

Road Tripping & Driving in South Africa Transcript:

So we're sitting in a car park. Why are we sitting in a car park? We are sitting in a car park because we have the fabulous Jen come and tell us all of her lessons of how to have a road trip and stay sane with children.

I always say one of the things I've learnt about living in South Africa is South Africans just put their kids in the car and drive. Now in the UK, driving for two hours would terrify me, but here people drive to Durban, which is five and a half hours from Johannesburg, maybe six hours. They drive up to Kruger, which is five, six, seven or eight hours, depending on what side of Kruger you go to. But also then...as Jen has done for the last eight years with her three young children, now not so young, to Cape Town, which is sixteen hours with a stopover.

I'm Jen. I'm not actually a South African. I'm American, but I grew up in Colorado doing road trips. So it's very much in my blood. Moving here wasn't such a big change. I mean, we drove across America, so, you know, 16 hours, three week road trips were kind of part of growing up. We stay in Johannesburg. We bought a house in the Cape when my daughter was one. And it was just normal to just drive down. I used to take my mother-in-law with me.

And then we'd just stay for three weeks or months for the school holidays or even longer. But yeah, so with trial and error, we've added a few kids in the meantime. Yeah, we do that a lot, but also, you know, just getting in the car and driving is kind of par for the course here. So we've kind of perfected the drive down to the Cape. We stay in the Karoo, which is lovely. I always think of the Karoo kind of like New Mexico and America. It's got beautiful big vistas. The road is straight and easy to drive unlike some of the other drives in South Africa which can have more traffic or more taxis or be a bit more stressful. It's just an open, lovely... Yeah, I have just come back from the Karoo for my first time in the Karoo and that's exactly how I felt. You know, I kept on thinking, this is like a... you know, an old western film, any minute now the cowboys are gonna come over that ridge and the horizon. It's amazing, it's huge, a huge open space, isn't it? Just horizons forever. And the stars come out and it's beautiful sunsets, beautiful sunrises. I mean, like, the stars, unlike anything else in the silence, like you just go out. this world, out of this world.

I think for me, the amazing thing about getting in a car is you slowly just switch off. The further you drive, I mean, it's stressful initially, to get everything ready and kids ready and get you in the car but then you all just switch off and then just having that stopover firstly you can discover new places we'll come on to where to stop but secondly you you get to be in the middle of nowhere and see places that tourists don't see or that we don't really know about and I think the Karoo is definitely one of those gems amazing the best chicken pie I've ever had was at the Bloemhof there. But Jen, tell us, how do you prepare for your road trip? From trial error, we split it into two days and we leave quite early because the kids have a lot more tolerance for morning hours than afternoon. And then if you get there by one or two in the afternoon, you still have the whole day to kind of spend. The first day it's eight hours and then day 2 another eight hours. The first, we have our stops set; They're like automatic now and we kind of have learned from experience we don't stop for long you get in you go to the bathroom you grab some food you get back in the car and you just drive so you're talking about on your way to your first main overnight stop, all the little garage stops the pit stops so yeah it's almost I think the kids too they've grown up with it so they have this in their this is where we stop and we have it we hold the iPads as like a treat so you only get an iPad from the second half of the drive, so the second four hours, because we learned that if you give it to them in the beginning, then they just get bored. But if you hold it as a carrot... We do after lunch. So whether we leave at two in the morning or whether we leave at eight o'clock in the morning, it's after lunch. We have it as like after second breakfast, so 10 a.m., which is about four hours in, then they can get it. And then we have, you know, books on tape. We've done all the Roald Dahl. We're doing all the Harry Potter's now. Actually, we haven't even had to bring out the... iPads in the last two trips because they're so into the books, even our youngest who's four, that they just listen and it's just very calm and chilled and we have snacks and you know everyone just kind of falls into a rhythm of it. Jen, has it always been calm? Give us some say! When I first started my daughter was one and I used to drive down and you know we stopped quite a bit later so it was an 11 hour drive the first day and you know just... emptying handbags, screaming at the top of her lungs while you're in road works an hour away from your destination. It's dark. We're trying to give her like everything out of the handbag one by one, 30

seconds, toss it out, scream at the top of your lungs. So after that, after maybe two or three times of that on the drive back, I just had my mother-in-law, who was driving with me write down every single guest house on the road between Beaufort West, which is on that side and so halfway and I just looked them all up and that's how I found this place, Bloemhof Karoo, that Hannah has also stayed at, which is lovely. And then that's halfway. So you get eight hours, eight hours instead of 11 hours and five hours. And that just works so much better.

