timbavati isn't far from Mozambique. Within a couple of days the Nharalumi was a raging torrent: 60m wide and 3 m deep.

It was my job to check the rain gauge. One morning I found it full: 100mm. I emptied it and went back to check at lunch time. Full again. By then not even a Landy could ford the river. Guests couldn't come and guests couldn't go.

I became an expert at driving a Landy out of mud directly off a high-lift jack, which sometimes resulted in 10kg of steel ping-pong into a tree.

Inconvenient, then, that our only guests should be a British group who had travelled to South Africa for a wedding in Cape Town. The wedding couldn't really go ahead without them – we had the bride and groom!

The phone lines were down, so ranger Grant had to drive to the highest point in the reserve and climb a tree to get cellphone signal. He managed to contact a helicopter company, but he was cut off before he could confirm any details.

Our only hope was that the chopper would simply arrive. An hour or so later it did – landing on the flat ground behind the waterhole. From there, the pilot began ferrying the guests two-by-two to the airfield on the other side of the river.

There were nine guests in the group, so Rodney – the camp's Shangaan barman – could squeeze onto the last flight. His wife had just given birth to their first child and he had not yet met his son. "This bird is scarier than a black mamba," he said as he climbed into the cockpit.

Around the same time, Harriet the resident hyena decided she'd had enough of the weather. She gnawed her way through the kitchen door and raided our stocks. This happened a few nights in a row. Under normal circumstances we would have installed a metal door, but because of the floods we had no way to get one. Usually she scuttled off before we opened up, but one morning we found her nursing a litter of newborn pups in the darkness of the pantry. Luckily she didn't seem to enjoy the noise of the kitchen, and she left with her family at nightfall.

Now that the wedding party had gone, we decided to close the camp. We had plenty of cleaning up to do.

After a few days of manual labour, Grant and I treated ourselves to an afternoon off.

We inflated tractor tyre inner tubes, took a six-pack each from the cold store, and floated down the Nharalumi. At one point a family of elephants crossed the river just ahead of us. Later I saw an owl swoop on a flailing leguan. We climbed out downriver and caught catfish in the newly formed oxbow lake, using chicken livers as bait.

That evening the river subsided just enough for us to cross and we went into Hoedspruit for a night on the town. A meal of steak and chips at a restaurant in the old railway station was followed by a *sokkiejol* at a bar called Pakhuis. The dress code was khaki and the Backstreet Boys featured heavily on the playlist.

On the way home we rounded a bend and came face to face with a female leopard. We dimmed our headlights and watched in the moonlight as she sniffed all four tyres before retreating into the bush.

We were forced to re-open the following morning. A mad Frenchman and his wife had made it all the way to the camp in a rented Toyota Corolla. We later found out he was an astronomer who the previous year had won a million dollars for locating a lost Nasa satellite in some distant galaxy. No wonder he had managed to find us.

From then, we settled into a routine. The flooding was a daily reality, but it wasn't getting any worse. About half the guests with reservations cancelled their trips, but the other half arrived. Every day, one of the rangers would get stuck in the mud with a load of guests. I would drive out with a replacement vehicle and we would swap cars. I became an expert at driving a Landy out of mud directly off a high-lift jack, which sometimes resulted in 10kg of steel ping-pong into a nearby tree. It was not very sensible, in hindsight.

All the rain meant that there was lots of standing water. Grant contracted malaria and I had the honour of driving him to the clinic. On the way he insisted on buying a case of Lucozade and a carton of Stuyvesant red. He would not be a model patient.

My time at the lodge eventually came to an end. When I left, the river was more of a stream and Grant was back at work. Rodney had met his baby and Harriet had moved on to bother some other camp. I had learnt how to drive in mud and how to drive out of it; how to drink whisky and how to *sokkie* in the Lowveld.

And I had learnt to never say never when it comes to the weather. ■