

# Deon Maas

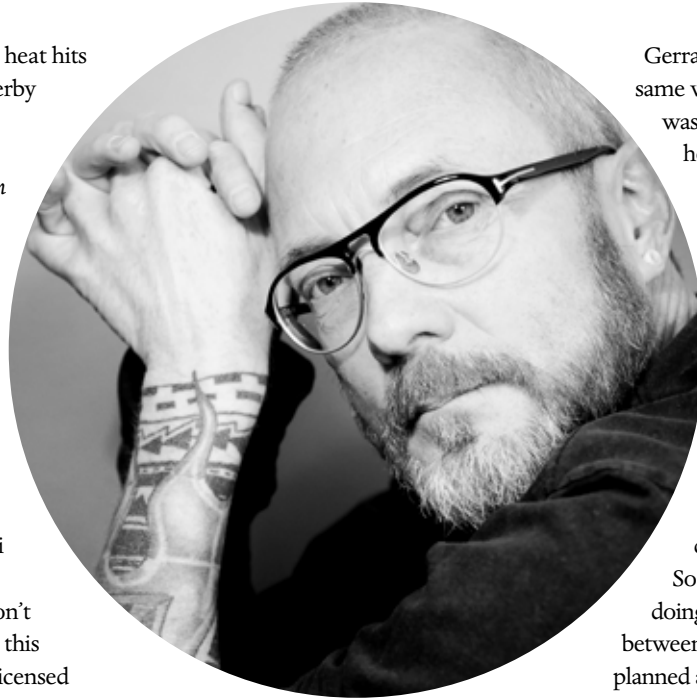
You can't change the endless nothingness of the Kalahari.  
But make sure you can change a tyre.

It's the middle of December and the heat hits you like an open oven. The last passerby I saw was 30 minutes ago. It was a dehydrated donkey towing a small wooden cart, occupied by an old *oom* and (presumably) his grandchild. His face showed the weather map of a life without moisturiser, left to the dry heat of the arid Kalahari. He did not look as if he had a membership card to the Automobile Association.

The endless nothingness is what I was looking for when I planned this trip. What I didn't plan for was a flat tyre. The Hyundai Terracan that I have owned for 21 months has never had a flat tyre. I don't even know where the spare tyre is in this marvel of old Japanese technology, licensed by the Koreans so that poor folk like me could afford a vehicle of its magnitude. After finding the spare tyre, I can't even figure out how to get it from its comfortable resting place.

Veda, my girlfriend of three months (sorry, three months and three days according to her), sits in the middle of the dusty road and lights a cigarette. I can see how the sun is turning her beautiful, lily-white face red. On either side of her, the road stretches for 10 kilometres, coming together in a single focal point at the horizon. The last road sign we saw read "Moedverloor se Vlakte", loosely translated as "plains of despair". There's nothing between us and the end of the world.

Somehow, I'm hoping to be surprised by some kind of passing traffic, preferably a practical boer-type who knows how to solve the problem. The only practical side of my family – my eldest son Gerrad – is trying to get a signal from his cellphone to download an instruction manual for the unexpected little spare tyre problem. He stands on the roof of my impeccably looked-after vehicle, but his attempt is unsuccessful. Meanwhile, I'm trying to explain to all parties present why, for some strange reason, the instruction manual was left behind in Johannesburg.



*“There's nothing between us and the end of the world”*

In my mind's eye, I can see archaeologists digging up our bones in a century-or-two's time, trying to figure out the mystery around our untimely demise. The first problem would be figuring out the family connection between us. If they did an age test on our bones they'd see that Veda was 20 years younger than me, just six years older than Gerrad. Maybe they'd think that he was her slightly younger boyfriend.

Regarding my youngest son Axl – who at is lying on the backseat of the Terracan and making absolutely no contribution to society – they would really have a problem. He's at the end of one of those infamous gap years where he is trying to find the door to the other side by living the vegan life, smoking up half the produce of the Transkei and indulging in other mind-altering natural produce. I shudder to think how the archaeologists would interpret his bone samples without thinking that perhaps he killed us all in a drug-fuelled rage and then passed out on the back seat of the car.

Gerrad is practical because I am not, in the same way that I am not because my father was. Genetics skipped a generation to take hold in him. And even though I am the eldest and the driver of the vehicle, my money is on him to get us out of this situation. There's a point in every child's life when they realise that their dad is not the superhero that they grew up thinking he was. This is one of those moments.

But what brought us here?

Well, I haven't spent Christmas day with my parents in a long time. The kids saw the Touareg ad on TV and decided they wanted a real road trip.

So I combined the two and, instead of doing the straight 14-hour drive on the N1 between Johannesburg and Cape Town, we planned a seven-day trip through the Kalahari.

“Planned” is perhaps not the right word. The idea was to get in the car, see where the road took us and stop in the evening wherever we encountered interesting people and/or places. We learned quickly that, in the Kalahari, these things were a bit further apart than we thought.

And on that day in the desert, we also learned how to change the tyre without any outside help – there's a long, metal rod hidden under the back seat, which you have to turn in this hidden little hole underneath the vehicle to loosen the spare wheel before getting the jack out from an even more secret place. And, finally, I knew we'd get out of there. Alive.

I also knew that Gerrad, Axl, Veda and I had had an experience we would always remember.



Deon Maas is the author of *Witboy in Africa* (Tafelberg). He was born in Cape Town but decided to make the big trek north and lives in Jo'burg. His favourite town is Graafwater, because his dad comes from there and because the Graafwater Hotel bar is the most interesting in the country.