

# Botswana July 2015

## **Bookings**

I have not been to the Botswana parks for many years. With the various private operators now operating different camps in the parks, I found it virtually impossible to try and plan and coordinate an itinerary. Trying to secure bookings during SA school holidays is especially difficult and it seems as if one has to plan and book a year in advance.

I used the services of Botswana Footprints in Maun (Tara-Lee Goosen) and found their services to be excellent and essential. All the vouchers were delivered to me by DHL and all were in order at all the various places we visited.

At first glance, Botswana parks appear to be expensive. The quality of the parks, the low volumes of visitors and the unspoiled nature thereof more than makes up for it though.

We were meant to be three couples in three vehicles but one party had to withdraw at very short notice and so we were two vehicles. A Ford Ranger 3.2 Super cab fitted with a brand new AHA camper and Marianne and I in our trusty Landcruiser 76 with a rooftop tent. The AHA camper is certainly very nice and well designed. Personally, I prefer to travel light and like to have my camp set up in a few minutes of arriving. I am a strong supporter of the KISS principle.

As always, the week prior to going on leave was hectic at the office with many last minute matters requiring attention and direction. To compound matters, I had the mother of all colds, felt like death warmed over and simply could not do my fair share with the preparations and packing for the trip. I take my hat off to Marianne who raised to the occasion and did an absolutely sterling job.

We left Johannesburg early on a cold July morning and headed for the Khama Rhino Sanctuary near Serowe via Groblersbrug. The crossing on the SA side took about five minutes and I thought that it was going to be plain sailing. Alas, it was not be. It took an hour and a half to get through the Botswana side.

We arrived at KRS at around 16:00 where we stayed for two nights. The second day was spent resting and in my case recuperating from the blessed cold. It also provided an opportunity for our travelling mates to find their legs with the new camper.



The nights at KRS were typically cold and on the second morning I measured a round 0° C at around 07:00.

There are few things I enjoy as much as sitting in the morning sun on a cold winter's morning. It seemed that the resident squirrel also thinks so. It was comical to observe him, sunning himself hanging upside down the tree.



We were fortunately as snug as the proverbial bugs at night. But we soon picked up what I call bush perfume – the smoke infused odor of sitting around a camp fire at night – a feature for the duration of our trip.

KRS is actually a very special place, with an abundance of game and as the name indicates, especially Rhinoceroses. Given the horrific statistics on Rhino poaching, one simply cannot predict how long we will still have the privilege to see these magnificent animals. We observed two white rhino bulls involved in a light skirmish. It was amazing to see the copious amounts dust this generated and also how surprisingly light-footed these otherwise lumbering beasts actually are.



### **Central Kalahari Game Reserve**

We left KRS for the CKGR where we were to spend the next three nights.

The road to Matswere Gate is not great. And the road from the gate to Deception is worse. All in all around 90 kilometers of shake, rattle and roll.

We were booked to spend the first night at Deception Camp 3. On arriving it was beset by a group of 6 vehicles and many people. On comparing booking slips it was clearly a double booking on the part of the

Botswana authorities, with both parties in possession of perfectly legal permits for the site. We made camp just next to the designated camp to be close to the amenities. Such as they are...

During the night we heard lion roar in the distance. Always, to me, a wonderful sound, bringing home the realization that one is now truly in the bush.

The next morning we set off in the direction of the Passarge Valley. A truly beautiful part of the park and in places reminiscent of the Serengeti with plains abounding with game.



On arrival, our camp site was covered in lion tracks, although they eluded us in the immediate vicinity of our camp. We did encounter them the next morning though, but some distance away from the camp.



We left Passarge or Leopard Pan. Unfortunately the pan did not live up to its name and we did not spot any leopard.

This was my first visit to the CKGR. We stayed for three nights. Definitely not enough time. I will return to stay longer. Soon.

### **Maun**

After three wonderful days in the CKGR, we departed for Maun.

En-route, we crossed the Boteti River. The Boteti was flowing strongly. What a beautiful sight.



This contrasted strongly with a previous visit when it was bone dry. It was heart rendering to watch the animals fighting for a drink at Meno-a-Kwena.



We stayed at the Island Safari Lodge for two nights. As in the case of the Boteti, the Thamalakane River was also flowing strongly with clear water.

We spent the afternoon stocking up on fresh produce. Maun is not the cheapest place in Botswana. A kilo of biltong at the Reilley's shop cost the same as in Johannesburg and the price of rump steak I more than double the price in Gaborone.

The second day Marianne and I took an hour long flight over the Okavango swamps. A great experience and although pricey, worth the money.



The bird life next to the river is also abundant. We were entertained by four African Green Pigeons feasting on the fruit of the Jackal Berry trees in the camp. Considering how hard (at least to me) it usually is to spot these normally shy birds, it was a real pleasure to watch them going about.



Island Safari Lodge is great for a stay over in Maun. They have free Wi-Fi and with the ridiculous costs of data roaming, a special bonus. I will stay there again. A short word of warning to those allergic to local sounds – there is a bar across the river and at night the sounds of music drift across the river. I did not find it intrusive and thought it contributed to the ambience of staying in an African town.

### **Moremi**

We spent three nights in Moremi. Unfortunately the only booking we could manage was at South Gate Camp.

