# Wildlife Safari in Botswana

**February 21 – March 3, 2015**

**Captain's Log**

By now, we had become an extended family. For eight marvelous days, we had traveled in close quarters, taking all of our meals together and sharing the adventure of game drives with each other twice each day. Now, at the end of our final full day in Botswana, the last ray of sunset extinguished over the Zibadianja Lagoon, we began to make our way carefully in the dark toward Duma Tau Camp. Suddenly, on the other side of a low rise, we saw an array of orange lanterns and a central campfire illuminating an area of tables set with white tablecloths. Behind the tables, kitchen staff with white aprons stood awaiting their guests. Our first thought was that the occasion was a wedding party. But Graham revealed that this splendid array was actually for us, a bush dinner to celebrate the conclusion of our safari in Botswana. After climbing down from our vehicles, we were once again warmly greeted by our hosts and led to the bar area for a refreshment and then to our long table beyond the fire. The dinner buffet that followed was extraordinary, as every dinner at Duma Tau had been. But this was special—to enjoy a meal on primordial ground, as it were, the air cool at this hour, the moon and the stars now luminous overhead. We could put aside thoughts of packing for a few hours, settling into the moment and lingering into the night. After dinner, Graham directed our attention to constellations with his green laser pointer, Orion overhead, Centaurus, Canis Major, and then to the south the Southern Cross. The year was 2015. Each of us had come from a separate point of origin to a place we would have otherwise scarcely known. We had grown comfortable with the wilderness, with a pattern of life less complicated yet vastly larger than our own. And now, we were spilling into the stars.

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**Saturday and Sunday, February 21 and 22**

The thought that I might begin my 70s with a safari in Botswana had lifted my spirits for several months, pushing the darker thoughts of this ominous threshold year from my consciousness. But on the day of departure the trip suddenly looked doubtful, for snow had begun to come down hard and heavy in Lexington early this morning. By the time Helen and I arrived at the Roanoke airport, all flights had been canceled. We considered the length and time available for a drive to Atlanta, our bridge point to South Africa. Fortunately, we were able to re-book another flight departing at 4:30 PM from Greensboro, which lay just below the storm line on the weather radar. We kept our rental car and pushed on at 40 mph through the driving snow. About 10 miles south of Roanoke we came upon stalled traffic caused by a tractor-trailer truck jackknifed across both lanes of highway 220. After a nearly unendurable 90-minute delay we were on our way again along gradually clearing roads. As it turned out, we had plenty of time before our flight to Atlanta in a nearly deserted Greensboro airport. On the wall of the waiting area hung a photo of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. I've walked across that crowded bridge many times. Now on my 70th, I would await another, longer crossing, 16 hours from Atlanta to Johannesburg. The key then as always would be to keep moving forward.

The subsequent flight to Atlanta was cheering, for it was now clear to us that we had finally escaped the grip of winter and would be able to catch our flight to summer in South Africa. The long, dark confinement aboard Delta #200 on a crowded Boeing 777 began at 8:30 PM. After a night of fitful drowsing, we were finally able to lift the window shade onto the grand African sky west of Johannesburg at 5:30 PM the next day. Graham Johansson, a veteran South African guide who had served several of our safaris in this region, met us at the far side of customs. We were soon packed off to the rather imposing D'Oreale Grande hotel complex, where we were welcomed by Mac and Chippy Holladay, Dave and Gigi Redmond, and Eileen Glenn, all of whom had arrived early. After checking into our commodious room, we enjoyed a welcome drink with the group, birthday balloons galore, then stumbled along, legs stiff from lack of exercise, to a festive dinner at a nearby casino complex. The Dulles flight carrying Bob and Sara Armstrong, the one remaining couple, had been delayed for four hours by the snowstorm in Virginia. On returning to the hotel, we were relieved to learn that

they had arrived and were settled into the hotel. The velvet dark of our first night in Africa beckoned us. As we gave in finally to exhaustion, we took comfort in knowing that we were well enough begun.

**Monday, February 23**

We awoke at 4:00 AM with conversation in the dark until it was finally time for a restorative breakfast at 6:30 in the hotel's bountiful breakfast room. Smartly outfitted in safari clothes, our group of ten departed for Johannesburg's Tambo International airport at 8:00 for our 11:15 flight to Maun, Botswana. The two-hour flight on a twin-prop Air Botswana plane served to remind us that we were gradually moving off the grid of high technology. The long, slow-moving line at customs informed us of the abundance of time available to the front line of Botswana's bureaucracy. Once in the hands of the young Wilderness Safaris personnel, things moved rather more swiftly.

At 3:00 we met the boyish pilot (a young Denys Finch Hatton), who rode the minibus with us over to the 15-seat, single engine Caravan that would carry us across the Delta to our first camp, Banoka, on the northeastern fringe. The 30-minute flight passed quickly. The occasional lift and fall of winds confirmed the necessity of double seat belts. It was lovely to fly at 10,000 feet over the pooled and ribboned green of the Okavango Delta and then, at last with the thump of tires on the landing strip, to settle into it. Our two drivers, Wise and Kabo, were waiting for us with twin Land Rovers at the end of the strip. On the way to the camp, we encountered our first wildlife, a small group of kudu and a breeding herd of elephants near a waterhole.

As we approached Banoka Camp, the staff swayed and sang a greeting song in Swana, matching our own joy of having arrived at last. We were welcomed with cool, fragrant face cloths and warm introductory handshakes. Check-in went quickly after a few points of hospitality. Each of us was assigned a well-furnished house tent and advised not to make the journey to and from the main lodge in the dark without an escort. Shortly thereafter, we went on our first game drive, bouncing along the rutted roads of the camp's vast concession in search of observable wildlife. The breeze blowing across our faces was a tonic on the hot afternoon. We found small herds of impala and a great variety of birds, most notably an Eagle Owl, the size of a three-year old child, an eerily human face in

feathers, its eyebrowed eyes dark and watchful. Equally remarkable was our guide Kabo's ability to spot the owl high in the shadows of a tree some 100 yards away. He would amaze us with his keen eyes several times that first afternoon.

