

# OUT OF AFRICA

## THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE

**Siobhán English recently travelled to the Okavango Delta in Botswana, where, with African Horseback Safaris, adventures were aplenty**

**I** think now would be a good time to leave," our guide John said as the six-tonne lone bull began to make shapes. A trumpet or two would have been apt, but no, the charmer waited until my back was turned to make a move on us! It was the photo opportunity we were hoping for, but, with our subject unwilling to pose for the mounted paparazzi, we wasted no time executing a calm retreat before reflecting on our latest 'Out of Africa' experience.

Encounters with elephants are par for the course when on horseback in the wilds of Africa and, make no mistake, a riding safari is not the same without one. The excitement when a distant sighting is followed by a staring contest; the trust in your bombproof horse when he stands his ground less than 200 yards from the imposing beast, and the adrenalin rush when it emerges, perhaps, that you are no longer welcome at the show – all truly unmissable.

At no point, however, did we feel in danger, our own trust in our armed lead guide and back-up being reinforced in the knowledge that unnecessary risks are non-runners when it comes to wild animals. This is the Okavango Delta, and this is about as wild as it gets. You cannot afford to be complacent.

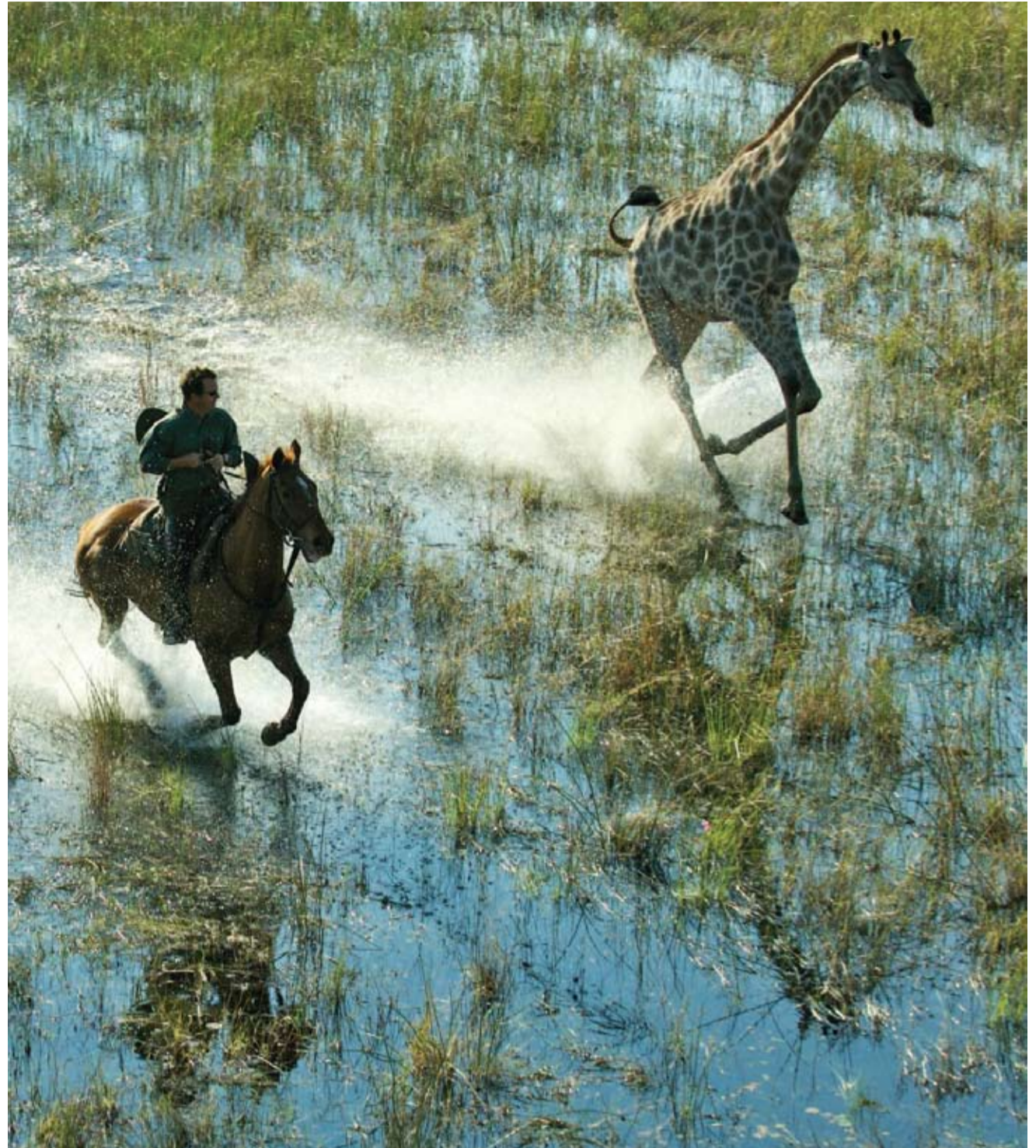
My latest adventure had taken me back to Botswana, where I'd had my first African

riding safari two years earlier. That one had been classed as 'the holiday of a lifetime' but I soon realised it was going to be impossible to draw comparisons.

