

From Water to Pans – A Report from Botswana

By Kristina Trowbridge, WinWin Vacations, May 2008

More pictures at <http://www.kristinasafari.com/Albums/africa.htm>

Botswana is about the glittering waters of the Okavango Delta,
that give birth and life to all creatures of the Kalahari.

Botswana is about the glittering stars above the Makgadikgadi Pans,
that shine vibrantly adding sparkles to the sky that totally engulf you there.

Botswana is home to the Bushmen with ancestries that go back millions of years.

Botswana is a well kept secret visited by only a few privileged souls.

A group of travel agents and companions travelled from the US on invitation by Ker & Downey on an educational safari to Botswana. We were carefully chosen by the sales reps from Ker & Downey and accompanied by the President and his lovely wife: Mr and Mrs David and Gana Marek. The agents were: Sue Alstedt; Arlene Hamann; Bobbie Pequignot; Kristina Trowbridge; Nicole Porto; Pamela Wilson; Pat Ackley; and Maxine Wells Nelson accompanied by TJ Nelson, Shelley Podolny, Tom Trowbridge and Vicky Whelan. Our inspirational, untiring special hosts from Uncharted Africa were Ralph Bousfield and Kaelo Makati.

I arrived in Maun tired from Indaba and travelling around Southern Africa for over 3



weeks hoping for a slower pace of safari. Imagine 2 nights at Okuti Camp, 3 nights with Uncharted Africa luxury camping and 3 nights at Jack's! Such luxury was waiting for me and my husband Tom, whom I hadn't seen for over 3 weeks. Okuti Camp did not disappoint. Totally rebuilt from the bottom up with the most unusual tents anywhere it was indeed pure luxury. The Camp is located alongside the Moanachira River, as it flows into the Xakanaxa

Lagoon, in the famous and beautiful Moremi Game Reserve. Located right on the water channel with a hippo trail below our deck, who could ask for anything more.

We choose the relaxing boat trip with Nelson on the Xakanaxa Lagoon as our first game drive and our first sundowner in Botswana. Here you see the most beautiful sunsets in all of Africa. Just amazing! The sky seems to be on fire, reflecting back from the lagoon like a mirror image. WOW! After a scrumptious dinner and surprise entertainment by the staff around the campfire, everyone was ready to crash. Most had jet-lag to deal with also.



Moremi Game Reserve offers some of the most spectacular game viewing in Botswana.



Here we encountered this young bull in a trunk to trunk stand-off with our vehicle (yes, we have one too!), a pride of lions on the airport runway, a female leopard with 2 young cubs, grazing impalas and kudus, red lechwe running through the water, incredibly beautifully colored birds like the lilac-breasted roller and some extremely rare species of birds like the wattled crane and slaty egret. A typical day at Okuti Camp offers morning and afternoon activities on land and water, with a packed lunch or returning to camp for lunch, then a siesta in the

heat of the day and back out exploring again in the evening with a “sundowner” before returning for dinner. The evenings end with relaxing around the campfire watching the friendly staff singing and dancing, most definitely enjoying it as much as the guests they are entertaining.

It’s time to go camping ... in style: And we’re off to adventure in the bush with the girls



on top. Here we go! Nothing can stop us. Introducing Ralph and Kaelo - our incredibly knowledgeable guides from Uncharted Africa Safari Company. Uncharted Africa Safari Company was founded in 1993 by Ralph Bousfield in memory of his legendary (some say infamous) father, Jack Bousfield. I think Ralph is already legendary in his own right. Each mobile safari with Ralph is an experience and you can

expect only the totally unexpected! Our first camp by the Xini Lagoon was our first surprise. Here we were surrounded by hippos and their songs, continuing all night like a dream come true. The tents are luxuriously appointed with real beds and pure white cotton sheets and feather bedding. All have bucket showers and a throne attached, which flushes the normal way. You couldn’t be more comfortable: enter the gourmet meals! These are coming from nowhere. The “kitchen” is just a few wooden boxes and a fire with some pots. Better food you cannot get even at the Ritz in Paris!!! Uncharted Africa Safari Co. is renowned for fresh tastes and original interpretations of classic dishes, many invented by Ralph’s



mother or sister. All bread is baked daily on the coals in trunk ovens.



