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Front cover and top left: The Okavango on horseback (photos courtesy of African Horse Back Safaris).

Middle left: Gaborone City Marathon ((photo by WebPort); Bottom left: Maitisong Festival 2010 (photo by Monirul Bhuiyan).

CITY MARATHON
GABORONE BY STORM
SUMPTUOUS BUFFETS
BUSINESS SURETIES

PLUS
SPECIAL REPORTS:
WATER FOR LIFE
UTILISING THE OKAVANGO WATERS

OKAVANGO HORSEBACK SAFARI



THUNDERING HOOVES

You can see Botswana's spectacular Okavango in a 4X4 vehicle, by boat, by canoe, or on elephant-back. But, there are few more thrilling ways to experience the Delta than on horseback.

Writes Steve Stockhall. Images courtesy of African Horse Back Safaris

We could just make out the shape of an elephant herd way in the distance. Bongwe, our guide, turned around in his saddle to indicate that we could go in closer to take a look. And, we could – easily, because the horses we were riding could get us anywhere in this 500 000 acre private concession; they could go places no driver in a 4X4 vehicle would even dare.

The flat terrain of the Okavango Delta, with its extensive marshes, open grasslands, floodplains and wooded islands, is perfect for equestrians. Exploring this beautiful and ever changing wilderness in the saddle, we could follow the game anywhere, under nearly any conditions, unrestricted, and in our own time. That is the thrill of being on an Okavango horseback safari.

Our pre-dawn wake-up call was delivered by a smiling Macatoo Camp attendant, bearing a nice hot cup of tea. Getting up early and sitting on your private deck, pondering the day ahead, is one of the great joys of being on safari.

Down at the main dining area, we arrived in time for a bit of light banter amongst guests, intrepid travellers from around the world, and breakfast – toast, muffins, cereals and more tea, which would keep us fuelled for our morning ride ahead.

Grabbing our various bits of riding kit, we made our way to the barn to meet our sturdy and trusty steeds. This 14-bed camp, situated on the western side of the Delta, has over 40 stabled horses – offering a wide choice to the intermediate and advanced rider.

We were greeted with the smell of horses and saddles and Motamedi 'Mod' Manyema – the barn manager. His job is not only to care for the horses, but to match the riders to their mounts' temperaments. No easy task, given the number of people who visit this camp.

A team of grooms and stable hands spend from four in the morning until past ten at night caring for the horses. On average, six tonnes of horse feed is trucked to camp every five weeks or so, to keep them in a healthy state. Their diet consists of the horse feed as well as grazing on the wild grasses – within movable electric fence systems – presumably to prevent them from wandering in the bush, and to protect them from predators. The horses that were 'off duty' would spend the day at rest within these fences; the others were saddled and readied for us.

The camp's two expert guides – Wabongwa 'Bongwe' Makate, the head guide, and Sekongo Katsotso, the lead guide, share the duties of conducting each ride and imparting their impressive and intimate knowledge of the bush. Each ride also has a back guide for safety, and this task belongs to Motsugi Samokwasi.

Once the riders had mounted up and felt comfortable, Mod and his team checked that all the saddles were on tight. Bongwe, in the meantime, reiterated the rules for a safe ride and how to respond to various situations in the bush – from a charging elephant to racing through shallow floodplains.

We set out into the rising sun for a morning of adventure.

Being on horseback in the bush is undoubtedly one of the best – and most exciting – ways to explore it. We

were high up in our saddles, with a 360 degree view of spectacular terrain, and no noise to mute the sounds of Nature. In fact, we were so unobtrusive that we felt we were part of an ancient, long forgotten world again, with city life a million miles away.

It was a case of 'animals watching animals'; and in such a scenario the wildlife took little notice of us. It was exhilarating how we could get so close to them, without disturbing them. We felt part of the herd, sharing a few

intimate minutes of their daily lives.

