



*Segaiigai  
Farm*

## CYCLING THE PIPELINE ROUTE FROM BOBONONG TO PALAPYE



We've all seen the ads (and the price tags)

**See things differently – cycle amongst the animals at the Big 5 Lodge**

In Botswana you can have the same experience for next to nothing. The sandy tracks of the Kalahari and the Okavango Delta would be hard going on a bike, but there are plenty of animals and good cycling routes elsewhere if you know where to find them.

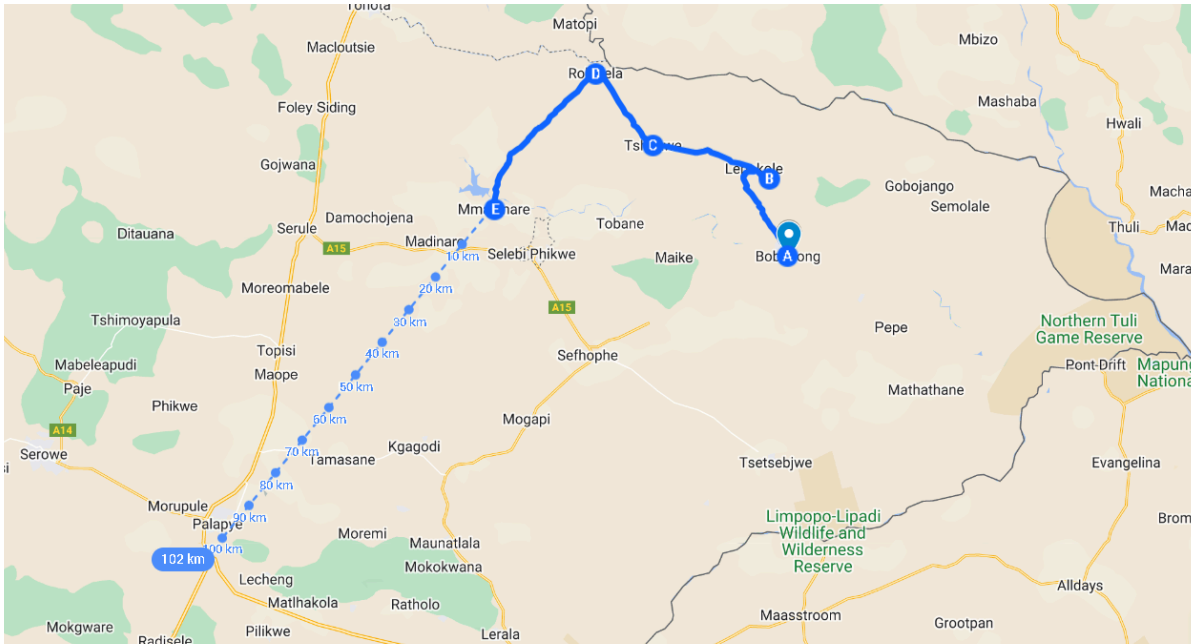
At Self Drive Tours Botswana our mission is to help visitors explore the hidden byways of our country, and we are cyclists ourselves.

This story describes one of our favourite rides. It's 285 km of gravel trail which takes you through some wild country far from the usual tourist spots. It's a unique way to see the country and meet the people.

If you are from Limpopo, Bobonong is less than 100 km from the Platjan Border Post. Palapye is only 116 km from Groblersbrug. You'll need a support vehicle. But if you have a car, some camping gear and a mountain bike this is written for you. Best of all, it's Botswana. You can safely stop anywhere along the way. Just watch out for the elephants !







*The cycling route. The dotted section is the long final day. There are no villages, accommodations or other amenities along this stretch.*

*Day 1: 30 km in the saddle.*

Bobonong always seems exotic. A market village with stalls selling everything imaginable; donkey carts mingling with the traffic, and flocks of goats wandering freely and unattended through the streets. For me it has always been the edge of adventure: a gateway to the wild country beyond, and the last chance to stock up on essentials.

Surprised children shout *Lekgoa mo baesekeleng* (a white man on a bicycle) as we ride to the edge of the village. Tourists are rare in Bobonong, and bikepackers are a real novelty. It would be fun to stop and chat, but we want to reach the Lepokole Hills before dark. It would be fun to stop and fossick in the riverbed too – the Motloutse River brings down agate, geodes and other geological oddities from further west. I wish we had set out earlier in the day !



*Lekgoa mo baesekeleng ! James roadtesting an adjustment before we set out in earnest.*

We turn off the tarred road 5 km beyond the village, and from here on it's gravel all the way. The ploughing fields with their neatly thatched mud huts give way to forest as we leave the river floodplain and gently climb into the hills and through a rocky pass. The forest here is full of baboons, vervet monkeys and brightly coloured birds, but the road demands close attention as here and there boulders peep through the gravel surface. It's hard to maintain a regular rhythm.

