

A Tale of Two Camps: a Journey Through the Okavango Delta

www.spearswms.com, 3 April 2019

Christopher Silvester *discovers an ethos of high-cost, low-impact safari tourism in Botswana's Jao and Vumbura Plains camps*

On my first ever game drive at Jao, within 20 minutes, we stop suddenly. Our female guide, T-Jay, has spotted a baboon up a tree, making an alarm call. Beneath the tree, some twelve feet away on my side of the track, lies a sleeping lioness and, a few feet beyond her, two sleeping male lions. T-Jay turns off the engine. The lioness barely bothers to notice us and her two teenage male cubs are entirely oblivious to our presence, their tails flicking intermittently to keep the flies away. We move the Land Rover forwards a couple of yards and now the lioness is even closer. She stretches and rolls her head back to look at me upside down. Her large yellow-orange eye seems to glare at me, but then she turns away, uninterested. Her teenagers need feeding every other day, T-Jay explains. Lions can sleep for between ten and 20 hours a day, depending on how well fed they are. There are more lions at Jao when it's dry, but right now in April, it is the start of the wet season, by which they mean not that it rains a lot but merely that the Okavango Delta is gradually being flooded.



Jao Camp, one of the best in Botswana's Okavango Delta, has undergone a rebuild and will re-open in June 2019. Jao Reserve comprises 65,000 hectares, and contains six camps, of which Jao is the premier. While retaining its main stilted area in the tree canopy, there will be two villas and five twin rooms with private plunge pools and decks. The new Jao Villas will accommodate four persons each and will offer a private vehicle, guide, chef, and butler.

My own visit to Jao (meaning peaceful place) in April 2018 still resonates. As we drive across a wooden bridge in a Land Rover Defender, T-Jay, explains that they never bother the animals, which, for the most part, remain oblivious. Indeed, they have little fear of being hunted by humans, since hunting was banned in Botswana a few years ago. If you were even to kill an animal accidentally, she says, 'boy, would you be in trouble.'

T-Jay, short for T-Jayanda, trained as a safari guide in 2005, worked at Jao in 2009, took some time out to work in Botswana's diamond mines as a dump truck driver, and then became as a freelance guide. Now back at Jao, she intends to stay.

The night noises start at around 6.45pm. Cicadas, toads, hippos, fruit bats, and reed frogs, which make a noise like a wind-chime. Over dinner, the guides talk about guests who lack common sense around animals. One guide had to restrain a female actress who wanted to get down from the Land Rover and

pet a lion – all because she had once performed in a production of *Cats* and believed she possessed a special empathy with all felines. Others want to wave their T-shirts and pose for selfies. ‘Do you want to be lion food?’ the guides will ask them.

T-Jay is great at spotting game from a distance. But on one drive I spot something before she does. A grey heron is locked in a struggle with a water snake, holding it in its beak, shaking it, dropping it, picking it up, and shaking it again. This lasts for several minutes as we observe through binoculars. Occasionally, the snake coils itself around the beak and appears to be about to wriggle free, but the heron’s persistent shaking pays off and the exhausted snake disappears inside the bird’s gullet.



Arriving back at camp there is someone to greet us with a chilled wet flannel and a glass of amaroula, a less sickly version of Bailey’s made from maroula nuts. Elephants and baboons, too, sometimes get drunk on its fermented fruit.

Jao is owned by David and Cathy Kays, and Kingsley Mgalakwe, who took a former hunting concession with a very basic camp and transformed it into a safari camp in 1999. Wilderness Safaris do some of the staff training and the marketing, but staff members are recruited by the owners. In the early days, some of the wood needed for construction was floated in. Now an army truck brings everything in to the back entrance of the camp, not across the wooden bridge used by guests.

Suppliers in Maun, the regional centre, provide lettuces, herbs and Swiss chard as well as the beef and venison (which are farmed). Otherwise, fruit and vegetables, and excellent wines, are imported from South Africa. The back-of-house operation is huge: logistics and infrastructure. There is a lot of co-operation with neighbouring properties. For example, Jao has a reverse osmosis water purification system and supplies the water for nearby camps. The new suites and villas will use Climate Wizard, an eco-friendly Australian cooling system, while self-igniting Calore stoves will provide heating during the colder months.

On a morning game drive, we get to experience the abundant bird life of the Delta. By 9.30 am the sun is already hot. Hammerkops. We stopped besides a watering-hole for some coffee and cookies. A crocodile breaks the surface of the water, just its eyes and brow visible, then a smaller crocodile, the sunlight catching its snout, then a flash of back. They are lurking in wait for catfish, their favourite meal. Meanwhile, sacred ibis are in flight overhead and a fish eagle is calling. The African fish eagle has the most common call in the Okavango. Strictly monogamous and highly territorial, both sexes incubate the eggs and take turns to forage for food. At the water’s edge there are long-toed plovers, blacksmith lapwings, and water diggers.