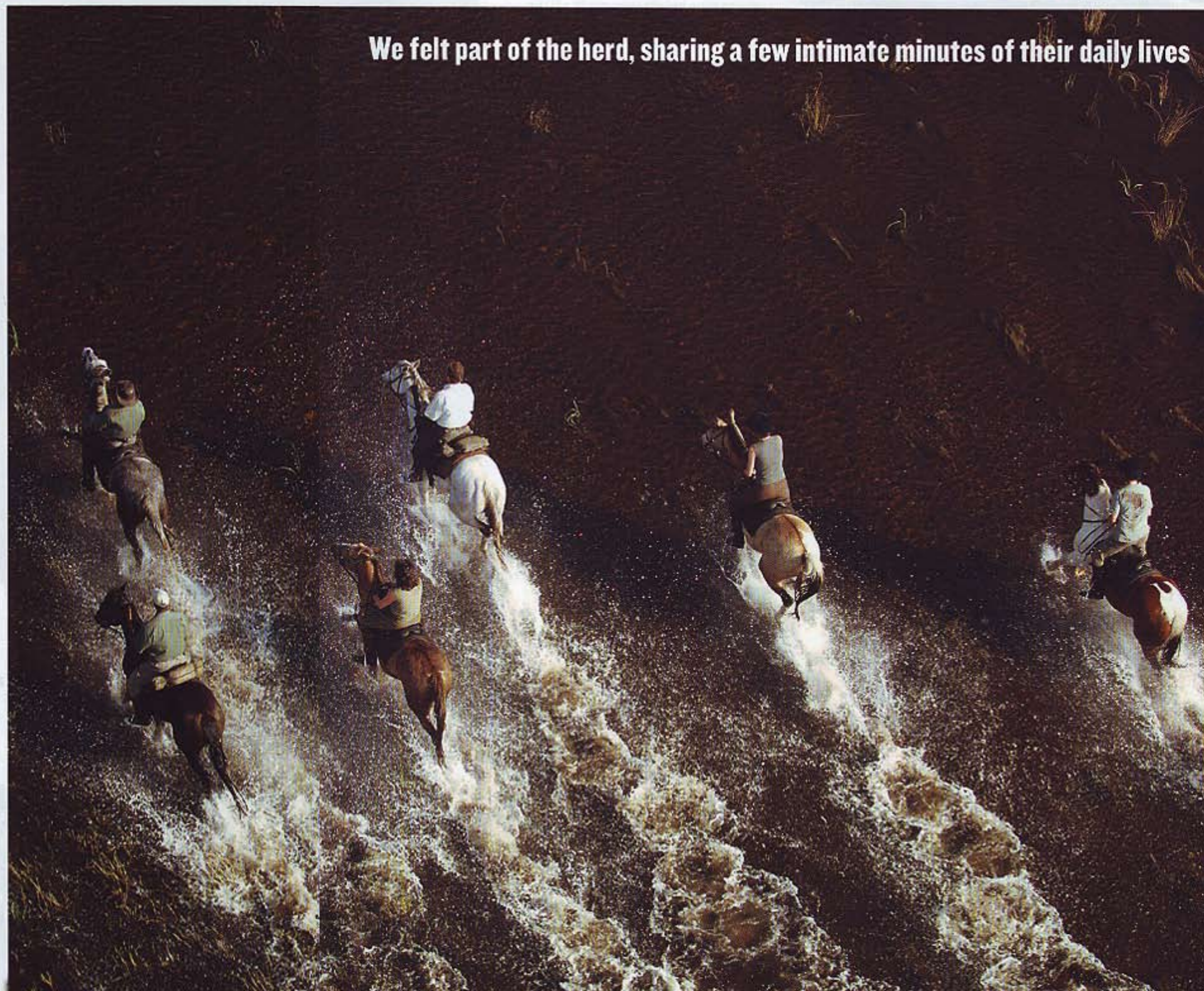
Our first sighting of zebra entailed us walking straight towards them, then getting in amongst the animals – amazingly close. These striped cousins of the horse were nonplussed with our presence; and after watching us approach, returned to grazing. Behind them, a herd of giraffe suddenly appeared on the open grassland.

We turned our attention to the giraffe, first skirting around, and then coming alongside them. Their three-



Below: "We could follow the game anywhere, under nearly any conditions..."
Left: "Slowly the sun edged towards the horizon" - winding down after an adventure-filled day in the saddle.

We felt part of the herd, sharing a few intimate minutes of their daily lives





Our guide Bongwe is on the lookout for crocs and hippos as we cross deep waters.

metre plus height was made all the more impressive by our proximity to them on horseback. Overhead, a Fish Eagle in flight made its presence known with its loud, screeching call. We were overwhelmed by the remarkable sense of freedom that riding in the wilderness brings.