I had been told that Macatoo Camp, the home of African Horseback Safaris, was remote, but little did I know exactly how much until I arrived at Maun Airport. I had been met there by the company's marketing manager Riana Fourie, who told me not to waste time buying toothpaste in the shop – she would make sure a tube was flown into camp the very next day. A Colgate package on a chartered Cessna? Well, not quite. Some other supplies were arriving also.

Indeed, thanks to this same trusty Cessna, my marathon journey from Dublin-Paris-Johannesburg-Maun and, finally, to camp deep in the Delta, was drawing to a close. My pilot had just dropped off a German couple on their way to a different safari lodge, and, like a bus, the light aircraft was off and then down again 25 minutes later at the camp's airstrip, which, I'd been told, was roughly nine hours' drive from the nearest town. Only now was the whole 'supplies on a plane' story beginning to make perfect sense.

My charming local back-up guide for the week, Motsugi Samokwasi, was waiting patiently to take me on my next leg of the journey, and an open jeep took us to the edge of the water, where a short



Cantering alongside giraffe is one of the most thrilling aspects of a riding safari

**“** The day of our close encounter we acknowledged the patience needed to train horses to have this level of trust; they all stood motionless as we gazed in amazement

boat ride would take me to my final destination – a five-star oasis, but not a television or telephone in sight.

Normally the jeep would have gone the distance, but unprecedented rainfall in this vast wetland two months earlier had resulted in Macatoo being practically marooned. Bar a helicopter, for an emergency evacuation, there was only one way in, and one way out. Water levels were higher than normal and, as the landscape changed, so too did the guests' itinerary. A week at Macatoo in November (during Africa's summer) might feature fast gallops across open, dry plains, and occasional

sleep-outs. However, this was mid-May and swimming in open water was top of the list.

Nobody was complaining though and an early morning dip in the saddle was a given – an additional canter through flooded dirt paths some four hours later, being a welcome coolant as we returned to base for lunch.

Of course, nothing is guaranteed in the Delta, or anywhere else involving animals in the wild, and sightings of shy creatures can be sometimes sporadic. However, trained guides know this territory back to front, and inside out, and owner John Sobey and his team are all

well-seasoned spotters.

A native of Cornwall in England, the 42-year-old would, to some, seem like a fish out of water running a riding safari company in the depths of Africa.

But this is no amateur and 15-plus years of experience in the business has seen him graduate as an assistant in his 20s to owning and running one of the most popular riding safari companies on this continent. So much so, for the second year running, it won the Best Riding Safari Operator Award in Africa earlier this year.

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### OKAVANGO DELTA FACT FILE



THE Okavango Delta (or Okavango Swamp), in Botswana, is the world's largest inland delta. It is formed where the Okavango River empties onto a swamp in an endorheic basin in the Kalahari Desert, where most of the water is lost to evaporation and transpiration instead of draining into the sea. It is 3,000 kilometres in length and 1,000 in width. It is said to have first been discovered in 1849 when visited by David Livingstone and his fellow explorers William Cotton Os-

well and Mungo Murray.

Major features, in and around the Okavango Delta, include the Panhandle, a broad valley of permanent swamp, the alluvial fan with areas that are permanently flooded, seasonal swamps that are inundated each year, and occasional floodplains which only flood in years with exceptional high flows.

It is both a permanent and seasonal home to a wide variety of wildlife. Species include elephant, buffalo, hippopotamus, lechwe, topi,

blue wildebeest, giraffe, crocodile, lion, cheetah, leopard, brown hyena, spotted hyena, greater kudu, sable antelope, black rhinoceros, white rhinoceros, plains zebra, warthog and chacma baboon. Notably the endangered African wild dog still survives within the Okavango Delta, exhibiting one of the richest pack densities in Africa. The Delta also includes over 400 species of birds, 112 of those being aquatic, 64 species of reptiles, 117 species of fish and 1,300 species of plants.

