

Makgadikgadi Pans - Kalahari safari stirs the soul

Mark Sissons, Special to The Chronicle

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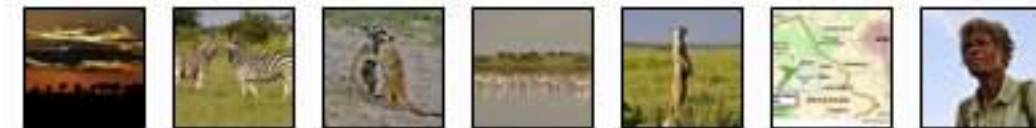
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Sunset ignites the African skies above the shores of Botswana's remote and mysterious Makgadikgadi. Photo: Mark Sissons, Special To The Chronicle



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Whatever you do, don't get out of the truck. At least that's what they tell you.

Yet here I am, lying flat on my back on the ground, hundreds of yards from the safety of the Range Rover, in the middle of Botswana's Kalahari Desert, world renowned for its big-game viewing. And instead of nervously wondering where the lions and leopards are, I'm feeling downright peaceful under a

brilliant canopy of stars in a place so enormous, empty and silent that I can actually hear the blood circulating in my head.

If this were one of Botswana's other jewels - the Okavango Delta, the world's largest inland delta; Moremi Game Reserve; or Chobe National Park, each teeming with four-legged predators - I'd probably be the main course by now.

But here, in a remote part of the Kalahari called the Makgadikgadi Pans, I'm OK to go walkabout because you can spot uninvited dinner guests a country mile away in this remnant of what was once the world's largest lake. Covering 23,000 square miles of what is now northern Botswana, Lake Makgadikgadi dried up less than 10,000 years ago, leaving a flat, starkly beautiful salt bed of ethereal, glittering white moonscapes from horizon to horizon, along with super-size skies and exceptional visibility. This is Death Valley meets "Wild Kingdom" - and one of Africa's most unusual safari destinations.

Unlike most African safaris, which are usually all about ticking Big Five sightings off your bucket list, the landscape is the big draw in this unique ecosystem, thought to be the world's largest salt pan. Eerie, otherworldly, surreal - all have been used to describe the Makgadikgadi.

"When I first came out here, it completely blew my mind and changed everything," says Super Sande, who's been guiding in the Makgadikgadi for more than 20 years. "I'd planned to stay only two weeks. But once I was out here amid this incredible sense of space, I felt I was finally able to breathe."

You could wander for weeks in the Makgadikgadi without encountering another human being, let alone the swarms of safari vehicles that make some of Africa's game parks seem like vehicular feeding frenzies.

"I can park my truck anywhere here and look at 10,000 animals in front of me for the whole day or even a week without seeing anybody," says Sande.

Huge herds of wildebeests, springboks and one of Africa's last great zebra migrations turn the Makgadikgadi into a movable feast for predators such as lions, cheetahs, jackals and the rare brown hyena when the spring rains come, transforming this harsh wasteland into a lush green carpet of savanna grass. Shallow lakes also form then, providing nesting grounds for Africa's second-largest gathering of pink flamingoes.

Some of those lakes turn out to be mirages, glittering in the hazy margins of this epic emptiness as clouds of gray clay dust streak across a cobalt sky in the wake of our sprinting Land Cruiser. Overhead, giant cumulus clouds hover in formations like whimsically shaped airships. With no permanent roads and constantly shifting tracks, navigating Botswana's Empty Quarter without a GPS can be risky.

"If you get lost out here, you either have to just give up or hope for the best," Sande says.

Post office tree

Unless you happen to spot the only real landmark for hundreds of miles around. Chapman's Baobab (also known as the Seven Sisters) is one of Africa's largest trees, with a circumference of more than 80 feet. By some estimates nearly 3,000 years old, this solitary goliath is named for James Chapman, a South African trader and explorer who

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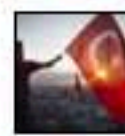
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As Kalahari scrub robins and swallow-tailed bee-eaters perch on branches high above, Sande points to a hole 10 feet up the main trunk large enough to hold a duffel bag. "That's where the early European explorers and travelers used to leave letters for each other," he says, adding that correspondence would sometimes take up to a year to reach the recipient.

Other early visitors carved dated inscriptions in the baobab's gnarled trunk going back to the 1870s.

