

• Kalahari Desert

• St Germain des Prés

• Okavango Delta

• Place Vendôme

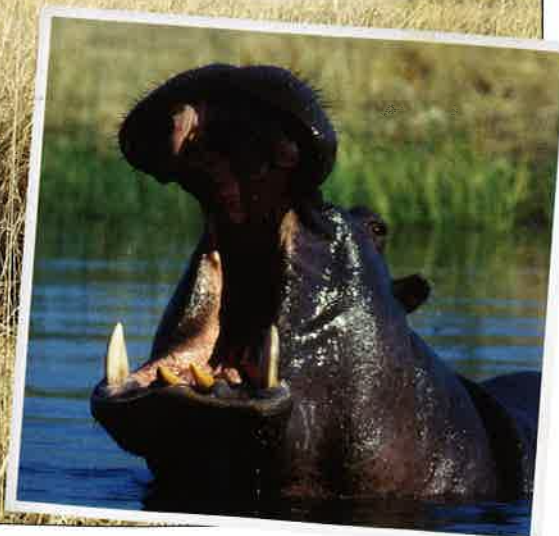
Travel

Edited by MELINDA STEVENS

What a RIP-ROARING, ROLLICKING RIDE!

Did Ciara Parkes nearly get eaten by hippos on her super-charged odyssey around Botswana? Yes. Twice. Was it the most amazing holiday of her life? Probably

So here we are on little more than a Brazilian of an airstrip in the Kalahari Desert, and a man called Super is introducing himself. What a name! I recently met a charming woman named Cilla Snowball and that impressed me for days. But it turns out Botswanans often name their children after favourite things, which leads to wondrous monikers that knock all others into touch. Consider, for example, my favourite, a guide called Electric Radio, and his son Relax. Super ▷



Photographed by GUS GREGORY

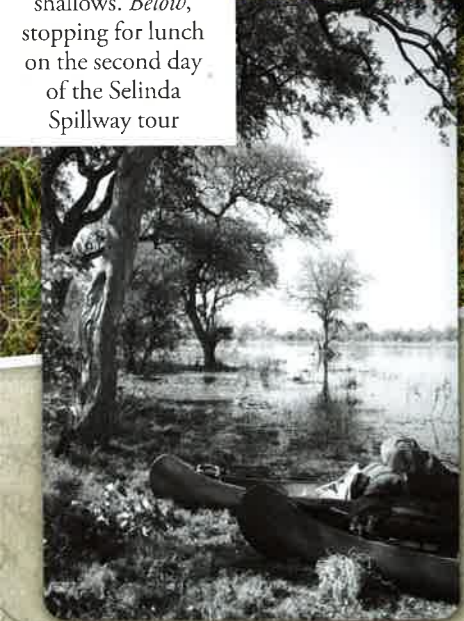


Previous page, Ciara Parkes contemplates the waterhole from Jack's Camp. Left, the spare safari horse lets off steam. Below, Ciara eyes a hippo. Right, the beds at Jack's Camp

I've been on many safaris, but this place blows me away



Above, pushing canoes through the shallows. Below, stopping for lunch on the second day of the Selinda Spillway tour



◁ drives us to the small, laidback Camp Kalahari, the latest lodge to be opened by international man of mystery Ralph Bousfield – a kind of beautiful Crocodile Dundee. CK is just the latest venture in his incomparable swagbag of unique places in Africa, among them Vumbura Plains and Jack's Camp. He is bush-born and -bred and his set-ups have all the integrity that his long-gone father – legendary crocodile hunter Jack Bousfield – would approve of. CK is unique in that it offers tailored riding safaris, mostly over three days, with nights spent out in the bush.

Exhaustion evaporates as we finally absorb our glorious surroundings! Our room is full of faded teak furniture, our deep bed is brass, there is proper linen and an outside shower. We expect to go for a little snooze and a holiday snog. But David Foot, our riding guru and guide, kicks our arses out of the door and has us saddled up in minutes.

