



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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BOTSWANA

Date - September 2009

Duration - 33 Days

Destinations

Gaborone - Khama Rhino Sanctuary - Central Kalahari Game Reserve - Maun - Okavango Delta - Moremi Game Reserve - Savute - Chobe National Park - Livingstone - Victoria Falls

Trip Overview

The main purpose of the trip was to try a new mobile safari operator in Botswana, as the Central Kalahari Game Reserve incorporates a vast area and cannot be explored adequately unless you have the time and freedom to reach the more remote regions, which basically means camping. There are a few lodges in both the north and south of the reserve, but excursions from these cannot reach the best wildlife areas and are far too limited in terms of where you can go and what you can see. I planned to camp in the Kalahari and the Okavango Delta and to split these expeditions with a few days at a new lodge in another area of the Okavango. The final



section of the tour would include lodges at Chobe National Park and Victoria Falls. Having spent two busy weeks in Botswana the previous year, partly researching this trip and a much longer tour of the entire country, the logistics worked perfectly and my detailed preparation culminated in a spectacularly successful trip packed with unforgettable experiences across a variety of habitats. The Kalahari, Okavango Delta and Chobe are simply three of the greatest wildlife destinations on earth and the almost unique combination of arid desert and fertile floodplains, within a few kilometres of each other, is very hard to match anywhere in the world. I must add that I am slightly biased in terms of these three African jewels, as I have visited them all on countless occasions and this is the trip, with a few minor amendments and additions, that I would take if I could only visit

this remarkable continent one final time. I began my tour with a visit to the Khama Rhino Sanctuary, which I had not been able to make time for in 2008, but which I always try to support. Although I have heard Khama described almost as an irrelevance in comparison with the other more famous destinations in Botswana, it is anything but, as the black rhino population was poached to extinction in this country in the early 1990s and just a few white rhinos remained. The fact that the situation has now improved even slightly is almost totally as a result of the rhino breeding programme at Khama and I believe that this sanctuary is actually one of the most important in southern Africa. Sixteen rhinos have now been introduced to other areas in Botswana thanks to this vital conservation initiative and, if that is not a huge number, it does at least represent a beacon of hope for these persecuted creatures. I always urge everyone visiting Botswana to spend a couple of nights at Khama, not only to support this essential project and the continued existence of both black and white rhinoceros in the country, but also because a stay at the sanctuary represents their best opportunity of seeing these majestic animals in a land where they once roamed in large concentrations. No one should visit southern or East Africa without seeing rhino, they need to be part of the landscape in the same way that lions and elephants are and the more people that make a concerted effort to see them, the better their chances of long-term survival. Khama also works as an excellent introduction to the country, as it protects a large number of animals, many of which are relatively easy to see. The reserve is not large, although additional land has been purchased and it will shortly double in size, but the rhinos are living in totally wild conditions and during my two-night stay I encountered greater kudu, gemsbok, eland, hartebeest, wildebeest, springbok, impala, steenbok, giraffe, zebra, warthog and black-backed jackal. This was a highly encouraging start to the trip and of course I also saw a lot of rhinos, fourteen of the white variety, out of a population of about 30 and whilst I did not have time to take the game walk to look for black

rhino, I was fortunate enough to see one in thick vegetation towards the end of my final drive. A friend of mine has also seen a leopard here asleep by the side of the road and although I would have to wait until later in the trip for that particular highlight, for now I was just delighted to see several rhino calves trotting happily beside their watchful mothers. I moved on with a renewed sense of hope for these majestic animals and only time will tell if that optimism proves to be unfounded or not, as the rhino's plight remains critical and a great deal more effort needs to be made to ensure their survival, not only in Botswana, but across much of Africa. I had already spent the first couple of days with the guide that I was going to use for the majority of the tour and as we drove towards the Central Kalahari Reserve, we collected our cook and camp helper, as this was going to be safari style



camping, which is not really like camping at all and more resembles a mobile luxury lodge. The tents are large, the camp beds are raised and comfortable and every evening a delicious meal is served by the genius of a cook, who manages to prepare three appetising courses on two rings of a gas stove. Meals are served on a candlelit table under a temporary canopy and bowls of hot water are prepared for you to wash each morning. Bush showers are constructed whenever required, you have no idea how good a bucket with a tap on can make you feel in the middle of a hot Kalahari afternoon, and at night the cook will prepare breakfast and lunch in advance



