

# My Maloti Drakensburg experience

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MATATIELE

Being based in a certain country is often translated as being familiar with the place, but the reality is that you might have not seen anything from the window of your own house unless someone tells you.

Therefore you need to go out there and 'discover' it yourself. This is what happened when we took off for the Maloti Drakensburg Transfrontier 4x4 expedition recently. While for some people it was more of a travelling adventure, it was more of a journey to 'rediscovery' for participants from Lesotho and South Africa who partook in the excursion.

Proudly sponsored by Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles that supplied 10 VW Amaroks, the Kingdom of Lesotho and the Republic of South Africa extended an invitation to media houses from both countries for an experience that was never to be forgotten.

For five days the media as well as the crew from key tourism players comprising of Lesotho Tourism Development Corporation (LTDC), Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA), Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW), Free State Tourism Authority (FSTA), South African National Parks (SAN Parks) and Tourism KwaZulu-Natal (TKZN) as well as the Maloti Drakensburg Transfrontier Programme (MDTP) coordination team were taken on a trip through the Maloti Drakensburg Route (MDR) to challenge some of the most thought-provoking routes.

Marked as the starting point on October 28 2017, Matatiele welcomed a group of 30 participants whose first stop was the Ongeluk's Nek Pass in the wee hours of the morning. Ongeluk's Nek was previously used as an official border between Eastern Cape and Lesotho, mostly by the business community to ferry shopping consignments.

Here, Lesotho had tried to resuscitate its immigration services but living conditions proved too hard hence currently there only remains one on the South Africa side. On the Lesotho side is Letsa-La-Letsie, a wetland system which was declared a Ramsar site because of its unique environmental and bio diversity status. A Ramsar Site is a wetland site designated of international importance under the UNESCO Ramsar Convention. The lake flows into the greater Senqu River which off-loads into the Orange River in SA.

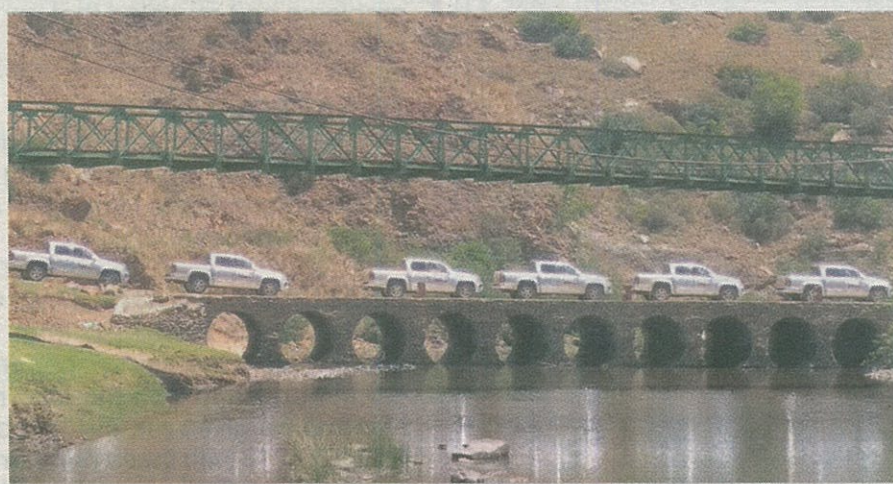
Despite a shift in seasons which brought about cold breezes, drizzles of rain and mist, participants were all on board up and early, enthusiastic about the adventurous day ahead. Led by Andre de Villiers, a 4x4 specialist from Safari 4x4 routes in South Africa, the convoy of 10 Amaroks plus one 4x4 he led the convoy looked set to conquer the toughest of terrains.

A convoy like never seen before driving through the old route to Qacha's Nek and back through Quthing left individuals, groups and communities in awe at the meticulous order which left just enough room between the vehicles. Observing from the window, it was evident that some were left wondering what the convoy was all about, while the majority of children and adults took in the excitement waving all the way through the convoy.

While speed is everything in such adventures, the specialist led the convoy communicating through wireless radios placed in the vehicles the conditions of the road ahead, animals



Participants of the 4x4 expedition



Convoy under a suspension bridge in Qacha's Nek

crossing and cars on route as well as the speed limits through Hloahloeng Pass that recently got tarred opening smooth travel between Maseru and Qacha's Nek, cutting distance by about two hours. Communities around this area were previously only reached by airplane and now leads to Semonkong.

The entire expedition was planned to the smallest detail from stops, to nature relief, lunch hour and destinations arrival, courtesy of the MDTP planning team led by the coordinator, Rabson Dhlodhlo.

Travelling on gravel road which was the order for the majority of the excursion, De Villiers instructed that the cars be in low range which was right up the Amarok's alley with its uncompromising off-road feature spirited on the asphalt with a combination of everything one would expect from an exclusive premium class all-rounder convertible.

