

## SEKORORO 4X4 TRAIL

The Sekororo route in Limpopo province's Klein Drakensberg offers various options, but essentially it follows a track from the dry side of the watershed to the wet side. The Voortrekkers, 150 years ago, tried for many months to find a way through the mountains. Modern-day 4x4s have fewer problems.

Text and Photography: Robert Fysh

# *Journey to the Source of the*







...kororo valley near Lekwaneng, then  
of the Olifants River to the north.

**H**igh in the remote, unspoiled Klein Drakensberg in Limpopo province, far from highways, five-star hotels and game lodges, and beyond the reach of the national mobile phone network, a convoy of Land Rovers creeps along the western flood plain of the Olifants River.

The convoy has long since left the R37, the scattered villages, the goats and baobab trees. Here, climbing ever higher into the mountains on an old prospector trail through entangled bushveld, the sand track yields to shale and protrusions of sharp-edged rock.

On the crest of a hill, up from a bend in the trail, west of the floodplain, the Land Rovers come to a stop.

From this elevation, less than an hour before sunset, one can see the irregular meanderings of the shadowy valley below. To the east is a mountain range that a group of Voortrekkers attempted to cross a century and a half ago in a bitter search for a route to Lourenço Marques (Maputo). It took them almost a year to complete the task.

Under Louis Trichardt's leadership, they struggled through thick bush and ravines, cursing and coaxing their oxen through swirling water, mud and sand. At one stage the trekkers briefly rebelled, refusing even to inspan their exhausted oxen.

Today, the Land Rover convoy pauses just long enough for expedition leader Louw Booysse to tell the trekkers' story. He points to the mountain peak, and reminds the 4x4 group that – concealed by haze and distance – the tracks etched on the mountain by Trichardt's party are still there.

By nightfall, the convoy arrives at a spring that feeds crystal water to the Mafefe rondavel campsite – the first overnight stop. Drivers unpack the Land Rovers, light a log fire and pop cans of beer. In an afternoon's drive, they have covered a journey that took the trekkers several months.

"There was no road, of course," says Louw, referring to the trekker party. "They didn't know whether they would be able to cross the mountains. Every evening, scouts would report back with even more bad news about inaccessible approaches.

"They eventually trekked across a ridge 1940m above sea level – where the 'trig' beacon is today – before abandoning the mountain. It took them seven months to reach Lourenço Marques, malaria claiming almost half the party, including Trichardt himself."

For Louw, a farm boy, a building contractor and a 4x4 enthusiast (he honed his four-wheel-drive skills with the Defence Force "tiffies" in Angola during the 1980s), the trekkers' story is a recurring inspiration. It prompted him, while still a schoolboy at Trichardsdal Primary, to explore the old trail.

As he grew up, the memories lingered. Twenty years later he befriended Kgoshi (Chief) Sekororo, paramount chief of the Sekororo community, and asked the tribe's permission to build a 4x4 route on their farm through the area that Trichardt had attempted to conquer in 1838.

The chief extended to Louw a seldom-offered gesture – his blessing. "A blessing from a Kgoshi is worth more than a contract," says Louw.

Hard work preceded the first expeditions in the late '90s – 10m deep gulleys impeded navigation. Louw excavated drainage ditches and cut back paint-tearing vegetation.

Now the Sekororo Trail is ready for business.

Our convoy had convened in Polokwane the previous afternoon. With Louw leading, the Land Rovers – two Defenders, four Discoveries (three diesels and a petrol V8) and a Toyota "hanger-on" – make a short dash along the R37 towards Lebogakgomo. A left turn at Mafefe, and a right onto a dirt road along the Olifants River brings the group onto an old prospector trail at Lekwaneng.





Nibbling the west bank of the Olifants along the Ivory Trail, the convoy crosses onto Madeira, the 90 000ha Sekororo community farm.

After the overnight stop, the expedition penetrates thick forests, forging the Makutswi River repeatedly as the trail meanders along the contours of the river to the Orrie Baragwanath pass.