to enable you to spend all of the following day in the field. This is not actually the way I prefer to camp, as I am happy with a bedroll in most warm climates and have always enjoyed falling asleep on the floor listening to the distinctive sounds of whichever environment I happen to be in. However, on this type of safari most of the additional assistance is essential, as we move from one area to another fairly regularly and the cook and camp helper are responsible for unpacking all of the equipment and setting up camp at each destination. Without them you would lose large sections of every day and even on the days when you break camp, you go out for an early morning drive and by the time that you return, everything is neatly packed away ready to move on to the next site, again saving several hours during one of the best game viewing times of the day. It can of course be a lot of fun to do this yourself, with two vehicles and all of the essential equipment, and I have done so on many occasions, but it is not practical either with guests or when researching an area for guests, as you spend much of your time on the chores around camp and reach only half of the areas you would otherwise. The Kalahari is simply too stimulating and too evocative a destination to have to worry about erecting a luxurious campsite and I personally like to begin exploring just before dawn and not to have to return until dusk. Although the Kalahari Basin is an immense semi-arid region which extends into five surrounding countries, and incidentally includes both the Okavango and Chobe, it is not a true desert and as such supports a diverse array of animals perfectly adapted to life in these harsh conditions. Different animals inhabit different areas according to the availability of water, and therefore prey in the case of predators, and in general a greater variety of species can be found further to the south west in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park, a less arid reserve shared between Botswana and South Africa. That park also attracts more visitors and the beauty of the Central Kalahari Reserve is the solitude with which you can still explore one of the last remaining great wildernesses. At one stage on this trip I went six full days without seeing another vehicle and the dramatic landscapes take on a far more haunting feel when you are constantly discovering them alone. Much the same can be said about the wildlife, as watching an elegant cheetah is always special, but watching one with another five vehicles and twenty people taking photographs is not quite as special as sitting on your own with one for three hours and knowing that there is probably not another human being within 100 kilometres. This section of the Kalahari is actually my favourite place to observe cheetahs, as there are less competing predators, lions are prevalent, but the reserve is so vast they do not come into contact as often, and they are generally far more relaxed. This was perfectly demonstrated one morning when we spotted a small animal in the distance, which at first we thought, based on size at least, might be an aardwolf. As we approached, we could see that it was a young cheetah and that it was doing its best to guard a dead springbok from several opportunist jackals. It was only when we got very close that we realised it was actually a cub and immediately began scanning the area looking for its mother. We found her viewing the scene with interest from a sand dune and knew that she had killed the springbok purely for her infant and was not going to



partake of this particular meal. The cub was obviously inexperienced and either did not appear to know exactly how to open up a carcass or was too preoccupied with the jackals to do so in their presence. It kept lying beside the unfortunate antelope, attempting to penetrate the soft underbelly, but every few seconds the jackals would approach and the cub would pluck up its undoubted courage



and run straight at them. As more and more jackals arrived, so the young cheetah became more cautious and eventually walked off and left the jackals with a bonanza they could hardly have expected when they began foraging that day. Although I was intrigued to see whether the feasting jackals would then attract further predators, I was particularly hoping to see a brown hyena, we decided to stay with the cheetah cub in order to get a better view of its mother. Unfortunately, after about fifteen minutes it turned away from the road and we lost sight of it, but all the time the mother had followed her young from a discreet distance at the top of the sand dune, without making any attempt to join it. It was a fascinating encounter and that is the type of rewarding experience the Kalahari can so often provide. There are certainly less animals, but when you do see them, you have the rare privilege of witnessing

instinctively natural behaviour, whether it is gemsbok kicking up a tuber for the moisture it provides or a honey badger digging up insects in a flurry of dust and sand. We were lucky with cheetah in general on this trip, as we traversed almost the entire reserve south to north over the best part of two weeks and saw eight in total, including one making an exploratory run at some springboks and

another that we spent most of an afternoon within a few metres of. Eight might not appear to be a great number for so long, but you are looking for the tiniest of needles in the largest of haystacks in this area and we would also take time to enjoy each individual sighting, as you can often stay with animals for prolonged periods in an environment where very little occurs quickly unless strictly necessary. Our mornings were particularly productive, as lions were always more active early in the day and on one memorable occasion we watched a pair of aardwolves mating in bright sunshine. This was one of the highlights of the entire trip for me, as I can count on one hand the number of times I have seen aardwolf during the day and to watch a pair mating out in the open was an extraordinary bonus. I was also slightly surprised by the honey badger activity, as I have observed them sporadically during the day in the Kalahari, but not in such numbers and not generally in the middle of the afternoon. We came across fourteen in all and at one stage were seeing them almost more regularly than ground squirrels. Bat-eared fox were just as common and other small carnivores included numerous black-backed jackals, yellow mongoose and eventually two meerkats, which I



was not certain we would encounter, as they are far more widespread in the Kgalagadi. I was equally uncertain about our chances of finding a brown hyena, which are also easier to see further south, but it was already turning into that sort of trip and although our one



glimpse of this mysterious and solitary animal was not a prolonged one, and we were not even that close, it was another highlight for me. In addition to the gemsbok and springbok, steenbok were observed fairly routinely and in one area with a dependable natural water source, there are a lot of artificial waterholes in the Kalahari, we also saw giraffe, hartebeest and greater kudu. As usually is the case in this reserve, lions were abundant and we had a nice surprise one morning when we left our tents and found their tracks going straight through camp within two metres of where we had been sleeping. My guide, who is one of the best I have known, checked the surroundings and said that he could distinguish seventeen different animals and we quickly jumped in the vehicle to see how far we could follow their prints. Fortunately they had stayed on the road for quite a distance and we found them within an hour, although my guide was disappointed that he was out by two and there were actually nineteen. The next couple of hours were spent

watching an entire pride interact, with some of the females sleeping on the backs with their legs in the air, while others slept more or less on top of each other in an attempt to shade under a tiny dead tree. There were no cubs, but there were a few energetic sub-adults

