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OF THE MONTH**

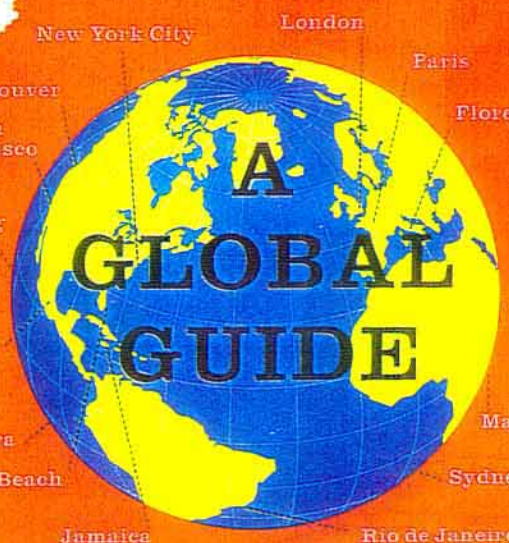
**Condé Nast**

# Traveler

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

MAY 2000

# HOT LIST 2000



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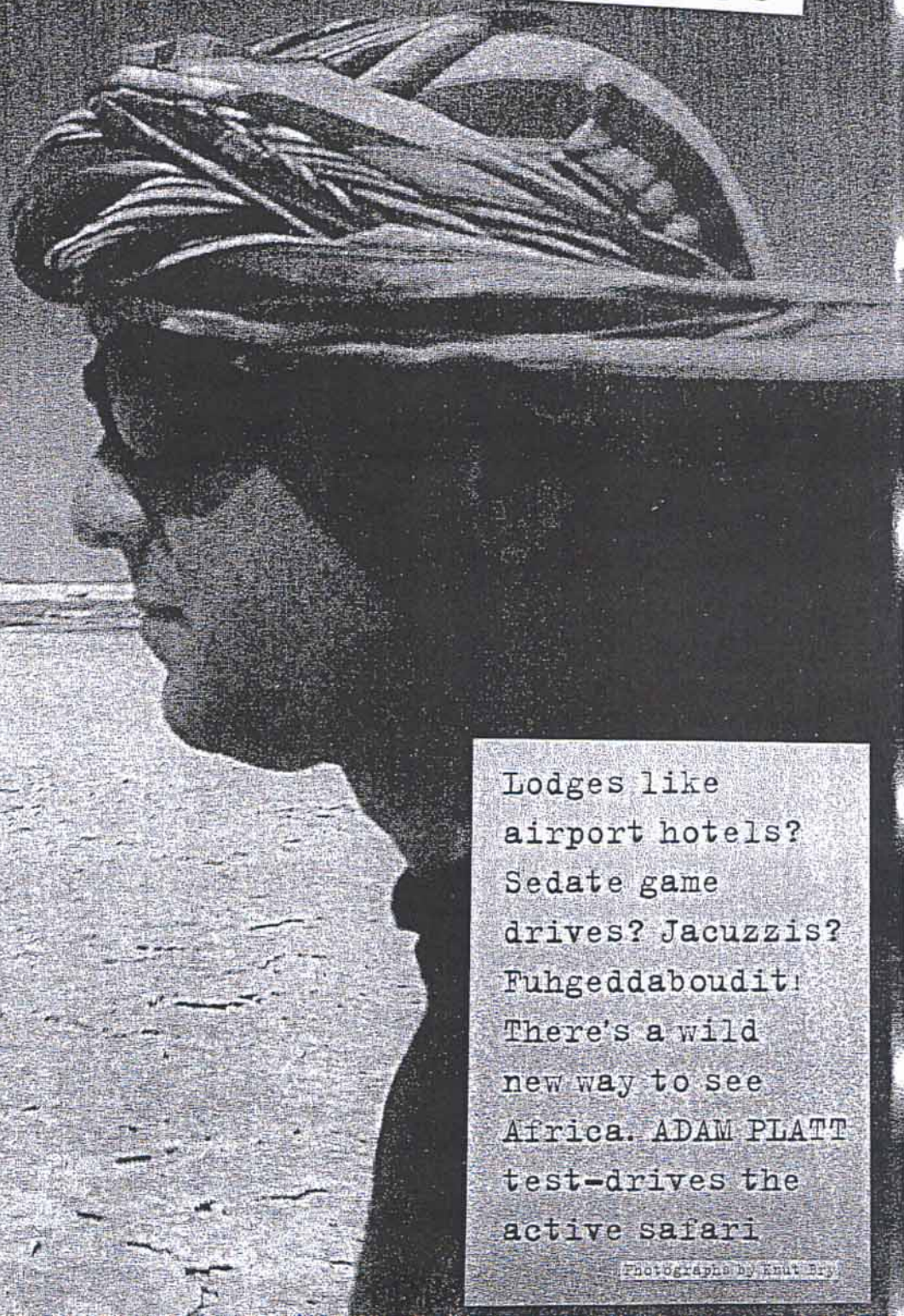
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Adventure

# Africa

## Unleashed



Lodges like airport hotels? Sedate game drives? Jacuzzis? Fuhgeddaboudit! There's a wild new way to see Africa. ADAM PLATT test-drives the active safari