The majority of the estimated 200,000 large mammals in and around the Delta are not year round residents. They leave with the summer rains to find renewed fields of grass to graze on and trees to browse, then make their way back as winter approaches. Large herds of buffalo and elephant total about 30,000.

The town of Maun is the gateway to the Delta and in recent years has developed greatly with the introduction of new roadways and tourist shops.



## A60 TRAVEL FEATURE



Up close and personal with an African elephant

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One would wonder what persuaded Sobey to leave his homeland to live and work with Botswana natives. There was one simple answer, the mid-1980s movie *Out of Africa*.

"When the movie came out I was completely fascinated with the place," he said. "I had always been involved with horses at home and did a stint in Denmark, but I was constantly drawn here."

It was only through a chance meeting with Bristol-born Sarah-Jane Gullick that he finally got the opportunity to come to Botswana for a three-week holiday. Clearly hooked, he returned home, but with itchy feet, and within a few months, and now in his mid-20s, he was back in the country training to be an apprentice guide.

Like most intense jobs with such responsibility, this required years of training and, in order to obtain a licence, a lot of hard work. "It was just at a time when Sarah-Jane was thinking of starting a business and she asked me if I would be interested in working with her." Needless to say he didn't have to be asked twice and, after three years running a riding safari within Macateer, when Sarah-Jane made a move to set up an independent company, John's ambitions of running his own place came another step clo-

ser to reality.

"It was Boxing Day 1998 when we moved to Macatoo and we set about building on it with all the facilities and a stable of horses." As is now still the case, anything that couldn't be flown in had to be brought in by road, and that included the horses.

Nowadays, once guests soak up their magical surroundings on arrival, they soon appreciate the effort that goes into running a tourist business in the company's 500,000 acres of wilderness.

In 2004 John made the decision to return to England to run his own business specia-

“A few of us sipped champagne by the mess tent while watching an elephant munching his way through a late snack

lising in bespoke safaris, but it was not long before he was back in camp, this time as owner/managing director in 2007 when Sarah-Jane decided to move to pastures new.

#### TAKING HIS GUIDANCE

HEAD guide at African Horseback Safaris, Bongwe Makate, is acknowledged as an expert in the business, having spent the past 11 years at Macatoo.

He spent much of his early life in Maun and after, working in a livery stable there, moved into the Delta to begin his career as a guide. This started at Okavango Horse Safaris and in 1999 he moved to Macatoo.

In the early days he worked in the stables, but after only three years he trained to be a back-up guide for the area, and eventually head guide. This process

involved taking several courses, some equine-specific, in order to be able to handle all eventualities with guests and horses.

Nowadays Bongwe oversees all rides when owner John Sobey is absent and is



Since then Macatoo has grown further into a luxury riding safari company with a full complement of 40 horses, and more on the way. They are mainly sourced from Namibia and are of various breeds, from Trakehners and Hanoverians to the odd thoroughbred.

One who seems to be enjoying his new life is Savannah, who came off the track in Zambia and underwent intensive career guidance. My swimming partner for my first and last day, he has truly found his niche.

This training can take up to one year as the resident

equines are put through their paces. All new arrivals are closely monitored to rate their interaction with wild animals and, for many, it is months before they are used by guests. Some, on the other hand, simply don't make the cut and are returned. For lead horses, training is even more rigorous, as it is these who will be the first to meet an elephant, or anything else, head on.

The day of our close encounter we acknowledged the patience needed to train horses to have this level of trust; they all stood motionless as we gazed in amazement. Even when the elephant moved in our direction, the horses remained calm while some of their riders were not so blasé.

Back at camp, we relived the day's adventures over a smashing lunch, our time in the saddle leaving us hungry for seconds. "So what did you see or do?" we would question the other group of riders who'd taken a different route. Some saw crocodiles and lions, some didn't. Others saw a herd of buffalo, while one night a few of us sipped champagne by the mess tent while watching an elephant munching his way through a late snack.

This time round the big cat managed to escape me, although one night from the comfort of my bed I did recognise his distant roar as he

called out for his mate. Roars in the afternoon, however, were most likely from the baboons as they gathered by the plunge pool and hammock on the deck. They always knew when they had an audience.

Apart from the obvious, identifying animal tracks in the sand is a fine art, and, while we couldn't miss the tree felling as 'big feet, big ears' passed through camp, visiting leopards were often miles away by the time their marks were spotted at dawn. As John once commented: "Whether we are out riding or back in camp, there's no end to the amount of animals watching our every move."

While your run-of-the-mill campsites across the globe will often offer bucket showers and hole-in-the-ground loos, Macatoo leaves nothing to chance when it comes to maximum comfort for its worldly guests.