So one thing that a lot of people will say is try not to drive at night, right, in South Africa for lots of reasons. One is we get a lot of drink driving in South Africa. And obviously in the evening people sometimes have been drinking all day. So that's not to be negative, but that's something to be aware of. Also on that road, a long stretch of that road going down to the Cape, it's not a dual highway. So you have big lorries coming up and down between Joburg and Cape Town. They move over into the sort of the hard, what I would call the hard shoulder. What would you call a hard shoulder? The side of the road. Yeah. The side of the road. Wide shoulder. So yeah, the trucks, they kind of... you learn quickly that the protocol is if you're going slow you move over to the side so it's easier for a person to pass and the drive to the Cape is wonderful. The lorries move over, you drive past, it's very smooth. But if then there's something on the side of the road where they don't move over often, people fall asleep on that road too. So if you're driving at night, they fall asleep and go into your lane and it's just a bit not safe.

So we drive often to Kenton which is in the Eastern Cape. And when we are driving to Kenton, we will leave in the dark, often three or four in the morning, because as Jen said, our kids are much better at that time in the morning, because it's all exciting and they should be asleep. They don't sleep, but at least they're dozy. But we would never do it leaving Kenton back to Joburg, because we would probably hit an animal, like a cow or... Yeah. You've just been to Kosi Bay, and if you drive that road at night, there's black cows ... and they call it like cows everywhere, black cows on the road, your car will be totalled. Or from Kosi Bay, which is up near the Mozambique border, the roads nowhere near as good as the roads down to the Cape or Eastern Cape or Durban. And the potholes there are just, yeah, your tire would go and you're on the side of the road. It's not ideal. We two flat tires the last time we drove to Cosy Bay. Yeah, because it was a fancy car. It took about three days to get tires trucked, I mean don't take a flat tire, it's like oh it'll be fine, two flat tires not so good. What's the fancy car? Audi S4, low profile tires not so great in rural areas in South Africa. Where is a Toyota or a Mitsubishi or a... No but even those tires, I mean I think I had normal tires on his other Audi estate and we also got two flat tires.

Yeah my neighbour had the same problem with a BMW. And I'm sure we would have this, we have a Land Rover, I'm sure we'd have the same problem with a Land Rover. Your Land Rover just went into the garage for six weeks! Yeah, that was not for tires. That was for a piece that had to be shipped out from the UK and it got stuck in a port in Durban and they didn't even know which container it was in. It took three weeks for them to just find where this part was. Don't get me started, it might trigger me. Land Rovers breaking down in the middle of nowhere might actually be its own podcast.

Tell us Jen about your road trip into Botswana. Cause obviously you can do a road trip down to Cape Town, which is a destination, right? And it's relatively straightforward. As you go down that road, it's a straight road. It's in pretty good nick. I know cause I'm just driven it. You've got service stations, not all along the way, but fairly regularly. So the one thing I was going to say at Christmas time, the whole of Joburg leaves. So they either go to Durban or to the Cape. And so that road is so busy. I remember our first road trip, we were stood waiting for 45 minutes to get the equivalent of like a Wimpy, I tell you. They are not quick. So pack your own snacks. Don't be reliant on a service station. And as Jen said, just get, get somewhere nice for one o'clock for your lunch. Toll Plaza is back up in the busy times and then you can spend a good 45 minutes waiting to get through the toll plazas which is no fun. Do you have a tag so you can go straight through? No, because I don't, well that's a whole other issue. But mostly they take credit cards. Or just have a load of cash. From a point of view of avoiding the traffic as you go through the toll plazas. Yeah, get the E tag and then you can just go straight through. There's lanes just for credit cards that you can also go through. But I think if you are doing a road trip and if you don't have to do the road trip around the 15th or 16th of December, then you're fine, generally. We're leaving Joburg on a Friday, either leave lunchtime, because there's some tolls, going north or going out to the Kruger, leave before lunchtime, don't leave too late or you're going to sit in traffic. We learnt

that. First weekend I was here, my husband was already out, he said I'm going to take you to Dullstrom. So not that far, but we left a bit too late on a Friday afternoon and we just hit traffic and we hit weather and then it got dark and then we were told oh no no. Leave early. Take the Friday morning off. Leave early. Yeah.

