Tenting in Botswana

January 2015

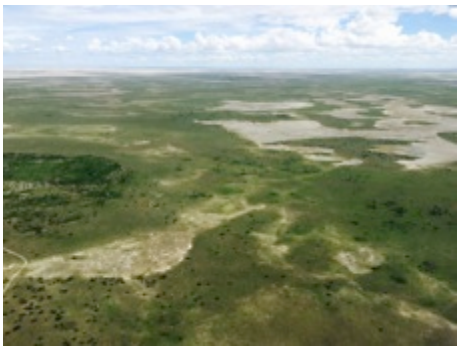
By Roger James

1 January 2015

Having returned from the Congo the previous day, we stop the night at the Johannesburg Airport Intercontinental.

Saying goodbye to Tom and Beka who are heading to Spain, we board flight SA 8300 to Maun in Botswana. Although an international airport, Maun is a bit backward. Bags are handed out manually and there are lots of people in uniform sitting or standing around doing not very much. Through customs we are greeted by a lady holding up a sign with our names on. Our bags are whisked away and it's through a rather lax security screening. Eventually we hop in a van and are driven slowly, following the pilot who is on foot, to our plane. It's an 8-seater Aussi-built machine. Checks are done and we are airborne.

The airport is at 3100 feet we climb out to 5500 before leveling off. It then strikes me how flat this large country is. There is a 360 degree view of the horizon not a hill or even a mound in site. No ravines or even small gullies. The Boteti River is the only recess in the land running from the north to south. As we fly the 105 nautical miles north. we are a intrigued by the spectacular cloud formation. There are patches where you can see rain falling from the clouds like a giant sprinkler. The land below is green and fertile looking with animal tracks running east west.



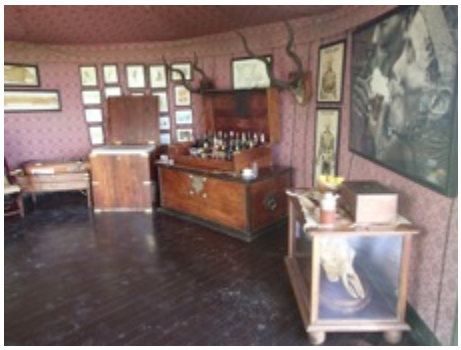
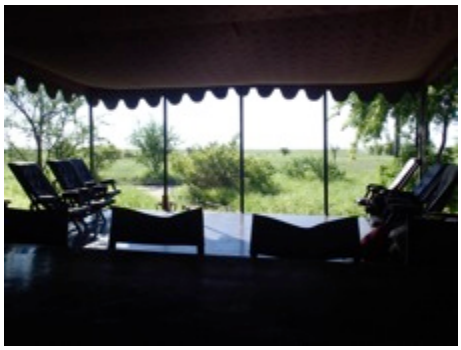
The pilot handles the 10 knot cross wind quite well, putting down on the grass strip with only a few small bounces. Here we are met by Fanwell in a long wheel base Toyota Land Cruiser. Fanwell is to be our guide for the duration of our 3 night stay at Jacks Camp.

Founded in 1960 by Jack Bousefield, it is 4000 hectares of land within the Magkidikidi salt pan area of the Kalahari Desert. Formerly a great hunter, the story goes he tossed in his rifle and took up tourism and preservation of the local wild life.

Over the years the camp has been developed into quite a flash set up. The tents are lined, have polished wooden floors, a four poster bed and antique furniture. The ensuite has a copper polished shower and a Victorian style flush toilet. Real "Out of Africa" stuff!

We are greeted at the dining room which has a bar at one and and a library at the other. It also doubles as a museum and memorial to Jack who apparently died in 1992 at 63 in his

eighth plane crash after being trampled by elephants. After settling into our tents we head to the dining tent and meeting place for afternoon tea. This is served daily at 1630.