and eventually the massive male had all he could take of two irritating adolescents and moved off to rest on his own away from the pride. Lions were always more active in the morning, in these hot conditions they often barely stir during the day, and on another early drive we found two brothers approaching their prime, one of which had two porcupine quills imbedded in his face. In a land where huge herds are largely absent and absolutely nothing is easy to catch, porcupines can form a significant part of a lion's diet, although this particular boy may have to refine his approach somewhat. Fortuitously for me, and I would imagine for the animal itself, the resident lions had failed to eat at least one porcupine, which we found ambling along the road as we headed back to camp late one afternoon. As much as I love the Central Kalahari, I rarely feel bad about leaving, as my next stop is always the Okavango Delta and there is something very special about contemplating moving from the parched plains to the reinvigorating crystal clear waters of the Okavango. There is always a tremendous feeling of anticipation at this point, not only in terms of exploring a totally contrasting environment, but because you will also soon be searching for an entirely new set of rare and beautiful animals, including packs of wild dog, leopards and the southern lechwe, a stunning reddish antelope, which always looks amazing in the bright sunshine against the lush greens of the Okavango. The antelope species in general will increase dramatically and there will also be the first buffalo and elephants of the trip. As I was camping, I would be staying mainly in or around the Moremi Game Reserve for the majority of my visit, but before then my guide and assistants took a



very well deserved break and I flew further into the delta to try a lodge that I had not stayed at previously. The Cessna flight from Maun is a wonderful experience in itself, as the divergent blue arteries of the animal trails are revealed against the various hues of the green reeds and papyrus grass and as you fly low the first herds of animals come into sight. I have never suffered a bad or even indifferent stay in the Okavango and this visit was no exception, as I spent four delightful days in the presence of an impressive array of creatures, many of which were observed in large concentrations. It seemed incredible to be watching hippos and crocodiles after two weeks in the Kalahari and to see the birdlife change so dramatically from the raptors of the desert to a constant parade of wattled cranes, saddle-billed, marabou and yellow-billed storks, herons, egrets and ibises. It is genuinely hard to believe that the two areas can be within such close proximity and it is the remarkable contrasts between each, both in terms of landscapes and wildlife, that continually attract me to the region. I did not witness any one significant event during my stay at the lodge, but each new dawn produced a succession of glorious sightings, from vibrant lechwe, waterbuck, kudu, reedbuck and sable antelope to elephants frolicking in the water and lions sleeping in the long grass. Herds of zebra, tsessebe and wildebeest all mingled, as giraffes watched on



in the background and massive crocodiles basked on the banks of the shallow channels. Vervet monkeys foraged in the branches above rutting impala and warthogs and baboons wandered around the grounds of the lodge. Whilst I had hoped to find leopard and possibly wild dog here, there was so much to see each day that I was never conscious of their absence and enjoyed an idyllic few

days. This was further enhanced by the fact that the lodge was situated in a concession area of the reserve and I was able to spotlight each evening. I am always keen to get out at night whenever possible and my four nocturnal drives produced a number of new animals for the trip, including white-tailed mongoose, spotted hyena, side-striped jackal, which were also active during the day, and common genet, one of which sat in a tree beside the terrace restaurant at dinnertime hoping for a few titbits. Prowling lions were also regularly encountered at night, as well a second porcupine and my last significant sighting was a giant eagle-owl, which was notable both for



the beauty of the owl itself and the fact that when I went to move on, I discovered that my poor guide, they often work very long hours at lodges, had fallen fast asleep. He had been so friendly and enthusiastic during our time together, that I called it a night after the owl to let him get to bed and when I left the next morning, I was pleased to see that he had finally been given a day off. After a very relaxed break the pace picked up as soon as I departed, as I had decided to leave by speedboat for a different perspective of the delta and got one far sooner than expected. We had been cruising for about an hour with many stops to photograph the profuse water birds, hippos and crocodiles, and in one case several crocodiles eating a hippo, when we came across a larger boat, upside down in the delta with a rather neat puncture in its hull. I joked to the driver that a guide had obviously attempted to get his guests a little too close to an elephant, as the hole looked as if it could have been caused by a tusk, and when we got to the dock to meet the guys of my mobile safari, we were informed that is exactly what happened. The worst part, however, was that the boat was transferring six American tourists, who had never been in Africa before, to a lodge, so they had their luggage and camera equipment with them, all of which was now at the bottom of the Okavango Delta. They had lost everything within an hour of landing in the country, but of course the situation could have been much worse, as they were all fairly damp, after rather understandably jumping out of the boat as soon as the harassed elephant made its intentions clear, but were fortunately unharmed. My guide went on to explain that it was the first elephant they had ever seen and they were trying to get as close as possible when the elephant, probably irritated by the noise of the engine, decided enough was enough and flipped the boat as if it were made of paper, leaving the panicking tourists with no choice but to risk the crocodiles and swim to the opposite bank. Luckily the channel was not a wide one and they did not have far to swim, but it was not the best introduction to the continent and I had my own experience of a guide pushing an animal too far a few days later.