A tar loop from Lekgalametsi to Ofcolaco delivers the vehicles to the northern facade of the Klein Drakensberg and entry to a network of unused, criss-crossing forestry roads. Remorseless 30 to 40 degree slopes snake the foothills to a "gorillas in the mist" environment of indigenous yellow-wood forests and cycad colonies, leading to a camp at the base of mist-shrouded cliffs 1000m above the turn-off.

Entering Sekororo in the aftermath of spring rains, the Land Rovers climb terrain that would have compelled the trekkers to dismantle their wagons. Yet in "crawl" gear, they ease over the terrain like tug boats cresting swells.

Comparisons seem preposterous. Louis Trichardt spent many months groping for an escape route out of this trap; the Land Rovers breeze over the same terrain in two days. The Sekororo route rapidly evolves from gravel into a lurching ascent over flood-tumbled, homebuilt bridges into a morass of slippery clay and rotting vegetation.

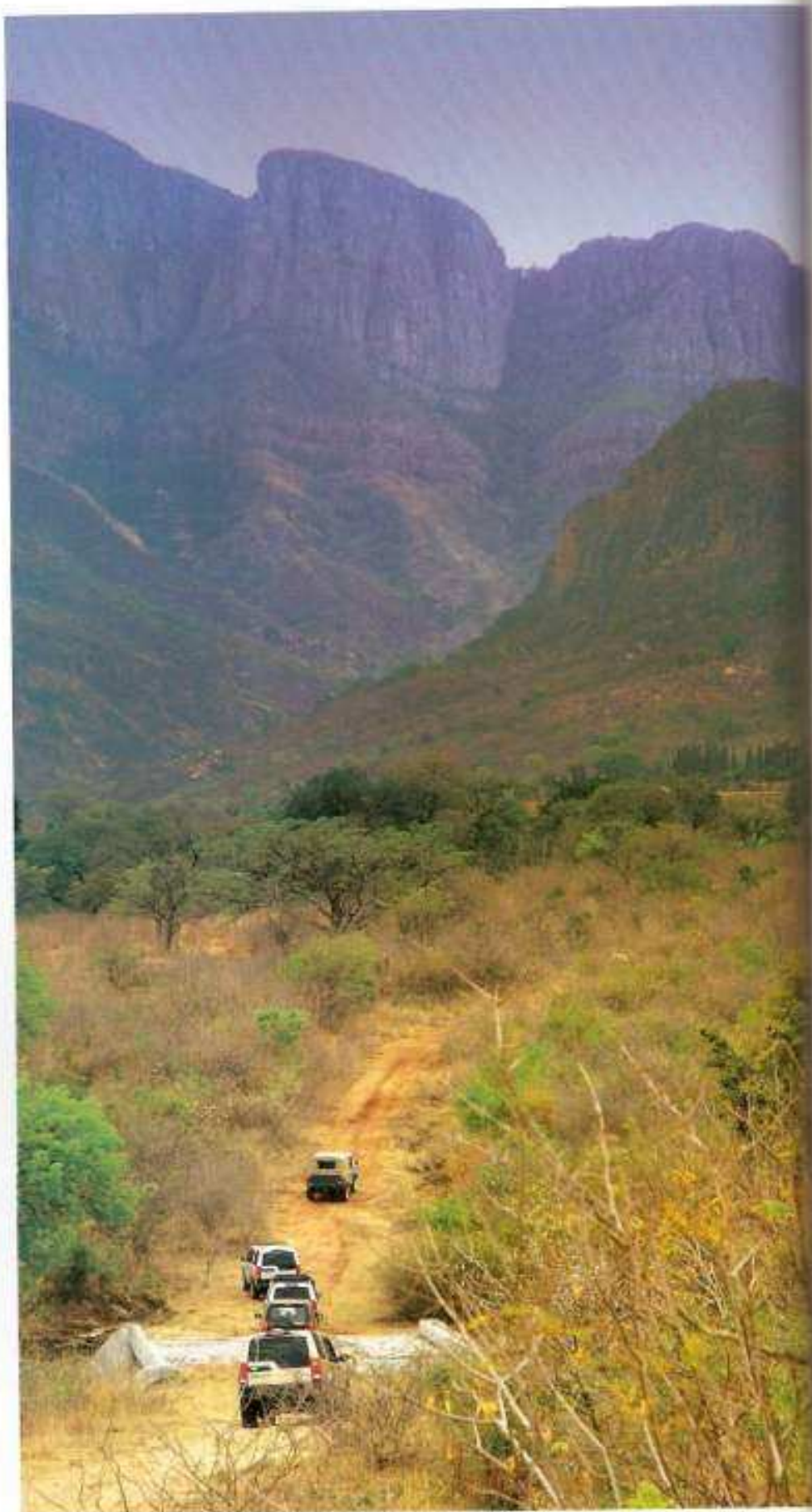
Louw changes tactics: "Change to low range and switch off Dynamic Stability Control. We're going to drive up very steep roads and there's no turning back."

