

Southern African Safari



Zebras – the national animal of Botswana

1. Africa is falling apart. That's a statement about geology rather than politics. The continent is largely formed of three Cratons, huge chunks of the original super-continent of Pangaea and Gondwanaland with roots like enormous wisdom teeth that reach down to colossal depths in the molten mantle of the planet. These roots provide the conditions of huge heat and pressure that are required for the formation of diamonds which somehow find their way back up into the continental crust through the gaps between the Craton masses. And those same gaps are growing, forming features such as the Rift Valley and the depressions of the northern and eastern deserts - and they will ultimately rip the continent to pieces. The gap between the Congo and Kalahari Cratons that will eventually separate the southern third of the continent from the rest is also the basic reason for the existence of the Okavango Delta. The tectonic trough between the two Cratons forms an endorheic basin, a closed system that retains water and allows no outflow.

2. Flowing into this basin, the Okavango river is fed by the waters from the central Highlands of Africa running from Angola through Namibia into Botswana where it drains, not into the sea or into a lake, but into an enormous inland delta system in the north of the Kalahari Desert. The Okavango is often cited as the world's largest inland delta; it isn't but

it is plenty big enough. Each year approximately 11 cubic kilometres (that's 11 European billion litres) of water spreads over an area of 15,000 square kilometres.

3. Geological and geomorphological gee-whizzery aside, the Delta sustains a huge quantity and variety of African wildlife. And that was the main reason for our visit.

4. As safari virgins, we didn't really didn't know what to expect. But we had some basic underlying theories. One was that we would be very lucky to see glimpses of some of the iconic African animals: there was, after all, a heck of a lot of countryside for them to melt into. Another was that if an animal was seen it would soon attract a fleet of vehicles bearing other visitors: we had, after all, seen the famous picture from the Serengeti lion's point of view of an encircling phalanx of 4x4s. And we reasoned that any animals we did see would be mostly some way off: even if we could get close they would, after all, be unlikely to want to hang around in our company very long. (Based on this reasoning we decided that, lacking large cameras with long lenses, we shouldn't expect to take photographs and should take binoculars rather than cameras.) The rest of this account is really an extended version of the phrase "how wrong can you be?"

Part One: Outdoors in the Okavango

Monday 30 September

5. It was an auspicious day to leave for safari in Botswana. The National Day of the country and the day on which a national ban on all game hunting came into force. Of course we didn't know that. For us it was simply a pleasant day for a train ride through sunny border and north English countryside, then the flat lands of the midlands and the east to Kings Cross and thence by tube to Heathrow for an overnight flight to Johannesburg. Modern long haul air travel is an unromantic business: indeed, it doesn't feel like travel at all, it's like being transported (as in cargo in transit or exile to the Antipodes rather than enraptured). The best part of it was that we slept - a bit.

Tuesday 1 October

6. We were advised to book our bags only as far as Jo'burg and collect them there before checking in separately for the flight on to Maun, the gateway town for the Delta. So we queued through the Republic of South Africa immigration desks to be rewarded with a twelve hour visa and the chance to pick up our bags and carry them through to the Air Botswana desk.

7. The flight to Maun crosses the arid landscape around Jo'burg, occasionally relieved by large circular green fields, the shape presumably dictated by giant rotary irrigation systems. And then the green disappears and the landscape of the Kalahari takes over, more

shades of ochre than you would have thought possible with one or two plumb lines of white stretching to the horizon where the sand has been beaten into a road. We had hoped to get the chance to find a cache just outside the small terminal building of Maun International Airport: it would be our only chance to get a cache in Botswana. But we were met immediately, our bags whisked from us for transfer to the light aircraft that would take us on to the Pom Pom airstrip in the Delta and we were ushered through yet another security check and into the light aircraft departure area.

8. It seemed that we were the only passengers for Pom Pom. A minibus took us across the apron to a number of small planes where we met our pilot, Tap. Having been flown in a questionably airworthy small plane over Venezuela by an overweight pilot with only one functioning eye, it was welcome to be shown to a smart 4 seater high wing plane by a trim pilot with a full complement of eyes. Leaving Maun, the plane climbed quickly and we soon passed over the hugely long “Buffalo Fence” that almost wholly surrounds three sides of the Delta, built to keep the wild animals from straying into the cultivated land.



9. We knew the Delta is big but flying over part of it gave a real sense of just how vast the area is. And it was a fine introduction to the variety of terrain, the contrasts between the

ochres, yellows and tans of the dry areas of bush and savannah, the white of salt and bare sand and the lush greens surrounding pools and channels of water. And everywhere were what looked like monuments or standing stones – circular areas of grey with pinnacles rising from them – termite mounds. We were taking this in and at the same time pointing excitedly as we picked out elephant and hippo. Then as the plane dropped, we passed a large white-headed fish eagle. Tap put the plane into an elegant wing-over and came in for a whisper soft landing on the dirt strip of Pom Pom. More excitement as we realised that the large fibrous bundles on the perimeter of the strip were elephant droppings. There really were animals out there... Oh, how naïve!

10. Tap handed us on to a guide called Elicious who took us and our bags to a large green all terrain vehicle. Together with the light planes, these ATVs are the workhorses of the Delta, long wheel-base Toyota LandCruisers with a canvas roof over three rows of bench seats which are elevated above the driver's compartment. On the front left of the bonnet is a folding seat which is used by a tracker to look ahead on the "roads" for signs of animals. Although the vehicle would seat 9 (plus driver/guide and tracker) we were the only passengers apart from a couple of ladies who were returning to work at a safari lodge from leave in Maun – which is where most of the staff in the lodges come from.

11. About a third of the Delta is taken up by the Moremi Game Reserve, the first protected reserve in Africa to be established by local people. The rest contains land concessions to the companies that operate the safari lodges. We were traveling with a company called And Beyond, who operate 4 lodges in the Delta and our plan – or at any rate the plan we were advised to follow - was to stay in two of them: first Xudum (pronounced "kudum" with a soft click on the k) which is a "wet camp" on a permanent channel with a lot of water and river in its nearly 700,000 acres of concession, then moving on to Sandibe, a "dry camp" on the north east side of the Delta with more bush and savannah in its terrain. The name "And Beyond" reflects the origins of the company in a safari lodge in the Republic of South Africa and their subsequent expansion into other areas of the continent such as Botswana, Tanzania and Kenya and, er, beyond. They now also operate in southern Asia and northern India. As well as looking at the pictures of extraordinarily luxurious looking accommodation on their website, to assuage our liberal consciences we also read about their commitment to conservation, eco-friendly operation and support for local community projects in the areas where they operate.

12. Almost immediately on leaving the airstrip we started to come across animals, a lone male tsessebe (the fastest antelope, known as "the Botswana Ferrari") – a beast we would soon be seeing regularly in large herds - an egret and a small crocodile as we crossed a watercourse, another fish eagle and a pied kingfisher (which hovers over the water like a humming bird before diving for fish) a pair of elephants and some impala and in the sand tracks of lion and hyena. The landscape is dominated by the large towers of the termite

mounds. Because the water table is relatively high in the Delta, the termites go in for high-rise construction (in the rest of the Kalahari there is almost nothing above ground, but an extensive system of cellarage). The mounds are the second feature after the water that gives the area its distinctive landforms. The mounds provide fertile ground for germinating seeds and most have one or more trees growing out of them. The roots help consolidate the sand further and as water pools around the mounds in the wet season, sedimentation accumulates further sand and they grow into islands. The mounds are equally important to the animals. They provide look-out points for grazing animals to keep an eye out for predators, they provide sheltered spots to lie up in the heat of the day. Once first opened by aardvarks ripping into them to Hoover up the termites, holes provide homes for snakes and mongooses (a mound with mongoose and snake sized holes is known as a “Mamba Hotel”). And as the holes get bigger they provide dens for hyena, wild dogs and warthogs.



Tsessbe



Xaranna Lodge



Cocktails & canapés on the water

13. First stop en route to Xudum was another And Beyond lodge, Xaranna, which is built on the side of the river that bisects the territories of the two lodges. Here we were to transfer

to a boat and travel upstream to meet the guide from Xudum. We left the ATV and were greeted by the manager of Xaranna who – as it was 4.00pm and obviously the cocktail hour – made us large gins and tonic and provided us a plate of canapés. We thought we were to take these on the verandah but it turned out that we were to take them while seated in the bow of the boat that Elicious steered along a channel through the papyrus and sedge which dominate the waterways. The channel gave way to a lagoon with the exit channel directly ahead. Also directly ahead and between us and the channel were two large – this close up, *very* large - brown backs and distinctive Mickey Mouse ears. As the hippos swung towards us, Elicious gunned the outboard and described an arc around them across the lagoon and into the exit channel. Dodging hippos while sipping cocktails. Welcome to Africa!

14. As Elicious steered us into the right bank of the channel where another vehicle was waiting, a line of three bull elephants was approaching. Elicious introduced us to SK, who would be our guide while in Xudum and set off to return to Xaranna. SK put our bags in the vehicle and pointed at the elephants who were flaring their ears. “It’s the mating season,” he said casually. “They can be very aggressive.” The question why were standing outside the vehicle watching them approach seemed more than a little pertinent. But before reaching us, the bulls turned into the channel and crossed to the other side. SK obviously knew that they were heading that way, he just didn’t share the information. He was to tease us again (equally effectively) later in our stay. Mind you, when he thought there was any possibility of risk, he was very careful – always checking behind convenient termite mounds before anyone took a comfort break.

15. The last stage of the journey to Xudum took us past herds of zebra, Marabou storks, mixed herds of tsessebe and impala and reedbuck beside the channels. And in the last large area of grassland before reaching the camp we came over a rise to be faced with a very large herd (200+) of Cape buffalo. They had, it seems, just arrived as they hadn’t been there when SK set out to collect us. The buffalo have wide sweeping horns which grow sideways from the flat of the head, looking like massive centre partings; they are, SK told us, the most dangerous animals in the continent – in the sense that they are responsible for many more human deaths than other beasts. Hippos are the next in line, then crocodiles. The big cats hardly figure in the competition.



Cape Buffalo

16. We were met at Xudum by the camp staff singing a welcome song in multi-part harmony as the vehicle pulled up. Our bags were taken away and we were given warm flannels and a welcome drink while being led to the shared area of the camp built beside a permanent channel of the Delta system. Once we were briefed on meal times, drive times and safety rules (the camp is entirely open and animals of all kinds wander freely through it, so basically you don't go anywhere after dark without a guide) and introduced to our butler, George, and Matilda our housemaid (no, really) we were shown to our "room". It was one of a line of four buildings, each separated by about 100m of light forest, built along the channel with views out across the water and surrounding area. Ours was the furthest from the common area building. It was larger than my first house. There was a large, canopied verandah with private plunge pool, a huge bedroom, a massive bathroom with free standing bath and a large shower area. There was another shower outside and a large divan with a canopy on the roof, which was recommended for the afternoon siesta. There was a large cool box and a slate so that we could order whatever drinks we wanted to fill it up. We never found the need for more than water as drinks before and during dinner flowed freely – in both senses – in the common area. There was also a large torch and a gas operated klaxon in case of unwanted visitors.

