Moremi, Chobe or the Kgalagadi are the standard 4x4 destinations into Botswana. The more adventurous might head into the Central Kalahari or the Makgadikgadi, but most overlook the delights of Eastern Botswana. Which is precisely why Stephen Cunliffe decided to spend a week there with his good friend and a trusty Hilux.

WORDS & PICTURES STEPHEN CUNLiffe
While important to locals, the region east of the A1 is perennially bypassed by travellers en route to Botswana’s more renowned wildlife and wilderness destinations. Yet this area has the World-Heritage-acclaimed Tswapong Hills, the even wilder Lepokole Hills, and one of southern Africa’s most under-rated game reserves in Tuli. Time for a closer look...

Having visited Gonarezhou, we approached from Bulawayo via Plumtree, and the modern infrastructure and relative wealth of Botswana was glaringly apparent as soon as we crossed over from Zimbabwe. Exiting the Ramokgwebana border post onto immaculate roads and light traffic, we made good time to Francistown. After stocking up on food and drink in Botswana’s second largest city, we made our way south, overnighting at Tachila Nature Reserve – a considerably more attractive alternative for breaking the journey than a city hotel would be.

**Tswapong Hills and the Goo-Moremi Gorge**

A couple of hours further down the road, the flat expanses that typify Botswana gave way to boulder-strewn slopes and lush canyons. The Tswapong Hills – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – comprise some of the most dramatic landscapes in all of Botswana. I had heard rumours of lush canyons and picturesque waterfalls, but these images jarred badly with my impression of Botswana as largely flat, and (with the exception of the Okavango) overwhelmingly dry. So, as we approached the Tswapong Hills from the north, anticipation was running high.

The Goo-Moremi Resort dramatically exceeded our expectations. This place is the proverbial hidden gem: an undiscovered paradise for active nature enthusiasts; despite having five stunning campsites and six newly-built self-catering chalets, we were their only visitors. The
friendly BTO project manager, Wendy Phaletshane, greeted us and told us that Botswana Tourism had partnered with the Moremi Village community to empower them. All members of staff at Goo-Moremi were drawn from the local village; they were trained, and the facility was managed, by BTO; (but when they were ready), BTO would pull out and let the community take over running this project alone.

An ongoing re-introduction programme has seen the 1000ha community-owned reserve restocked with indigenous wildlife. The animals are a welcome addition to the place, but the lack of dangerous game also ensures safe walking conditions. During the couple of days we spent hiking and exploring the area, we enjoyed sightings of baboons, vervet monkeys and zebra. The staff of the Moremi-Mannonye Conservation Trust also informed us that more zebra, impala and giraffe were on the way shortly. But, undoubtedly, the most unusual sighting of our stay was watching a spotted bush snake catch and devour a rather unfortunate mountain gecko!

One of the prime attractions of the Tswapong hills is the Goo-Moremi Gorge Trail, so, after a good night’s rest, we set off to explore the canyon. Zuma Mmereki was our local guide and he truly displayed the perfect blend of authority, information and appreciative silence, enabling us to savour the hike’s spectacular natural beauty. Within the space of a few short steps we were thrust from arid Botswana into an unexpectedly lush environment, dominated by a crystal stream overgrown with ferns, gigantic shady trees and scrambler figs along the rocky canyon fringes. Five sacred waterfalls cascaded down through the verdant canyon, while vultures and black eagles wheeled overhead. It was a place unlike anywhere I’d been in Botswana before.

“Absolutely no swimming please; we need to respect Badimo [the ancestral spirits] in this sacred gorge,” explained

Top right Moremi Gorge trail has a number of picturesque view sites, including this rest spot with a spectacular vista. Above right Gurgling mountain streams and lush vegetation are not the norm in arid Botswana.
Zuma. “These steep-sided canyons are the spiritual resting place of our Bapedi ancestors.” Despite the heat, we respected his request and turned our attention away from the inviting rock pools and instead concentrated on the sheer beauty and abundant birdlife, as we slowly made our way deeper into the vertiginous canyon. It was hard to believe that we could have the raptors and rock art of this sacred place all to ourselves, but the best was yet to come…

After a couple of hours of gentle climbing past the five cascades, Zuma navigated us into the aptly-named Vulture Gorge. The craggy canyon walls were littered with the nesting sites of endangered Cape and white-backed vultures. After 20 minutes of silent appreciation, Zuma broke the spell to tell us that it is one of only two vulture breeding sites in the whole country, and that the 2015 vulture census had revealed that over 200 of these scavenging raptors shelter and breed on the cliffs of Vulture Gorge.