This camp is managed by Kwalate Safaris and the ablutions are definitely not up to scratch. Although clean, the unit closest to our camp, is in desperate need of some repairs and maintenance. One of the two toilets in the men's section was out of order and the other lacked a toilet seat. The cap on the top of the roof (thatched) is broken and one can see daylight from the inside. The solar lighting did not work – I suspect that the battery was needed to start one of the operator's vehicles.

A special sighting was the presence of an African Barred Owlet.



Apart from the above, Moremi was, as usual, magic with the swamps showings signs of filling up. This crossing was unexpectedly deep, with the onlookers who were all too scared to cross, fully expecting, and even hoping, for us to fail.



Many tracks close to the water's edge will soon not be passable.

### Savuti

We left Moremi via the Khwai north gate.



The road from here to Mababe Gate is good. The same cannot be said about the sand ridge road from the gate to the camp. I used to rate the Mana access road as the worst road I know of, but it has handed its number one podium spot to this track. The sand, although deep in places, is not the problem and any vehicle with reasonable clearance will manage without any difficulty. The road is full of evenly spaced holes caused by wheels digging in which causes the vehicle to pitch downwards and upwards, almost like a seesaw. Very annoying and tiring, especially if it continuous for almost 70 kilometers.

It also reminded me about how fickle one's mind can be. I recalled this road as mainly running through open grassland. Instead it runs through kilometer after kilometer of Mopani forests.

We also encountered a big MAN 4x4 truck fitted with a crane, transporting a broken down off-road trailer. I wondered how much this recovery cost the owner or his insurer. I also spotted a group of vehicles in the middle of the bush, effecting repairs to yet another broken down trailer. The roads to and from Savuti are really hard on a vehicle and it must be close to devastating for a trailer. Lugging a trailer though the thick sand must also put severe strain on a vehicle.

Savuti is, to me, one of the best parks in Southern Africa. The wildlife here is special. The elephants seem bigger, the lions fiercer.

It seems as if the park officials have removed the aggressive elephants which roamed the campsites. Even the hyenas were well behaved.

The Savuti campsite is now managed by SKL. This company clearly knows what it is doing and the camp and ablutions are in excellent shape. The staff are friendly and efficient. An impressive improvement over the way in which it was previously run by the park authorities.

We could stay for one night only before moving on to another of my favorite places Linyanti.

### **Linyanti**

We departed for Linyanti via the 40 km sand road. This track has seriously deteriorated since my last visit approximately 8 years ago and I can see why people get stuck.

Linyanti is also operated by SKL and a new ablution block is almost completed. The old one has been spruced up and is, compared to what it was before, actually quite nice with gas heated showers.

The wildlife did not disappoint with daily visits to the camp by elephant. A special treat was two Kudu bulls locking horns next to the ablution block and a pack of African Wild Dogs resting in the neighboring campsite.



An elephant provided the entertainment when it discovered that its favorite rest spot had been occupied by campers and showed his displeasure by pushing over a small tree in the campsite.



Driving in Linyanti is limited, but the river drive never disappointed.

We stayed for two nights before departing to Chobe.

### **Chobe**

Chobe has changed a lot since our last visit. There is a LOT of traffic, somewhat eased by a one way system. The tracks bear witness of the heavy traffic.

I was shocked to notice the impact the high concentration of wildlife has on the environment. It resembles scenes from some post-apocalyptic sci-fi movie. It is said that nature always balances itself. I wonder what will happen during this process.

It seems as if the area is suffering a drought and the Chobe river is a mere trickle compared to what it was on my previous visits.



We camped at Ihaha and was allocated campsite 2. This site should be withdrawn as an option. It is the overnight spot of a rather large troop of baboons. It is covered in baboon feces, stinks and is generally very dirty. We camped outside the designated site. We were due for a two-night stay but left early on the second day. None of us could face another stinky visit to our campsite. Complaints to the staff drew blanks.

An interesting feature was the vehicle patrols. The camp is patrolled by a vehicle which drives up and down the river road during the night to keep prospective thieves from the Namibian side at bay. I assume that this was introduced after a family was robbed some months ago.

I must say, that it was comical to listen to the baboons awaking with the resultant paff, paff of the feces hitting the ground, intermingled with a series of high-pitched farts.

On the positive side, there really is a lot of game in Chobe and the wild dogs sighting close to camp was an added bonus.

### **The way home**

We went to Kasane to have brunch whereafter we decided to tackle the return trip. The Shell garage in Kasane had no fuel and the queues at the Engen at Kazungula were very long and I decided to take the chance to try and reach Nata as I still had a half tank of diesel left. We drove slowly and fueled at Pandamatenga, whereafter I was set for the trip home.

We camped at Nata Lodge for the night and left at 06:00 for Johannesburg via the N11. All went well until we reached Potgietersrus (or whatever it is called now). It was a Sunday and the traffic was unbelievable. The N11 should be re-routed around this dump of a little town.

The traffic continued on the N1 with queues of about a kilometer at each toll gate. The tolling business is obviously booming. The traffic did not flow smoothly – one moment one would travel at 100 and the next moment come to virtual standstill. I figured out what the problem was. Cars travelling in the left lane would all move over to the right hand lane the moment they observe a truck or bus a kilometer ahead traveling at 80, including all the cars, of which there were surprisingly many, travelling at 70...

It took almost 11 hours to complete 900 kilometers and we were relieved to arrive home safely.

All in all it was a fantastic holiday. There is no substitute for a bush holiday. I cannot wait for the next one.