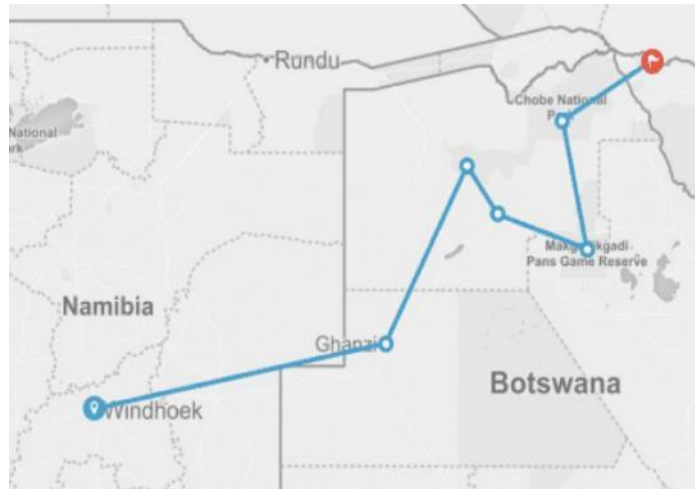


This long-awaited trip, originally planned for 2020 but dreamt of for years, more than met my hopes. Fortunately, I was able to find several books at The American Library in Paris that allowed for advance preparation. Here is the overview of the itinerary with Intrepid Travel to which we added two days in Zambia.

Botswana is about the size of France and has a population of 2.65 million compared to France’s ~65 million.

Although the photos in my write-ups are almost always mine, in this case I must extend thanks to members of our travel group who shared some very special images!



We stopped for fuel and bathrooms after crossing the border from Namibia into Botswana and there were several women of the Herera tribe there. I did not intrude by taking their photos, but here is a sample of their unique style of dress.

Our first activity was a demonstration walk with members of a San (Bushmen) village. Historically they were hunter-gatherers throughout the Central Kalahari. Two young men pantomimed a hunt (hunting has been banned for two generations) and the women mimed the celebration that occurred after a successful hunt. I was impressed by the demonstration of



the arrows that have no feathers at the “tail” and are perfectly balanced. We saw a plant, wild

thyme, that was rubbed on the body to disguise human odor and another, quinine, that was ingested at the beginning of the rainy season to prevent malaria!

A wide variety of roots have purposes including to soften and protect the skins of the



traditional capes worn by the women, which are used for everything from carrying babies to weather protection. The ostrich egg was the primary vessel for carrying water. The young men also demonstrated starting fire by rubbing two sticks together just as I learned in Girl Scouts!

Due to the sparseness of diet, the women often nursed their children up to three years of age and had a next child only every four years. This maintained the population within a size that their territory could support.

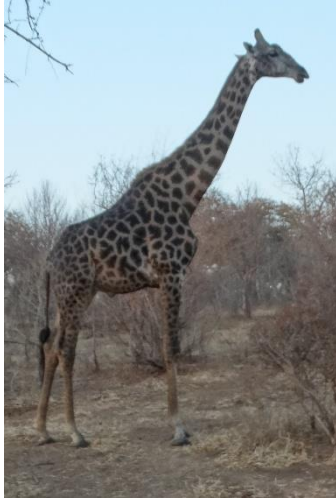


The Central Kalahari Desert varied from sparse low shrubs to treed areas, especially acacia and mopani. Other than the mopani which is fast growing, cutting down trees is now illegal as the ebony, mahogany and teak forests had been decimated for export by the colonizers.



