Botswana’s great salt pans – Nxai, Ntwetwe and Sua – cover an expansive region of northern Botswana known as Makgadikgadi: an ethereal and austere landscape like no other place on earth. A portion of this spectacular landscape is conserved within the Makgadikgadi and Nxai Pan National Parks. Our freelance writer, Stephen Cunliffe, explores the larger of these two intriguing and oft-overlooked parks.

WORDS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE & JEAN-MARC GAUDIN.
Most people know Makgadikgadi as the home of a host of sprawling saltpans that play endless tricks on the mind. Heat mirages destroy all sense of spatial awareness and orientation; imaginary lakes shimmer on the horizon only to evaporate upon closer inspection; ostriches learn to fly and stones metamorphose into floating mountains.

There’s no denying that the blinding white saltpans are an otherworldly place and well worth exploring (see Probing the Pans sidebar), but that is the Makgadikgadi of the rainless winter months. By the time we arrived, the sizzling heat of the late dry season had given way to billowing grey clouds and dramatic thunderstorms.

Owing to the epic scale of the Makgadikgadi saltpan complex, the 3 900 km² national park that bears its name encompasses only a fraction of the overall pan network. Extending from the wildlife-rich Boteti River in the west, to the enormous Ntwetwe Pan – the largest of the saltpans – in the east, the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park protects large swathes of savannah grassland, palm forest and Boteti River woodland, along with the western reaches of Ntwetwe Pan. This lesser-known overlanding destination is home to a couple of luxury lodges and a handful of basic campsites, making mysterious Makgadikgadi the near-exclusive domain of the adventurous 4x4 aficionado.

Passing through sleepy Khumaga village, our Hilux came to a juddering halt when the swollen Boteti River blocked our onward progress. In 2009, record rainfall resulted in the highest Okavango flood level for 25 years, and with the Boteti forming the main outflow of the delta, the rising water levels rejuvenated the dusty river which then surged down the western boundary of the national park once more. Luckily, a two-vehicle pontoon ferry bobbed a few metres offshore and it wasn’t long before Otetseng Motlhabani, the amiable pontoon captain, appeared. For the princely sum of BWP 130 (or ZAR 150) we were provided with an official receipt and safe passage across the river.
Disembarking on the eastern shore, we met Jason on his way out of the park and started chatting. Driving a Toyota Hilux Raider from Bushlore 4x4 Hire in Joburg, Jason had spent the previous three days exploring the park and the neighbouring Nxai Pan. “Last night we had a massive storm here, so I’d be careful if you plan to explore the pans,” he warned, “but the game viewing around Khumaga has been excellent. During my drive yesterday afternoon, I ended up surrounded by close to a hundred elephants, and then the lions kept me awake all night with their roaring.”

The only natural source of permanent water in the reserve, the Boteti is the scene of an under-rated wildlife bonanza where dense concentrations of elephants dominate the show and clans of dainty impala and families of curious kudu complete the riverine spectacle. The burgeoning elephant population has hammered most of the trees along the riverbank and the widespread devastation is, in many ways, reminiscent of Chobe. We were also surprised to find an inordinate number of zebra carcasses littering the floodplain, giving an inkling of the harsh challenges faced by the herbivores that throng to the river to assuage their thirst during the long dry season.

While we saw plenty of elephants, along with a raft of hippos at the aptly-named Hippo Pool, most of the game herds had already dispersed eastwards with the arrival of the rains. Triggered by the onset of the annual rains in late spring, the Makgadikgadi plays host to the dazzling spectacle of the largest surviving zebra migration in Southern Africa - with an estimated 30 000 animals participating each year. The golden grasslands in the east of the reserve transform to a nutritious green carpet that stretches as far as the eye can see. It’s an attractive landscape, punctuated by the occasional palm-tree island along with a plethora of small seasonal pans and temporary natural waterholes.

Without warning, and as if by magic, large herds of zebra suddenly materialise on the rambling plains, drawn by the lush, grassy expanses, and for several months during the rains, the verdant eastern grasslands pulse with life and teem with game.

We were fortunate enough to catch the start of this gathering, with zebra herds – often over a hundred strong – converging on Gutsa Pan and the western fringe of Ntwetwe Pan to take advantage of the seasonal bounty. Accompanied by the occasional wildebeest interloper, the zebra throng rubbed shoulders with a handful of drought-resistant oryx and the

area’s diminutive year-round resident, the steenbok, while ostriches strutted their stuff on the marshy pan nearby. The first waves of waterbirds also began to flock to the pans to feed on the ensuing algae bloom and emerging crustaceans.

