



Author at a waterhole at the base of a kloof.

Hunting the Karas Mountains

"May I shoot that kudu bull?" Faffie asked. "Where?" was all that I could say before he went into the prone position. I followed his muzzle's direction to where the youngish bull stood with three cows. At the shot the bull jumped into motion, and disappeared behind some boulders. We sat down to discuss tactics – as the bull was about 300 yards up on one of the kloof's slopes, and since Faffie had taken the shot, we agreed that he should take the high road while I would cover the bottom. If the kudu had been wounded and made a break for the lower ground, I would be waiting. After about 10 minutes, I decided to climb a little higher. This was all the persuasion the bull needed – it broke cover some 50 yards higher and about 100 yards to the left of Faffie. I swung up my rifle, just in time to see the bull crumple to a shot from Faffie's .300.

After driving through the night from Bloemfontein we had arrived at Oom Boet Eksteen's farm, Selderus, on the eastern side of the Karas Mountains earlier that morning. Over breakfast we were instructed to

By Karl Stumpf

shoot at least two kudu bulls, one for Oom Boet, and one for his friend, Oom Bertie, who was visiting for the weekend. After some polite conversation we were dropped off at 9.30am at the start of Diepkloof and set out, somewhat fatigued, for the hunt.

You can see the Karas Mountains looming into the sky when still more than 100km away – the colour of the mountains changes from a distant blue to a haunting purple depending on the weather. If you are lucky, the tops might just be covered in snow. The road from Karasburg to Keetmanshoop passes between the Greater Karas mountains (to the east) and the little (klein) Karas Mountains (to the west) – the peaks which can be seen from Keetmansdorp are part of the Greater Karas range. The Greater Karas extend almost to the Kalahari and the Klein Karas extend to just short of the Fish River. The Karas Mountains remind one of the Khomas Hochland region in central

Namibia, only with less vegetation. The Schwarzrand, parts of the Namib (like the Kuiseb canyon) and the Huns Mountains come close to the Karas in vegetation and ruggedness, but each has its own character. I have hunted in these mountains since I was a boy, and believe the Karas to be one of the most challenging places to hunt in southern Africa, and find it strange that they are so little known to outsiders.

Most South African and overseas hunters head for the northern, central and Kalahari parts of Namibia, with few going for the Namib. While I love hunting in these parts, I believe that the Karas Mountains are as unique as the Namib, and definitely worth a visit. It is a hunter's paradise for those who don't mind the physical challenge of the rocky terrain. These rocks are hell to climb over and even more difficult to build a path over – which means that some of the game shot will have to be carried for quite a distance. The terrain is mostly broken with gullies running into huge kloofs. Between the major kloofs, flatter areas or plains can also be found, but round rocks that can cause a

Author and friend with springbuck shot on the mountain.



sprained ankle in seconds, are still all over the place. I took my GPS on a recent hunt and found that my average speed over the rockier places was only about 800m an hour. This was before we started the actual hunt, we were just walking, or should I say climbing into the start of a kloof. The mountains are mostly covered in Bushman's grass, with a few black ebony and camelthorn trees, lemoendoring and haakbos growing in the kloofs. It is in these kloofs that the kudu are mostly found. The climate fluctuates from boiling hot in summer to well below freezing in winter. In fact, it is one of the few places in Namibia that receives regular snow.

Due to the very rugged and open terrain, walk-and-stalk hunting is highly demanding, so most shooting in southern Namibia is done from the back of bakkies. Besides, most of the locals are simply harvesting the meat, and are not too concerned about hunting ethics. As I have known the farmer since my primary school days, selling the idea of a 'fair chase' hunt to him was comparatively easy, but I very much doubt that this concept will ever become standard practice in the region. That said, however, you'll probably be able to talk most farmers into allowing you to try it.

One of the kicks I get out of hunting in these mountains is to take a hunter who is used to kudu but not to this area, after these grey ghosts. After seeing the terrain and vegetation, he will almost always look at me strangely and shake his head in sympathy. But then, after only one day's hunt, he will probably say something like: "I have never seen so many kudu in one day!" Although the kudu are plentiful, don't think getting one in your crosshairs is going to be easy. Because of the open terrain, the kudu can sometimes see you from more than a mile away. Luckily they are likely to hold their

ground in the shadows of an overhanging kranz – which can also make them difficult to spot. The most successful method of hunting them is to walk slowly at the bottom of a kloof, with regular stops to glass for them up on the slopes and under the trees growing along the many dry watercourses found here. If you spot a kudu that interests you, the game is on. It is sometimes possible to use either the camelthorn trees or some rocks to get a little closer, but shooting distances will most probably be longish and something in the .300 to .338 magnum class (with bullets medium to heavy) is recommended. My personal favourite is my 8x68S loaded with 220gr Swift A-Frame bullets.