I may not be wildly saddle-savvy but, over the course of the following days, David's patience pays off and he has us clenching effectively enough both to stay on and to experience the wonders of the beautiful salt pans of the Makgadikgadi. In the winter, the pans are one big salt crust the size of Switzerland, where nothing lives and nothing grows – there's no water, no food, no

animals. In the summer, it explodes with a billion shrimp – daily snacks for over a million flamingos – and is home to mammoth herds of zebra and wildebeest.

Each day is a new adventure. We visit Livingstone's famous baobab tree and see his name carved on its bark before lunching under cool acacia trees. After a nap and tea we move on, gliding across the pans for a night under the stars, with supper cooked for us by CK's marvellous staff. The horses are bedded down, my bedroll beckons (but my arse still hurts).

Heck, the pans are the most amazing place in which to wake up! As the sun rises, and the light fractures, this desolate Doctor Who-scape just gets more beguiling. It blows my mind, slowly, then again and again.

After our spectacular saddle-worn expedition, Super inherits us back from David and we move to CK's sister lodge, the legendary Jack's Camp. When anyone finds out that you're going to Botswana, all they ask is, 'Are you going to Jack's?' Well, yes sir, we are. And it's everything you could ever want a lodge to be. A fabulous tented camp, right in the heart of the bush, that fairly glimmers with glass, silver and polished wood. The main tent is a museum of stuffed everything, along with jars of pickled lion cubs. Our own tent is full of rosewood campaign furniture and two mini four-poster beds. It is joyful and fantastic, so I jiggle about in an outdoor shower and splatter

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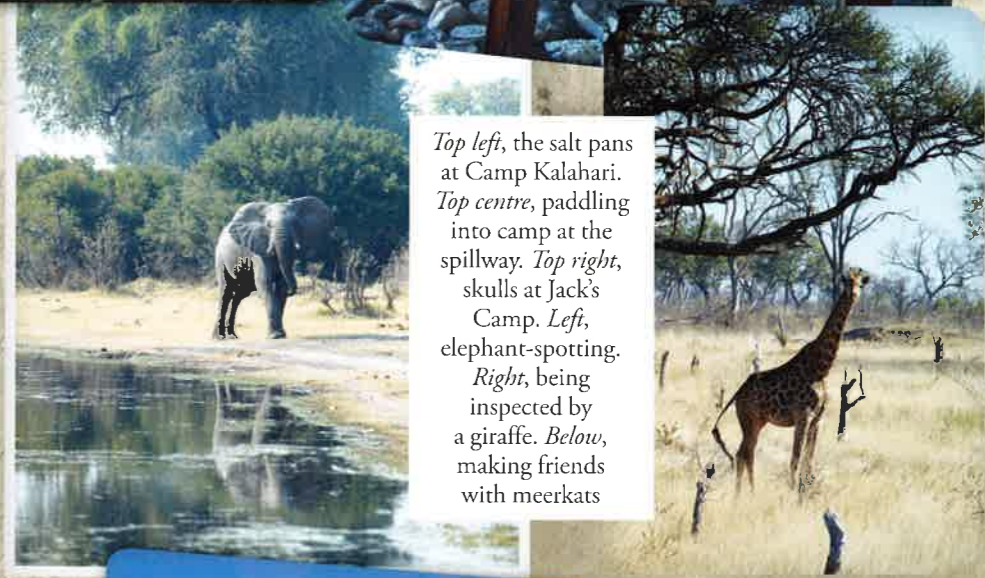
shampoo on a few yellow hornbills sitting on a low-slung branch. I pass out blissful and beswaddled in stiff linen.

Super spends the next few days instructing us in all things bush. We learn to track, we learn to stalk things, to lick branches and sniff dung. Bloody hell, this is brilliant! We are proper explorers! After hours of tracking, we find a herd of young bull elephants completely destroying a thicket of palms. They rock the trees backwards and forwards and then... TIMBER! – they're down.

We spend an afternoon with the local bushmen from the Jou's tribe. It's difficult to register their names and much worse to try to repeat them, as they are mostly a series of clicks and guttural expressions. I attempt one and spit, embarrassingly, into my boyfriend Gus's face. If they have their own version of Scrabble, their names would be surefire winners for a 20-across: Dam Xixae, Xoma Xwii, Qamme Kxamxoo and Nxho Xwii.