Photographs by Knut Bry



# A

ARDVARK TASTES PORKY," RALPH Bousfield declared, not quite licking his lips. The object of our culinary attention snuffled in the desert darkness, ten yards away, rooting for termites and colonies of Matabele ants. According to Bousfield, the San Bushmen prepare aardvark feasts by removing the animal's stomach, sealing the carcass, and then burying it under a great fire to bake for hours. Ralph had grown up trapping wildlife in Botswana with his father, so he carried in his head troves of quirky information, which he unspooled for clients and guests like some madcap rendition of a David Attenborough nature documentary. He knew, for instance, that in the Kalahari Desert, the gizzards of the great southern ostrich are sometimes filled with diamonds (they digest rocks), and that the best way to catch a baby ostrich is to throw a pie tin just above its head (the bird thinks the shadow is an eagle and freezes). On his Bushman walkabouts he'd sampled aardvark and porcupine too. Porcupine is "lamby," and a delicacy called a jewel beetle tastes like soft-shell crab. Flamingo eggs are "shrimpy," with magnificent yolks the color of the setting sun.

Bousfield stands six feet two inches tall, with a leonine mane of hair, and he stalks the earth with giant, enthusiastic steps. He'd turned his father's remote desert camp in northeastern

euphoria in newly arrived Europeans, particularly women. Maybe that explains my giddy reaction to Ralph's offer of a termite snack before dinner. We'd finished observing our aardvark and were driving back to camp when Ralph cried, "Great, termites!" and lurched his Toyota Land Cruiser to a halt. Pound for pound, I'd already been told, harvester termites contain as much protein as rump steak. Bushmen fry them by the bushel and eat them like popcorn. I followed Ralph onto the road, and we began rooting around in the dirt. The termites wriggled and gleamed as Ralph held them up to the Toyota headlights. "Our ancestors lived off these," he exclaimed, gnashing one between his teeth. I looked into his giant alpha-dog smile, then up at the glittering African sky. Without a murmur of protest, I ate my termite too.

THIS WAS DAY SIX OF A HECTIC, THIRTEEN-DAY bushwhack through the remote wonders of the Republic of Botswana in southern Africa. Already, I'd engaged in an impala dung-spitting contest with another excitable bush guide ("Ruminant dung is unbelievably clean," he'd cried). I'd endured armed walkabouts in lion country and slept in tree houses above floodplains populated with elephants and hippos. Ralph planned to whisk me off on a three-day expedition over the blistering salt pans, riding all-terrain four-wheel

motorbikes, wrapped up like bedouins. Together with an intrepid cowboy couple from Steamboat Springs, Colorado, we'd camp on an ancient granite island covered in baobab trees, then journey to the southernmost tip of the Great Rift Valley itself. After that, we'd hop a bush plane back north, to a horseback safari camp in the Okavango Delta where a proper Englishwoman named Sarah-Jane Gullick leads helter-skelter



Face to face: In the Okavango Delta's Eden Camp, walkabouts are de rigueur. "You can still get scared," says an aficionado.

"A buffalo came at us yesterday," a guest purred to

Botswana into a kind of outback oasis. Guests fly in by bush plane, sleep in canvas safari tents, and explore the vast Makgadikgadi Salt Pans, an ethereal landscape twice the size of Delaware but without a single living soul. Standing under the clattering palm trees, on the edge of such nothingness, city folk sometimes come unhinged. A cosmopolitan woman from one of the Paris fashion magazines was so spooked by the Kalahari moonscapes that she had to be airlifted out. Ralph said such cases of agoraphobia are rare, although he'd had people strip off their clothes in the desert and run crazy circles in the sand.

Africa has that effect on visitors, of course. Exposed for the first time to the continent's limitless, primal spaces, pink-bellied tourists were known to dissolve into tears or let out great war whoops. Old East Africa hands thought the pristine quality of the air in the mountain highlands produced states of

cavalry charges among herds of zebras and giraffes.

We were riding the wave of the latest high-end safari travel craze, something savvy tour operators are calling "Active Africa." Post-post-Hemingway, there is a feeling among aficionados that the standard safari experience has become a toothless caricature of its former self, with lodges in Kenya resembling airport hotels and many in South Africa even sporting Jacuzzis. Elderly clientele travel from Kruger National Park in South Africa to Kenya's Ngorongoro Crater, ticking the big game parks off on their itineraries like so many golf courses in Scotland. "Kmart Safaris," as Cheri Briggs, the inveterate Africa traveler who had concocted our madcap tour, describes them. Now Briggs, and operators like Abercrombie & Kent, are tailoring trips to a younger, more gonzo crowd. Briggs had made her name packing museum officials off to wild destina-



## Mapping pictures like astronauts on the moon

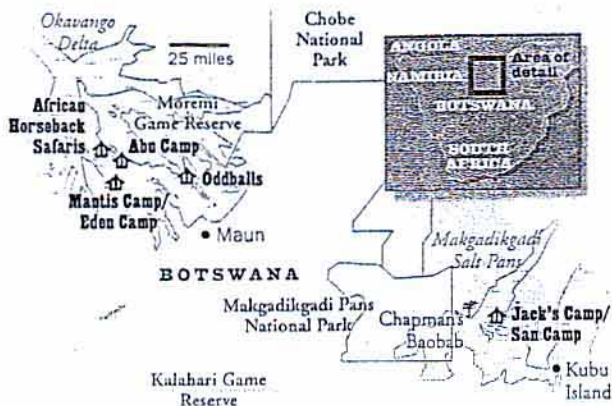
tions like Ethiopia and Borneo. Her Colorado-based company, Explore, can arrange a sojourn among the Himba tribesmen of Namibia, if you wish, or secure you a horse for a weeklong cattle drive through the Kalahari. "And Botswana's the greatest," she told me in her husky, surfer-girl voice. "It's one African country where you can still feel the edge."