Meanwhile, I had the Moremi Game Reserve section of the Okavango to explore and a pack of wild dog to search for, as these heavily persecuted canids are one of my favourite animals and I have seen them at Moremi on a number of occasions. My initial prospects did not appear favourable when I asked my guide whether any had been seen in the area recently and was told that they had been denning, but apparently hyenas had found the den and killed a number of pups while the adults were absent. This was devastating news, not in terms of my success, but for the dogs themselves, which are endangered and struggle to survive across much of their vastly reduced range. As it was, the reality of the situation was far more encouraging and over the next few days I experienced a number of unforgettable encounters. The first occurred just after lunch on the same day as the boat transfer, when we spotted a group of about



twenty elephants approaching our tents. Most of the elephants wandered around the edge of the camp, but one female, with a couple of youngsters in tow, emerged from the trees in the middle of our campsite and it was immediately clear that she was not at all happy with our presence. As the cook and assistant made for the vehicle, my guide and I stood our ground, as we were much closer to the elephants and did not want to startle them with any sudden movements. As the lead elephant continued to display signs of agitation, foot stomping, billowing ears and raised trunk, I made the only decision I could and stopped taking pictures and sat down, attempting to lessen my presence and show the elephants that I was no threat, which of course I was not when you consider what one had done to a boat only that morning. Happily this worked, and as my guide took pictures perhaps twenty metres further back, he may have been a great guide, but he was not going to win any

bravery awards, the elephant calmed considerably and wandered past me with her young charges. It was a fairly emotionally charged moment as the elephants strolled by within three metres of my right shoulder, but the large female must have been satisfied that I was as puny as I appeared and continued on her way without giving me a second glance. As we discussed the event later that evening my cook berated me for not running to the vehicle, but I explained that I have seen several apparently indestructible safari vehicles completely trashed by elephants and that by running towards him I would have risked us all. Little did I know that as we laughed about the distance my guide had kept, I would experience three thrilling incidents on foot on consecutive days. I realised the next day was going to be special when the morning was spent watching a pride of 24 lions, including the most magnificent male in superb light, as well as the first leopard of the trip, which we stayed with for about half an hour as it peered out of the vegetation. After seeing the leopard, and knowing there were likely to be more at Chobe, my guide and I made the decision that we would now concentrate primarily on wild dog, which would involve trying all the best areas and covering as much ground as possible. It was a fairly loose

plan, as a travelling group of wild dog can cover huge distances in a single day, but we hoped that the previous reports had been wrong and that young pups would keep them in the vicinity. As it was, we drove straight into a pack of thirteen within less than an hour of our conversation. I was delighted to see that of the thirteen, four were pups and also that the pack was entirely calm and relaxed around us. Whether this was the same pack that the hyenas had apparently attacked we were unsure, but there was no indication that these were stressed animals and it is more likely that the hyenas simply disturbed the den and the wild dogs moved on. Whatever the case, the entire pack was supremely indifferent to our presence and I proceeded to spend three riveting hours watching these highly social creatures interact. The pups



were boisterous and played with each other and most of the adults until they got hungry and promptly fell asleep after a long feed. What was interesting, was the way that all of the pack members not only tolerated the pups youthful enthusiasm and advances, but reciprocated with a number of rolls, tumbles and harmless bites. This was a group of animals very much as one and the behaviour was so absorbing that I stopped taking photographs and began filming them instead. Eventually I did neither and just sat back and savoured the experience and my exceptional good fortune. What I thought was the end came quickly, as one animal darted to its feet alerted by something and within seconds the entire pack had disappeared into the bush. On the way back to camp we stopped to watch the sunset and decided to stretch our legs in an open area with good visibility in terms of predators, as the afternoon had been

intensely hot and we had sat reasonably still for a long period. As it was, the 250 or so metres that we strolled from our vehicle was probably a little too far, but it was lovely to walk after hours of confinement and we were just considering returning when a small group of impala sprinted out of the treeline and ran more or less directly towards us. We both instantly looked beyond them to see the inevitable pursuer and were greeted with the sight of our pack of wild dogs in full flight, running down the terrified antelope. There was nothing we could do at this stage, as it was impossible to make it back to our vehicle without influencing the situation in one way or another and we did not want to block the impala's escape route or hinder the chasing pack. We therefore both just sat down on a



nearby abandoned termite mound and watched the extraordinary event unfold before us. The impala were actually almost past us by the time that we took our positions and the wild dogs quickly followed, running to both the left and the right of us without breaking stride. The pups brought up the rear, but they were escorted by one adult, which kept at their pace and ensured they were not left behind. I could barely believe that I was witnessing the most efficient predators in Africa engaged in what they do best and to be caught in the middle of a full bloodied hunt is something that will stay with me forever. We had no way of knowing whether this particular pursuit was successful or not, as antelope are faster, but have less stamina and a chase of this kind can go on over several kilometres, with the dogs running at a steady pace and

