

Southern Delights

What made the 2019 Defender Trophy special? Patrick Cruywagen reports from the crocodile-infested Limpopo River, to find out



I may live in England but African blood runs through my veins. In my nearly 20 years as a 4x4 journalist I have attended over 10 Defender Trophy events: they are always held in Southern Africa and as the name suggests they are for Defenders only. Though last year Englishman Phillip Young did it in a Toyota Land Cruiser. This was because he could not get his Defender through customs in time after shipping it over from the UK for the event!

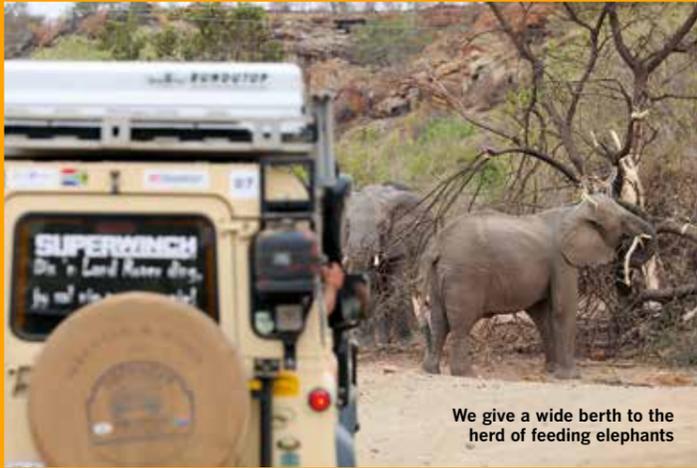
As I exit the O.R. Tambo arrivals hall in Johannesburg I walk straight into the welcoming hot Highveld air. After a few minutes of waiting, the mother of all Defender 130s appears – it's the Front Runner demo model. It has more accessories than the most accessorised Defender in the world. Actually it might just be the most-accessorised Defender in the world. Ryno Cloete is behind the wheel. He has the best job in the world, demonstrating Front Runner products to the world's media.

I quickly realise that Ryno is one of those classy guys who just can't do enough for you. He whips out a packet of biltong (dry and spicy red meat) and places a cold drink in my hand. "Welcome home brother," he declares.

Our first stop is the Front Runner factory and world-class showroom at the nearby Kyalami. Even though it's a Saturday there are loads of (mostly) Defenders lined up and waiting to get some or other accessory added. Jaco Nel meets us at the entrance and takes us on a guided tour. The place has expanded tenfold since my last visit over a decade ago. Front Runner is one of the big South African 4x4 success stories with offices and warehouses all over the world.

DAY 2: Even though we only have to report for Defender Trophy duty on Monday afternoon, we head off on Sunday morning. I'm in the 130 with Ryno while two of my best

Pictures: Patrick Cruywagen



We give a wide berth to the herd of feeding elephants



The 31 Defenders make their way through a Mopani tree forest



Deflating the tyre to drive the dry river beds



mates in the world, Aldri van Jaarsveld and Lindsey Parry are in a Defender 110 Td5. Aldri has tied a big South African flag to the back of his Land Rover. He is impossible to miss.

We take the N1 toll road north in the direction of Zimbabwe. I have driven this road about a thousand times and not much has changed, except the tolls are more expensive now. We cross the Tropic of Capricorn. After about four hours we reach Polokwane, the capital of the Limpopo province. We now take the more rural R521 road towards the Limpopo River. The last town we pass through is Alldays, where we top up on ice and other essentials. It's nearly 40 degrees Celsius so ice is like gold in these parts. We swap the tar for gravel and head east along the Limpopo River.

We are now in a wildlife area and our home for the next two nights, the Ratho Bush Camp, is also a working farm. We are one of the first of the 31 competing Defenders to arrive. The main event organiser Johan Kriek warmly greets us and tells us to set up camp in a dry section of the Limpopo River. Before I can put up my Front Runner pop-up tent, Ryno passes me the first of many cold beers. The sun forms a blazing orange ball and slowly slips behind some baobab trees. A herd of impala nervously cross the river about 200 metres away from us.

It gets dark quickly and so we make a fire to cook on. Ryno

expertly cooks us some lamb chops and local sausage, also known as Boerewors. The single malt whiskey flows and the shooting stars entertain us further. I have left my head torch in my tent and so I walk the 50 or so metres from the BBQ to go fetch it. I hear a snarl behind a rock or log. It makes me nervous. I walk backwards towards the fire and tell the others: they just mock me and say that I have been in the UK too long. One of the events sponsors, Johan Fouche, grabs a searchlight and walks with me. We straight away see the yellow eyes of a lioness who is hiding behind a large log. This is not good. Johan carries on walking towards her. She jumps up and scurries away. I decide it's time for bed.