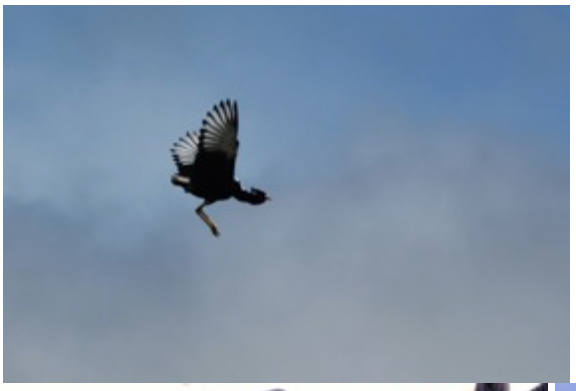



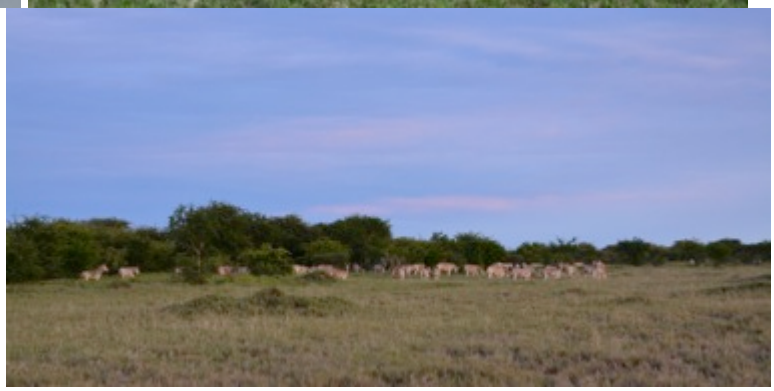
We are teamed up with a lovely British couple who now live in the US. Charlie and Pauline are both experts in parasitology. They are studying the schistosomiasis parasite, which infects 250 million people, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa.

Around 5 we head off on an evening safari.

The camp is situated in the saltpans, which extend some 41000 square kilometers. Right now we are in the early part of the rainy season. Some 20,000 zebras and 15,000 wildebeest travel over 300 Km from the west to feed on the lush grasses that have sprung up with the rain. The ground is flat out to the horizon in all directions. It is like we are under a giant dome.

We drive around among the zebras. Groups of wildebeest appear from time to time among the zebras. We also spot some steenbok antelope and in the distance some kudu. There is a huge range of bird species here. My favourite is the northern black korhaan, called the helicopter bird because of the way it lands. It makes the strangest noises. Initially I keep thinking there is a stone caught in the brakes on the Toyota.





Each salt pan normally fills with water but the rains have been light this year. Surrounded by grassy areas of various sizes which go on for miles. The unique cloud formations make for one of the most fiery sunsets I have seen.

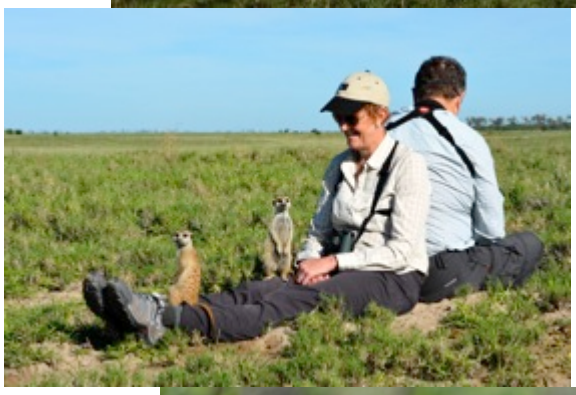
We return to the camp at eight for dinner. All twenty guests dine together with some of the guides at a big long table.

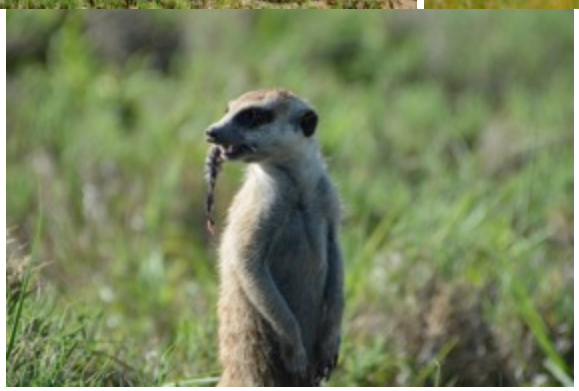
Friday 2 January
We are woken at 6 by a hello from the maid delivering coffee and hot chocolate in silver pots with cozies.

After a great breakfast we are in the back of the Toyota. Charlie and Pauline kindly let us have the middle seats so I could rest my braced leg. We head off through mobs of zebras. There is a guy standing in the field with a walking stick. We pull up to see he is

surrounded by 8 meerkats. These guys are habituated and the stick man spends each day with them.

We follow them on foot as they forage their way to a mound in the distance. Eating grubs, insects and rodents they dig rapidly. One guy digs a hole twice his body length in a few minutes managing the tailings as he goes and appearing eventually with a mouse in his mouth. The mouse is devoured bones and all just leaving the skin, with the same vigour he had dug the hole. Sylvia and I sit back to back and they climb on our legs and play around us. Pauline is being used as a lookout, one sitting on her head and even staying there as she stands up.



