



# Of meerkats & men

ON A CONTINENT STRAINING TO FIND THE BALANCE BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND COMMERCE, BOTSWANA IS STEPPING OUT OF THE WILDERNESS. ONCE IN THE DEPTHS OF POVERTY, THE COUNTRY HAS BEEN PROPELLED INTO ECONOMIC OVERDRIVE BY AN ARMY OF HUNTERS-TURNED-CONSERVATIONISTS EAGER TO SHOWCASE "THE REAL AFRICA" TO TOURISTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD. *Matt Doran* WAS AMONG THEM, TRAVELLING IN SIX-STAR STYLE.





BECAUSE IT WAS NEAR-FREEZING IN the bush on the day our guide was born, his parents named him Ice. But today, alert behind the wheel of an open-air 4WD in the heart of Botswana's breathtaking Okavango Delta, this veteran animal-tracker is on fire: three lions, a dazzle of zebra, a tower of giraffe and an injured infant warthog, and all in the space of five minutes.

"When I was hunting with my grandfather we had to be mindful of the direction of the wind, so we would smother all of our bodies in sage. Then we creep up on him, the prey, so that he couldn't smell us."

The skills on display here at Chief's Camp have been passed down through six generations. Ice was seven years old when his father lit a fire by a creek and revealed his secrets for hunting and defending against predators in the bush. Ice learned that by dissecting the shape and direction of a footprint in the sand he could identify and track the female animals – famed for their softer and tastier meat. He trained his ears to interpret and follow warning calls from the vervet monkey, and to distinguish between an impala on heat and an impala in hot water. He was

trained to recognise the medicinal properties of the humble bush turkey, and how to harness the powers of the so-called Sausage Tree: a remedy for snakebites, evil spirits, syphilis and – in times of better health – the key ingredient for African beer. By the age of 15 he'd shot, killed and eaten his first hippo. Just one bullet, too, right through the upper mouth. Not intentionally, of course; the monster had charged him as he played with mates near a waterhole. And anyway, Ice knew better than to try and outrun it – a hippo is roughly the same speed as Usain Bolt. >>





PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT DORAN



**AFRICA ON ICE:** Above from left: The author with guide Ice; Plush interiors at Chief's Camp. Opposite page main image: A pod of hippo keeps an eye on the group. Opposite page inset from top left: A leopard relaxes near Chief's Camp; Botswana is home to one third of the world's elephants.

Ice shuts off the motor, the twist and snarl of the thick tires kicking up skull-coloured dust under the fading African sun. We are on Chief's Island in the heart of the Moremi Game Reserve, widely recognised as the predator capital of Africa. Our camp is a nine-hour drive from Maun, the nearest township, but thankfully our light aircraft made the trip in 25 minutes. The island is a vast tongue of sand stretching a thousand square kilometres, and there are few people who know the area more intimately; Ice's grandfather was once a chief here.

We have stopped at a waterhole for a sun-downer and Ice is feverishly erecting a makeshift cocktail bar beside a 50-year-old termite mound. This is the first of many magical, unforgettable moments which ultimately put this Abercrombie & Kent travel experience ahead of the herd. We are sipping gin and tonic less than 20 metres away from a pod of semi-submerged hippo. The beasts have one eye on us, and the other on a pack of endangered wild dogs skulking through the reeds towards a lone impala.

Before a falling blood-red sun, the waterhole stretches out like a sheet of copper velvet. Dancing on the surface are shadows from a row of dead and dying trees – stripped of their bark by a herd of nutrient-starved elephant. We are standing in their giant footsteps as we drink.

Ice is deep in thought, lamenting the rise and rise of what he calls Cowboy Guides in other parts of Africa. They've learned their craft from books, not experience, and they're reckless. Too often trampling the rules, or the wild-life, in their lust for action.

"This is the real Africa," he tells us. "It is about love for the land and the trees and these beautiful animals." His hunting days are behind him, he told his tribe, and then proved it by misfiring a gun to save the life of a leopard which had been harassing the community's livestock.