DAY 3: As we have a day without driving we take in some tourist activities. First up is a croc farm tour. There are around 10,000 crocodiles at the Ratho Bush Camp. Why so many? Well each year they sell 2500 croc skins to mainly Italian and Korean buyers. The average price of a skin is around US \$200. So you make the sums. It's a pretty lucrative business. The most impressive part of the tour are the large breeding crocs.

As my son is mad about crocs I buy him a real crocodile skull. Later in the afternoon we head out on a game drive with a local guide. We see impala, kudu, elephant and some nervous warthog but no sign of the lioness from last night. By

Aldri flying the South African flag

the time we get back from our drive most of the competitors have arrived and have put the event decals onto their Defenders. Despite the fact that we have so many Defenders, no two are the same.

Tonight is a slightly more civilised affair as I catch up with Defender friends that I have not seen for years. Dara King from Tuff-Trek in the UK is also here on his first Defender Trophy. He is a guest of Bundutec, the headline sponsor. There is also a Dutch family who are on their second Defender Trophy.

DAY 4: We're up at sunrise as today is the first official day of the 2019 Defender Trophy. Before leaving, Oldrich van Schalkwyk from the Endangered Wildlife Trust talks to us about the need to create wildlife corridors for the free movement of animals. He goes on to say that we are currently in an area which is home to one of the last free-roaming groups of lions in the world. I can confirm this as I saw one two nights ago. Oldrich talks for about 45 minutes and I look forward to seeing how the various wildlife authorities from the countries we will be travelling through work together to facilitate the free movement of wildlife. We head west away from Ratho Bush Camp.

Johan has obtained special permission for us to enter the Mapungubwe National Park via one of the Rangers gates. It

Ryno Cloete took great care of our precious editor

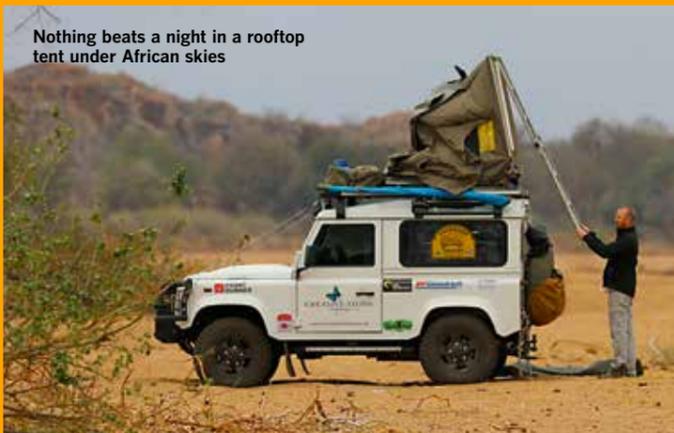


Now you know why crocs are called flatdogs



Nervous impala keep an eye out for predators

Nothing beats a night in a rooftop tent under African skies



is like entering the London Zoo via a private underground tunnel. We find ourselves in the less touristy eastern side of the park – Mapungubwe is best known as the former home of the Ancient African Kingdom over 700 years ago. Evidence of this active kingdom was found on the form of a golden rhino excavated here by archeologists.

We exchange the gravel tracks for the rocky trails of the Rhino Eco Trail which snakes its way through the red sandstone kopjes of the park. Ryno engages low range and our beast purrs forward in second and third gear.

Each day, teams are given a questionnaire with loads of interesting questions about the area we are driving through. These will be marked and the points tallied up to determine the eventual winner of the event.

We leave the rocky trail and join the game track that runs alongside the Limpopo River. Where there is water there are animals and we now see loads of wildlife along this section of the route including elephant, bushbuck, impala, kudu, giraffes, elephants and baboons.

While it feels as if we have had the park all to ourselves thanks to the unique 4x4 tracks we have been driving, Johan does allow for a stop at the touristy viewpoints. From where

we are we can see the confluence of the Sashe and Limpopo Rivers. It's one of the most magnificent views in all of the Limpopo Province, which probably explains why it feels as if everyone in the Limpopo province is here right now. As we leave the viewing area our progress is halted by a herd of elephant having a feed. As they have loads of youngsters with them we give them a wide berth.

As we near our campsite for the night we're met by Stefan Cilliers, the senior section ranger in Mapungubwe National Park. Despite the fact that he does not drive a Land Rover, Stefan is a rather remarkable man. During the last nine years he has helped to reduce rhino poaching in his area to zero. He and his team have collected 1187 animal snares in that time and also arrested 113 suspects. Pretty incredible really. That night we once again sleep in the dry Limpopo riverbed.

