

## The Picnic Site Phenomenon

There's something to be said for bush breakfasts. I mean, how many times have you arrived at a picnic site in any reserve, opened the car door and *bam*, been smacked in the face by the unmistakable smell of sizzling bacon? It's like a primal trigger, something that overrides even the excitement of a lion sighting. I don't care how focused you are on ticking lifers or chasing ellies along the river, that smell hits, and suddenly you're starving. You could have eaten a full buffet back at camp an hour ago, but in that moment, it doesn't matter. Bacon wins.

Now before I get to our little story, let me just say this is a universal experience. It doesn't matter if you're at Afsaal, Tshokwane or Mooiplaas, the minute you roll in, you can bet there'll be someone channelling their inner bush chef, firing up a skottle and making magic. And even if you came prepared, it's suddenly never *quite* enough. That brings me to *our* Babalala morning...

We were staying at Shingwedzi at the time, one of our favourite northern camps. Quiet, classic, with the kind of wilderness that still feels a little raw. That morning, we'd mapped out a drive along the S56 river road, a scenic favourite, up to Babalala picnic site and then looping back to camp somewhere mid to late morning. Nothing rushed. The kind of drive where you can take in every hornbill and buffalo herd without worrying about the time.

As always, we were prepared. And by prepared, I mean our snack bag was packed to bursting. It's never just a few rusks and coffee for us. Oh no, we're professionals. Muffins, fruit cake, breakfast bars, sweet biscuits, savoury biscuits, crisps, chocolate (and I'm talking *multiple varieties*), biltong, chilli bites, lollipops, and a few mystery items that seem to appear only when you dig to the bottom. And of course, our trusty Stanley flask, filled to the brim with piping hot water for roadside cappuccinos or bush brews wherever the mood strikes.

That was the plan. Get to Babalala, whip out the camping mugs, pour some foamy cappuccinos and choose between a muffin or a slice of fruit cake. A modest pitstop before a proper brunch back at camp. Easy. But that was *before* the neighbours showed up.

Now, let me paint the scene. We pulled in, greeted the picnic site attendant, parked under some lovely shade and started setting up. Just a flask, some mugs, and the beloved snack bag. But before we could even unzip it, we heard the *pssshhh* of gas canisters being connected nearby. Not one, but *two* skottle braais came out. Our neighbours, a well-seasoned duo in matching bush shirts and a very serious-looking cooler box, meant business.

It started with onions. Always the onions. There is not a human alive who doesn't love the smell of onions frying. It's the universal starter pistol for hunger pangs. Then came the mushrooms. Sliced perfectly, tossed in like they were auditioning for a MasterChef challenge. Bacon strips followed, layered like precious cargo, soon joined by plump sausages and halved tomatoes sizzling around the edge. Then came the eggs.

At the fold-up table next to them, the woman cracked egg after egg into a massive mixing bowl. We counted along like it was a game. Twelve... thirteen... fourteen. I stopped keeping track after that. She must've had chickens on standby. It was the most glorious display of

bush kitchen finesse I've ever seen. Then came the hash browns, placed delicately around the edge of the second skottle like golden little soldiers. It was a breakfast for royalty.

Naturally, we tried not to look like we were staring. But I'm pretty sure we were. At one point, Mom leaned over and whispered, "Maybe they're expecting a group to arrive. Like family or a birding tour or something." It made sense. No one cooks like that just for two.

We all nodded in agreement. But that theory crumbled as fast as a stale Marie biscuit.

Without a word exchanged between them, the couple began the transfer. Each food item, still steaming hot, was scooped into neatly labelled Tupperware containers. Bacon in one, mushrooms in another, sausages piled high in a third. Tomatoes, scrambled eggs, hash browns — all perfectly packed, sealed, and stowed like a military operation. The silence between them wasn't cold, it was competent. These two had done this before.

The only moment of rebellion came when the man, mid-pack, casually slipped a single rasher of bacon into his mouth. No eye contact, no comment, just a reward for a job well done. And that was it. Within minutes, the skottles were off, the table wiped, and they were gone. No group arrived. No brunch picnic unfolded. They'd driven all the way up to Babalala just to cook, pack, and vanish.

We were left sitting there, snack bag open, mouths half full of fruit cake, looking at each other like, "Did that actually just happen?" And it did. And it left a mark.

From that day on, we never left camp without a pack of bacon, some rolls or baps, and a few eggs — even if we weren't planning a full-on fry-up. Because let's be honest, no granola bar or chocolate-coated biscuit, no matter how fancy, can compete with the smell of breakfast after a morning of birding and game driving in the bush. It's a memory trigger, a comfort, and honestly, a right of passage for any proper safari.

So next time you head out on a morning drive, do yourself a favour — leave space in the cooler box. Not for the snacks you *think* you'll want, but for the bush breakfast you *will* wish you had. Because trust me, someone at the picnic site is going to start frying onions, and you'll never forgive yourself if you're caught empty handed.