During the two days we spent exploring the zebra-bedecked eastern plains and fringes of Ntwetwe Pan, we saw only one other vehicle: a DWNP research vehicle conducting a census of the migrating zebra. Well-versed in the local conditions, they informed us that attempting to drive across the wide-open expanses of Ntwetwe would be suicidal as the pan had already been transformed into a salty marsh: a no-go zone for all but the most foolhardy 4x4 enthusiast.

However, the track that hugged the fringe of the pan, crossing the myriad narrow channels between the islets and spits along the pan’s western shore, would be no problem for our Hilux. When I remained sceptical and unconvinced, the researchers invited us to follow them and see for ourselves. We didn’t need a second invitation, and spent a thoroughly enjoyable day in their shadow, adventuring along the muddy fringes of Ntwetwe while surrounded by a dazzling display of black-and-white stripes.

The best place to stay in order to observe the enthralling zebra spectacle of the summer months is at one of the park-administered wilderness campsites conveniently located on the eastern plains. Njuca Hills Campsite is probably the best known of the two DWNP sites, although very few people have ventured out to stay there.
When researching our trip, everyone we spoke to, and all the 4x4 forums we consulted, suggested that this campsite was currently closed, so it was a pleasant surprise when we learnt at the gate that not only was it operational, but there was also nobody currently staying at either of the wild Njuca sites!

While Njuca No. 1 (NHC1) enjoys great views from the top of its hill, the actual campsite itself is situated lower down with inferior views and little shade. For these reasons, I would say that secluded site No. 2 (NHC2) is the superior of the two with plenty of shade in spacious surroundings. All Makgadikgadi's wilderness campsites are waterless but have their own private bucket shower and well-maintained long-drop toilet.

While there's considerably less wildlife to be found on the seasonal eastern plains (outside of the zebra migration) than alongside the perennial Boteti River, Njuca and its neighbouring Tree Island Campsite do offer a high-quality savannah wilderness experience that's unparalleled in the region. If you're lucky, you might even get to see one of the resident cheetah that range the surrounding grassy plains in search of steenbok sustenance.

While I'm a big fan of Njuca Hills and its wilderness vibe, I have to admit that Tree Island Campsite takes the cake as my favourite. It enjoys an epic setting surrounded by wide-open grasslands, and overlooks a couple of small, seasonal pans. By the time we rocked up, these waterholes had been recharged with rainwater, providing a temporary source of water for the herds passing through the area.

Although I found the three wilderness stands to be situated a little too close together for my liking, Tree Island offers an ideal retreat for a small group of nature lovers or a couple of families travelling together. The sites are unnumbered, so I assume the place operates on a first-come-first-served basis (the first of the three sites was our favourite), but so few people even know about this picturesque wilderness campsite — much less travel all the way out there...
Unfortunately, the fence had been constructed when the Boteti was in the midst of a long dry spell. The fence builders errantly neglected to consider that water might one day return to the channel, and erected a meandering wire barrier that crisscrossed the dry watercourse as it made its way north. When water eventually returned to the Boteti five years back, long sections of the fence were submerged, shorting the electrics. Without a current to deter the elephants, they trampled the fence at regular intervals to get at the newly revived water source and to raid the crops. In turn, cattle from the villages used these elephant highways to enter the park and access fresh grazing inside the reserve.

Today, the smashed up fence has fallen into a shocking state of disrepair with bird’s nests of knotted wires and shattered fence posts littering the boundary track at regular intervals. The severed fencing wire is not only a serious threat to wildlife, but also a real danger to vehicles as well. We dodged a minefield of tangled wires as we travelled north along the western perimeter - on more than one occasion coming across the bizarre spectacle of elephants vacating the reserve while cattle wandered in the opposite direction.

Park staff informed us that there were plans afoot to shift the electric fence back across the river, although funding for this massive undertaking remains an unresolved hurdle. For now, the dilapidated fence remains Makgadikgadi’s "white elephant".

When it reached the rhino-reintroduction boma, the road finally veered away from the old fence, bypassing the Khumaga entrance gate towards privately-run Khumaga Campsite. Operated by the SKL group, the 10 stands at Khumaga sit high atop the eastern bank of the Boteti River. It’s an attractive site with good shade, braai pits, and excellent ablution blocks with solar-heated showers and flush toilets - facilities cleaned daily.

We’d heard previous visitors had complained about night-time noise from the village across the river, but on both the nights we spent at Khumaga, all we could hear was the chorus of a million frogs and the guttural grunts of lions calling to the north. While the Khumaga region is best known for its incredible wildlife concentrations during the height of the dry season, we still found plenty of animals in attendance despite the onset of rain.

