

Botswana

Premier African wildlife and wilderness: Bushmen, desert and the Okavango Delta

Fly UK-Maun (Botswana) via South Africa/Kenya (flight time from around 14hrs)

Apr-May: the end of the rainy season



LION KINGDOM

Botswana's Central Kalahari: a place of Bushman legend and endless wilderness, echoing to the roar of lions. **Dale Morris** explored by horseback – and then tried the luxury approach

Pictures Dale Morris

Botswana

Around the blazing fire sat four Bushmen, a family of Afrikaans-speaking farmers and a team of horseback riders, including me. The flames were big enough to keep the evening Kalahari chill from our bones; I hoped they'd also keep the lions from our camp: Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) has a reputation for producing some of the largest and fiercest wild cats in Africa.

It was 2010, and my first trip to the CKGR. We'd already ridden for a week through its bu er zone, one of the biggest, driest and sandiest wildernesses on the planet, but we had yet to encounter big cats. Oryx, ostrich and jackals yes, but lions and leopards no. I've seen a few lions on my travels but don't mind admitting that for as long as I was perched precariously atop a horse – e ectively a moving banquet – I was quite happy for that absence to continue.

The CKGR is a place of stark and serene beauty: a 52,800 sq km chunk of uniformity right at the heart of the much, *much* larger Kalahari desert, which accounts for more than 80% of Botswana's total area and extends into South Africa and Namibia too.

A supposed no-go area for hunters and settlers, the bu er zone that surrounds the CKGR acts as a barrier between the wildlife and the nearby towns. As I trotted slowly through those pancake-flat sandy grasslands, with nary another human being in sight beyond our travelling pack, I felt very small indeed. True wilderness has a way of doing that to you. Lions can do so too.

Cool for cats

"Do you hear them?" asked Uncle Willie, the rough-and-ready Kalahari cowboy leading our expedition. "They can smell the horses."

I listened intently, trying to somehow aim my ears into the empty darkness, but all >



'The Bushmen won their fight to return home – a victory for human rights'



Kalahari etiquette
Ostriches are a common sight on the plains. After devouring one, three cheetahs are 'escorted' out of the area by disgruntled oryx (above)

Left: Xuta (left) and Xisea (right) are Bushman cultural guides at the Deception Valley lodge

Below: Kalahari lions can be elusive – but they're among the biggest in the world



Botswana

< I heard were the rumblings of a far-o thunderstorm. But then, from relatively nearby, came the unmistakable roar of a Kalahari lion.

“We’ll be fine, Dale,” said Willie, obviously seeing the fear in my eyes. “Don’t you worry. They’ll probably not attack us.”

Probably?! I peered out at the moonlit plains of gently swaying grasses and tried to see what it was that most certainly had a better view of me. I saw nothing but the flicker of lightning.

Later that evening, as we ate oryx steaks and Kalahari truffles (collected by our Bushmen crew), Willie – a natural-born storyteller – regaled us with tales of dangerous lions, Bushman magic, cowboy antics and leopard hunting. It was like listening to an Afrikaans Davy Crockett.

The Milky Way arched through the night sky above our makeshift camp like a celestial rainbow; the fire flickered and the horses whinnied nervously in response to grumbling lions. Most evenings out there in the Kalahari wilderness I felt safe in my little domed tent, visions of big ferocious cats creeping stealthily outside kept sleep at bay as effectively as a double-pint of Red Bull.

The following morning our scout Xego and I scoured the land around our camp for breakfast. Bushmen are famous for their remarkable ability to locate food and water where it seems there is none, and each day we would go out in search of tasty morsels. We dug up gourd-shaped mushrooms, roastable seeds, a big tuber that could be grated for its moisture content and a couple of unappetising-looking beetle larvae. That morning, however, it didn’t take the skills of a Bushman to spot that we were being followed.

The lion’s huge pugmarks were everywhere. But when I anxiously scanned the flat horizon with my puffy, sleep-deprived eyes, I saw nothing. This pattern repeated itself throughout this first expedition to the CKGR. The lions continued to shadow us – their footprints evident near camp most mornings – but they never revealed themselves. And for that I was secretly rather grateful.

