



Botswana: A Wilderness Paradise

May 2008

Tour Report

In May 2008 Peter Smart, Wild Arena's photographic guide and tour leader, accompanied a group to southern Africa on our first ten day safari to **Botswana: A Wilderness Paradise**. This tour had been planned for some time to offer an alternative location with a contrasting range of animals and birds to our frequent trips to Kenya and Tanzania in east Africa which many clients have enjoyed ... some returning many times. Botswana fully met, indeed exceeded, our expectations with some wonderful encounters with large herds of elephants (including many youngsters), at least six different leopards which we saw by day and by night and, on our last morning, a pack of African Wild Dogs!



After an overnight flight from London to Johannesburg in South Africa, we drove to the border, entered Botswana and soon after arrived at our camp in the Mashatu reserve which would be our home for the next seven nights. No sooner had we unpacked our cameras, then we were on our first afternoon game drive and immediately found a lovely female leopard in a tree, with an Impala kill, which we were able to observe until the sun went down. The "routine" for each afternoon game drive was that we stopped at a suitable location for sundowner drinks and then continued game driving for a couple of hours to observe the nocturnal activities within the park. This was a routine we quickly adapted to! On this first evening we were fortunate to observe both Genet and African Wildcat, and on subsequent occasions saw the wonderful Spring Hare, Bat-eared Fox and Porcupine.

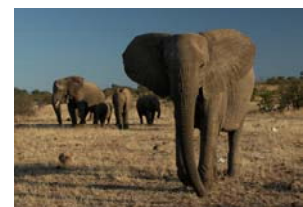
A very early start the following morning (the sun rises early in May!) saw us return to the female Leopard who was initially on the kill in the tree and then she walked to a quiet spot to spend the day giving fantastic photographic opportunities in perfect, early morning light. We then found our first elephants - a herd of over 100, including many youngsters - which occupied our cameras for some time. We also observed many other mammals such as Greater Kudu, Bushbuck, Giraffe, Steenbok, Grey Duiker, Impala and Zebra and we also identified a great variety of bird species, many of which were large and colourful, allowing the memory cards to fill quickly. Of particular note amongst the birds were White-fronted Bea-eater, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Yellow-billed Hornbill, Crested Barbet and the ubiquitous Lilac-breasted Roller.



The camp has a nearby waterhole, overlooked by a comfortable hide, which the group usually frequented in the middle of the day when animals and birds would come to drink. Impala were the most regular visitors and offered lovely reflections in the water. Amongst the birds, the colourful Golden-breasted Bunting and the extraordinary Paradise Whydah stood out. A small pool near the restaurant also provided close-up photographic opportunities of many other birds including Long-tailed Glossy Starling, Kurrichane

Thrush and Arrow-marked Babbler.

The following day we were fortunate to have the elephant researcher from the park join us on our morning game drive. As well as finding us huge numbers of elephants in some great settings, her commentary on how the herds fitted into the ecosystem, as well as the stories of particular individuals, greatly enhanced the day.



In the afternoon and evening we were privileged to have Mashatu's predator researcher accompany us. Several of the leopards in the park are radio-collared to allow their movements to be tracked and we found one as darkness fell. Not the one we had been tracking (who must have been nearby) but a large male up a tree with a kill and a hungry group of Hyenas



waiting eagerly below for any morsels that might drop down. While the researcher was a little disappointed that we didn't find "his" leopard, we were rather pleased as it meant the one we found didn't have a collar appearing in the photographs! Photographing using a spotlight for illumination at night is not an easy task. However we had covered the technique in earlier discussions and these continued while we were in the vehicle resulting in some pleasing images of the Leopards and Hyena.

The presence of the elephant and predators researchers added much to our enjoyment and we are extremely grateful to Mashatu for allowing this. We expect to include this opportunity as part of the itinerary on our future trips.

On a number of occasions during afternoon and evening drives we met up with a female leopard and her male cub who was a strapping boy of a similar size to his Mum! They were totally unworried by the presence of the vehicle and provided us with some great photographic opportunities.



All too soon our safari was drawing to an end but on the last morning we had a final game drive. We caught up with some lionesses we had seen previously (and who appeared pregnant, promising some great game viewing next year!) and they were bathed in warm morning light which produced some wonderful images of these lovely cats. A fitting finale, so we thought, to our time in Mashatu as we prepared to return to camp for breakfast before starting our return journey.

However, we heard that a pack African Wild Dogs had been seen on the edge of the reserve (yes, in the opposite direction to camp!) but it didn't require much thought to speed off to see if we could find them. And find them we did! A pack of around 14 of these magnificent animals which were gathering around a small group of bushes to sleep during the heat of the day. The numbers of Wild Dogs (also know by a variety of other names including Cape Hunting Dog) in East Africa has plummeted over the last 20 years and are rarely seen there. Indeed, we have not been fortunate to view any during Wild Arena safaris to that area so this was quite an event for us! With regret, we had to leave the Dogs to their slumbers while we had to move into top gear to begin our journey home with many great memories and photographs ... particularly of our final morning!



It was an exceptional trip and much of its success can be attributed to everyone at Safari Consultants, our business partner in the UK, who help us plan the itinerary and handle the travel arrangements for all our safaris. In addition we had wonderful support from Mashatu and the management, researchers and staff. The facilities within the camp are excellent. The tents are very comfortable with wonderful showers available at any time of day, and each had a power point allowing batteries to be regularly topped up ... a necessity given the huge range of photographic opportunities that we experienced. A useful library of books is available and there is even a swimming pool for those who can find time to enjoy it!

The food is exceptional (even if far too much of it!) with a huge breakfast (or rather brunch) buffet each day, an extensive "high tea" in the afternoon (which included another "lunch" as well as very more-ish cakes!) and a delicious evening meal ... not to mention an excellent selection of wines. We thank everyone involved, but special mention must go to Dan, our fantastic driver/guide, and Simeon, our spotter, whose skill and keen eyes (not to mention patience with us photographers!) helped make the safari one we will never forget.

A selection of photographic highlights from the tour may be viewed at:

http://www.petersmartwildlifephotography.co.uk/wa/tour_gallery/bw2008ap/

This contains an overview of the trip with an additional folder of the Elephants which were one of the many highlights of the trip. All photographs were taken by Peter Smart using a range of Canon cameras and lenses.



Peter Smart, June 2008

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