17. There wasn't a lot of time to explore our new domain as we were due to meet SK for our first evening drive. The day is built around two "drives" at the times when animals are most active. The first begins at sunrise and goes through to the early forenoon. By then all sensible animals are under cover and waiting out the hottest part of the day; even squirrels fall asleep at this time. The second drive begins around 16.00 and goes through the sunset, with the second part of the drive made using large lamps to seek out nocturnal activity. The first target of our evening drive was to revisit the buffalo herd and marvel again at the powerful build of the males and the care the beasts took to keep their young shielded from our approach. Even more remarkable was that by the following morning, the herd had moved on and for all practical purposes vanished from the earth just as mysteriously as they had appeared. None of the guides could find them.



Sleeping squirrels; warthogs

18. As we moved on we were greeted by warthogs, elephant groups, and jackals and a group of ground hornbills. As the sun began to set a low grey shape with a black head and reddish flanks ran along in front of us and then crossed into the bush. It was a honey badger, a pretty rare sighting. (The camp manager was envious when we returned: "I've lived in Africa all my life and I've never seen one.") Despite its relatively small size (unsurprisingly it is badger sized) it is supposed to be the most aggressive animal in Africa. That is an understatement; more accurately it is completely psychotic. It will attack anything, irrespective of size. If one takes a dislike to one of the all terrain vehicles it will sink its teeth into a tyre and will not let go, regardless of being whirled round and bounced on the deck as the vehicle accelerates. The honey badger's hide is very loose and it can apparently turn round more than 30 degrees inside its own skin. So if anything is ill-advised enough to try to bite a honey badger – even from the rear – it will be faced by the badger turning on it to sink its own teeth into the face of its attacker. They are also pretty much indestructible. SK claimed to have driven over one that just got up and walked away after the vehicle had rolled

over it. I can believe it. There is a YouTube video of one attacking a cobra. While the badger is trying to bisect the snake, the cobra gets its fangs well into its attacker before succumbing. The badger carries on chowing down on the snake until the venom kicks in and the badger collapses. Dead, of course? No, just temporarily inconvenienced. After a few moments the badger wakes up, shakes itself and carries on eating snake meat.

19. As the sun reaches the horizon, SK pulls up to let us enjoy the riot of colour while he unpacks a table and a large box from the storage box at the back of the vehicle. The box contains a fully stocked cocktail bar, icebox and dishes of canapés. The colonial sundowner tradition is alive and well it seems. A G&T while watching the sunset and the onset of night while silvery jackal slide through the grass is hard to beat. A short run in the dark with the lamp shows us the local marsh owls hunting before we get back to Xudum where an excellent dinner with equally good wine is followed by a guided walk back to our room for a bath and bed. It had been a long and amazing day and we're due for an early call in the morning.



The bar is open: Africa-style

Wednesday, 2 October

20. Hippos spend the day in water and they are most active at night, when they come ashore to graze. They can travel long distances to find grassland. I mention this because it explains part of the symphony that played through the night. As they move about (they are surprisingly light footed) hippos snort and blow and call. The call is hard to describe, but imagine Brian Blessed playing Falstaff or maybe Santa and giving a deep “ho-ho-ho-ho” belly-laugh. Then play it through a rock band’s PA system turned up to stadium volume. The background is the continuous stentorian croaking of the frogs that live in the channel reeds. Add the swish and rattle of the wind moving the blinds and mosquito netting, monkeys dropping onto the roof and running across it (it is the best shortcut between trees on either side) and baboons in the next again tree giving it laldy as the sunrise approaches. But one way and another we still slept well – and once we had first experienced the night time sound track we just tuned it out on subsequent nights

21. So it was that we were actually still asleep when we got our 05.00 alarm call – not a telephone recording but SK gently calling our names outside the room. By 05.30 we had been fed coffee and biscuits and were seated in the vehicle – just us in ours, John another guest travelling alone had a vehicle and guide called OT to himself - ready to set off into the surprisingly chill start of the day. SK showed us fresh leopard tracks in the sand of the “road” and declared that leopard was the target for the morning. In fact the first sighting was a hyena, carrying a dried up lump of an old kill and searching for a pool to soften it up for breakfast. It must have been seriously dry as hyenas have enormously powerful jaws and digestive fluids of industrial strength which begin almost immediately at the back of the animal’s throat. It might well be the reflux of these acids that make hyenas so cantankerous, that or the fact that, however kindly you look upon them, they are plug-ugly, with the slope from their powerful forelegs to the tail giving them a Quasimodo gait. Unsurprisingly they are one of the “Ugly Five”. The “Fives” started with big game hunters identifying the animals hardest to hunt as the “Big Five” (elephant, rhino, Cape buffalo, lion and leopard). Then someone came up with the “Tiny Five” which mimic the “Big Five” at the other end of the faunal scale (elephant shrew, rhino beetle, buffalo weaver bird, antlion and leopard tortoise). There followed the “Shy Five” (aardvark, aardwolf, bat-eared fox, meerkat and porcupine) and the “Ugly Five” (hyena, wildebeest, warthog, marabou stork and vulture).

22. Past groups of tsessebe and impala we steered for “leopard island”, an area where SK knew the local young male leopard had its territory. We circled the “island” (which in the dry season is just a raised bit of land) without result and headed towards the river past a warthog family, a pregnant sow with two near grown offspring. The warthog trundles along with its tail raised vertically making surprising speed – from which it gets its soubriquet as the “Botswana Express”. Nearer to the river were groups of red lechwe, a particularly graceful

antelope with splayed elongated hooves that give it traction in the swampy ground of the river margins. As they bound through the river edge grasses they leave arcing trails of water gleaming in the sunlight. Like many herd animals, although the lechwe are seen in groups, there is usually no social relationship between the animals, save for the time a female has young with her. Also on the water margin were marabou and saddle-billed storks. The marabou stand up to five feet in height and have the largest wingspan of any bird at up to twelve feet (more has been reported). They qualify for membership of the “Ugly Five” by virtue of their ungainly gait and bald head and neck, an adaptation like the vulture’s to a diet based largely on carrion. The saddle-bills don’t compete on wing-span but stand a full foot taller than the marabous on enormous legs with orange joints supporting their iridescent black and white bodies. As the name suggests, their chief glory is their enormous bill, red with a black band and a square yellow shield or saddle where the bill meets the head. Another classic Delta bird, a lilac-breasted roller was displaying close to the vehicle. An exotic patchwork of kingfisher blue, yellow and pink with electric blue wings, it is often described as the national bird of Botswana, although SK told us that the official designation was not yet made and the roller was in a run-off against the saddle-bill. Was that just another tease?

23. A call came over the radio from OT in the other vehicle that they had found a pack of hyena feeding. The guides are thoroughly familiar with the local terrain and navigate by particular landmarks so the message that the hyenas were “just past the large tree” meant something to SK while for us, surrounded by large trees, it was wholly mysterious. Leaving the “road”, SK took the vehicle into the bush, skirting larger clumps and riding over smaller ones. The hyena were a group of five: a pregnant-looking female (mind you all hyena females seem to look pregnant) a male and three cubs. They were feeding on a baby buffalo, which SK presumed they had found already dead. The powerful jaws of the adults were dramatically in action, the buffalo was being very efficiently butchered into large joints; meanwhile, the cubs were getting their chance on the softer meat of the belly. Muzzles clotted with blood and tissue, the hyenas were definitely living up to the “ugly” tag, even without the soundtrack of crunching slurping and growling. It was our first experience of how close to the animals you can get: the hyenas seemed completely oblivious to two large green trucks just a few feet from their banquet. And we discovered that we could well do without long lenses and fancy cameras; our phones could do the job just fine. It seems that most animals have either become entirely familiar with the vehicles and simply ignore them or that they have a predisposition to accept that there are some big things in the world that move around noisily but don’t bother you and you don’t bother with them. For the visitor it means that as long as you stay within the perimeter of the vehicle, you are effectively invisible: the animals simply see one big thing. So the three key rules are “don’t point” and “don’t stand up” and “don’t shout”.



Hyenas and their buffalo meal

24. I could have stayed all day but SK had other ideas; while the two vehicles were together he had heard that wild dogs had been seen nearby recently. So we left the hyenas to their meal and set off past a group of red-breasted swallows in search of the dogs. SK turned off the trail towards a gap in the bush where he said he had seen the tops of dogs' ears. How? Those ears would have been two or three hundred feet away in the bush and at ninety degrees to his line of sight forward. And since he was driving a large vehicle over rolling sand and scrub with us aboard I fervently hoped that he was indeed focusing forward! But the dogs were there, a pack of eleven, two adult pairs and seven cubs feeding on the remains of an impala. The African wild dog is not to be confused with feral domestic beasts. It is a distinct

species also known as the “painted wolf”, a translation of its scientific name “*lycaon pictus*” and a very apt descriptive title as the fur is vari-coloured ochre, brown, black, white and yellow in irregular patches. The ears are distinctive, large and rounded. Although clearly canine, the wild dog has only four digits on its hind and fore limbs. All other dogs have five digits on their forepaws. The social group – which can be up to forty strong - is dominated by an alpha pair and as other females litter the alpha female will decide either to kill or take the offspring into the pack. The care of her cubs and those “adopted” is shared by all the adults and the pack also hunts as a group. Sadly, the dogs are the most endangered of the African carnivores, through a combination of disease and human activity. The population in northern Botswana is estimated to be around 800 animals.

25. Once again we could drive up close to the feeding animals. While the adults ignored the vehicle, the cubs were curious and came over to sniff and look around the hull, pausing only to cock their legs against the tyres. That done they returned to the adult group, occasionally gathering round one of the dogs and making “wee, wee, wee” noises that prompted the adult to regurgitate meat for them. A handy way to carry baby food when on the move. Suddenly the adults were all focusing in one direction; there was a hyena further along in the bush. As if planned, the pairs separated to approach the hyena obliquely from each side, surprised it and drove it away. Then after a little more feeding and play, the dominant female led the group away towards the river. We followed in the ATV. Once at the water margin the adults lay in the grass and watched the cubs play while the alpha female advance towards the water edge and lay down, looking at the water. It was as if she were weighing the decision whether to take the pack across. And in truth that would be a difficult decision to make: the hunting might be better on the other side or it might not and there would be a very real risk of meeting crocodiles in the river. She was obviously in no hurry to make up her mind and we set off again on the return leg to the lodge.