During the first part of our overland travel (4-6 hours per day in a well-outfitted truck holding 11 travelers plus our guide and driver) we mostly saw giraffes and zebras with the occasional ostrich. (I never managed an ostrich picture

although I have seen them many times previously). It seemed to me as if the giraffes' color varied with the surroundings, pale in the savannah area and darker in the forested area. A guide later in the trip agreed, but said they also get darker with age. It was interesting to learn the Latin

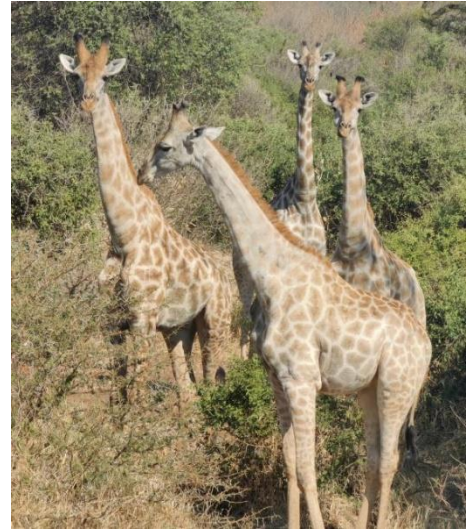


name: giraffis camelis leopardis. Picture how much their head looks like a camel and the spots like a leopard! I also learned that you can usually tell the males from the females because the females still have lots of hair on their horns, from not fighting. There are various terms for groups of animals and in the case of giraffes the term

is a tower of giraffes.

Termite mounds/castles abounded and varied in color according to the local soil from which they are constructed.

What I hadn't realized is that what we see is the "tip of the iceberg" so to speak, as the underground area can be eight times as deep. They are part of the process of interconnectedness as seeds get deposited on them permitting trees to grow which animals, especially baboons, then climb to reach the tree's fruits. These species are called keystones. We will learn later that elephants and hippopotamuses are the other keystones in this region.



I did not realize that the zebras here migrate north to the Chobe in advance of the rainy season and we would see large groups gathering in preparation.

This was not a major wildebeest area and in fact I didn't see any until the very last day when driving in a white rhino preserve in Zambia. Fortunately, I witnessed their

migration in Kenya on safari in the Serengeti in 1997.



Our next ecosystem was the Okavango Delta. This unique area covers almost 6000 square miles of

northwestern Botswana. We accessed our houseboat accommodation via a two-hour ride in a comfortable open speedboat along the river's

panhandle with the Namibia border. In addition



to feathery papyrus and regular reeds we saw crocodiles along the banks (this one had obviously had a good meal) and numerous bird species.

I was particularly impressed by the African fishing eagle which strongly resembles our bald eagle. The



kingfishers are beautiful and dive like ours. We saw their multiple layers of nests (holes) in the riverbank (in Chobe) when the water level varied. We also saw a lot of storks and vultures.



Botswana carefully regulates touristic access, especially to the Okavango, to protect this valuable ecosystem. The water source is in Angola and after passing through Namibia reaches this inland delta of hundreds of shifting channels and islands. The water is at its highest in about May and gradually recedes to its low point in September. So, in late July we were at about the mid-point and the water was about 1 meter deep and crystal clear in the channels we explored. There are agreements among the three countries regulating uses in the drainage basins of the river to ensure its continued quality.



Our houseboat accommodated 12 guests and our captain/cook Sam was friendly and a good cook! His assistant ferried us on the speedboat. We saw only two other houseboats in our three days and didn't encounter



their occupants on our forays either by poled canoe or on foot.

Botswana has in place an elaborate education program for local youth to become official guides with successive levels ultimately leading to the equivalent of our PhD. Our poler, Filee, was at about the midpoint of the process. He said he



already knew much of the species knowledge from growing up in the Delta but had to learn it in other languages plus the Latin species designations. I was happy to see that one of our six polers was a woman. The canoes, called mokoro, came to the Delta in the mid-18th C with the Bayei people from



the Zambezi. Now they're made of fiberglass since it is illegal to cut down the trees from which they were traditionally made. We did see some local polers.

I had never seen a blue lotus before.



The search our first morning was for elephants which we finally spotted off in the distance and the polers expertly triangulated from where we were to where we would intersect their direction of travel. The domestic cattle freely roam in the same area and beef is one of Botswana's major exports.



