



Animal magic

Riding with zebra and meeting meerkats leaves Jo Ryan refreshed and set on returning to Botswana

Cantering across the savanna, our horses' thumping hoof beats were suddenly accompanied by another sound – the 'yelp-yelp' alarm call of zebra. A stripy herd was on the move a little way to our left, sand blowing up behind them from the dusty plain.

It was the second day of my week-long riding safari on the Makgadikgadi Saltpans, in northeastern Botswana, and the moment I vowed to give up shopping and a social life so I could afford to go again.

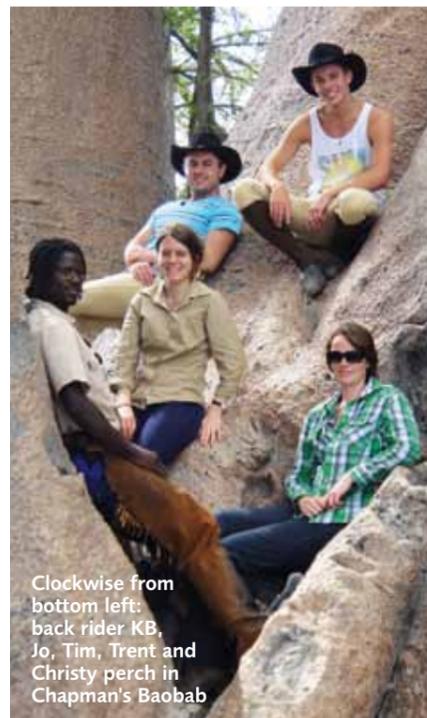
I had arrived, with the other guests, Christy, Trent and Tim, the previous day at our base, Camp Kalahari, nestled in the 6,200 square miles of salt pans left when Lake Makgadikgadi evaporated thousands of years ago.

"Welcome!" greeted safari guide David Foot and camp manager Jo Harris, when the four of us emerged off the flight to the lodge. "Come and have a drink – what would you like? Lemonade? Coke? Wine? Beer?"

This generosity, shown by all the staff, instantly made me feel at home, even as a novice solo traveller.

The homeliness extends to the living quarters, too. Wandering through the camp's mix of traditional-style tents and thatched dining areas may make you feel like a Victorian explorer, but you don't have to live like one. From the en suite, outdoor bathrooms for each tent, to the daily laundry service, no luxury has been ignored.

In the fading heat of that first afternoon, humans were paired with



Clockwise from bottom left: back rider KB, Jo, Tim, Trent and Christy perch in Chapman's Baobab



Close encounter: Jo meets her first meerkats



Dear Readers
Galloped with zebra,
 marvelled at meerkats and
 learned how to survive in
 the desert – for a wild
 riding adventure, come on
 safari in the Makgadikgadi!
 xxx

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Approaching the famous Chapman's Baobab



Not just any picnic: lunch en route to fly camp

horses – I had Appaloosa Safer – and we rode into the bush. A mix of Boerperde crosses and Appaloosas, the horses are happy to walk quietly, but will eagerly up the pace – vital in lion country.

The parched grassland stretched in all directions, dotted with sandy, palm-fringed pans allowing for fast canters.

When I visited at the beginning of December, the wet season was getting underway. Heavy rains transform the sandy pans into watery oases, which draw thousands of migrating animals.

Riding for two hours across the plain, we spotted early herds of zebra, wildebeest, a lone red hartebeest and a tortoise hiding in his shell. Disturbed by our horses, the swift animals galloped off, their calls ringing above the thunder of a far-off storm.

As the sky darkened, we spied, behind a clump of thorny bushes, a table laden with bottles and trays of nibbles – surprise sundowners to finish the ride. The view of the zebra-filled salt pans added extra zing to my gin and tonic.

In the night, I woke to the sounds of clicking bones and brushing grass – zebra were walking right past my tent. Though safe in my canvas cocoon, I had an eerie reminder of our wild home.

Early rising

Wake-up was at 4.30am – a necessary evil when by 10am it's like a sauna. It felt odd, though, in the predawn dark of the second day, as rain drummed on my tent, to be sloshing on the factor 30.

We mounted at 6am, all onto different horses. I was on another Appaloosa called Kambuku, which means 'leopard' in the Malawian language of Chichewa.

Looping across the pans close to camp, we spotted zebra, jackals, a

honey badger – rare but ferocious – and a group of wildebeest.

The flapping wings of vultures above us in the palm trees and the 'crak-crak' cry of black korhaans flying overhead were a constant accompaniment to our horses' hoof beats on the dry ground.

Knees, thighs and calves were in protest by the time we got back to camp. "Don't worry," David called out. "After the third day, you'll be fine."

Aches and pains were quickly forgotten when we sat down to lunch – fluffy Spanish omelette, crisp salad and endless wine, beer and lemonade.

The food all week was worthy of a Michelin star: Botswanan beef, tangy Greek salad, ox tail falling off the bone, all prepared in the simplest of kitchens.

Me, and Livingstone

On the third day, we rode the long trek to a 'fly' camp at Xau Xai, where we were to spend two nights. Heading east, the landscape changed, with the stands of palms and yellow grassland broken up by open woodland of thorny acacias.

Pausing beside a track across our path, David pointed to the horizon. "That big tree is Chapman's Baobab, a landmark for explorers like David

Livingstone," he said. "This track is the Missionary Road, which they followed."

