

Sharing the savannah

Tented camp in Botswana offers visitors the chance to observe wildlife up close



Tuskers Bush Camp in Botswana – between the Nxai Pan National Park in the east and Moremi Game Reserve in the west – is a classic tented safari camp, deep in acacia scrub and mopane woodland, where elephants roam freely.

For more details or to book a stay, go to sundestinations.co.za.

In front of the main dining tent, boma and bar is a waterhole, where breeding herds of elephants come and go throughout the day and night. The pachyderms linger to greet one another, to swim and play, or move in to simply slake their thirst. I am riveted to the scene, as it is a privilege to witness such behaviour and interaction – not to simply spot this popular member of the famed Big Five.

Tiny elephants are particularly cute to watch, as they have no control over their trunks and have to develop that skill. Mothers and aunties are most solicitous of these infants, watching them and guiding them with their skilled trunks, taking care to shield the babies from other animals that visit the waterhole. A mother – the apparent matriarch of the group – trumpets loudly when she considers the youngsters to be in any kind of danger.

Lingering as near to the breeding herds as they are allowed are elephant bulls, trying to ease closer to the females. Some have impressive tusks. One is clearly in musth, as he is irritable and aggressive, driven by testosterone up to six times the normal levels. His



temporal glands secrete a sticky fluid, which he rubs with his trunk against a tree. His scent is attractive to receptive females. These cows emit loud, subsonic calls to attract the desirable musth bulls, who are in peak condition to sire their offspring.

As this Kwatale Conservancy, a private concession area of 365,000ha, is open to unfenced Moremi, animals have freedom of movement. It is possible to see lion, cheetah, leopard and wild dogs on the game drives or even at the Tuskers Bush Camp waterhole. Around the camp precincts, the purple-pod terminalia trees are laden with their cabernet sauvignon-coloured pods. In a young camelthorn tree, a blue waxbill has constructed a nest with bits of grass.



Destination Maun

- **Tuskers Bush Camp:** Two- to two-and-a-half hours' drive from Maun, and reached via a lodge transfer or a 4x4 drive in your own vehicle.
- **Helicopter tours:** See part of the Okavango Delta from the air. Numerous operators available at Maun International Airport.

- **Sundowners:** Old Bridge Backpackers, 10km out of town, has a bar with a gorgeous view over a pool populated by hippos.
- **Horsing:** Held this year on 20 April at the Shashe Horse Race Grounds, the Mascom Derby is the biggest sports event in Botswana over the Easter holiday period.



Tuskers Bush Camp places its guests in the middle of the wilderness.

Lessons in the landscape

Tearing myself and my camera away from the engrossing scenes in the camp is not easy, but our guide promises the likelihood of more fabulous sightings on the route he has in mind. Firstly, we visit what has been dubbed 'The Elephant Graveyard', which is in fact the site where hunters of the past used to butcher the elephants they had culled for trophies and for meat for the local people. Hundreds of bleached bones lie scattered on the savannah.

I feel tender and respectful towards those elephants. As a biologist, I am fascinated to see the details of the huge bones. Thankfully, hunting is forbidden in this area and the elephant population is healthy and growing.

From the open game vehicle, it is fascinating to watch details of an elephant feeding, as it deftly curls its trunk around tufts of grass and bangs the grass on the ground to rid it of soil before placing the food delicately into its mouth. When we stop near a waterhole to alight for a stretch, we watch as a band of bachelor elephants move almost totally silently to drink across from us.

We observe a variety of game, including dwarf mongoose, stately giraffe, elegant kudu and great

numbers of birds – like purple rollers, double-banded sandgrouse and the glorious crimson-breasted shrike – before we stop for our sunset drinks on a salt pan. This is remote Botswana, and we meet no other vehicles in the Conservancy. Why does a chilled glass of wine taste so good in the bush?

Creatures and community

Back in camp I return to my twin-bedded Meru-style tent, the last in a row of six, under evergreen mopane trees. Secluded, private and facing the veld, I particularly enjoy my veranda under canvas, where I see, or sometimes just hear, game moving past me. Swallow-tailed bee-eaters flit from their perch down to the ground, catching insects. A hot bucket shower awaits me in my enclosed en-suite bathroom. Constructed using sound eco-friendly principles, the bathrooms have flush eco bush toilets and solar heating. The unfenced camp keeps encroachment on the vegetation to a minimum.

Our evening meal is festive. We sit together at a wooden table in the dining tent with the camp manager and our learned game guide, to share delectable food, pleasing wine and tales of the bush. A raconteur of note, our guide tells of narrow escapes from lions while walking in the bush. Escorted by a guard, I return to my tent, then stand in silence under a bridal arch of stars forming the opaque Milky Way. I cuddle up to the hot water bottle I gleefully discover in my bed, as I listen to the howling of a jackal. I sleep with my tent flaps open, so wake to a melted vermilion sunrise, as an elephant moves phantom-like past my window.

How to get there



Airlink connects Johannesburg and Cape Town with Maun. Go to page 91 for further details. www.flyairlink.com

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