



A MTB SAFARI IN THE LAND OF THE GIANTS

*Riding among the majestic wildlife of Botswana, Tracey Croke
discovers a heartening haven for Africa's animal refugees*

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Give way to the Giraffes



Their heads sweep from side to side. Eyes flick in different directions. Rangers Mosa and Mario are always scanning the breadth of the Botswana bush, ready to react at a moment's notice.

Leaning on their bikes, they ooze a kind of casual cool. But even when chatting, I suspect a part of their brain is permanently reserved on yellow alert in case an elephant charges.

We are taking a shady break from the deadly midday heat of Mashatu – a fenceless game reserve on the eastern fringes of the Kalahari Desert.

Riding mountain bikes along ancient elephant trails might not be the most conventional way to observe the vast wild-life here, but it is a better way according to Mosa and Mario. Among white, calcium-rich hyena poo, we chat about the pros and cons of Jeep versus bike safari.

“The bike is quiet,” says Mosa “It’s better for the animals and the environment... and it’s more in tune with nature.”

“And bikes can go to places a jeep can’t reach,” adds Mario.

“Yes, Jeeps are noisy,” agrees Mosa. “We see more on bikes because we are quiet and the animals don’t get spooked.”

On the other hand, the 300 square kilometres of Mashatu Game Reserve – named after the mighty tree we are shading under – is a sanctuary to our greatest danger. And that danger isn’t posed by big, hungry cats, but the single, largest population

situation, I start to question this theory. But now is not the time to ask because Mosa has halted with his hand in a stop sign, which means he’s spotted something.

“There they are; the trail builders,” announces Mosa pointing into the distance. “Can you see them?”

In the expanse of the bush, I see the silvery skeletons of embattled mopane trees, which submitted to the harsh environment long ago. Along a ghostly branch, a lone hornbill cuts a silhouette against a luminous blue-grey sky. Then I hear it; the distinct snap, crackle and pop of bush being trampled by a family group of six-tonne elephants.

“We can safely observe them because we are downwind and they can’t smell or hear us,” assures Mosa. We happily snap away taking our photos. Mosa and Mario are back in their happy place too. Heads still scanning, eyes still flicking and brains still on yellow alert.

A MIGHTY HAVEN

This “Land of Giants”, as Mashatu is also known, has earned its reputation from the number of elephants, prolific predators and enormous trees that thrive here.

The ancient mashatu tree can reach a staggering 30 metres in height. Trunks thick enough to house hobbits prop up colossal canopies. Along with providing shade for our fenceless

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of wild elephant on privately owned land in Africa – thought to be around 700-strong.

As Mosa informs me, there is no way a bike can outride an “ultra protective bull elephant charging at 40 kilometres an hour”. And with those thoughts, we move off.

Botswana-style trail maintenance requires flicking dry elephant dung out of the track with the front wheel of a moving mountain bike. Judging by Mosa and Mario’s relentless performance of this lightning-quick skill, it won’t be long before we have our first elephant encounter.

We ride as instructed, quietly and in single file, which is easier said than done with knobby tyres crunching baked mud.

Mosa leads from the front of our group of eight with a rifle strapped on his back. Mario protects the rear.

The trail is technical in parts. I’m avoiding thorny acacia, traversing rocky paths and feeling like a moving platter of human canapés at a cats’ luncheon.

I felt somewhat reassured this morning when Mosa explained why people on safari in open top vehicles don’t regularly get mauled to death by the wildlife. Apparently, lions can’t define people sitting in a Jeep; they just see one big shape.

“It’s the same with bikes,” says Mosa. “Once you stick together in single file, the wildlife sees you as a very long shape like a giant snake.”

As we crunch along into the hot, stark, risky reality of the

camp, each tree sounds as if it’s supporting a mini universe of life.

The flourishing wildlife is also credited to a notable act by a group of farmers in the late 60s. Like many areas in Africa, wildlife in the region at that time had almost been hunted to extinction. In a collaborative conservation move, the owners of the 35 farms pulled down all fences to restore free movement through migratory corridors the animals need to survive. Today, Mashatu makes up one third of what’s now known as The Northern Tuli Game Reserve – one of the largest privately owned wildlife sanctuaries in Africa.

My humble safari tent, perched on the edge of the Limpopo River, comes complete with a metal camp bed and mattress. A five-metre drop below, the parched riverbed stages scenes straight out of Disney’s Jungle Book. Throughout the day we had missed multiple family groups of elephants trumpeting their way to regular waterholes.