gradually exhausting their prey. Our last view of them was running into the trees on the opposite side of the clearing, with that one adult still carefully protecting the pups. It was a truly exhilarating spectacle and my guide was as excited as I was, as he had been visiting an area known for wild dog sightings for fourteen years and had seen them kill a cornered animal, as I had in South Africa, but had never witnessed an actual hunt. Over dinner we were joking that we should end the trip now, as it would be impossible to improve on our unique encounter, when I mentioned that I would like to visit a nearby lodge that I had used previously, as they offered a good guided walk and that might be a nice option instead of simply trying to repeat such an incredible day. We dropped by the lodge during our morning game drive and I arranged to join a walk that afternoon with four Dutch girls. Although it was nice to get out of the vehicle for a few hours, the walk itself was fairly sedate and we did not see a great deal until the two guides that accompanied us took us to an area where a baby elephant had died. The carcass had not been eaten, which indicated that the poor elephant had died and not been killed, and was slowly liquidising with the assistance of several thousand maggots. The stench was as bad as anything I have ever known and was completely different to the smell of an animal that had been killed and partially eaten, which you get used to over time and even use to find predators. The guides mentioned that they had brought us here because an old male lion had been seen around the carcass and we would come back in another hour and check again. When we did, we had the

rather peculiar sight of a lion walking away with an elephant's leg hanging from its mouth and the guides decided that we would follow it for a while. It stopped to eat within a short distance and I could tell that it was an old lion and had almost certainly been chased out of its pride by a younger, stronger male. I knew that the lion must be desperate to eat putrid flesh that not even hyenas or jackals would touch and it was actually rather sad to watch a once magnificent beast reduced to scavenging in this way. At this point our guides asked if we wanted to get closer and I said that there was no point and that we should leave the animal to eat, as I have seen a lot of lions on foot and did not feel that it was appropriate to disturb one that was obviously struggling to survive. The girls, however wanted to and, as I had joined their walk, I agreed but told the

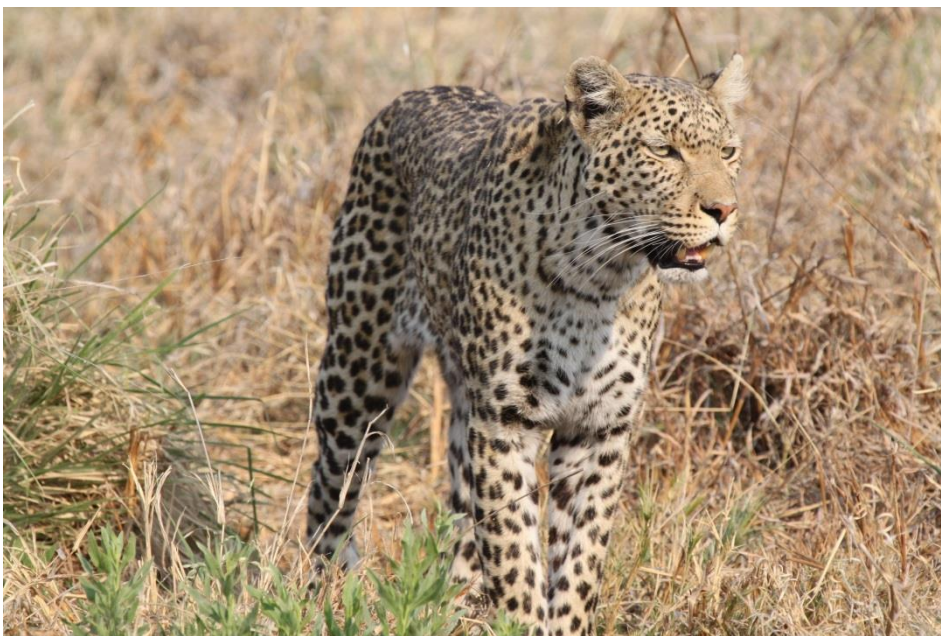


guides not to push the lion too far or to chase it away. No one likes to watch animals at close quarters on foot more than I do but I do not believe in being invasive and you have to be able to read a situation and to know whether your presence is likely to influence or disturb a creature's natural behaviour. Unless they are specifically stalking you to eat, which is very rare, animals will always give indications of their mood and will generally warn you if they are agitated by your presence. The two guides were very young and whether it was the bravado of youth or they were trying to impress the Dutch girls, they took us far too close to the lion, which was clearly annoyed and had climbed to its feet to face us head on. When it began growling I told the girls that it was about to charge, but that it would probably run to one side at the last moment and that under no circumstances were they to run. I pulled us all into a tight

group and at that moment the lion sprang forward and rushed straight at us. For a brief instant I had a vision of what this proud animal must have looked like in its prime, as it covered twenty metres in seconds and had less than that distance remaining until it was on us. I felt bodies tense around me and although I had been fairly confident that the lion would not actually attack, I must admit that there was a brief flicker of doubt in my mind, as this was an old, unpredictable animal and he was now within ten metres. I am not sure how close he ultimately got, but it was far too close for comfort and at the very last moment he veered off to my right and disappeared into the trees. Whilst the experience had certainly been exhilarating, I had never had a lion run at me before, it had not been a truly natural occurrence and when we returned to the lodge I explained what had happened to my own guide and asked him to talk to the other two, as the girls were still clearly very shaken and if the lodge guides continued to act in that manner, it would only be a question of time before they got someone killed. I did not talk to them myself because I thought that it would be better coming from another guide and I could tell on the walk back, which was completed in almost total silence, that they knew they had made an error of judgement and were probably worried about any possible consequences. Hopefully they learned from the incident, as I certainly did, and although my third up close and personal encounter within the same number of days had not been as natural as the previous two, it remains an experience that I will never forget. The event at least concluded happily, as we returned to the rapidly diminishing elephant in our game vehicle the next day and found the old lion wandering off with another leg. All too quickly my stay at Moremi was over and whilst those three major events had obviously dominated proceedings to some degree, my time in general at this outstanding wildlife haven had been as spectacular as ever. Things continued in much the same vein as I moved on to the Savute area within Chobe National Park, a destination famous for the large prides of lions that hunted isolated and disorientated elephants after they had made