We learn to ground-trace and dig out yellow scorpions, the favourite food of meerkats, who individually scarf up about 70 a day. We learn how to trap guinea fowl by using gum from the tiniellie tree, and to make poison for the tips of arrows used to hunt small mammals and birds. (Frankly, I think Bruce Parry makes it look more difficult than it is: I resolve to expose him.)

That evening, Super takes us out on the barren pans on quadbikes. It is a wonderful ▷

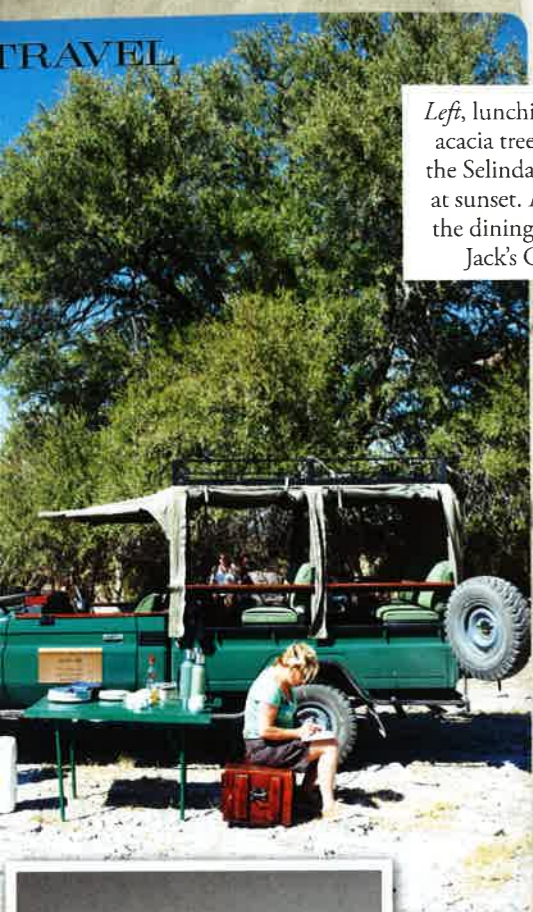


Top left, the salt pans at Camp Kalahari. Top centre, paddling into camp at the spillway. Top right, skulls at Jack's Camp. Left, elephant-spotting. Right, being inspected by a giraffe. Below, making friends with meerkats

I am in a curious sort of heaven – wild meerkats making me one of their own!