Tonight's accommodation is the Lepokole Hills Nature Reserve, which lies beyond the pass.

This reserve is run by the local community, and incorporates a nice campsite. The whole reserve is fenced to keep the elephants and other wildlife out – the big attraction here is the bushman rock art,



and the big granite domes. From the top of the domes you can see hills in both Zimbabwe and South Africa. Take the time to explore.

You won't find a coffee machine in Lepokole but you will find ladies brewing traditional beverages, and a litre of sorghum beer or brandybush wine is a very affordable BWP 7.

*Day 2: 48 km*

The gravel road from Lepokole to Robelela is little used by cars. It runs through cattlepost country, and the sparse local traffic is mainly donkey carts. The first half cuts across the grain of the countryside, crossing numerous small rivers. Each is an invitation to stop beneath a shady tree and sit for a few minutes to see what wildlife is about. Most of the mammals in these parts are nocturnal, but mongoose and monkeys are diurnal and always fun to watch; with luck there will be big monitor lizards; and there will always be birds. And sometimes there will be real zebra crossings.





Most local families will have their main house in a village; a picturesque thatched hut in their ploughing field, to be occupied seasonally; and another, typically less picturesque hut at their cattlepost. The cattle roam freely on common land during the day, but are locked up in a kraal at night to keep them away from leopards, and one of the menfolk will stay with them.

Every Motswana seems happiest at his cattlepost. Cattle are an important part of the national psyche. The man you see dressed in rags, herding his cattle of a weekend may be a lawyer in a smart suit during the week. There might be a BMW tucked away behind the hut. Or he might be an economic refugee from Zimbabwe, fleeing destitution back home. Here at the cattlepost both will be the envy of their peers.

By lunchtime we were at the little village of Tshokwe, population 1586 at the last census. Tswana tradition is to set an extra place at the table in case a stranger should show up. This custom has died out in the cities, but is alive and well in the backblocks, so don't be surprised if you are invited into a family compound. Rural Tswana dishes look simple at first glance, but what they have to offer is so much more than meets the eye. Lehata is a lovely stew of mung beans and fresh sorghum kernels. Mophane stew is dried and salted caterpillars stewed with tomato, capsicum, onion, fresh chilli, cumin and minced garlic. Absolutely delicious.

The 23 km from Tshokwe to Robelela is through forest much of the way: easy pedalling but you have to keep your eyes on the road. This is elephant country, and the piles of elephant dung left on the road are a very real hazard to an unwary cyclist.



What to do if you meet an elephant ? If you don't bother them they won't bother you. But cycling between a mother and her calf is best avoided. The elephants typically travel in herds, and if the herd is feeding on both sides of the road it might be better to stop and wait for them to move off.

Robelela is a tiny village and unless you have brought your own tent there is nowhere to stay. We had the luxury of a support vehicle so opted for a night of comfort at Phokoje Bush Lodge, <https://web.facebook.com/Phokoje.Bush.Lodge/>, 50 km away. It has an extensive menu. New Zealand greenshell mussels in a creamy white wine sauce are hard to resist, and so is the swimming pool. Just the thing for an overheated cyclist !



*Day 3: 58 km*

Next morning it is back to the trail. The giant Dikgatlong Dam at Robelela is at the top end of the North South Connector pipeline. Most of the population of Botswana is in the south, whilst most of the water is in the north. The pipeline is the biggest engineering project ever undertaken in the country, built to prevent Gaborone from running out of water.

From Robelela to Palapye you can follow the all-weather pipeline service road. Unless work is being done on the pipeline at the time the road will be deserted all the way.



First stop is Robelela kayak port. The fishermen from Robelela ply their trade in canoes, each registered as a commercial fishing vessel with the government. They will happily sell you a fish. Fresh fish fried over a campfire ? It's hard to beat.



*A fisherman sets out to check his nets at dawn*

Then on through the hills and forest to Mmadinare. This is lion country.

I have mixed feelings about lions. I'm pleased they are there, but I don't really want to see one. Like dogs, they are said to chase cyclists for fun. Even Harrie Lavreysen couldn't outpace a lion over a short course, and I'm not in his league. This time all we saw were kudu, impala, duiker and steenbok. Lions are rare, and don't really see humans as prey. But

don't tempt fate. Leave the fluorescent lycra at home and wear something that blends into the scenery.

Nearing Mmadinare is the big Letsibogo Dam. It's used for town water supply, so swimming is discouraged. Why I don't know, since elephants, baboons and livestock have free access and the water is treated very thoroughly before it reaches any domestic taps. The dam is also the training ground for the Botswana yachting team. It was a rude shock when they entered their first ocean regatta in Capetown: they were very skilled in avoiding rocks, dead trees and other obstacles, but had never seen an ocean swell before in their lives. But even if you can't swim the dam is a great place for a picnic.