From seeing the 'Maletsuinyane falls at 182m per single drop, boasting the longest abseil recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records, the team took to conquer Matebeng Pass at 2955m above sea level. This pass remains one of the most revered 4x4 tracks in Lesotho providing the most spectacular scenery between the Senqu valley on the west and Sehlabathebe on the east. Matebeng pass is commonly used by cyclists and off-road motorcyclists who love extreme adventure and also possesses immense opportunities for para-gliding.

Nearing the completion of the expedition, the participants were led to Thamathu in Sehlabathebe. Thamathu is located adjacent to the Maloti Drakensburg Park (World Heritage Site) and sits on the buffer zone. The village is accessible by road and the tourism departments have earmarked it for piloting homestays project to benefit the communities by providing accommodation, food and cultural performances as well as other activities.

Seated around a bonfire, partici-

pants feasted on a buffet of Basotho traditional food including the famous 'Smiley' sheep head to trotters, to steamed bread and tripe which seemed to go down quite well with the traditional beer. The following morning participants took a deserved break, short though it might have been, to visit rock paintings and some spectacular rock formations within Sehlabathebe National Park which is now part of the Transboundary Maloti Drakensburg Park World Heritage Site.

Heading back to Matatiele on the 4th day, De Villiers and his team drove by the Ramatseliso's pass commonly known as 'Ramas'. It is located half way between Sehlabathebe and Qacha's Nek and serves as a gateway into SA via Matatiele with both SA and Lesotho immigration services available.

The inception of this programme came as a result of a shared vision between the two countries to develop and position the area as a prime tourist destination and to showcase the tourism products in the area.

The area contains irreplaceable resources of unique but fragile ecosystem that host a high concentration of endemic plant species, places of cultural significance and wetland systems that are vital sources of freshwater for the communities they are bound in. MDTP believes that the beautiful scenery juxtaposed with the features add immense value to the mountains, allowing them the potential to become an internationally preferred nature and culture based tourism destination.

Initially, Nkuebe Lerotholi, the Manager Strategic Marketing at LTDC explained that the concept was to have a ladies only 4x4 expedition, but that did not materialize. The idea was to have something unique and authentic enough to attract attention from all walks of life taking haphazardly a convoy of 10 vehicles, all driven by women through the most difficult terrains and passes in what predictably is a man's world. However upon not materializing opened it up to both men and woman.

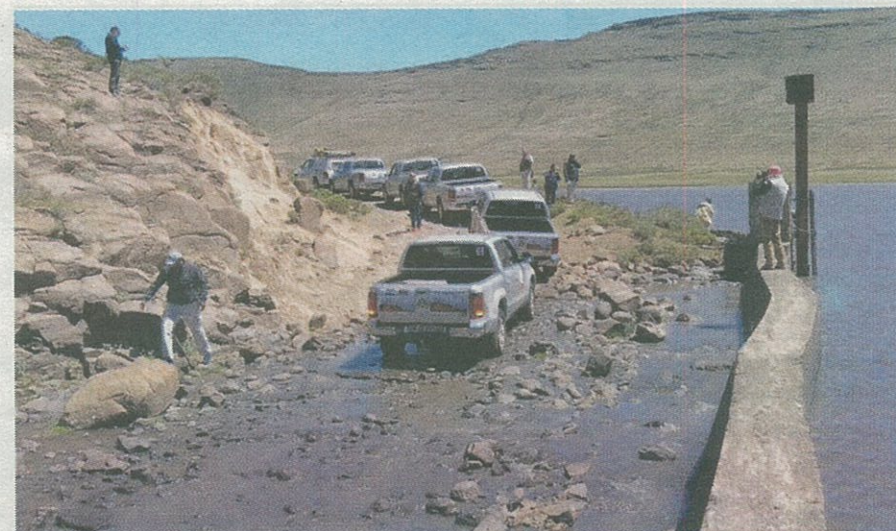
From Cape Media, Greg who participated in the expedition described the journey as "ambitious yet classic." He shared that the expedition dared him and other participants to break boundaries of time and fear among others which they succeeded in.

"We saw some of the most breathtaking sites and got to meet and get acquainted with people from Matatiele and Lesotho and the villages we went past. I would encourage people to visit these places, whether on horseback or by 4x4 for the ultimate experience that Amarok afforded us," he maintained. Some of the expressions through discussions were that people own 4x4s but are unaware of its capabilities and adventures they can embark on, especially through MDR.

Matatiele Municipality Manager Dr Nakin addressed participants upon their arrival on October 30, indicating that the collaboration of the two countries can only be the beginning of greater things to come. He further stated that the two borders now have to capitalize on the hype for discussions on developmental strategies on the protection and growth of eco-tourism.

For many, MDTP did not only unite people through tourism but also made them see it in a different light, a light that allows the blending of cultures and most importantly a light that allows people to live their dreams.

According to Dhlodhlo the plan is to organize similar expeditions annually either with support from vehicle manufacturing companies or people bringing their own 4x4 vehicles. The ultimate goal is to turn the Maloti Drakensburg Experience from an Amarok into a personal and self-driven experience for the nature loving and adventurous visitor.



The convoy of Amaroks passing through Lets'a la Letsie