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STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

Elephants at Botswana's Abu Camp, rescued from zoos and circuses, live a quiet life in the Okavango Delta. Some are returned to the wild.

B O T S W A N A

Talking to the elephants on
safari in Southern Africa

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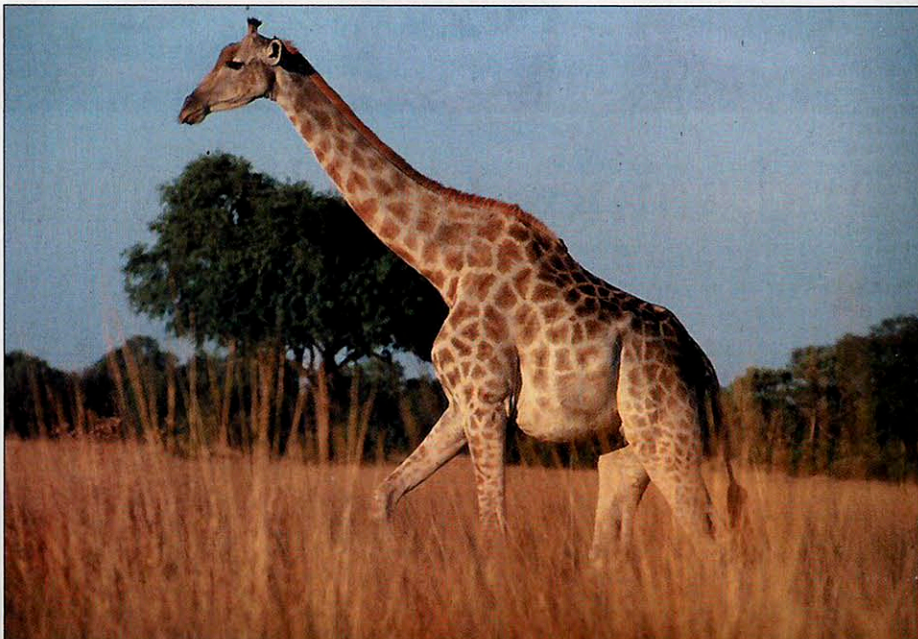
The baboons, barking at our approach, climbed a tree for a better view, and the giraffes, curious but unafraid, turned to watch as we plodded slowly across the grassy marsh, riding on Cathy's broad back.

Cathy, matriarch of the herd at Elephant Back Safaris, at Abu Tent Camp in Botswana's Okavango Delta, was a familiar sight to the giraffes. On most mornings, the 45-year-old African elephant and her family of seven, including two-year-old Naya, crossed the marsh, munching on young palm fronds and spraying water into the air.

Sitting in front of us, Cathy's "mahout," Billy, a lanky youth with a broad grin, sat comfortably with his legs hanging down behind her ears and urged her forward in a low voice.

"Cathy move, Cathy move, good girl, good girl," he said, gently tugging her ear.

Riding behind him on a padded saddle, we marveled at her skin's rubbery ridges and the careful way she stepped over fallen logs. Now and then she lifted her trunk over her head to touch my hand, feeling for a piece of kibble from Billy's stash of treats. When she called to the other elephants, a low-frequency vibration that rumbled up from the depth, we felt as if we, too, were talking to the elephants.



Please see **AFRICA** on **D17** This giraffe appears to have a baby on board.

Safaris offer civilized surroundings

AFRICA

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The Abu Camp elephants, rescued from zoos and circuses, live a quiet life in the Okavango, "working" only when visitors sign up for a ride. A few have been returned to the wild. Others, like Cathy, are too habituated to people to fit into a wild herd. Elephant Back Safaris gives them a home, helps to earn their keep and brings elephants and foreign visitors together.

If you've been to Africa but not to Botswana's Okavango Delta, a life-changing experience awaits you. The country is stable and prosperous, one of the few places in Africa where you can travel on your own without worrying. But if you're going for the first time, your money will be better spent if you let an experienced safari operator help you plan.

Thus it was that we called Ker & Downey Botswana (based in Katy, Texas), a safari planner specializing in Botswana and South Africa, to arrange a two-week trip. Recommended by friends, Ker & Downey is ranked on Travel + Leisure's top-10 list of safari tour operators and its reservationists are personally familiar with each destination.