So another thing on our bucket list that we will cover off on the travel and where to go podcast, but I think is road trips and road trips into Sub-Saharan Africa or around Africa. Jen, tell us, have you done any of those exotic, exotic road trips? I did. So I...took a friend of mine from the States and we drove up through Botswana. I had an old 1987 Land Cruiser and we just drove up and made our own plan winged it, totally. Which was amazing, driving through Chobe and Moremi. You camp, there's no fences. I had a little mountain camping tent that we took out, which maybe wasn't the safest thing in retrospect, but we survived. So you camped on the floor? Yeah, on the ground. On the ground.

In the middle, but you... With no fences. No. So there were like cheetah, leopards, crocodiles... hyenas in camp. Yeah, there's really no fences and Botswana, basically liability is there's an old fly-bitten sign on the gate to the park that says, lions and hyenas will eat you. And that's, you just agree that if you're stupid enough to be out there, you know, you take all the risk. I mean, we had, I have pictures where we have my tiny little two-person tent and elephants sitting next to it because we'd camped under the camel thorn tree and he that's where he had lunch and You know massive elephant tiny tent and he just walked in you know ate the camel thorns I got in the car quick to be like well Maybe I should move away, but then I wasn't sure if I drove away that he would come after me But yeah, it was fine came in Some of the camps yeah, they're like the bathrooms are fortified against the elephants so they don't get at the water But generally yeah, we had Elephants come on the river and surround the car, like a hundred elephants, that we just sat there for two hours while they made their way on until after dark. Yeah, you're supposed to be in the camp by evening, like six o'clock, it's the same in the Kruger. Did the elephant tread on your tent or did he avoid it? He avoided it. But I think in some ways it's a lot of luck. So how would you go about, is there information online or would you say...

You just winged it. Can people just wing it? Like, do you just get in a Land Cruiser and take your tent and off you go to Botswana? Yeah, I mean, we did. You can. And the thing is, Botswana is very safe compared to South Africa. I remember when we first went, I was so terrified because I was like, someone's going to steal the car, someone's going to steal all their stuff. But Botswana, it's amazing. You just cross the border and it's very safe. No one's going to break into your stuff. No one's going to hurt you.

So let's just talking about crossing the border. Did you need a visa? No, you can just cross the border. Botswana, you don't have to pay. Zambia, you do. We did learn that because we went over to the falls as well. Zambia, it's better to... I don't know if things have changed in the past 10 years, but you have to have a hotel reservation if you don't want to pay 100 US dollars, which was quite a thing for us. We took the ferry, I think, over and it was like, what do you mean we have a hundred dollars we have to pay? And so that was quite a shock. But everything's fine. You can just wing it.

It's probably better to get a reservation, but it was quite fun just to see how it went. So you did this pre-kids. Would you take the kids camping to Botswana on a road trip like that? I think so. We were talking about it now. I was thinking like now, my kids are quite little, so you have malaria, which you have to worry about. But like the salt pans, I think that's next on our list. Like go to the salt pans in Botswana. It's not too far. It's not too crazy wild, but it's stunning. Like it's open. There's still game.

And then Namibia also is quite easy. It's not quite as much in the thick. Like, I don't know. I don't know if the four-year-old is going to get taken by a leopard in the middle of camp. That's really... You laugh, but that actually happened to a friend of ours up at Kruger. It was unfenced and their four-year-old was taken. They were all sat around a campfire and the leopard just came up and snatched the four-year-old into the bushes. Thankfully, then something scared him and the four-year-old survived. But...

