

RIDERS ON THE KALAHARI

Only on horseback can the traveller fully experience the true romance – and punishing distances – of Botswana’s ancient salt pans and sprawling savannah.

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Chapman's baobab, one of Africa's largest trees, was named after 19th-century elephant hunter James Chapman.

Galloping across the Kalahari in pursuit of fresh elephant tracks at daybreak, it's easy to lose yourself in the chase. But my guide has neglected one minor detail. "I should warn you," Ride Botswana's David Foot shouts over the drumming hooves. "Your horse – young Oliver – he hasn't seen an elephant before. That could prove interesting."

Feigning complete control, I surreptitiously wrestle the over-enthusiastic Oliver down a gear from his cavalry-style desert charge into a canter – all the time hoping that sighting an elephant three times his size won't provoke any fight-or-flight responses. As experienced fellow riders and tourist-laden game trucks are in the area, pride is heavily at stake. And thus, Oliver effortlessly extracts the first of many bribes offered over the next few days: no shying, pig-rooting or playing up – especially in front of the game trucks – and my stewed dessert apples are his.

The Kalahari has long been recognised as one of the world's most formidable, driest regions. Stretching 900,000 square kilometres, it covers about 70 per cent of Botswana (referred to locally as "Bots"). In this semi-arid sandy savannah, the Makgadikgadi salt pans fan out with a chimerical beauty,



more moonscape than desert. Pronounced "maakgaadikgaady", with the "g" more like an "h", the name means "vast, open, lifeless land" in the Setswana language. During the dry season it is just that. Then rain falls and the wildlife returns. One of the world's largest salt flats, the Makgadikgadi is the graveyard of a massive lake the size of a small European country. It dried up several millennia ago.

In the process, nature has done the horse enthusiast a huge favour. Salt pans make for firm, flat, open galloping ground; the tracks of all that's gone before you – from elephants to meerkats – lie imprinted on the flaky salt and soda crust for weeks in the big dry from March to November.

Most Botswanan tourists head straight for the lush Okavango Delta. But the Kalahari, too, has a legion of fans. Controversial explorer David Livingstone passed through here in the

late 1800s, writing extensively about the area in his journals. In 1955, South African war hero, Laurens van der Post, was commissioned by the BBC to film the hardy bushmen, generations of whom have roamed the area for some 20,000 years. His account, *The Last World of the Kalahari*, was a best seller. More recently, zoologists Mark and Delia Owens published their classic, *Cry of the Kalahari*, in 1984. The Kalahari even makes the odd appearance in Alexander McCall Smith's series, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, set in Botswana's capital, Gaborone.

British travel writer A. A. Gill has described the soulful nothingness out here as "God's own minimalism". This isn't just visual. The deathly silence of the pans shattered by the roar of a lone lioness at dawn could be the Kalahari's soundtrack. "At night it's so quiet, you'll hear the blood pulsing between your ears," Classic Safari Company founder and owner Julie McIntosh told me.

All this and more captured Foot's imagination a few years ago. Like most seasoned local horsemen, he'd done all the big rides on the continent: from Kenya's Masai Mara to Malawi's Nyika Plateau and Namibia's Nabib Desert. He was based in Malawi for 15 years with his young family and a team of 36 horses, but recently relocated to the bustling town of Maun on the Boteti River, establishing Ride Botswana with wife Robyn.

Riding safaris have long been offered in the Okavango, where Maun is the gateway. But Foot is the first also to take tourist horses into the Kalahari, on rides that range from half a day to five-day expeditions, including two nights' fly camping on the pans, and midnight rides by moonlight. "I saw this country and fell for it," he says, riding long and easy aboard his bay mare, Phinga. "Our aim is to turn this into one of the iconic rides of Africa."

I do three days' riding, returning each night to enjoy the full creature comforts and cordon bleu meals of Camp Kalahari. Along with its sister camps, Jack's and San, Camp Kalahari is run by Uncharted Africa Safari Co, the last family-run tented safari operation left in Botswana. Each morning at 7am sharp, Foot is



FROM TOP: Taking a nap on the salt pan; a domesticated meerkat enjoys the view; riders saunter past a herd of zebra.



waiting with horses groomed and saddled, a rare treat any regular rider will appreciate. (Be warned. In the wet season you rise as early as 4.30 am to beat the heat.) Despite our best tracking efforts on the first morning, we don't find the young elephant bull known to be in the area. But we do encounter royal palm fronds strewn next to his tracks – the elephantine equivalent of tossing a snack wrapper as you go.

Plenty of diversions compensate in lieu of big game. It's August, so much of the wildlife has migrated for the dry, but we sight jackals, bat-eared foxes and a pair of the area's brown hyena. Lilac-breasted rollers, red-billed buffalo weavers and banana birds (aka yellow-billed hornbills) dart and weave on the breeze as a herd of ostriches lumbers past in the distance, heavy plumage flapping like shag-pile carpet.

