

SAFARI FROM THE SKY



RIBBONS AND RAINBOWS: A violet-eared waxbill in a camel thorn tree

Picture: IAN WHITE/CREATIVE COMMONS

Barbara Adair gets the all-clear for a unique perspective on the Central Kalahari

THE earth is far beneath me. I can touch her and yet I am enclosed — this is a retinal experience, visually sensuous. There's no sound but the engine, no smell but perspiration, no taste but salt. At 5 500 feet above the ground, I look out over the arid semi-desert below, an uneven landscape, small hills that are shrubs, bumpy green, and the sky, an uneven blue.

As we fly close to the Tau Pan Camp, six elephants walk over the dune scrub. But there are no elephants in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve — these elephants are buildings. The roofs are made of thatch, the walls are grey.

I look for the landing strip, a windsock blows and six oryx walk on the warm gravel, basking in the reflection of stone rays. We fly over them; they do not move but look upwards at this humming bird, then they walk away.

As we land, an open-topped Land Rover drives towards us to take us the 2km to the "elephants" we spotted from the sky, elegant buildings of modern design, open to the vast plains.

The manager of the camp, a Motswana, sits with us. It is the policy of camp owner Kwando Safaris to employ Botswana, allow them to develop in whatever way they choose and then to become part of the organisation.

We sit on a wide verandah, shaded by a thatch canopy, and watch six kudu come to the waterhole to drink, one male and five females.

Our guide, Chris, who has been a guide for seven years, says he can tell us "something about this area. "Birds, I know about birds," he says, "but probably you know more."

What is the allure of floating in the air, of being able to take to the sky? This is why I fly: I want to be a bird. I envy them.

"Look slightly to the right," says



DROP-DEAD GORGEOUS: A black-maned Kalahari lion, above; and Scupper, a Bushman tracker, opposite

Pictures: BARBARA ADAIR

My best was a leopard drinking at the swimming pool

Chris. "The violet-eared waxbill, of the seed eaters, he is very colourful. He has violet cheeks, a red bill, a blue rump and a chestnut body."

The waxbill sits in front of me on a camel thorn tree. The wind blows

his tail feathers, which are as blue as the sky in which he flies.

A black-chested snake eagle hovers, comes in to land on a sand strip close to the waterhole and follows a mouse.

Chris raises the binoculars to his

eyes. "And that is the black-chested snake eagle, listen to his call." I wish I were a bird.

"We made the waterhole," Chris says. "There is little water here so we have to keep pumping it from our boreholes. The wild animals

come here rather than go to the agricultural lands that surround the park."

The lodge is open, no fences around it. During the day animals are visible, at night they hide in the dark.

"The lodge is fine to walk about during the day but at night we accompany guests to the rooms. Sometimes lions walk through the camp," Chris tells us.

"Only yesterday I found their spoor on that path." He points to the path we walk on and laughs.

"The best sighting I have had is a leopard drinking at the swimming pool. The rains had not yet come, he was thirsty."

The room is not cold, though it is winter, and in summer, when the temperature is 40°C, it is cool.

There are two beds in its centre, covered in a white feather quilt and materials of an indigenous design. The beds are metallic, high and elegantly draped in mosquito netting. The bathroom has two showers, one inside and, for the brave, one outside.

"Tau means lion."

In the afternoon we drive towards Tau Pan, the white flickering in the fading sun.

"There is hardly ever any water here, they are dry pans. The water lies deep under the ground. This is why there is vegetation and why a lot of animals come here in the evening — it is warm."

A pale chanting goshawk flies over, circles a Kalahari apple-leaf tree. Her pink legs brace for the landing and, as she does it, her legs do not waver. She is elegant. She does not need the co-ordinates of



QUICK FACTS

WHERE IT IS: Tau Pan Camp is in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana. It may be accessed by 4X4 through the Rakops entrance to the park or by air. Kwando Safaris provides a fly-in service from Maun.
WHAT IT HAS: Nine double suites and one family room. Activities include guided game drives, drives to Deception Valley, star gazing and Bushman walks.
PRICES: All-inclusive rates are from \$450 per day (about R4 000) per person sharing.
CONTACT: Visit www.kwando.co.za or e-mail info@kwando.co.bw.

the tree, for any tree is a landing strip. She has the freedom of the air, freedom to fly where she wants to; she watches the earth from the sky with grace and knowledge.

"I think you get the dark chanting in South Africa," says Chris. "They look similar. This one is bigger and paler than the dark one, it must be that it lives in the desert."