Rocks mutate into huge boulders; charred tree stumps and fence posts annotate the roadside; pawpaw trees sway like forlorn flag posts over isolated patches of cultivated land.

Ignoring contours, the track snakes into a brutal climb. The Discoveries crawl remorselessly from foothill to foothill like Sherman tanks. Behind the convoy, huts and villages dwindle to blue haze and vague cross-hatchings in the valley behind us.

Louw leads in a Defender. A second – carrying provisions – plays sheep dog at the rear.

Within 45 minutes the convoy encounters



Approaching the foothills of the Klein Drakensberg, the Land Rover convoy embarks on the first stage of a trail that will culminate in the "staircase" – one of the extreme 4x4 challenges that the group will encounter before the descent in rain and mist the following day.



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or hinge ascent to the  
degree turn through  
nd old tree roots.

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s Hill Descent elec-  
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pull on the vehicle.  
and roots protrude  
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h root impedes progress up the  
ine. A quick shift to crawl gear  
s rev-counter pendulums lazily  
0 and 1500 as the large vehicle  
fully up the slope.

Vynand Schoeman's Discovery  
a brief wheelspin. "You did not  
momentum," Louw shouts from  
s. "Gaai agteruit. Nog, nog. OK,  
back."

overly backs halfway down the

duskant of daardie kant ry?"  
s. This side or that?  
eyond the large rock."

boom...the Discovery eases  
flush and claws up the slope.  
ing group claps and whistles.  
case, further up, encountered  
lunch, is another matter alto-  
e convoy stops. Doors slam.

ently launched Defender leads the way  
ous "staircase".

ontrol driven Discovery HSE TB lords the  
r through "rain forest" on a section  
rail.

The Malele overnight camp provides  
able, but basic 4x4 amenities.



Louw Booysse, 4x4 guide and pioneer of the Sekororo Trail.

Drivers congregate at the  
foot of a particularly  
daunting formation of  
staggered rock – a men-  
acing, untidy scrimmage  
set against the incline  
like a stalled escalator  
mounted on the win-  
dowsill of a precipitous  
drop to the left.

Man-sized steps, sever-  
al of them more than  
knee height, rise ponder-  
ously to a switch-turn that proceeds to the  
right along a clay-coated incline to a shallow  
plateau. To some, the staircase resembles  
an impassable tank trap. Several boulders,  
blackened by serial wheelspin from an earlier  
expedition, suggest that we turn back.

Louw is confident, but several of the drivers  
shake their heads.

"Watch my hand signals," says Louw, posi-  
tioning himself at the top of the stairway.

Eben Schoeman takes the wheel of

Louw's Defender. Steadying himself, he  
selects a line. Low range. Deep breath.  
Ease the clutch. The Defender mounts the  
first step, half of the second, then wedges  
against a boulder on the next level. The  
rear left wheel spins.

No go. Eben backs off. Another measured  
lunge. No go. He backs off again.

"Wag. Ek sal jou help," Louw shouts, hold-  
ing up a hand. "Wait."

He points to a large slab of rock. "We  
need to plug that gap." Several volunteers  
lift and carry the slab to the designated  
spot. A final heave and they drop it into the  
depression.

Louw climbs into the Defender. He'll show  
them. He rumbles the diesel engine; steady-  
ly, incrementally, the front wheels mount  
the reconstituted staircase. Crack, crunch.

The Defender stalls. More stones. More  
advice.