Departing Goo-Moremi after a couple of pleasantly active and decidedly stress-free days, we went in search of the elusive Kgagodi Crater. It turned out to be a disappointing detour, and we began to question whether our planned excursion to explore the largely unknown Lepokole Hills was worth the risk. Despite hours of Internet searching and research, getting information on Lepokole was near impossible. But it was precisely this dearth of credible information on the place that ultimately made it so intriguing.

After a short discussion over a cold St Louis, we decided to go for it. Arriving in Bobonong, we detoured onto a dirt track and things began to get interesting, but it was another 25kms northeast of Bobonong that the wild-goose-chase really began.

Lepokole is off the beaten track and sufficiently new not to feature yet on Tracks4Africa. To compound matters, a myriad dirt tracks criss-cross the scrubby woodland with nary a road-sign in sight. After hours of bumping around in the bush, we happened quite by chance upon the boundary fence to the Lepokole wildlife sanctuary … but which way was the gate? We flipped a coin and turned left, following the fence line in search of a way in. This tactic brought us to a chance encounter with Amos Ditaleo, the Lepokole security officer, who was out on a fence patrol. A state-of-the-art
electric fence separated us, but, after much language-impaired debate, he sketched a map and sent us on our way again. An hour later we arrived at the excessively grand Lepokole Hills entrance gate. This time it came as little surprise when the gate guard informed us that we were the first visitors to have reached them in days!

**Lepokole Hills and the Mapanda Conservation Trust**

Taking their name from the highest hill in the area, the enigmatic granite hills of Lepokole are the southern-most extension of the considerably better known Matopos across the border in Zim. The arid dome-shaped hills are considered an archaeological treasure trove because of their accessible San rock art, old ruins and other cultural sites. We were keen to take a walk and sample their purported offerings first-hand.

The newly appointed Lepokole reservations officer, Kebaabetswe Kebonyethebe, agreed to accompany us on a hike into the hills to show us some of the San paintings and other cultural riches. As we walked, she told us about Lepokole: “It is a community-based tourism project: a joint venture between Botswana Tourism Organisation and the local Mapanda community. This place is an arid wilderness of rocky koppies and unrelenting silence.”

As we ventured deeper into the hills, a pair of steenbok skipped off ahead and a distant baboon barked – the only sounds to compete with the dull tramp of our rhythmic footfalls. It wasn’t long before the path terminated at an overhanging cliff, so imagine our surprise when Kebaabetswe pointed out that this unassuming spot was, in fact, the premier rock art site in all of Eastern Botswana. Meticulously catalogued by Alec Campbell, the overhang houses 69 San etchings of 20 different indigenous animal species that have been painted in a similar style and colours to those found in the nearby Matopos. In spite of exposure to the elements having taken a toll on many of the paintings, a handful of exceptionally vivid images still remain. We took time to appreciate the vanishing art, and I soon found myself imagining the San artists of yester-year eking out a simple existence in this harsh environment.
From the cave, we continued climbing up Boredi Hill to a sacred place; here, an old basket held offerings left by the local tribe to provision their ancestors and appease evil spirits. It was the mystique of these captivating cultural-offering sites – including an ingenious ancestral ‘money safe’ – that really captured my imagination, catapulting me back in time.

But Lepokole is not just a one-trick-pony. The area’s rich cultural heritage has been augmented by a comprehensive wildlife re-stocking programme that has seen the reintroduction of eland, impala, zebra, wildebeest, red hartebeest and oryx to the community-owned reserve. A waterhole close to the campsite afforded us the opportunity to catch up with many of the newly arrived antelope… After all, it’s more than likely that these timid beasts will be the only other creatures you see while exploring Lepokole. To say that this place is off-the-beaten track is the ultimate understatement: it’s truly out of the way, challenging to find, and has yet to undergo its official public opening.

Despite these visitor challenges, we found the friendly staff to be champing at the bit to get out there and share the area’s hidden offerings with intrepid tourists. The presence of only harmless herbivores meant that we could confidently abandon our Hilux for a couple of days of hiking and exploring in our own private rock-strewn wilderness. While Lepokole visitors need to be totally self-sufficient, significant BTO investment in the tourist infrastructure has produced a place that’s certainly worth a visit; certainly worth it to all connoisseurs of rock art and solitude.