Driving from Chapman's Baobab back to our base - a traditional East African 1940s-style collection of 10 canvas tents spread across an island of desert palms and Kalahari acacia - is a couple of hours as the vulture flies.

Built by the son of a white hunter named Jack Bousfield, who first settled in the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans in the 1960s, Jack's Camp is an upscale throwback to the classical safari era of Hemingway. Each of its spacious tents has a large veranda, en suite bathroom, and rustic indoor and outdoor showers. Persian rugs, antiques and period furniture accent the colonial ambience.

A shaded lap pool overlooking the pans catches the Kalahari breeze while offering welcome respite from the intense midday heat.

Guests gather around the central dining tent's communal table for gourmet meals and tales told by the camp's veteran staff, many of whom are graduate students who combine research with guiding. Only limited solar-powered electricity is available during the daytime; the yellow glow of kerosene lamps and the flicker of firelight illuminate the inky African night.

"Jack's Camp is quite different from the camps I saw in other places. There's more solitude here," retired German property developer Karl Homberg says one evening over cocktails around the fire pit. He is here with his wife and two teenage children. "The Makgadikgadi is a place where you can really let your soul dangle."

A passionate amateur anthropologist, Bousfield, who died in a 1992 plane crash, put his own heart and soul into scouring this magnificent desolation for fossils, prehistoric Bushmen tools and bones - hauling back everything from elephant femurs to baboon skulls.

Bousfield's eclectic collection is on display in the dining tent, alongside a series of stunning black-and-white portraits taken by his son and current camp co-owner, Ralph. Many depict the camp's resident Zu/hoasi Bushmen, employed to offer guests guided nature walks, where the Kalahari's original inhabitants demonstrate age-old survival techniques - from finding water in a desert and starting a fire with twigs to sucking the life-sustaining juices out of a live scorpion.

Audience participation is optional.

A visit to the meerkats

Mandatory, however, is a visit to a meerkat burrow not far from camp. These industrious members of the mongoose family live in close-knit family groups where everyone is expected to pitch in. While some furiously dig out the entrances to their homes or forage for lizards, insects and other small prey, sentries stand ramrod straight, on constant alert for hungry eagles, snakes and jackals.

Jack's Camp employs a "meerkat man" whose sole job is to spend quality time every day with the meerkats, gradually habituating them to limited human contact. Which explains why the meerkats' preferred watchtowers are often visitor's heads, which provide them with excellent vantage points.

As I sit stone still near the entrance to the meerkats' manor, several eventually emerge, cautiously investigate me and then scamper one by one up onto my legs and into my lap like miniature mountaineers. One brave climber eventually clambers up my neck and onto my head, where it assumes the signature meerkat position.

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Letting a wild animal, no matter how cuddly and cute, use the top of your head as a lookout can drive a person to drink. Sundowners, to be precise, served by the campfire on a ghostly white pan that extends in all directions like a frozen infinity pool. Gin and tonic in hand, I venture toward the crimson African setting sun as silhouettes of a herd of grazing zebras

dot the distant horizon like furtive shadow puppets.

Several hundred paces on, sprawled on the soft, warm clay ground, I gaze up at the same southern celestial constellations our distant ancestors once saw as they huddled on the shores of this imponderably vast inland sea. Waves of silence and serenity now flow through the magical Makgadikgadi. With a current soothing enough to make you want to get out of the truck and take a long, slow stroll into the middle of nowhere.

Just to hear yourself think.

If you go

The best time to visit the **Makgadikgadi** is during the summer rainy season (November to April) when enormous herds of zebras, wildebeests and several species of antelope (followed by predators) move onto the lush green pans to graze. The dry winter season (May to October) offers the opportunity to explore the shimmering, desolate salt pans on quad bike safaris.

Getting there

South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) has daily nonstop flights to Johannesburg from New York and Washington, with frequent connections to Maun in Botswana. Light aircraft transfer guests from Maun to Jack's Camp.

Where to stay

Jack's Camp (www.unchartedafrica.com) is a luxury permanent tented camp designed in a traditional East African 1940s safari style. Those on a more modest budget can opt for nearby Camp Kalahari, owned and operated by the same company.

Outfitters

Africa Adventure Consultants (www.adventuresinafrica.com, (866) 778-1089) of Denver offers a range of customizable luxury, adventure and family-oriented Botswana safaris that include Makgadikgadi Pans and Nxai Pan national parks, Chobe National Park, the Okavango Delta, Moremi Game Reserve and the central Kalahari.