Briggs had recruited Don and Barb Silva as my partners on this rough-and-tumble trip. In his younger days, Don bulldogged cattle, served as a hunting guide in Alaska, and, with his hard hat on, hung off Hoover Dam as a model for Winston cigarettes. He called me Frasier, after the neurotic TV character, and was amused to see that I'd packed all-blue

clothes for my journey, blue being the one color known to attract tsetse flies. Don and Barb, on the other hand, were decked out in the latest haute couture safari styles. They wore slouchy Stetson hats and mud-colored outfits discreetly cut with jaunty epaulets and high-tech wind vents. When I asked Don if he'd traveled anywhere else in Africa, he gave me a craggy look. "Kenya's history is behind it," he said. "We kind of look at Botswana as the last stronghold. We compare it to Wyoming in the States."

South Africans, in particular, regard Botswana as a kind of frontier Valhalla. "In Botswana you can still get lost," one stout Johannesburg burgher told me. "You can still get scared a little." Slightly more than a million people live in Botswana, compared with thirty million in Kenya, although the countries are roughly the same geographical size. Safari vehicles are so thick on the ground in the Kenyan game parks that cheetahs sometimes use them as hunting blinds. But great white hunters still operate in Botswana (Kenya outlawed big game hunting in 1974), along with native tribesmen who practice trance travel and kill giraffes with poison-tipped spears. The diamond-rich government employs army troops to protect local wildlife against poaching, and seasonal floods make even such well-known tourist destinations as the Okavango Delta and the Kalahari Salt Pans impassable for months of the year.

A single tar road leads into the frontier tourist town of Maun, on the southeastern fringes of the Okavango. Prior to 1991, there was no road at all, and visitors either flew in or fought their way over a rutted two-wheel track hundreds of miles long. The Okavango Delta is an evanescent marshland chock with animals of every (*Text continues on page 296*)



Map by Joyce Fendola

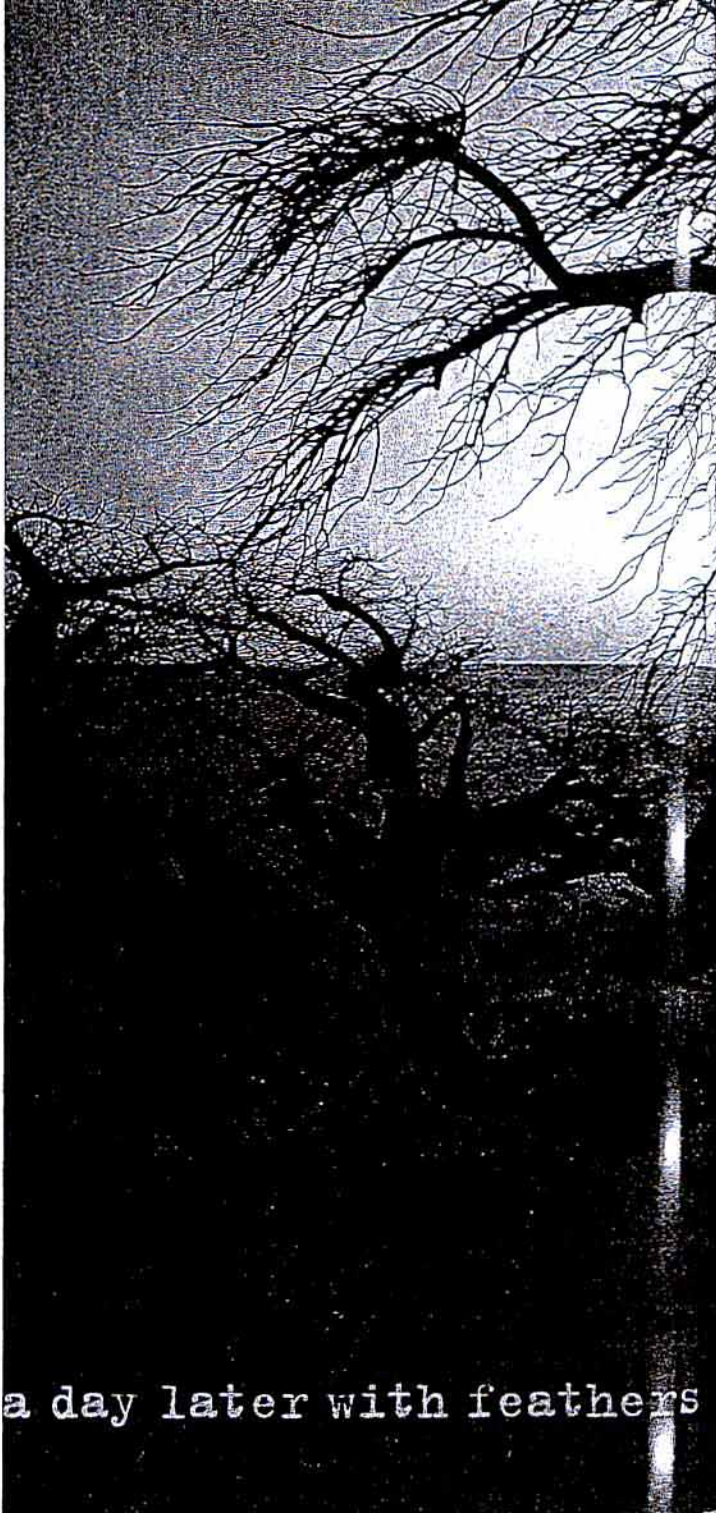
kind. Each year herds of game follow its floodwaters, which travel from the mountains of Angola into the Kavanga River and the northwestern corner of Botswana. Roads into the delta are seasonal and arduous, so most travelers catch rides into the bush on a network of prop planes. The airstrips are made of sodium and crushed cement, and the pilots sometimes buzz them before landing to clear the wildlife away.

