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Walking With Elephants

**On safari in southern Africa
with Ker & Downey**

by Anne Z. Cooke
09/19/2005



Kathy plodded leisurely across the Okavango Delta's tall grass, her flexible toes, hidden in trunk-like legs, cushioned each step.

In front sat Billy, our mahout (elephant driver), who straddled the African elephant's neck, tugged on her

ear and urged her forward in a firm, low voice: "Kathy move, Kathy move."

I sat behind Billy on a padded saddle and marveled at her stiff, velvety skin and the careful way she stepped over fallen trees. Now and then she arched her trunk back to find my hand, gently feeling for one of the bits of kibble that Billy doles out during these rides.

The rest of our group, five visitors from the U.S., rode similar elephants — all rescued from zoos and circuses, brought to Botswana and retrained.

The Elephant Back Safari at Abu Camp is one of the many unique safaris offered to clients in Botswana and its close neighbor South Africa. Whether clients want to travel by elephant or cruise in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, wildlife encounters are as up close and personal as safety allows.

"Most of the animals — kudu, lions, even leopards — are used to seeing vehicles drive by, stop for a few minutes and then leave," said Paul Swart, vice president at Ker & Downey, the safari-travel company that planned and booked our 10-day trip. "They've learned there's nothing to be afraid of. As long as you don't get out of the car, they ignore you."

And I must admit, being ignored while driving by wild giraffes, lions and leopards is one of Africa's great wonders.

Southern Africa is home to variety of lodges, and most offer game drives that follow a similar routine. Clients wake early, grab breakfast before a 6 a.m. game drive to get up close to Africa's wildlife when the animals are most active.

At around 10 a.m., clients return to camp for lunch. Afternoon game drives start at around 4 p.m. and last about four hours, after which dinner is served back at camp. During the drives, travelers are guaranteed to see all kinds of animals with the help of guides who read pad-prints like road signs.

While the game drive itineraries are fairly standard among camps, the differences in lodge amenities can be drastic. Some camps are government-owned and offer the basics, while other privately owned camps offer clients luxe settings.

As a rule of thumb: In Botswana's game parks, clients typically stay in tents outfitted with twin or double beds, electric lights and a private bathroom with shower, while South Africa's game lodges usually offer clients comfortably furnished cottages or bungalows.

We enlisted Ker & Downey to plan our southern African safaris. The Houston-based company operates four game lodges in Botswana and also books safaris at all lodges in Namibia and Kenya. All reservationists are South African or have visited the properties they sell.

We first flew into Johannesburg, South Africa, and then headed to Singita, a game-viewing resort on a private wildlife reserve next to Kruger National Park. The luxury resort is perched above a river with a long outdoor pool overlooking a popular elephant watering hole.

Next, we flew to Royal Malewane — a colonial-style lodge outfitted with English antiques, oriental rugs and four-poster beds. Both lodges conduct safari drives on private tracts of wilderness with ample populations of lions, leopards and rhinos.

After flying into northern Botswana, we were greeted by giraffes and baboons grazing beside the runway. When we reached Kanana Camp, we had just enough time for lunch and a nap before leaving for a mokoro (canoe) trip deep in the heart of the Delta.

This camp, like most lodges in the Okavango Delta, is a temporary structure designed to protect the environment. The main lodge is a tent bolted to a multi-level deck with a large dining area and lounge. In the evenings, electricity provides lighting.

The bungalows, usually eight per camp, are also tents pitched on raised decks with shade flies and porch furniture. Mosquito netting covers the windows and heavy-duty zippers close the doors. All have private bathrooms.

But the lodge at Shinde Camp, also in Okavango, was my favorite, with its treehouse-like terraced decks.

It seems no matter where clients stay while on safari, nights end with the sounds of a chorus of frogs and roars of distant lions. This, too, is a wonder of Africa.

DETAILS

Ker & Downey's rates are fully inclusive, including alcoholic beverages and daily laundry service.

Commission: 10-11 percent, depending on trip

800-423-4236

www.kerdowney.com

Abu Camp requires a three-night minimum stay at \$5,100 per person, sharing.

www.abucamp.com

In high season, Kanana and Shinde camps range from \$395-\$550 per person, per night, double.

Singita's 15 bungalows start at about \$1,000 per night, double.

Royal Malewane starts at about \$850 per night, double.

www.royalmalewane.com

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