Other game that can also be found are mountain zebra, klipspringer, gemsbuck and springbuck. Some farmers have also introduced hartebeest and eland. Mountain zebra are quite scarce on the average farm these days, but must be the top trophy a hunter can take in this part of the world. Klip-

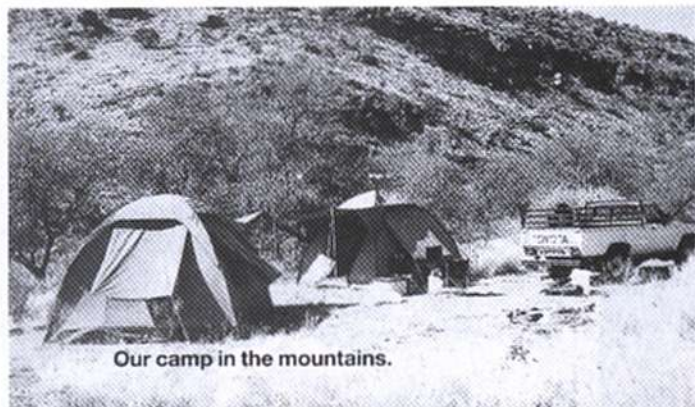


Young kudu bull as it fell. Note the slope of the mountain.

springer are numerous, but Specially Protected Game Permits (which are strictly controlled) apply to them. The kudu are generally about 10% lighter than those found in the north of Namibia – probably because they have to work so hard in the tough environment. This does not mean that a good representative trophy cannot be found. My personal best was a 50.5" bull and I have measured a few horns over 55" (one of 62"). A hunter with a little time on his side can expect to at least break 45". On the other hand I would much rather hunt a 48"+ kudu in these mountains than shoot a 60-incher

A hunter's view into Diepkloof.





Our camp in the mountains.

on a smallish game-fenced farm. It is after all not only horn size that matters, but how much you enjoy the total experience.

In contrast to this, I have not seen more than two sets of springbuck horns over 14" that come from the mountains of this region. The rest of southern Namibia, including the rugged broken terrain surrounding the mountains and typical of the south, does have exceptional springbuck. Because springbuck and gemsbuck inhabit the flatter parts of the mountains – which have less vegetation – hunting them can be quite difficult. If it were not for the myriad of gullies, which a hunter can use to move closer, it would probably be close to impossible. In some years, the bushman's grass can also be a big help. Another favourite method is to hide and let someone spook the animals into moving towards you. Even if the 'aan-jaer' is on foot, some might find little difference between this method and the traditional Karoo method of 'voorsit'. The difference is that the difficult terrain makes it impossible to use a vehicle

and most farmers are not too keen on horses, as there is little enough grazing for their animals already.

What puts a lot of people off hunting these mountains is the recovery of the animal. If you are lucky, a 'nearby' road will be in the order of 500m away. On the flatter top areas, you may have to carry a springbuck or a gemsbuck for more than a kilometre to get to a place accessible to a vehicle. As most kloofs have a road of some sort leading into them, recovery distance is usually much shorter – but the terrain is more difficult. You better have strong legs and a lot of help if you shoot anything in a kloof without roads into it.

One year I shot three kudu bulls in one day, and went to fetch my brother and a friend to help me recover them. The first bull was easy, as we could ride up to him and load him. The second bull was in the bottom of a kloof without a road. After that, my brother threatened that if the last bull was in a kloof anywhere near as deep, I would have to recover it on my own. When I told them it was lying only about 30m from the top of the kloof, they agreed to help me. What they did not know was that it was at an angle of over 35 degrees. In the end, my father and another friend had to help us; otherwise we might still be up that mountain! If you have four or more people help with the recovery, the best way to carry it is with a steel pipe through the front legs and another through the back legs. If, however, fewer people are available, or if you want the cape intact for a mount, the only option is to skin and quarter it on the spot and carry out the pieces.

After Faffie's kudu went down, I climbed up to congratulate him. We dragged the bull down into the kloof, marked the spot, and started to walk back. We followed the tracks of a small group of kudu down in the sandy river bed of the kloof. It turned out to be



a few cows, and a very young bull. As we rounded a bend in the kloof, the sharp-eyed Vrystater saw another bull on the left slope. After a few hectic moments, I eventually settled into a sitting position and tried to steady my rifle. However, I hurried the shot and missed the bull. Luckily the sound reverberating in the kloof confused him, and he only ran a few steps, before presenting me

with a perfect broadside shot. This time I took my time and at the shot, everything happened at once – my bull dropped and another much bigger bull jumped out from behind some vegetation that had concealed him. As this bull also did not realize where the shot came from, it ran onto a ledge closer to us. When about 180 yards from us the ledge narrowed and the bull realized that it was in a cul-de-sac. We were already aiming at it, and I whispered to Faffie to take the shot. What followed was perhaps the most spectacular crash I have ever seen – the kudu tumbled over the ledge and fell about eight yards straight down. We ran up the slope and, incredibly, found the bull still alive. A very close-range shot to the head killed it – Faffie's biggest kudu to date. Due to the cold climate we could leave these bulls overnight after eviscerating them.

We started the long walk back to the farmhouse, only to reach it well past 9pm. Not even the prospect of having three bulls to recover the next morning could dampen our spirits around the fire that night. I have hunted in a lot of places, but I must confess that I have a soft spot for the Karas Mountains. If you have not tried a hunt there, you are missing out. **um**