African Wild Dogs

26. We made a stop for coffee (the camp table was brought out to be loaded with flasks of coffee, milk and dishes of biscuits and fruit) and a comfort break behind a termite mound where a pile of enormous giraffe bones marked an earlier lion kill. Then stopped again as a roller conveniently posed for photographs on a bare branch just beside the track. This time the vehicle did not respond to the ignition key; nothing at all, not even a wheeze. SK radioed the second vehicle bearing our solitary fellow Xudum resident which rolled by very soon after the call, followed by a third vehicle with a couple of mechanics. And very shortly we were back at the lodge for an excellent and very welcome breakfast.

27. Which after unpacking and a little lounging time led on to lunch and a siesta. I took to the roof-top divan, waking to find myself looking at an adolescent green monkey. We knew from the night-time noises that the monkeys used the roof as a convenient passageway. It seems that they also used the rail around the divan as a thoroughfare to the stairs at the rear of the building and the troop had no doubt been doing that while I slept. But this fellow found himself cut off by a man now conscious. After bobbing about a bit with brows knitted he decided to try to scare me off. Standing up, teeth bared, displaying his penis, he reduced me to helpless laughter: at which point he ran round the rail and down the stairs and no doubt regaled the rest of the group with the story of his heroic encounter.

28. The sunset “drive” was to be a mokoro trip. The mokoro is the traditional dugout canoe of the Delta, originally made from the trunks of sausage-fruit trees although for conservation reasons only glass fibre versions are permitted now. It is propelled with a pole from the stern, punt-fashion. We sat on the floor of the canoe and SK took up the pole. Many of the Delta water courses are completely choked with papyrus reeds; it is the passage of hippos that create the navigable channels that the mokoros use, so the timing of a canoe trip is set for the time of day when hippos are most likely to be resting in the deeper lagoons. As SK emphasized (he had an ulterior motive) you really wouldn’t want to meet a hippo in a mokoro...

29. To underline the message, a large bull elephant came through the reeds to our right, slowly making his way towards the channel to cross into the trees on the far side. Being seated in a dug out makes an elephant seem even larger than it looks when viewed from a vehicle. At the other end of the scale were the painted frogs that live in the reeds. They are fingernail size and fold themselves around the reed stems. I was entirely incapable of spotting them but SK pointed them out and pulled reed stems with frogs attached across the boat with his pole. In the margins of the channel water lilies grow among the reeds. The pads provide a promenade for the African jacana a water bird with extraordinarily long toes that distribute its weight sufficiently to allow it to run along the pads as if walking on water. Chestnut brown with a white head and a long blue bill the jacana has a polyandrous mating system. Males make nests and care for the young and the females consort with many partners, moving on when her eggs are laid. In the clear water we could see banded jewel

fish, gold with black vertical bands. They also have a particular approach to child care. The female lays her eggs on a water lily stem and the male fertilizes them in situ. Then both fish stay by the stem, using their tail fins to fan the eggs, increasing the oxygen supply for the eggs during incubation. When the eggs hatch, the mother takes the fry into her mouth and makes a depression in the channel bed where the fry attach themselves to the bottom. The male fish then takes up guard duty over the nest until the fry are able to swim freely.



Painted g

Frog; Cooling hat in the mokoro

30. The water lilies also provide traditional “cooling hats” and decorations. Pulling up a couple of pads and stems, SK made two conical hats, the shape secured with a pin made from a section of a papyrus stem, biting a series of regular gaps into the skin of the stem and then threading it through itself with the flower at one end, he also made a necklace for Sally. The wet leaf hats certainly worked as quick cooler which could be recharged at will simply by dunking it over the side, so A for function. The sartorial quality was a bit more dubious. The channel led us up to an island which gave a welcome change of posture and chance to stretch our legs. A short climb up to the central spine of the island led to a view out over the far fringe where a group of thirty or so red lechwe were feeding.

31. The sun was dropping as we made the return journey towards the lodge. We were heading straight into the sun and it was difficult to see directly ahead. SK started to tell us that he could see something in the glare. We looked, spread our fingers to squint through them and sure enough there was something there – a black shape? Could it be a hippo on the

move early? SK fanned the flames of the thought by saying that whatever it was it was big enough to be a hippo; “It’s probably dead,” he said. “We should go and look.” This was plainly crazy, how could he know it was dead? And if it wasn’t.... We went closer...

32. At which point we were close enough for the glare to be cut off by the reeds and to see that the “hippo” was a large inflated inner tube with a bowl in the centre containing a bottle of champagne, two glasses and a dish of canapés. Even in a mokoro, SK could arrange a sundowner! We pulled alongside and took the bottle, glasses and canapés aboard. One of the advantages of us both having been to Oxbridge is that we know how to handle champagne in a punt and we made our final approach to the Lodge in fine style.



The “dead hippo”

33. As we were walking up the bank to the Lodge, SK turned in the direction of “leopard island” He could hear alarm calls from reedbuck and monkeys. “Quick!” he called “I’ll get the vehicle round to the front; bring the champagne and get in. It may be the leopard!” Clutching the bottle, bowl and glasses we climbed aboard and set off lurching and bumping in the gathering gloom on the most direct overland route to the trees where SK had previously seen the leopard. (Remember that P J O’Rourke essay, “How to Drive Fast on Drugs While Having Your Wing-Wang Pulled, Without Spilling Your Drink”?) We pulled round a tree with a large crook and there we could see the unmistakable silhouette of a leopard reclining legs astride the branch, its tail curling below. SK pulled out the large searchlight and cast a beam up into the tree, picking out not just the leopard but also a bush baby higher up in the branches. The leopard was supremely unconcerned; he lay there with an occasional languid yawn, occupied in simply being beautiful. SK called up OT and John who were at the other side of the concession, by the time they arrived the leopard – a young male – had decided it was time to climb down in a lithe and fluid motion. It seems he must have fed the night before as he was in no hurry to go hunting. Instead he played around the

base of the tree, showing himself a true feline by catching a mouse in a pile of elephant dung and toying cold-bloodedly with it as a domestic tabby might.

34. Returning to the lodge we were invited to share John's farewell dinner (he was due to leave in the morning) and were fed aromatic lamb shanks by a wood fire while the staff sang to us.



Our first leopard sighting

Thursday 3 October

35. We were joined for a pre-dawn start by Pro, SK's tracker, a man with the short muscular build that made it no surprise to learn that he was a San (the people once known as "Kalahari Bushmen"). With Pro mounted on the bonnet seat, we set off to leopard island to follow up on last night's sighting – and on the discovery of fresh tracks in the camp that told Pro that the leopard had paid us a reciprocal nocturnal visit. No sign of the leopard near his tree and we made a couple of slow circuits of the island driving through a sea of waist high grass. It was clearly a needle in a haystack job but then suddenly there was a leopard walking slowly along the trail in front of us in plain view. This was an older male, presumed to be trying to oust the younger one. He walked ahead, tail raised, spraying to mark the territory as he went. He climbed up a termite mound and took in the morning sun, sitting upright among the rocks. Then on again, us following, until he reached the channel at the far side of the island where it seemed he had taken to the water which was too deep for the ATV to cross. We drove around "the long way" and searched for him on the far side without success.



The Rival: Can you see the leopard?

36. We left the search and headed back to the lodge in a loop across the plain seeing groups of different antelope: wildebeest, kudu, steenboks, and reedbucks. The wildebeest were travelling and feeding with large herds of zebra, the herds containing numbers of pregnant females and young foals. The zebra is Botswana's national animal, its colours reflecting the colours of the national flag and symbolizing the harmonious relationships of the races in the country. Although we think of zebras as being black and white striped, the patterns are much less regular than the conventional "humbug" image and there is a less conspicuous "shadow stripe" on the white sections of the flank, like a faint charcoal line. There were many fish eagles; their shrill cries "the sound of Africa". Each pond seems to have its own, some circling, some perched in the tall bare trees that they favour. There was a pair of Wallenstein eagles, carrion eaters that specialise in eating the eyes and tongues of dead animals. We saw "hippo highways", trails beaten into the plain by the regular passage of the animals browsing in the night. We passed two large bull elephants, one possibly more than fifty years old with a missing tusk, holding a thick branch in his trunk and munching on it like a stick of rock. The other was browsing on a poisonous fever tree, apparently relishing the meal. The elephant is rather stuck in a dietary quandary. Its diet is so poor in anything much more than fibre that it has to eat huge quantities to get the nutrients it needs and to process all this roughage it needs an enormous digestive machine, which means that it has to be a gigantic animal which means that it needs to eat vast quantities to sustain itself, and so

on. In practice the result is that elephants can be hugely destructive to the vegetation, pushing down trees to get at branches they can't reach from the ground, tearing up large areas of rough grass and leaving the ground bare. But then the fallen trees sustain a whole other range of organisms and the bared savannah is effectively tilled by the tearing up of the grass and, fertilized by the elephants' dung, so it can regrow lusher than before. Needless to say, this long term ecological balance does not work in cultivated areas and a visit from a herd of elephants is pretty much number one on farmers' lists of catastrophes.

37. We made a coffee stop by a termite mound that had very recently been raided by an aardvark whose tracks were plainly visible in the sand. The fine sand of the Delta is a wonderful medium for taking impressions and Pro showed us how he could tell which way animals were travelling (pretty obvious – except for the crinkly ovals left by elephant feet, their toenails leave only a very faint impression on the leading edge), how long it had been since the tracks were made (by judging their clarity and the amount of sand that had been sifted over them by the slight breeze) and at what time of day (whether they were overlaid by, or themselves overlaid, the tracks of the francolins: birds active around dawn). It seemed possible to imagine doing it when were stationary, crouching and looking carefully at the ground. Pro of course could do it while bouncing around on the bonnet of a moving vehicle rolling through the bush.

38. Back at Xudum we were taking breakfast on the terrace when there were sounds like loud shots from across the channel. There was a bull elephant, head down, pushing over a large tree to get at the upper branches; the noise was the splintering of the trunk as it succumbed. He was joined by three cows of varying ages. By the time we had lunched and taken a siesta two new couples, one from France and one from Kentucky had arrived at the lodge and were preparing for their first afternoon drive. They joined together as a foursome in a vehicle with OT while we remained in solitary splendor with SK and Pro. The two vehicles split up, both with a mission to find the younger leopard that had been displaced from his territory.



Xudum Lodge

39. It was OT who called in to say they had found him. He was in a new area, elegantly draped over a branch and content for us to admire him, even deigning to reverse position at one point so we could see his other profile. We then headed to another new area, the southern plain via a forest section where we watched a group of ground hornbills. Turkey sized, black with bright red faces and bare throat patches and - of course – large, curved bills, the adults were sifting through the leaf litter for the snakes, insects and other animals they eat. They are known to take other birds and to tackle tortoises. The chicks were fluttering around apparently disguised as leaves. The hornbill is a “co-operative breeder”; each breeding pair is assisted by at least two other birds and experiments in captivity have shown that birds without at least six years experience as “helpers at the nest” are unable to breed successfully. With that and the fact that chicks are dependent for up to two years – meaning at best a triennial breeding cycle – it is fortunate that hornbills live a long time, up to seventy years. Home is usually a hollow tree bole but a hollowed out termite mound can also serve.