We returned to camp after "sundowners," the happy custom of evening libations out in the field, then took dinner in a boma, a walled enclosure lit by a central fire and open to the sky. A short entertainment of songs by the staff followed the buffet supper. We were duly exhausted by the long day but managed some polite enthusiasm over songs sweetly intended for us but, in the native tongue of Swana, impossible to understand. We then dragged ourselves to bed behind our escorts. When the lights were out at last, the heavens rolled out a luminous canopy of stars.

**Tuesday, February 24**

Several of the group reported waking well before the 5:00 AM wake-up call this morning. Even at night, the bush seemed densely alive—for the predators, even more so. When we ventured beyond the bed-warm interior of our tents we could feel the cool of the night. Soon after our escorted walk to breakfast, the horizon grew pink. In time, the soft, refracted glow of twilight brought our neighborhood gradually back to green, and the sky soon crystallized into a cloudless blue. After a pancake and cereal breakfast at the lodge, we found our game drive initially somewhat bracing in its chill but soon pleasantly balmy. Part of the initial chill was the discovery of a hooded cobra dead on the road just outside camp. Graham manfully retrieved it for us, holding it aloft at arm's length, explaining with noticeable pity the virtues of snakes and the local value of a healthy snake population. No one took him up on his offer to hold the limp serpent, so Graham placed the cobra back on the shoulder of the road, its pale underside up so that the dead snake would be more visible to vultures. He then "washed" his hands in the Kalahari sand.

We saw many birds on the drive—Fish Eagles, Ground Hornbills, Saddlebill Storks, Waddled Cranes, White-headed Vultures, a variety of egrets, rollers and kingfish among many others. The landscape was dotted with small and shrinking waterholes, this being a dryer wet season than usual. Near these we saw several elephants, antelope (including impala, tsessebe), and red lechwe), Burchell's zebra, warthogs, vervet monkeys, a hippo lurking in one of the ponds, and the giraffe

unique to Southern Africa and the Kalahari. The myriad roads were often deeply rutted with a morass of Kalahari Desert sand. Our Land Rovers fishtailed and heaved through these patches, roaring along in low gear. Somehow our drivers managed to avoid getting stuck even while pointing out birds and animals along the way. Halfway through the morning, we paused for tea and a comfort stop behind a convenient bush—sheer terror is a marvelous diuretic. The drive lasted well past the 11:00 AM scheduled return. Once you get into the rhythm and serendipity of a game drive, it's hard to break off.

After a fine brunch back at camp, most folks caught up on sleep in the day's increasing heat. Banoka is well suited to a leisurely afternoon, as the layout of each tent is mainly about the king-sized bed in the center facing out to the bush beyond a small deck. At 3:30, Graham offered a helpful introduction to the geography and economy of Botswana. That diamonds were its principal industry surprised many. Tourism and cattle are well behind as the other major sources of revenue. At 4:00, we climbed aboard our Land Rovers again for a short drive to a nearby river marsh, the Khwai Channel, part of the final fan of the Okavango Delta. Here we enjoyed a ride on a mokoro, or dugout canoe, gliding among the thick vegetation of the marsh in search of hippos. Each mokoro was piloted—or poled—by a cheerful young member of the local tribe. They delighted in finding for us the minute, nearly invisible frogs clutching the tall reeds at water's edge. The hippos were soon spotted in a wide pool of the channel. We approached them to within 50 yards or so and poled against the bank to watch them watch us, their little ears flicking with attention. But, despite their occasional warning yawn, hippos are especially phlegmatic creatures, especially in water, where most of their massive bulk is invisible. So in five minutes we reversed direction to explore whatever else we could find in the channel. We discovered a small crocodile nudged up motionless against the bank, its snout and leaden eye just above the surface. After an hour we were ready for the float to end—sitting on the floor of a narrow dug-out, legs extended, was hard on aging backs. On shore, Wise and Kabo had prepared our sundowners, which we enjoyed on the nearby pier, reveling in the declining light and each other's easy company.

On our return to camp, the Banoka maidens were waiting for us, as always, handing out moist and fragrant cloths for our faces and hands. Dinner afterward was welcome, as was the ensuing sleep in the familiar, chattering dark.

**Wednesday, February 25**

Wise and Kabo devoted this morning's game drive to a search for the elusive lions of the Khwai's immense concession. By now we had become well acquainted with the abundant wildlife of the region. Indeed, during the night at least one hippo and an elephant had strolled through our camp intent on the waterhole 100 yards behind our tents. But the lions had been visible only in footprints out along the roadways. The morning was again quite cool as we set off. But soon the sun rose through the distant trees, sending shafts of raking light across our path. In the open areas of the mopane woodland, the tall grasses glistened with light as they waved in the breeze. As we headed east under cloudless blue, the birds settling on branches ahead of us seemed possessed of transparent wings, sunlight streaming through their feathers.

Shortly into the drive, Kabo and Graham lifted their hands for silence. They had heard a lion's low contact call. Kabo turned off his engine. Another call, and then another. Two calls, one there, Kabo pointed, and one there. We began to track off road to the northwest, winding around the trunks of fallen trees, crunching over young mopane and Kalahari appleleaf trees, Kabo and Graham keeping a sharp eye over the side of our vehicle for fresh footprints. The search for the lions went on a good three hours, punctuated by the occasional sighting of a fresh print. "Two males, but there are also cubs and a female. They are all over this area, but it's hard to tell which way they are going now." Halfway into the lurching, bouncing hunt we happened upon another Wilderness Land Rover, this one with a guide trainer and five guides. In the affable conversation that followed, the guides volunteered to help us and headed off in another direction. Intermittent radio calls kept us apprised of their progress—another set of prints, and then during our tea break news of the discovery of a fresh kill, a sable antelope. The lions had already fed on the kill and were probably resting nearby. Further search followed until a radio call informed Kabo that the lions had been located, well away—or so it seemed—from our present location. When we arrived at yet another waterhole we spotted the trainer's vehicle and then, in the dappled shade of two cathedral mopanes, the noble figures of two male lions.