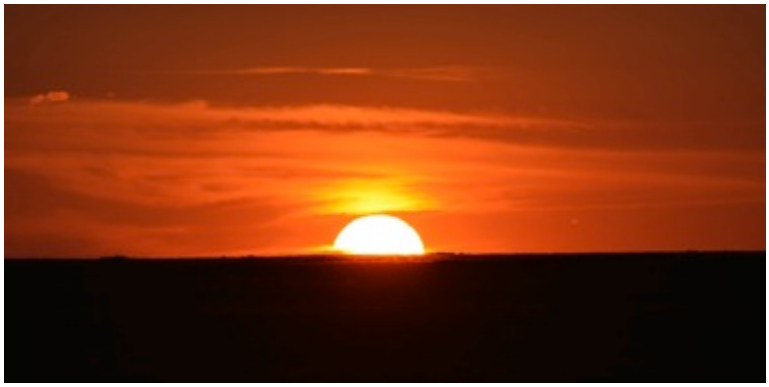


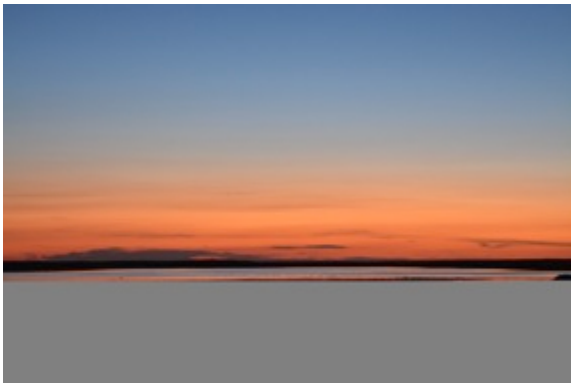
The latter part of the morning concludes with a walk on the saltpan.

After a delicious light lunch it is siesta time until 4.30. It's too hot to do much else.

After tea we drive out to visit Chapman's Baobob the largest tree in Botswana. Five thousand years old and 33m in circumference, it is the third largest in Africa. It was used a landmark when explorer Livingstone and others came here in 1870. Apart from a few palm trees there are mostly shrubs around here. A big hole in the tree was used as a mailbox back in those days.

From there we skirt around the saltpans. At this time of year they are too muddy to cross so we stick to the edges. Normally by now most would be full of water but a dry wet season has not seen that happen. We stop for a gin and tonic as we watch the sun go down.





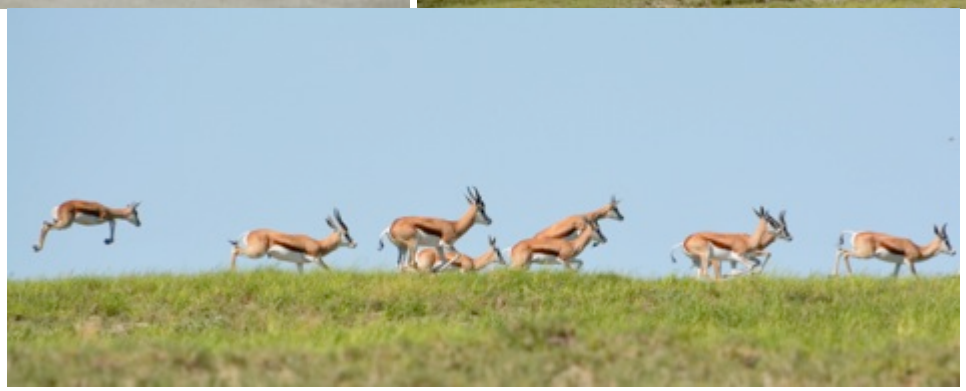
As darkness arrives a spotlight picks up hares, jackals and a spring hair that is tail powered just like a kangaroo. They are fun to watch pound their way across the tundra.

Arriving back at camp we all eat a delicious fish dinner and reflect on our day. Sarah and John from New Your and a Spanish couple had made a 3 plus hour journey into the national park to see some lions. They also spotted a cheetah. The lions and cubs followed them for a few minutes on their journey home.