Flying north into the delta from Maun, the Kalahari wastelands turn emerald green. Hippo channels run between plains of papyrus, and from the air you can see herds of elephants cutting silvery wakes through the water. Our first bit of local advice came from a delta guide who'd hitched a ride with us into the interior. He had shaggy hair and rhino-thick soles on his bare feet, and when he saw us milling around on the runway in our newly pressed jungle clothes, he said, "Good luck to you—try not to end up on the wires." The "news wires" are a euphemism for disaster in the bush, where ghoulish stories travel fast. Earlier in the month, according to wire reports, a staff member at one of the reputable Okavango camps had wandered too far into the bush in the middle of the night and had had his neck snapped by a lion. The same month, in Zimbabwe, a young Englishman, a graduate of Harrow, left his tent unzipped on a hot evening and found a li-

#### PLACES & PRICES

Southern Africans view Botswana as the last stronghold of primal Africa—"where you can still feel the edge." For outfitters, lodges, and tips, see "Botswana's Beat," page 348.

## We came out of the desert a day later with feathers

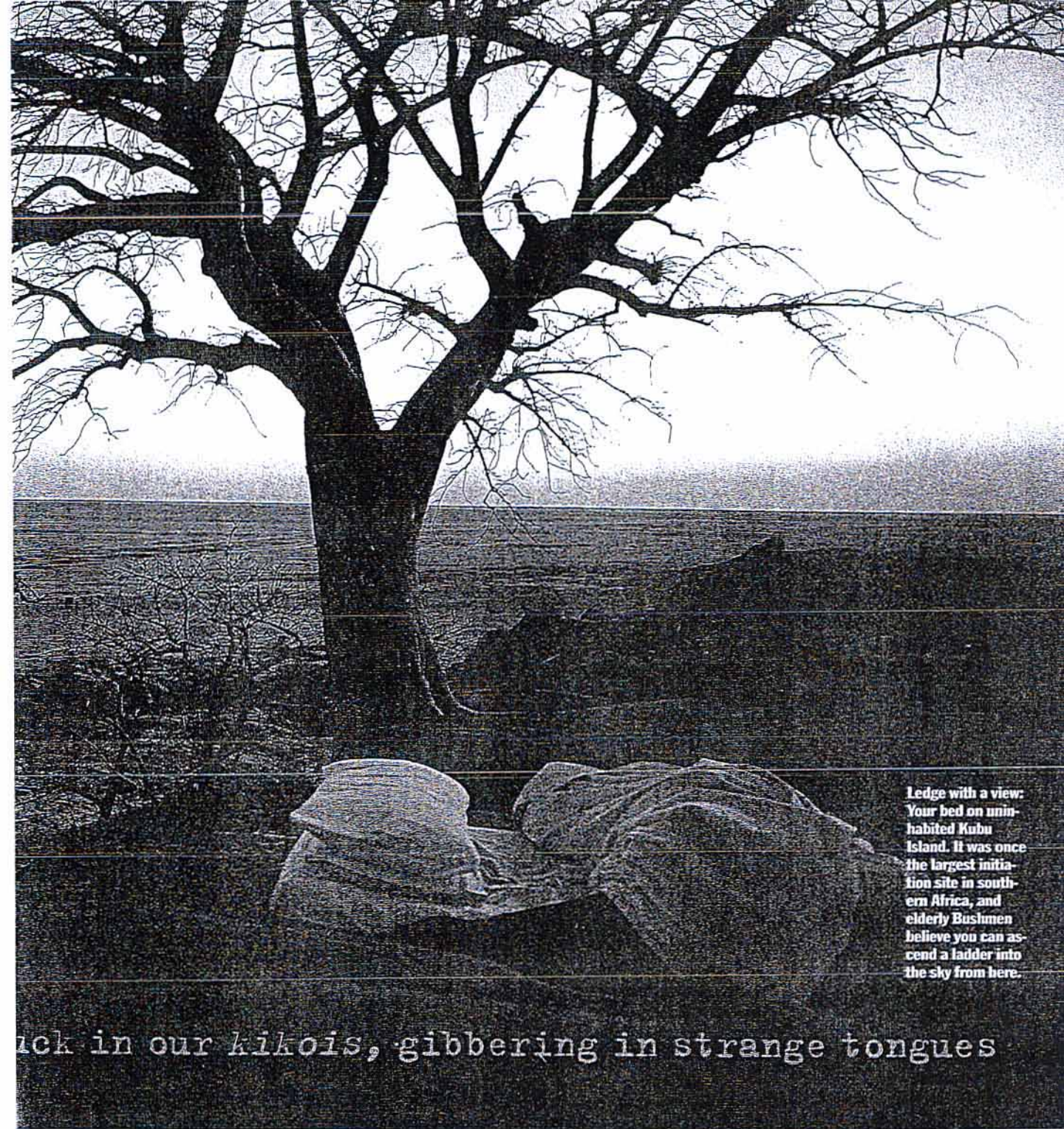


oness peering at him in his bed. When this happens, you're supposed to roar, counterintuitively, or throw something at the animal's head. But the Englishman panicked and ran from his tent, straight into a pride of twelve lions, which mauled him to death.