The lions were at rest, their bellies distended from the recent engorgement, their jaws drooping as they panted in the midday heat. We studied them at close range for a good long while. The pair seemed to take little notice of us, even as we

drew closer. The older master of the two passed very close to our vehicle on his way back to the waterhole for a refreshing mouthful of muddy water. "The water is full of salt and other essential minerals," explained Graham. After his drink, the older lion went over to his companion and nuzzled a greeting, then lay down beside him for further bellows-like panting. We took hundreds of photos and gazed at length at the magnificent pair. Then, our thirst for lions slaked like the elder lion's own immersion in the pond, we began the long track to the camp. "We'll look for the pride this evening," said Kabo, "now is time for brunch."

We were indeed well satisfied. On the dodging and weaving off-road drive to a road that led to the camp, Graham sensed our satisfaction and remarked on his further pleasure in the toasty fragrance of tall grass in the midday sun. Twenty minutes later, we arrived at the camp to the cool towels distributed by our smiling hostesses. At lunch, we all expressed our amazement at the tracking adventure. We had found our quarry in a veritable labyrinth of trees.

The day grew beastly hot, so everyone lay low until our 4:00 teatime at the lodge. Here we met our guest lecturer John "Tico" McNutt, a specialist in wild dog conservation and the management of large carnivore populations. Tico had flown up from Maun to give us a talk on his subjects and join us for a couple of game drives. The evening game drive was another off road pursuit, this time of the females and their cubs. This proved unsuccessful, though it was good to feel an occasional breeze on our faces and enjoy the serendipity of the drive. Eventually, we made our way back to the waterhole where we had found the two males earlier that day. They had moved down from the shade to rest beside the water. We watched them pant and drink for several minutes before pushing on again, eventually to our final sundowner beside a waterhole near the camp. Mama Bee had set up a table with a white cloth and various neatly arrayed nibbles along with a "Banoka Special" cocktail. The declining light of day was especially lovely.

Thereafter, we gathered again at the lodge for Tico McNutt's talk, "The Challenges of Wildlife Conservation in Botswana." Among the challenges cited was the recent construction of barrier fences, the hard boundaries that had carved up migration routes. These, he said were largely a result of the huge regional increase in cattle farming. A further challenge was the general assumption among the citizens of Botswana that wildlife is infinite, and therefore conservation was unnecessary. Tico also listed the problem of illegal hunting for bushmeat, which had begun to reduce certain species to dangerous levels. Tico concluded his talk

with a discussion of his wild dog research, which has engaged him since 1989. Wild dogs, he explained, are the most threatened large carnivore population. Many questions followed before we finally repaired to dinner under the stars and then, blessedly, to bed.

**Thursday, February 26**

Our final game drive at Banoka Bush Camp began at a leisurely 6:15 after a light breakfast. Mama Bee once again waved us away. The sun broke through the trees shortly thereafter, softening the chill. We had heard lions in the night, this time from the west, so the plan for the shorter drive this morning was to head in that direction to see if we could locate them. The drive was heavenly as we wound through several open areas, or "flats," and under stands of taller trees—mopane, fever berry, giant acacias and leadwood trees. The air was sweet, so fresh and mild, it was good to take in great lungfuls. Along the way, we came upon several breeding herds of elephants, who eyed us nervously as we approached, then bleated a warning, like the blast of an air horn, and flare of their ears. When Kabo shut off the engine, they promptly returned to grazing, their 18-hour preoccupation each day. It was sweet to observe them, noting their family dynamics, their care of the little ones, and the friskiness of the adolescents.

After spotting in the distance a male ostrich with four scampering chicks in tow, we entered upon a broad flat featuring a large waterhole. Kabo had received a radio message from Wise that the lions had been seen in the vicinity, so he steered the Land Rover toward the gassy margins of the flat, advancing slowly towards the edge of a grove of trees. Suddenly we saw them, lounging in the tall grass, a russet and tawny blur nestled in green at first but then as they raised their massive heads we could see our friends from yesterday, leaner now from the long walk here at the western reaches of the concession. We watched them for a while, shooting several more photos. We then drove over to the waterhole, seeing evidence in the sand of where the lions had spent the night. Had presumed ownership of the pond inspired them to roar away visitors during the night? We watched three kudus—two adolescents and an adult—stroll cautiously from the waterhole toward the area where the lions lay, their eyes and great sound-gathering ears forward, their noses up and twitching. Later we heard the signature bark that a kudu makes when he sees a lion. The alarm inevitably leads to flight. The area was empty when we passed through soon after.

The drive ended shortly after 9:00, allowing us ample time to pack before brunch and luggage out at 10:00. At 11:00 we bade farewell to the staff and headed out with Tico for the landing strip. Tico had his own little Cessna plane. Mac, a former Navy pilot, checked out his aircraft while Tico fussed with preliminaries. Then, apparently with Mac's approval, he taxied off, waving to us from an open window, a guy at home in his adopted country, doing what he thought needed to be done. Kabo and Wise waved us away as our own plane arrived. We were aloft and bound for Xigera Camp before noon, Mac ensconced at the front as volunteer co-pilot.

The 20-minute flight to Xigera gave us a grand aerial perspective on the Delta's varied topography. From an altitude of 7,000 feet we could study the Delta's watery wilderness, its myriad channels through marshlands, and the winding rivers and blue-green ponds that make up this portion of Botswana. In a month or so, the region would be transformed by the flood season into larger lakes and swollen floodplains. Xigera Camp is located on a small island in the middle of one of the Delta's fingers. One of Wilderness's older establishments, the camp is quite appealing in its design, from its open air lounge with dining area and elevated wooden walkways coursing through a small woodland, where kudus bed down at night, to handsomely appointed house tents. At the landing strip, our two new driver-guides, Dips and Rueben, retrieved our luggage and slowly pushed on to the camp, inching across the lodge pole bridge that connects the island to the road in. The staff greeted us with song upon our arrival, a Wilderness tradition, then treated us to a full lunch—three meals in five hours were generous hospitality indeed, though a bit over the top. We then were given three hours to rest before tea and our 4:30 game drive. Had we not been so weary from the thickness of our days in Botswana, we might have just stood about in wonder.

