

Chobe Game Lodge - River Safari

# Stanley Johnson in Botswana: a return to the wild heart of Southern Africa

Four decades after first visiting Botswana for a CITES conference, our editor-at-large follows the Chobe River, the plains of Savute and the Okavango Panhandle to see how a conservation-led approach has protected elephants, predators and some of Africa's last great wild spaces

I first visited Gaborone, Botswana's capital, in May 1983 to attend one of the periodic conferences of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora, known as CITES. There must have been 200 delegates. We met in a huge tent specially erected for the conference in the grounds of the Sun Hotel.

As an environmentalist, I had an introduction to Louis Nchindo, chairman of the newly formed Kalahari Conservation Society. Nchindo was also a director of the all-powerful De Beers company, known in Botswana as Debswana.

There were not many gleaming modern offices in Gaborone in those days, but Debswana had one of them. Nchindo was keen to help. "You can't be stuck in meetings all the time. You'll have to see a bit of the country. We can let you have a Cessna and a pilot for the weekend. You can sit in the co-pilot's seat if you like."

Well, that was 40 years or more ago. I hadn't been back to Botswana since, except for a brief visit to the Tuli Block in 2008 to track wild dogs.

But then I met Li Boatwright at a book launch and got talking. Li knows a lot about Botswana. She represents Desert & Delta Safaris, one of the most established and respected companies working in the field out there. "Empowering the People of Botswana through Tourism. That's our philosophy."

"Count me in," I said, when she told me it was about time I made a return visit.

Four weeks later, in October 2025, Oria Sekondeko, our guide and driver, met us at Kasane Airport. Her Toyota Land Cruiser was parked outside. She gave us a little pep talk before we climbed on board to drive the 15 kilometres to Chobe Game Lodge. "All the guides at Desert & Delta's Chobe Game Lodge are women. All the boats we use on the river are run on solar power. The Chobe Lodge is the only permanent structure in the National Park."

Chobe Game Lodge looks out across the Chobe River to the vast Caprivi floodplains. To the east, in Zimbabwe, there are the mighty Victoria Falls. In the distant north, the wilderness of Zambia; in the south-west, the savannah lands of the Kalahari Botswanan desert. Chobe National Park is home to elephants, buffalo, leopard and a wide variety of antelopes.

But if there is one totally staggering fact about Chobe National Park, it must be the amazing number of elephants to be found there. Forty-five thousand seems to be the best estimate. I would say that in the course of our time there we must have seen several hundred, and we visited only a small fraction of the park's vast area.

That first evening, for example, as we cruised along the Chobe River looking at the hippos and crocodiles and riparian birds like egrets, herons and African darters, we saw herd after herd of elephants coming down to the river. Some would completely submerge themselves, just coming up from time to time to breathe. Others would decide they wanted to swim or wade across to the far bank, the Namibian border.

At a time when other countries in Africa have allowed their elephant populations to be cruelly poached and slaughtered, Botswana's elephant population has risen to more than 100,000, accounting for over a quarter of the world's remaining African elephants.

Are there too many elephants in Botswana? Certainly, Botswana has absorbed many 'immigrant' elephants fleeing from wars and conflicts in neighbouring countries such as Namibia, Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe. But that doesn't mean the time has come to reintroduce trophy hunting or mass culling. The best option must surely be to let nature take its course. In time, more elephants will die for whatever reason, including possible environmental stress, than are being born. Those that remain will still bear witness to the abundance and vitality of Africa's largest land mammal. In a very real sense, the survival of the African elephant in all its might, majesty and dominion is Botswana's gift to the world.

And that is a debt which the rest of the world can, and should, repay.

We flew on to Savute, a wild, open corner of Chobe National Park known for its vast plains, big predators and the Savute Channel, a waterway that mysteriously switches between flowing and drying for years at a time. Our new guide, Lynn, was there to greet us at the airstrip.

We piled into her Land Cruiser, then drove two-thirds of the way down the runway to ➤



**Above:** Stanley Johnson



Chobe Game Lodge - Chobe Deck

watch the plane take off again. Time for a photo, I thought.

I patted my pocket and came up empty. I patted all my pockets. Still nothing.

Panic intervened. I couldn't find the mobile phone anywhere. I must have left it on board the plane and the plane was about to take off.

Desert & Delta doesn't employ female guides and drivers to make some marginal political point. They employ them because they are good at their job. Lynn certainly came up trumps that morning. The plane, already advancing swiftly down the runway, came to a sudden stop with a squeal of brakes. Lynn jumped out of our vehicle, ran to the plane and scrambled up into the cabin through the door which the pilot had already opened.

I don't usually feel stress, but this was a bad moment. If my phone wasn't in the seat pocket, where was it? They could hardly hold the flight up while they searched the whole plane.

I picked up my hat and clamped it on my head. I didn't want to lose that too! As I did so, I recognised a familiar small oblong black object which had been lurking all along underneath the wide brim of my Australian-style headwear!

Not my finest moment, I certainly admit. I have lost my phone many times in many places, but this episode was in a class of its own.

Panic over, Lynn drove us from the airstrip to the lodge. I asked her how she had communicated so quickly with the pilot, forcing him to abort the take-off.

"I flashed my headlights at him. That meant stop if you can. And he did."

Phew.