Elegant killing machine

40. On the edge of the forest area elephants were co-operating to knock down a baobab tree. The baobab is called the “upside down tree” because its branches look like a root system. Evidently this baobab didn’t have long before it would be upside down for real. There were also sausage fruit trees – hanging fruit just like large bangers and some smaller creatures: bush baby and rabbit (“leopard snacks” according to Pro). The plain was rich with zebra, tsessebe and kudu with their beautiful large spiral horns. Rather more distant was a large group of wildebeest. The collective noun for the wildebeest is apparently “an implausibility of gnus”. The poor creatures do look rather unlikely – the head and shoulders of something like a bison and the body of an antelope, which is what it is. I confessed I thought they were rather fine looking animals but Pro was having none of it; pointing out a wildebeest skeleton he said “Even their bones are ugly”. On our way to the sundowner spot, mongooses – of both slender and dwarf varieties were running between termite mounds. There was a resident banded mongoose in the camp which we had seen a couple of times. The collective noun for mongooses is “a business of mongooses”; and, while we are about it, it’s “a dazzle of zebras”, “an obstinacy of buffaloes”, and “a journey of giraffes”. It seems likely that the creative spirit of colonial vocabulary was enhanced after a few sundowners...



Kudu; Wildebeest

41. When we return to camp, SK and Pro confirm that our morning drive will be a boat trip, this time on a larger motor-powered craft. This means we are entitled to an extra hour and a half in bed – our morning call won't be until 06.30.

Friday, 4 October

42. Did I dream that I heard the “cough” of a leopard among the hippo calls and frog songs last night? Whatever the truth of that, it was a fact that our long lie was not to be. Just after five o'clock, SK was running to the room, calling urgently: “Can you get up? The young leopard has a kill!” The young male was back in his original territory, lying in the long grass below his original tree with a week-old baby reed buck. Strictly speaking it's not a “kill”, the reed buck is still alive and the leopard is alternately licking it tenderly and biting into its hind legs. Each bite produces a crunching noise and a high, plangent cry from the buck. Its mother is bounding through the grass searching for her infant and calling alarm calls to it. The survival strategy for infant bucks is to lie still in the grass while mother feeds; only in response to an alarm call from its mother will the infant run. Sadly this one is not going to run anywhere and its cries of distress are drawing mother closer, bouncing high over the grass. Whether it is a deliberate strategy or just opportunism is debatable, but either way the leopard now leaves its prey and starts to stalk towards the female reed buck. Entirely unable to influence the outcome, it is gruesomely fascinating to watch. Eventually the female buck bounces away and the leopard returns to the infant, this time to feed. The noises are really very far from pretty: beautiful he may be, but the leopard is truly a killing machine.



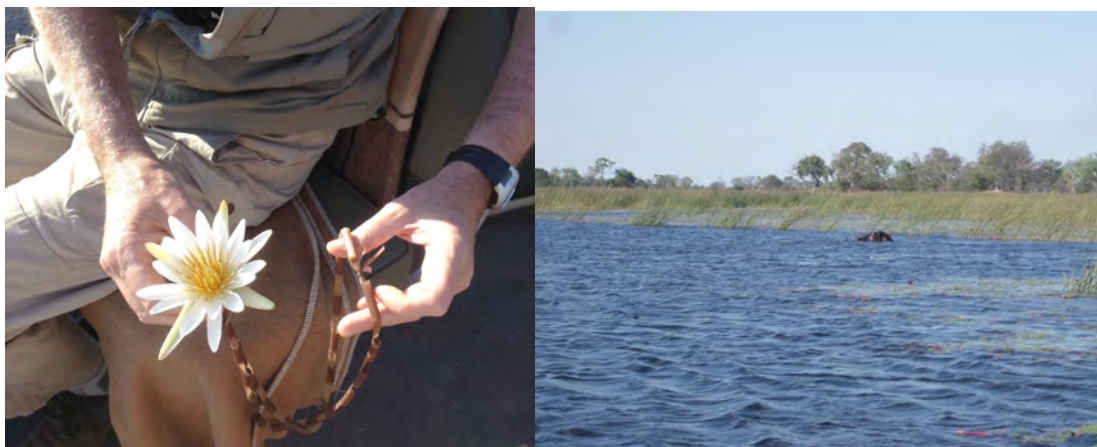
Leopard with baby reedbuck

43. Back at camp we leave the vehicle and get into the boat. Almost immediately we enter the channel a large hippo surfaces in front of us, blowing. After crashing about a bit, he sets off away from us, below the water but setting up a huge bow wave on the surface. Then the wave enters a small lagoon and dissipates: has he stopped in the lagoon or continued? No wave appears in the channel: he has either slowed down or stayed in the lagoon. Just in case he is still about we run the lagoon fast and then slow down in the channel where an elephant

is standing to one side eating water lily roots. Having pulled up a large bundle of the long tubes the beast is washing them in a rotary motion to clean out the sand and then feeding them into its mouth like a forkful of extra-long linguine. The coffee box from the vehicle is produced and coffee, biscuits and dried fruit are served as we progress. This time it's Pro's turn to make Sally a water lily garland. We find more painted reed frogs (how can something so small make such a loud noise?) and watch a malachite kingfisher, the most exquisite and brightly coloured bird imaginable: a fantasy by Faberge. A pied kingfisher hovers, dives and surfaces with a fish. A goliath heron takes off from among the reeds, fully living up to its name. Slate grey wings, a chestnut head, neck and crest and a banded white belly, it looks about the size of a light aircraft as it turns. On the opposite bank, three giraffe are making their way among the trees and feeding as they go. It is extraordinary but these enormous angular creatures can disappear from view among the trunks before being spotted again.



Up close to an elephant



Necklace; hippo blocks our way back

44. The channel leads into a large lagoon and having crossed it we turn for home. There are four hippos in the lagoon, a group of three and a single animal separated from them. The group of three comprises a male and two attendant females, the single hippo is a subordinate male sizing up his chances. The hippos occasionally surface and the males yawn at one another – each showing his rival his large canine teeth. As herbivores hippos have no need of canines for feeding, they are solely used for fighting – and fights often end with one animal dead and one badly wounded. The problem for us is that when they do surface they tend to have moved from one side of the lagoon to the other, which makes deciding which side to use to run back to the channel a little difficult. We make it without incident and follow the channel round to where the elephant was eating noodles. He is now standing in the centre of the channel but obligingly moves aside to let us pass – which we do, possibly three feet from his grey flank. The last question of the journey is whether the first hippo is still in the original lagoon. If he was, we didn't see him and are soon enjoying breakfast. Some light bird watching and reading takes us through to lunch, after which we have to wait for an elephant which is wandering along the path to our room; once he has moved on we head for a siesta.

45. The first stop of our last afternoon drive at Xudum is to check out the young leopard's kill site. On the way we pass the grizzled old elephant that had held up our siesta. He is now standing just outside the camp, digging up acacia roots with his forefeet and scooping them up to munch. At the tree the hooves and some skin from the reed buck are all that remains. There is no sign of the leopard: SK evidently thinks that this is because of the boisterous laughter and loud chatter from a second truck – his expression clearly reads, "Bad Form!"

In the grassland near the camp there are wildebeest, zebra, tsessebe, lechwe and elephant all heading towards the water. Further on towards another small channel there are marabou stork saddle-bills and wattled cranes. The cranes, large elegant birds, are a species at risk with estimates of a total population less than 8,000. More kudu, elephant and zebra; warthogs and, in the forest margin a journey of giraffes – two young with their mother and a courting couple rubbing their necks together.



Impala

46. Our sundown stop is at what used to be Xudum's own airstrip. Sadly the location was not well chosen and it was regularly flooded. Pro brings a handful of ash from a tree stump burned out by a lightning strike. His people use the ash, rich in potash, as a hair conditioner and toothpaste. On the return journey in the dark, the searchlight picks out steenbok and the headlights show a nightjar sitting on the "road" quietly munching its beakful of insects before taking off again to hunt for more. As it's our last night at Xudum our dinner is set at the "parting table" by the fire and when we return to the room the bed is decorated with "Sally and Michael, Goodbye" spelled out in petals; there is champagne in an ice bucket, a foaming bath has been drawn and candles lit, all courtesy of our housekeeper, Matilda. This time we really do get a long lie; our call is at 07.30 for an 09.30 departure to meet a flight at 10.45 to take us on to Sandibe.

Saturday, 5 October

47. By the time we were at breakfast everyone else was out for the morning drive. Pro was about to drive us to Pom Pom and we made our farewells to the camp staff. Pro told us that there were reports of lion being sighted near our route and we detoured, following the

tracks of the vehicle that had called in the sighting. But there was no lion to be seen and we continued, stopping for a driver whose ATV had broken down while bringing in supplies to Xudum. He had no radio, so depended on another vehicle happening upon him. At the river a boat was in place on the bank; Pro produced a part for the outboard and we crossed with our bags to where a further vehicle waited to take us to the airstrip which we reached as our plane approached, landed and taxied back up the strip. It was Tap again.



To Sandibe

48. The flight gave us another view of the immensity of the Delta. There were two large herds of buffalo moving across the landscape, a breeding herd of elephant and a solitary bull standing in a watercourse. Tap demonstrated his landing skills again at Chitabe, putting the plane down on the rough strip like he was putting a baby to bed. We were greeted by Gee, a Sandibe guide, who drove us to the lodge passing a pair of yellow-beaked kites, a tsessebe family group, the female heavily pregnant. There were warthog, elephant, a “boys club” of young male impala and the bright flashes of a group of carmine bee-eaters.

49. We arrived to a sung welcome, warm flannels and fruit juice cocktails. Sandibe was to be closed for refurbishment later in the season and parts of it did look a little tired but the level of luxury was still very high. Our “room” was once again a detached house with a verandah and a wooden walkway onto a covered deck built over the marsh which fringes one side of the camp. The common area was built like a local village longhouse, open on three sides with a tall thatched roof and a mezzanine deck through which a troop of monkeys regularly clatter to raid food, mothers with infants clinging to their bellies. The butler, TP, carried a pole to drive them off, but it was a fruitless task. The inside of the roof was clustered with fruit bats, wrapped in their leathery wings, hanging by their toes from the netting that secured the palm thatch. Every so often one would open its wings and flap a little before folding itself back up again. Mining wasps had made hay with the ornamental boxes

on the coffee table in the seating area and some had even started work on a couple of the electrical sockets, turning the square holes round.