DAY 5: We wake up to a temporary border post that has been set up by the South African authorities only a few metres from our campsite. They are from the nearby Pontdrift Border Post, which is the most northern border post between South Africa and Botswana. They efficiently stamp us out of SA, then we drive for about one kilometre in



Horse power versus donkey power equals a smile

“It’s one of the highlights of the event, giving back to those who have so little”

The convoy leaves the croc farm and heads east

a westerly direction. There is a huge welcome party consisting of Zimbabwean officials from just about every government department including the secret police, of course. They take great interest in me because I am a British journalist and seem disappointed that I have pre-arranged my media accreditation from the Zimbabwe Media Commission. In fact, Nothando Moyo has come all the way from Harare, a distance of 700km, to personally issue it to me. The convoy's paperwork takes about two hours to complete. While this is going on Nick Smart, a Defender Trophy veteran, helps to recover one of the official's truck.

Some clever entrepreneur has been informed about our visit and he has set up a stand selling baobab juices. He even has promo girls to help with the tasting. I try some. It's not for me. Others buy bottles by the dozens.

We make our way to the Sashi Primary school which is about a 45-minute drive away along some very dry and dusty roads. The place is currently in dire need of rain. Hundreds of school kids are waiting for us. Nick has raised about £400 for the school after selling some cloth Defender Trophy badges. Everyone else is carrying much-needed equipment for the school. Brett Ellis has made a special wooden box full



of sporting equipment for the kids. The whole village comes to see what the fuss is about. It's definitely one of the highlights of the event, giving back to those who have so little yet still have big smiles on their faces.

We have lunch at a nearby Hunters Lodge and then take a trip to what remains of an old fort. The entourage of officials is still with us and explains the history of the area to us. They are very friendly and kind towards us.

Then it's time to deflate tyres again as we drive up the dry Sashe River for 25km. Botswana is now to our left. The only people we see during this sandy slog are some fishermen and herdsman. Our original plan was to camp where the Sashe and Tuli meet but the wind is too strong and we are exposed. So we instead camp in sheltered spot a kilometre or two away. Our day in Zim has been long but memorable.

DAY 6: After packing up camp, which takes us about an hour, there is a driver's briefing and then we arrange all the Defenders in a line abreast for a drone shot as they continue up the dry riverbed. After about 15km we arrive at the small Mlambapele border post. Time to clock out of Zimbabwe and into Botswana at the Mabolwe border post. By now we are running low on beer and so we make our way to the village of Semolale, where we top up on St Louis, Botswana's finest and only beer.

From here we head south towards the Tuli Block and enter the Northern Tuli Game Reserve. Suddenly we start to see more and more signs of wildlife – elephant dung, damaged trees and tracks everywhere. Once we enter the Mashatu Game Reserve we find the animals. There are elephants, giraffe or impala around every turn. As we head back into the

Much-needed equipment is well-received



dry riverbanks we have to stop to deflate tyres again. Some try to advance without deflating and get stuck, of course. Just as the sun starts to set we reach the confluence of the Sashe and Limpopo Rivers.

My final night on the Defender Trophy is spent camping where not only three countries meet, but also where wildlife can roam free across international borders. The way it should be, without having to worry about being poached or shot for the pot. That night the BBQ fires burn long into the night and Defender war stories are exchanged. These are my people and some of my best mates. Like me they love Defenders and wilderness areas. It's why I keep on coming back.

FINAL DAY: Unfortunately I cannot hang around for the last day and prize giving as I have to get back to the UK for the LRM off-road driving days. It takes us the best part of a day to cross the Botswana border back into SA and then make our way back to the O.R. Tambo Airport. I make my flight with minutes to spare. When I wake up the next morning, the first thing I see are the dull early morning lights of London as we touch down. The sands of the Sashe River are still in my boots. My wish is that more people from around the world get to experience Africa and the Defender Trophy. It's better than the real deal.

FLIGHTS: I paid £700 for a return flight on SAA. BA also fly to O.R. Tambo International Airport.

VISAS: British and Irish citizens do not need a visa for South Africa. However British citizens will need a visa if going into Zimbabwe. This can be obtained at the border post for a fee of US\$50. So do bring along some US dollars.

What happens when you land in South Africa? The Defender Trophy event organisers will meet you at the airport with your fully-kitted hire Defender. All you have to bring is a toothbrush and some sunblock. And clothes too. They will take care of the rest. This includes: fuel, food, equipment, toll fees, event entry and camping fees. This is all included in your

daily Defender hire rate. The Defender 110 can take up to two people but there is a 130 for small families.

Best of all, they won't feed you beans on toast: brace yourself for proper South African hospitality and cooking. You will put on weight. All you have to worry about is the driving, beautiful settings and wildlife experiences. If you would like a safari add-on to the trip or a few days in Cape Town then this too can be arranged.

Book now for 2020: Want to do the 2020 Defender Trophy or something similar in Classic Land Rovers? See defendertrophy.com or email Johan Kriek on admin@defendertrophy.com.