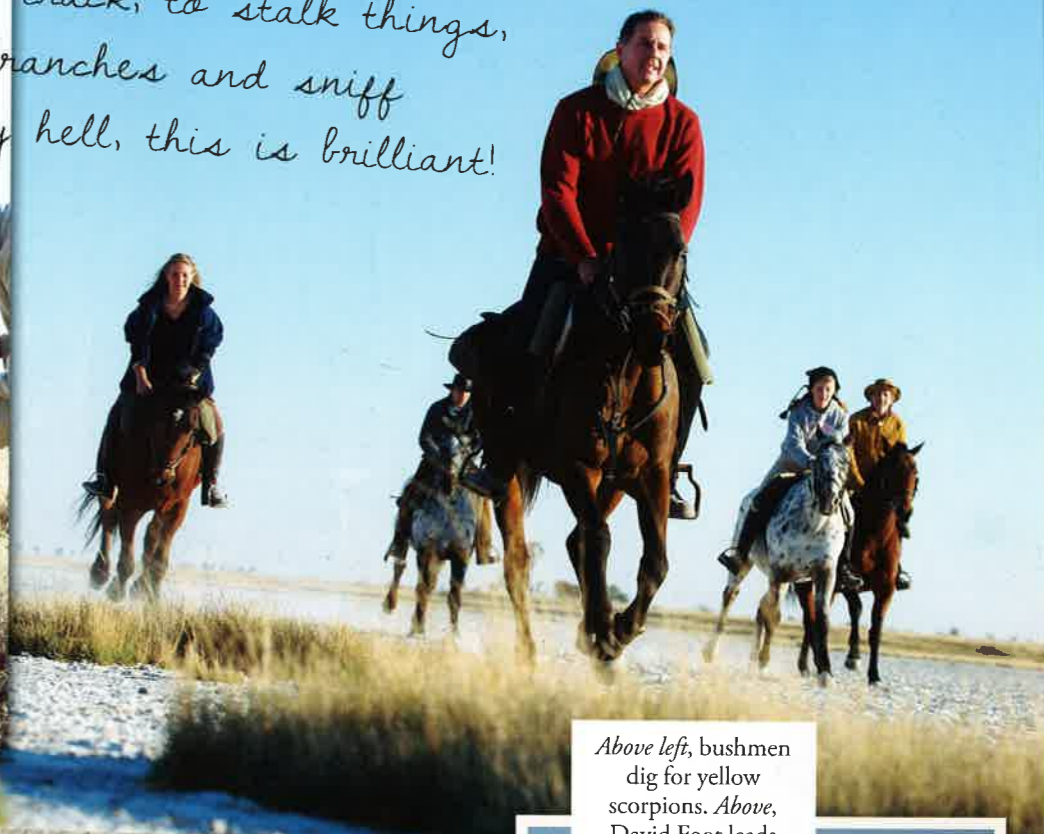


Left, lunching under acacia trees. Right, the Selinda Spillway at sunset. Far right, the dining room at Jack's Camp



When anyone finds out that you're going to Botswana, all they ask is, 'Are you going to Jack's Camp?'

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Above left, bushmen dig for yellow scorpions. Above, David Foot leads the charge. Below, quadbiking on the salt pans. Bottom, stargazing as the day winds down

We have drinks under Saturn

◁ way to see this other planet. As the sun sets, we look all around us – and up. The sky is the requisite dome of stars but with the luminous Milky Way streaking from right to left. In the far distance we see a light; we ride northwards. It's a fire. We stop. We have drinks under Saturn.

Then, something secret. We have to swear that we won't write what happens next. So I won't! Suffice to say that at Jack's Camp they do this for all their guests, producing surprise after surprise, each one surpassing the last. The night turns out to be one of the best of our lives.

Next morning, we do something else remarkable. We track down and find a colony of meerkats (they are virtually silent, so thankfully, no more silly TV accents from me). Super propels me towards them: it takes a huge effort to stop myself from pocketing one! I am in a curious sort of heaven – wild meers making me one of their own! Suddenly, a mustering of storks start gathering above, startling the meerkats below. The kats go ballistic, and within seconds I'm providing scaffolding for about seven of them. I have one sitting bolt upright on my head, one on each shoulder and a scattering of others on or about my lower person.

It's hard to leave the splendour of Jack's Camp. The staff and guides are exceptional. I've been on many safaris, but this place is truly out of this world.

The last part of the trip is just a short plane ride away. We are to canoe down the Selinda Spillway, part of the Okavango Delta. The delta is downstream of the immense rainwaters from Angola, which can take five months to course down to the spillway that then feeds into the Linyanti Swamp, across the border in Namibia. Only 30 years ago, many of these spillways were arid bush, but now they are home to herds, prides and skulks of beautiful beasts. It is like the *Land that Time Forgot*, complete with its own dinosaurs.

But in light of what we are about to experience, I should have taken Gus's earlier advice and had a go at canoing before we left British waters. I'm an idiot.

The smell of the bush is different here and the air is dense with wild sage. As the sun sets, we arrive at the river, and meet our South African guide Cliff. I ask about hippos and crocodiles. Yes, they inhabit the river, but not here, further down. There haven't ever been hippos here.

Just six minutes later, Gus points at a black blob looming ahead and asks if it's a hippo. No, it's a log. Two minutes later, Cliff whispers in a measured but insistent tone that we paddle 'right bank, right bank'. I am in the lead boat, in the front seat, and will pass it first. I tense on my seat. My bum goes into a spasm.

