

TEXT AND  
PICTURES PETRA  
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“WHERE DO I DRIVE ONTO the pontoon?” I ask Abraham Ramonwana, my guide for the week to come. He smiles and tells me to leave my car at the border post. He takes my luggage and I follow him meekly to some obscure area alongside the river and into what looks to me like a post-war hangar. I’ve just arrived in Botswana, on my way to Tuli Safari Lodge for some me time.

“So where’s the pontoon?” I ask, and he points to a tiny metal cage balancing on a cable across the Limpopo River. Right. This is not the ferry I imagined I’d use to cross the river and to jeer at the crocodiles in the water below ...

“I love my job,” Abraham tells me as we drive to the lodge. Abraham has been working for Tuli Safari Lodge for 18 years, and I look forward to sharing his passion and extensive knowledge about his beautiful homeland. We drive through lush green scenery with tall grasses and enormous evergreen trees. Abraham knows them all.

“That’s a shepherd tree,” he points out. “It’s a welcome resting spot for herders and animals, providing lots of shade.” He also shows me a giant 800-year-old nyala berry tree and tells me how the children peel the berries, put them in half a bowl of milk, stir and take the seeds out. The milk will become thick and creamy. This man doesn’t just share textbook information – his knowledge comes from

countless hours of observing the bush.

I choose to stay in the tented camp a short distance away from the lodge. There’s no one else in the camp, there’s no electricity, and it’s not fenced, but I long for peace and quiet around a campfire. A double G&T in hand, I immediately fall in love with my ‘private’ camp and its sunsets over the Limpopo River. To be immersed in the sounds and smells of the bush allows me to fully connect with nature, and myself. That is until I hear roaring and quickly zip up my tent to experience the bush from inside. I blow out my bedside candle and soon doze off for the night.

I wake before sunrise, light a fire, and enjoy a cup of tea, ignoring the vervet monkeys who spy on me. This morning I’m as nervous as I am excited, because I’m about to explore the Tuli Block on horseback. “What if we encounter elephants?” I ask Cor Carelson, my guide and the owner of Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris. “Ah, the cracking of the bullwhip usually stops the charge of an elephant,” he reassures me. This is my first horseback safari in the bush and I absolutely love it. I feel safe and enjoy Cor’s knowledge of the flora and fauna, and the snippets of history he shares with me. He shows me a walking Kori Bustard. “Look,” he says, “it’ll take off like an aeroplane.” The Kori Bustard is the heaviest flying bird in the world and in local custom only chiefs are allowed to kill and eat it.

When Abraham takes me to the third confluence of the Shasha and Limpopo Rivers – where Botswana,

South Africa and Zimbabwe meet – the vegetation becomes much denser with lots of palm trees, fragrant baobabs, and many termite hills. To reach the third confluence we need to cross the shallow Shasha River on foot. “Crocodiles only attack in deep water, where they can gain speed,” Abraham reassures me. And off we go, slinging our boots over our shoulders and keeping an eye on our sunbathing toothy friends. Standing in this remote place where two rivers and three countries meet makes me think of the great Africa explorers. I wonder what went through their minds as they stood here, at exactly the same spot.

Later Abraham takes me to his village, where I meet his aunt Tirafalo, his niece Maureen and his sister Selelo and get a glimpse into their daily lives. I ask about marriage customs and Abraham tells me that parents don’t want their children to marry early.

“It’s important to have life experience and to leave the silliness behind.”

“And what if the marriage fails?” I ask.

“The husband will be sent to the district commissioner for counselling, and disciplinary actions can lead to two months in jail. If the wife is causing trouble, she will be put under house arrest and do all the chores for a given period. In case of a divorce the rule is simple – the one who leaves, leaves everything behind. You may take only your clothes and there is no turning back.” It’s a different world.

Tonight I’m sleeping in a bird hide some two

kilometres from the lodge. “As long as you keep the fire going, you’ll be fine,” Abraham says as he gets in the car and drives off, leaving me on my own in the middle of nowhere. I delight in my solitary sundowner next to the camp fire and look out over vast wide open spaces thinking of all the great stories I’ll soon be able to share with my family. I place the paraffin lamps in a circle around me and the sun sets quickly, leaving me alone in the dark. I hear branches crackling in a bush nearby and I cowardly move into the bird hide only to realise that one of the panels doesn’t close.

“Damn, I should have checked this before he left,” I curse myself. The wind picks up and blows out some of the paraffin lamps. This time I don’t doze off for the night ...

Shortly after sunrise Abraham arrives and together we walk back to the lodge. Just as we’re enjoying a close encounter with zebra, an impala gives us away by snorting at us and they all run off with thundering hooves.

“You never stop talking,” I tell Abraham.

And you never stop taking notes,” he laughs. □

**Map reference A7  
see inside back cover**

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# EXPLORING TULI

A solo visit to Tuli Safari Lodge gave PETRA VANDECASTEELE the chance to reconnect with nature and explore the bush on horseback