The flight from New York to Johannesburg, South Africa, a 17-hour flight with a one-hour stopover in Dakar, Senegal, was surprisingly comfortable, even sitting in coach. Once in Jo-burg, however, you're so close to some of the game lodges near Kruger National Park that it only makes sense to include them in your itinerary. As a result, we spent our first jet-lagged night in luxury at Singita, an award-winning lodge on a private reserve.

When you ride on an elephant, you're above it all, seemingly immune from danger. But when you sit in an open-topped Land Rover with nothing between you and a pride of lions except thin air, fear is an inevitable reaction. Fortunately, you can relax.

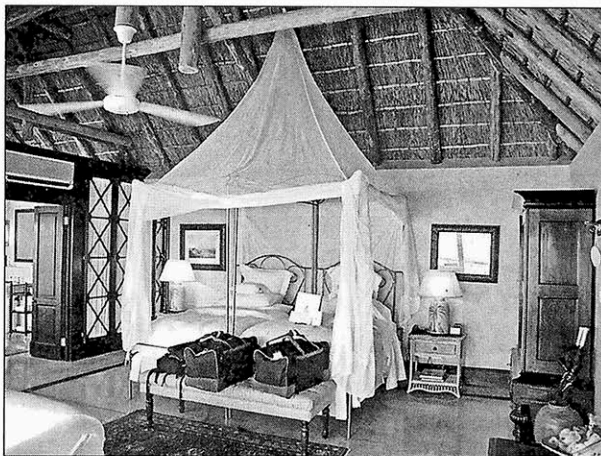
"The animals, kudu, giraffe, lions, even leopards, are used to seeing vehicles drive up, stop for a few minutes and then drive away," said Ker & Downey Vice President Paul Swart, a native South African who began his career as a safari guide. "They don't see you as game to be hunted and they've learned that you're not going to hurt them. As long as you don't do anything to stimulate that predator instinct — like getting out of the car and running — they ignore you."

Sure enough, we soon passed a half-dozen giraffe, impala and zebra and two young bull elephants who glanced at us and kept on chewing. The surprises continued when we reached Singita, where our bungalows looked down over a river with a favorite watering hole, and we spotted a leopard in the brush.

For the next several days, spent at Singita and then Royal Malawane, we decompressed with mid-day naps, morning and evening game drives in an open Land Rover and long social evenings capped by a traditional South African barbecue, served outdoors at long tables, with candlelight and a campfire.

Finally, jet lag at bay, we headed north to Botswana, flying over the parched earth of the Kalahari Desert to Maun (mah-OON), gateway to the Okavango Delta.

From that point on, we flew from one tent camp to the next on five-passenger Cessna 206s, the workhorse of the Delta. To some travelers, small planes feel like a death trap. But in bush country, Botswana in particular, it's the only way to get the big picture: the Okavango River flowing in from Namibia, permanent lagoons overgrown with papyrus, vanishing water holes, dry pans, animal trails everywhere and scattered

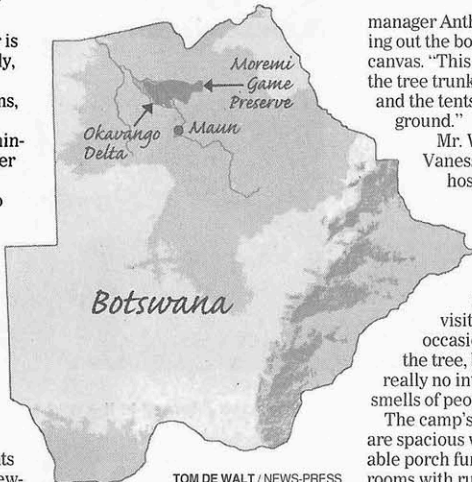


STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

Royal Malawane Lodge bedrooms are furnished in safari style.



The interior of tent No. 8 at Shinde Camp.



TOM DE WALT / NEWS-PRESS

woodlands, some with tent camps.

"Do you see the elephants?" shouted pilot Steve Hollingworth, an expat Brit with a chipper smile, dipping the wings and swooping low over a water hole where 50-odd elephants were wallowing. "Look over there, cape buffalo and kudu on the river bank."

Arriving at Kanana Camp, giraffes on the runway foiled our first landing attempt but the noise buzzed them off and we came to earth in time for lunch and a tour of the camp. Later, as the day cooled, we climbed into a mokoro (native canoe), and with a guide poling us into deep water, went in search of some of the Moremi Game Reserve's 550 permanent and migratory bird species.

