

# IN THE Valley OF Deception

One of the largest and driest parks in the world, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve is far from lifeless

By DALE R MORRIS [WWW.GECKOEYE.COM](http://WWW.GECKOEYE.COM)



A mother cheetah and her mature cubs had devoured an ostrich before sauntering into the grass for a snooze near some grazing oryx. Before long, an impenetrable and menacing wall of horns loomed above the cheetahs and sent them packing from the area.

**A**round two years ago while on a travel assignment for COUNTRY LIFE, my poor backside was put into the somewhat torturous circumstance of having to sit in a saddle for almost three weeks on the trot, literally.

I had joined a cavalcade of salt of the earth yet clearly demented horsey types who had banded together with a bunch of local Bushmen in order to cross Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR), one of the largest, and driest, parks in the world.

It was a fantastic experience, but when finally I dismounted and said farewell to Bruce Lee, my spirited steed, I was dog tired of horses, hated the heat, and never wanted to see another tent as long as I lived. I also had the distinct feeling I hadn't really seen much of this 900 000km<sup>2</sup> semi-desert at all. But that's not surprising really. After all, the Kalahari is 29.48 times larger than Belgium, and, what's more, has almost no hills from which to view its famously flat landscapes.

Once a giant inland sea, the Central Kalahari is now a seasonally dry semi-desert, lacking any permanent water but for the Okavango River. But it's far from lifeless.

Every year, torrential summer rains douse the desert and up come succulent grasses. And where there is grass, there are herbivores, and a cavalcade of teeth and claws and manes and spots.

The CKGR, and indeed the greater

Kalahari Basin, a staggering 2.5 million km<sup>2</sup> in size, is one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet. The Bushmen, those ancient people first here, call this place their home, as do the largest lions on Earth, the biggest herds of springbok and the greatest gatherings of gemsbok anyone is likely to see.

But alas, because we were mostly traversing the park's buffer zones and cut lines, locations where Bushmen communities and livestock can be found, big game was relatively scarce.

"If you want to see lots of animals," a wizened bushman called Xego had told me, "you must go to the north of this land, where there are no people and the grasses are greener."

Tempting. But I didn't really fancy the idea of returning. I had slept in tents and on sand among the scorpions night after night. I had shivered in the desert darkness and sweated like a Bangkok pole dancer by day. I had even eaten grubs with the Bushmen.

It had been an adventure for sure, but the Kalahari is a harsh place, especially for softies like me. But Xego, a man full of great wisdom born from his connection to the land and his ancestral ways, had some additional words of encouragement. "There are upmarket lodges in the north. Try Googling them. I hear they have aircon there."

That's how I found myself back in the imposing emptiness and swaying grasses of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, only

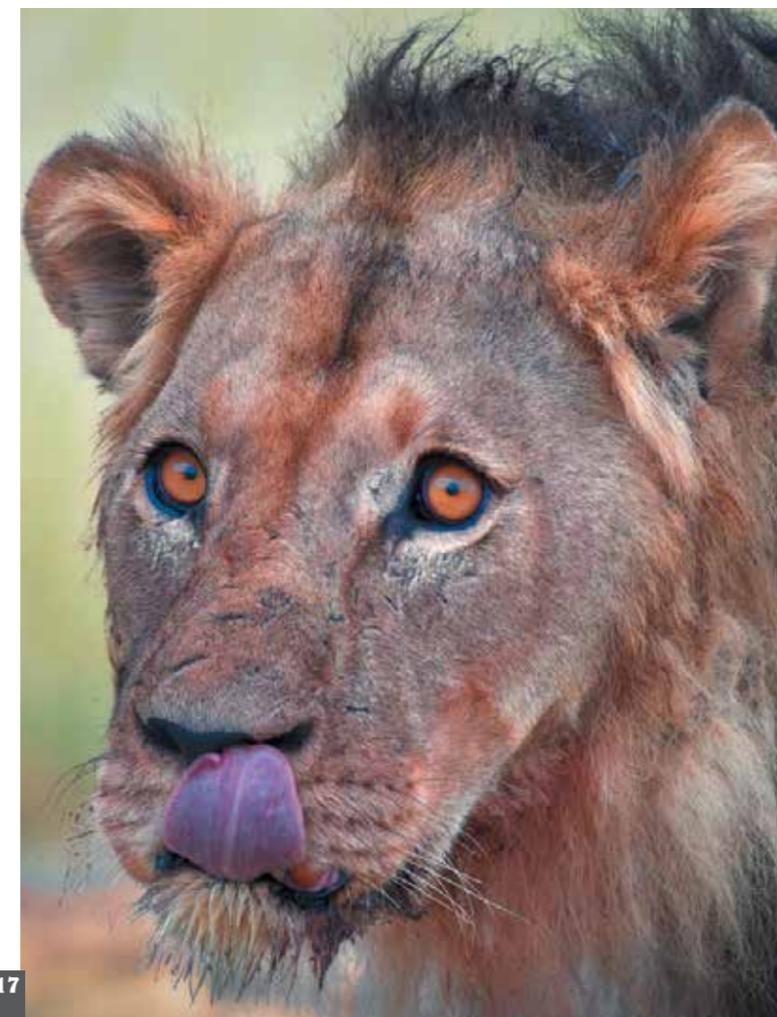
**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Painted dogs (African wild dogs) have a stronghold in the Kalahari. The Kalahari is famous for having some of the largest lions in the world. Guineafowl on a game-viewing track.**