When a bustard takes flight only metres away, you can actually feel the air stirred by its wings and Oliver springs into a trot. "Not bad being out among it," Foot smiles. "I get queries from a lot of people who haven't done that much riding – but don't want to be just another game-truck jockey in designer jeans. Horses complete this country. They force you to live it – not just observe it."

By the second day, I'm definitely living it – especially the aching limbs and chapped lips. Then there's the plentiful thornbush: failure to respect this prickly scrub can result in a jab in the thigh if your horse brushes too close.

Foot's guests have included members of the British Olympic equestrian team and the Prince of Liechtenstein. He gets everyone out roughing it – regardless of their stature in the equestrian world. "I never wanted this to be a little pony trek operation," he says. "We're happy to cater for novices. For experienced riders, the pans make for great fast riding."

On the third day, he delivers on his promise as we prepare to ride 21 kilometres from camp out to two of Africa's oldest, biggest trees: Chapman's baobab and then on to Green's baobab for lunch, which will be delivered by Uncharted Africa complete with wineglasses, linen napkins, bone china, foldout table and a portable wooden loo. Both trees are named after 19th-century explorers and are important geographical markers in such a vast area.

Having a goal promotes a very real sense of the desert's punishing dimensions. We ride for hours until finally Foot points to a landmark, a

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Gaolape Bachae on Griffin and leading Socks; 1940s-style interior and swimming pool at Jack's Camp; massed meerkats; lunch on the salt pan.



far-off dot, Chapman's baobab. "You wouldn't guess at its massive size from here would you?" he says cheerfully, binoculars in hand. "It's barely a blip on the horizon. Yep – we've sure got a way to go." Even Oliver groans. As Livingstone discovered, you earn each mile here, the horse's steady four-beat walk drumming the journey into your bones.

Comprising Foot and Phinga, local horseman Gaolape Bachae on Bon Jovi, Oliver and me, our small party presses on. The horses are almost as eclectic a bunch as the riders. A handsome, thickset, 16-hand boerperd stock horse, Oliver hails from a Johannesburg riding school. Bon Jovi is a nimble failed racehorse from Zimbabwe. With a bright eye that's eager to please, he suffers a pathological fear that the other horses just might canter off and leave him. Phinga has

'Horses complete this country. They force you to live it – not just observe it.' David Foot, Ride Botswana.



been with Foot for more than 15 years, after he bought her from a horse dealer as an unbroken three-year-old, roaming wild. As lead horse, Phinga knows she's his firm favourite. The two are virtually inseparable. But at home, Foot won't have her near the house paddock.

"She stands by the kitchen window and bosses me around," he says with a playful pat of her neck. "She's too much like a wife."

We pick up the pace, moving into a steady armchair canter to cover ground, before drawing rein when 150 zebra and wildebeest cross our path. A Mexican stand-off ensues as we size them up and they stare us down. Foot lets Phinga graze. "They're reading us," he says. "When the horses graze it sends the message our animals are relaxed, they're not alert – there's no danger." Oliver and Bon Jovi follow Phinga's lead, loudly munching on the tussocky grass. Sure enough, the striped roadshow gets the message and resumes its journey, each single-file zebra nipping at the rump in front to hurry its owner along.

When we reach Chapman's, it's been well worth the three-hour ride. It's a colossal

dinosaur of a tree. "Six vast trunks, cupped like the fingers of a hand, converge at a base 85 feet in circumference," historian Thomas Pakenham writes of its structure in *The Remarkable Baobab*. "It reminded me of Rodin's famous sculpture of two hands, the bronze he called *The Cathedral*."

The tree also moved 19th century explorer and elephant hunter James Chapman: "We were lost in amazement, truly, at the stupendous grandeur of this mighty monarch of the forest," he wrote. Chapman, Green, Livingstone and countless others used the trees as mailboxes, leaving messages for those coming behind. Green's Baobab has the haunting inscription "Green's Expedition 1858–1859" carved into its fleshy pink trunk.

Late on my final afternoon, Camp Kalahari's chic manager Mercedes Bailey insists on a quad bike ride. The bike is fast and fun but, as we speed over the pans in the fading pink light, there's the nagging feeling of something missing: the stamp of an impatient hoof, anxious to be on its way; the smell of a freshly oiled bridle mingling with the sweet desert air; the reassuring jingle of a snaffle bit as the hours tick by. If horses complete the landscape, they also enhance the intoxicating romance that is tourist Africa. And let's face it, no matter how practical machinery is, a quad bike can't plod you home safely after one too many G&Ts on the pans at sundown.

The writer stayed with Uncharted Africa on media rates. www.classicsafaricompany.com.au; 1300 130 218

Bountiful Botswana

THERE'S NO NEED FOR RIDERS TO ROUGH IT.