Sandibe camp

50. Heading for a post lunch siesta we were greeted by two female elephants with young, one of which was much smaller than the other. We managed to get into the room but wondered if we would get out again for the afternoon drive as one of the females headed back up the path to the common area. They were, however, gone by the time we woke up. At tea the monkeys staged another successful raid, making off with fruit that they ate sitting in the trees just outside the building just to annoy the butler, TP.

51. Our guide and tracker, Lesh and Twaelo introduced themselves and we set off for the sunset drive in company with a couple from Switzerland. There were many breeding groups of elephant, younger mothers some pregnant some with young accompanied by older “aunties” and led by a matriarch. One group obviously thought we were too close to the young and an auntie turned to us, flaring her ears and trumpeting. The trail we followed crossed a river, the water just below the deck of the ATV. A large Nile crocodile thrashed up onto the bank as we crossed; it was lying there in wait for animals taking the same route. Further on there were still more elephant groups, giraffe, impala, lechwe and zebra in smaller groups of males.

52. The main reason for including Sandibe as a “dry camp” in our itinerary was to get a chance to see more of the big cats and Lesh explained the current social set up of the local lions. There was an established pride led by two older males and there was a recent arrival of a couple of younger males who had formed an alliance to muscle in and take over. Tonight’s

drive was towards the area where these two had last been sighted; we found “cold” tracks but no lion. We continued to an open area which was the domain of the local cheetah passing warthog and more giraffe. Once again we found “cold” tracks but no cat. Heading for our sundown spot we saw ostrich, mongooses peering from burrows in termite mounds and a group of baboons led by a large old male who was hunkered down with his arms folded over his knees watching the antics of the young ones with an expression that read “Youngsters! Bah! It’s all gone to hell in a handcart these days”.

53. Sundown cocktails were taken on a slight rise above a large pool that was stiff with hippos. Every so often one or other of the males would raise his head and make a threatening yawn display. I asked Lesh what they were displaying at, was it each other? He patiently waited for it to dawn on me that they displaying at us – “Keep out of our pool!”. The sky turned riotous orange, pink, red and purple and then it was time to be returning, with the lights showing up hippos grazing and running across the grass, surprisingly fast and graceful. We also came past a termite mound that had been taken over as a home by three hyena mothers. They were outside lying on their sides with their pups playing around them. One of the pups, drawn by curiosity about the searchlight, found Twaelo’s boot and put his paws on the bumper to get a good sniff and then a gnaw. He was gently pushed away. Dinner was served “on the beach”, a sandy area by the marsh fringe lit by blazing torches and a large fire and then it was time to sleep, ready for another early call.



Sunset ‘yawn’

54. The call came in the form of Lesh tapping a drum outside the room and we woke to hear monkeys delivering shrill alarm calls. There was a leopard somewhere in the marsh; indeed, TP had seen it pad calmly across the dining terrace when he arrived to get the morning coffee set out. The Swiss couple were leaving this morning so we had a “private car” heading past the large groups of elephant and antelopes towards the hyena den. Two of the females were lying outside taking the early morning sun, quite unconcerned by our arrival. Then two by two, four pups appeared and started playing in the sand and crawling over the adults. How do cute balls of fluff like this turn into something as ugly as a hyena? One of the fat females added point to the question by spraying a large pool of urine onto the sand and then rolling in it – a behaviour which promotes cooling by evaporation but looks like typical hyena boorishness.



Hyena cubs & Mum

55. We carried on towards the cheetah plain, passing a termite mound that had recently seen the attentions of an aardvark. Eight magpie shrikes were feeding on the remaining termites. Driving across the plain and spotting no tracks, we were prepared to be disappointed again. But Twaelo called softly and pointed to our left; under a bush on the side of termite mound was the distinctive silhouette of a cheetah’s head. As we approached the cheetah rose and walked across an open area to a taller second mound with a large tree growing from it. It is hard to express the languid beauty of the cheetah’s liquid stride, the ripple of its body and the sinuous curve of its long tail. Climbing the mound, the cheetah

settled into the shade and slept in momentary bursts, waking every few seconds to look around. I knew, of course, that cheetahs rely principally on speed to catch prey; I didn't know that, having caught something, they then have to eat quickly too. They are "bottom cat" in the pecking order and other cats and even hyena will drive them off a kill and take it for themselves. Experienced cheetahs will avoid opening the body cavity of a kill until they have fed on the rest to reduce the chances of other animals scenting the meal.



Cheetah; first sighting

56. We set off to go to "lion country" to see if any of the local pride are about. On the way a group of helmet-headed guinea fowl spilled out of the bush and across the trail and further on we passed a pair of southern white-backed hornbills. A group of vultures, a mixture of white-headed and white-backed varieties circled low nearby. Then a slight detour to visit a group of ostrich, sitting in the sand. Ostrich form mating groups, each male has four females one of which is the principal. She lays first then the others lay around her eggs, providing insulation to improve her reproductive chances. The three secondary females then disappear and the principal pair raise any chicks that hatch.

57. Back on the trail to lion country, the route skirts round a large forested island from where monkeys are alarm calling. There is a leopard in the area and that may be the reason for the calls, so Lesh noses the ATV up through the scrub and into the trees, crunching over

acacia and thorn bushes on the way. Weaving between the trunks we are concentrating on looking up for branches that might be a suitable resting spot for a leopard. It is Sally who says, "There it is" and tells us to look on the ground where, between two bushes and close to the left side of the vehicle, a slender leopard is sitting upright on the sand, tail demurely wrapped around. It is a young female, much lighter in build than the males we saw at Xudum; she rises and silkily glides to a tree then climbs sinuously up and reclines on a branch, looking back at us showing a distinctive mark in her right eye just below the pupil. Lesh tells us that she is the daughter of an older female leopard with a nearby territory. This is her first season in her own patch and the mother still visits occasionally as if to check on how she is getting on.



58. Moving on we pass giraffe, zebra, wildebeest and yet more elephants. Twaelo on the bonnet spots fresh lion tracks and we follow them until he calls for us to stop, climbs down and examines the tracks closely. The lions have doubled back, so we turn and follow the trail to a termite mound covered in acacia, under which three lionesses are lying in the shade. The group is a mother with two of her daughters, each just over two years old. A little further away in the open ground a warthog, tail high and nose down is rootling about. Then, oblivious to the lions (warthogs have poor eyesight and rely primarily on hearing and scent), the hog trundles slowly directly across the line of sight of the lionesses. Mother rises slowly and stalks obliquely towards an acacia bush closer to the hogs line of travel. Then having got there, she obviously decides that she's had enough pork recently and anyway it's a bit hot to be chasing around in the open. Still unaware of her and her daughters' presence, the luckiest warthog in Botswana goes on his way.



59. Heading back to the lodge we pass a journey of dozen or more giraffe and then a large herd of impala. Watching the giraffes moving around, sometimes surprisingly quickly, you can see the real peculiarity of their gait: they move both legs on one side simultaneously, then the opposite pair. A miracle of balance. In the same area a little further away a group of kudu with their beautiful spiral horns is grazing. The horns are so complex that they can become locked together when males are fighting, with the result that both animals die. One of them, for no apparent reason, suddenly starts running in a wide circle, repeating the gallop several times. Further on a large troop of baboons streams across the trail, there are more than a hundred of them, smallest infants clinging under mothers' bellies, older ones riding jockey style on mothers' backs. One mother is holding a dead baby baboon. Apparently the maternal instinct is so strong that a mother will keep hold of a dead baby until it literally falls apart. A little further two large bull elephants are standing on the "road" under the shade of an overhanging tree. They clearly have no intention of moving for us and we make a cautious off-road circuit to pass them. ("Off-road" for the bush that is; the "roads" themselves would be considered off-road driving anywhere else.) By the time we make it back to the lodge we have been out for nearly six hours, in which time we've covered twenty-nine miles. A quick brunch and siesta comes as an almost instant black-out.

60. For the sunset drive we are joined by an English couple, Robert and Caroline. (Robert would win prizes in a Robert Hardy impersonator compensation.) On the drive out we are seeing birds – black-chested eagles, and by the river crossing blacksmith lapwings, slate egrets, squawker herons and spur-wing geese. If the crocodile is still here, he's keeping himself concealed. Past the river we come upon a group of elephant mothers and aunties. One of the calves is tiny, probably less than a month old, its ears still folded in and it is obviously still in the early stages of learning what it can do with its trunk. A return visit to the cheetah plain shows the cheetah still on his termite mound. As we arrive he wakes up, sits up and looks around and then undertakes a bit of scratching and spraying to mark his tree. Another suicidal warthog (or perhaps it's the same one?) trundles directly towards the cheetah's mound under his watchful orange-red gaze. But the god of warthogs is still on duty and the cheetah makes no attempt to take the bait and the oblivious hog veers off to rootle in another mound. Further out on the plain Sally spots a distinctive striding bird. It is a Secretary Bird, a mainly terrestrial predator that stalks imperiously along on long legs with black upper and white lower parts – a fine impersonation of breeches and silk stockings. The eighteenth century costume is completed with a long stiff tail like the skirts of a morning coat and a fancy plumed hat in the form of an erect crest. We return to the hippo pool for sundowners and the night drive shows us trotting hippo and an African wild cat.



Cheetah; second sightin

Monday, 7 October

61. There were elephants all around the room overnight, munching the trees and rubbing their backs against the walls of the building. We got our 05.30 call but when we left the building to walk up to the terrace, the path was blocked by a large elephant. At the front end she was stripping branches and at the other she was depositing fibrous bundles over the path. After a while she moved a little into the trees and we were able to skirt round her through the area around the next building along. Gee became our driver for the day as Lesh was unwell overnight and had to go to Maun to see a doctor.

62. On the drive out, Twaelo had the car stopped to pick some small red seeds from open dry pods on a bush. They were “lucky beans” he said; we were to make a wish, whisper it to the beans and put them in our pockets. Both of us made the same wish: “male lions”. But first it was water life and birds as the route ran around the fringe of a marshy area interspersed with lagoons. In one there was a great thrashing and splashing as two hippos mated and a third tried to get in on the act. There were kingfishers, pied and malachite; fish eagles, black-chested eagles, ox-bills, hornbills and spur-winged geese. Turning away from the marsh and towards lion country we passed the inevitable masses of elephants, a group of kudu, impala and a troop of baboons. Ahead of us in an open area punctuated with termite mounds were the two boss lions of the local pride. It has to be said that these kings of beasts were not looking their best – not so much the glamour of the young Henry the Fifth more the squalor of the later Henry the Eighth. Both were fast asleep, more or less in the open: no need for concealment; nothing was going to mess with them. They had clearly fed largely on buffalo the evening before. Their muzzles were black with blood and feeding flies. Their bellies were hugely distended; one of them so far that its owner could not sleep on its side and was all but lying on its back, one hind leg in the air. Well, the beans had done their job!



Satisfied lions.

