



Herds of zebra migrate through Nxai Pan and often stop for a drink



Quad biking across the pans

Despite what is said, the Kalahari isn't strictly a desert: it's a fossil desert, a vast sand-sheet, now largely covered in bushes, trees and grasses. Most of the Kalahari remains arid and untouched, as it has been for about 65 million years. Here you'll be struck by the feeling that you're light years away from modern life.

There are many special sights in the Kalahari, magical places where you can pick up tools last handled in the Stone Age; examine the world's first paintings; look around at the earth's curvature; and – occasionally – see vast herds following ancient migration routes. It's a fascinating place, but above all the Kalahari is a wilderness; that's what captivates us about it.

THE GREAT SALT PANS

In the middle of the northern Kalahari lies a complex of huge, flat salt pans. It's a harsh, spare landscape, not to everyone's taste, but it offers isolation as complete as anywhere in Southern Africa, and a wealth of hidden treasures. The pans play a vital role in the area's ecosystems, their geology and history are fascinating, and they're especially photogenic.

Makgadikgadi Pans

The great Makgadikgadi Pans cover about 10,000km² of the Kalahari in salt. Some are enormous; others are the size of a small duck-pond. Around these are rolling grasslands overlooked by the occasional picturesque palm-tree islands. It's an eerie and intriguing environment.

Around January to March, if the rains have been good, these pans flood. Then grasses spring to life, and often flamingos arrive, together with a huge migration of zebra and wildebeest. Although very unpredictable, this is one of Africa's great wildlife spectacles. On opposite sides of the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park are two contrasting areas: the Central Pans and the Boteti River area.

Central Pans

Three sister-camps stand on palm islands outside the Makgadikgadi National Park; all offer similar activities although all are different in style. If you visit one, then try to stay for three nights.

Jack's Camp is beautifully constructed in a classical safari style, with lots of thoughtful touches. It has 10 spacious, walk-in tents, each with an en-suite bathroom including a flush toilet and private showers (indoor and

out). There is a plunge pool, a dining tent and a Persian-style 'tea tent' complete with a small 'museum'. **San Camp** opens only from mid-April to October. It has just six tents on decks, built in similar style in white canvas, including en-suite flush toilets and bucket showers.

Camp Kalahari is the most basic of the three, and the most affordable. It has a traditional thatched living/dining area with earth floors and six twin-bedded Meru tents, each with an open-air bathroom, hot/cold running water and a flush toilet.

Activities at all three camps are the same, aiming to impart an understanding of the area's geology, archaeology and anthropology, as well as its wildlife – but note that big game is often scarce here. Expect 4WD nature drives and walks (some guided by San/Bushmen trackers), night drives and quad-bike excursions (when the season permits), and visits to archaeological sites. Researchers based here have habituated brown hyena and meerkats to human observers, so relaxed sightings of both species are common.

Boteti River Area

The Boteti River forms the western boundary of Makgadikgadi Pans National Park. It ceased to flow in the early 1990s and reduced to a string of small waterholes. During the dry season, these attracted thousands of jostling zebra and wildebeest – together with elephants, giraffe, many predators and even the odd white rhino. The riverbed miraculously flooded again in November 2008, and the coming year promises to be a very exciting one for the animals.

Both of the camps here are set on cliffs of

sand, high above the arid riverbed – and in front of each is an amazing waterhole, often offering excellent game-viewing, even without leaving your camp.

Meno A Kwena Tented Camp is an old-style safari camp, run by a really engaging old Botswana hand, David Dugmore. The camp isn't palatial, though royalty have stayed here: it is very laid back. There are eight fairly simple tents, all new for 2009; each has a separate rondavel bathroom, with a flush toilet, and a private bucket shower that is completely outdoors.

Many visitors just relax here, staying in camp for much of their time: ideal for a restful start or end to a safari. Alternatively, activities include 4WD sorties (up to full-day drives with a picnic) and visits to the local community. Stay for longer, and you can opt to quad-bike across the salt pans and spend a night under the stars.

Further south, **Leroo La Tau** is a much more substantial, luxurious lodge, with 12 en-suite thatched chalets. All are very comfortable with glass fronts, large verandas and individual raised decks beside the river. Like the lodge's buildings, Leroo La Tau's activities are more structured, focusing on morning and evening game drives.