In between sightings, Bongwe put our riding abilities to the test. He signalled that it was time to trot; off we went, rising and falling in the saddle, along one of the many game trails. After a while, we slowed to a walk, to carry on watching for game and to continue chats with the nearest riders.

Every now and then, Bongwe and Sekongo brought us into a semi-circle to point out something of interest, or to share details about their lives. There were many questions we wanted to ask, but, as they were speaking, we heard a hippopotamus grunting. The first grunt was followed by many others; and the sounds echoed across the floodplains. We turned the horses around and cut across a palm island, the guides leading us to a quiet lagoon they knew lay ahead. We were amazed again at the ease of movement and our ability to cache ourselves in the bush; and we spent some time watching the hippos interact with each other.

An astounding variety of life was all around us. In one morning we had seen elephant, giraffe, hippo, tsessebe, zebra, impala and a myriad of bird species. There were waders picking their way along the water's edge, storks fishing, kingfishers hovering, goshawk, snake eagles and other birds of prey circling high in the sky above us.

The hippos quieted down, lazily lolling in the water; and the tranquil, idyllic scene before us was recorded on our point-and-shoot cameras. (These, and a small pocket set of powerful binoculars are recommended when trying to ride and photograph at the same time. The bigger cameras were hauled out when we opted for a game drive in the coming days.)

The safety of the horse and rider is paramount out here; and Bongwe constantly checked on us to see how everyone was doing. Our response was mostly big grins, coupled with an enthusiastic thumbs-up signal.

Our morning ride lasted five hours, and, as is usually



The adrenaline rush kept us going through some of the most awesome scenery on Earth

the case, was a combination of wildlife viewing and putting our equine skills to the test. Trotting and cantering, and sometimes galloping, across a great variety of terrains – from open grasslands to floodplains to woodlands – is wildly thrilling, to say the least.

Bongwe gestured to us that it was time to try a canter. The horses hit the water with great gusto, splashing and soaking us. They were probably having more fun than we were. The adrenaline rush kept us going through some of the most awesome scenery on Earth.

When we all finally caught up with Bongwe, everyone started talking about their experiences at once. We found a spot to dismount, and the guides took from their saddle bags home-baked treats from the camp kitchen and some fruit.

The surrounding vista of wilderness was almost too much to take in, and we basked in the glory of its beauty.

We mounted up again; and an hour later, we 'stumbled' upon our very own 'bush brunch'. A beautifully decorated table and the accompanying smell of tasty food quickly reminded us of just how hungry we were.

With drinks in hands, we sat down in the shade of a sausage tree to enjoy a sumptuous meal, whilst Bongwe and Sekongo carried on telling us – with great enthusiasm – about life in the bush. The stories of their experiences were phenomenal; and it occurred to me that they must be part of an elite set of guides who specialise in conducting these types of safaris.

Later, back at Macatoo, we got to put our feet up for an hour or so, relax and catch up on a bit of reading. Some people headed for the pool, others for an afternoon siesta, the comfortable, well appointed accommodation a welcome respite.

Afternoon tea and preparations for the evening ride came all too soon. The pace slowed down on this shorter ride; and we mostly walked the horses and sometimes went for a short trot. Everyone was happy just to take in the sights, smells and sounds, and to reminisce about the day's adventures.

Slowly the sun edged towards the horizon, the light started to soften and the night sounds slowly began to filter into our ears. Just as dusk approached, we arrived back at

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Macatoo Camp guide Bongwe Makato.

the stable, to hand our horses to the grooms. The guests had already struck a bond with their animals; and there was lots of patting and petting and chatting to the grooms, before we walked to the main lodge for dinner.

After a hot shower, people arrived to the dining area refreshed. With the camp fire blazing, everyone settled around the warmth and glow of burning *mophane* wood to share the stories of the day.

The peacefulness of the African bush, the brilliant stars shining above and the intimate conversation made everyone feel at once both relaxed and energised. Out on the edge of darkness unseen, wild animals roamed the night, doing what they do, doing what they were intended to do, since time immemorial.

A three course dinner was served, and later, our beds beckoned. Exhausted and collapsing into bed, I instantly fell asleep. My dreams that night were of horses and wild animals, and of pristine terrain. It seemed I was ready to get back into the saddle before I had even woken up. ■

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