The drive this afternoon began quietly enough with observations that ranged from the supremely beautiful—a solitary Lilac-breasted Roller bobbing against the breeze on a low branch—to the homeliest of Africa's creatures, the warthog. We caught the latter on a family outing of dashing about and then falling to their knees for a nibble of the short grasses. When they run, their tales stand bolt upright like radio antennae, and when they graze their snouts scour the ground like vacuums. Their comical appearance can be applied as evidence for two hypotheses, depending on one's beliefs: that evolution can run out of ideas and that God has a sense of humor.

Rueben received a radio call that the leopard seen yesterday some distance from the camp might still be visible. We made our way several miles to the south, heading toward a distant horizon blurred by the smoke from a line of fires we had spotted from the air. All around us was evidence of the fires that had swept through this area several months earlier. A leadwood tree stump still smoldered, white ash seeming to bleed from a stump as the fire ate away at the aptly named dense wood. After a bumping transit of an hour, we finally reached the area where the leopard had been spotted yesterday. Suddenly, we saw her head bob up from the tall grass near her tree cover. When we approached, we could see that she was busy with the remnants of a recent kill. Reuben drew within thirty feet of her backside and turned off the engine. For the next hour and a half we just watched her, admiring her exquisitely beautiful coat and listening to her powerful jaws crunching bones of a bushbuck. Dips and the rest of our party soon joined us. Occasionally, the leopard would lift her head to take note of something on the wind, though she seemed to pay little or no mind to either of our vehicles. Graham mentioned that she might have a cub in the area, adding that soon after weaning leopard cubs became self-sufficient hunters. Not long after, a yearling cub stealthily approached her mother, who rose to snarl her away. The cub repaired to the tree cover to watch and wait. Meanwhile, the grand African sky began to darken and flash with lightning. Thunder ripped and rolled across the plain. The leopard paid no mind to the approaching thunderstorm as she methodically crunched and devoured the bushbuck's head. To the west we could see it coming, like the charge of a spirit cavalry, the rain advancing towards us, veiling the distances in a silvery sheen. It was soon upon us, thumping the canopy of the Land Rover with heavy drops and filling the air with the welcome fragrance of a summer rain. Reuben and Dips distributed rain ponchos. As the rain grew heavier, the leopard seemed to tire of her meal and rose to clean herself elsewhere. The cub was immediately upon the meager remnants of the bushbuck, keeping a wary eye on us as it ripped at the hide and tore at the sinews of the remaining bones. Cameras clicked away for several more minutes.

The hour had grown late, so as the thundershower haled off to the northeast we followed, gazing back occasionally at a gorgeous sunset. The pink and golden light was brilliant on the trailing clouds of the storm. Framing the far cauldron of the setting sun were lofty fan palms, now silhouetted against the spectacular tableau. The scene was transformed into such an apocalyptic spectacle that one could barely speak. As we crept along the path back in the rapidly falling

darkness, Reuben turned on his headlights until we came upon a herd of bushbuck stampeding across the road. In the sudden dark they seemed like ghosts as they dashed swiftly and silently across our path. And yet they had survived another day.

Back at Xigera Camp, everyone seemed merry. To have so closely observed a pair of leopards was a real achievement for a safari. Conversation over drinks and the delicious dinner that followed was intense.

**Friday, February 27**

Graham had announced last night that he would postpone the wake-up call until 6:00 so that we could enjoy the sunrise from our beds. The staff would bring hot water for tea to our tents. While some lingering clouds interfered with sunrise, a solitary elephant strolling across the flat before our tents put our minds on the day ahead. Also focusing our minds was a bit of commotion between a pair of rival male baboons tearing along the walkway. After a nicely presented light breakfast, bits of which were occasionally purloined by astonishingly quick vervet monkeys, we set out for the boat station for another ride on the mokoro dug-outs. Reuben paused to allow us to observe a small family of kudus when suddenly he received a call from Dips that a wild dog had been spotted just up ahead. "Hold on," he exclaimed. As we bounced back onto the road a moment later, the dog appeared immediately before us. He paused for a moment, seemingly confused, then trotted around us apparently intent on a quarry. We reversed direction and followed him as long as we could. He kept mainly to the road, but then broke off to follow an elephant path into the brush. It soon became apparent that the wild dog was after a small herd of impalas, trying to wear them down with the long pursuit. Several minutes later, we spied the impalas leaping gloriously across a clearing, their delicate hind legs kicking high, heading for cover. Reuben explained the function of the high kick: impalas have metatarsal glands at the back of their hind legs that send out alarm scent to companions. The impalas seemed safe for now, for the wild dog did not appear again for several minutes. We soon lost sight of the dog again. Fortunately, no kill was observed today. Reuben mentioned that this had been only the second sighting of wild dogs at the camp this year. Again we were very fortunate to have made the discovery, though we were puzzled that the dog was solitary and without his pack.

The ensuing mokoro ride was somewhat more comfortable than the one we had taken at Banoka Bush Camp, as those of us with aching backs were given slightly elevated seats on the floor of the dugout. It was pleasant to glide among lily pads and down along hippo channels. We observed a distant herd of red lechwe antelope, who favor this environment, but they were shy today so we couldn't get near them. During tea on an island, Graham used a map to offer a helpful instruction on the formation, size, and seasonal flooding of the Delta. The increasing heat of the day, however, soon drove us back to our dugouts for a return to our vehicles.