Saturday 3 January
Around 4 am we hear the thundering hooves of zebra galloping past our tent. When we arrive at breakfast there is great excitement in the camp. Two lionesses and two cubs are hanging out near tent 8. During the night they have killed a zebra. After breakfast we mount our Toyota and head to where the lions have now moved to. After driving through some scrub they are chased out in front of us. We follow then finding them lying on a grassy bank. After a few photos at around 10m one gives a pretty pissed of growl and moves off, the other follows. Time to back off.

We drive out onto the tundra to see a jackal devouring the remains of a zebra. He is surrounded by vultures all trying to get a piece. As the vultures move in he gives a growl and a snarl and they back away. Further down the road we spot another bunch of vultures who this time had the upper hand on a jackal who in spite of several attempts to get to the carcass was driven off by the pecking birds.

Heading off around yet another saltpan we spot a mob of springbok intermingled amongst the zebra and wildebeest. The springbok are impressive as they gallop away springing high into the air. I take great delight in pointing out to Charlie (originally from Scotland) that the Scots rugby team doesn't really stand a chance in the line out against the Springbok.



At lunch we say goodbye to Charlie and Pauline who are heading to Kenya to continue their research. We had really enjoyed their company.

After lunch and siesta we head off for a walk with the Bush people. These guys rotate in and out of here from a village some 750 km away. They are a family from grand parents to kids. We first stop at a shrub, which I have named the ‘everything tree’. These guys

talk with a click and are a little hard to understand. The ‘everything tree’ has edible berries, which can also be used for making a hair straightening paste. The branches are also used for making a shelter. The dry sticks are used as firelighters. Grubs, which feed on the leaves, leave a larva. This is used as a poison for arrow tips which will tip over a wildebeest after a couple of hours.

Next I see an oblong hole in the ground and ask what it is. Scorpion they say and proceed to dig it up with a small stick shovel made from the everything tree. The hole is quite deep going off in different directions to keep the water out. Using a piece of grass to work out the directions the yellow scorpion is recovered by grabbing its tail. Holding the tail in one hand and with the big nippers gripping his finger on the other hand the guy sticks the body in his mouth. Expecting it come out with the legs chewed off, we were all surprised when he pulled it out still intact but nice and clean. He proceeded to show us its eight eyes. A small tunnel was dug and the scorpion reversed into it so he could wait out the day and dig a new home that night.

Next comes a fire lighting demo. Some dry straw and a few twigs are collected along with some zebra shit. A spear top is placed on top of the pile with some fine dry zebra shit. The ‘everything sticks’ are rubbed and in no time a fire is going. Out comes some tobacco, which is stuffed into some bone pipes. They sit around and have a puff before we move on.

They finish off with a game which although explained in detail I am not sure we understand. The women sit behind the men and sing while this takes place. These guys are to say the least impressive.

As we move back to camp I notice the lionesses watching us with interest from the bush edge 300m away.

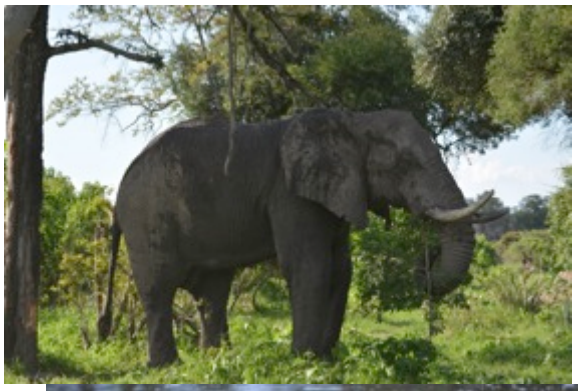
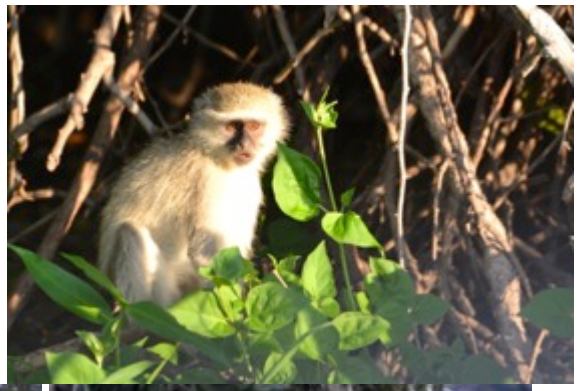
Sunday 4 January
We sleep in until 8am. After breakfast we make our way to the airstrip via a bushy area seeing more game and birds along the way. Boarding a Cessna 207 we take off with a Spanish couple for the flight to Maun. Landing there Sylvia and I board a Cessna 172 for the flight to Mombo camp. On landing at the nearby strip we are greeted by OB our guide for the next four days.