Arriving back at camp, the manager greets us and guides us along a dark path to our luxury bush pavilion. Simon's mantra to guests is that here, everything is possible. You truly have not known customer service until you have visited Chief's Camp.

"Now, I must warn you: if you see a lion or a cheetah on the path at night, pause immediately and stay still. But if it starts moving towards you with its teeth showing, turn around and kick the person behind you in the knees. The lion always gets the slowest first." He is only half-joking.

That night we are treated to a traditional African dance, the men and women stomping and singing and dancing. And then we settle down for a delicious braai feast around a campfire, sharing stories of the day's lion and leopard

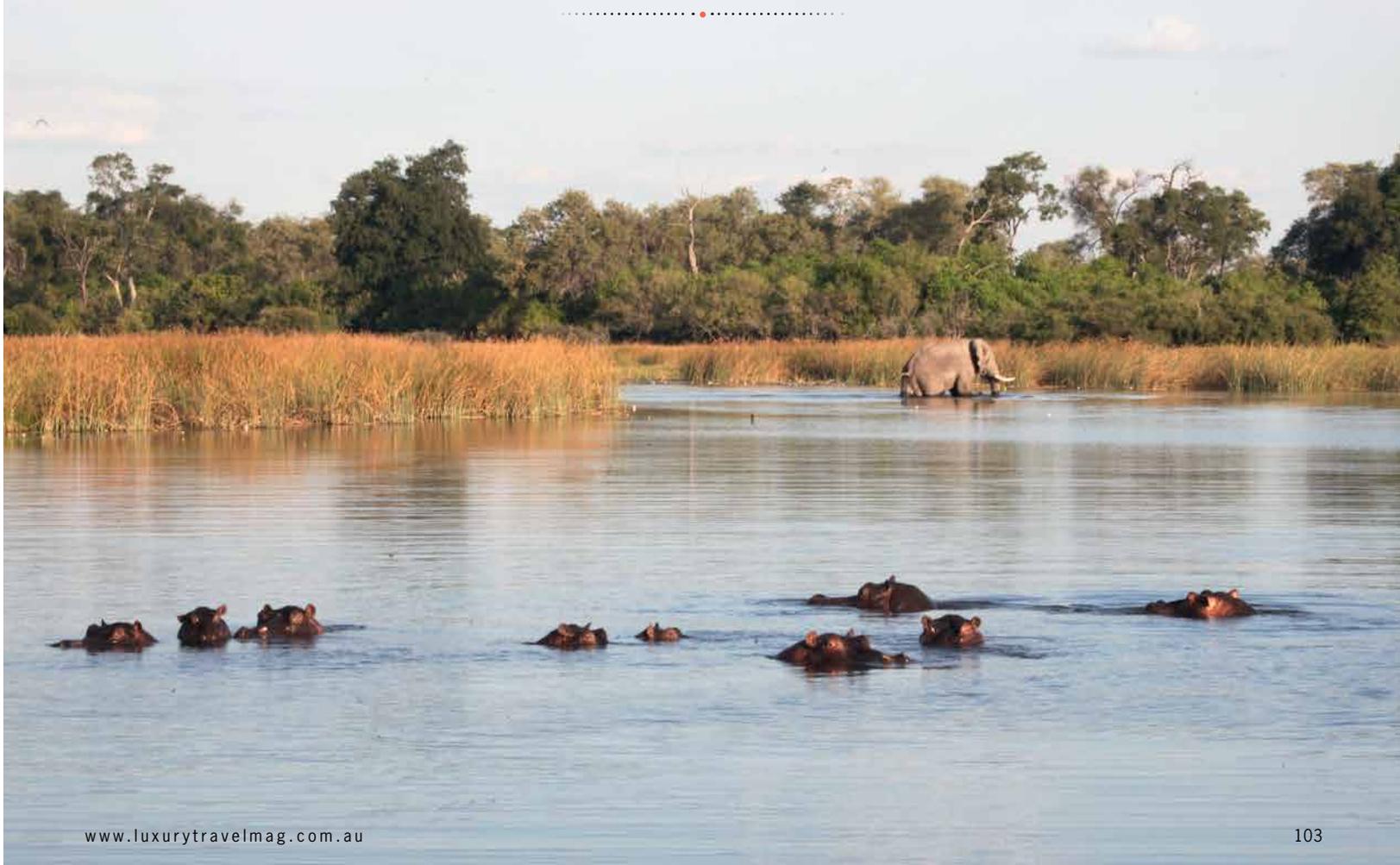
sightings and the breathtaking Mokoro trip along a crocodile-infested lagoon. We had the last laugh though; that night the reptile was on the menu, along with impala, ostrich and exquisite African vegetables.