At Kanana — and now at all Botswana game lodges, governed by strict environmental regulations — the structures must be temporary — tents, in other words.

"Tent camps are designed so that they can be dismantled and moved without leaving a trace," said camp

manager Anthony Washford, pointing out the bolts at the base of the canvas. "This deck is built around the tree trunk — I love this tree — and the tents never touch the ground."

Mr. Washford and his wife Vanessa are the ideal camp hosts; welcoming, enthusiastic and knowledgeable.

"Birds fly in and out," he told another guest, jittery about nocturnal visits from lions. "And an occasional snake gets up in the tree, but larger animals have really no interest in anything that smells of people."

The camp's eight bungalow-tents are spacious with awnings, comfortable porch furniture, private bathrooms with running water and mosquito screening over windows and doors. They're also equipped with a flashlight and a signal horn, in case of emergency.

Our favorite game lodge, Shinde Camp, was larger and more spread out than the others, with an airy lounge and dining areas on terraced decks under spreading tree branches. Ten large tents were arranged in an oval around a swimming pool and a meadow. On one side we could see the water; on the other, a broad savannah.

The daily routine at Kanana and Shinde is typical of most safari camps. You awaken to a cacophony of bird song, grab a mini-breakfast and leave on a game drive at 6 a.m., while the day is cool and the animals are active. Sightings are guaranteed since your guide remembers yesterday's locations and your tracker, sitting on the fender seat, reads paw prints as readily as road signs.

Between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., you're in camp, socializing, reading, napping, checking off your bird list, swimming and eating lunch. The afternoon game drive runs until about 8 p.m. with a pause at dusk for

IF YOU GO

Recommended reading: A *you* de force, the guidebook "Botswana" by Chris McIntyre (a Bradt Travel Guide, Globe Pequot Press, \$21.99 is unequaled. With detailed travel information, color photos and the author's personal thoughts, it also includes history, geography, wildlife watching and environmental issues.

In Botswana, look for the "Shel Tourist Map to Botswana," by Veronica Roodt, updated based on trips she made in 2003 and 2004, \$20, which includes shipping. A 192-page guide packaged with a map, it is full of hard-to-find detail. More information is on Ms. Roodt Web site at www.veronicaroodt.co.za. Order by writing to Ms. Roodt, P.O. Box 911-716, Rosslyn 0200, South Africa, or by e-mailing veronicaroodt@lantic.net.

Planning: Ker & Downey, which operates four game lodges in Botswana, books safaris at all lodges in Southern Africa, including Namibia and Kenya, from its office near Houston. All reservationists are either from South Africa or have visited Kanana, Shinde, Abu Camp, Singita and Royal Malawane, and can describe the experience. Rates are fully inclusive, including alcohol, beverages and daily laundry service.

In South Africa, Singita's 15 bungalows start at 6,800 rand per night. Royal Malawane starts at 5,450 rand per night. (As of March 21, the exchange rate was 6.10 rand per dollar.)

In Botswana, Abu Camp is \$5,100 per person, with a three-night minimum stay. Kanana and Shinde camps range from \$395 to \$550 per person per night. All prices are based on double occupancy.

Call (800) 423-4236, or visit www.kerdowney.com.

Lodges: South Africa's game lodges are open year around; accommodations are cottages or bungalows. Botswana's safari camps are usually closed during the rainy season, from December through February; tents are outfitted with twin or double beds, a table or dresser, electric lights and private bathrooms with showers.

Abu Camp has gourmet meals and its custom-designed tents are furnished with romantic four-poster beds, antiques and chi-chi safari decor. Elephant rides are an integral part of the experience, but the camp also offers motorized game drives. Rates for a three-night minimum stay include elephant and safari-vehicle drives, canoe (mokoro) trips into the Okavango and all food and drinks.

a "sundowner," with wine and cheese. Dinner is served at 8 p.m., family-style, and lasts until 10 p.m., followed by coffee or a drink around the campfire. Bedtime brings a chorus of frogs and the roar of distant lions.

As for Abu Camp, a fabulously romantic game lodge, we spent just day there, foolishly thinking that riding elephants was a tourist stunt. Fortunately, Paul Swart, who knows Africa better than we do, added it to the itinerary. And so can you.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are Marina del Rey-based freelance writers.