

SA 4x4, December 2007



Pulling power

The Malgas Pont



There's something romantic about putting your 4x4 on a barge, boat, ferry or pont and sailing it across the water, although in Africa such romantic notions can become fraught with anxiety as some of these vessels are distinctly un-riverworthy. Returning home from a trail, our Bush Editor took a slight detour to cross the Breede River via its pont.

Words and pictures by Patrick Cruywagen



Ponts are said to have originated in the Netherlands where people would build floats they would take with them as they moved into the interior; when faced with water obstacles or crossings they would just float everything across.

Currently there's only one operational hand-drawn pont in SA and it plies its trade near the little village of Malgas in the Southern Cape. This pont takes you across the Breede River, thereby eliminating a long drive around via the N2. The only other similar setup is the engine-propelled ferry that takes one across the Kei River towards the Wild Coast. According to the Collins

English Dictionary a pont is "a river ferry, especially one which is guided from one bank to the other by a cable." As the Kei River ferry is not guided by a cable, technically it's not a pont but a river ferry.

The little town of Malgas, which lies on the western bank of the Breede River, is the perfect stopover if you're exploring the Overberg area and the nearby De Hoop Nature Reserve. But if you want to move on to other attractions like Witsand, Vermaaklikheid and Infanta, you'll have to cross the Breede via the pont.

I was returning from the Ostrich Trails 4x4 route in Witsand (see the trail

review elsewhere in this issue) and instead of heading for the tar of the N2 I opted for some pont action.

Many aren't aware that Malgas used to be an important inland harbour town around the middle of the nineteenth century. A local entrepreneur named Joseph Barry used to sail his 156-ton boat, the Kadie, up the Breede River from the coast, and forty-eight kilometres later he would moor at Malgas. Sadly Barry's business went bang after the Kadie sank, and today the little white Barry Church in Witsand pays homage to his contribution to the area. Happily the pont outlived the Kadie and continues to ferry people, livestock and vehicles across the river.

A road sign on the final bend before the river shows a vehicle going over a jetty, a reminder that now's the time to slow down. As you round the corner you'll notice straight away the long steel cable spanned across the river, with the deserted pont waiting on the other side. Several bright orange flotation devices, similar to the ones used by fisherman to mark the spot where they have cast their nets, are draped over the cable where it crosses the bank.

As I climb out of my Land Cruiser Wagon all I can hear is the sound of the river flowing past and the wind finding its way through the leaves of the nearby blue gum trees. I savour the serenity for a few minutes then honk the horn because I need to get to the other side.

Out of the reddish face brick building on the Malgas side of the riverbank come Alex Lolwana and Booi Nkhulu, who have been pont operators for two and five years respectively. They wave, and Alex gives me a broad Colgate smile.

Each has a harness across his chest, attached to which is a piece of chain of no more than a metre long. The basic tactic of moving the pont is as follows: Stand on one end of the pont. Swirl the chain around in circles like a cowboy's lasso, okay, maybe not quite so elaborate a movement, but ►



you get the picture; once you've got a good swirl going, let the chain wind its way around the pont cable. Once it's settled, walk towards the opposite end of the pont and feel the massive pull on the harness across your chest as your body transfers the force between the pont and the cable. Slowly the pont will start to move towards the other side. Repeat this procedure until reaching the opposite bank.

The most famous of all the Breede River pont operators has to be Moxie Dunn, who achieved legendary status in the district. Out of a need to provide for his family at a time when farming was tough, Dunn took the job on all on his own, and kept at it for a staggering 27 years. "He was a real people's person, and during stormy nights he would sit and make a fire next to the river and look after the pont," said his daughter Valerie du Toit.

Valerie isn't as certain of the dedication of today's pont operators and told me that on two recent occasion the pont broke free from its moorings and almost ended up being washed away. "I don't think they will buy another one if this one ends up in the ocean," lamented Valerie, who oversees the day-to-day running of the pont.

With the area surrounding the Breede River becoming an increasingly popular weekend getaway, especially given the many good 4x4 trails nearby, the

line of vehicles waiting for the pont on a Sunday looks like something you'd expect at the Menlyn Mall. Farmers from the surrounds have taken advantage of these crowds by opening a little farmers' market where a wide variety of fresh goods is available, including pancakes. "On weekends we cross the river up to eighty times a day and in December maybe a little more," says pont operator Booi Nkhulu. Booi has been doing this for five years now, and after I tried to pull the pont myself, I'm guessing that he has one of the strongest backs in the region.

As we near the halfway mark a Volvo XC90 appears on the bank we just came from. Rather than having to do a double trip, Alex and Booi decide to return to pick up the Volvo; two vehicles fit comfortably on the pont.

When we dock at Malgas a convoy of three vehicles – including the local SAPS van – pulls up. Martin du Randt, the owner of the Volvo, and I decide to have a drink and watch the pont do a couple more crossings. The winter sun rewards us for being outdoors by heating us up nicely, or was that glowing feeling caused by the *knertsie* of 10 year old KWV that Martin gave me?

This is one of those travel moments when you find yourself totally content and happy. Unexpected pleasures are just the best. Most people just put

their vehicles on the pont, get taken across and drive off. To me it was a celebration of sorts. I watch the reaction of kids as they jump out of their parents' vehicles. They cannot contain their excitement and shout out loudly as they run up the ramp that has been lowered onto the sand for vehicles to drive up. Mothers tell them to slow down while they struggle to keep up. Sometimes I think we need to be more childlike in our travels. After an hour I decide to move on and wish Martin well in his travels.

As I make my way home I cannot help but hope that the pont never ends up stranded or washed out to sea as this would deprive travellers of a great and uncommon adventure. Long live the pont!

WANT TO GO PONTING?

Costs	
Cars	R30 (both ways, same day return)
Towed items	R10 (both ways, same day return)
Motorbike	R10 (both ways, same day return)
Yearly fee	R900
Monthly fee	R150
Operating hours:	Sunrise to sunset
For pont queries call (028) 512 3772	