63. If male lions had been missing from our “tick-list” of iconic animals, Robert and Caroline needed to see a leopard. We visited the place where we had seen the young female and a couple of other possible areas but with no success. Returning towards the marsh edge we passed a group of elephants including a small calf with no tail and a stub of a trunk. Gee thought it had probably been rescued from a crocodile attack by the older animals, but lost its appendages in the process. With no trunk it may not have much of a future. At a lagoon there was an open-billed stork – the name describes it precisely: a large black wading bird whose large bill meets only at the tip, an adaptation to its diet of molluscs. There were Hammerkop – another descriptive name, this wading bird has a hammer-shaped head and feeds in the shallows on shrimps, fish and amphibians. The most extraordinary thing about them was

evident in the trees behind us. Hammerkops build absolutely huge nests, up to five feet across, out of sticks cemented together with mud and decorated outside with whatever brightly coloured things the birds can find. The nest is entered by a mud-plastered entry hole in the bottom which gives access to a two-foot long tunnel leading to a nesting chamber. There were whistling ducks – which is a less accurate descriptive name; they do have a high whistling call, but they are not true ducks. And there were copper-tailed coucals, the coucals are species of cuckoo and their calls are characteristic sounds of the bush. The run home along the marsh fringe was rich with waterside antelopes and brunch was followed by another instant oblivion siesta.



64. The sunset drive took us back to leopard territory, again without result – although Robert was so keen to see one that almost every object had him calling “There’s one!”. The cheetah was not at home, either. Gee turned to a new area, a run along the river which divides the Sandibe concession from the Moremi Reserve. Passing through a forest belt a giraffe was feeding on sausage fruit, stretching as high as its neck would reach and then curling its tongue around the fruit, pulling it down to its lips and drawing it into its mouth, the giraffe (which has only molars) used its lips to nip the fruit off the stalk. An area of the river where hippos were gathered appeared to be reduced to mud, but in fact the thick brown surface was an infestation of an alien water weed. Further on a group of elephants was being led down the bank on the Moremi side to drink and possibly cross the river. They gave up the latter option when we stopped to watch them. We drove on to the sundown spot across

cropped sward and rich herds of many kinds of antelope and many zebra; and after the customary sunset fireworks we turned for a long night drive with the lights picking out eagle owl, a rare bat-eared fox, two civets, a wild cat and another honey badger.



Sausage fruit





Elephants at sunset; hippos in the weed

Tuesday, 8 October

65. Woken by an 05.30 drum call, we continued the search for a leopard for Caroline and Robert. On our way a “boys’ club” of adolescent bull elephants blocked the trail and were not going to give way as the vehicle approached. Much ear flaring led to one bull making a demonstration charge – running towards us like a drunk in a pub shouting “Hold me back!”. (At least that’s what it looks like in retrospect because I now know that the beast stopped short. Gee and Twaelo read it at the time and reassured us that the bull would not follow through: we were by no means so sure!) Gee responded by gunning the engine and the “boys” gave us some space, trumpeting boisterously as we left the scene as if to say, “Saw them off good and proper, eh lads?!”

66. The search for leopards was again fruitless. But as we turned, the radio alerted us to a sighting of a younger male lion, a son of one of the debauched pair we had visited yesterday and one of the pair of younger males trying to take over the pride. (Maybe references to medieval royal houses is even more appropriate than I thought.) As we arrived, the lion was

in an area of grass, sitting by an acacia bush showing his golden mane – which will darken as he matures – and generally looking a lot more spruce than his Dad and uncle did yesterday! Across the grassy area from him was a pair of side-striped jackals. At some point in the development of the species, jackals must have hired a really bad PR agent. Their name is synonymous with almost everything negative. Yet the reality is that jackals are very attractive animals, handsome and domestic dog-like; and, as these jackal demonstrated, they are pretty gutsy. Spotting the jackals, the lion stood and trotted over towards them. One jackal went to earth in their den (presumably they had young there), the other stayed above ground and danced around, teasing the lion which was sniffing at the entrance to the den. Then the jackal began yipping a continuous series of alarm calls and the lion recognised that any possible prey was now well aware of his presence and stood up. The jackal walked towards him, yipping the while. The lion stood for a while; you could see “Is this guy for real? I’m about ten times his size!” running through his head. Eventually, the lion gave it up as a bad job and went back to his bush to take a nap: jackals one, lions nil.





67. A further leopard search came up dry (despite Robert's imaginings) and Gee took us to another new area which had been forest but where all the trees were killed over a hundred years ago by unseasonal flooding. Dried dead trees still stand rising from banks of sand. A pair of ostrich with a group of fifteen fluffy chicks ran away as we approached. We had our coffee break in this extraordinary landscape and then returned to the lodge along the fringe of the marsh.

68. We went to our room before brunch to drop off our dusty kit. As we stepped onto the verandah to open the door we realised that we were not alone; just the other side of the verandah, looking at us through soulful eyes with long, spare lashes was a female elephant. She had her family in tow: a small baby still not fully weaned and a young bull of three plus years. (With all the elephants we had seen, we had learned how to judge gender and age!) The family were browsing in the bushes and trees beside the building; the mother delicately picking leaves with the "fingers and thumb" in the tip of her trunk, the three year old was crashing about noisily, and the baby was small enough to get under the deck to the fresh green grass and sedge there. Having got into the room, the question was when would be able to get back out? Meantime, we watched the family: the young bull quickly bored of the tress

and trundled into the marsh to splash around in the mud; the baby decided he needed something to go with his grass and came back to the mother to suckle; and once his immediate needs were satisfied, the mother led him on into the marsh, making deep rumbling calls to her other more boisterous youngster.



Visitors at our lodge

69. This was to be our last sunset drive. Once again we searched without success for a leopard for Caroline and Robert. It did seem unfair – leopards are known as the most elusive of the cats (a website for trainee guides says that a guide may work in the bush for a year or more and not see one) and we had seen three and become almost intimate with the young male at Xudum. We also revisited the lion sighting places and the hyena den, equally without success. A tour of the marsh fringe and the dead forest were also cat-less. This concentration on cats, and even more specifically leopard, is, of course, to ignore the dozens of elephants, many kinds of antelope, birds (including another group of ground hornbills) and so many giraffes I lost count. We took our sundowners by the hippo pool and once again the sunset was magnificent. Our return night drive showed us eagle owls, hyena, genet and wild cat. Our parting dinner was set on the pontoon over the marsh with candles floating in air-filled bags on the water; champagne was on ice in our room and the bed decorated with the message “Sally and Michael – We Care”. Tomorrow we leave the Delta. It will be a wrench. We care, too!



Last Botswanian sunset cocktails

Wednesday, 9 October

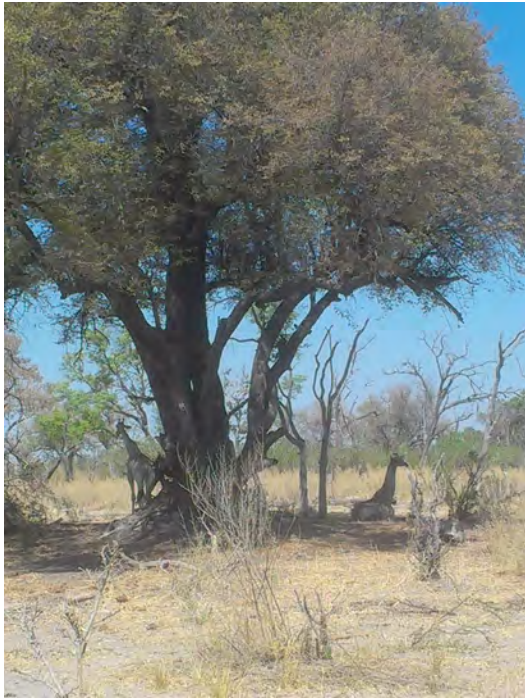
70. Another late start, breakfast at 07.00. Everyone else is already out. Gee has planned a game drive to the airstrip rather than a straight transfer trip. The elephant groups start almost immediately we leave the camp and further out one blocks the way completely. Nothing to be done but wait for them to move on. One has a deformation of his tusks, they curl together in front, almost crossing. Gee points out that this will prevent him from pushing down trees and may be a reason why he will not survive as long as others. Once grown, they are pretty much invulnerable to predators (apart from man) and starvation is the usual natural end for an adult elephant. They rely on massive grinding teeth, twelve a side, and have a strange cycle of tooth replacement. New teeth grow in at the back of the jaw and move forward to push out a worn front set. They will have six replacements through their life and the final set is in place around the elephants early forties. Once they are worn out, the animal can no longer feed effectively and will inevitably die.



Elephants on “the road”

71. The elephants eventually move along enough for us to pass into mixed herds of antelope and zebra. A “boys’ club” group of male impala includes several with one horn missing or broken, probably damage from fighting over females. There are also many giraffe. The giraffes included a group under a tree, one of which was lying down, body upright, legs folded beneath. How did it accomplish it? I wish I had seen the folding up of legs that this exercise involved: it must have been like a giant laundry rack collapsing. We cross a wide grass plain, the ATV seeming to swim through the vegetation and then make a call on the two prime male lions, who are at home, asleep again but now in a rather more dignified state. Then move on to visit the two young would-be interlopers whoa are also together, one asleep and one awake. They are extraordinarily beautiful animals and in part it is the sense of sheer raw power underlying their languid poses that makes them so. I am so struck by the sight that I forget and the rules and move to stand up to point my phone at the sitting lion. Gee immediately and urgently reminds me. It is a sobering moment, suddenly bringing home that we are in an open vehicle and there is a full grown male lion within nine feet of us; a gap that he could cover in a single leisurely spring. And that wonderfully handsome muzzle is a handy carrier bag for a full assortment of butcher’s tools... The next stop is a call on the

young female leopard, who is also obligingly at home. Our luck has been phenomenal. This really is the drive that Caroline and Robert should have shared!



Giraffe lying down



Last lion sighting

72. At Chitabe airstrip we make our farewells to Gee as a seven-seater comes in to land. Four Americans, also on the way out of the Delta are already on board. We take off and fly east-north-east to Kasane, the airport at the “four corners” where Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe meet. As we fly we can see the margin of the Delta vegetation is on fire, a long ribbon of red with smoke flowing away. Such a long line of fire, it is presumably a deliberate management measure. The plane begins to drop towards Kasane and a wide tarmac strip and airport buildings come into view ahead. It seems a long time since we saw such urban infrastructure and it is a clear marker that another chapter is about to open.