"Use panic as the last resort," advised Jeff Gush, our walking-trails guide at Mantis and Eden camps. Mantis and Eden are separate islands in the Xudum concession, in the southwestern section of the delta. The delta's Moremi Game Reserve is its largest piece of public land, with the rest of the Okavango divided into private concessions leased to safari operators. Xudum alone covers half a million acres, which I reckoned left each of us a hundred or so personal miles of untouched delta wilderness to explore. Guests in both camps sleep in tree houses overlooking papyrus lagoons. A local cook provides hearty colonial meals, accompanied by imperishable jars of Marmite

and HP steak sauce. Toilets are dug at strategically beautiful spots around camp, although Jeff assured us that each tree house comes outfitted with a metal chamber pot, so that fearful guests won't have to go stumbling off into the bush darkness, like the unfortunate Harrovian.

My own bedroom, that first evening at Mantis Camp, stood next to a termite mound, under the spreading shade of a jackal berry tree. Propped on my pillow, I could observe flocks of green-bellied parrots and an elephant across the floodplain, rummaging among a grove of acacia trees. I was content to watch this wildlife diorama unfold for hours, but Gush, a former South African army platoon sergeant, had the internal motor of a Matabele ant. He took us careening out in his Land



**Ledge with a view:** Your bed on uninhabited Kubu Island. It was once the largest initiation site in southern Africa, and elderly Bushmen believe you can ascend a ladder into the sky from here.

## ack in our kikois, gibbering in strange tongues

Druiser to look for game before sunset, then woke us at sunrise the next day for a morning walkabout. In game reserves, guides aren't allowed to carry guns, but this was private land, so Gush packed a bolt-action .458 Winchester Magnum rifle, with soft-nosed bullets as long as my thumb. "If you see a potentially dangerous character, don't run," he said brightly. "Call me and we'll try to sort it out."

Gush had never fired his gun as a guide, but he'd been charged plenty of times. The year before, a bull hippo had tried to chase down his Land Cruiser, loaded with a passel of squealing ladies from Aspen. He'd been charged by a male lion as he sat by the campfire with a group of Italian clients in a bush camp in Savuti. The lion made no sound as it charged, which meant it was going

for the kill, and being in a game park, Gush had no gun. He made a clamorous noise and threw sand in the air, but the Italians all bolted, the men trampling their wives to find cover. A similar dynamic occurred when a group he was leading got stampeded by a breeding herd of thirty elephants. "There were too many to stop, so we just ran. With elephants, it's not advisable to climb trees, so those guys were really sprinting. They pulled their wives and girlfriends behind them to get out of the way."

Gush related these hairy tales as we trekked gingerly down ancient game trails, among plumes of buffalo grass. I kept to the middle of the pack, getting dive-bombed by tsetse flies in my odd blue clothing. When we came upon a lone elephant flapping its ears, I crouched, karate style. (Continued on page 361)

(Continued from page 297) among the thornbushes and scanned the terrain for ways of escape. "Ah, he's a funny old gentleman," said Gush. "Let's give him some space." Deep in the bush, that's generally all the animals need. Lions hunt after dark and tend to avoid humans altogether. Hippos can be dangerous if you stumble on them at night or invade their water holes, and elephants mostly charge to protect their young. As we walked, my panic was replaced by a tingly, champagne sense of awareness. "Our ancestors were hunted in country like this," Gush merrily explained. "Your subconscious is telling you you could die here."

**T**HAT AFTERNOON WE BOARDED the famous local dugout canoes, called *mokoros*, and poled among the hippo channels to Eden Camp. The Okavango is not a stagnant swamp. Currents flow among the islands, making the water crystal clear. We saw bluebottle dragonflies on our jungle cruise and small herds of antelope splashing over the floodplain. The camp staff on Eden Island greeted us with singing, and the camp itself was suffused with the sound of honeybees. Driving in the Land Cruiser that evening, we found a pride of lions not far from camp, near a place called Paradise Plain. There were eight of them, lounging in a thicket of trees. They were barely visible and made no sound, although when we turned the engine off, we could hear the slow flicking of their tails in the underbrush. "As it gets dark, they'll start to move," said Jeff. When the sun fell below the treetops, the lions stretched and began their hunt. We drove after them, shining a handheld spotlight, and in the darkness, their yellow eyes had the hard glitter of diamonds.