this time I was doing it in style.

Initially I hooked up with a mobile tented safari tour run by Wilderness Safaris, and although I had promised myself never to sleep under canvas again, I needn't have worried. The tents had proper beds in them. There were ice cold drinks on tap, fantastic food, my own guide and game spotting vehicle, and a brigade of camp hands, chefs and wine pourers to pander to my pedantic needs. Short of having a pair of scantily clad ladies standing either side of me with fans at the ready, I couldn't have asked for more.

But it wasn't only the comfort levels that were markedly different from my previous Kalahari excursion. As I'd hoped, the north was a place of prolific wildlife. It was a fantastic treat to see big herds of eland, Africa's largest antelope, as well as zebra and wildebeest. I even encountered some elephants which I was told are extremely rare in the Kalahari due to a lack of standing water. Quelea, sparrow-like birds, were present in their tens of thousands, and hawks, eagles and Marabou Storks were there to gorge on them.

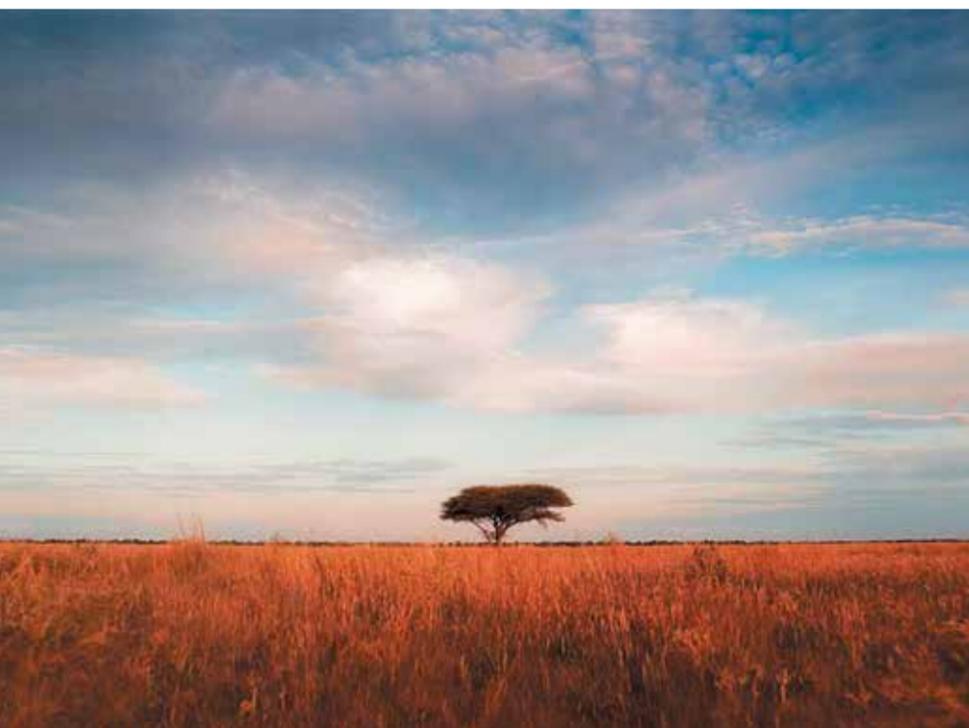
Whenever I turned my head, springbok pronked, oryx rattled their horns and ostriches did their gangly dances. I also saw