After a couple of days in the hot, dusty, great outdoors, it felt good to back behind the wheel of the Hilux and cruising south once more. Returning to paved road was an odd sensation after the rugged Lepokole wilderness, but that was short-lived, as roadworks pushed us onto a parallel dirt track. We left the road repairs behind just before Martin’s Drift border post, and swung east onto the gravel B141, tracing a route parallel to the Limpopo River towards Tuli.

**Molema Bush Camp and 4x4 Trail**

After a brief stop at African Ranches River Camp, we continued on to Molema Bush Camp – a community-owned tourism project operated by Tuli Safari Lodge. Friendly camp manager and guide, Sakao Manytsa, met us as we drove in, saying: “Welcome! Can I interest you in our premier activity: a three-hour Tuli game drive combined with a walk to Eagle Rock?”

We were sorely tempted; but, having just experienced a couple of days of quality hiking, we opted for the local 4x4 trail instead. I’d first heard about the Molema...
4x4 trail from the owner of Tuli Safari Lodge, Stuart Quinn, who’d said, “A new community-run 4x4 trail has opened up in the area adjoining the Tuli Game Reserve; guests drive their own vehicles accompanied by a local guide to provide information and to show them the route. I highly recommend taking a picnic lunch and making a day of it.”

At 7am the next morning, we met Koketso Tshabalala – the local 4x4 trail guide and developer of the new 4x4 trail. He told us that the trail was the result of a 2014 government initiative to get communities to diversify away from cattle and become more involved in the tourism industry. However, the community had realised that they lacked experience, so had chosen to partner with Stuart Quinn and Tuli for their tourist knowledge and business expertise.

The entire 4x4 trail – which we soon learnt is comprised of a number of iterations depending upon the season and how much time you have at your disposal – takes place on community land. Limited time meant that we had only a taste of what the trail has to offer, but Tshabalala assured us that the best 4x4 option starts at Mothabeng village, tracing an undulating route amongst the koppies that pepper the Tuli game reserve boundary before detouring into the Majale riverbed. You are then confronted by a sand fest until the riverbed eventually intersects with the Makadibeng Road. It’s a leisurely six-hour drive in the dry season but nigh impossible after heavy rains.

Crossing over some beautiful sandy riverbeds, I was sorely tempted to go exploring in the sand, but our wily old guide was adamant that we shouldn’t take the chance. I couldn’t help feeling that the guy was being overly conservative, but, with time, the reason for his aversion to damp riverbeds emerged: on the guide’s last trip, a South African man in a Fortuner had insisted that his vehicle would make it through the waterlogged sand, so the guide had eventually given in. A bad decision, as they hadn’t got very far down the wet riverbed before the vehicle had become hopelessly bogged down. In the end, the guide had been forced to walk all the way back to the nearest village and mobilise the villagers to bring their donkeys to pull him out. The guide added, “I’m telling you, that guy was real embarrassed!”

With cattle, kudu and Kori bustards for company, we found the Molema experience to be a fine complement to the diverse range of activities and experiences we enjoyed during our exploration of Eastern Botswana. My summation of the trail is that it’s not a particularly hard-core or technical 4x4 route, but more of a cultural tour that requires a 4x4. That said, it would be a good idea not to bring
a brand-new vehicle, as the mopane scrubland has a bad habit of lashing your vehicle at regular intervals along the route.

Our amiable host, Tshabalala, turned out to be a mine of interesting information. “I was born and bred in this area and, over the years, I have found some very fascinating things like San paintings and beautiful landscapes that I wish to share with our visitors. We have no time limits and no restrictions on where we drive. If you want to go exploring for the whole day, then that’s fine by me.”

Bidding farewell to Tshabalala, we headed back to Molema Bush Camp. The campsite’s riverside location in Northern Tuli Game Reserve meant that we were surrounded by the sounds of wildlife on all sides, with the sound of breaking branches and the deep rumbles of a herd of hungry elephants. With the fire crackling below a bright moon, we soon grew accustomed to the wonderfully wild sounds of the big beasts feeding peacefully all around us. A Scops owl calling from a branch alongside our campfire was suddenly drowned out by the competing calls of roaring lions and whooping hyena. It was a fabulously hair-raising cacophony that made us both smile, and appreciate the privilege of being in wild Botswana.