I utilized my tree house chamber pot that night, and the next night too. "Lions could climb up here in a split second," said Don Silva, unlimbering a bullwhip he'd brought along to deliver to his son, who was a wrangler at African Horse Safaris Camp, which we would later visit. But the lions never visited Eden Island, and the next time we saw them, they'd devoured a large kudu and were sprawled like drunken squires under the shade of a fig tree. We observed a promenade of nineteen elephants later on, and pairs of giraffes nibbling at acacia leaves like inbred French aristocrats. When wildlife became scarce, Jeff pointed out their tracks in the powdery sand. Hyenas walked with dainty ballerina steps, and giraffe hooves made wings, like flights of giant butterflies. Gush described how the great Bushman hunters could interpret en-

tire dramatic scenarios just by looking at the ground. After that, we crept through the underbrush, puzzling over telltale lion droppings and bent wisps of grass.

**I**N OLDEN, COLONIAL AFRICA, SAFARIS unfolded over a leisurely succession of months. When the Duke and Duchess of Connaught visited Kenya in 1910, their staff planted vegetable gardens around the great canvas tents and prepared such elaborate dishes as eland soup and giraffe bone marrow on toast. But by day four of our active itinerary, the experiences were accruing at warp speed. We clambered up a baobab tree at sunset, debriefed a group of lion experts in their tent, got lost in the Land Cruiser searching for leopards after dark. "Prepare yourself for a big change," said Jeff, after we returned from a cocktail séance with a raft of hippos on our last evening in the delta. We flew south into the Kalahari the next afternoon, over brushfires billowing clouds of orange smoke. Ralph Bousfield was on the plane, and when we landed, he gave us bottles of water mixed with Rose's lime juice to drink. "Ah, then," he exclaimed, as I stood blinking in the harsh desert sun, "just in time for tea!"

Tea appeared to be an immutable tradition in the Bousfield corner of the Kalahari, along with showers every afternoon. Ralph's frontier roots went back five generations on both sides of his family. As a hunter in Tanzania, his father, Jack, killed more crocodiles than anyone else on earth (53,000 according to an old copy of the *Guinness Book of World Records*), and his great-grandfather on his mother's side fought in eighteen wars. Jack Bousfield first camped on the edge of the Makgadikgadi Pans in the sixties, when his business was trapping wild animals for export to zoos around the world. In his later years, he took up permanent residence there, dressed in desert costume, smoking a curved meerschau pipe. Ralph was his father's youngest son, and together they followed the vast animal migrations through the Kalahari, lassoing zebras, catching flamingos in nets. Jack was a stickler for regular showers in the bush after a cousin neglected to wash and had his face bitten off by a curious hyena attracted to the ripe smell. "He'd always say before dinner, 'Have you taken your shower yet, Ralph? Remember what happened to cousin Louie!'"

Jack Bousfield died in 1991 in a desert plane crash (his seventh), which Ralph survived. His original camp in the Makgadikgadi Pans is still called Jack's Camp, and in 1994 Ralph and his girlfriend opened the

more opulent San Camp, named for the San Bushmen of the Kalahari, nearby. We stayed at San, a series of white canvas tents strung along under fan palm trees like gazebos on a beach.

**T**HE MAKGADIKGADI PANS ARE the largest ephemeral water system on earth, meaning they flood every year with the summer rains, then dry out again in winter (since Botswana is below the equator, its seasons are the opposite of ours). During the summer months, temperatures can reach 120 degrees, and in winter, the land turns to flat alkaline crust as far as the eye can see. The pans once formed the bottom of a giant superlake that covered all of Botswana, and they still evoke a nautical sensation. Crossing one of them during the 1860s, the missionary explorer David Livingstone described an immense void "on which the latitude could be taken, as [if] at sea."

Bousfield packs up both camps for four months every year, so the impression you get upon arrival is of taking part in an old-world safari of long ago. The tents are constructed in the old imperial style, on teak platforms with drop toilets in back, next to a canvas-bucket shower hung from a pole. The mess tent is the size of a small ballroom and contains Persian throw rugs and Isak Dinesen-style family heirlooms made of Sheffield silver. Dinner on our first night was impala steak, served by lamplight on a damask tablecloth.

I sat next to the daughter of a noted ornithologist from Zambia, who asked if I'd ever eaten kudu before. Ralph discussed how the Bousfields went ostrich hunting on Boxing Day, and the time his Land Cruiser became mired, during the rainy season, in a colony of toads. Walking home under the vast carpet of stars, the tents appeared lit from within like Chinese lanterns. Inside, the beds had been turned down, and buried in my sheets was a hot water bottle with its own cotton cover.

The next morning, Don Silva presented me with a safari shirt, which I proudly wore as we went on desert wildlife tours and visited Chapman's Baobab, one of the oldest trees in Africa. The baobab stands alone on the northern edge of the pans like a great, unrigged sailing ship. Our guides reckoned its age at between three thousand and five thousand years, which might make it older than the Pyramids at Giza. The tree is visible from miles out in the pans and has been used by travelers as a navigational aid for centuries. The trunk is riddled with carvings from Arabic slavers and other explorers, and it is so wide around that David Livingstone's party measured its circumference

in fathoms. Children from a nearby village were playing around it when I arrived, and when they clambered up into the boughs, I followed. The bark was furrowed with lines and pinkish, like the inside, I later imagined, of an ancient elephant's ear. Ralph delivered one of his Attenborough monologues, and then we stood around under the spreading branches and listened to the weird seashell sound of the wind coming off the desert, before driving back to camp for showers and lunch. Don and I went on our aardvark hunt with Ralph that evening, and ate our termite snack after another cocktail séance with three rare brown hyenas.