The next morning, a smiling Merapelo, the SKL campsite attendant, came over to greet us and check our permit. He was also the man responsible for the spotless ablution blocks. An easy-natured guy; when we quizzed him on the lions we’d heard roaring at regular intervals throughout the night, he responded, “I’ve been stationed here for a year and seven months, and in that time I have heard the lions plenty, but I’ve never actually seen them around the campsite; although we did have a pack of six wild dogs pass through here earlier in the year.” Further enquiries revealed that ongoing persecution of the Makgadikgadi lions whenever they stray outside the park has resulted in the king of beasts developing a serious mistrust of humans. So, despite hearing them regularly, we failed to track down the well-concealed tawny cats.

Enjoying a hearty braai on the final evening, the three of us raised a plastic mug of Merlot to the majestic Makgadikgadi. We were in unanimous agreement: this varied national park offers so much more than a springboard for the saltpans. While it might not boast the same predator-viewing potential as some of Botswana’s other frontline reserves, it does boast sensational elephant sightings that rival the world-renowned Chobe. Throw in the park’s incredible diversity of habitats, picturesque wilderness campsites, and a zebra spectacle second only to the Serengeti, and you have a year-round destination that belongs on any overlanding itinerary when exploring the best of northern Botswana.
CAMPSITE PROTOCOL: WHAT CONSTITUTES LITTER?

Towards the end of 2013, SA4x4 published a flurry of letters and devoted an editorial to the growing segment of the South African 4x4 community that displays deplorable behaviour when across the border in Botswana. While not wanting to rehash this sorry state of affairs, I do want to add my two cents’ worth to the Overlander’s Code.

I absolutely and wholeheartedly agree that we should always strive to leave a campsite in a better state than the way we found it. I believe there’s more to it than just a feel-good deed; it is an obligation and the duty of every nature-loving overlander. When you next encounter a dirty campsite, don’t sit amongst the debris silently stewing over our messy and mannerless countrymen; rather get active and become part of the solution. Get the whole family involved. Collect and burn all the combustibles and add the cans, tins and bottles to your own garbage bag. Yes, it’s frustrating to have to clean up after others, but without a groundswell of altruistic endeavour, the wilderness on which we all rely in order to indulge our overlanding passion will not endure for our children’s lifetime.

For the most part, we found Botswana’s campsites to be impeccably clean, yet two unnatural items blighted every single camping spot we visited throughout Botswana. The first of these was cigarette butts: a well-known and perennial old foe. For some inexplicable reason, many smokers remain convinced that their butts are biodegradable and seem incapable of understanding that their stompies actually constitute litter. We burnt hundreds of these carelessly discarded filters in our braai fires, but never quite managed to incinerate them all. The second item that we found—littering absolutely every campsite—was the lowly cable tie. Allergic to the annoying sound of rattle, 4x4 enthusiasts frequently employ a small army of these useful little ties to silence their noisy overlanding gear. From the high-lift jack handle to the rooftop tent, everything gets secured with a couple of cable ties. Unfortunately, the problem arises when overlanders enter their campsite at the end of a long day – often when it’s getting dark – and set about erecting camp. The Leatherman is employed to de-cable-tie everything and, in the campers’ haste, a number of tie everything and, in the campers’ haste, a number of...

PROBING THE PANS

The sprawling Nxai, Ntwetwe and Sua salt pans together make up the 12 000 km2 Makgadikgadi complex. Remnants of an ancient super-lake, this system of gigantic pans eclipses even Bolivia’s Salar de Uyuni (the biggest single salt pan in the world) to claim the accolade of being the largest network of salt pans on the planet.

The vast salt pans boast extraordinary lunar landscapes punctuated by the occasional rocky outcrop, such as mesmerising Kubu Island, along with a sprinkling of dunes, islands, channels and spits along their shorelines. Across this otherworldly pans, sporadic clumps of ethereal baobabs rise up from the glaring salt like ancient desert wreaths on a shimmering stage. Makgadikgadi is as much an emptiness as it is a place, mesmerising in its scope and beauty: a humbling sight to even the most adventurous 4x4 enthusiast.

To explore the pans, you need a reliable 4x4 vehicle, plenty of fuel and a GPS loaded with an up-to-date version of Tracks4Africa, as well as common sense and confidence in your driving ability. The hallucinatory and horizonless landscape swiftly erodes your sense of direction and can have a hypnotic effect on drivers, so it’s sensible to take along a good map (on which to keep track of your progress), a back-up compass, and all the requisite emergency and recovery gear. Stick to the well-worn tracks of other vehicles and keep to the edges of the pans after any rainfall. With the onset of the rain and water pools, the salt pans and their salty upper-crust soon dissolve to expose a thick layer of sodden clay below. The hard, white expanses quickly degenerate into soft, grey-green mush with a consistency similar to that of wet concrete. Every year these Makgadikgadi marshes claim a couple of hapless vehicles that unwisely venture into the salty quagmire only to become irretrievably bogged down in the unforgiving clay.