The highlight of our mobile safari in the Moremi Game Reserve was fly-camping on Xhobega Island. We spent all afternoon getting there on a double-decked boat, cruising through the papyrus on the Moanachira River. We stopped for lunch and a swim along the way at the Sand Bank. After a sumptuous dinner in camp, Ralph took us out in the Xhobega Lagoon where he literally reached out and

grabbed a baby crocodile (just like Steve Irwin). This was an experience I will never forget: hearing that baby croc cry out like they do, ... and in person ... well to me is indescribable. Ralph didn't harm it in any way, but it just wouldn't relax as we all had to pet it, of course. When Ralph released it back into the lagoon, it turned around to try to bite him, but Ralph was prepared for that, so the croc missed and swam away. I'm sorry, I didn't bring my camera.

The next morning, we went back on the boat and caught a charter flight to Jack's Camp in the Makgadikgadi Pans. The large pans of Makgadikgadi are the most visible remnants of a lake that was formed more than five million years ago.

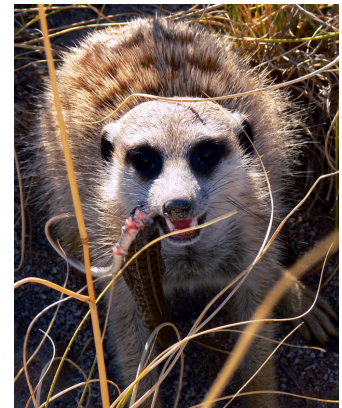
I found it be a vast wilderness of endless space and timelessness. This is where Jack Bousfield lived and raised his family. Ralph was the youngest child. He grew up trapping wildlife with his father, so he's full of interesting information about just about everything in nature, which he constantly unravels for his guests like some madman from outer space. He talked faster than my brain could absorb it even though I concentrated, because I didn't want to miss a word. Ralph stands 6 foot 2"



and wears a lion mane around his head. Here we got to experience a group of habituated Meerkats waking up and coming out of their burrows in the early morning. Oh, how I had longed for this moment! I was hoping that one would climb up on my head and use me for a look-out post, but today they were just



sunning themselves before starting their foraging for breakfast. When they were warm, off they went, tail straight up, stopping to dig out what they could find to eat, like scorpions, frogs and lizards. As difficult as it was to leave them, they would forage for food for the rest of the day and we didn't want to disturb them too long.



In the afternoon, we set out into the Makgadikgadi Pans on quad bikes. We rode those bikes into the sunset and disappeared into nowhere. I had no idea a place like this existed on earth. There's absolutely nothing out there. The sky and the



stars touched the ground and enveloped us like we were in a planetarium. It made me feel insignificant on earth, but still so privileged to be able to experience this. It puts your own life in perspective, makes you think; makes you appreciate all life, our earth and our roles to keep it pure and simple. As I was contemplating all this, Ralph again had a few surprises for us. I don't want to spoil it for those of you who will follow, so I'm not going to say what

the surprises are.

The next morning, riding the bikes back to base, I realized just how dusty it was and why we were wearing those kikois on our heads!



What would the Kalahari be without the San people or Bushmen as they themselves still prefer to be called?

Ralph has an extremely close relationship with them and he understands their plight. He has arranged for clients staying at Jack's or



San's Camps to have a walk with them for a few hours. Our leader was Cobra.

Cobra and his 3 young Bushmen taught us about their way of life, how they use the available plants as food and medicine, how they make fire, how they catch birds in a snare and how they dig up scorpions, and how they play games and have fun.



That evening, Ralph escorted us to the Brown Hyena den, where this 3 months old cub just emerged from hiding after sunset. Ralph wants to habituate the cubs to people as he has done with their mother, but for now we kept our distance to not stress them. It was such a privilege to be able to see one of these rare and elusive animals. Later, an aardwolf circled around the area and the mother hyena showed up after dark at which point

two more cubs emerged from the den.

The next morning our safari came to an end with our flights back to Johannesburg. This was an experience that few people will ever have. I hope to send as many of my clients to Botswana as I possible can and I will highly recommend Ker & Downey, a visit to the Kalahari, Jack's Camp and Uncharted Africa Safaris. I feel extremely privileged to be doing what I love – sell travel – and to be in a position to be able to travel to Africa. I'm grateful to Ker & Downey for the invitation to participate in this unusual fam trip and for being able to bring Tom. It was a humbling experience and I feel so fortunate.

Thank you David Marek, President of Ker & Downey for this opportunity

Kristina Frowbridge

WinWin Vacations