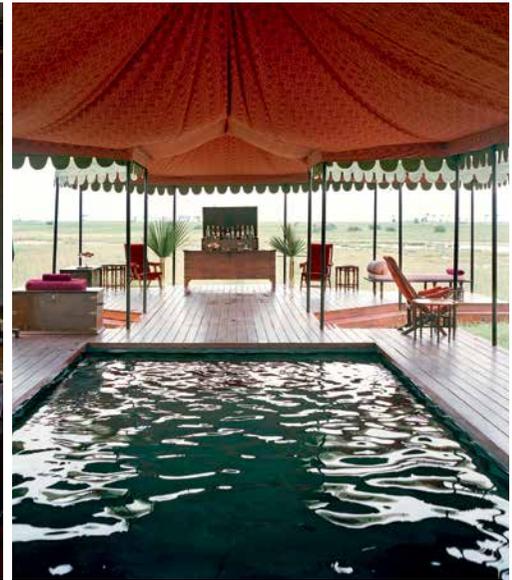
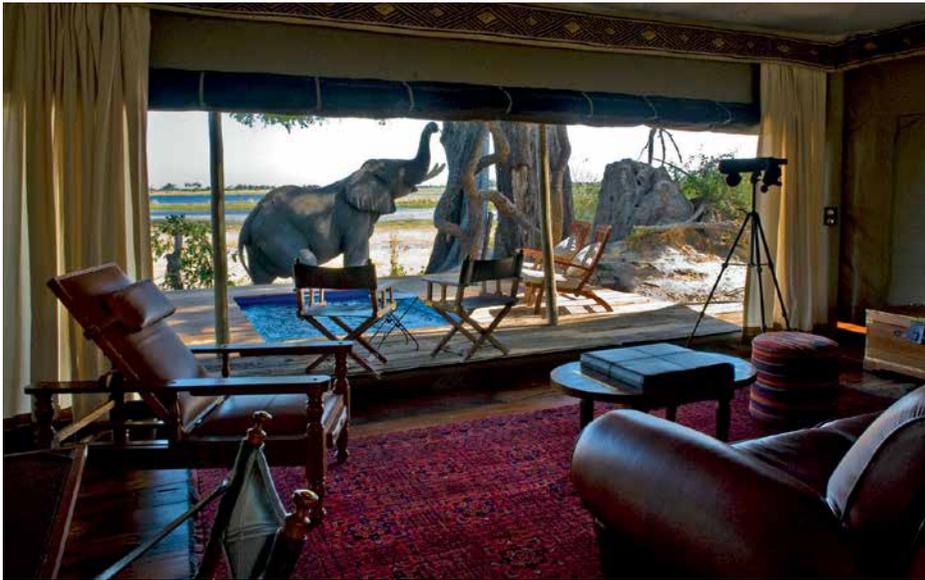
The next day, as we approach the tiny airstrip that's the portal to Zarafa Camp, we are metres from a wounded lioness with only one thing on her mind: a kill. It is midday, an unusual time for this predator to hunt, but it's been days since her last meal. And then, a gift from the Gods: a family of warthog drifting through the golden reeds in her direction. Teeth bared, she settles down in the sand to wait. These poor warthog – a baby in their midst – are blissfully unaware, delighting in the rich grass that's sprung up on the floodplains. At the last moment, just as the lioness is ready to pounce, an impossible instinct sounds the alarm bell, giving the fat pigs a crucial half-second head-start. We film them as they race to freedom, centimetres saving the baby from the lion's open jaw.

