

# Safari school

Has the Big Five checklist become the report card for far too many safari-goers? See four and score your holiday a B. Only spotted one? That is a definitely a D. **Mike Main** believes this is too often the case. To cure the problem and enrich times spent in the wild, here is one great solution: go back to class.



Wildguides workshops are aimed at any person who would like to increase their level of knowledge and awareness in the bush

**S**o, you've finally ticked the last one off your list: you've seen them all. Is that it? Is that Africa done? The truth is, you haven't even started.

I've lived in Africa for most of my life and there is a lot I now take for granted because it is always there: the big skies, the dramatic storms, the driving rain, the big bold sunsets: even the game is no longer a novelty. It can all get a little passé.

For the first-time visitor to Africa, things are quite the opposite. Everything is new, massive, extraordinary and utterly different. There is nothing like it anywhere else on earth.

Unfortunately, as visits to Africa are usually short and expensive, people sometimes feel that they

need to rate the holiday in order to satisfy themselves that they've got their money's worth. That's how we get to the Big Five checklist and, sadly, to how many travellers evaluate their safari. How many of them did they see? This disappointing reduction of an African visit to a numbers game is exacerbated by those who guarantee sightings of all the Big Five in a single day (of course you pay through the nose for the privilege) but the practice tends to raise general expectations and imply that such experiences are normal. They are not.

Africa is not at all like that. It is not a colossal zoo that one should visit with a checklist. It is, instead, an extraordinary array of vast and intricate living strands, interconnected and interdependent, woven into a



TULU SAFARI LODGE / WILDDGUIDES / NICK H

their empty vehicle was discovered in the distance... Approaching it full of fear, I was stopped in my tracks by the sight of five khaki-clad bottoms pointing to the sky. Closer examination revealed the guide and four clients on their knees in the track learning the wonders of the humble dung beetle. It was a lesson for me and a good example of how the small and apparently ordinary can be just as compelling and fascinating as a herd of buffalo.

I have seen visitors entranced by a young Bushman guide using a single stem of grass to probe and sequentially excavate the tunnel of a scorpion, gradually digging deeper until the animal was found and displayed to all on the guide's open hand.

This is the task of a professional guide: to take you, metaphorically by the hand, through this African wonderland and to share its myriad miracles.

Once I was with a Bushman at dawn, on the trail of an eland. When he saw the spoor he paused and, without any theatricals, pronounced that the animal was a male, relaxed, hungry, eating nearby and had passed this way the previous evening – all from the apparently cursory examination of a few footprints.

## For the first-time visitor to Africa, things are quite the opposite. Everything is new, massive, extraordinary and utterly different

I was at first awed and then cynical, yet this man was able to produce logical and irrefutable evidence for every single deduction. I was not only humbled but left amazed at the two fundamental skills possessed by this man that are so essential to understanding and enjoying Africa.

Firstly, he had a complete and detailed knowledge of the environment in which he lived. That understanding did not embrace just the names of the plants and animals but was a catholic knowledge of his universe and the biology of its inhabitants. He knew, for example, what time mice ventured from their homes, how the moon affected the feeding patterns of antelope and how the sun changed the colour of freshly turned soil. How did he acquire this knowledge? From his mentors perhaps, but much of it he would have learned for himself through careful and patient observation.

To his knowledge of the environment he added the second vital skill: the ability to see in a way that urban humans no longer do, with a clarity and detail that generally escapes us. He can also place his direct observations within the overall context of what he is following.

These skills are not beyond us – we are simply not used to exercising them. There was a time when Bushmen were regarded as specially and exclusively endowed with regard to their ability to track. It is not so. Research has shown that physiologically their senses are no better developed than ours; however, through constant practice, they have retained the ability to use them. We have not.

So, to really get the best out of a visit to Africa (or to anywhere, for that matter) we need to be able to look in context and to see in detail. If we can combine that with an improving knowledge of the natural environment, suddenly, the world changes and we get to share some of the real wonders.

Learning how to do this is not as difficult as it might seem. Whilst you are not going to become a Bushman tracker overnight, there are organisations that will speed the process for you. Just a few weekends ago I attended a Wildguides >>

dazzling complex of vibrant life. To seek out only the biggest and the most obvious is to miss all but a tiny fraction of what Africa is really about.

How does one access this hidden Africa?

No visitor, arriving for the first time, could possibly know what to expect, and so it is here that the knowledge, the training and the professionalism of the safari guide is so important; they become your eyes and must show you what to see and hear.

Many years ago, as the CEO of a large group that included a tourism company, I decided to make a field visit. To my dismay, the senior guide and clients were neither in camp, nor reachable by radio. With growing concern I arranged a search. Finally,

course in Botswana, organised jointly by Tuli Safari Lodge and the Okavango Guiding School (OGS) of Maun.

OGS is the premier guide training institution in Botswana and meets the highest accepted international standards. In partnership with Tuli Safari Lodge it also offers a special short course, of which my weekend visit was one. Such workshops are aimed at any person who would like to increase their level of knowledge and awareness in the bush without having to undertake full guide's training.

The purpose of the course was to allow us to experience the type of training undergone by modern professional safari guides in Botswana, and to not only teach us what skills are needed in guiding, but also how to use them. Besides the crucial lessons in understanding animals' body language, which are crucial to ensuring that encounters with the likes of lions and elephants are safe ones, we delved into everything from tracking to driving over rough terrain. Despite being anything but a novice to the bush, I found the whole process as exhilarating as it was fascinating. And it further enhanced my own appreciation of what it is to be in the African veld.