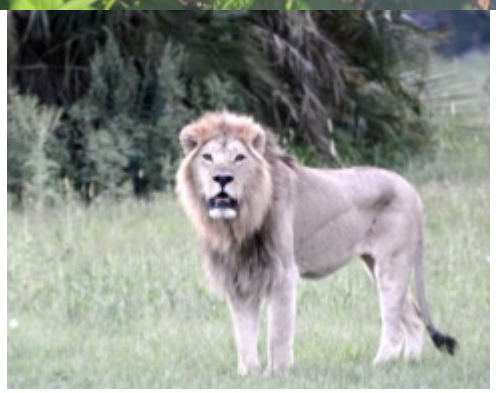
On the way to the camp we drive past numerous giraffe, elephants, warthogs, monkeys, baboons, impala and a few more local animals. We are welcomed by Neil the camp manager and staff who sing a local welcome song.

I thought Jack's camp was flash, this is a step up again. There is a large dining room, bar and deck. Our tent is huge with a lounge, large bed, double shower bathroom, deck, outside daybed and shower. We have fans electricity a bar and more.

After lunch we head off in the long wheel base Land Rover. We have not gone far and whilst looking at a large Python in the grass we get a call on the radio. A local game manager had spotted a large rhinoceros and her calf some distance away.
Three vehicles converge on the area. We spot them in some bush. Over the next hour we follow them around in and out of the bush getting a really good look at them as they finally trot off across a clearing.

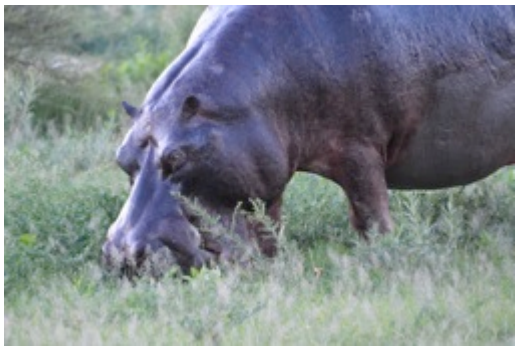
Later while we are looking at a couple of hippos we spot a lion. We drive over to it. He is a little skinny and separated from his pride. We watch from a safe distance as he roars and bellows, apparently calling to locate his family.



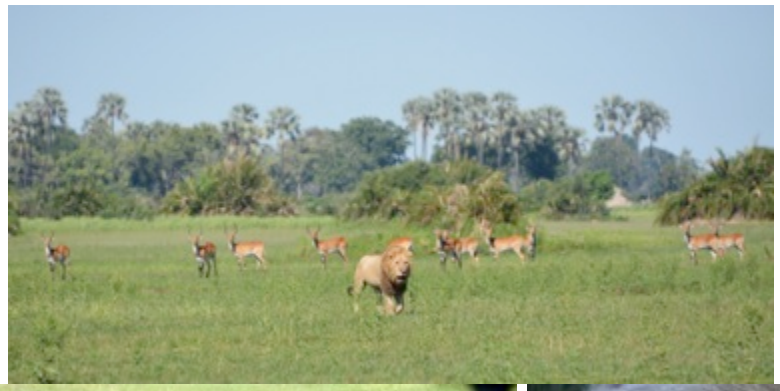
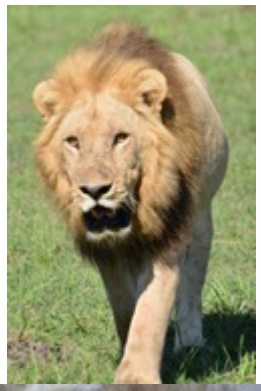
We dine that night watching massive vertical bolts of lightning strike the ground in the distance.

Monday 5 January
After driving around for a while among giraffes, elephants and many more animals we come upon a hippopotamus getting out of a pond and moving across the open ground. Quite an unusual sight as they normally lay up in the water during the day.
Next is a mob of 100 plus cape buffalo. These haven't been seen in the area for some seven months.



A short drive later we stop to have a brew. OB has just set up the brew kit and is making the coffee when I spot a lioness walking past a mob of red lechwe 300m away. We watch as it crosses our front and goes after a warthog and her piglets, which it chases out of our view.

The coffee is just poured when we look up to see two male lions 200m away heading straight for us. We move behind the vehicle as they get closer. They keep coming - we climb aboard - they keep coming. It is really exciting as they are now 4m away. They stop and lie down in the shade. We watch them for some time as they sleep, snore and sometimes stare at us.