It seemed so little had changed in the intervening centuries, and I could still hear the ox carts rattling past.

With a circumference of 25m, Chapman's Baobab is a monster and inscribed with the names of explorers who stopped there. We tied the horses to nearby bushes and perched on its roots for a break before carrying on to a rocky, shady area for lunch and a siesta.

Remounting at 5pm, we rode the last leg to camp, eating up the ground with long canters. The sun was sinking as we arrived, setting the ice-blue sky alight with a crimson glow.

Comprised of small tents, open-air bucket showers and a mess tent, fly camp had a simplicity that added to the sense of adventure. →

Holiday essentials

- High-factor sun cream in a small stick you can apply on the go;
- Travel sickness pills for those with a sensitive tummy – the flight into camp can be bumpy;
- Hand wipes;
- A head torch;
- Insect repellent and bite cream.

WISH YOU WERE HERE



This is not just a safari – it's an adventure, and I returned home intent on going again

We followed hot showers under the stars by supper, before collapsing into bed. After the long ride, even the noise of beetles smattering against the outside of my tent and scuttling around the floor inside couldn't keep me awake.

Comparing the meerkats

As dawn broke, we set off in search of some of the Kalahari's most adorable residents – meerkats.

A group lives near the camp and a bushman called Mothusi follows these creatures throughout the day, so they can be found in their vast territory.

Dismounting as we neared them, we watched the meerkats go about their morning routine of keeping a lookout for danger and lounging in the sun.

Before long, they raced off to forage for creepy crawlies. Keeping up with them on foot, we sat on termite mounds by their burrows, which are scattered all over their territory, gaining their trust so they came up close.

Tracking the small, furry animals, hearing only their 'brill-brill' chatter

and the 'tap-tap-tap' of clapper birds rising out of the grass brought a great sense of peace. But the heat forced us eventually to make our way back to camp and dive under an icy shower.

A gust whipped up towards dusk, sweeping storms across the pans. We rode out into the grassland, feeling insignificant in the strong wind.

Fork lightning provided bush cinema, with thunder on surround sound. But when the clouds closed in, we headed home, glad to reach the sheltered safety of camp.

The following morning, we set off on the long trek back to Camp Kalahari, starting lazily, letting the horses snatch at the feathery grass.

In a bid to reach base before midday, we pushed on with fast canters, the muggy air thick with the sweet scents of hot horses and pink fireball lilies, which had sprung up in scattered clumps.

Crossing the final pan was like stepping into a David Attenborough documentary – herds of animals dotted the savanna.

Wilbeest slumbered in the shade of the palms and a few springbok stood on alert as we passed, before leaping to safety.

To our right, 100 or so zebra galloped into sight, sweeping a group of ostriches ahead of them. The migration was gathering steam.

Bush life

The last morning we had a lie-in until 5am – heaven!

This was a non-riding day and before going on our way, we



Bushmen show how to make fire

had a bush tour from four Jo'hunsi bushmen. They share their skills with guests, helping to keep their traditions alive.

Sticking near the lodge, they showed us plants they use to treat diseases, and how they find water and trap animals. They even dug up a scorpion – I'm glad this came at the end of the trip!

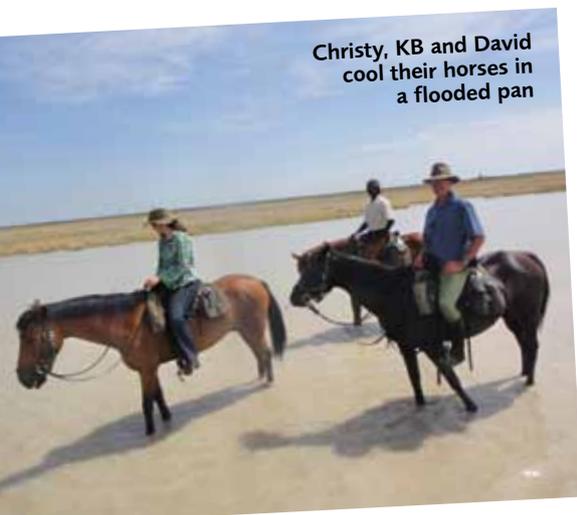
This is not just a safari – it's an adventure, and I returned home invigorated and intent on going again.

Every so often, when it's raining and cold, I spread out my map of Botswana, shut my eyes and I'm back, galloping with zebra over the salt pans. **W**

What you need to know

- Camp Kalahari is in the Makgadikgadi Salt pans, in northeast Botswana, about three hours by car east of Maun and surrounded by the Kalahari Desert.
- Guests stay in luxury tents with en suite facilities, with two nights at the fly camp at Xau Xai. All food and drink is included.
- The five-night safari costs £2,375, with a single supplement of 25 per cent. International flights are not included.
- For more details, visit: www.wildandexotic.co.uk, tel: (01439) 748 401 or email: rosie@wildandexotic.co.uk.
- **Best of both worlds:** Wild and Exotic has availability on a unique 'Salt and Spray' riding adventure in Botswana from 15-26 June.

Guests will spend the first five days exploring the Kalahari Desert and Makgadikgadi Salt pans as featured in this article, before flying north to ride through the Okavango Delta, a game-rich landscape of rivers, lakes and floodplain. It costs £4,420 per person, including all private-charter flights.



Christy, KB and David cool their horses in a flooded pan