

# Place of salt and shadows

Barbara Adair visits the harsh white landscape of Botswana's vast Makgadikgadi Pans

It is early, Jo'burg is cold, the temperature peaks at -1°C. I stand outside the airport building, huddle between a wall and a pillar, light a cigarette and feel the wind slice through my thermal vest, my blood-drenched heart and wonder "will we go?"

The hurricane continues unabated, one hour, two ... we wait and wait, for a hiatus, an exit visa to a promised land. We are going to the Makgadikgadi Pans in Botswana.

And then we go. Underneath me, for as far as forever, there are houses and cars and people; toys, mechanical creations. And everything, and everywhere it is all the same.

We touch down in Polokwane, it is warmer; I do not shiver, yet I shake as I hold a pen between thumb and forefinger and fill in the forms, my passport number, 1, 2, 3 ... stamped, legitimate travellers. Up again, I concentrate on a map under my hand and the Earth below me; a river rises, a mountain peaks, a railroad cuts. I caress a mountain, follow a river with my fingers. Next stop Francistown, another country. We fly over the wide Limpopo River, the border between South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

We stay at Jack's Camp, an unnatural habitat set against the sky. There are 10 green, stylish, canvas tents, colonial and military, an en-suite bathroom and, to dare the sky, an outside shower. I imagine that I am an explorer: Burton ... Stanley, an explorer in style and comfort. I sleep in a high bed that is covered in an immaculate white, cotton-covered, feather duvet, copper piping in the bathroom, hand-beaten, behind-the-times paraffin lamps, worn Persian rugs, years of prayer.

The mythology is that while on a trapping expedition in the pans during the 1960s Jack Bousfield came upon this desolate space; wild, striking. It captured his imagination and he set up a camp. This man, this outlaw of Africa, who already held the world record for killing the greatest number of crocodiles, raised his tent under a thorny acacia tree knowing that some day other people would share this space. And other people can share this space, for a price.

Ralph Bousfield, the son of Jack, now owns the lodge. He is tall and tanned. In the cold night he wears a brown leather jacket, by day he wears khaki trousers and a khaki shirt. He blends into nature so well with his tanned skin that never needs sunscreen and his designer, dusty, camouflage clothing; a privileged accent, a brave voice that takes care of women and small animals.

"My father died about 15 years ago in an aircraft accident," he says, "and I carry on here. This place was created by my father; that's him." Ralph points to a photograph on the wall of the tent; it is not made of brick so the photograph moves with the wind, black and white, dangerous.

A man with a dark-grey beard looks down at me; his head is swathed in a kikoi. Next to the photograph is a poster, Peter Beard, Stress and Density, I look at the lissom dark model lean out her hand to feed a giraffe; one more African adventurer, an adventurer who hunted with Hemingway, wrote a book on the murderous effects of the railroads and discovered the Somali beauty, Iman.

Jack's Camp, a memorial, a headstone; an honour to the vision of a dead father. It glitters with champagne bubbles; catwalk

models rub shoulders with Oprah and Gail, Elton is on his honeymoon, I shake the golden hand. I buy the adventure; I buy the more real than real colours, the stark cold wind and chapped skin; I buy my authenticity.

Later I take a walk with the Zu/'hoasi Bushmen. An old man who can speak no English walks with a young man. "Click clack tick snap..." his words are musical, a sign of sound.

We walk over dry dust, the young man points out the various plants that Bushmen use for medicine; he tells me which are the poison ones that can be used to kill; he shows me a waterhole that is never full - the lodge pumps water into it to attract the naturally shy, rarely seen, aardwolf; and a little nearer to the camp, he points to where the gold-yellow full moon will rise and explains how it is used as electricity, a light in the night.

After a while they stop. The old man finds two sticks, dry and brittle. He rubs the sticks together; then there is a flame, a bright red flame catches the light, the grass begins to burn, smoke curls upwards. The old man lies on his back, the trunk of the Makalani palm tree shadows his face, and he begins to play a sound on his bow, melancholy, sad, a lost sound, silent.

We are driven by Kaelo, a guide, to the edge of the pans. He is knowledgeable, he is completing a masters degree in zoology, an erudite combination of research and

**This place is a relic of one of the world's largest superlakes. It dried up thousands of years ago as the Earth's crust shifted**

guiding. He knows about the geology of the pans and the reason for the vast upside-down umbrella shape of the baobab tree. He stops the vehicle and takes out a geological map, traces it on the salt.

"This place is a relic of one of the world's largest superlakes," he says. "It dried up thousands of years ago as a result of the continued shifting of the Earth's crust. When the lake was formed, some 5 million to 7 million years ago, its shores were the setting for the growing up of a world, fish, man-ape, dinosaur, zebra and hippo..."

We cross the white salt to a known den of the rare brown hyena, not an animal that is often seen. The more common hyena is the spotted version of this carnivore.

"This animal has pointed ears and striped legs with a dark brown to black shaggy coat, white shoulders and neck," Kaelo tells us.

"It is different to the spotted hyena - the one that is so well known because of its macabre laugh. The spotted hyena is much bigger, it has a very large head and a sloping back, it is more yellow, has round ears."

We wait and watch and then quietly, without a whisper or a hint that it will be there, an animal moves from a hole in the salty sand. It has a long cream-coloured mane that seems to extend from the back of its neck and across its shoulder bones.



A Zu/'hoasi Bushman - a walking guide at Jack's Camp. He could speak no English, but played a melancholy tune on his bow. He was accompanied by a younger man who introduced us to the medicinal plants of the area

I watch the animal in the fading twilight; the moonscape. It waits, watching me, wondering, moon shadows of its fur make a mysterious mark on the white salt.