Instead of returning to camp for lunch, Dips and Reuben drove us to a wooded area near camp for a beautiful bush lunch. On entering the site, Reuben spotted the rare Pels Fishing Owl high up and largely concealed by the branches of a nearby tree. We all dutifully trotted over, cameras and binoculars in hand, craning our necks upward. But the Pels Owl was shy and soon suffered an attack of stage fright, leaving his perch for an unaccustomed daylight flight. Lunch came complete with full bar, hand-washing station, and a handsomely set table—and a thousand flies. Graham explained that the rains yesterday had hatched them. The grilled chicken and cold cucumber soup were especially tasty to all. But in the end, the flies seemed to carry the day, so we did not linger long after the generally pleasant repast.

Following the day's three-hour respite, we took to the road again for another exciting game drive. Not far from camp we paused to observe an elderly bull elephant grazing on the soft grasses near the flooded roadway that we would need to ford to gain access to the grasslands beyond. Reuben did not want to challenge the elephant's tolerance of our proximity, as older bulls can be irritable. While we sat silently observing the elephant's luscious feasting on the long and damp grasses, suddenly the wild dog that we had followed yesterday scampered right up behind us, virtually within an arm's reach of our vehicle. "Whoa!" Reuben exclaimed, chuckling with delight. He had not seen such a thing happen before. "That was really magical," he would later say. The dog lay down panting for a short time in front of our vehicle as Dips's Land Rover arrived. The dog's enormous sound-gathering ears pivoted in several directions as he surveyed the area for his quarry, head up, damp nostrils combing the breeze. Then he marked the road with his scent and headed off again into the tall grass near where the elephant had lumbered into for more of his breakfast buffet. Suddenly we heard a trumpeting and an agitation as the elephant re-emerged from the thicket. Not wishing to be

surprised further, the elephant hastened across the flooded roadway, head shaking, ears flapping, dropping grapefruit-sized dung balls into the water to lighten his load as he fled. We followed the elephant slowly until we could pass him. Reuben wanted to follow the dog further and seemed to have an innate sense of where he would next show up in his pursuit of impala. So for an hour or so we followed the dog, watching small breeding herds of impala react, first in a posture of frozen awareness, then in a great bounding flight. Later in the drive we found the dog again, lying down for a short rest in the middle of a clearing. He had spooked the herd a few times but was unable to catch them. Graham wondered why the wild dog was solitary and not hunting with his pack. "There are two packs in the area and reports of some fighting between them. When the male and female alpha dogs are defeated, their pack shatters. This one may have been a member of the one that lost out." The dog before us appeared to be in his prime, his teeth white and head erect. Perhaps in time he would be the one to find and reconsolidate the pack.

Several minutes later, the dog was up again and trotting off. We left him to his quandary and headed in another direction, Reuben calling back the identities of birds in the distance. As the sun sank further toward the horizon, Reuben found a hippo pool where he and Dips had agreed to meet for sundowners. As we disembarked and edged closer to the pool, we counted ten hippos of different ages and ranks. The dominant male kept a steady eye on us, his tiny ears pitched forward, his enormous snout alternately submerged and lifted towards us. Despite their alert caution and our bemused curiosity, the mood of the place became increasingly tranquil, the light of the setting sun igniting a marvelous array of gold, pink, robin's egg blue and salmon, these colors reflected in the sheen of the pool, turning the hippo family into silhouettes. It was a good place to have the last of our Xigera sundowners.

Later, back at the camp and after everyone had had a moment to refresh, we gathered for a short video on Botswana's rhino re-population project, introduced by the camp director Johan. It was heartening to hear some good news about rhinos for a change, though the re-population project was obviously motivated by bad news elsewhere. So far, approximately 100 rhinos have been relocated in Botswana with several hundred more planned. Reuben followed with a slide presentation on the geology and hydrology of the Delta, a talk that largely duplicated Graham's of this morning.

Dinner was lovely once again, this time with beef and/or duck. The meal was introduced by a happy chorus of singers, then by the chef, whose lilting description of the menu seemed to continue the music. The dessert was a fatal combination of white and dark chocolate mousse, so rich and creamy that few could finish it. Everyone seemed ready for bed.

**Saturday, February 28**

The sunrise plan worked better this morning, for the east was clear. Once again, our tent attendant brought us hot water for tea. In the flat before our tents, impalas grazed placidly in the morning twilight, a scene of such beguiling calm as to be nearly intoxicating.

This morning's game drive was a study in detail, an interlude of footnotes to what we had already seen. The breeze was soft under a cloudless sky. All of the major mammals appeared to have slept in, so these precious hours proved to be a morning without predation. Reuben pointed out a few birds from 200 yards off as he eased his Land Rover away from the camp compound. Then he stopped to let us examine and photograph fresh elephant footprints on the road, explaining how the elephant's front footpad is round in order to bear the weight of the elephant's head, while the hind footpad is oval to provide propulsion. He further paused to hand us tufts of cotton wool grass, then thatching grass, then the fruit of a date palm, the skin delicious to elephants, which help to disperse through their droppings the indigestible nut containing the seed. Then he paused again to have us study more closely a brown patch on the trunk of a tree—a cluster of bees, the prized fruit of the ubiquitous bee-eaters. Then we examined dark marbles of giraffe scat, and later he halved a fruit from the sausage tree, pointing out the fibrous interior and its use as a loufa for bathing. We also learned how through reversed binoculars one could see tiny crystals of silica in the Kalahari Desert sand. Then we studied a typical termite mound as Reuben explained its anatomy. How many termites in each mound, we asked, hundreds of thousands? "Think New York City," he replied. The termite mounds were so numerous here that the floodplain resembled a memorial park, the towered monuments pointing to the sky. Overhead, a straight line of migrating spoonbills coursed to the north.

Eventually, we found some mammals—a pod of dozing hippos sleeping off last night's dinner in the exquisite calm of a small lake. Then we came upon a small

herd—called a "dazzle"—of zebras. They were well alert to us before we could approach them and trotted off before we could get close. We found other dazzles later, one with a herd of tsessebes, Botswana's topi, their flanks glistening in the sunlight. Tsessebes are Africa's fastest antelope, next to the pronghorn. Although seemingly at leisure, a few individuals broke out in gallops from time to time, like runners warming for a race.

