

Chobe

Wildlife Tented Safari

The young elephant bull was just metres away, flapping his ears and shaking his head intimidatingly at our vehicle. Two tiny little babies, sheltered by their big grey mothers, wandered across the road while the rest of the herd milled around in the dense green bush. We knew that Chobe is known for its vast elephant population – in fact, it boasts the highest densities in Africa – but this was the wettest time of the year, when the animals are normally spread around the park and more difficult to spot. The day's sightings were beyond our wildest dreams.

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Our trip began the previous day when we hopped into a riverboat at Chobe Safari Lodge. Even there we'd had some pretty good encounters. A hippo grazed nonchalantly on the lawn as we returned from dinner, and elephant spoor was clearly visible in the morning. The lodge, in the Botswana frontier town of Kasane, is the right on the edge of Chobe National Park, and since there are no fences the animals pay slight regard to the park boundary and frequently wander into town. The riverside setting, with shaded places to lounge and watch the birds, crocs and hippo, is guaranteed to put you in the mood for a safari, and the range of affordable accommodation





options – big chalets, rondavels and a shady campsite – ensures that it's a long-standing favourite among southern African travellers. Recently renovated, the lodge has a superb deck and bar area where you can chill and enjoy the African bush before wandering into the dining room to feast on local specialities – impala pie, venison roasts and local fish – as well as stir-fries and fresh salads.

Jensen, our guide for the trip, met us after breakfast and escorted us to the jetty. As we completed the park formalities, our skipper Rambo explained the unique geography of the area – just downstream of the lodge four countries meet. Indeed, the easiest way of getting to Chobe is to fly to Vic Falls or Livingstone, from where Kasane is only an hour's drive. We were now a short distance from the borders of Zambia and Zimbabwe, but across the river lay Namibia's Caprivi Strip. This little corner of Africa takes some working out. I'd always thought of Namibia as a desert destination, but the Caprivi consists of swamps and hippo grass as far as the eye can see. Here and there are occasional fishing villages – temporary structures that would soon be underwater as the river rose in its annual cycle.

After the skipper alighted quickly to sign us into the park, we pottered along slowly, watching kingfishers hovering then diving, often surfacing with small fish in their beaks. We spotted beady crocodile eyes poking out of the water, saw the great beasts lying in the shallows and, of course, came upon numerous pods of grunting hippo. There were plenty of

tuskers too, wallowing in the mud and towering over us on the riverbank, and cute impala swarmed the Botswanan bank – even in the grounds of the exclusive Chobe Game Lodge.

The only hotel in the National Park, this is where – as every local will proudly tell you – Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor got married in 1975. And the guides can fill you in on every detail about the secret wedding too. This was the second time the couple had been joined in matrimony – apparently only 16 months after their first ten-year stint at marriage ended in divorce. And there were giggles at Rambo's suggestion that Taylor was clearly a serial wife – Burton was her fifth husband, while she was his second wife! Clearly the lives of rich and famous visitors to Chobe is every much a part of the guide training course as knowledge about the 450-odd bird species in the park.

And what a twitcher's paradise it is. The collectors ticked off some 50 species in three hours – dikkops (or thick knees, as I'm reliably informed they are now called), egrets, lilac-breasted rollers, cormorants, darters, Egyptian and spur-winged geese, white-faced duck, and yellow-billed and saddle-billed storks. We enjoyed the classical African experiences – the haunting cry of the fish eagle, graceful jacana looking as if they were literally walking on the water, and yellow-billed ox-peckers removing ticks from the ever-present elephants.

For me, it was a pleasure to come across birds that I'd never seen, though my enthusiasm to photograph a squacco heron nearly ended in

tragedy. Disturbed by the boat, the bird took flight and settled further away in the reeds. Moments later we saw an African fish eagle leave its treetop perch and dive straight for the heron. It missed, but I learnt my lesson to not upset the natural balance in my urge to take home holiday snaps.

The cruise passed so quickly that we were surprised to see a game cruiser waiting for us at White Sands. I was sorry to leave the river – it was such a tranquil, beautiful place, but as we drove the short distance to the camp we saw a huge herd of Cape buffalo, yet more elephant, and some magnificent sable antelope, so the land-based adventure started full of promise.