**Mashatu Game Reserve**

For the final stop on our Eastern Botswana itinerary, we splashed out and headed to the 32 000-hectare Mashatu private game reserve in the heart of Tuli Block. The exclusive reserve does not permit private vehicles, so we parked our Hilux at Limpopo Airstrip and transferred to an open-top game viewer before setting off in the capable hands of Jakes Kamogelo and Justice Thipe.

I instantly relaxed on our leisurely game drive back to the tented camp, confident that no exciting wildlife sightings would slip past our eagle-eyed guides. Imagine my surprise when, five minutes into the drive, Duncan exclaimed, “Stop; cheetah!” My initial reaction was one of mild embarrassment for my old friend. After all, he’s a self-professed ‘horrible wildlife-spotter’ and now here he was, spotting stumps under trees and delaying our finding some real animals… or so I thought. We detoured off towards a patch of shade under a tree to investigate. Coming face-to-face with a grooming cheetah licking her paws, I was forced to eat my words. Turns out the old boy with bad eyes had pulled off the sighting of the trip!

The pressure was now squarely on the guides to step up and deliver. And deliver they did. Excellent general game sightings, dazzles of
zebra and big stretches of giraffe followed. We then spent an unforgettable hour with a breeding herd of elephants, enjoying the antics of the playful youngsters. Next came two handsome male lions, and, finally, the unmistakable rasping cough of a leopard guided us to Africa’s most elusive feline. It was a phenomenal sequence of high-quality sightings and, as the sun sank low on the horizon, we headed to the appropriately named Cheetah Hill for a celebratory sundowner.

After draining a couple of cold beers and doing some damage to the snack platter, we loaded up again for the final leg of the journey into camp. Unlike Botswana’s other game reserves, Mashatu is comprised of privately owned and rehabilitated farmland, so night drives with spotlights are permitted. An African wild cat, springhares and a clan of inquisitive spotted hyena with cubs were the sightings that rounded off one of the finest afternoons of wildlife watching that anyone could hope for.

Nestling under the boughs of enormous leafy trees on a bend in the river, the jovial camp manager, Monty Mphafe, welcomed us to the understated Mashatu Tented Camp. After a very welcome hot shower and much-needed shave, we grabbed a cold St Louis and headed to the open-air boma for dinner. With just eight ultra-comfortable canvas abodes, this camp provided a measure of opulence and exclusivity for the final night of our Botswana safari. And later, as I drifted off to sleep, I savoured one final bush serenade from a whooping hyena out on the prowl.

The merits of Mashatu have not gone unnoticed. The next morning, we caught up with an old friend, documentary filmmaker Kim Wolhuter, to hear his views on Mashatu, as well as to learn about his latest film that chronicles the life of a scruffy hyena named Mohono. With a wry smile, Kim said, “Mashatu is quite rightly renowned for its big cats and burgeoning elephant population, but (as you’ve experienced) there’s a lot more to this incredible place.”

Northern Tuli Game Reserve is one of the Botswana’s best-kept secrets. Although this is a phrase bandied about with nauseating frequency, in the case of Mashatu, it’s well deserved.

Eastern Botswana is a melting pot of cultural, historical, archaeological and nature-based wildlife tourism. It’s a great destination for Botswana regulars looking for something new and different; it’s an ideal destination for softroader owners and 4x4 newbies alike; and, most importantly, it provides a welcome backroad alternative to the busy, boring A1 bypass… well worth considering whenever you next find yourself heading north.
WHERE TO STAY

Rather than overnighting in Francistown, Tachila Nature Reserve – located five kilometres south of the city – offers a good camping option for overlanders wanting a quiet, safe place to camp. More details at http://about.me/tachila or tachilanaturereserve@gmail.com

A joint venture between Botswana Tourism Organisation and the Moremi village community has produced the stunning Goo-Moremi Resort. This little-known oasis in Eastern Botswana has five large shady campsites – one extra-large stand for groups – each with its own kitchen sink and private ablutions, boasting hot water and flushing toilets. All the campsites are first-class, but Maifala is my favourite. For those in search of more comfort, the six fully furnished, self-catering chalets won’t disappoint. Check out www.goomoremigorge.co.bw or direct enquiries to: info@goomoremigorge.co.bw or goomoremiresort@gmail.com

Situated 25km northeast of Bobonong, Lepokole Hills has five campsites with pristine new ablutions, solar-heated hot water and braai places. With the exception of water, intrepid visitors need to be completely self-sufficient and recognise that shade is limited in this arid environment. Chalets, bar/restaurant facilities and a conference centre will be added in 2016. There are currently no official contact details for this new project, but you should be able to get up-to-date information from Botswana Tourism.