## THE SECOND LARGEST GAME RESERVE IN THE WORLD



- Historically, much of the area's big game migrated between the CKGR area and the permanently wet Okavango Delta, but in the 1950s a cattle fence was erected. As a result, millions of wildebeest, zebra and other animals perished. Bodies lay heaped along this impenetrable barrier.
- There is no standing water in the park, and the only moisture available to animals comes via seasonally predictable downpours and water-storing plants such as wild melons and underground tubers.
- Although most species are drought adapted, the authorities decided to install and maintain boreholes, which continue to keep certain species from extinction during particularly dry periods.
- About 40 000 years ago, today's Kalahari Desert was once the bed of a giant inland lake that would have been up to 300m deep in places. Tectonic shifts caused the lake to drift off and dry out, leaving behind a paradoxically parched environment where dry sand can lie as much as half a kilometre deep.
- Despite these harsh, dry conditions, giraffe, brown hyena, warthog, cheetah, wild dog, leopard, lion, blue wildebeest, eland, gemsbok, kudu and red hartebeest abound. Four fossilised rivers meander through the reserve. They never flow but underground water stimulates the growth of grasses.



cheetahs eating an ostrich, and leopards lazing in a tree.

At night, on the floor of Deception Valley, a fossilised river bed that never flows, I slept beneath canvas in unfenced campsites and listened to the spine-tingling roar of lions mixed with the raucous call of zebras. Magical.

Camping out here is indeed an awesome experience. The designated sites are miles apart from one another and, despite the park's size, just a few dozen vehicles are permitted to enter at any given time. As such, you can spend weeks

without seeing another soul.

Tau Pan and Kalahari Plains are the only lodges inside the park and both are small and strategically situated in the heart of the 'gamiest' region of the reserve.

When not being chauffeured around in an open safari vehicle, I was given the opportunity to take lessons in desert survival, from local Bushmen who live and work at the camps. I learned how to collect water from giant underground gourds, how to dig up and consume beetle larvae, how to kill my enemies with a poison dart (very useful, that) and how to strangle a guinea

## WHAT ABOUT THE SAN?

The CKGR was established in 1961 as a sanctuary for Bushmen and their traditions.

However, in the 1980s, diamonds were discovered there, which many people believe prompted the government to begin relocating residents from the park into special reservations.

Between then and now, the vast majority of Bushmen left their traditional lives and homelands. Some say they had no choice as the government refused to allow them to establish boreholes, to hunt with modern weapons, or to keep livestock.

In 2006 some lobbyist Bushmen were awarded the right to return and, in 2011, the right to establish boreholes.

Finding a sustainable balance between the modernising needs of Bushmen and the needs of local wildlife is difficult. Tourism may be a partial solution that provides income and jobs for locals in an environmentally sustainable way.

fowl using a few twigs and a bit of vine.

Other essential skills I mastered were how to impress a girl by making a fire with a stick (apparently you can't get married unless you know how to do this), how to throw miniature bouncing spears, how to dance, how to capture a giraffe and how to fashion a splendid head garment using just a tortoise shell and some wildebeest sinew. The very same Bushmen also showed me

**TOP:** A ghostlike mist hangs over the Kalahari in the predawn chill. **ABOVE LEFT:** Flat open spaces characterise the Kalahari. **RIGHT:** Bushmen believe that if you can't make a fire you will not find a woman.



how to make an excellent gin and tonic from the lodge bar, and how to use my GPS properly.

“How do we stay in touch?” I asked several of my guides, all of whom were dressed in duiker skin loin cloths and very little else. “Facebook,” they replied in unison. It was nice to see that the Bushman culture was adapting to a modern world yet, at the same time keeping to an extent their ancient ways, skills and beliefs. Even if only for tourism . . .