We needed to return to camp by 10:00 in order to pack and be ready for our next move. Following a full breakfast, attended by flies and monkeys, we headed for the landing strip. The plane was waiting for us. A young couple giddy with anticipation took our place on the Land Rover for the return trip.

The flight to the landing strip serving Duma Tau took 35 minutes. The pilot of the Caravan kept the plane just beneath the gathering ceiling. We flew through and past several rain showers. Once on the ground again, we met our guides Flame and Rodgers. The drive to the camp took slightly longer than the flight. Duma Tau was entirely rebuilt two years ago, so it was essentially new. The completely solar facility had all the latest amenities installed within a contemporary design reminiscent in tone and color of Restoration Hardware—rusticity chic—with just a few evocations of British campaign style. It was clearly the most beautiful camp of our itinerary, a nice choice for the final few days of our visit to Botswana.

After our afternoon down time, we set off on our evening game drive. The landscape seemed much drier than we had seen previously. And yet the bird life seemed equally abundant, though the large mammals were scarce. We did spy and photograph a few giraffes and in the crook of a tree a hand-size section of a monitor lizard. Not long into the drive, Rodgers' Land Rover shut down. While we waited for a replacement, he explained with some chagrin that his vehicle of the day had been borrowed from a neighboring camp. Graham noticed that some lug nuts on a rear tire were loose as well. The mechanic who delivered the replacement vehicle was able to re-start the gimpy Land Rover but we were all happy that we did not have to rely on it for the rest of the outing. The highlights of the drive were a pack of 15-20 wild dogs that we found asleep on a road near a dead elephant. Evidently, gnawing on an elephant carcass requires a great expenditure of energy, after all. Overhead, a variety of vultures, bowed like funeral home attendants, perched on the naked limbs of dead trees. We spent the next several minutes shooting photos of the dogs. Every once in a while, a dog would lift himself up from the roadway on his long legs and trot off again to the carcass in the bush.

We became curious and decided to follow. Though Rodgers did his best to approach the elephant upwind, the stench of three-day old rotting flesh was overpowering. Rodgers stopped his vehicle about 100 feet from the carcass. The elephant lay on its side, a ruined giant suffering through a final indignity. We could see that the belly of the enormous beast had already been hollowed out. Here and around the throat and mouth area, the wild dogs, writhing like maggots, pulled at whatever they could get a purchase on. It was a harrowing site. We did not linger. On the drive away, we chuckled over the dodged mishap of having had a mechanical breakdown in that spot.

Later we met up again with our other half for sundowners at a hippo pool. The sunset was spectacular, an augur perhaps of stormy weather ahead. Later in the hour a female hippo with a calf swam from around a bend in the channel to an area near our spot, perhaps intent on a dry-off. They seemed a little nonplussed by our presence here but seemed content to wait us out. Back at the camp, drinks and dinner were as lovely and as abundant as ever, the meal service preceded by singing and ululations by the staff. Sleep under mosquito netting was heavenly.

**Sunday, March 1**

Heavy weather did arrive, as Graham had predicted, in the hours before sunrise. A fierce, big-mama African thunderstorm began flashing and booming at 4:00 AM. Heavy and prolonged rainfall followed, with winds whipping our tent awning and the thick foliage around our tent. We wondered whether it would lead to the cancellation of our morning game drive. But our luck held: just before the 5:00 AM wake-up call, the bulk of the storm moved on to the east, the winds dying, with just a thin petticoat of sprinkles trailing after. We grabbed our umbrellas and headed off for a light breakfast at 5:30. By 6:15 we were off again. The air was cool and refreshed. A thick overcast dulled the early light. Intermittent sprinkles brought out the rain ponchos. For the first hour or so we saw no major mammals, only the occasional platoon of impalas and a few rather damp birds. More remarkable were the enormous puddles on the roads—the gully-washer had collected axel-deep in several places. We were able to spy several fresh prints—hyenas and leopards in the mud and sand. Rodgers tried tracking a leopard for a while, listening for warning calls from the impalas and the larger birds. "They are very shy," he explained. Then Rodgers learned that hyenas had been seen at the elephant carcass. Off we sped. We did find them several minutes later lying on the

same road where we had seen the wild dogs of the day before. We pulled over, upwind of the carcass. We took several photos and listened to the whoops of other hyenas—perhaps a rival pack—deeper in the bush. Then, in Rodgers' effort to re-position the vehicle for another view of the carcass, the rear tires began to spin—a dream come true: stuck in the mud near a dead elephant, enhanced, of course, by the fact that we were surrounded by hyenas. "We stuck," Rodgers grinned. After discovering that the rear left wheel was buried to the axel, he got on the radio and called Flame. When they arrived several minutes later, their first concern lay with the hyenas, naturally, so they wheeled about the brush near the animals snapping photos. One hyena got especially curious and came up virtually to the passenger door, nose up to Graham as if faintly recognizing him. Then, with a wave from Mac as if they would be pushing on without us, Flame did bring his vehicle around to our rear, almost getting stuck himself in the process. A half hour later, Flame and Rodgers were able to free the vehicle, much to our relief.

We continued with our safari, now intent on lions spotted about 30 minutes to the east. It was a beautiful drive through more open woodland with occasional stops for other curiosities along the way. Finally, we arrived at a bank overlooking a vast marshland. Beyond it lay Namibia. We took some refreshment while enjoying the enchanting view, then pushed on in search of the lions. We had almost given up before another guide informed Rodgers that the lions, two males and a female with cubs, lay in a thicket close to where we had entered the area. We were able to catch several heart-warming glimpses of the nursing cubs and sleeping mother by peering through a small gap in the thicket. Also visible was a mature male nearby, largely concealed in the foliage. He had come with another larger male companion across the marshland from Namibia. One of them, probably the larger, had found a girlfriend here. Now the two of them would protect her cubs.