Christ, it's big – a bull and probably injured, according to Cliff. It isn't happy. Nor is Cliff. I'm suppressing a weak and low-rising hysteria but Gus manages to paddle

us out of danger. As we sit in camp an hour later, the realisation that hippos are a clear and present danger in these waterways renders me silent. I smoke, and practically eat, a packet of Marlboro Lights.

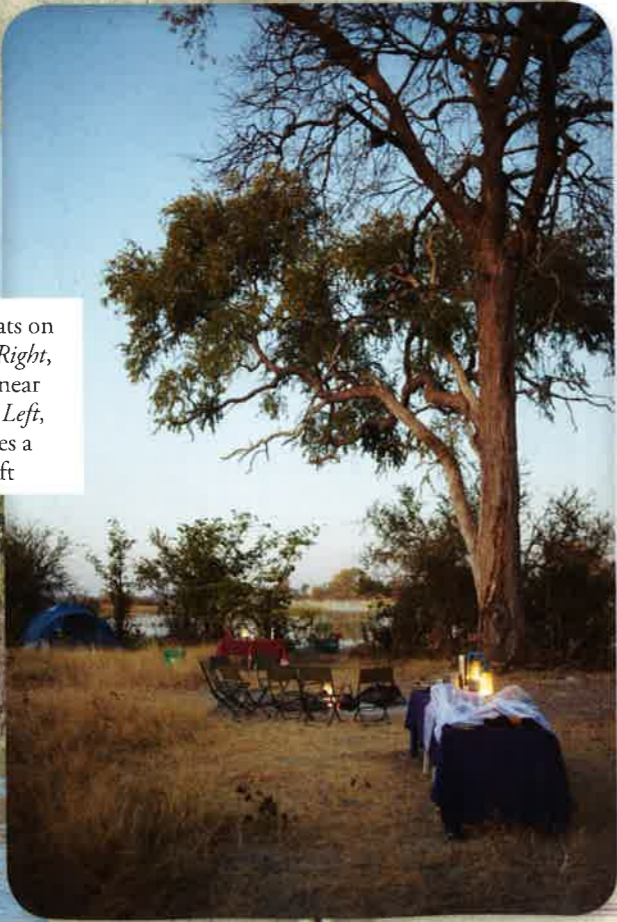
Breakfast is accompanied by instructions from the ever-patient Cliff on how to handle a hippo attack. We all eat our porridge rather quietly, as the information seems to rather take the edge off the beautiful, pink rising sun. The spillways, on the other hand, are truly mesmeric, and contentedness falls on the group for the morning. The long grasses flirt in the bleached sunlight and the scene looks for all the world like a Joni Mitchell album cover.

We spend the day joyously spotting elephants on the banks, lilac-breasted rollers on the tips of drowned trees, khol-heavy impala in small family groups. After lunch, we swim in cold, clear waters, then sit in damp clothes as Cliff shows us the remains of an elephant's jaw he's found on the bank. I ask if I can snaffle a tooth into my pocket. He frowns at me and says no (dammit).

The next afternoon we decide to paddle down the backwaters, as we have heard elephants trumpeting and trees crashing in the distance. The water is low and we have to haul our canoes through the verdant reeds. Our feet are battered but it's worth it. Suddenly, ahead of us, there are about 40 ▷



Above, meerkats on the lookout. Right, supertime near the spillway. Left, a hippo gives a heron a lift



Below, evening settles over Jack's Camp. Right, ostriches nearby



It happens in slow motion. Cliff jumps out into the shallows, grabs his gun and places his left hand on his bullet belt

◁ elephants bathing, fighting, feeding and generally larking about in the shallows. We spend a very gentle 20 minutes watching them before they catch wind of us and Cliff motions for us to retreat. It is a phenomenal sight – and to think we are the only people in the whole 135,000 hectares of this wilderness.

And then, suddenly, as we round the corner, we enter a lagoon containing at least 20 hippos. My heart sinks. The nearest hippos are about 15 metres from us, with two huge bulls behind us nearer the bank. They start to move towards us at speed. I now know that hippos kill more people than lions and elephants put together, and all Gus and I have between us and them is 2mm of fibreglass. I feel as though I'm lolling in a Flake wrapper in a swimming-pool with a great white shark.