I asked one of my guides, Tlholego, what he thought about dressing up for tourists. It was, after all, freezing in the mornings

**BELOW: Hey Ho, Hey Ho, it's off to work we go. Traditionally attired Bushmen demonstrate hunting prowess to educate tourists. BOTTOM: Tsama melons, a traditional source of water for Bushmen and for the wildlife. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Tourists enjoy a sunset game drive. Luxury accommodation at Tau Pan camp in the heart of the game reserve. Quelea amass in their tens of thousands after rains. A nyala stays alert.**

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and his skimpy gear seemed to do little in fortifying him against the cold. “I am quite happy to do this,” he said through chattering teeth. “And although my people don’t usually dress this way anymore, when visitors come from all over the world to see our culture in action, well, we become happy and proud of our traditions and history.”

Bushmen are allowed by the park’s authority to live in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, but it is an extremely contentious and complex issue. They have always been there, long before borders were created or game fences erected. But in modern times, the potential for serious

conflict between the interests of a modernising people and that of wildlife conservation is not a trivial matter.

Traditionally in the past, Bushmen did not keep livestock nor did they dig permanent water wells and, as such, their footprint on the environment was small. However, in modern times, goats and donkeys are kept, guns are used for hunting, wells are needed and livestock conflict with predators is not at all uncommon.

There are rules imposed by the Botswana government that strictly control hunting permits and the establishment of permanent settlements but not everyone is happy, least of all some of the Bushmen. However, tourism, and the jobs it provides, is bringing much-needed income to locals, and encouraging a resurgence in traditional skills and cultural practices in young people. And at the end of the day, the CKGR is very big, and theoretically should be large enough for all.

On my very last game drive, Ongalebwe, another Bushman guide, said he had a special treat lined up for me. Roast beetle grubs? Sun-dried desert rat? Perhaps some warm tsama melon juice (that tastes horrible, by the way). But no, he had found me a small pride of lion near the camp.

Cubs and older siblings rolled around in the soft grass like mischievous puppies. They lolled among flowers in the late golden light, and tumbled playfully over a huge black-maned male who cuffed them gently. Fluffy females, fully grown and purring like oversized kittens, lay on their backs with their paws pointed to the sky. A wonderful, peaceful and tender family scene.

“Fantastic,” said Ongalebwe. I turned to look at the wonder in his eyes, and then at the lions, and in that moment I saw a possible future for the Central Kalahari, where both wildlife and Bushmen could still live in harmony. ■



■ **When To Go**

The green season usually starts in November and ends around April, with January typically one of the wettest, hottest months. Thunderstorms can be fierce, but usually brief, with midday temperatures averaging at around 35°C. The dry lakes, or pans, in the north of the park will be carpeted with grasses during and just after the rains which, in turn, attract large herds of antelope and predators. The dry season (April/May to Sep/Oct) is generally cooler and can get quite chilly at night so bring warm clothing. Blue skies will be the norm.

■ **Visiting the CKGR**

You can explore the CKGR with a tour company or as an independent. Most campsites, lodges and game-viewing tracks are situated in the northern sections. Animals are attracted to the artificially pumped waterholes and grassy pans located in the north.

The CKGR gets steadily drier, and emptier, the further south you go. The jeep tracks that pass for roads in the CKGR are often very slow and sandy and the speed limit is 25mph.

If you plan on a self-drive, you’ll have to bring everything from the kitchen sink to the water you intend putting in it. Drive in a convoy because there is often no cellphone signal and no AA to rescue you if you have a breakdown. You can reserve one of 41 campsites by visiting Bigfoot Tours [www.bigfoottours.co.bw/campsites.html](http://www.bigfoottours.co.bw/campsites.html)

Both Tau Camp and Kalahari Plains are upmarket resorts that provide guides, vehicles and full board and lodging as part of their packages. On a mobile safari, also fully catered, you will be accommodated in army-style dome tents. Prices change according to season. Keep an eye out for special offers.

■ **Useful Contacts**

**Wilderness Safaris** [www.wilderness-safaris.com/botswana\\_kalahari/kalahari\\_plains\\_camp/introduction](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com/botswana_kalahari/kalahari_plains_camp/introduction)

**Kwando Safaris** [www.kwando.co.za/tau.html](http://www.kwando.co.za/tau.html)

**Bigfoot Tours** will assist you to book a campsite. [www.bigfoottours.co.bw/campsites](http://www.bigfoottours.co.bw/campsites)

