

JUMBO IN THE JUNGLE

Best Time: July-Oct
You need: A week
Type: Wildlife

Setting out on a two-week exploration of Botswana's finest wildlife reserves, **STEPHEN CUNLIFFE** began his safari excursion in world-renowned Chobe National Park and found an African Eden that more than lived up to its international reputation as one of the premier wildlife destinations in the world



(Below) An elephant herd on the banks of the Chobe River. (Above) A muddy calf follows her mother



A safari in Botswana has very few dull moments. PICS/STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

SIMILAR in size to France and with a population of just two million people, Botswana is synonymous with wide-open spaces and prolific animal-life. It is arguably Africa's finest wildlife region, boasting of the continent's largest population of big herbivores, such as elephant and buffalo. With 84 per cent of the country covered by the semi-arid Kalahari desert, the perennial waters of the Chobe River create a green swathe that is a veritable magnet for wild animals that trek in from the arid hinterland. Chobe has one of the highest wildlife densities in Africa. This is especially evident during the long dry season when herbivores flock to the wide, grassy floodplains adjoining the perennial Chobe River, producing an unrivalled wildlife spectacle. Watching countless elephant families drink and bathe in the river is an unforgettable experience, but when vast herds of buffalo, huge rafts of sunbathing hippos and armadas of gigantic crocodiles join the fray... there's no disputing that this is one of Africa's greatest game parks.

The ever-increasing popularity of Chobe — a Mecca for elephant enthusiasts from around the globe — and the fact that no lodges are allowed within the national park, have resulted in safari activities concentrating alongside the gateway town of Kasane in the well-worn eastern sector of the reserve. But, thankfully, the recent inception of luxury mobile safaris in Chobe has provided a safari alter-

native that circumvents the park's overcrowding problems. Upon arrival at our exclusive safari camp, all 10 staff members — along with a curious male baboon — were outside to greet us with big smiles and waving hands. Camp manager, Robson Chongwe, led us to a spacious safari tent

The temporary tented camp gives us, along with eight other privileged guests, the opportunity to enjoy the relaxing solitude of a secluded wilderness campsite deep inside the game-rich national park. I am impressed when I discover that my camp's five well-appointed safari tents each come with their own hot-water shower and flush toilet, despite the fact that the semi-permanent camp moves location every five days!

After a tasty lunch and siesta, we grab our cameras and binoculars before climbing aboard the open-top vehicle for our first Chobe game drive. In the company of nature guide Stanza Molaodi, we are treated to a wildlife extravaganza. Twice daily game drives are interspersed with a couple of highly memorable boat cruises along the Chobe River. The rains are late, which ensures a daily procession of elephant, buffalo, giraffe, zebra and it's like trekking to and from the life-sustaining river. Lions lazing in the nearby shade keep an

BOTSWANA BASICS

Best season to visit: Wildlife sightings peak during the cool, dry winter months from July to October.

Getting there: South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) operates daily non-stop flights between Mumbai and Johannesburg. Onward connections to Kasane in Botswana with Air Botswana (www.airbotswana.co.bw) or South African Airlink (www.flyairlink.com). Alternatively, Jet Airways operates daily flights to Doha from Mumbai, Delhi and Kochi. From Doha, you can catch a connecting code-share flight to Johannesburg with Qatar Airways.

Visa requirements: Indian citizens require a visa to visit Botswana and this must be obtained in advance. Contact the Botswana High Commission in New Delhi at botind@gov.bw or call 011 4653 7000 for further details.

What to do: Twice-daily guided game drives and boat cruises on the Chobe River to view hippos and elephants

What to bring: Binoculars, camera, sunglasses, sunscreen, hat, insect repellent, rain jacket and neutral-coloured clothing for safari activities; warm attire is essential in winter.

Need to Know: It is imperative to get a Yellow Fever Vaccine booster before travelling to a location infested with mosquitos or insects. The vaccine is to be given ten days before travelling to a place surrounded by wild forests. In Mumbai, you can get the vaccination in International Health Organization Building, Next to Ambassador Skychef Building, Sahar Elevated Access Rd, Chimatpada, Andheri East

For more information: www.discover-botswana.com and www.andbeyondafrica.com



A deer at the national park

open eye on the passing "antelope menu" until the sinking sun finally galvanises them into action. The sight and sound of a couple of powerful lionesses hungrily devouring a stately sable antelope they have just brought down is an experience we certainly won't forget in a hurry; a young leopard snoozing in the fork of a shady tree was another Chobe highlight. But it isn't all about the predators... the ladies in our group were enamoured with all the baby animals being born to coincide with the arrival of the first rains: tiny warthog piglets and gangly impala lambs being the most ubiquitous of the diminutive newcomers.

When a highly successful tracking escapade on our penultimate game drive leads us to a regal lioness, Stanza takes time once again to share his in-depth wildlife knowledge with us. I believe his final comments shortly before we leave the tawny feline summed up how everyone on the vehicle was feeling on the eve of our departure: "Nature she is very beautiful and totally fascinating and you never know what could be coming next... But this is Chobe and it's a very special place!" I couldn't agree more and there was no denying we had enjoyed a spectacular wildlife experience.

Sleeping under crisp linens and listening to the primordial roars of a distant lion pride filter through the canvas walls of our room on the final night. My wife and I are in complete agreement that there can be no better way to get up close-and-personal with Botswana's wildlife than on an intimate and extremely rewarding luxury mobile safari excursion.

smdmail@mid-day.com



(Left) A hungry lion family sits down to lunch, while (right) a Lioness lazing in the afternoon sun, poses for the camera