Mmadinare is a small town with a population of 13,200. There are campgrounds, guesthouses, a fishing lodge and of course the yacht club. Amenities like an ATM and a supermarket and icecreams. And more small children shouting *Lekgoa mo baesekeleng*.

If you are after authentic street food it's hard to go past Mapakong Corner Restaurant.

They even serve thepe – a kind of wild amaranth much appreciated in this part of the world. They also serve a popular local dish made of chicken intestines. Try it if you dare.

*Day 4: 100 km –*





Beyond Mmadinare the pipeline road is very easy packed gravel and you can really settle into a groove. . It pays to start early, both to cover some distance in the cool of the morning, and also to catch the animal night shift before they head off to sleep. A bicycle lets you get close to wildlife in a way that a car does not, and we were rewarded with sightings of chanting goshawk, an eagle owl staying up late in the morning, a slender mongoose running across the trail, and a small spotted genet peeping out from a pile of rocks.

The forest and the rocky hills glide by smoothly, but climbing one of the hills rewards with a nice view and perhaps a handful of wild rock figs.

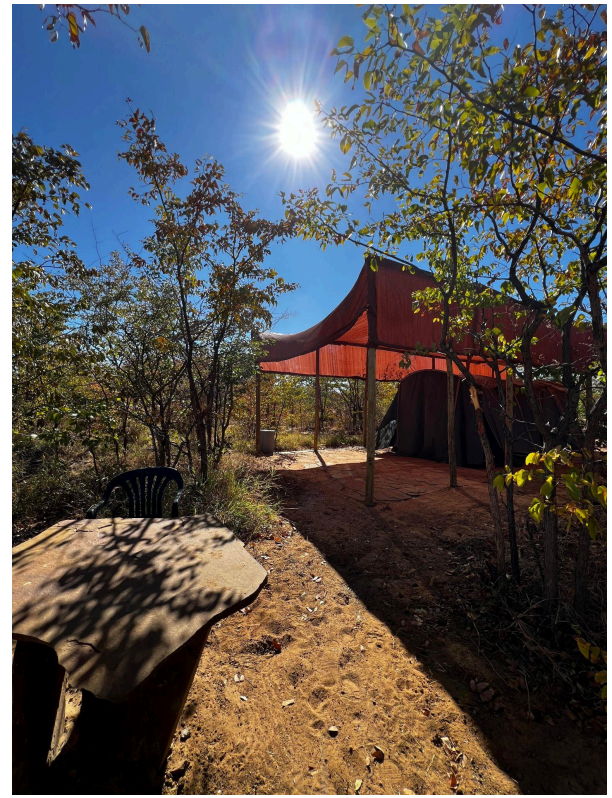


After 80 km you finally come to somewhere you are allowed to swim – Bonwakathako Dam - and from here it is an easy ride to Palapye. We were heading for a scrumptious dinner at Segai Farm, [www.segaigai.com](http://www.segaigai.com).

This farm has a campsite, a luxurious self catering cottage, and quite a collection of tame nocturnal wildlife. It's easily accessed from the Palapye end of the pipeline service road, and it is the starting point for both the OPM Hiking Trail and the Porcupine Loop Trail into the Tswaoopng Hills. But hiking the Tswapong Trails is another story, and one that doesn't involve bikes. For us it was the end of the ride.







### *The bikes*

I've been riding my 1984 Rocky Mountain Sherpa for so long that it has only a few of its original parts. But the frame still has the original decals. Naomi and Leutlwetse rode on Apollo Boardwalks and James and Peo took turns riding a Merida Kalahari s24 and driving the support vehicle. So there was nothing special about the bikes – any mountain bike will do. But that's not true of the tyres. The flora of Botswana is dominated by trees with big thorns, and we all used the local 'thornproof' tubeless tyres. There are bicycle shops in both Gaborone and Palapye that will fit these whilst you wait if you can't get them at home.

For navigation we use 'Tracks4Africa' downloadable maps on a tablet, but for this trip the route finding was straightforward.

### *The logistics*

You can reach both Palapye and Bobonong easily by public transport. 13 seater 'combi' vans leave Gaborone and Francistown when full, and those towing luggage trailers will always have room for bikes on the trailer roof. But as noted above, we did our trip with a support vehicle. The route takes you through some really remote countryside, and if you break a bike you are a long way from help.





*Bicycle helmets are not compulsory in Botswana, which provides the option of wearing a sun hat instead whilst cycling. But it is possible to wear both simultaneously !*





Booking accommodations was easy for us. We run a company called Self Drive Tours Botswana, and we specialize in helping people drive themselves around Botswana. So we had all the contacts we need. In case you were wondering we **don't** organize guided bikepacking holidays. There are others who do this and we will cheerfully pass you on if you ask. We go cycling for fun.

There **are** parts of Botswana with deep sand; and there are times of the year when it **is** scorching hot. But you can easily avoid both and have a great bikepacking trip, so come on over.