Part Two: Falling Over Victoria

Wednesday, 9 October (continued)

73. We wheeled our bags across the tarmac in blistering mid-day heat, glad that it was only a short walk to the terminal building. After a short wait, our driver arrived to take us to the Kazungula Ferry, the crossing on the Zambezi between Botswana and Zambia. There were elephants browsing along the highway verge as we approached the large flat pontoon ferry past a long queue of huge articulated trucks. Despite the size of the motorised pontoon – one of the largest ferries in southern Africa – the 70 tonne capacity means that only one truck at a time can make the 400 metre crossing in either direction. As Kazungula is a critical junction in both north-south and west-east highways, traffic for almost all of south and central Africa is passing through here and the queues of trucks mean that it can take up to three days for any individual vehicle to make the crossing. There is a plan to replace the ferry with a bridge, originally proposed in 2007 to link Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe dropped out of the agreement and so far nothing has happened. Meantime the ferries ply back and forth, a truck at a time. I assumed we would be crossing as pedestrians on the pontoon alongside whichever truck was at the head of the queue.

74. But that wasn't the idea. Our driver pulled off towards a small slipway beside the main ferry terminal point. A small flat-bottomed boat was waiting with a grinning pilot who welcomed us aboard and stowed our bags, showing us to seats in the bow. A wave from the driver and off we went into the swirling currents of the great river. On the Zambian side was a corresponding slipway and a waiting minibus. Our bags were transferred, fond farewells from the boatman and we were taken into the border post to "complete the formalities" (ie buy Zambian visas). "Welcome to Botswana," said the friendly man at the desk. "From the UK?" "Yes," I replied cheerily. "From Scotland." That was a mistake, which took a short explanation of the geopolitics of the British archipelago and a reference to Livingstone to rectify. Actually "Scotland – David Livingstone's country" would probably have done the job on its own. Good nature was soon restored and we were on our way with a page of our passports adorned with a very colourful visa form. Sometimes the decorations are worth the fee!

75. The purpose of the trip into Zambia was to round off our southern African adventure with a couple of days on the Zambezi near the Victoria Falls and our destination was Tongabezi, a lodge (actually a fair-sized complex) on the bank of the Zambezi a little way above the Victoria Falls. The wide highway carried trucks, cars and buses driving on the left as per colonial inheritance. Bicycle traffic was somehow exempt from that convention and bikes always came on the "wrong" side of the road. It is presumably a practice that has grown up to give cyclists the best chance of seeing an oncoming vehicle and getting out of the way: having one of the many two-trailer artics come up behind you and sweep past, blasting you with its slip-stream wouldn't be conducive to staying upright. By a rail crossing

we turned off the highway and on to a dirt road that led down to the Tongabezi gates. We were given the introductory briefing over welcome drinks in the entrance lounge while our bags disappeared to our “room” after which our valet, Given, took us through the verdant grounds to our accommodation. A wide verandah overlooking the river, a sitting room with a stocked chilled drinks cabinet and mosquito curtains for the evening, bedroom with an enormous four-poster also with mosquito curtains, bathroom with rolltop bath and shower.



Tongabezi on the Zambezi river

76. After unpacking and a late lunch we spent some time watching the vervet monkeys on the lawn. Youngsters were tumbling and play-fighting, an anxious mother was being persuaded that she should give her tiny baby to his sister for a cuddle – her anxiety only increased when sister wouldn’t return the infant. An older baby wanted to play with the boisterous youngsters and was being restrained by another sister practising to be a parent. In fact we had only a short time before making our way to the wooden pier for a sunset cruise on the river. As it was a sunset cruise, the boat was, naturally, equipped with a cocktail cabinet and icebox and drinks were passed around as we pushed off from the pier. The river upstream from the lodge was a resting place for hippos – we had seen them from our verandah and heard the distinctive “ho-ho-ho” - and we set off that way passing rocks on which a crocodile was basking, then crossed over the river to the Zimbabwe side. As we cruised along, a group of elephants with young and led by a large matriarch came down to the river to drink. The matriarch then encouraged her followers to get into the water and bathe and soon it was evident that she planned to take them all the way across the river. They swam in line, their trunks raised like snorkels. Some of the youngsters were almost entirely submerged, just their trunks showing; the smallest youngsters riding on the back of older cows. We followed at a discreet distance and watched them make the crossing and scramble ashore, the smallest being pushed up the muddy slope, and then disappear into the forest.



Elephants river crossing: matriarch lures them and off they go

77. Back at Tongabezi, our bed had been turned down, the lights put on low and a bottle of champagne left in an ice bucket. A foaming bath had been drawn. We spent some time marvelling at the sunset over the Zambezi then put the champagne in the fridge and had a quick bath before going to dinner on the communal terrace. Drinks were served to us in easy chairs before we were led to the “hosting table” where the Lodge manager got us all to introduce ourselves. Our fellow guests were earnest Austrians, easy-going, friendly Americans with proper east coast manners and a quartet of (I’m sorry to say) utterly obnoxious Anglos who had that terrible south-eastern affliction of thinking that the Home Counties is natural and everything different from that is just amusingly quaint. On learning that we were from Scotland, one launched into a story about having once been in Edinburgh on business and being taken to a restaurant with an unpronounceable name (it was the Stac Pollaidh) and being given haggis. “I thought haggis was just a joke! I never realised it was real.” [Note to self: vote yes in the Independence Referendum.] No-one mentioned the single

most obvious fact: just like the safari lodges, the guests were all white, the staff were all black. But our host was both a gentleman and a diplomat; the dinner was excellent and we were seated next to the Americans so the conversation flowed freely without treading on my budding nationalist toes.

Thursday, 10 October

78. We had an early call from someone who mistakenly thought we needed to be awake at 06.00 to go elephant riding. But it was a pleasure anyway to have a leisurely pot of tea on the verandah and watch the sun rise over the river while water buck browsed the grass at the verandah edge. After an enormous breakfast we set off with driver and guide Chande to visit the Victoria Falls. On the way, Chande tells us about his guiding history: he has taken visitors including the Duke of Westminster, John Major and Steve Baumer around the Falls and now spends most of his time teaching guides. Having developed chronic malaria he has had to slow up a bit and hopes he won't be too slow for us. He also tells us a bit about Zambia, including the fact that the country has more than 70 native languages. Chande pulls in to the car park on the Zambian side of the Falls and walks us through the entrance and on to one of the viewing points where there is a model showing the structure of the Falls and the complex of gorges downstream of it.

79. The Upper Zambezi flows more or less north-south along an immensely deep basalt plateau, estimated to be over 300 metres thick, the result of huge lava flows over a million year period 200 million years ago. Over time, the river has cut into fracture zones in the basalt, cutting deep east-west gorges, known as the Batoka Gorges. Over the past million years, the Falls have receded north, each time cutting a new gorge and linking the series in a huge zig-zag. The current Falls have already started cutting back the next major gorge at a dip in the "Devil's Cataract" section of the Falls on the Zimbabwe side (the international border divides the Falls between Zimbabwe and Zambia). The trend line suggests next Falls will eventually run east-northeast.

80. The current Falls are 1,708 metres wide and 108 metres high, about twice the width and height of Niagara. In the wet season it gives the world's largest sheet of falling water, over 500 million litres a minute going over the edge at that time of year. In the dry season (as now) the flow is 10.8 million litres a minute and about half the gorge wall is dry, most of the river flowing west of Livingstone Island (which is roughly in the middle of the gorge wall). I haven't done the calculation but take the flow, multiply it by the drop in metres and the constant for a falling body in earth's gravity and you get the potential energy of the Falls – at maximum flow apparently enough to supply all of Australia's needs for power.



81. In the wet season the Falls themselves are more or less invisible and the gorge is filled with spray rising high into the air. It is this that gives the falls their original names: the Batoka-Tokolea people called them “Shungu na multima”, the Matabele called them “aManz’aThunqayo” and the Batswana and Mazolo (whose language is used by the subsequent Lozi – the people who showed the Falls to Livingstone) named the Falls “Mosi-o-Tunya”. All mean essentially the same thing: “The Smoke That Thunders”. It was Livingstone who named the Falls for his distant Queen and famously remarked that “scenes so lovely must have been gazed on by angels in their flight” (a proposition we planned to put to the test). And for what it’s worth, the Arab (mainly slave) traders who used the continental river systems to travel south and west called the Falls “the End of the Earth”.

82. So one advantage of visiting in the dry season (there is another, which we will come to) is that you can actually see the gorge and the Falls and even so there is plenty of falling water, spray and rainbows, and while most of that is in Zambia it is best seen from the other side in Zimbabwe. Thus, after we had spent time exploring the “Zam” side it was time to rejoin the minibus and have Chande take us across the border to the “Zim” side. But not before the obligatory walk through the curio market resisting pleas to enter shops and browse stalls. One vendor, dressed in a Celtic FC shirt, spots the saltire badge on my hat and launches into a paean to Livingstone (to be honest, I’ve never really understood his reputation: the story of his career is pretty much one failure after another and he was distinctly careless of his wife and family). Another tries the hard sell on replica masks of the chief and his wife who showed Livingstone the Falls. I should carry a card to save people the effort. In my time I’ve negotiated with the Dutch Government, the Ryder Cup Tour plc, the US State Department, the CIA, the National Audit Office, the Prisoner Officers’ Association, HM Treasury, the Education Institute of Scotland and the Catholic Hierarchy – to name a few.

83. Chande drove us to the Botswana border where our visa was stamped “out” (we had been advised to get double entry visas when we arrived in Botswana for just this eventuality) and then he took us into the area of “no man’s land” between the two countries’ border posts. Both Zambian and Zimbabwean law apply here, the relevant jurisdiction being the one you are heading for: if we wanted to commit an offence we reckoned it would be better to save it for the return journey. Chande then proved himself invaluable by taking our passports and doing all the work needed to get us to the visa desk. Had we been on our own, it would have

taken hours. As it was, the long queues of local people justifiably looked daggers at us as we sped through the process. Zimbabwe visas have a selective pricing system; needless to say UK and US passport holders pay the highest price, currently \$55 US. With these valuable pieces of paper we could return to the minibus and cross the Victoria Bridge into Zimbabwe proper. The bridge was originally built as a twin track rail bridge, one track bed is now a roadway and there was a queue of lorries, cyclists, pedestrians and occasional cars both ways. In the middle is a platform from which you can bungee jump the 128 metres into the gorge below.

84. The bridge spans the corner of the Falls and the first downstream gorge of the zigzag, running above the “Boiling Pot” where the river surges round the bend in a single 200 metre steel span. Opened in 1905, the bridge was designed and built in England then shipped out to be reassembled in situ. It cost £72,000 to design, build, ship and reassemble. In 2008 when the last major reconstruction work was done, the cost was £20 million. As the construction workers sent each half of the span out towards the centre, the local Lozi Chief Mukini made daily visits to watch the progress. He is recorded as saying “Of course the white men are very clever but when all this iron (*zimbe*) reaches further out it will naturally fall into the gorge.” When the two sides joined he said: “With great good luck they have got it across; but the trouble will come when they try to run a train across it, which they evidently mean to do. To save all their work, they need to put a stick up from the gorge to support the bridge. It would need to be a very long stick, but having done this they could surely do that.” When the train ran safely across with no “stick” in place, Munikin declared, “Well, it is impossible. The finger of the white man’s god must hold the bridge up”.