**FELL ASLEEP THAT EVENING TO** the gentle clattering of palm fronds, and in the morning we set off on a three-day expedition into the pans themselves. "Life out here is lived on a knife edge," Ralph declared. "If you mess up, you die." We rode in a caravan aboard four-wheel, all-terrain motorbikes, with brightly colored Tanzanian robes, called *kikois*, wrapped around our heads. On the edge of the dry lake bed were Pleistocene middens filled with fossilized hippo molars and 150,000-year-old stone-cutting tools. As Ralph described these wonders, the tourists kept hopping off on little tangents, snapping pictures of each other like astronauts on the moon. Standing under the immaculate dome of sky, we were giddy and a little unsettled with the sense of limitless space. Small sounds, like the rustle of clothing or the scratch of a pen, became acute. Dust devils shimmered across the horizon, but otherwise the landscape was a perfect blank, like a vision of timelessness itself.

Driving through this white world, dust filtered up my nostrils, and my cheeks judgered around like spinnakers in the wind. Ralph stopped our convoy at high noon and served an incongruous lunch of vegetable quiche and salad from silver tiffin tins. He reckoned you could survive for two days on the pans without water by sitting in one place, but if you staggered around, you'd be in a coma within twelve hours. After that, I hunkered by my bike to conserve energy, swilling watered lime juice and cans of Schweppes lemonade. Our destination was Kubu Island, a pinkish extrusion of granite on the southern tip of the ancient lake bed, covered in baobab trees. It took five hours of *Mad Max*-style riding to get there, and when we arrived, at sunset, I felt like we'd journeyed to a magic kingdom on the far side of the moon.

Kubu had been inhabited centuries before, when the climate was more temperate. Because of its remoteness, the island had

never been properly excavated, so you could still find shards of pottery on the ground and slavers beads, traded from as far away as Venice. We washed that evening under a shower hung from a baobab, and after dinner our beds were laid out beneath the stars, with their hot water bottles freshly stoked. I slept on an outcropping of rock high above the desert floor, and dreamed that my wife threw a box of fragrant roses in my face. Others conjured up visions of lizards and weird geometric shapes. It turned out that Kubu was the largest known initiation site in southern Africa. Tribes of the Greater Zimbabwe Empire, not more than three hundred years ago, came from miles around to perform circumcision rites on the island's southern end, where an old stone wall still stands. Elderly Bushmen still visit a cave near the chief's chamber, from which, they believe, it is possible to ascend a ladder into the sky.

The next day we gathered empty flamingo eggs out on the pans (the birds breed there in the thousands during the wet season), then rode to the end of the Great Rift Valley, trailing huge rooster tails of dust. We came out of the desert a day later with bird feathers stuck in our *kikois*, gibbering in strange tongues. Don Silva had taken to reciting Homeric cowboy poems around the evening campfire. Ralph gave me a copper bracelet from the Tuareg people of northern Africa, which I wore with dreamy, adolescent devotion.

Back in San Camp, we honed our desert skills with a Bushman tracker named Dabe Indolo. Dabe was twenty-three years old and had learned to speak English at a missionary school in southern Botswana. He dressed in safari fatigues but carried a spear, which he used mostly as a walking stick. Dabe pointed out lark droppings in the sand and praying mantis nests, which looked like puffs of silver. When I told Dabe about eating termites, he gave a happy smile. "They taste like butter," he said, "but I like all kinds of Western food. I like a good diet!"

Dabe and his ancestors are the oldest surviving indigenous people in Africa, having lived off the land, according to some estimates, for eighty thousand years. Many consider *Bushman* to be a misnomer, since the term covers a multitude of clicking languages and clans (anthropologists, however, have recently begun using *Bushman* again, instead of San). In Botswana, most of the tribesmen have been assimilated into newer cultures, although a small number still practice the ancient techniques of living. They refer to themselves as the Real People and feel that

the world went out of whack when man placed himself above the animals. They describe three spiritual levels of enlightenment, the last of which involves floating, out of body, over the surface of the earth. Dabe couldn't elaborate on this ultimate psychic state, although when I mentioned that we were flying away that morning, he smiled again. "I like to fly in airplanes," he said. "Walking or driving is too slow."

**WE BOARDED A SINGLE-ENGINE** Cessna a few hours later and flew north, toward the Okavango, in a bucking headwind. Before leaving, I'd asked Ralph if he'd ever ridden a horse in the bush. "Not a hope," he'd cried, "I'm not mad!" The Silvas, on the other hand, wore the happy look of theatergoers before a Broadway show. They'd visited Sarah-Jane Gullick's African Horse Safaris Camp the year before, when it was in a different location. Except for a hippo rearing up into their path, they described the trip as positively soothing. Sarah-Jane kept a string of twenty-seven horses, whose temperatures were taken twice daily to monitor for sleeping sickness. They grazed behind a moveable electric fence and slept in a lionproof barn covered in corrugated iron. Riding at the camp was a mixture of game watching and pell-mell foxhunting pursuits. "Keep yer weight in the middle," said Don, in his Clint Eastwood whisper. "Don't look down. On horseback, where you look is where you fall."

