

THE KALAHARI

Despite what is generally believed, 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. 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; see the Earth's curvature along the horizon; 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 SALTPANS

In the middle of the northern Kalahari is an area of huge, flat salt pans. It's a harsh, sparse 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.



Quad biking across the pans

MAKGADIKGADI PANS

The great Makgadikgadi Pans cover about 10,000km² of the Kalahari in a thin crust of salt. Around these, the occasional picturesque palm-tree island overlooks vast rolling grasslands. 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.



Yellowbilled Hornbill

CENTRAL PANS

Three sister camps stand on palm islands outside the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park; all differ in style but offer similar activities. If you visit, then stay for three nights.

Jack's Camp is beautifully constructed in a classical safari style, with lots of thoughtful touches, curious objets d'art and rich fabrics. It has ten spacious, walk-in tents, each with an en-suite bathroom including a flush toilet and two showers (indoor and out). Central areas include a raised pavilion, a swimming pool, a dining tent complete with small museum, and a Persian-style 'tea tent'. **San Camp** opens only from mid-April to end-October. It was completely rebuilt in 2011 and offers six white canvas tents, raised on decks and with en-suite bathrooms.

By comparison, **Camp Kalahari** is more basic and more affordable. It has a thatched living/dining area, small plunge



Cheetah are diurnal hunters

pool and ten walk-in tents, each with an open-air bathroom, hot/cold running water and a flush toilet.

Activities from all of these camps are the same, focusing on the area's geology, archaeology and anthropology, as well as its wildlife. Expect 4WD nature drives, walks, night drives, seasonal quadbike excursions, and visits to archaeological sites. Big game is usually scarce here, but resident researchers have habituated brown hyena and meerkats to human observers, so relaxed sightings of both species are quite common.

BOTETI RIVER AREA

The Boteti River, which forms the western boundary of Makgadikgadi Pans National Park, ceased to flow in the early 1990s, but it began again in late 2008 and has continued to flow since then. During the dry season the Boteti attracts thousands of jostling zebra and wildebeest, together with



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

elephants, giraffe, many predators, and even the odd white rhino. Both of the camps here are set high on the riverbank: excellent vantage points for game viewing.

Meno A Kwena Tented Camp is an old-style safari camp, run by a thoroughly engaging old Botswana hand, David Dugmore. The camp isn't palatial; although royalty have stayed here, it's very laid back. There are eight fairly simple tents, each with a separate, private bathroom complete with a flush toilet, and a private outdoor bucket shower, all housed within a traditional stick kraal.

Many visitors here want a restful start or end to a safari, so they just relax in camp: watching wildlife from the hide, dipping in the plunge pool or reading by the fire. Alternatively, activities include 4WD sorties (up to full-day drives with a picnic), visits to the local community and a new Bushman walking experience which was introduced in 2011. Stay for longer, and you can also visit the salt pans and, in the dry season, spend a night under the stars.

Further south, **Leroo La Tau** is a more substantial, luxurious lodge: 12 very comfortable chalets with glass fronts offer large verandas and individual raised decks overlooking the Boteti River. Like the buildings, Leroo La Tau's activities are more structured, focusing on morning and evening game drives.

NXAI PAN

North of Makgadikgadi, Nxai Pan National Park is fascinating, though often underrated because of the unpredictability of its game. During the dry season the grassy pans here host herds of springbok, giraffe and gemsbok, which swell in numbers between December and April as the rain turns 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 Camp stands to the west of Nxai Pan and has nine spacious chalets, including a family room. Each has a private deck, an indoor and an outdoor shower and small lounge. The camp's crescent-shaped main building and nearby pool overlook a productive waterhole. Game drives explore the pan and its desert environs; a day trip to Baines' Baobabs is also possible.

Close encounters with relaxed meerkats in the Makgadikgadi Pans





White rhino at Edo's waterhole

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 to visitors, 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 are flush with green, attracting springbok and gemsbok – often in huge herds of just one species. You'll also find ostrich and giraffe, herds of wildebeest, excellent cheetah and the Kalahari's famous black-maned lions. Leopard and brown hyena are common, though rarely seen.

LODGES INSIDE THE PARK

The more obscure corners of this park are still best experienced on a mobile safari (see www.wildaboutafrica.com), but there are two fairly new permanent camps in the CKGR. Activities at both camps focus on day drives and short walks in the vicinity of the camp. Night drives are not permitted under national park rules.

Tau Pan Camp sits on a sand ridge with nine thatched en-suite chalets all overlooking a small waterhole and the vast Tau Pan beyond. At the camp's centre, a lounge opens out onto a raised deck and small pool.

In a remote spot southeast of Deception Valley, **Kalahari Plains Camp** is a very comfortable tented camp. Each of its ten en-suite tents is built on a raised platform with a rooftop deck on which you can sleep out under the stars. The main area is also raised, with a plunge pool overlooking both a waterhole and a large pan.

LODGES OUTSIDE THE PARK

Outside the fences which bound the CKGR, several lodges offer a Kalahari experience – conducting activities on their own patches of the Kalahari, without visiting the main game reserve.

Deception Valley Lodge is a comfortable retreat with eight thatched bungalows. Each is spacious, with heavy teak furniture, lounge area, an en-suite bathroom, an outside shower and a private veranda. Activities here operate with a guide and

tracker, who often come from the Naro group of San/Bushmen, and emphasise the area's flora as much as its fauna. They include walks and 4WD day and night drives. Nearby, the two-bedroom **Manor House** is ideal for families. It can only be booked by one party at a time and comes with a private guide and tracker.

West of the CKGR, the **Grassland Bushman Lodge** has its own reserve and visitors usually remain within this; ask us for the latest details and news on this lodge.

Even further to the west of the CKGR, but still in the Kalahari, **Edo's Camp** is a small tented camp on a game conservancy covering 1,200km². Unlike many of the other camps here, Edo's can be included into a self-drive trip from Namibia. Edo's takes up to eight guests in en-suite tents on wooden decks, overlooking a permanent, floodlit waterhole. This can be an animal magnet 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. Most visitors also make a visit to the local San/Bushman village of Xharo's Post, from where you can join villagers in their daily activities – which can be fascinating.