This is the Selinda Reserve – a wild, unfenced sanctuary straddling the Selinda Spillway, offering some of the most extraordinary game viewing in all of Africa. It is also home to the Zarafa Camp – voted best safari camp in Africa in the 2013 Safari Awards and surely one of the most spectacular destinations on the planet. >>



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**NATURE'S SLIDESHOW:** Above from left: Elephants up close at Zarafa; All Zarafa's suites have a private plunge pool. Opposite page: Fine dining at Jack's Camp.

There are just four 92-square metre marquis-style suites which capture uninterrupted views of the stunning Zibadianja Lagoon. Each of the three rooms inside the tent is meticulously decorated with custom furniture handcrafted from copper and ancient hardwoods. Raised decks – constructed of century-old, recycled African railroad sleepers and enveloping a private plunge pool – form the tent's foundation.

The rooms feature air-horns (for use during an animal emergency), professional Canon digital cameras complete with powerful zoom lenses, deep copper baths, gas-lit fires and deadbolted minibars; the baboons have learned to help themselves.

The king size bed is positioned to capture an astonishing view through the flywire towards the lagoon, which has come alive at night. At 3am I am woken by a guttural, snorting chorus from a pair of hippo. The reflection of a full moon is dancing off their steaming, fleshy pink backs as they devour clumps of grass less than 20 metres from our deck. Behind them, half a dozen sets of laser-red eyes; the crocs are watching them eat, too.

Breakfast is our first taste of what's to be three days of gourmet feasting fit for the most discerning of kings. Three-to-five courses, three times a day, prepared by a world-class chef

and punctuated of course by morning and afternoon teas. Restraint's a pipedream when cocktails, high-end wines and spirits are unlimited. There's a gym here for those keen to make amends – not a bad alternative to a run around the campsite which would, I'm told, most certainly result in being eaten.

Australia was Zarafa's biggest growth market last year. It is real African big-game country – made famous by Dereck and Beverly Joubert's National Geographic films – and home to hippo-killing lions, buffalo, zebra, hyena, giraffe, wildebeest, waterbuck, kudu, African wild dog, warring leopards and cheetahs. Up to a third of the world's elephant population also roams Botswana, and many of them can be seen here.

For a bush experience like no other, you can leave the jeep behind and set off on one of

Zarafa's walking safaris. You'll sign a waiver and set off with one guide and one rifle. Our guide is an Englishman, Josh, who left Britain as a teenager a decade ago and never quite managed to escape Botswana's grasp.

This is a man destined for life in the wild: he learned to wakeboard in a river infested with crocodiles. Now, he charts canoe trips through the world's largest intact island delta, dodging hippos and fighting off crocs with paddle. Shaped like a fan, the Delta is fed by the Okavango River and has been steadily developed over the millennia by millions of tonnes of sand carried down the river from Angola.

We emerge from scrubland to discover a herd of elephants. One of them, a teenager, is particularly impetuous, which we discern from his enraged charge in our direction. He is in »

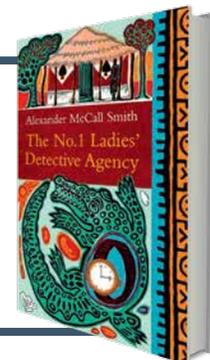
## BOOKS

### RECOMMENDED READING

#### The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency by Alexander McCall Smith

*Hachette Australia*

Written in the spirit of classic whodunit detective novels, the first book in the series follows Precious Ramotswe as she establishes herself as the first female detective in Botswana.



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT DORAN



**DESERT LUXE:** Above from left: The author with a local tribe near Jack's Camp; Cocktail hour. Opposite page: A meerkat seeks out higher ground.

musth – a period of highly-aggressive sexual behaviour where a male bull's testosterone levels explode up to 60 times beyond their normal level. As he thunders towards us, Josh commands us to stand still while he strides preposterously in the elephant's direction. He raises an arm in the air, looking every bit the accomplished elephant whisperer, and orders to the animal to "slow up, boy. Hold up. Hollllllld up." The 4,000-kilogram mammoth meanders to a halt, trumpets what surely must have been an insult and then returns to the herd. Hundreds of people are trampled and killed by elephants every year. Tomorrow's safari will be by car.