This advice flashed through my brain a day or so later, as I jounced across the swamp plains aboard a horse named Rocky. "If your horse gets a fright, cling like a monkey," Sarah-Jane had told me the previous evening, in her fluting, Mary Poppins voice. Her safari camp was farther north into the Okavango than the other camps had been, and deeper into the bush. She and her husband, a professional hunter named Peter Holebrow, had constructed it the previous winter along the banks of a place called Island 99. The couple had met when Sarah-Jane hired Peter to help protect her horses on a three-week drive overland into the bush. At the end of the trek, the horses escaped and had to be rounded up on the fringes of the delta. Several had since died from sleeping sickness, and one or two still wore souvenir claw marks on their flanks from encounters with lions in the bush.

Rocky had no lion scars on his flanks and had been chosen, I was assured, for his stolid nature. "The elephants are quite active," piped Sarah-Jane. "We had two mock charges yesterday, which is rare, but that's the way it is in the bush." Guests of African



## BOTSWANA

Horse Safaris normally fill out a lengthy riding questionnaire, but mine had somehow been misplaced. Sarah-Jane asked how much I weighed, and when I told her, she gave a little frown and said that I was way over the limit. Many of the other guests were svelte Euro-diplomats and elegant flight attendants who'd grown up crashing about the English countryside on horseback. They wore scuffed hip boots and lounged about in the evenings with glasses of port, discussing their most recent brushes with death. "A bull buffalo came at us yesterday," one of them purred to me over dinner our first night in camp. "Mmmm, what an adrenaline rush."

**M**Y OWN ADRENALINE RUSH WAS more or less permanent those first few days in the saddle. Sarah-Jane was leery of my riding skills, so she took me and the Silvas out alone while the rest of the guests went careening off with a wild-eyed guide named John. "Zebras are quite hectic to run with," said Sarah-Jane, "and wildebeests are downright dangerous because they circle around the horses." Her favorite animals to observe on horseback were giraffes, which move at a more majestic pace. "You can watch them," she said. "They unfold before you." Sarah-Jane had grown up riding horses among the tidy hedgerows of Hampshire, England. She dressed in jodhpurs and Australian mud boots, and appeared to be covered in a perpetual layer of dust, like a tomboy character in some children's cartoon. "People think if you're riding in the bush you'll get eaten," she sniffed, as we jogged along. "It doesn't happen. We're still here."

We saw no lions around Island 99 (on a recent trip, they'd spotted fifty-two), but on one ride, I counted forty zebras in one spot and thirty impalas moving in perfect unison, like a school of tropical fish. Forging among the islands, we passed through scented clouds of acacia blossom and pools of bottle-green water, deep enough for swimming. We tracked a pair of mating cheetahs for a time, and when one horse broke into a canter, the others followed, sending silver showers of water into the air. Most of the hard riding in the delta was done along the floodplains, since the islands are pocked with rocks and animal burrows. The most recent injury had been a broken collarbone, when one rider's horse stepped in an aardvark hole. But usually the guests tumbled off into shallow water. The sensation was almost pleasing, one of the guides assured me, like tripping from a pair of water skis into a vast country lake.

Each evening in camp, we dined ban-

quet style at a table set for sixteen, on English country meals such as pear tart and baked chicken with bread sauce. Riders exclaimed over the day's horsey exploits, and once, when the port came out, some of them even began displaying their private tattoos. Later on, we'd observe a raucous English divorcée consume several bottles of wine, then share her tent with a shift-eyed stranger she'd met over dinner. My own tent mate, a cultivated UN official from Pretoria, had seen this Francis Macomber dynamic before. "On this continent, we are addicted to the forbidden fruits," he said, before dropping off to sleep and snoring like a baboon. That night, a hot wind blew off the Namib Desert, knocking down a tree and sending the bush into commotion. I tossed and turned in my sheets and awoke before dawn to the weird, guttural sound of lions calling in the distance.

**H**ELTER-SKELTER JOURNEYS TEND to speed up as they go along, but by day twelve of my active safari, the world was slowing down. With each ride, we moved deeper into the bush. We camped outside on our last night, and just before sunset we spotted a herd of nine giraffes. I rode out to meet them, but they drifted off whenever I closed in—the way clouds do, it occurred to me, when you're floating in a balloon. Our cots at the camp were set up on a small ridge, under white mosquito nets hung from a jackal berry tree. We drank whiskey in the chilly evening air and ate a final campfire meal of oxtail stew. Lions occasionally come after the horses, so Sarah-Jane lets guests volunteer to stand watch late at night. I walked in diligent circles around the camp's perimeter from midnight until 2 A.M., sweeping the darkness with my flashlight beam. I saw nothing, in the end, and fell asleep in my cot, looking for satellites tumbling across the starry sky.

On my last day in Africa, such wonders accumulated as if on cue. We mingled with seventeen more giraffes, then followed a bull elephant on his stately morning rounds. Each time we approached, the elephant came toward us, causing the horses to skitter away. At the end of this cat and mouse game, we dismounted under the shade of another giant baobab tree. Over the years, elephants had trampled the brush around the trunk into a huge, smooth circle, so it was possible to turn 360 degrees and observe wildlife in almost every direction. Impalas, wildebeests, and herds of zebras grazed in the foreground. Farther off, we could see more giraffes in the forest shadows, and great marabou

storks turning wide arcs in the sky. We watched this last, grand curtain call eating apples from our saddle packs, then turned back toward home. We were too tired to canter, so we rode down the old elephant trails for what seemed like hours, traveling for the first time on our active safari at the languorous, dreamy pace of the animals themselves. □