The region is part of Africa's second-largest summer zebra migration, with one of the main herds moving through Savute each year. Migration is always followed by a large number of predators. In Chobe National Park we had seen more elephants than we had conceivably imagined. In Savute, lions occupied the top slot. If I look at the photos I took over the next two days on my now safely recovered mobile phone, I see a plethora of lion photos. Large lions, small lions, male lions, female lions and lots of lion cubs, too. If they are sleeping in the sun, they don't seem to mind if you drive right up close. They might open an eyelid for a moment or two but soon go back to sleep.

The extraordinary thing about going on safari in Botswana is that quite often you find there are only one or two or at most three other vehicles at the scene, whereas in Kenya's Masai Mara or Tanzania's Serengeti you can hardly get a glimpse of whatever it is you are looking at (if indeed you know), such is the crush of vehicles.

One evening our guide and driver, Conrad, pointed at ➤



Chobe Game Lodge - Standard Room Bathroom



Chobe Game Lodge - Suites

a distant thicket and whispered "lion!".

We saw where he was pointing, but we had no idea what he was pointing at. So he drove round to the other side of the bush and – lo and behold! – there, in the evening sun, were a dozen or so lions, spread out in a variety of different postures but all sleeping soundly without a care in the world.

"The big male is still there inside the bushes with his kill," Conrad explained. "The pride has been in there, and each one has had as much as it wants. Now they're sleeping it off."

I was tempted to get out of the vehicle and tiptoe over to the bush to see precisely what it was the lion had killed, but Conrad saved me the trouble. "That's a wildebeest," he said. "Or used to be."



Savute Safari Lodge - Fire Pit

The following morning, we witnessed an extraordinary spectacle. At about 8 a.m., as we drove around the savannah, we spotted a leopard in a tree. We watched it in silence for a minute or two, and then suddenly, for no apparent reason, the leopard jumped out of the tree and raced off into the bush.

"Why did it rush off like that?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear the scream?" Conrad replied.

"What scream?"

Conrad understood what had happened even if we didn't.

"We've got to find the cheetah," he said. "That leopard heard the sound of a cheetah killing its prey. Let's go and look for the cheetah."

Unbelievably, we saw not one but three cheetahs that morning. And there was a final twist which Agatha Christie herself would have been proud of. Around 8.40 a.m., we caught up with the leopard we had last seen leaping from the tree and racing into the bush. Now it was holed up inside a thicket. We could see quite clearly that it had prey on the ground in front of it.

"That's a young steenbok," Conrad said.

"When did he kill it?" I asked.

"That leopard didn't kill the steenbok," Conrad explained. "He stole it off the cheetahs. That's why he dashed out of the tree when he heard the steenbok scream."

I can't say I understood then, or now, how one young leopard managed to steal the prey of three large cheetahs.

Desert & Delta Safaris purchased Nxamaseri Island Lodge, our third and last stop, in 2021. It is one of the oldest camps in the Okavango Delta, located on the Panhandle and established in the early 1980s by PJ and Barney Bestelink, who at the time offered horse-riding safaris in the Okavango when I was flying overhead in Louis Nchindo's Cessna.

I sat with a gin and tonic in hand looking out over the water to the tall trees on the other side. An African fish eagle perched high up in the branches of a tree opposite the camp. I pointed my Nikon and took a long-distance image of one of Africa's finest birds of prey. If Chobe Game Lodge had offered a solid diet of elephants, and Savute that magnificent display of lions, then for me at least ➤

Nxamaseri Island Lodge, ideally situated on the Panhandle of the Delta, must rate as a birder's paradise.

Nine, a tall, handsome Motswana who acted throughout as our guide and mentor, punted us down the tributary until we reached the main stem of the Okavango River. The hippos were not as plentiful as they had been on the Chobe River – frankly we had been spoilt for choice up there – but there were quite enough hippos to be getting along with. The same could be said about the crocodiles. What saddened me in the Okavango was that I totally failed to get a decent photograph of the Malachite Kingfisher. I almost had it once, in fact more than once. Several times more than once. But each time I pressed the button, the bird had flown.

The very last treat of our trip, the cherry on top of the cream, was our quick dash to Tsodilo Hills. According to UNESCO, which has awarded the place World Heritage status (like the Okavango Delta), Tsodilo, with one of the highest concentrations of rock art in the world, has been called the "Louvre of the Desert". Over 4,500 paintings are preserved in an area of the Kalahari Desert only 10 km².

It takes over two to three hours to get to Tsodilo from Nxamaseri Island Lodge. The sun was setting as we arrived at the campsite. The campfire was already burning. We had supper and watched a brilliant display of San Bushmen dances.

It had been a long day and we turned in early. Next morning, we walked in single file through the rocks and craggy passages where fifty or a hundred thousand years ago our ancestors lived and worked and drew those extraordinary images which have come down to us – some of them at least – in virtually pristine condition.

And yes, we found the beginning of the precipitous rocky trail which Laurens van der Post famously climbed to leave a propitiating message for the ancestral spirit whom he believed he had inadvertently offended.

But no, I didn't actually follow in van der Post's footsteps all the way up the mountains to inspect the actual crack in the rocks where, apparently, he posted his message. On trips like this one, time is always pressing. There are planes to be caught, etc.

"Next time, I'll climb all the way to the top," I said to Nine. "That's a promise I mean to keep." ■

## Further information

Produced with support from Desert & Delta Safaris. Stanley Johnson travelled as a guest of the company and received complimentary accommodation, guiding, internal flights, and transfers. To find out more about its camps and operations, visit **desertdelta.com**



Nxamaseri Island Lodge