Following a late brunch and a siesta, then tea, we departed camp for our final evening game drive. The bush was still quiet in the day's heat. We bounced and lurched along observing various birds and listening for warning calls, which would signal the presence of large predators. We happened upon a herd—or "journey"—of giraffes, so placid in their vigilance in all directions. It was our first opportunity to observe them at close proximity, for they were at ease in our company. They returned our gaze while calmly chewing their cuds, which Graham later explained goes up and down the giraffe's long throat a few times before it is finally digested. Several minutes later they moved on with their juveniles at an

easy gate, their incredibly long legs moving as if in slow motion, one pace for every twenty steps by a warthog.

The sky was a deep cerulean blue at this hour. Immense white cumulus moved lazily in the calm afternoon, morphing into dream figures. Shafts of sunlight streamed from the clouds the sun had ducked behind, rimming their white with gold. We would motor past warthogs with a chuckle, impala with a sigh. Birds would flutter away from our commotion, stunning us with a sudden pop of intense color in their plumage. Perched high above us on dead branches, the raptors would cock a head towards us then turn to more absorbing subjects. In time we moved into the taller stands of trees—cathedral mopane, leadwood, jacaranda, fever berry, and giant acacia—that thrive above the banks of the Savuti Channel. The short waterway flows from the immense Zibadianja Lagoon, named for the red lechwe antelope that frequent its marshes. The lagoon is also the source of the Linyanti River, which flows past Duma Tau Camp. The Linyanti eventually joins with the Chobe River, which empties into the Zambezi, which eventually provides the spectacle of "the smoke that thunders," Victoria Falls. While we didn't see any of the red lechwe, we did come upon two magnificent kudu bulls about a quarter mile within each other, each walking slowly in the twilight from the marshes across the tall grasses to the cover of the dense woods beyond. Each bull was crowned with an impressive rack of long, twisting horns. Graham explained that the shape of the antlers serves to help the kudu draw tree branches down for easier access to foliage but that the twist could complicate a round of head butting. He had seen kudu bulls literally locked in combat. These two, however, seemed unaware of each other and content to manage their separate fiefdoms. The embodiment of power and nobility, they were the last animals that we saw on the last evening game drive—a frame of sorts, as the first animals we had seen on the first day of our safari were a group of female kudus.

Graham had a pair of surprises up his sleeve. The first was a table with champagne and some very nice nibbles set on the grass and lit with lanterns at a place that he and the guides had chosen for our sundowners. Propped against the table was a small message board with a birthday wish. It was obvious to me that the sweet benediction had come from Stacy Fiorentinos, President of Classic Escapes. It was very touching reminder of our friendship as well as what had already proven to be the happiest birthday of my life.

The second surprise was a bush dinner softly illumined with lanterns and well-staffed with servers from the camp. The layout and provisions under the brilliant moon and stars were quite remarkable. What a fitting climax to our safari in Botswana!

**Monday, March 2**

On this day of parting, Graham had organized one last game drive before it was time for us to pack up and leave for our separate destinations. Given the long journey home that most of us were facing, we were able to persuade him to postpone the wake-up call from 5:00 to 6:00. Despite the good intentions, a hippo making her way to the river immediately in front of our tents provided sufficient alarm at 4:30. Apparently disturbed during her walk to the river, the hippo bellowed with a splendidly resonant, klaxon horn blast of sound. Perhaps the hippo had encountered a kudu, for we had heard a kudu's alarm bark also, followed by a great commotion in the foliage next to our tent. We were wide awake thereafter. Mac and Helen elected to skip the drive in order to recover some lost sleep.

The rest of us set off again at 7:15 after breakfast. The hour again was initially peaceful, except for our pronounced swaying back and forth in the deep Kalahari sands. We encountered the usual suspects—impala, warthogs, giraffe, a hippo dozing motionless in the shallows of a small pool, and a great many birds too numerous to mention. The real excitement of this short game drive was the discovery of the pack of dogs we had seen earlier on a fresh-killed impala. Graham speculated that the antelope had been brought down a mere 10 minutes earlier. By the time we arrived, not much was left of the poor critter. The pups at this point were engaged in a feeding frenzy, ravenously chomping and tearing on what remained. Several of the adults were streaked with blood from the initial kill and engorgement. It would serve as a final reminder that, even with its astounding grandeur, Africa was "nature, red in tooth and claw"—to borrow a phrase from Tennyson.

Later, on the long drive back to camp, we had ample time to muse on our experience in Botswana, to breathe deep lungfuls of this pristine air, to take in the broader vista of the natural landscape without the infinite particularity of a game drive, and, finally, to make peace with leaving this place, with its extraordinary beauty, its wealth of wildlife existing freely in a primordial setting, and with the

deep serenity that comes from a stretch of time without phones and sirens and the flood of news media reminding us that the world is a dangerous place. In the end, it was good—as the impala would say with a flick of her tail—simply to be alive.

After a quick brunch, we began a long series of farewells: to Rodgers and Flame, who continued to point out creatures on the way to the landing strip; to Eileen, Sara and Bob, who would be pushing on to Victoria Falls with Graham; to Gigi and Dave, who would be flying to Washington, DC; and to Chippy and Mac, who would be joining us on the flight to Atlanta on another part of the plane. The prospect of a long flight in a narrow seat loomed ahead of us. A chap with a belt extender went into full recline immediately ahead of me. But I had within me now the dappled light of mopane woodlands, the citrine glow of the leopard's eye, and from remembered elevations a vast realm of green ticked with the blue and white of reflected sky for the cramped and dark times at hand and those that would inevitably follow.

