



Tourists in South Africa don't need to join guided tours to enjoy wildlife safaris. They can simply drive on their own to see an impressive array of animals, including lions, giraffes and elephants.

Independent travel in South Africa is worth the road trip

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Earlier this year, we took our sixth trip to South Africa. Over the past decade or so, we've visited parts of all nine provinces and most major national parks, plus many minor parks. We're often asked why we keep going back and how we travel, so we thought it's time to discuss what it's like travelling independently in South Africa.

While escorted tours abound, we prefer wandering on our own. Fortunately, South Africa is tailor-made for road tripping. The extensive highway system is generally in good shape and well-signed, though you have to get used to driving on the left. The car is definitely king here. Public transport options are limited and usually non-existent off the beaten path.

Having a car is a huge advantage for self-drive wildlife safaris. In most African countries, wildlife safaris are only practical on guided trips, which may be excellent but pricey. In South Africa you can simply drive on your own to see an impressive array of critters from lions to rhinos, elephants, and more species of antelope than you'll remember. Since South Africans drive to their parks, an extensive car-accessible infrastructure has developed. Visitors in rental cars can also take advantage of this. While four-wheel drive might be handy in some places, famous wildlife areas such as Kruger National Park are accessible in practically any car, since all vehicles must stay on established roads.

It was the wildlife parks, and the possibility of visiting them independently, that first attracted us, though South Africa's varied scenery was equally enticing. The diverse geography encompasses

everything from mountains to deserts, wild coastlines, sand dunes, beaches galore, fertile farmland, and jungle-like lowlands. It's easy to get around, people are friendly, and health standards are high — you can drink the tap water almost everywhere.

The biggest factor in making travel affordable is the exchange rate. International travel using the battered loonie can be challenging these days, but the South African rand has devalued even more over the past few years. For example, during this year's trip, we paid less than \$20 per day for our rental car, a new Toyota Corolla. Accommodation and food prices are generally lower than in Canada, and their excellent wines are a bargain. However, gas is more pricey, around 20 percent higher than at home. Park admissions can be high, so it's often best to buy an annual pass, which can pay for itself in less than a week.

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It's easy to get around in South Africa, and the country's varied scenery is enticing.



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While hotels and B & Bs are everywhere, we usually go for self-catering accommodation, which seems more popular here than anywhere we've visited. Places with fully-equipped kitchens, are not only handy but provide a huge cost saving over eating out. While prices vary widely, we often found entire apartments for less than \$50, though costs are higher in national parks. On some trips, we also camped, which opened up even more possibilities, since camp-

grounds seem to be everywhere.

As anywhere in the world, travel here has both pros and cons. The most common question we're asked is about travel safety, given South Africa's unenviable reputation for being crime-ridden. The country's high crime rate is concentrated in urban areas where we spend extremely little time. In rural areas or in wildlife parks, worries about crime drop significantly.

South Africans tend to be exceptionally security conscious. At some accommodations, it's common to leave cars inside a locked

gate for the night. Supermarket parking lots often have security guards, and tourist attractions almost always have "car watchers" — people who keep an eye on your vehicle in exchange for a small tip. We've never felt unsafe, although we generally don't drive or wander around at night. As anywhere, the best bet is to follow local advice as to what to do and where to go and not go.

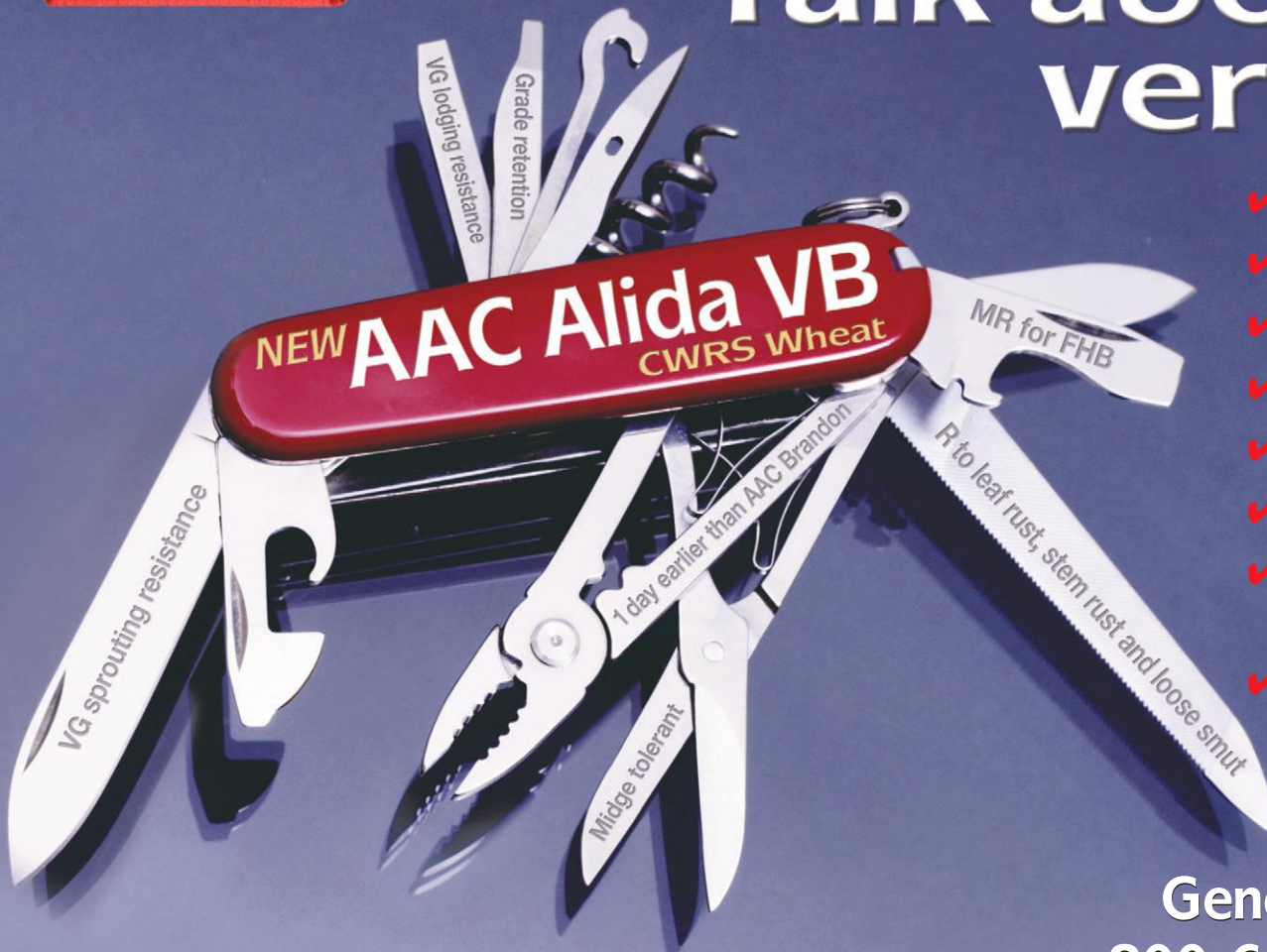
Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.

The country's wild coastlines are part of its diverse geography.

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