I wonder what it is like to fly

with feathered wings.

"And there is the black-fronted waxbill. Look at the black mask across his face, his rump is dark crimson and the martial eagle, the largest of the eagles, his breast is white and his legs are feathered, the king of the birds."

Chris looks at the Bushman tracker, who sits next to him.

"Scupper, can you hear the sound?" "The spoor is lion spoor. We have a resident pride in this area, nine of them — two females, one male and six cubs."

We hold our breath. Two yellow females walk towards us, the male waits behind a low bush, the cubs jump and scramble, two springbok, their hind quarters quivering, watch as the lions walk past. The springbok are safe for now, tomorrow they may become food.

The male lion gets up from behind the bush and walks after the lionesses, slowly, regal.

"Look at his mane, a black-maned Kalahari lion. Other lions generally have tawny manes, he is the real king of Africa."

We watch for a long time. Seven giraffe walk ahead of us, all male, an adolescent gang.

Later, in the dark, I watch the sky. I hear a pearl-spotted owl playing an arpeggio. The notes rise, then fall. I sit and watch imaginary black and white falcons fly across the treeless space; the earth fades to pale in the shadow.

The moon rises, tracing a path of ancient silver. I hold out my hands in a salutation to my aeroplane, for I too can fly. The wings of the falcons whisper past my face as the lions purr. — © Barbara Adair

CRUISE SUPER SALE

HUGE SAVINGS • INCLUDES FLIGHTS • FREE HOTEL STAYS

10 NIGHT BARCELONA & MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE

from R14,999pp

• 2NT BARCELONA STAY • 7NT CRUISE • 1NT BARCELONA STAY
 ONBOARD COSTA FAVOLOSA
 DEPARTS VARIOUS DATES JUN - NOV 2013
 Fly Johannesburg to Barcelona, Palma, La Valletta, Catania, Naples, Savona, Barcelona. Fly back to Johannesburg
 Inside from **R14,999pp** Outside from **R16,999pp** Balcony from **R18,999pp**
Price based on 10th November 2013

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- FLIGHTS • AIRPORT TAXES • PORT CHARGES • FULL BOARD CRUISING
- ENTERTAINMENT • FREE HOTEL STAYS

WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT?

- RAPID RESPONSE • SAME DAY PRICE QUOTE • UNRIVALLED SERVICE AND KNOWLEDGE
- ACCESS TO THOUSANDS OF WORLDWIDE ITINERARIES, FLIGHTS AND HOTELS

9 NIGHT ROME STAY & MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE

from R15,999pp

• 2NT ROME STAY • 7NT MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE
 ONBOARD COSTA SERENA
 DEPARTS JUN - NOV 2013
 Fly Johannesburg to Rome, Sicily, Palma, Valencia, Marseille, Savona, Rome. Fly back to Johannesburg
 Inside from **R15,999pp**
 Outside from **R17,999pp**
 Balcony from **R19,999pp**
Price based on 9th November 2013

9 NIGHT VENICE STAY & EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE

from R15,999pp

• 2NT VENICE STAY • 7NT MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE
 ONBOARD COSTA MAGICA
 DEPARTS JUN - NOV 2013
 Fly Johannesburg to Venice, Bari, Katakalon, Athens, Santorini, Corfu, Dubrovnik, Venice. Fly back to Johannesburg
 Inside from **R15,999pp**
 Outside from **R17,999pp**
 Balcony from **R19,999pp**
Price based on 16th November 2013

10 NIGHT DUBAI STAY & MIDDLE EAST CRUISE

from R22,999pp

• 3NT DUBAI STAY • 7NT MIDDLE EASTERN CRUISE
 ONBOARD COSTA FORTUNA
 DEPARTS 24 DECEMBER 2013 (CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR)
 Fly Johannesburg to Dubai, Muscat, Khasab, Abu Dhabi, Dubai. Fly back to Johannesburg
 Inside from **R22,999pp**
 Outside from **R26,999pp**
 Balcony from **R32,999pp**

BOOK WITH CONFIDENCE
 CRUISE EXPERTS
 SECURE BOOKING
 DEDICATED AFTER CARE

SATOA
 Celebrating 30 Years

BEST TOUR OPERATOR 2013
 Getawayshow

0861 600 400

Call free on 0861 600 400 or visit imaginecruising.co.za
 OPENING HOURS: Mon - Fri 9am to 7pm, Sat 9am to 4pm & Sun closed
Standard terms and conditions apply - for full details please visit our website imaginecruising.co.za