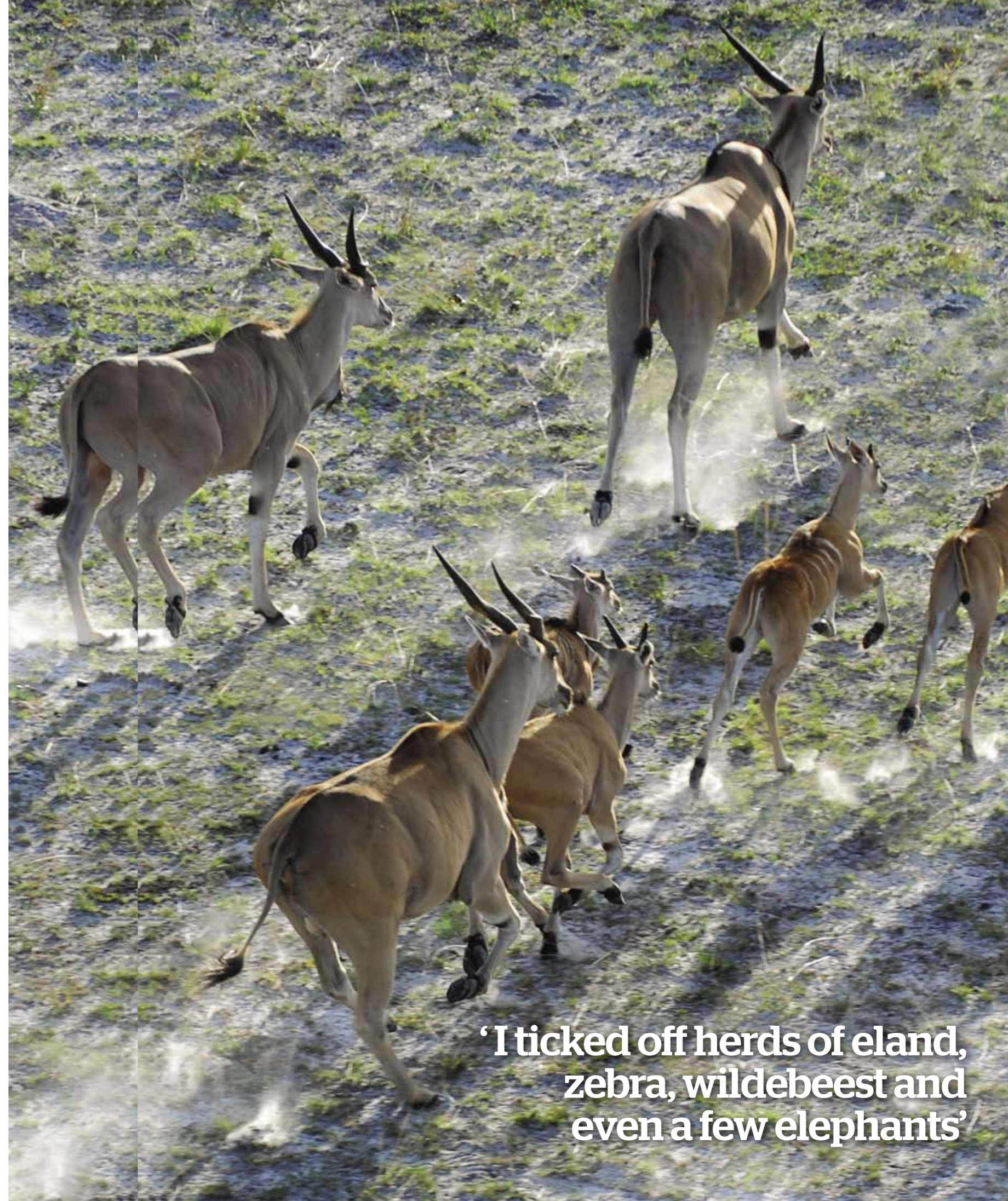
The Bushmen’s battle

While a lack of predators was, to my mind, acceptable, I was a tad disappointed with the paucity of other animals.

I’d heard that the CKGR was teeming with wildlife. A week before commencing our trek, I’d been practising my rather rusty riding at Willie’s Grasslands Bushman Private Wildlife Reserve, a 15,000 hectare Kalahari sanctuary adjacent to the buer >



All ears
A pair of young jackals peer out of the Kalahari grasses
Above: Xuta and Xisea relax by the fire
Below: Wildebeest walk in single file across the plains
Right: A high-speed herd of eland, Africa’s largest antelope



‘I ticked off herds of eland, zebra, wildebeest and even a few elephants’



Campfire's
burning
Swapping tales
by the flames –
the perfect
Kalahari evening

'I slept beneath canvas in unfenced campsites, listening to the lions roar'

< zone through which we were now travelling. There, I'd seen numerous herds of beautiful oryx with their scimitar horns, as well as springbok, zebra, kudu and wildebeest. But out on the edges of the game reserve proper, the few animals we had seen had been exceptionally nervous.

"There is no poaching of wildlife in the private reserve nor in the interior of the CKGR," Xgara explained when I asked him why everything seemed to be running or hiding from us. "But out here in the buffer zone, Bushmen hunt from the saddle with dogs. There *are* wild animals living here. Plenty in fact. But they know to keep away from horses and humans."

It's a contentious issue, but over the past few years there has been much hullabaloo about Bushmen in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve and their rights to live and hunt there. During the harsh droughts of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the hunter-gatherer clans of the Central Kalahari started to settle down around government-built water wells. With stability came livestock and some agriculture, which in turn led to an inevitable conflict with the local wildlife.

As a result, the government decided it would be best to close down the wells and

move the Bushmen out of the CKGR to resettle them in villages on the park's periphery. Schools were built, water was provided and grants were allocated to the displaced people.