the long, arduous trek through the desert in Namibia. I have seen lions run at elephants when they have been sharing a waterhole, but have never watched them actually attempt to bring one down and whilst it is meant to be a remarkable experience from a dispassionate perspective, having witnessed some particularly gruesome and protracted buffalo deaths, I am frankly glad that I have been spared the trauma. For the majority of visitors, Chobe National Park is the waterfront area in the northeast of the reserve, as most guests spend two or three days here after an Okavango safari and do not explore any further south. This is fine, as the section of the park overlooking the river has very high concentrations of animals and I always try to spend at least a couple of days there if possible. However, Chobe is actually huge and incorporates several superb wildlife areas, including two of my favourites, Savute and Linyanti. I would have visited Linyanti on this trip, but I did not have time for all three Chobe destinations and I had to visit the waterfront, as the only lodge within that section of the park is fairly expensive and I needed to research an alternative just beyond the reserve for future guests. It was therefore a straight choice between Savute or Linyanti and I was eventually pleased that I opted for the former, as



my great streak continued at Savute with several outstanding sightings, although this time they were all from within the vehicle. The first was a leopard stalking a steenbok in the midday sun, which went on for almost half an hour and culminated in the majestic cat running and leaping the entire width of the road. The tiny antelope appeared to be doomed as it lay resting in the shade on the opposite side of the narrow path, but the pouncing leopard had misjudged its jump by a matter of inches and landed just in front of the startled steenbok, which instantly disappeared before the leopard could react and give chase. Whereas the leopard had been crouching low in the grass for the majority of the hunt, it now made no effort to conceal itself and walked along the road beside our vehicle before crossing just ahead of us and vanishing into the bush.

After spending time with a large pride of extremely healthy lions and savouring the rather ludicrous sight of an elephant running at two secretary birds for attempting to share the same waterhole, another guide informed us that a pack of wild dogs had been seen at a nearby lodge earlier that day. We of course headed straight to the area only to discover that the dogs had settled for the afternoon within the extensive grounds of the lodge, which you could only access if you were actually staying there. I had done on two occasions previously, but this time I was camping and it would just be a case of driving in and taking a chance that I would see



someone I knew. Fortunately, the senior guide was not out in the field because of the wild dog presence and he recognised me and offered to take us both down to see them. There were eight in all, relaxing in open ground in front of a section of forest and taking shade at times beside a fallen tree. We only spent an hour with them, as the guide was doing us a favour and I did not want to abuse his hospitality, but it was a wonderful hour and afterwards I spent some time catching up on events with the lodge guide, who informed me that the big prides of elephant hunting lions had largely dispersed into smaller groups and that there had not been any attacks on elephants for some time, at least not in the areas that he visited. He did though mention a lioness that had been seen in the area near where we were camping, which was apparently not part of a pride, but had been making a name for herself in terms of her solitary hunting

skills. My own guide and I discussed the possibility of looking for her during dinner that evening, but we concluded that there was not much point searching one specific area for a lone lion when there were so many prides in the region and that we would just drive the next day and see what we came across. After such an eventful trip, I was not really looking for any specific animals now and was happy to enjoy the best views of whatever wildlife we encountered. That morning, for instance, was spent in the company of groups of entertaining dwarf and banded mongoose, as well as two of only three individual slender mongooses seen during the entire tour. In

addition to a lot of elephants and lions, we also spent time with a couple of spotted hyenas and a small herd of sable antelope, neither of which were seen often on the trip, surprisingly in the case of the hyenas at least. We were about to drive to a waterhole for lunch, when my guide spotted a family of warthogs on the left hand side of the road and slowed down. As we reached the family, which included a number of young, a lioness suddenly sprang from the long grass and ran at the warthogs, which instantly scattered. One of the babies actually ran straight under our vehicle and out the other side, but another was far less fortunate and, as the vehicle finally came to a complete stop, we watched the lioness walking away with one of the young kicking and squealing in her mouth. The pitiful cries did not last long, as the hungry cat sat down under a bush in the distance and quickly polished off what would have been no more than a snack for her. I was not entirely sure whether this was the solitary animal that the lodge guide had mentioned the previous day, but we were in the general area and it was unlikely, although certainly possible, that there were two lions hunting alone in one territory. What was more interesting was the attack itself, as it could have been a coincidence, but the lioness appeared to time her assault exactly as we reached the warthogs and partially blocked at least