Meerkat on the lookout



Baines' Baobabs, on the edge of Kudiakam Pan, have been standing virtually unchanged for centuries

Nxai Pan

North of Makgadikgadi, Nxai Pan National Park is fascinating, though often under-rated because of the unpredictability of its game. During the dry season the grassy pans here host herds of springbok, giraffe and gemsbok, which swell between December and April as the rains turn the pans into a veritable salad bowl. You'll also find hartebeest, along with lion, cheetah and both brown and spotted hyena. Don't leave without seeing Kudiakam Pan and the famous Baines' Baobabs.

Nxai Pan is sometimes visited by mobile safaris (see page 68 for an example), but in February 2009 the park's first permanent camp should open here: **Nxai Pan Camp**. It will stand to the southwest of the park and promises seven luxury en-suite chalets. Ask us for the latest on this exciting development.

CENTRAL KALAHARI

The Central Kalahari Game Reserve (aka CKGR) covers over 50,000km² and is the ultimate in 'remote' destinations. Until the late 1980s this park was closed, although there have always been small groups of San (or Bushmen) living here.

The Central Kalahari is at its most enticing when travel here is most difficult: during and just after the rains, around January to May. Then the beautiful inter-dune valleys flush with green, attracting thousands of springbok and gemsbok. You'll also find ostrich and giraffe, herds of wildebeest, excellent cheetah and the Kalahari's famous black-maned lions. Leopard, cheetah, lion and brown hyena are common, though rarely seen.

The more obscure corners of this park are still best experienced on a mobile safari (see *Wild about Africa*, details on page 68). Meanwhile, two permanent camps, Tau Pan Camp and Kalahari Plains Camp, are planned for 2009; ask us for details.

Lodges outside the park

Outside the fences which bound the CKGR, several lodges offer a Kalahari experience – all generally conducting activities on their



White rhino at Edo's waterhole

own patches of the Kalahari, without visiting the main game reserve.

Deception Valley Lodge is a beautifully constructed, high-quality retreat with eight thatched bungalows. Each is large and very comfortable, with luxurious sofas, a lovely en-suite bathroom, an outside shower and heavy teak furniture. Activities here emphasise the area's flora as much as its fauna; they include fascinating walks with San/Bushman guides (from the Naro group) and 4WD day and night drives. Organised in advance, whole-day trips into the CKGR are possible for an extra cost; these are well worth it, especially towards the start of the year.

To the north of the reserve is the relatively new **Central Kalahari Game Lodge**, whilst to the west is **Grassland Bushman Lodge**. We've not yet visited these last two lodges ourselves – but ask us for the latest news.

Far from the main reserve, in the northwest Kalahari, **Edo's Camp** is a small tented camp on a game conservancy covering 1,200km². Unlike the other camps here, Edo's can be included into a fly-drive trip from Namibia.

Edo's takes up to eight guests in en-suite tents on wooden decks, overlooking a permanent floodlit waterhole – which can be busy in the dry season; on our last visit, several white rhino came down for an evening drink. Activities include tracking rhino on foot and gentle 4WD safari drives, although a sun-downer drink at the camp's waterhole is often more rewarding. Most

visitors also make a visit to a local San/Bushman village, Xharo's Post, which Edo's Camp supports. From there you can join villagers in their daily activities – which can be fascinating.

THE PANHANDLE AREA

North of the Delta, in an area known as the 'panhandle', stand several old, established camps. These are often viewed as fishing camps, as the tiger-fishing here is particularly good, but the birdwatching is also first class, with rarities like skimmers, as well as a host of egrets, storks, kingfishers and warblers all present. Big game is very scarce here, but these camps do offer a remarkably good-value Okavango experience; they are often visited as part of self-drive trips from Namibia.

Nxamaseri Island Lodge (see also page 33) has six solid, en-suite, brick-and-thatch chalets (plus a 'tree-house') on its own very tropical island. This stands on the edge of a classic, shallow-water Okavango Delta environment – perfect for boat trips, fishing and sometimes mokoro excursions. Booked in advance, full-day trips to explore the Kalahari's Tsodilo Hills are possible for an extra cost.

A little further north, **Drotsky's Cabins** is a long-established lodge beside the Okavango River, with comfortable bungalows and its own special atmosphere.



African skimmer



Exploring the rock art at Tsodilo Hills

Hills and Caves in the Kalahari

For adventurers, the magical **Tsodilo Hills** is an intriguing place which rises out of the undulating Kalahari. This is one of Africa's greatest sites for Bushman rock art; Laurens van der Post famously described them as a 'Louvre in the desert'. Even more isolated, **Drotsky's Caves** (in the Gcwihaba Hills) and the **Aha Hills** are also fascinating spots in the Kalahari which are possible destinations for adventurous private mobile safaris; they can't easily be visited on a fly-in safari.