"They are solitary and nocturnal," Kaelo says. "They lie in thick bush or deserted aardvark burrows during the daytime, which is why we are here now, we would never have seen one in the daylight. This one is part of a clan, they all live in that burrow. Watch carefully, another might appear, or even one of the young."

There is a sound in the back of the Land-Rover, the sound of a case being unzipped, the click of a camera lens.

"I know it is getting dark," Kaelo turns to the person who has raised a camera, "but you cannot use a flash; it will blind the hyena and scare it, so take a photograph if you want to, but no flash."

Early the next morning, after drinking a cup of finely ground coffee that smells perfectly African, the stars still visible and my hands frozen from the cold, Kaelo takes us out again.

"I am going to show you the meerkats," Kaelo tells us. We drive for about 30 minutes, stop. Suddenly I notice them: 20, maybe 30 meerkats are bounding along the ground. They run around, forage, jump, have fun.

A lonely sentinel sits on an ant heap, watching, vigilant, a surveillance guard. And yet there may be danger all around this guard and his friends, for we are here, we are watching them.

"Come closer," Kaelo says to me, "look," - about one metre away from where I stand is a hole. "Shh," he says, "watch". From out of the hole a face edges up, big black eyes, then another, then another.

"Those are the meerkat babies. The adults keep them in the hole until they are able to sense danger for themselves and they find food for them until they are strong enough to do this on their own."

The small meerkats come out of the hole; they show no fear of those that surround them. Across from us two American children, a boy and a girl, stand. "Kneel down," Kaelo tells them.

The children obey him. After about five minutes a meerkat approaches and jumps on the head of one kneeling child, it stands there, on guard, watching.

"Take a photograph, quick," the man calls to his wife. "Wow, what a picture to show folks back home."

"Did Kaelo take you to see the meerkats?" Ralph asks me later. "What did you think? Unbelievable, hey, so close?"

"I am not so sure about it all," I reply. "It is not that I did not find them fascinating, beautiful really, and yet I can't help being concerned that they are so habituated.

They are wild animals, and yet they are domesticated. We have made them like us, we discuss their habits in human terms. Is it easy to anthropomorphise for we cannot know how they think, we must assume that they think as we do, comforting, familiar?"

"It's not that," Ralph replies. "It is not that we have tamed them, more that they have grown up with people, people are part of their environment."

"We have never been a predator, we have never invaded their homes, stolen their

food. We are here and they are here and so we live together. It is good for both of us."

People and animals: who, I wonder, is really like whom?

I am in an untainted space, far away from the world of commodities and consumerism, a pristine fantasy; lonely and lonesome.

And yet a misgiving creeps in, a silent suspicion. I feel uneasy as I use a flawless image; a question invades my space: is this the real world, or is this a representation of

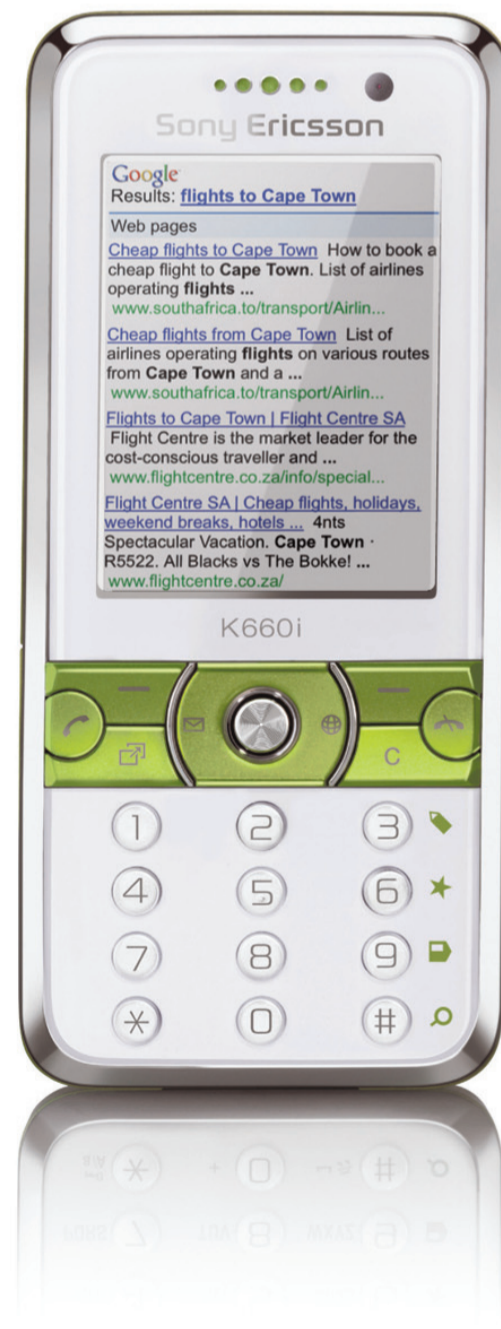
what the world outside tells me that I must experience, that I must buy?

The ghosts of black-and-white, prehistoric zebra race across the treeless space, they lick the salt, search for water. There is nothing but the moon shadow, the sunset shadow, the shadow of my progress, a hoary silver space.

I grasp the fading light, darkness, and salute to somewhere. The shadow of my hand reflects back to me on the salt, it waves goodbye.

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The story goes that Jack Bousfield came across this desolate space while on a trapping expedition in the 1960s. It captured his imagination and he set up a camp. It remains today, though as the upmarket Jack's Camp frequented by supermodels and celebrities