Staff is in abundance, with some 40 locals tending to guests' every single need. As for the food, when the chefs can produce a three-tier 50th birthday cake from a kitchen 'in the middle of nowhere', you know you really are somewhere very, very special.

It was Friday night and the four ladies' last night in camp and Cape Town-based Sally Pegg and Viv Marais were almost overcome with emotion as we prepared to bid them farewell over dinner.





Swimming home



Lounging about in the hammock. Baboons passed through camp daily



Dinner at sunset. Each night the table napkins changed to a different shape of animal



Playing Jenga on the platform with endless wildlife as spectators

Two nights earlier I learned that Sally's English-based sister Sue and another friend Jane Johnson had also been planning this holiday for years, a story repeated by two lovely French couples several days later.

Romance, we discovered, had not gone out the window when we heard that Bruno Pages' wife Annie had received 23 letters of the alphabet as gifts over a five-year period. The anagram was unravelled at Christmas - African Horseback Safaris - in May.

While Sobey no longer guides on a regular basis, he was back in camp from his base in Maun to lead our group that included his good friend Mike from Cirencester, whose visits to Macatoo in the past 10 years now number close to 30.

A missing link on this visit had been another friend of theirs from home, Roger Nutland, who passed away last year but whose memory lived on at nearby Lion Island. One of his favourite parts of the Delta, some of his ashes had been scattered here, where crocodiles and kingfishers have now built their homes.

A short boat trip had taken the three of us there one evening for sundowners, while other guests enjoyed a leisurely hack. This had been one of several amazing sunsets spent on the water, others being used to get close to three

sedentary giraffes and two lively hippos on the move. We'd also gone to the Water Lily Pond just before closing time to see these stunning flowers glow in the evening light.

Indeed giraffes were plentiful during our rides, but so too were wildebeest, elephant, zebra, warthog, a wide selection of antelope and a multitude of parrots, eagles, owls and woodpeckers. All are among some 450 species of birds that live on this land.

Traversing from island to island in search of such animals puts demands on the horses, but a rota saw them used only every other day, and no more than two or three mornings a week, when their fitness is tested to the limit.

However, their rewards were great and, after a day in the bush, an afternoon grazing in a nearby sunny paddock proved to be the ideal battery recharger before the evening's hard feed.

One who was late home one

evening was Bismarck, who that morning had managed to offload the other groups' lead guide Bongwe Makate in water, but thankfully, unlike the German battleship that sank, he safely made his way back to base in time for supper. His rider, on the other hand, had a rather long walk home. Indeed our own candlelit three-course supper that evening proved most entertaining as the camp's head guide had his adventures played and replayed like a

broken record by his highly-amused colleagues. But the laughing didn't stop there, and as regular as it was hysterical, the following day it was John at the receiving end when his internal GPS mysteriously ran out of batteries.

"Do you know where you are going," we heard Mike call out from the back of the ride, his giggle being enough to know John was, indeed, lost. We'd been on the move for some time after our break, but it was all rather silent now up the front as he attempted to get off this very large roundabout. "Look there's some giraffe," said Justine Andrew and Claire Nixon from York, but no, there was no time for viewing as we all moved in the opposite direction.

We were not heading back to camp, but rather to a newly-built high platform overlooking the water, where our lunch awaited us, along with a change of dry clothes organised as part of the surprise by our ever-efficient team. We were a good 40 minutes late and our hungry fellow riders were bewildered as they peered down through the trees. John got lost? Yes, can you believe it!

Indeed that lunch had been one of the most memorable, as had the previous night's dinner on the deck, lit by a candle-filled chandelier hanging from a bow of a tree overhead. Drip went the wax onto the table as the stories and

tales were shared over wine. The main course that night was game stew, kudu to be precise, this largest member of the antelope family in Africa being one of the most spectacular when in full flight across his terrain.

Moving at a more leisurely pace were the giraffes, who, on my final morning's ride, had obliged us greatly when spotted down by their own Giraffe Pool. Gathered in a collective journey, they cantered with immense grace and let us ride alongside them before disappearing into the trees. Not only was it a thrill, but an honour to join them, even for those few brief moments.

Back at camp, we again shared our stories as some of us prepared to leave for home. A 6.30am wake-up call, and 7am breakfast around the campfire before our ride and one final lunch by the water, my last supper was to be followed by a night on the platform, with only the sky for a roof. Equipped with a mattress apiece, and a mosquito net overhead, we played Jenga to moonlight before bedding down to the sounds of the wild.



Posing beside a baobab tree believed to be 3,000 years old