Another low range lunge. Wheels spin  
and grope for traction. The Defender lurch-  
es, wobbles, then baulks. The front wheels





wedge against a shelf of jutting rock. No go. "The problem," says Gerhard Breytenbach, another Discovery driver, "is that even if you get over this rock, your wheel will get stuck there." He shakes his head. "There's no way... I'm a realist."

The afternoon passes. The convoy is running behind schedule. But there's no turning back – not in a million years can the convoy turn back.

A spade? Albert Booysen (Louw's younger brother) packs sand around the rocks and trims the clay slope. More rocks. Louw is determined. "It can be done. I've done it before."

He climbs back into the Defender. He grins. "Who wants to come with me?"

Nobody volunteers. Charlie, Wynand's wife, glances nervously at the exposed kran on the edge of the staircase.

This is the eighth attempt, or is it the ninth? Louw backs up. "Vrooom, vrooom." Crunch, lurch, pop, silence. No go. He backs off, accelerates. Growling like an enraged bear, the Defender lunges, teeters and then hesitates. The front wheel slips, grips again, spins, grips, sticks, and then defiantly lurches over the lip of the staircase – success and loud cheers.

Now for Wynand. He is too polite; too hesitant; too civilised. No go.

More finger pointing; more advice.

"Go back. Go back," says Louw, "you must maintain your momentum."

A second lunge, a growl and a stall. Louw connects a towrope to the Defender at the top; it's time to pull these bloody Discoveries over this obstacle.

"Nee, nee," Wynand protests, "I can make it." He backs up again.

As a safety precaution, Louw connects the towrope. "When I start pulling you must accelerate – I can't go back," Louw warns.

The two Land Rovers grind and strain. Bit by bit, the Discovery mounts the staircase – first the front wheels, then the rear. The vehicle tilts awkwardly, then leaps over the top. Applause.

Gerhardt is next. The Discovery driver takes no prisoners. He charges the staircase like a mad buffalo. The vehicle bounces over the first step, rears up, tilts, lunges, rocks precipitously, erupts over the top, slides into the corner and wheel-spins up the incline, belching blue smoke.

Chris Viljoen, next, a cautious driver, takes heart. One by one, the remaining Discoveries prance to the top.

The convoy moves on. Rain sets in. Albert, back from a reconnaissance of the trail ahead in a Defender, shakes his head.



Above: Vehicle by vehicle, the convoy returns down the notorious "staircase" through impenetrable mist after a night of heavy rain. Below: Co-drivers attempt to stabilise a descending Discovery – anchored to a second Land Rover and a nearby tree – on the soap-slippery clay incline at the top of the "staircase".





stuck on the lip of the scarp. One of the crew removes the restraining tow-rope that anchored the vehicle on the preceding day incline that leads to the stairs.

have to stop here for the night."

"If we carry on in this rain we get to our camp after sunset and do recovery work in the dark. It's dangerous."

They break out the tents. Campfire smoke fills the mountain air. Steaming coffee and cooked steaks.

At last, rain sheets down. Mist sets in. The rain slows the returning convoy to a walking pace.

At last, rain sheets down. Mist sets in. The rain slows the returning convoy to a walking pace. Louw anchors the vehicle to a tree; he shepherds the convoy by vehicle over the treacherous trail like wary snails. The drivers slip-slide down the water-slick mountain to the valley below.

The Sekororo is not for the 'brandy and cowboy' four brigade," says Louw as he shakes hands.

1. "Ja-nee."

## TRAVEL PLANNER

The Sekororo trail is situated in Limpopo province, about 450km northeast of Pretoria and 60km northwest of Tzaneen. Expect rapid climate changes. Temperatures vary from 1° C to 36° C in the mountains. Vegetation ranges from proteas to cycads. Guests can stay overnight at one of the many independent camping sites or up-market game lodges in the area. Sekororo 4x4 Adventure Trails offers a guide for a weekend trail or one- to seven-day trails. Driver training courses and catering can be arranged. A maximum of eight vehicles can be accommodated.

### What you need

A 4x4 vehicle (with low range) and camping equipment

### What it costs

Two-day trail:

R650 for vehicle and the driver

R50 for each additional person

over the age of 12 years

R200 camping fee per vehicle

### Who to contact

Louw Booysse:

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