

# ON SAFARI

WITH

Mary King

Expansive sunsets and spectacular vistas where animals roam wild and free, draw many people to experience an African safari. For British event rider, Mary King, Macatoo camp in Botswana promises two other important elements - quality horses and adrenalin.

STORY BY LUCY DE LA PASTURE

PHOTOS COURTESY **IN THE SADDLE AT AFRICAN HORSEBACK SAFARIS**













Situated in the Okavango Delta, Macatoo is a tented camp in the middle of the bush. The holiday adventure starts on boarding a light aircraft at Maun and after a short flight, landing on a dirt airstrip where elephants often have to be moved off the runway to allow the plane to land! The final leg of the journey to camp is by open-topped safari vehicle with game-viewing on the way.

Apart from the canvas, this isn't camping – each tent has comfortable beds as well as an en-suite bathroom. Tucked away in a private spot is a small plunge pool, perfect for relaxing after a day in the saddle. There is a real feel of being close to nature, with wildlife able to come and go as they please.

Just before the busy eventing season started, Mary King – together with husband David and her two children, Emily and Freddie – took a well-deserved break out of her Olympic training to host a riding safari at Macatoo for riding holiday specialists, *In the Saddle*.

For Mary, 2012 will be a high pressure year. With two horses on the Olympic short list – Kings Temptress and Imperial Cavalier – she needs good performances this Spring to secure a place on team GBR for her sixth successive Olympics. But from speaking to her you would never know – she seems the epitome of calmness, a quality she says she gets from her mother.

“When *In the Saddle* asked me to host this holiday, I thought it was an amazing opportunity and a fantastic chance to spend some time with my family. The lack of mobile phone reception is an added bonus!” jokes Mary. “My horses probably enjoyed a week off from me riding them.”

With David's farming commitments and Freddie – more at home on the pitch than in the saddle – quality family time together is a rare thing! Sixteen year





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old Emily is busy at school, completing her GCSE's this year, while following in her mother's eventing footsteps and is already proving to be a talented young rider. Last year Emily was the youngest member of the Junior European team and is competing at Advanced level on a horse she has produced herself.

So what is special about the Okavango Delta in Botswana? It is the world's largest inland delta, formed seasonally when the Okavango river floods into a 17,000km<sup>2</sup> basin. A mix of labyrinthine channels, palm islands and fertile floodplains in the midst of parched Kalahari sands, it is an oasis for wildlife.

More than 400 bird species flock to the rich feeding ground of the Delta and the water brings together a concentration of wildlife rarely seen in Africa, making it one of the best places for game viewing including all of the big 5 - lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and buffalo.

Safari on horseback is the best way to see game close up and the riding can be fast and a real adrenaline buzz, so it's no wonder the list of previous visitors to Macatoo camp reads like a veritable who's who of the eventing world. Mark Todd was at Macatoo last winter for an out of season adrenaline kick.

“I've been on horse safari before but the riding was relatively quiet. The thrill of the Okavango Delta has always appealed to me, I like a bit of excitement,” says Mary in her typically understated way.

At Macatoo the riding is varied, sometimes quietly walking, stalking big game and admiring the bird life,




sometimes cantering through the water-meadows alongside galloping giraffe and lechwe. There are over 40 horses at the camp so there is a horse to suit everyone, though you need to be an experienced rider capable of riding out of potentially hazardous situations.

Mary visited Botswana in February and, despite the high temperatures of up to 40 degrees centigrade some days, it was a good time to visit the Delta with the water rising and running but still plenty of dry land. “We rode in the early morning and evening when it was slightly cooler,” says Mary.

The bush is green as the delta rises and home to a plethora of birds and wildlife. “We saw most of the big 5 except the leopards. They were around, though we only saw photos of them on an overnight trail camera together with leopard prints on the ground,” recalls Mary.

“The riding was fast, with plenty of galloping across





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the plains and dodging in and out of bushes. It was breathtaking galloping alongside giraffes and watching them moving in, what seemed to us, slow motion compared to our horses.”

Even lunch was something to look forward to, recalls Mary, often taking place in the most surprising of places – from tree-houses to the middle of flooded plains.

But the highlight of the trip for Mary was the elephants. On horseback you can ride right up to the herd, she explains.

“The bull elephant turned and looked at us as we got close and trumpeted, flapping his ears in annoyance. As the bull elephant moved towards us in warning, the horses tried to spin in the knowledge this was a potentially dangerous situation!

Our experienced Guide made his horse stand its ground facing the elephant and there was a lot of shouting. He then took a few steps forward and after more ear flapping the elephant turned away and the danger had passed.”

Still buzzing after a long day in the saddle, back at Macatoo camp the fun continued into the night with favourite moments of the day shared over supper and Mary proving to be the queen of party games!

So how can you sum up a holiday at Macatoo? In Mary’s words, “Lovely horses, exciting rides, great fun and company (with 11 other guests), delicious food and best of all 5hrs drive from the nearest village so we didn’t see any other people for the whole week! But we saw plenty of thrilling game and felt so at one with nature in the most fabulous surroundings... what a treat!” ☞

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