Our first elephant family was headed by the matriarch and her baby. If the baby can stand underneath its mother, then it is less than six months old. Other family members followed including some taking a dust bath and at the rear are the bachelor males that are to be shunned from the family to find new territory and



eventually a mate. No telephoto here, we are extremely close.

Elephants are left or right-handed (footed) and you can tell by which tusk is the most ravaged from fighting, ie. the dominant side. We saw how they peel the bark to get at the cambrium layer of a tree for its moisture and then it becomes smooth as they rub off bugs, etc. from their skin.

Another local tree is the Marula, whose berries produce the digestif Amarula that I love (similar

to Baileys Irish Crème). Both elephants and baboons can become drunk from eating fallen berries that have fermented!

Our other most prevalent companions were the hippopotamus which would gather in shallow pools to stay cool. They can stay submerged for about six minutes and were often on the move. A group of hippos is called



a bloat and they are the third largest land animals on the planet after the elephant and white



rhinoceros. At night they sleep on land and we saw areas of vegetation flattened by their large bodies plus their and elephants' footprints. Hippos are dangerous on land if provoked as they can run up to 40 km per hour thus outpacing humans and most of their predators. They are vegetarian, eating the grass close to the water's edge and pods of the lily pads in the channels. This stimulation of the grass growth makes them also a keystone animal.

I had only seen the destructive side of elephants as they tore down trees in their path but had not understood their keystone role. By standing on their hind legs they tear down branches with their trunk thus making them available for other animals' use. And because they don't digest fully, their enormous quantities of dung contain seeds, fruits, etc. for other species.



The channels and islands are constantly shifting, and the animals move among them. On our third day in the Delta, we retraced our two-hour speedboat ride and drove to Maun. Several of our group took a flight over the delta, to appreciate its true extent. They also flew over the Moremi Game Reserve where they said the animal density was incredible. There are large areas leased as private game reserves in addition to the government parks and forests. (Getty Images)





The next day's visit was to the Makgadikgadi salt pans and en route we visited one of the typical villages we had been

passing. We went into one family's compound, the

father a fisherman the



mother a basket weaver. There are two rondavels, one made out of abandoned termite mound soil



for winter and the other out of reeds for summer. They are surrounded by a stockade fence to protect them from the animals and their dogs



stay outside at night for warning. They cook over a small fire and

have several small solar panels. After the tour, the village women danced and



sang a traditional story while an older man



encouraged the rhythm beating on a plastic container. There were a couple of small baskets for sale and my daughter bought one. It turned out we had been visiting our poler's family and his mother had woven the basket – a lovely coincidence. I bought a necklace made out of woven beads which turned out to have been made by the dancer. Here they are.

Along this road is a water line to serve the larger towns (the village women still haul water from the river). However, an elephant could lift the periodic concrete slab tops and access the water line to drink. A group of zebras gathered to wait their turn but every time they approached, the elephant chased them off. This scene was repeated a few more times along the way.



The road to the salt pans was very soft sand and in several areas fires had

been set to stimulate vegetation growth for the cattle. We stopped at a magnificent baobab tree, probably >400 years old.



At the edge of the salt pans



we watched a “gang” of meerkats. I did not previously know this animal, to me they are like a cross between a lemur and a

groundhog. They were very active with lots of scrambling and playing.

This is one of the largest salt pans on the planet and can be seen from outer space. The actual mining of the salt occurs 150 km further east. From our view





just before sunset, we could see the earth's curvature. The staff had brought ingredients for gin and tonic "sundowners" including gin made from a local berry that was very good,



That night our lodging was in individual rondavels with outdoor bathroom and we had, as usual, an excellent dinner. I haven't mentioned that at every location we are sleeping under mosquito nets but I rarely saw evidence of mosquitoes at this dry time of year.

Our next environment was Chobe National Park, on the bank of the Chobe River. This was Botswana's first national park, created in 1968, two years after independence, but had begun as a game reserve in 1960. Today it encompasses 4500 square miles and is Botswana's second largest national park. As there are few fenced areas remaining in the country, animals are generally free to roam wherever they need to for food and water.