We could smell lunch before we even noticed the tented camp hidden in the trees – the aroma of freshly baked bread wafted enticingly in the breeze. Whoever plans these trips has an eye for detail and a good sense of the little luxuries that can really make a trip. The main dining area was delightful, with typically African tablecloths, lanterns and interesting pieces of wood and vases full of local fauna providing ornamentation. There was a bush shower and eco loo, while the two-person safari tents had camp beds, big battery-operated lights, a mirror and all mod cons – even flowers on the table and individual canvas washbasins and hand towels outside. We made ourselves comfortable, then headed for lunch. The onion bread was accompanied by fresh tuna salad *niçoise* – bush cuisine at its best.

The afternoon game drive was a treat. Jensen showed us the tracks of various predators that



had recently taken the dirt road: lion, leopard and hyena. Elephant swarmed around us as they made their way down to the river. Wending our way through the herds was like swimming on a reef teeming with fish. We stopped on the ridge to enjoy the spectacular views of the snaking Chobe River. The rising water was beginning to engulf the flood plain – in a few weeks the temporary settlements would be abandoned. Then, as the stark light began to soften, we headed down to the river for sundowners and enjoyed the best time of the day as the red ball of the sun slunk into the horizon. Further along the river bank we could see the day visitors in other vehicles packing up as soon as the sun set in order to make the park gates by closing time. But we were in no rush. One of the huge privileges of this trip is the opportunity to enjoy the park in the twilight hours.

The tented campsite that was our home for the night is one of a handful of private concessions that members of HATAB (Hotel and Tourism Association of Botswana) can book exclusively for their guests. Local safari operator Chobezi, in conjunction with Thompsons Tours, create a temporary safari camp for each group of guests, and then remove everything at the end of the trip, leaving the secluded sites spotless. It's a wonderful concept. Instead of camping at the noisy public campsites or having to exit the park at night, visitors can enjoy an exclusive, authentic bush experience at an affordable price.

Our smiling hosts filled the big bush shower with hot water and we freshened up under the rising moon. A hyena sloped past as we sat out in front of our tent enjoying a pre-dinner drink,

then gentle thuds and grey outlines gave away a big herd of elephant passing only metres away. Sleeping out in the African bush is a magical experience – something that living in Cape Town, I forget. But escapes like this remind me of the exhilaration that goes with safaris, and I wish I could do them more often.

Our three-course dinner was both tasty and superbly presented – fresh fish and an assortment of meats, vegetables and salads, followed by pears in red wine. We turned in early and lay listening to howling hyena and the sounds of the nightjars.

We had no need of our alarm clocks the next morning – the twittering birds reminded us that an early-morning game drive was on the cards. This, a five-hour excursion deep into the park, gave us plenty of great photographic opportunities, but also the chance to learn more about the vegetation and the smaller inhabitants of the reserve. The telltale presence of vultures in the trees led us to two separate kills, and though we didn't see any cats that morning we were treated to sightings of puku (a rare relative of the waterbuck), red lechwe, roan antelope and cute jackals with their pups.

But the highlight of the trip came that evening as we were returning from our sundowner excursion. Jensen suddenly stopped the vehicle. There in the track was a leopard, the sleek graceful animal seemingly unfazed by our presence. When it moved off we followed it for a while until it headed back into the bush. We celebrated back at camp, but regretted that we had only one more drive before we had to return to the real world. This had been the safari of a lifetime. ←



EXTEND YOUR STAY AT VIC FALLS SAFARI LODGE

The easiest way of getting to Chobe is to fly in to Vic Falls – so why not treat yourself to an extra night or two at the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge? Take in a few of the adrenalin activities that Vic Falls is famous for, or simply sit at the bar overlooking the waterhole and watch the game, laze in the pool or stroll among the birds in the lush gardens. The Safari Lodge, with its awesome view over the densely vegetated plain to the river, is my favourite hotel in the Falls – not least because you really feel that you are deep in the bush. As we were eating breakfast one morning I noticed that a large clump of rocks appeared to be moving. Sure enough, a massive herd of elephant was passing through – unseen by most of the guests. Don't miss out on a meal at The Boma – complete with lively African dancing and entertainment – then lie awake at night listening to lions roar.

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