Perils during the rains, the sprawling seas of salt are best (and most safely) explored during the dry months of May to October. But always ask other overlanders and park staff whether there have been any recent, unseasonal showers, and what the conditions are like out on the pans, before setting out.

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Camping inside Makgadikgadi National Park is restricted to a choice of three stunning campgrounds. With ten shady stands, running water and two fully-serviced ablution blocks, the most popular place to pitch a tent is the Khumaga Campsite (where site number ten was our favourite). The campsite is managed by the private SKL group based out of Maun. Contact them by email at reservations@sklcamps.co.bw or phone +267 686 5365/6 with enquiries.

Botswana’s Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) operates the other two camping areas in Makgadikgadi. Situated in the grassy eastern sector of the reserve, Njüa Hills and neighbouring Tree Island Camp offer five idyllic wilderness campsites between them. Facilities at each site are limited to a bucket shower, long-drop toilet and braai pit. There’s no water at either site and visitors need to be totally self-sufficient. You can try contacting the DWNP office in Gaborone at dwnp@gov.bw, although you might have more luck calling them on +267 318 0774 or +267 397 1405.

Across the main tarred road to the north, the Xoma group manages the privatised Nxa Pan National Park campsite of South Camp and Baines Baobab. Reservation requests can be made via email to xomaxiestsa@botnet.bw, or call +267 686 2223. With enviable locations on the scenic eastern edge of Makgadikgadi Pan National Park, the three camps of Uncharted Africa – Jack’s Camp, San Camp and the more affordable Camp Kalahari – offer some of Botswana’s premier safari accommodation to those with cash to burn. Check out www.unchartedafrica.com or call (011) 447 1605.

Desert and Delta Safaris’ luxurious Leroo La Tau is located on the western boundary of Makgadikgadi National Park. The lodge’s twelve opulent canvas suites enjoy stupendous cliff-top views over the Boteti River, with animals flocking to the perennial waters during the dry season. More information at www.deserstdelta.com, or call +267 686 1243.

Low-impact and solar-powered Meno A Kwenia Tented Camp has just eight comfortable en-suite tents overlooking the wildlife-rich Boteti floodplain. Further information at www.menokwenia.com, or phone them on +267 686 0981.

The Gaing-O Community Trust manages the 14 wilderness sites of the Kubu Island Community Campsite which sit alongside a ghostly, baobab-encrusted granite koppie in the southwest of Sua Pan. Each stand has its own long-drop toilet and stone fireplace; otherwise, visitors need to be completely self-reliant. Check out www.kubusiland.com, or call the Trust on +267 297 9612 or +267 7549 4469.

Located on the outskirts of Maun, the cheerful Old Bridge Backpackers is a perennial favourite, boasting unquestionably the best budget-friendly accommodation in Maun. You can pitch your own tent or crash in one of their fully furnished en-suite tents. A good restaurant, lively bar and refreshing swimming pool complete the package. Have a look at www.maun-backpackers.com for further details, or ring them on +267 686 2406.

When passing through Gabarone, we stayed 10 km south of the capital at the excellent Mokolwane Backpackers – www.backpackers.co.bw – alongside the Mokolwane Nature Reserve. You can either camp next to the swimming pool or stay in one of the comfortable en-suite chalets with fully equipped kitchenette. Drop Sonne Gerber a mail at admin@backpackers.co.bw, or call +27 72 043 6255 (in South Africa) and +267 741 1165 (in Botswana) to make a reservation.

We encountered patches of thick sand on the tracks in the north and west of the park, along with soggy road conditions around the pans in the eastern sector of the park. But, for the most part, we found the park’s tracks to be in good condition and relatively straightforward to negotiate. The rains also helped compact the loose sand, making driving easier, although, sadly, the sprawling salt pans became a no-go zone.

**WHERE TO BUY PROVISIONS**

The best place to stock up on braai meat and fresh produce, along with other supplies, is Maun. We made use of the well-stocked Spar supermarket and bottle store located across the road next to the fireworks. Firewood can be purchased alongside the main road in Maun or, sometimes, on the road approaching Khumaga Ferry.

**ESSENTIAL GEAR**

The road conditions in Makgadikgadi Pan National Park are, for the most part, good, and you’re likely to bump into other vehicles from time to time; so visitors can probably get away with the minimum of recovery gear. A spade, high-lift jack, extra fuel and sufficient drinking water are mandatory. Sand tracks and a GPS would also be useful.

**CONVOY OR SOLO**

Solo is fine, although travelling in convoy would provide peace of mind if you plan to spend time out on the pans or to explore the more remote eastern sector of the reserve. Overlanders opting for a solo sojourn should ideally carry all the necessary recovery gear and emergency equipment, including a satellite phone and GPS.