

# tune in, DROP OUT

If you're looking for a safari with a difference, look no further than Wildguides@Tuli, an experience that combines the excitement of life as a field guide with the comfort of time-out in the bush.

TEXT BY SARAH BORCHERT



TULI SAFARI LODGE

It's late afternoon in Botswana's Northern Tuli Game Reserve and I am alone in the bush. Sunlight filters through the leaves of surrounding nyala and combretum trees and, to the untrained ear, all is quiet in the intense October heat. I, however, am bristling with energy. Using all that I've learned over the past two days, I have become a hyper-alert, super bushwoman, tuned in to the signs and sounds of the wild.

There! A broken branch, its fresh, green flesh not yet dry. And here, suspicious-looking scuffle marks. Hah! Definitely signs that humans have passed through the area. Having racked up few more 'finds', I return triumphant to Wildguides@Tuli convenor Clinton 'Cliffy' Phillips. Once my companions, a seasoned local and a wide-eyed Londoner on her first trip to Africa, return from their forays, he walks us through the short route that he and assistant Abraham Ramanwana have planted with clues to test our newly acquired tracking skills. My score? Four out of eight. Clearly, my super-bushwoman skills need work.

Billed as a 'four-day adventure that puts you in the shoes of a safari guide', the Wildguides@Tuli package combines the relaxation of a bush holiday with insights into the knowledge and activities of a field guide. 'It's not about getting a qualification, there are proper courses for that,' says Cliffy, who comes from the well-respected Okavango Guiding School. 'This is

things get off to a pleasantly slow start, helping our tired, city-strained minds to make the welcome transition to an altogether different pace of life

about learning some tracking, doing a little 4x4 driving and even rifle-handling, but mostly it's about getting a bit more out of your safari holiday, a bit more adventure and, hopefully, a bit more fun.'

Things get off to a pleasantly slow start, helping our tired, city-strained minds to make the welcome transition to an altogether different pace of life. After a relaxed briefing over lunch, we take in our first bush walk, heading onto the sandstone outcrops that rise up behind the main lodge. Dry and mostly flat, the eastern corner of Botswana stretches before us. 'Look at those beautiful baobabs over there,' Cliffy points out. 'See those nests in them? They're built by buffalo weavers, but you'll notice that most of them are on the western side of the trees.' We all nod eagerly. 'Why is that?' he continues. 'Some people say it's because the prevailing winds come from the east; others believe that the birds like to catch the last rays of the setting sun.' 'Ah,' we all say. And I think, 'Wow, I hadn't noticed that before.'

It's not the first time that those words will cross my mind over the next few days, as ►

Magnificent baobab trees dot the mostly flat landscape of Botswana's Northern Tuli Game Reserve. Breathing in the scent and touching one of these awesome trees is an integral part of the Wildguides@Tuli experience.

OPPOSITE The bush walks may start early, but the hours fly past as guests are introduced to the wonders of the wild, both big and small.

BELOW Abraham Ramanwana explains the intricacies of tracking leopards.

with Cliffy acting as translator, the 'language of the signs' begins to reveal itself to us



Cliffy makes good on his early promise to teach us to 'look *through* the bush'. Day two kicks off at 06h30 with a walk from our base at the Nokolodi Tented Camp (a more rustic, but no less comfortable version of Tuli Bush Camp's main lodge). Barely 20 metres from the tents, we find the prints of a hyaena and get down to the serious business of tracking. Initially, this feels a bit like reading a book written in a language you don't understand – you may love the pictures, but don't really know what you're looking at. With Cliffy

acting as translator, however, the 'language of the signs' begins to reveal itself to us. Light plays a large role – Cliffy claims that, with the sun at your back, a set of prints will light up like a runway – as does the need to remember that you're tracking an animal through the space it occupies, rather than simply following footprints. The scrape on a tree, a broken branch or a flower out of place could all be indicators that it passed this way.

Rather less romantically, many of these signs also have to do with poo. As we come across pile after pile of seemingly identical pellets and Cliffy explains the differences between them, I concede that dung has never been this interesting. Eland and giraffe are the only antelope species that defecate while they walk, so their droppings are more widely spaced than those of many other ungulates (which create middens); while the faeces of birds and reptiles contain uric acid, which dries white.

The hours pass quickly and, brimming with information about a multitude of small things (did you know that the bark of a marula tree contains a fluid that acts as an anti-histamine and that chewing on its leaves will relieve indigestion?) and the adrenalin rush brought on by an encounter with an elephant herd and a days-old calf, we head back for a well-earned breakfast. It's then that we realise that the morning's odyssey has taken us less than a kilometre from camp.