Guys, we are out there with wild animals. They will kill. They will go for the smallest child they can find, the easy one. Yeah, it'd be awesome to go. Yeah, let's go to take the kids. It's an adventure. If I took the kids, I'd go to a gated park. Yeah. You know, you're saying you just get in the car. Do you take water with you? Do you take more than one spare tyre? Do you take cash? Do you take the currency? Yeah, I mean currency is quite easy. ATMs and Botswana, it's pretty modern. Yeah, so I would recommend slightly more planning that we had. But part of why the trip was so cool is we had absolutely no expectations. It was just after I'd arrived, maybe six months. And so, yeah, we went, we took the ice, we ate a vegetarian, there wasn't anything to go off or spoiled. There was a little tiny shop between Chobe and Moremi that you could buy ice and it worked perfectly. But you know, most people probably want to pay under the paper for it. How long was your trip? I think about 10 days. But you could spend weeks. I mean, South Africans are like the ultimate campers where they go and they have the rooftop tent and it is catered to the nines. I mean, that's how most people would do it. But the fact that you can just pick up and go there it's totally safe. The alternative I guess is then to go to the fancy lodges and to fly there and then to get a light aircraft across and up to the Delta and but that's gonna cost you like \$400 a night per person I think the lodges start at Botswana. We didn't do it that it wasn't that expensive. No no no we flew into the yeah we found the travel agent there in Malham and I think we spent like 100, 200 dollars. I think because we were there too, and we could pick a camp that was less expensive. It is worth flying in because you see everything from above. Like it's a tiny little plane and going on the rivers, it's a totally different experience than going to the Kruger or somewhere else. Are there any other road trips Jen that you've done that you would recommend as a must do? Have you done Lesotho or? I don't know, driving to, like you said, Cosy Bay or what are some of the best highlights of that are great to see by car in South Africa? I had friends working in the Eastern Cape in the Transkei, which is a stunning place to visit. So actually going to the Transkei is a really good one. It's a place where very few even South Africans go. And where's the Transkei, Jen? So there's a province called the Eastern Cape. It's north of Port Elizabeth, sort of, but it is just the most stunning rural area. Very poor. The roads are atrocious. You hit the nearest road and then go off and there is pop, and it'll take you hours. But then you are just in the wild. There's cows on the beach, there's little huts where all the local people stay. And we went and then we went from there on a road trip through Lesotho. And we drove up, drove around Lesotho and that's also stunning. It's in the mountains, we took a pony trek. Yeah, Lesotho is also super safe. It's one of these things where, and it's totally different because you're high in the mountains, stunning vista, which is different than a lot of places in South Africa. I've just made recently a two year plan of things we want to do and the best times to do it. We're here for longer than that, but it's like, actually, we're not going to be in South Africa forever. So let's...work out when we want to go up to Vic Falls and when we want to go to Botswana and when we want to go to the Cape or whatever it is to go and see the Namaqualand flowers and all the rest of it. Have you done Namaqualand? Yeah. Namaqualand's on the west coast up north of Cape Town. So the flowers bloom anywhere from August, September. Springtime. They are just amazing.

Like, it's this in the middle of a little reserve called the West Coast Natural Reserve. You're like, oh, it's fine. If you go the rest of the area, you're like, there's some ostrich and it's by the coast. And then you go in springtime and there's a little place within the reserve that's only open when the flowers are in bloom. And you enter the gate and suddenly it's like carpets of beautiful flowers. And it's this tiny little place. You can go all the way up the West Coast and the flowers will bloom, but it's a really cool...

And it's a beautiful area of the country, like it's on the coast, it's really wild. So that's near Eisfontein, I've probably pronounced that wrong, and Paternoster, and that's... You're getting up right in the northwest corner of South Africa, getting quite close to Namibia. Like you say, it's worth kind of sitting down and saying, this sounds really cool, talk to people who are here, and it's kind of like, yeah, we should do this at some point, but it's worth like sitting down and saying, actually "We should go here, we should go here". Like Hannah's just been to Kosi Bay, which is another beautiful part of the country that is unlike anywhere else. That's right on the other side of South Africa near Mozambique. Yeah. Yeah, and I just, I think it's always, never ceases to amaze me how varied South Africa is. And whether you go to Kosi Bay, whether you go to the Trans Sky, whether you're in Lesotho, to Swaziland, to Cape Town, the Garden Route.

up to the west coast. I mean, you literally could plan a road trip or a trip for 10 years and still be discovering new places and seeing even the Vaal River, you know, which is an hour away from

Joburg. It really is an amazing place to discover. And the amazing thing is, sure, you can do the garden routes, but it's commercialised and it's where all the travel agents will tell you to go. As soon as you start to...

to kind of get one layer beneath the surface and holiday where South Africans holiday, whether it's going to Namibia, doing a road trip there or going to Kenton, which is just further up from the end of PE, so the end of the garden route. It's completely different. Or St. Francis Bay. So yeah, it really is an incredible country to explore.

It's a very large country, right? It's big. And I often get asked by South Africans, why are we here? Don't we want to leave? It's like, you know, yes, South Africa has its problems, but it is so versatile. It has so much to offer. You can have a seaside holiday. You can have a safari holiday. You can have a mountain holiday. You can go and see the flowers. You can see the whales. You can go shark diving. If that's your thing. You can go hiking. Lots of hiking. Vineyards, there's mountain biking, you can have a city time, you can have a rural time, you can be literally in the middle of nowhere. Or you can be right in the middle of a sort of vibrant, buzzing town. There's so much. My husband and I, on our trip, we decided we wanted to learn about the Boer War. That's another good road trip. That's amazing road trip into the Midlands. Yeah, Hannah and I have done this trail running race and they have people who give you talks about the Battle of the ?? and the soldiers that came up to it. I mean, it is just fascinating. I mean, I didn't know anybody. I mean, as American, we didn't know anything about the Boer War, but he makes it come alive and you're there on the mountain. You're about to run over it the next day. It is just, he gives you chills. Like those, I mean, the bits of history in South Africa is so rich in history. Definitely. Futures of Drift is, and their whole battlefield tour is a must.