At this point, the herd of elephants we've just seen comes over the top of the opposite riverbank, startling the hippos. They now clearly feel trapped – elephants behind them and us ahead, blocking their path. They start towards us and Cliff points for us to move towards the bank. From nowhere, the two bulls at the back appear directly in front of us and start to snort and display. Cliff knows that the bigger of the two is preparing to charge and, in that moment, so do we.

It happens in slow motion. Cliff jumps out into the shallows, grabs his gun and places his left hand on his bullet belt. He shouts for

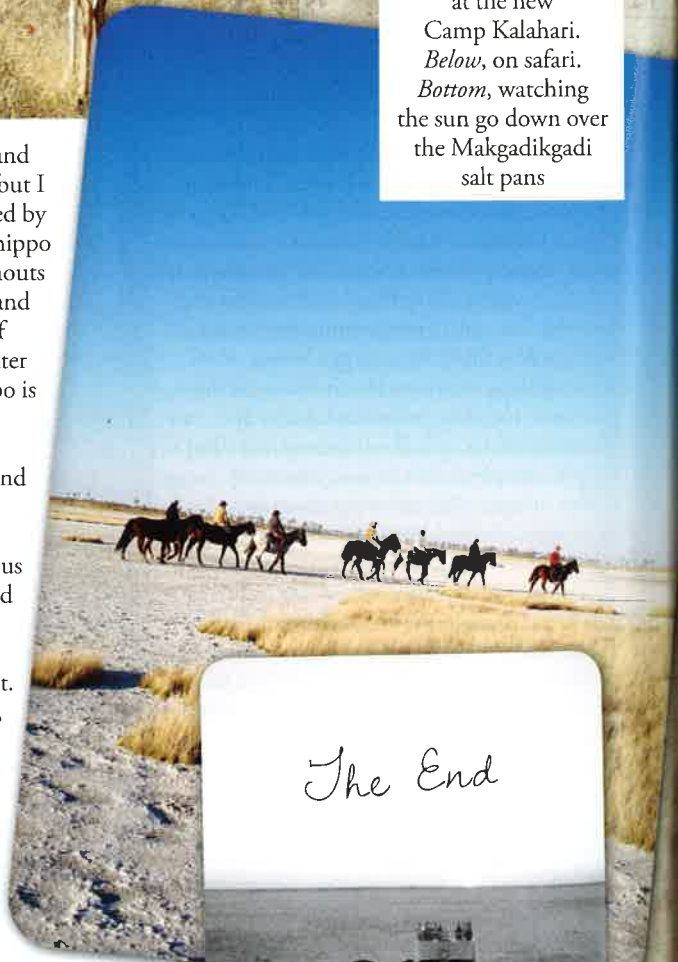
us to jump out of the canoes and make for the bank. It isn't far but I don't hear him as I'm transfixed by the huge wave preceding the hippo as it bears down on us. Gus shouts for me to get out, grabs my hand and we stumble to shore. Cliff paddle-slaps the top of the water with a huge thwack. The hippo is five metres away and Cliff is busily loading bullets into his gun. Despite the crashing sound of the huge elephant herd in front of us, the hippo stops suddenly and Cliff shouts for us to get back into the canoes and to paddle FAST.

We escape, just. That night in camp we drink a fair amount. Cliff has been a hero. He also, after an abstinence of 20 years, has started smoking again. It really was an extraordinary trip. A true life-affirming adventure that will remain with me always. So go on – buy the ticket, take the ride. □

Book it: Cazenove+Lloyd (cazloyd.com or 020 7384 2332) offers eight nights in Botswana from £8,675 a person, full board, including flights, transfers, five nights riding in the Kalahari and three nights on a canoe trail in the Selinda Reserve.



Left, female kudu. Above, a bedroom at the new Camp Kalahari. Below, on safari. Bottom, watching the sun go down over the Makgadikgadi salt pans



The End