one of their escape routes. I have often been in vehicles that lions have utilised as cover in an attempt to get close to prey and I have witnessed a leopard using a stationary jeep to try to block a dik-dik, but I have never encountered any animal intentionally timing an attack to coincide with a moving vehicle. It is possible that the lioness simply panicked in case we were about to scare away the meal that she might have stalked for a long time, but if she did not and the timing of her attack was deliberate, then this was new behaviour as far as I was concerned and this was one extremely intelligent and resourceful cat, which of course she was going to need to be without a pride to hunt with. That fascinating incident proved to be the last major highlight at Savute and the next morning we drove on to the waterfront area of Chobe. Although I was staying at a lodge just outside the park, I retained my guide and vehicle for the last few days, but





did say goodbye to my cook and camp assistant, who had transportation arranged to take them back to Maun. The plan for the final section of the tour was to split my game drives between my current guide and the guides at the lodge, in order to assess how they were in terms of future guests. Given the incredible encounters to date, I almost expected this section of Chobe to be slightly less remarkable, but the opposite was true and the tour ended with a series of superb sightings of a diverse collection of wildlife, including three antelope species, puku, roan and bushbuck, which were new for the trip. The Puku were largely viewed by boat on the Chobe River, which forms the border between Namibia and Botswana and is what this area of the reserve is famous for, as tourists have been visiting for decades just to take this breathtaking river safari. Although I prefer the isolation of other sections of the park, as this part of Chobe can get fairly busy, I always try to make time for at least one boat tour when I stay here, as the incomparable vision of dozens and sometimes hundreds of elephants drinking and swimming in the river is just too good to miss. This visit was no exception and my afternoon cruise, I always take the afternoon option to ensure that it is very hot, was enjoyed surrounded by several herds of deliriously happy elephants. There is nothing quite like watching elephants playing in water, as it brings out a sheer exuberant joy that is not always apparent when these massive creatures are having to find enough food to sustain themselves on land. Even the older

elephants join in and at one stage I sat watching over 80 elephants, in seven different groups, either swimming across the river or soaking in the shallows towards the banks. Hippos were even more prolific and we had some excellent views of them climbing onto the riverbank and relaxing in the sun. Crocodiles and monitor lizards were just as visible, and almost as numerous, and at one point a small herd of zebra decided to emigrate to Namibia, leaping spectacularly into the water and swimming one behind the other in more or less a straight line. Baboons and antelope would cautiously approach the water to drink, while pretty kingfishers dived into the river and, more often than not, emerged with fish. Colourful bee-eaters fluttered in and out of their nests on



the sandy banks and regal fish eagles sat perched high in almost every significant tree. Towards the end, I kept one eye on the heavens, as the sunsets over the river at Chobe are among the most evocative in Africa, particularly, as was the case on this occasion, if you happen to catch the final rays slipping away behind an elephant happily grazing on the riverbank. The encounters on land were just as rewarding and I could scarcely believe my good fortune when we drove across a pack of five wild dogs. Only once previously have I seen three different packs on a single trip, but never in three different areas and the view of these beautiful painted dogs running along the road and then up into the hills, was as thrilling as it was unexpected. That same morning we were treated to the hilarious sight of a young leopard attempting to ambush something from a ridiculously inappropriate tree, which was shorter than the passing giraffes and had almost no leaves. We spent quite a long time watching this inexperienced cat, but the problem was, for the leopard at least, that so did the rest of the passing animals, as the leopard was clearly visible and had to keep shifting position because

the flimsy branches could barely support its weight. Perhaps embarrassed by the laughter that emanated from each stationary vehicle, the endearing but fairly clueless cat eventually jumped down and walked off sheepishly into the bushes. A more serious encounter looked like it was going to develop between a herd of about 30 buffalo and three lionesses sleeping under some bushes, as these ancient foes were apparently unaware of each other's presence until the lead buffalo had almost stumbled upon the resting lions. The startled lions reacted first, with two of the three rushing at the equally shocked buffalo, which promptly turned and ran en masse, pursued by the two lions. The lions should probably have called it a day at this point, but they continued to chase the buffalo until they



reached the remainder of what was actually a much larger herd. There were probably over a hundred buffalo in all and the vast majority of these were not running, at least they were not running away, as they took one look at the two isolated and outgunned lions and took the collective decision to stampede towards them. I have very rarely seen buffalo take the initiative in this way until one of their own has already been either savaged or killed and the counterattack worked so effectively that it again makes you wonder why they generally react so late and with so little solidarity in these situations. One of the lions was actually extremely lucky to escape with her life, as she slipped attempting to turn quickly and just managed to regain her footing before being trampled. Eventually both lions fled to safety, but the buffalo were still spooked and continued to run for some distance, scattering

a number of innocent ungulates and finally disappearing in a cloud of dust. There were many other incidents during those final few days, including an immature fish eagle attempting to collect a stick that it could barely lift, a very fluffy African civet running across the road on an early morning drive and a hyena taking a nap in a storm drain before we had even reached the park one afternoon, but my trip was drawing to a close and all too soon we were making the short transfer to Livingstone in Zambia. I thanked my guide for his hard work over a final evening meal and as we laughed and considered each unique event, I could hardly believe that I had experienced so much or been so fortunate on one tour. After a stop to gaze at Victoria Falls, one of the iconic images of Africa, that I always make a point of visiting, I made the brief border crossing into Zimbabwe, as I had met a local operator during my trip in July and had arranged to spend a few hours discussing his tours. Following a productive meeting and a nice dinner, during which my new contact obviously picked up on my enthusiasm for animals, he took me to a nearby rubbish tip, which was apparently a good place to see genets and bushpigs. We found bushpigs easily enough and although there was no sign of any genets, I was delighted to spend several minutes with an elusive wild cat. It was a fitting if slightly surreal way to end what had been a spectacular tour, as it was the first small cat of the entire trip and an animal I had been hoping to see since I entered the Kalahari.