We stayed at Mowena Safari Lodge which treated us very well and I managed time to have a massage, much appreciated after the hours in the truck each day! After arriving we took an afternoon/evening game drive and not only had beautiful views over the river but saw many



antelope species, jackals, hyenas and giraffes. I never got a hyena photo, but here is a jackal.



We didn't see a leopard on this trip.

There are a wide variety of antelope species throughout this area, each more beautiful than the other. The most numerous are the impala which are the principal diet of the carnivores (elephants and hippos are vegetarian).

Here are a waterbuck and a kudu with their distinctive markings.



Early the next morning we set out in search of big cats as we felt we had



seen everything else in abundance. And we found them – first a male and five females.

Because this property has been protected for sixty years, the animals do not equate the large jeeps with danger, so they freely walk adjacent as they pursue their daily activities. As this was early morning the night's hunting was likely complete and they were preparing for the day's siesta. We found another pride down near the river and spent quite a while just watching them.



As they descended to the river to drink it was clear that there was a “pecking order” among

the females as each took her turn to drink. There was some play time before they all wandered off onto one of the islands.



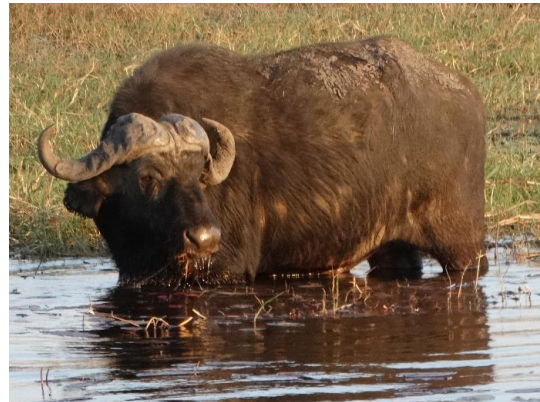
We were reminded that where there is life, there is also death.



The Chobe is bordered by Zambia on the north bank. The determination of a contested island's nationality between the

two countries finally went to the International Court and the decision was that the deeper of the two channels on either side of the island should form the country boundary. Thus, it came to be Botswana's and they have one of their flags planted there!

The final game drive was by boat and we were able to get close to buffalo. They are the most dangerous of the large animals because they have both excellent eyesight and hearing as



well as being very fleet of foot. We did not see any hunting activity however, only grazing. Here are some impala and baboons enjoying the same space.



One of my favorite elephant scenes was a mom and baby eating in the shallow water. They would pull up a clump of plant, shake off the dirt, then rinse it again before eating it.



And, at the end of the day the elephants lined up to head for their nocturnal resting place.

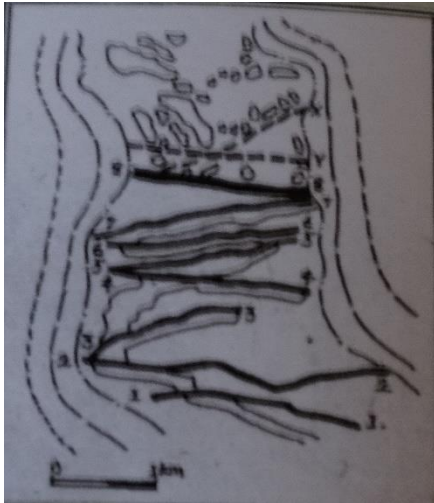


The next day we crossed into Zimbabwe to visit Victoria Falls. The visa on arrival took up some time and then we checked into our accommodation and did a tour and lunch at a brewery in Victoria Falls. The town seems to be one giant souvenir shop and only exists to support visits to the falls. Some of our group took a helicopter flight over the falls.



On our guided walk we learned of the falls' evolution over the millennia from a time when the area was completely submerged to the Jurassic age when the water had completely dried up and

what was left was the Zambezi River flowing down into a 1-mile-long gorge. This illustrates the various historical locations of the falls, and the Devil's Chute is already starting to erode to make



way for the next evolution, predicted along the horizontal dotted lines. In one area the spray is so constant that the vegetation is a wetland.