There are few places on earth where survival is more difficult than in Botswana's Kalahari Desert. The parched and dying zebra collapsed before us are evidence that in this bone-dry landscape, the elements can take a life just as easily as a predator. My girlfriend and I have journeyed northeast to Jack's Camp, near the border of Zimbabwe, and find ourselves in the heart of the Makgadikgadi Pan – one of the largest salt pans in the world. The lunar landscape is a relic of the enormous Lake Makgadikgadi which, until it dried up several thousand years ago, covered an area the size of Switzerland. It's also an archaeological treasure trove: the pans are rich with the Early Man's tools from the Stone Age.

It's easy to see why Jack's is consistently ranked among the world's best luxury accommodation. The camp is named after intrepid explorer Jack Bousfield who, until his death in a light plane crash, was a richly-tanned, white-bearded safari operator who made a name for himself escorting aristocrats and film stars into obscure corners of Bechuanaland (Botswana's name under English colonisation). He also had a bit of a thing for hunting crocodiles: the *Guinness Book of World Records* credits him with a total of 53,000.

Jack's grandson, John Barclay, is more of a conservationist. But having fought off an elephant with a can of deodorant and nursed to health a cousin whose nose was torn off by a hyena, he too has had his fair share of adventure.

"This camp is Jack's great legacy. There is truly nowhere like it in the world," John says.

The camp itself is a desperately romantic throw-back to the golden age of safaris, luxuriously appointed with campaign-style furniture in the East African colonial style of the 1940s. But there is no electricity. In the mornings we're woken by a local villager who – silhouetted by a rising, burnt-orange sun – unzips the tent, lights four paraffin lanterns and sets down a pot of freshly-made coffee.

Meerkats are also early risers in the Mak-

gadikgadi, and the resident gang near Jack's offer up one of the most unique and memorable game experiences you'll encounter. In their perennial state of anxiety they'll do anything to keep an eye on predators – including clambering up your back to use your head as a lookout post.

You get the sense here in Botswana that you're in the midst of nature's last great refuge. Home to just over two million people, this is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world. In fact more than a third of the landscape is set aside for game reserves and national parks. The isolation is otherworldly and enchanting; other African game reserves morph into parking lots during big game sightings but here, you're unlucky to even see another vehicle.

We have taken a quad-bike into the heart of the pans where our guide is busy assembling an elaborate cocktail bar. Martini in hand, I'm instructed to walk towards the horizon and spend 30 minutes alone in the sand. Delicate salt cakes crackle under foot, a brief respite from the profound and screaming silence. The only discernible sound here is a pulse thumping through my ears – an eerie soundtrack to a furious African sun that's plunging below the horizon. It's another of those famed Abercrombie & Kent pinch-yourself moments. Quite suddenly, I am in love with Africa.



Africa



#### THE SAFARI

Abercrombie & Kent operates the 10-night Delta to Desert safari through Botswana throughout the year with daily departures from Johannesburg, South Africa. Prices range from A\$13,260-18,905 per person twin share including all meals, selected drinks, safari experiences with a private guide, emergency evacuation insurance and flights between Maun/Selinda/Okavango Delta/Jack's Camp/Maun. Flights from Johannesburg to Maun are not included and rates can be obtained directly from Abercrombie & Kent.

[abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)

#### WHEN TO GO

Permanent wetlands and resident wildlife mean Botswana can be visited at any time of year, though the best time is between March and November. Days are cool but clear and there is minimal rainfall. The delta is usually in flood between May and August, making it a good time for boat and canoe safaris and many animals migrate to the delta in these months.

#### GETTING THERE

Qantas flies direct from Sydney to Johannesburg daily with connections to most major Australian cities. Return economy fares start from A\$1,700 and business class fares from A\$5,900. Total flight time is just over 14 hours.

[qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)