A short walk away, there is a long drop toilet and simple bucket shower with a bush view. It’s a thrilling experience if you don’t mind the prospect of showering in front of a troop of baboons.

Food is local, tasty and wholesome, cooked over an open fire and kept warm in cast iron pots on little piles of coals. Over a dinner of goat stew, I get to ask my burning questions about human interpretation of animal behaviour.

Leopard hangs out in a Mashatu tree perusing the menu



Camping under the life-giving Mashatu Tree, which provides refuge and food to a myriad wildlife



AN ELEPHANT NEVER FORGETS

Mosa, 33, tells me learning the skills of the bush starts young. He was raised in the small village of Mabolwe, close to the Zimbabwe border. Bushcraft came from a combination of formal training and his father, who was a ranger for 35 years.

He explains that attacks are rare and are usually the result of people ignoring the rules and rangers' advice. "If you know the zones of each particular animal and know their behaviour, we can live together. We respect them and their space and they respect us."

"What do we do if an elephant charges?" I ask.

"We must stand our ground and make ourselves big," Mosa casually explains. "You need to be very brave," (and have extremely large kahunas, I think). "As a last resort, I will fire a warning shot... that always works, but I don't like to do it."

Mosa is licensed to carry a rifle and he's trained to use it, however, since the country introduced a total hunting ban several years ago, the rules for discharging it are very strict. "Even if I fire a warning shot, I have to report it to the authorities within 24 hours," explains Mosa. Thankfully, this has only been necessary a handful of times during his 14 years of guiding. No mountain bikers or elephants have come to any harm in his experience, but he admits to a few close calls.

One day, Mosa saw an elephant with ears out, ready to strike. He made himself big and clapped his hands but the elephant charged. Next, he threw his helmet to the side to distract the elephant, but it didn't work.

"Wouldn't you be better throwing something bigger like your bike?" I enquired. Mosa looked at me like I'd lost the plot. "No – he might squash my bike! I fired a warning shot. The elephant stopped and pushed his tusks into the ground. It was his way of saying: 'Okay, I'm stopping, but I'm still the boss.'"

Why firing a gunshot in the air stops a charging bull elephant is unclear. Mosa thinks it's because elephants have memories of being hunted. The theory is supported by elephant movement data from Botswana-based non-profit Elephants Without Borders. They say elephants have a cognitive ability to understand areas of threat and safety, which explains why they have increasingly sought refuge in Botswana.

Botswana's hunting ban, political and economic stability, small human population and (controversial) zero-tolerance poaching policy have been cited as making it an elephant haven. More than a third of Africa's remaining elephants live here.

The country is a ray of hope amid Africa's dwindling elephant population. In just seven years, 30 percent of Africa's elephants have disappeared due to a surge in poaching driven by (according to conservation groups) poachers who can act with impunity and an insatiable demand for tusks in Asia.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

Suddenly we hear a spine-chilling roar from the bush. "Can you hear that? It's Kgosi, the strongest lion. He sounds very close." This guttural 'call', Mosa recognises as warning sub-adults to stay out of his territory. Just as I'm thinking I've had enough excitement for one day, I'm heading back into the nighttime bush, this time in an open-top Jeep to help "assess the situation".

Male lions go to great lengths to protect their 'parcel' of land, which can be several hundred square kilometres. We are only a couple of hundred metres from camp when a lion

(clearly in his prime), strolls from the bush and right into our tracks. Several breath-holding and bum-twitching roars later, Kgosi, or 'chief' in English, nonchalantly turns around and continues the business of patrolling his territory. We're told this is a rare ritual to witness and, if possible, to avoid the bush loo tonight.

Tucked up in fetal position, my thick canvas safari tent suddenly seems uncomfortably on the flimsy side. Throughout the night I drift somewhere between sleep and survival instinct to the sounds of trumpeting elephants and the hair-raising roars of King Kgosi.

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

The next morning, I'm treated to Southern Africa's temperature swings. I get on my bike shivering under a magenta pink dawn, knowing that I'd soon be sweating and seeking the cool shade of the mighty Mashatu once again.

Over the days, close encounters – mostly by bike and occasionally by Jeep – continue. Giraffes regularly pause from nibbling on tree canopies to give us a fleeting look. We are lucky to see a whole family of skittish cheetahs taking turns to drink from a waterhole while the others keep lookout for predators.