The bridge across to Zambia also carries a historic steam train which can be booked with a gourmet dinner to see the sunset. It

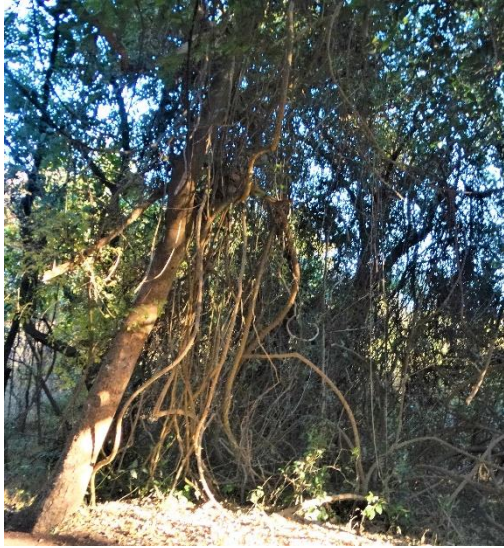
was completed in 1905 and formed part of Cecil Rhodes' dream of a Cape to Cairo rail line, never completed.

At the falls, the rainbows were probably one of the biggest attractions, plus being in a rain forest after all the desert. The rim of the falls is broken into several





smaller falls each with its own name. The falls are more than 300' high and were named a UNESCO heritage site in 1989. We were not there, of course at the peak flow which would have been right at the end of the rainy season when approximately 2 million gallons of water descend



every second. This is a strangler fig along the walking path and a vervet monkey following us in the trees. Two of our group chose to do the zipline over the gorge, here is their photo.



Our Intrepid Travel tour ended here but we crossed over into Livingstone, Zambia for two nights of pampering at the David Livingstone Safari Lodge and Spa. Livingstone was the first white person to report seeing the falls in 1855 and he named it for his Queen. However, it is still largely referred to as Mosi-Oa-Tunya, the Smoke that Thunders, for the spray that is visible from a great distance.

out my room when I arrived.

This vervet monkey was checking



We took a walking safari in a white rhino preserve. Both black and white rhinos are gradually being reintroduced through these private breeding programs. I had been fortunate to experience both varieties on my Kenya safari. The difference between the two is their diet, the white eats primarily grass and has a very wide mouth, while the black eats trees and shrubs and has a totally



different (hooked) jaw. (Photo courtesy of World Land Trust),

These are the two white juveniles (a third was sleeping nearby) we found on our walk. The

reserve has a total of eleven animals but two will be transferred elsewhere shortly as this territory can only support nine. The white rhino adult is also considerably larger than the black.

Walking is obviously a different experience as this



family wandered by.

Our guide explained that he could approximate the age of the elephant that had been chewing on this branch by the distance apart and shape of the tooth marks!



I wasn't too happy to spot these buffalo in the brush when walking. However, in addition to our two guides, we were escorted by an armed female ranger. Her role of course was not to shoot an animal but to frighten them away if they were threatening.

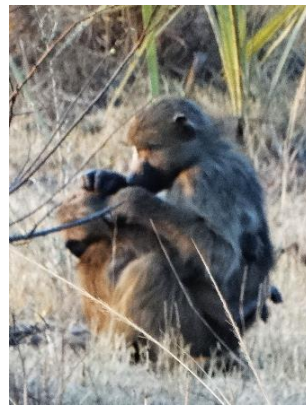


I finally got to photograph some warthogs, although we had been seeing them fairly frequently,



especially around our hotels.

In addition to a troop of baboons playing, we saw this mother with her youngster.



As evening was approaching some families arrived to picnic at the river's edge. At high water



this picnic area is submerged. This is the Zambezi River and one of our tour group had caught a picture of an elephant swimming across it!



All too soon we had to leave this magical world with its unique peaceful environment and friendly, environmentally conscious people and return to our own respective realities.