85. Chande’s guide permit doesn’t allow him to guide in Zimbabwe so we take a solo stroll along the Falls trail from the car park, finding two caches on the way. The views across

the gorge are – to give the term back its proper value – awesome, as are the accompanying sounds. The huge sheets and spouts of white, foaming water, the reverberating thunder and the rainbows in the rising spray. Although we are on the opposite side of the gorge from the Falls, there are sections of the trail where we get soaked by the spray thrown up by the power of the water falling into the river crashing along the gorge floor. You could believe that even in this season the Falls could power Australia! The return leg takes us eventually to a café where there is coffee and wifi to be had and then we rejoin Chande at the minibus. Chande kindly extends the tour by taking us along Zambezi Drive past what is allegedly the world's largest baobab tree and round into the town of Victoria Falls where he stops to let us take a (self-guided, naturally) visit to the Victoria Falls Hotel, an icon of the colonial era. The flagpole at the centre of the famous view from the hotel lawn to the span of the bridge now proudly carries the Zimbabwean flag.



Largest baobab?

86. Back through the border crossing, we are once again grateful for Chande's assistance. Even with his help, the time taken up by the entry and exit procedures each way is longer

than the total time we spent in Zimbabwe. On our return to Tongabezi we decide against the offer of a late lunch – the enormous breakfast is still fuelling us more than well enough. Time instead to take a shower and relax on our verandah with a cold beer and later remember the champagne in the fridge for sundown. Meantime the river and its wildlife (including a giant kingfisher) and the birds and monkeys playing in the trees above us are a pleasing distraction. The sunset explosion of colour is followed by gathering dusk as a civet strolls past the terrace and a crocodile glides into the bank. Time for dinner.

87. Breakfast is spent listening to a gloomy couple trying to convince the manager that their valet has stolen their “lost” money. After she has left, they begin to review what they have recently spent and it sounds as if they had actually lost no money at all. They seemed in no hurry to go and correct their accusation. But that blot aside this was to be a very exciting day. First would be the other advantage of visiting the Falls in the dry season, then would come the testing of Livingstone’s “angels” proposition.

88. Another of Tongabezi’s fleet of minibuses took us to the Livingstone Hotel passing sable antelopes, a recent re-introduction to the Falls National Park; huge sleek dark bodies and vast swept-back horns. There are zebra in the car park of the Livingstone Hotel, which is an enormous opulent colonial pile with grounds running down to the shore of the Zambezi just above the top of the Falls. Majors Domo in pith helmets, fezzes and turbans held open doors or stood importantly in the wide concourse and stately public rooms. At the riverside terrace we met a group of seven young German hydrologists and geologists who were engaged in a survey around the hydro-electric station in the gorges and Tom, an older solo traveller from Ohio. We were all on the same mission, which is why we were all wearing swimming gear under our outer clothes.

89. Since we had had the amazing chance to swim in the tail pool of Angel Falls in Venezuela it seemed only proper that we should get the bookend to that and swim in the Devil’s Pool. The Devil’s Pool is on the very rim of the Victoria Falls off the western tip of Livingstone Island. A chance formation in the underlying rock has caused the flow of the Falls to eddy and to cut out a pool which – but only in the dry season – it is possible to swim into and to sit on the edge of the Falls without being swept over while the full force of the Falls surges over just a few feet away. The first stage of the process was to sign a disclaimer which seemed to exonerate the guides not just from the consequences of any actions of ours but also of their own – including deliberately throwing us over the edge. Oh well. The next stage was a crossing of the river aslant the current and swooping round rocky outcrops until we disembarked on Livingstone Island. Then we walked out to the dry rim of the gorge and along the edge to the plaque which marks Livingstone’s viewpoint; the views out and down amid the rainbows were stunning – and a reminder of the potential consequences of making a mistake in any of the next steps.



90. From the edge of the island, a few metres up from where the water transitioned from horizontal to vertical, we entered a 30 metre wide channel of the river and swam first upstream against the current and then downstream angling into a rocky outcrop where we climbed out. A scramble across the low rocky pinnacle (the sharp basalt edges damned hard on the bare feet) took us to the edge of what at this season is the main section of the Falls. The swirl and the foaming white of the water was emphasised by the noise: that was a lot of water moving very fast indeed towards “the End of the World” (the Arabs had it right). But just this side of the crazy onrush was the relative calmness of the Devil’s Pool. The next stage was to get into it without being sucked into the maelstrom. The guides gave us a last chance to remain on the outcrop and watch the rest of the proceedings from a safe vantage point. They then reminded us to “swim left, not right”. It was self-evidently not advice to flout! There is a video on YouTube of a guide doing a standing back flip into the pool from this point. We opted for a less stylish entry and then thinking “go left, go left!” we were actually in the Pool swimming to the edge where the water was running out to begin its 108 metre plunge. Turning around we pushed ourselves up and then we were seated on the rim of the gorge with what seemed like all the water in the world rushing to perdition just beside us, while in a bizarre additional twist, the tiny Pool fish were nibbling the dead skin on our toes.



91. This wasn't quite the final task. The next stage was to roll over one by one on our tummies and wriggle out over the edge with our arms outstretched, doing the "Zambezi Fly". A guide meanwhile held the legs of the flier. When it came to Sally's turn she wriggled out as far as she felt comfortable (can that be the right expression in these circumstances?) and the guide asked me "Can I push her further out? I thought that was a question best answered by the principal actor!"



“Flying” over Victoria Falls

92. Then it was a question of reversing the procedure to Livingstone Island, drying down and changing while a second breakfast of orange juice, coffee, bacon and eggs benedict was somehow magicked up under a decorative awning. We all spent a lot of the time laughing with excitement and relief, having those “what did you think of when...” conversations and reviewing the pictures one of the guides had obligingly taken with our cameras and phones. Astonishingly he had remembered which belonged to whom with 100% accuracy. Back at Tongabezi Given was concerned that we were intending to have a second day without a late lunch. We pointed out that we had had two breakfasts – one a substantial cooked affair and really didn’t need another cooked meal. But we musn’t be constrained by the menu options! They could make us a light salad. We relented and were served an excellent mixed salad with cold meat and fish in the “Outlook Tower”, a wooden structure raised above the terrace with a large telescope for scanning the river. The meal was delivered by waitresses who wore catapults in the belts of their pinnies with which to deter the monkeys.

93. The second part of the afternoon was planned to be the test of Livingstone’s words about angels in flight by taking a microlight flight over the Falls and the gorges. The question was whether the wind would drop enough in the later afternoon to allow the flights to happen. At 15.30 we were called down to the airstrip. It wasn’t clear why the route passed two large cemeteries; perhaps there was no other way. But things still weren’t quite calm enough and we sat in comfortable deck chairs and drank fruit juice for a while. At 16.45 the aircraft were rolled out of the hangar and the first one taxied up to take a grumpy Swiss man who had been waiting with no good grace. Then it was Sally’s turn and I hoped her experience would be a good one – quite a place for your first ever microlight flight! My take off followed shortly after. My previous microlight experience over East Lothian had necessitated warm clothing worn under an insulated one-piece flight overall with motorcycling gloves and a polar snood pulled up and velcroed to the bottom of the helmet visor. Here I was going to fly in shirtsleeves and shorts. Otherwise the kit was the same – a

helmet with built in earpiece and microphone and a pull down visor; once the lead was connected to the jack on the frame pilot and passenger can hold a conversation at normal volume despite the wind and engine noise. Microlights have a very short take off and climb steeply and quickly, so we were up and heading out of the gorges in no time.



Over Victoria Falls in a microlight

94. It didn't take long to agree with Livingstone's angel theory. Seen from here the whole river/Falls/gorge system was like something out of this world. The third advantage of being here in the dry season is that you can see from up here – even at altitude (we were between 6 and 700 feet up while over the system) the wet season spray obscures the view and when over the Falls themselves the spray is high enough to soak pilot and passenger. We made three passes in a slow wide downward spiral from our original high point. Every few minutes the digital camera mounted on the wing clicked. (The absolute refusal to allow you to take a camera on the flight is not a way of milking you for extra cash for photographs. I knew from my flight in East Lothian that you can only take a personal camera – or anything else – on a microlight if it is absolutely securely fastened to you. Anything dropped or breaking free will be picked up by the slipstream and thrown into the rear-mounted airscrew. With that

shattered you've just transformed an aircraft in a rather heavily laden hang-glider. That would have been uncomfortable enough over the fields of East Lothian. Over Victoria Falls and the gorges?) .As well as the physical wonder of it all, the altitude allowed the creatures in the water and in the thin forest on the islands to be picked out. On the second pass, Heiko the pilot (a German who came to Zambia by way of the Republic of South Africa) followed up on an earlier chat about my daughter's anxious request for an immediate report on our safe return from the Devil's Pool. "Ok." He said. "Let's really freak her out with these pictures. You've flown before; you take the ship." And with that he let go of the controls and folded his arms; I reached up for the second set of control handles and we flew on. At which point I have to admit that straight and level flight in a microlight is not hard to achieve – in fact you get exactly that if you do absolutely nothing – you could indeed simply leave the controls alone. Once established in any pattern, including a banking turn, the aircraft will stabilise and continue to do whatever it is until the controls are adjusted again. The pressure needed to adjust the controls is minimal, the secret is combining movements fluidly.



Mike at the controls of the microlight

95. Taking off and landing, of course, are entirely another matter. I was very happy to hand control back to Heiko long before anything like that was involved! A final circuit and then dropping back towards the airstrip rushing over the heads of three giraffe just outside the perimeter fence. Touchdown (full marks for an arrow-straight landing that hardly used the suspension), swing around and a short taxi towards where Sally stood beaming. It had obviously been a good experience for her, too. The memory cards were taken out of the cameras and the pictures shown to us on a PC screen (after a wait – which proved too long for the grumpy Swiss chap: it was now clear that his grumpiness was in part due to the fact that he wasn't allowed to take his massive SLR along on the flight). At the modest price, we thought we were being shown the pictures so that we could choose a handful of the best ones. Nothing like it. The whole lot were transferred to two CDs and – when we got home and were able to read them on a computer with a CD drive – we found they also included two folders of professional aerial shots of the Falls at each stage of the seasons.

96. Back at Tongabezi we celebrated a quite amazing day with a foaming bath wherein cold beers were drunk. Then a recline on the terrace before Given served us our farewell dinner in the Outlook Tower. Excellent as it was, we retired stuffed with far too much food.



Saturday, 12 October

97. After a leisurely breakfast we set off for Livingstone International Airport whose new terminal – like the great highway – has been built with Chinese money and machinery. Our driver was a little cynical: “the Chinese will be our good friends until they have all our minerals”. As to the terminal one can only say it will be nice when it's finished. And so to Jo'burgh and back to being transported. But by now we had also been thoroughly enraptured.

ME

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