And as Mosa promised, on wide-open plains we pedal unnoticed by grazing herds of zebra and wildebeest until almost passing them by. The latter take off in a fit as if shaking off a frenzy of imaginary bees. Comical warthogs sometimes follow with tails aloft in a quickstep trot.

With such abundant wildlife, you'd think the common impala (a mid-sized antelope) wouldn't register on the wow-scale. But the formidable athleticism of this fragile beauty performing ballet leaps through the bush never fails to stop me in my tracks. As does Kgosi, who we spot again one late afternoon, this time sprawled like an elaborate lord in a post-feast slumber.

If there's one moment that defines Mashatu, it's this: we are captivated by a small family of elephants, munching a dent in their required 300 kilos of daily fare, when Mosa whispers "look up". I'm forced to trade cooing over a baby elephant for the heart-stopping view of a panting leopard dangling in the branches above.

I think nothing will top that highlight, but on my final evening, I'm beckoned from my sleep by a commotion outside my tent. It seems Mashatu is determined to squeeze in one more contender for the prize of most remarkable moment.

I drag myself outside and join the small audience of staff and guests congregated on the edge of the Limpopo. This can only mean one thing: the midnight march is on its way.

To my slight disappointment, a solitary bull elephant comes into a moonlit view. He meanders past with a trumpeting wave of his trunk as if to say, "That's all, folks".

Still, this parting memory knocks spots off any dangling leopard. After all, in Botswana, a lone elephant is thankfully a rare sight in my experience. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR

Tracey Croke is a travel journalist addicted to roughy-toughty off-track adventure and galavanting on her mountain bike. Her quest for a good travel story has seen her travel through post-conflict Afghanistan, the Ethiopian Highlands, and wilds of Kyrgyzstan.





On ancient migration trails, trees lost battles with elephants and the environment



King of the beasts: Frankly my dear I don't give a damn



Mashatu is a sanctuary to the largest single population of elephant on privately owned land in Africa



Several warning shots only in 14 years: "No animals have been killed" says guide Mosa Masupe

Riding close together and in single file is important for safety on bike safari



NEED TO KNOW

TRIP INFO - Cycle Mashatu has been operating mountain bike safaris in the African wilderness since 2003. Trip cost is \$340 USD per person for 4 days/3 nights. Mountain Bikes can be hired at an additional cost. More at www.mtbsafaris.com

DIFFICULTY - The terrain is mixed, but nothing too technically difficult for anyone with basic mountain biking experience and a reasonable level of fitness. Pace is easy-going, 4-5 hours per day, covering 30-40 kilometres, with regular stops for game sightings.

TAILORED EXPERIENCE - The trip can be customised with extra days and mixed with other activities such as walking, horse riding and jeep safaris. There is a choice of camping or lodge accommodation.

TEAM THIS ADVENTURE WITH - A trip to the Okavango Delta and Chobe National Park where you'll find Africa's largest elephant population - finish at Victoria Falls. See www.chobenationalpark.com

BEST TIME TO GO - Cooler months of May through to September.

GETTING THERE - Qantas fly direct from Sydney to Johannesburg. The adventure begins and ends at the border of Botswana and South Africa (Pont Drift Border) approximately 5.5 hours drive from Johannesburg airport. Cycle Mashatu will advise on transport options. Email: info@mtbsafaris.com

FIVE FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT BOTSWANA

- Botswana is a stable democracy with an excellent track record of governance since independence from Great Britain 1966.
- Since independence, Botswana has never suffered a military coup or a non-democratic transfer of power and has grown from one of the world's poorest countries to one of the world's fastest growing economies.
- Botswana has the world's richest diamond mine, which was found when termites pushed specks of diamond to the surface.
- Botswana is home to the Okavango Delta - one of the world's largest inland deltas. It spans 17,000km² - an area almost the size of Fiji - and supports vast groups of African wildlife. It's famous for huge herds of zebra and wildebeest, which make an annual migration to find food and water.
- Around 40 percent of the country is dedicated to national parks, reserves and wildlife management areas.

More about Botswana's elephant conservation efforts at www.elephantswithoutborders.org

The Great Elephant Consensus is the largest pan-Africa aerial survey ever undertaken.

www.greatelephantcensus.com

The author travelled at her own expense.

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