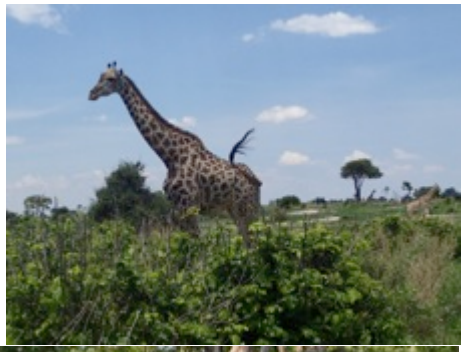
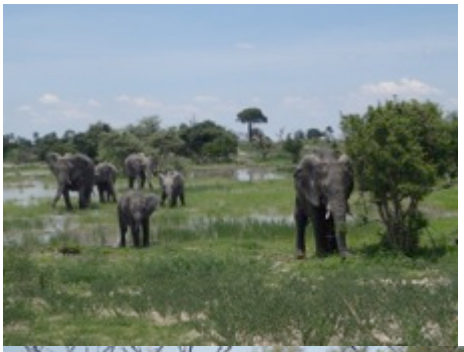
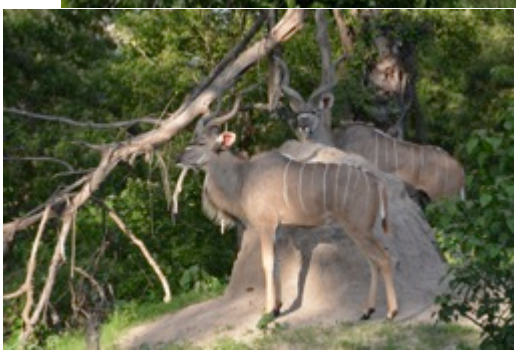
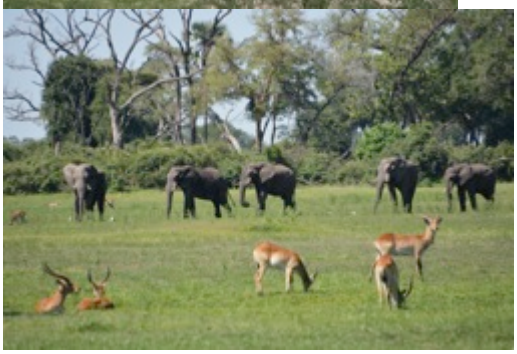
Eventually OB who is sitting in the back climbs down on the side of the vehicle away from them. I get out of the front passenger's seat while he climbs across into the drivers seat. We slowly drive off, brew kit still sitting on the bonnet. Around the corner we pack up the brew kit, mount up and drive back past the sleepy lions. We head to where the

lioness had been chasing the wart hog and her cubs. Tracks show she had missed her prey and wandered off. The morning safari is over so we head in for lunch.

The afternoon after a rest we meet for tea. Heading out again at four with two German-American couples. Renke and Pamela from Connecticut, and Constantine and Petra from New York's upper east side.

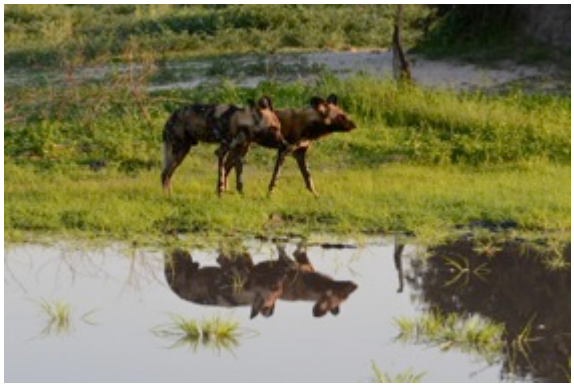
We drive around amongst giraffe, elephants, kudu and impala. Then we come across a clan of hyenas. Mum is sitting in a pond while a bunch of pups plays around the edges. The most energetic is a very young pup, still black, which sprints back and forth.

We drive on seeing more elephants, red lechwe and impala. On the drive back Sylvia spots a couple of lionesses who just happen to stick their heads up as we drive past. We drive over to them. A radio call is made and two other vehicles join us. These two are not fazed despite all the onlookers chatting and clicking away just metres from them.