Owned by ex-Singita chef Anne-Louise Schoeman, African Ranches River Camp is managed by Sam, who supplies the firewood and is always happy to take visitors on a guided walk along the Limpopo at no extra charge. Comprising just three spacious riverside campsites nestled under gigantic weeping boer beans, the camp can accommodate a maximum of 20 visitors. Small, rustic, plunge-pools at each campsite are filled during the hot summer months, while the spotlessly clean ablation block has a donkey boiler providing hot water after 4pm. A guesthouse is scheduled to open in 2016. Check out www.africanranches.com for more, or email info@africanranches.com to reserve a campsite.

Operated by Tuli Safari Lodge, the community-owned Molema Bush Camp has four fabulous shady campsites with private ablutions – site number four is the best – and four cabins. Firewood can be purchased from the office and the water is deemed safe to drink. Wildlife abounds in and around the camp, so watch out when walking at night. More details at www.tulitrails.com, or mail info@tulitrails.com to book a site.

Blending into its environment, Mashatu Tented Camp offers a luxurious alternative to pitching your own tent. The 16-bed camp boasts a swimming pool, wildlife-viewing hide overlooking a waterhole, and an atmospheric bar/restaurant area. It is also one of the only places we stayed that had electricity (to charge exhausted camera batteries) and WiFi (if connectivity is important to you). All meals and twice-daily activities are included. See www.mashatu.com for further details.
If you need to overnight in Gaborone, then try the excellent Mokolodi Backpackers – [www.backpackers.co.bw](http://www.backpackers.co.bw) – that is situated 10 kilometres south of the capital alongside the Mokolodi 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 7411 1165 (in Botswana) to make a reservation.

**ACTIVITIES AND 4X4 ROUTES**

Eastern Botswana offers hiking, bird watching, cultural excursions, archaeological tours to view San rock art, Tuli wildlife viewing, and the Molema 4x4 Route – a new community-run 4x4 trail. (BWP 300 per vehicle). A variety of 4x4 routes and terrains is available dependent upon your vehicle, the season, and the amount of time you have available.

**FUEL**

Fuel is readily available in Eastern Botswana. Outside Gaborone and Francistown, there are fuel stations in Selebi Phikwe and Bobonong; we also made use of the Caltex filling station at Lerala. Fuel is cheaper in Botswana and can be paid for in Pula or Rand; credit cards are also widely accepted. It’s worth noting that the smaller centres occasionally run dry, so fill up whenever you have the opportunity; carrying a jerry can in reserve is another sensible precaution.

**WHERE TO BUY PROVISIONS**

We restocked on our way through Francistown, but Riverside Mall in Gaborone is another good option with a wide selection of braai meat and fresh produce. A number of the small towns of eastern Botswana, including Palapye and Bobonong, have shops. Firewood can often be purchased on the roadside; remember that collecting wood inside the community reserves is not allowed.

**CONVOY OR SOLO**

Eastern Botswana is the ideal destination for a solo sojourn. Located within easy reach of Johannesburg and Pretoria, this is a softroader-friendly destination and an ideal short escape for newbie 4x4 owners and old hands alike.

**MAPS & DIRECTIONS**

With the latest version of Tracks4Africa loaded on the GPS, you really can’t go wrong, although we found their Botswana paper map (with distances and travelling times) to be very useful for planning purposes.

**BORDER CROSSING**

Overlanders approaching Eastern Botswana from South Africa have a mind-boggling choice of ten possible entry points. Several of these border posts are seasonal crossings over the Limpopo.

We made use of the friendly and efficient Pont Drift crossing (06:00-16:00) between Mashatu and South Africa, but once the rains set in, you would be well advised to rather enter/exit via the main border post at Martins Drift (06:00-22:00).

Remember all foreign-registered vehicles entering Botswana will be charged Botswana Road Tax of BWP 150 (ZAR 195) at the border, and this fee cannot be settled in Rand. Credit cards are sometimes accepted (if card machines are available and online), but having some Pula cash will avoid unnecessary delays.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Check out [www.botswanatourism.co.bw](http://www.botswanatourism.co.bw) or get hold of Lonely Planet’s Botswana & Namibia travel guide (3rd edition).