Having a heightened awareness undoubtedly adds to the quality of being outdoors. As Clifford Phillips, the senior professional guide, explained, you now question a sudden birdcall – something that may have been background noise previously – and you observe items that you may have simply stepped over without thinking in the past: a footprint, scat or a fallen branch. In the process you begin to piece together these disparate observations and soon it becomes possible to reveal hitherto hidden meaning. As he says: "Interpretation begins with observation."

Birds are curiously mobbing a bush. They may be doing so because an owl or a snake sits within.

Descending sand grouse are going to water. Follow and you'll find other animals there.

A giraffe, suddenly staring into the distance, has caught the attention of the impala who are also now looking that way too. Is a predator approaching?

An antlion has put its cone-shaped pit in the middle of a fresh elephant footprint and the tiny mound of excavated sand is still a darker colour, unbleached by the sun. It is at least twenty minutes since the elephant passed that way.

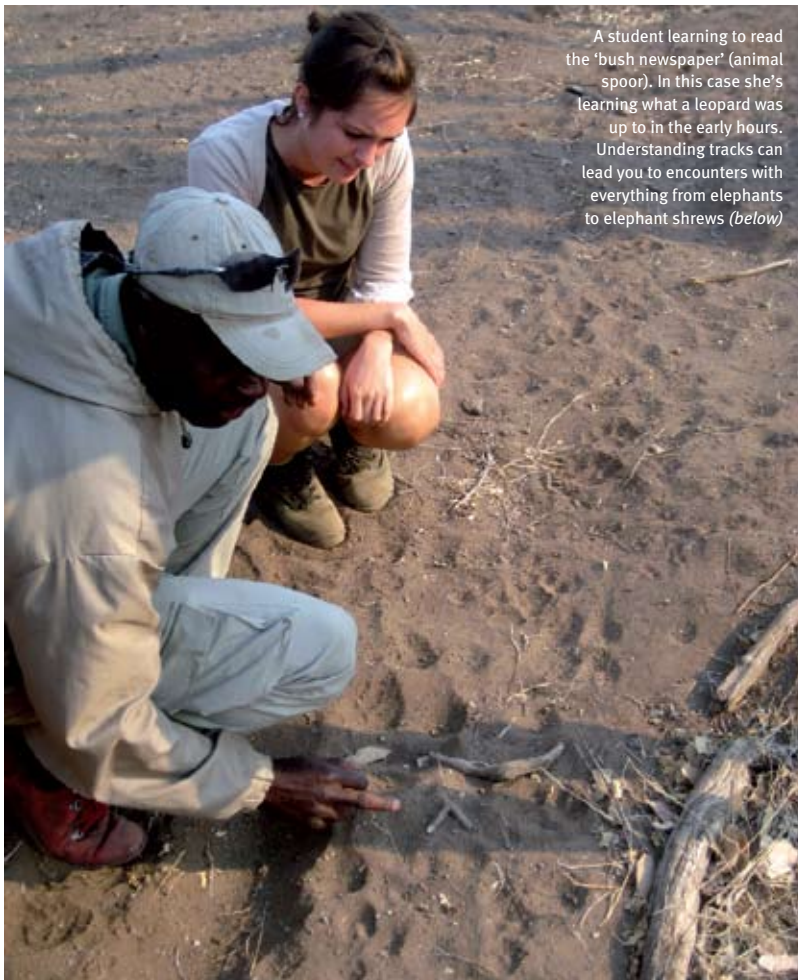
Ox-peckers calling in the distance alert the informed to the possible presence of buffalo.

The honeyguide tells of that fluid sweetness waiting to be taken.

Footprints are a picture but they are not the whole picture: the sounds, smells and actions of birds and animals are the street criers of the day – full of the latest news.

It's all interconnected, nothing exists in isolation  
Yes, it's possible to come to Africa, zip in to see the Big Five, tick Africa off your list and depart shortly thereafter. You'll even have lots to talk about at future dinner parties. But there is more to the continent's natural treasures than that. Having the skills and knowledge to unlock, or just better understand, the secret language of the bush can only enrich your time on safari. After all, enduring joy can only be found when there is a depth and richness within your African experience. 🐾

Mike Main attended the Wildguides course at Tuli Safari Lodge ([www.tulilodge.com](http://www.tulilodge.com)).



A student learning to read the 'bush newspaper' (animal spoor). In this case she's learning what a leopard was up to in the early hours. Understanding tracks can lead you to encounters with everything from elephants to elephant shrews (below)

Africa is an array of vast and intricate living strands, interconnected and interdependent, woven into a dazzling complex of vibrant life



TULI SAFARI LODGE ©

## WIN!

Tuli Safari Lodge is offering *Travel Africa* readers the chance to win a 2-for-1 Wildguides safari holiday in Botswana. Simply answer the question below and email your response to: [editor@travelfricamag.com](mailto:editor@travelfricamag.com) with CONTEST in the subject line.

Alternatively post your response to: CONTESTS, *Travel Africa* magazine, 4 Rycote Lane Farm, Milton Common, Oxfordshire OX9 2NZ, United Kingdom

**Question: What bird's call signals the possible presence of buffalo?**

The winner will be picked randomly from the contestants who have answered correctly. Deadline for entries is 28 February 2009.