Until we meet again,
Rob Fure


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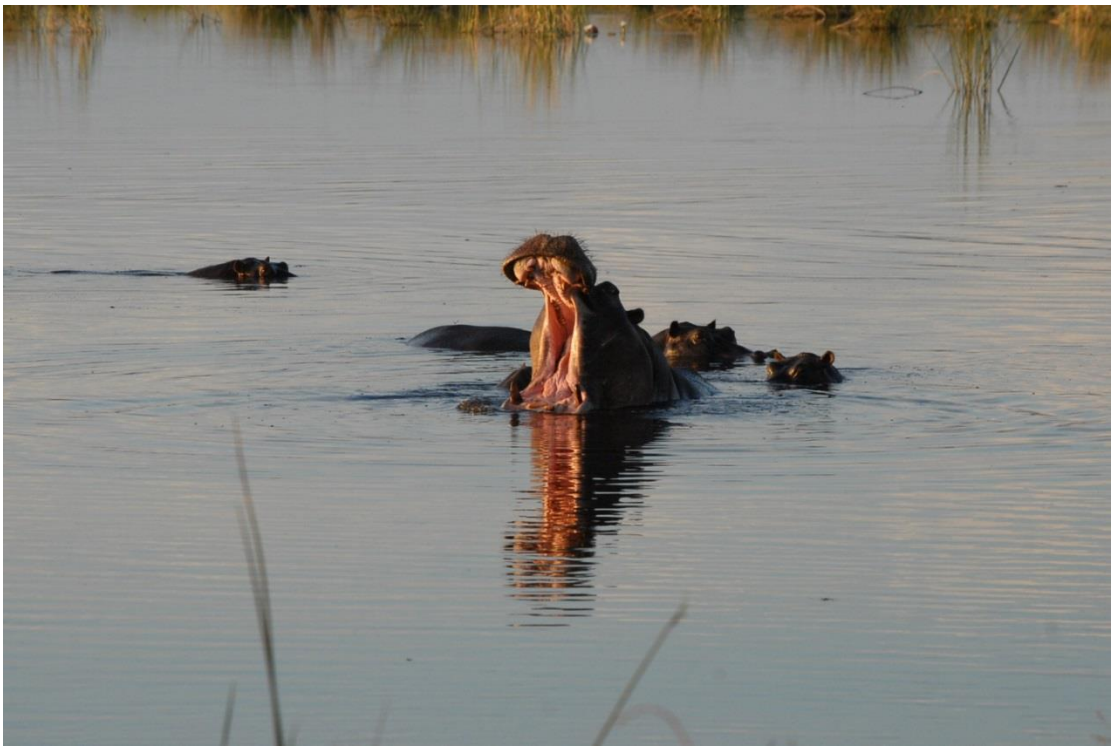

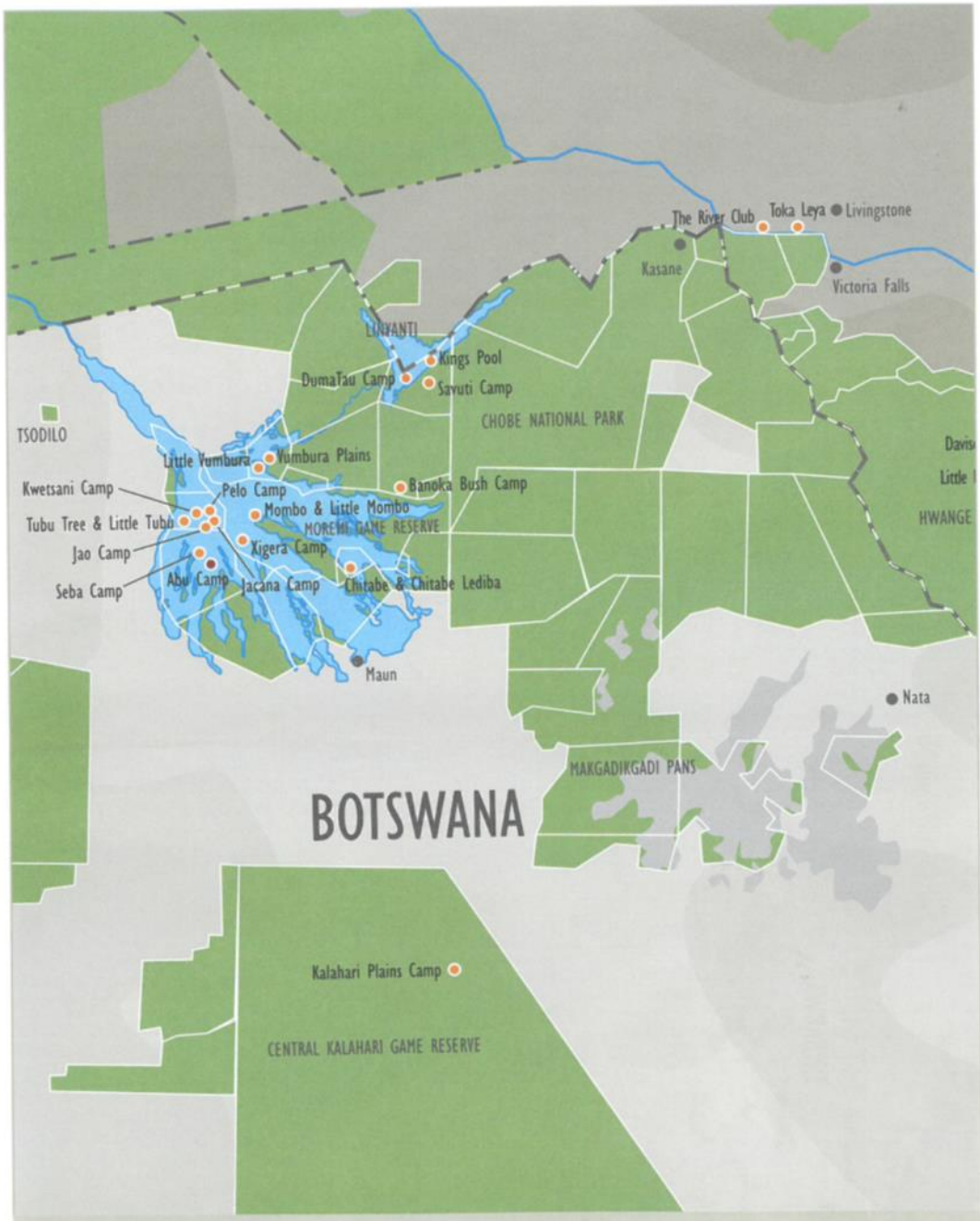


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