

ROCK BOTTOM IN MOREMI



WHY INVESTING IN A SNORKEL IS A GOOD IDEA IF YOU'RE TRAVELLING IN AFRICA

Off-roading expert Johan de Villiers shares his most frightening water crossing experience and why you almost always need a snorkel for your African adventure.

On our way to Zanzibar, off the coast of Tanzania, during a six-month sabbatical a few years ago, my partner and I decided to equip our Land Rover Defender 110 with a 125-litre extended range diesel fuel tank.

For good measure, we added a Safari snorkel for those really dusty conditions. In turn, the differential and axle breathers were individually configured with separate airlines into the snorkel intake, to allow for deep water crossings if the need arose.

Seeing that we were doing the trip solo, it was essential to have a fuel range of at least 1100km between stops, as we would be travelling for weeks without encountering any other travellers.

As fate would have it, we were traversing through the Moremi Game Reserve in Botswana en-route to the western border post outside Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, when we encountered a thick mopane forest with a single track traversing through it.

After following the sandy path for about four hours, we came to a huge pool, about 75m wide, with the rest of the track clearly extending beyond the opposite banks. The obvious mantra for deep water crossings is to walk the obstacle first, but this idea was quickly negated when a number of very large 'logs', or should I say crocs, disturbed the water surface of the seemingly tranquil pool in front of us.

Turning around was not an option either, as we already exhausted 700km of fuel range and the next diesel stop was en-route – about 200km north. Going around the mopane forest was also out of the question, owing to the thickness and non-availability of any alternative routes.


That said, we decided to do the 'rock test' to determine the deepness of the pool, the idea being that throwing a rock into a shallow pool would normally create a big splash and vice versa. The result of this was a rather disappointing 'plonk' followed by virtually no splash. Eventually, we mustered enough courage to engage second gear, low range, lock the differential and proceed gently down the embankment into the pool.

At first, everything was progressing beautifully, with a textbook bow wave forming in the front of the Defender. But 10 seconds later, the Landy took a huge plunge downwards with the brown, croc-filled water coming right up to the top of the windscreen.

Water was pouring through the air vents and door seals, with the thought of becoming highly religious on the spot was starting to look appealing. Luckily, the diesel engine still managed to get airflow through the snorkel and the Landy bravely continued soldiering on at the bottom of the pool until she reached the opposite embankment.

After wiggling her rump in the muddy bottom for additional traction, the Defender

slowly crept up the embankment with water streaming out of all the crevices. After opening the doors and de-flooding the Landy, we decided not to attempt a reverse manoeuvre for the photo opportunity this presented.

This was a defining moment in terms of validating our decision to, firstly, take a Landy through Africa; secondly, invest in a snorkel; and thirdly, not to consider anything else but a diesel vehicle. 

ABOUT JOHAN DE VILLIERS



Trained by the 1994 West German Camel Trophy team, Johan has extensively traversed a number of central and east African countries. On his return to corporate life, Johan continues to enjoy the lifestyle and has led numerous expeditions through Southern Africa. In addition to being a qualified Land Rover recovery expert, Johan is a qualified helicopter pilot and a regular contributor to various 4x4 publications. He drives a highly modified Defender 110 Td5.