Some, understandably, did not wish to leave their homelands. They fought a court battle that lasted many years until finally they won the right to return home, dig wells *and* bring their livestock too. It was certainly a victory for human rights, but what it means for the future of the region's skittish wildlife is not so clear.

Where the wild things are

Spring 2012. I hadn't been able shake the niggling feeling that my 2010 horseback expedition around the extremities of the CKGR hadn't given me a true perspective of the park. So, two years on, I returned to see if the interior had more to offer in terms of wildlife viewing.

The northern sectors of the reserve are – unlike the south or the buffer zones – capable of producing regular sightings of large herds of oryx and springbok, which gather there to feast on carpets of grasses growing on the region's empty lakes. And of course, where there are aggregations of hoofed animals, there will be predators too...

Initially I joined a mobile-tented safari tour in that area, to see the contrast between the buffer zone and the park's animal-rich interior. Wherever I turned, springbok pronged like popping corn while hundreds of oryx gathered in the shade of acacia trees. Sparrow-like quelea were present in their tens of thousands; hawks, eagles and marabou storks were there by the hundred to feast on them. I ticked off herds of eland, zebra, wildebeest and a few elephants – extremely rare in the Kalahari due to a lack of standing water. I even saw cheetah eating an ostrich and leopard lazing in a tree.

But the lions – though evident by their nocturnal roaring and footprints – remained as elusive as ever.

At night, on the floor of Deception Valley – a fossilised riverbed that never flows – I slept beneath canvas in unfenced campsites and listened yet again to the roar of Kalahari lions, mixed with the raucous call of zebra. It was transfixing and, without horses around to tempt the felines, I felt much safer than I had before – despite feeling more alone. The sites are miles apart and, despite being almost twice the size of Belgium, only a few dozen vehicles are permitted to enter the park at any one time. As such, you can spend weeks there and never see another soul. >



'In the soft golden haze, cubs rolled around like mischievous puppies'

< A little luxury

After spending so much time roughing it, I decided it was time to indulge in a spot of luxury. For my last four nights in the Kalahari I treated myself to stays at the only two lodges within the park. Tau Pan and Kalahari Plains are both five-star, and strategically situated at the heart of the 'gamiest' region of the reserve.

When not being chauffeured around in an open safari vehicle by my private guide and tracker, I was given the opportunity to take lessons in bush survival from the locals – a relative term, perhaps, when staying in a luxury camp. The options to suck moisture from a gourd or eat insect larvae were there, but so were G&Ts and fancy hors d'oeuvres. I went for the latter.

Each morning, before the sun rose, I was treated to a hearty breakfast (which didn't feature grubs) and then a game drive to some of the most scenic and spectacular regions of the park. In the evenings, the same again, but with a customary sundowner stop so that I could sup wine and watch the beautiful Kalahari sunset in action.

I ticked off a great many wildlife sightings, including a bristling pair of porcupines and a brigade of bat-eared foxes that more resembled chihuahuas than wild animals.

Both lodges employ local Bushmen (and women) as general staff and 'traditional' guides, who will escort you on a cultural foray into the wilderness. While trekking with them I honed my tuber-digging skills, learned where to find poison grubs for my arrowheads and was taught how to wear little duiker-skin pants without freezing to death on chilly desert mornings. "Chase an eland on foot," I was told by my guide Tlholego, "that'll warm you up."

I asked him what he thought about dressing up for tourists. "My people don't dress in traditional clothing anymore. But when visitors come from all over the world to see our culture in action, well, we are happy and proud of our traditions and history."

The kings of the Kalahari

On my last evening game drive in the Kalahari, guide Ongalebwe told me that he had a special treat lined up for me. Roast beetle grubs? Sun-dried desert rat? Perhaps some warm *tsamma* melon juice (which tastes horrible, by the way)? No, he had found me some lions.

Our car was one of those open-sided affairs, which made me a bit nervous when we parked a mere few metres from the maneaters. But Ongalebwe explained to me

that they were unable to differentiate between the hard metal of the vehicle and the tasty fleshy morsels inside. I still felt a little like a chop on display when eight sets of yellow eyes peered at me. "Are you sure they can't see me?" I squeaked.

"100%," he replied.

At his insistence, I forced myself to relax and enjoy the moment.

It was a small pride. In the late afternoon's soft, golden haze, cubs and older siblings rolled around like mischievous puppies, tumbling playfully over a huge black-maned male who, in turn, cued them gently. There were oryx and springbok nearby but they seemed unconcerned. Fluffy females, fully grown and purring like oversized kittens, lay on their backs, their paws pointed up at the sky. It was a wonderful, peaceful and tender family scene.

"Aren't they fantastic?" remarked Ongalebwe – a rhetorical question, of course. I turned to look at the wonder in his eyes, and in that moment I saw a possible future for the Central Kalahari, where both wildlife and Bushmen live in harmony, as they have always done. ■

Dale Morris is a freelance photographer and travel writer living in South Africa and specialising in conservation and wildlife