With its thriving economy and stable society, Botswana is Africa's pin-up state and a rock-star destination. Every major luxury brand boasts digs here. David Foot of Ride Botswana has joined forces with Ralph Bousfield and Catherine Raphaely of Uncharted Africa to offer guests the option of staying at one of the country's three main tented safari camps – Jack's Camp, Camp Kalahari or the new San Camp – and ride out. The camps are within 40 minutes' drive of each other, so you can mix and match.



JACK'S CAMP

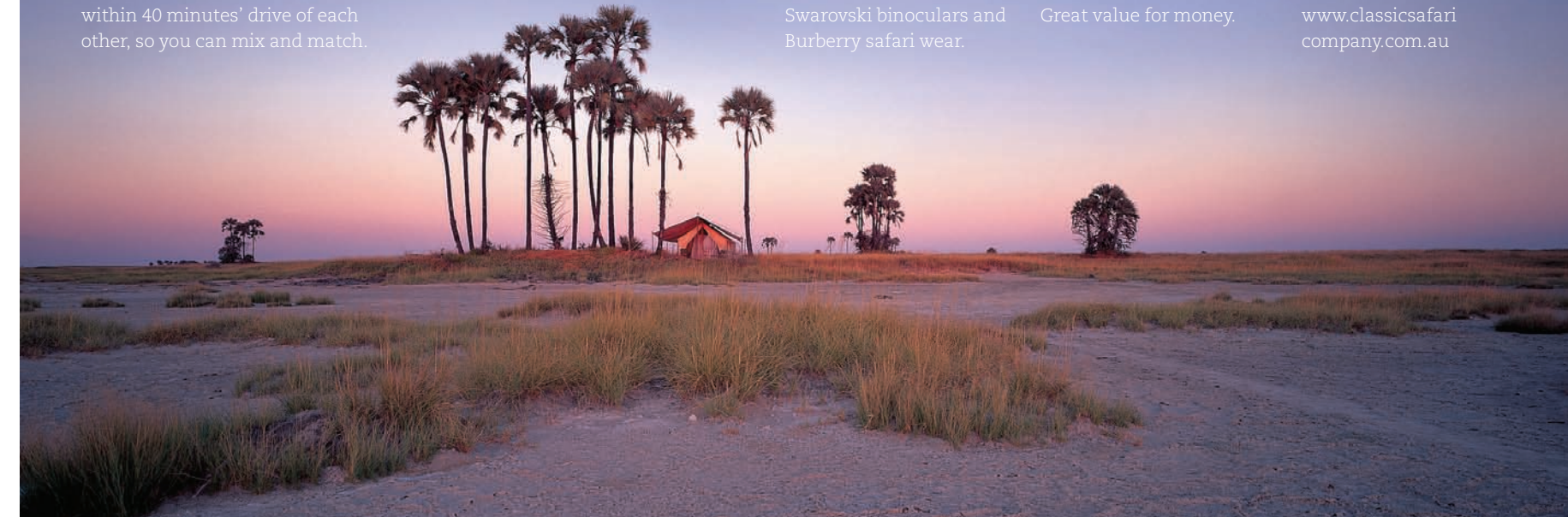
THE CLASSIC offering. For years, Jack's has ranked highly among top tented safari venues. With its 1940s east African-styled interiors, it's one of the continent's most famed experiences. Attractions include a large covered swimming pool, extensive library and artefacts museum. Impossibly stylish but friendly and laid-back. Bring your Swarovski binoculars and Burberry safari wear.

CAMP KALAHARI

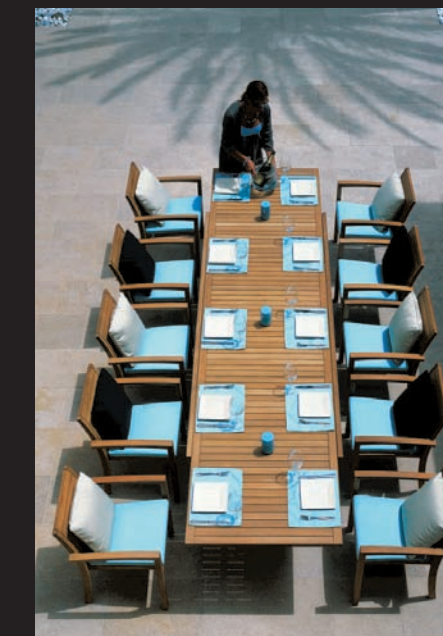
This is less luxe than Jack's or San, but still ridiculously comfortable, with loads of atmosphere and warm interior decor. Each tent has its own outdoor shower, with hot and cold water, and flushing loos (surrounded by discreet high timber fences). Camp Kalahari keeps it real, however, and at night is lit by paraffin lamps. The horse corrals are here, too. Great value for money.

SAN CAMP

THE newest offering. San Camp, opened this year. Decked out in white like a Bedouin camp – complete with plump Persian cushions – this little oasis is big on romance. A prime honeymoon destination, it perches on the edge of a salt pan. As the marketing guff says: "Turn 360 degrees, and nothing crosses the eye but the bowl of the sky." www.classicsafari.com.au



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