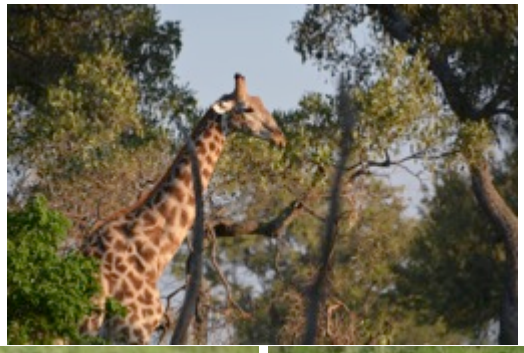
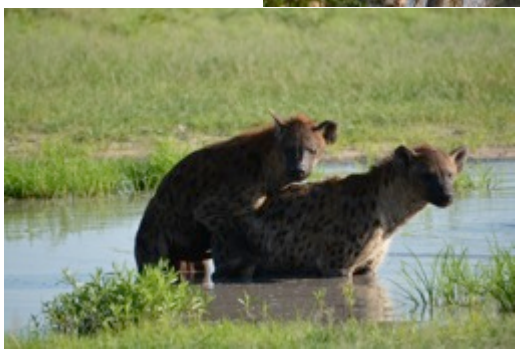





Arriving back at camp we are treated to a Kgotla. This is a meeting place where the village meets for important occasions. Dinner is cooked on coals and some staff dance and sing.

Tuesday 6th January
Sylvia was feeling a little under the weather and stayed in the tent for the morning. The rest of us headed out at 6am and came across a pack of 6 wild dogs. These are a very endangered animal so it was great to see them. As we followed them they rolled in elephant dung to hide their smell. Soon the chase was on as they went after an impala. Moving at speed for some distance over rough ground we followed them. In the end the impala got away and the dogs disappeared.



We saw again many elephants, giraffes and other game. Next we came across a bunch of hyena two of which were mating while the others looked on and raced around. Mating over, they ran to a nearby pond and played in the water by throwing themselves backwards into it, as if to celebrate.

We came across the tracks of a lion, caught up and followed it. After about 30 mins it found its three lionesses and lay down in the shade with them.

After watching for a while a call comes over the radio that sounds like an animal has been spotted. This turns out to be for a very flash lunch set up in a paddock.

After returning to camp we go on a tour of the solar power plant. This is quite large with big banks of batteries under the panels. It provides 90% of the power for the camp - the rest comes from a large generator.

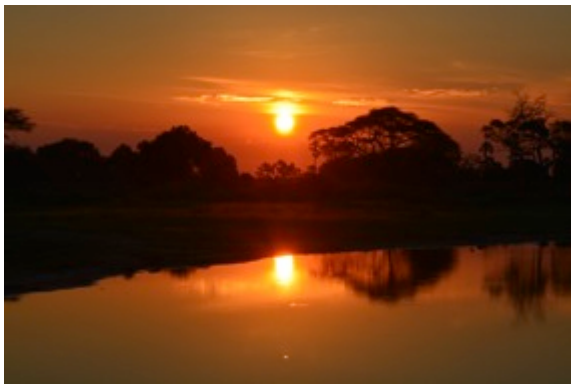
This is followed by a massage we had booked. In typical camp efficiency the table is set up in our tent. Everything here is done with absolute professionalism. Rooms are serviced three times a day, food is fantastic and the main bar is stocked with everything you can

imagine including Cuban cigars.

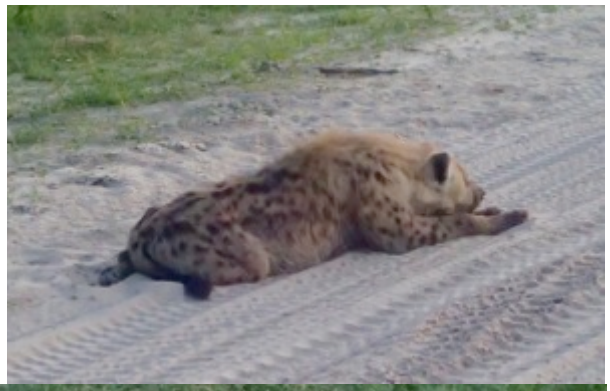
The afternoon game drive reveals a leopard tortoise, and a bunch of ousted buffalo bulls who graze to within a few meters of our vehicle. Life can be a bit grim for the old blokes in the animal world.

We get a call on the radio that a rhino had been spotted some distance away. OB drives us at speed for 20 minutes to its location. The rhino is pretty much blind and is quite happy grazing away some 25 meters from us, ears flicking back and forth listening intently for danger.