Please note that for the purposes of this list, Chobe refers to the waterfront area within the national park.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	Large numbers at every major reserve.
2	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	One at Moremi, one at Savute and one at Chobe.
3	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>	Eight in the Central Kalahari.
4	Wild Cat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>	Lone individual at a rubbish tip in Zimbabwe.
5	African Wild Dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>	Packs at Moremi, Savute and Chobe.
6	Black-backed Jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>	Seen in every reserve.
7	Side-striped Jackal	<i>Canis adustus</i>	Seen by day and night at the Okavango Lodge.
8	Bat-eared Fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>	Several groups in the Kalahari, Okavango and Savute.
9	Aardwolf	<i>Proteles cristata</i>	Mating pair in the Central Kalahari.
10	Spotted Hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>	Low numbers in the Okavango and at Savute and Chobe.
11	Brown Hyena	<i>Hyaena brunnea</i>	Distant individual in the early morning in the Central Kalahari.
12	Honey Badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>	Fourteen individuals in daylight in the Central Kalahari.
13	African Civet	<i>Civettictis civetta</i>	Lone individual at Chobe in the early morning.
14	Meerkat	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>	Pair running in the Central Kalahari.
15	Yellow Mongoose	<i>Cynictis penicillata</i>	Three or four in the Central Kalahari.
16	Banded Mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>	Several groups at Moremi, Savute and Chobe.
17	Common Dwarf Mongoose	<i>Helogale parvula</i>	Common at Savute and Chobe.
18	White-tailed Mongoose	<i>Ichneumia albicauda</i>	Two at the lodge in the Okavango Delta.
19	Slender Mongoose	<i>Herpestes sanguineus</i>	Two at Savute and one at Chobe.
20	Common Genet	<i>Genetta genetta</i>	Several in the Okavango, including one around the lodge.
21	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	Large herds in the Central Kalahari and smaller herds at Khama.
22	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	Widespread except in the Central Kalahari.
23	Sable Antelope	<i>Hippotragus niger</i>	Small numbers in the Okavango and at Savute and Chobe.

24	Roan Antelope	Hippotragus equinus	Small herd at Chobe.
25	Southern Lechwe	Kobus leche	Relatively high numbers in the Okavango.
26	Puku	Kobus vardonii	Between 20 and 30 at Chobe.
27	Common Waterbuck	Kobus ellipsiprymnus	Large numbers in the Okavango and at Chobe.
28	Common Wildebeest	Connochaetes taurinus	Common at every reserve.
29	Tsessebe	Damaliscus lunatus lunatus ssp	Common in the lodge in the Okavango.
30	Common Duiker	Sylvicapra grimmia	One in the Okavango and two or three at Chobe.
31	Greater Kudu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros	Seen at every reserve.
32	Gemsbok	Oryx gazella	Abundant in the Kalahari and a few at Chobe.
33	Southern Reedbuck	Redunca arundinum	Common in the lodge in the Okavango.
34	Hartebeest	Alcelaphus buselaphus	Small numbers at the Khama Rhino Sanctuary.
35	Common Eland	Tragelaphus oryx	Small herd at the Khama Rhino Sanctuary.
36	Steenbok	Raphicerus campestris	Common at every major reserve.
37	Bushbuck	Tragelaphus scriptus	A few individual sightings at Chobe.
38	African Buffalo	Syncerus caffer	Widespread from the Okavango to Chobe.
39	Plains Zebra	Equus quagga	Seen in large numbers everywhere except the Kalahari.
40	Giraffe	Giraffa camelopardalis	Observed at every reserve.
41	African Elephant	Loxodonta africana	Abundant from the Okavango to Chobe.
42	Hippopotamus	Hippopotamus amphibius	Observed in large numbers in the Okavango and at Chobe.
43	White Rhinoceros	Ceratotherium simum	Fourteen at the Khama Rhino Sanctuary.
44	Black Rhinoceros	Diceros bicornis	One at the Khama Rhino Sanctuary.
45	Chacma Baboon	Papio ursinus	Common except in the Kalahari.
46	Vervet Monkey	Chlorocebus pygerythrus	Common except in the Kalahari.
47	Common Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus	Common everywhere except the Central Kalahari.
48	Bushpig	Potamochoerus larvatus	Several at a rubbish tip in Zimbabwe.
49	African Savanna Hare	Lepus microtis	Small number at Savute.
50	Cape Hare	Lepus capensis	Two early morning in the Central Kalahari.
51	Cape Porcupine	Hystrix africaeaustralis	One each in the Central Kalahari and Okavango.
52	Smith's Bush Squirrel	Paraxerus cepapi	Several seen in the Okavango.
53	South African Ground Squirrel	Xerus inauris	Abundant in the Central Kalahari.
54	Springhare	Pedetes capensis	Three in the Central Kalahari.







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