The pace picks up that afternoon when Cliffy and Abraham put us through our rifle safety paces after lunch. While I'm not a gun person and find the thought of having to shoot an animal, even in self-defence, unsettling (I skip the target practice later), I appreciate Cliffy's matter-of-fact approach. 'An elephant can charge at up to 12 metres per second. That means that if you're 30 metres away, you have less than three seconds to act. In most cases, you only have time for one shot.' Far from being a trigger-happy, gun-toting cowboy, he spends the rest of the session emphasising the gravitas of being in the bush with a rifle.

However, the situation does get a little gung ho the following morning when we are given a chance to drive the 4x4 game-viewing vehicle over sand, rocks and even a dry riverbed. What with driving, looking for game and keeping guests entertained, I gain renewed respect for the multi-tasking skills required of guides.

The programme gets more exciting still when we take turns in the tracker's chair that evening, holding the spotlight during a night drive. Perched at the vanguard of the vehicle does feel a little as though you're being used as bait, but I am soon absorbed by sweeping the light from side to side and trying to find animals. The trick is to avoid blinding diurnal



TULI SAFARI LODGE (3)

species, whose eyes light up green (the emerald eyes of a herd of impala take on the surreal appearance of an army of Martians). Absorbed in a sighting of two bat-eared foxes foraging for insects, I happen to glance ahead and see a spotted hyaena, not 20 metres in front of the vehicle, regarding us calmly. I'd like to report that my composure did not waver, but instead I gasp, drop the light and hiss at Cliffy for advice. Fortunately, the hyaena, far from being put off by these antics, stays put and we settle into a lovely sighting of an animal that is much prettier than its reputation suggests.

On our last morning, after being serenaded by a pearl-spotted owl during a welcome coffee break, we head out on our final bush walk. As we traipse down to the edge of a small dam, we see the unmistakable round, patterned prints of an elephant. Following them down to the water, we turn so that the rising sun is at our backs and, lo and behold, the tracks light up, just like a runway. ■

## infotravel

Tuli Safari Lodge is a five-hour drive from Johannesburg and lies a few kilometres beyond the Botswana border in the 71 000-hectare Northern Tuli Game Reserve. The Wildguides@Tuli experience is based at Nokolodi Bush Camp, where accommodation is in comfortable bush tents with en-suite bathrooms. While Wildguides@Tuli may initially appeal to seasoned safari-goers, it is also a fantastic introduction to the bush for first-timers to Africa.

And, once it's over, you can relax and enjoy a few days at the main lodge. Here, accommodation is in eight spacious and extremely comfortable chalets (left), staff members are knowledgeable and friendly, and game drives offer the possibility of seeing elephants, lions, spotted hyaenas, giraffes, zebra and even a pack of reintroduced African wild dogs. This is also a recognised Important Bird Area, with more than 350 species recorded. Children under 12 are welcome, and the author can personally vouch for the level and warmth of service in this regard. (Our 18-month-old daughter was treated with great kindness and patience, nothing was too much trouble and, even though bush walks were not available to her, she enjoyed numerous game drives, complete with specially prepared meals.)

To find out more, refer to Tuli Safari Lodge on *Africa Geographic's* Special Places pages, tel. (+267) 264 5343, e-mail [info@tulilodge.com](mailto:info@tulilodge.com) or visit [www.tulilodge.com](http://www.tulilodge.com)

### Sleeping over in Jozi

If you are, as the author was, looking for somewhere to spend the night in Johannesburg, there are numerous options. The Safari Club SA lies close to O.R. Tambo International Airport and is comfortable, clean and welcoming. Tel. (+27-11) 979 0321 or go to [www.safariclubsa.co.za](http://www.safariclubsa.co.za)

If your tastes are a little more extravagant, why not treat yourself to a night at the Westcliff Hotel? Sister to Cape Town's Mount Nelson hotel, the Westcliff's hillside setting in one of the city's most exclusive suburbs offers superb views, while its five-star surrounds and service pamper and spoil. Tel. (+27-11) 481 6000, e-mail [reservations@westcliff.co.za](mailto:reservations@westcliff.co.za) or visit [www.westcliff.co.za](http://www.westcliff.co.za)

Waterberg Transfers offer a shuttle service between Johannesburg and Tuli Safari Lodge. Tel. (+27-11) 425 6814 or (+27-82) 320 6515, or e-mail [info@waterbergtransfers.com](mailto:info@waterbergtransfers.com)