

A dream fulfilled



André de Villiers

Surfing the dunes of Vleesbaai in the Cape with his beach buggy as a youngster, André de Villiers probably never thought he would one day own an outdoor accessory chain and be a successful businessman. Or perhaps he did...

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André de Villiers, owner of Safari Centre Menlyn and Safari Centre Bryanston – and the Safari Centre trademark, for that matter – has always had a love of the outdoors and an adventurous spirit, and the realisation that if you want something, you have to work for it.

"As a youngster, I badly wanted a motorbike," he recalls. So he started delivering newspapers in his home town of Wellington in the Cape, where he spent his formative years and matriculated at the Huguenote high school in 1981. "I guess I've always been a bit of an entrepreneur," says André.

Son of the well-known Boland rugby guru Dawid de Villiers (long-time Boland coach and chairman of the Boland Rugby Union), young André played a mean game of rugby, and in fact captained the Boland Craven Week schools team.

After matric he had six months to kill before reporting for his compulsory national service, and became an assistant viticulturist at Nederberg Farmers' Wineries. His task? To walk through the vineyard, picking the bottom, middle and top grape of one bunch at the bottom and one at the top, every few metres, and filling a plastic bag with the grapes. At the end of the vineyard he crushed the grapes and tested the sugar content to determine if the grapes were ready for collection. "It was actually

André (left) and a colleague with two pygmy warriors in the north of Zaire.



very interesting," says André.

During his army training his leadership qualities were recognised and André became an instructor with the rank of sergeant, stationed at Oudtshoorn.

He acquired his first motorised wheels – two – when he was 12 ("not that you could call it a motorbike; it was more like two wheels and an engine," André smiles) and by age 14 he was driving cars. He bought an old Mini, which he fixed, and later on a beach buggy.

His love of nature and particularly the sea stems from the many holidays and weekends spent at Vleesbaai, where his father had a holiday home.

"In those days beach driving wasn't such an issue as it is today, and we really didn't know better," says the man who today is a confirmed conservationist, "and I spent many hours driving on the dunes." (Not that the lightweight buggy with its wide tyres would have caused much damage.)

He also became a keen fisherman, casting from the beach and catching shad in summer and galjoen in winter, although today he prefers deep-sea fishing and has his own boat.

After his stint in the Defence Force, André followed his love, Ejtleen, to Pretoria. He started working at the Atomic Energy Corporation, at the same time fur-

André and his children with two kabeljou – André and Albert standing, and the twins, Neil and Jaco.



thering his studies at the Pretoria Technikon, where he qualified in vehicle mechanics.

Joining Mercedes-Benz, André specialised in Honda products and became involved in product development. Later he was approached by a company called TFM to help with the development of armoured police vehicles such as the Njala.

"This vehicle was four-wheel driven, and I spent a lot of time at the Gerotek proving grounds outside Pretoria conducting a variety of tests. It was very good experience."

In 1990, André joined Reumech and became product integrator for the armoured troop carrier project, and when the Army wanted a command vehicle based on the troop carrier, he was appointed project manager. "We worked on a very tight time schedule, burning the midnight oil, and did many tests. Again I gained valuable experience of four-wheel drive systems and driving."

The development of the Mamba military vehicle gave André the opportunity to expand his business skills – and explore Africa. Apart from the mechanical side, he got involved in the marketing as well, which was to prove valuable experience for his later career.

In 1993 the chance came to drive Partners. Johan Kriek, Willie Venter and André had a tour operation in Zambia.





Left: Making a new road in Mozambique after the floods.

Below: Willie Venter entertaining the young ones during a tour.

Bottom: Wanna buy some diesel? Salesmen in Burundi.



through Africa, and this experience deepened André's love for the continent. "I was put in charge of logistics for a group of motorcyclists who wanted to travel overland from Johannesburg to Hamburg in Germany, and it also offered the opportunity to put our Mamba vehicle to the test in real-life conditions.

"Of course, we couldn't let on they were military vehicles, so we converted them somewhat, painted them white and had the words 'Peace for Africa', printed on the sides."

The eight-week trip took the group through many African countries, and as they had appointments with ambassadors along the way, they were running on a very tight schedule.

"Circumstances didn't make it easy for us. It was in the rainy season and there was lots of mud. One day we started driving at

Below: The Mamba troop carrier in a civilian role during a trek through Africa.



six in the morning and stopped at six that evening. We covered exactly 11 kilometres.

"When we arrived at Lake Tanganyika, we found that the ferry couldn't transport the heavy Mamba trucks. It meant that we had to drive around the lake, over the mountains. It wasn't a road that was used very often. We entered Tanzania through a farm gate!"

"The road consisted of twin-track paths high in the mountains. We drove the whole day, sometimes to 02h30 the next morning, and it took us four days to complete the distance of 450km."

"Near the equator we also had to build, or fix, many bridges. On one particular day we crossed 42 of them. Some of the bridges had been washed away, and we had to cut down trees to make new ones, and where the bridges were still standing, we had to chain the logs together to make sure that they didn't give way under the Mambas' weight."

Political unrest farther north forced a detour to Cameroon, where they shipped the Mambas to Barcelona in Spain, from where the group continued the journey through Europe to Hamburg.

"It was a hard slog, but I'd give my eye teeth to do it again," says André.

At Reumech OMC he became business manager for light armoured vehicles, all of them four-wheel driven, and his work entailed a lot of travel with the marketing people, to places such as Dubai, Saudi Arabia and the Ivory Coast.

"It taught me a lot about the business side of things. I had long decided to start my own business one day, and when Safari Centre in Menlyn came up for sale, I jumped at the chance."

André turned the business around with his policy of providing quality customer service, quality products and quality fitment, and recently he also acquired Safari Centre Bryanston.

He understood the importance of 4x4 training and tours to his business, and with the help of Willie Venter, started the 4x4 Academy and Safaris side of the operation.

"Today the tours are very successful and popular, especially those to Botswana and Mozambique," he says.

After the floods in Mozambique last year, André led a tour to the country, with four trailers packed with food, clothes and medical supplies for the flood victims.

"When we came back we were stopped by the floodwaters and had to build our own road, arriving back in South Africa a day and a half later than planned. But that's all part of the adventure."

André is married to Ejtleen and the couple have four sons.