On the way back to camp we stop for a sundowner at the pond where we saw the hyena play in the morning. Witnessing a beautiful sunset and enjoying a drink with our great companions over the past couple of days.



Just outside the camp we see nature's food chain all lined up. A wildebeest stands in the grey light on the right side of the road. On the left side of the road lies a hyena looking eagerly at the beast deciding if he can take it on. Three metres behind the hyena in the grass lies a two-plus metre python inching its way toward the hyena.



That evening Neil (camp manager) gave us a great presentation on rhino and the re-release of them in this area over the past 10 years. There are now only around 17,000 white and 5,000 black rhino left in Africa. Last year some 1200 were taken by poachers. They believe they will be extinct within ten years. Mombo had 16 black rino's released in the area last year. They came from South Africa and were flown in by a C130, then kept in stockades for some weeks before being released. Complete with GPS tracking bracelet on an ankle and a radio transmitter in the horn, they are monitored by a rhino manager. They are also protected from poachers by the anti-poaching squad and the Botswana defense force. They have a shoot to kill policy on poachers.

We enjoy dinner with Petra, Constantine, Pamela and Renke - some of us sampling the

ostrich, which was cooked to absolute perfection.

Wednesday 7th January
We have a leisurely start to the day with breakfast at around 8. The six of us head out about 9 hoping to spot an elusive leopard before dropping our game drive companions at the airstrip a for their flight to Savuti Camp. We have had such a great time with these guys it is hard to say goodbye.

The afternoon drive reveals elephants bathing in a local pond trumpeting and making growling noises as they leave the water. Then where the rhino had been the previous evening two old lions lie cooling off in the shade. Sitting only meters away we can see ticks attached to their body and ears.

Heading back we drive between a group of new-to-the-district elephants. Not being

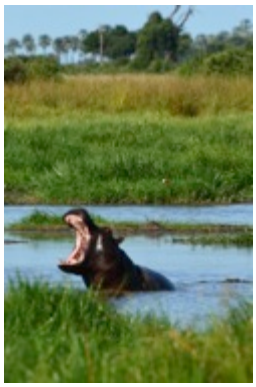
familiar with the vehicle they become spooked and a big male runs in front of us trumpeting as he goes. As we go past the matriarch puts in a charge stopping just short of the vehicle. She withdraws trumpeting and rounding up the whole group into a tight bunch, most of them facing us ready to charge. We stop. Again she charges, this time with some of her herd stopping short of us as we drive off.

We stop for our last sundowner in the shade of a umbrella acacia tree. A hyena wanders past a nearby pond before walking almost right up to us as we sip our gin and tonics.

Thursday 8 January
We are on the road before 6 hunting for the elusive leopard. Quite quickly we come across the wild dogs, which we follow for some time, as they seem to be able to cover a large area at a very fast jogging speed without getting tired. The elephants don't like these guys in spite of the fact they have rolled many times in elephant dung to conceal their scent. At one stage they charge the dogs over a good 500 metres with lots of trumpeting. I can see why these guys have become endangered. Their hunting skills aren't really up to speed. Several times they slow and try to stalk impala always being outwitted as the impala go off in all directions.

We leave the dogs and head into some new country still looking for the elusive leopard. OB often stops and listens to the alarm calls of various squirrels, birds and baboons. Apparently leopards really hate baboons as their calls often spoil their hunting. The leopards will often kill the baboons just as a punishment as they don't eat them.

Around 9 we stop for a brew beside a pool containing over 20 hippos lazing the morning away. Every now and again they grunt and yawn displaying their huge mouths. Just as we are about to leave we spot a black mamba snake crossing the creek leading to the pond. Attacked by loud, squawking starlings it finally disappears into the reeds.



We return to the camp just before 10 to find a couple of rather casual, armed soldiers sitting under the tent next door in preparation for the arrival of President Ian Kama (the President of Botswana). The President and his entourage arrive while we are having brunch.

All the guests are leaving today to make room for the President and his entourage who are staying for the next two days. At about 11:30 we all leave for the airstrip where the President's plane and helicopter are parked surrounded by more somewhat relaxed defense personnel lying in the shade of the plane with SLR's sitting on the ground nearby on bipods.

Eleven of us board the Cessna Caravan for the 30-minute flight to Maun, where we board an AVRO RJ85, a small four-engine commuter jet for the 90-minute flight to Johannesburg.

This draws to a close a fantastic seven days amongst the magnificent game of Africa. I can see why people fall in love with this place and keep coming back.