So just talking about driving, we've been talking about road trips and there's a couple of things I think we need to talk about driving in South Africa. So we may have mentioned it in passing in the past but first of all traffic lights, as everyone else calls them around the world, are called robots. So when someone's giving you directions and they say go down to the robot and turn right, don't look for a robot. R2D2 is not going to be there. It's a set of traffic lights. There's also something called the four-way stop. So a four-way stop is a crossroads. Now in the UK, usually, in fact always, you have one road that has priority and then you have give-way signs or yielding signs. So if you're coming up to the crossroads,

If it's not with a traffic, set of traffic lights, some people have to give way, some people have to yield, and other people have priority. Yeah, or they would just put a roundabout in. Or they put a roundabout in. In South Africa, when you have, you have what they call four-way stops, which is a crossroads where everyone has to stop. Everyone has to stop when they get there. And then... And you have to stop because we've been pulled over by the police before, because we didn't stop, physically stop at the stop sign because we could see there was nothing else there but unless you physically put your brake on and stop the police will ticket you. Yeah we've been got with that. We got got with that in the airport actually coming out of the airport. So right now we're at a set of traffic lights robots that are out and this is where the practice of the four -way stop comes into its own because what happens at a four -way stop... is whoever gets there first gets to cross first and you sort of take it in turns. You have to learn to take it in turns. Sounds really stupid but... so I would naturally I just follow the car in front of me. Don't do that because you will get hooted and booted and do not follow the car in front of you. You have to wait and everyone in, it's the most orderly thing I've ever seen, takes their turn. It's extraordinary.

but you really need to learn it because otherwise you're going to have all sorts of issues, possibly a crash because everyone in South Africa knows that's how a four way stop works. And that's what happens when your traffic lights are out. Which is a lot. Which is very frequent. So you need to learn that. But now this is where it gets complicated. At a roundabout in the highway code here, It is meant to be that it works like other roundabouts around the world, that you give way to the right. However, that's not what happens. People treat roundabouts like four -way stops. So if you have arrived from the left, but you got there before, momentarily before the person to your right, they will give way to you. And you must do the same. You may feel like every fibre in your body thinks that is wrong and it does mess you up for driving anywhere else in the world. But that is how a roundabout works here.

Just to recap, traffic lights are called robots. Traffic light systems are often down. You take your turn, one, two, three, four, when the lights are out and four way stops is where everyone has to stop and whoever got there first goes first.

Subsequently whoever got there next goes next. And I think Jen mentioned this but the only other thing when you're going on a road trip if you are going slower or cars behind you just move over into the hard shoulder over the yellow line or the side of the road and that car goes past. If you are the one wanting to get past afterwards you just put your hazards on a little flash to say thank you. you, exactly.

Shall we talk about car guards? Oh yeah we should talk about car guards. When you're stopping and yeah. Wherever you go to an area and there's lots of people parking you will find a car parking guard, a guy who's probably got a high viz vest on, may not but often they do, and they'll probably say hello to you which might take you back a little bit to begin with. They're just letting you know that they are your car parking guard. It's a very well -known practice in South Africa. The courteous thing is to tip that person when you get back to your car.

So five rand, 10 rand on a cold night, we'll even go 20 rand. If you are in an area such as downtown or at a concert or something, you tip beforehand because you actually want them to look after your car properly. So that's when you bring in the big guns and maybe give them 20 rand. I often, when people say how much, you know, it's very easy for you to make somebody's day here.

So sure, you could give them two rand if that's all you have or five rand. But if you give them 10 rand or 20 rand, what do you know what? Sometimes I get 50 rand. The look on their faces, you have changed their day. Whereas for me, do I ever miss that 50 rand? Not at all. It's redistribution of wealth. Exactly. And it's the right thing to do. Also with garages, you don't have to fill your own car. So there's such high unemployment here.

Basically people have been very creative in creating jobs. So looking after your car, filling your car with petrol. So when you go to a petrol station, you will be asked if you want your tyres checked, your water checked, your oil checked. They'll also ask if you want your windscreen washed. We ended up having a like a full car wash by accident when we asked to have our windscreen washed the other day. Do tip people. 10 Rand, 20 Rand.

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