Driving through the bush, we scatter francolins and spurfowl, plentiful game birds, and while on a safari across water by *mokoro*, a type of dug-out canoe traditionally fashioned from a long straight tree, though more often today made from fibre-glass, and propelled forward by a pole, we are able to see

many birds up close, such as little bee-eaters, pale-breasted swallows, lilac-breasted rollers, and more fish eagles.



After a couple of days at Jao I am flown to another camp called Vumbura Plains. My new guide is Ron, who has 14 years' experience, seven of them with Wilderness Safaris. The Vumbura Plains concession, some 60,000 hectares, is part of a community area containing five villages. The Wilderness lease will be up for re-negotiation in 2021. It is located on the edge of the Delta, where game (buffalo, elephant, giraffe, zebra) comes in and goes out as it pleases. Compared to the old-school elegance of Jao, Vumbura Plains offers spacious suites with minimalist décor that reminded me of a Manhattan loft apartment.

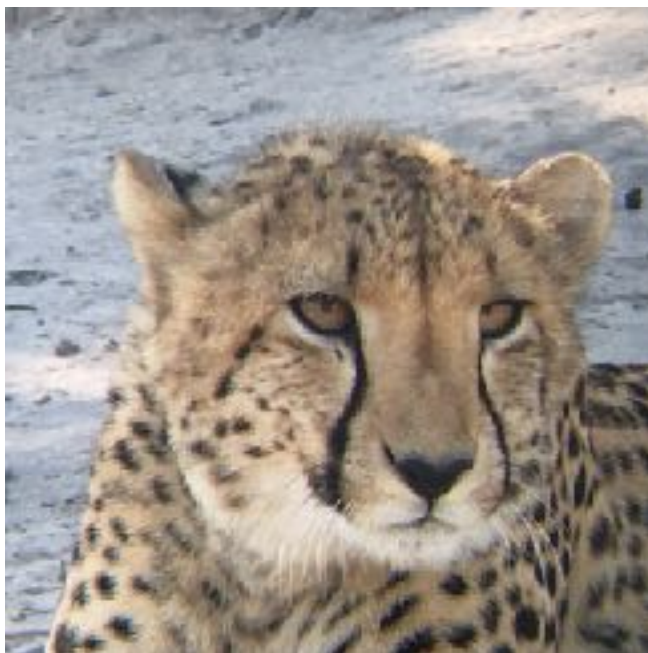
The staff at Vumbura North and South is around 80 and at Little Vumbura it is around 110. The camps embody Wilderness Safaris' ethos of high-cost, low-impact safari tourism.



On one game drive Ron finds a male lion who is sleeping by the side of the track, his belly very full. We turn off the track and into the scrub and before long we reach a place where another vehicle is already parked up, its passengers quietly observing the rest of the pride: three big males, two big females, two boys and two girls. The cubs inter-mate, Ron explains. They are a mother and daughter and a big daddy. The cubs inter-mate, Ron explains, and are suckled by both the adult females. A pride of lions is a formidable hunting force. One pride is named the Kubbu pride, after the native word for hippopotamus, because they once killed a hippo.



Later, we come across a collusion of three cheetahs, a mother and two boys. The cheetah is a critically endangered species, with only 7,000 left on the planet. It is the fastest but weakest of the big cats and its claws are permanently bared. Cheetahs will only hunt at night if the moon is full and they can avoid lions. For about 20 minutes this collusion waits in the shade of a tree, the mother sitting upright and alert, the two boys reclining, until all three move off to stalk an ostrich. Ron is able to get some great close-ups on my iPhone by holding it behind his binoculars, a feat I am unable to replicate. Before long, we meet up with our cheetahs again, just as they are tearing into the carcass of a baby impala. Their chins and whiskers are blood-smeared as they feed on the loins and hind legs first, these being the best meat.



On an afternoon game drive over water, aboard a Ron drives us into channels through a reed forest aboard a canopied, flat-bottomed boat with a powerful outboard that is capable of moving at quite a

lick. At first it is the birdlife that impresses: pied kingfishers and malachite kingfishers dart back and forth across our path through narrow channels, but then we reach more open water and pick up speed. We reach some more narrow channels and slow down again. Upon turning a corner we come across a large bull elephant feeding on papyrus rushes, cut our motor entirely, and stop a few yards away from him. He is not especially pleased to be disturbed. For several minutes he carries on chomping on the reeds, occasionally glancing in our direction, seemingly nonchalant, but then suddenly he turns towards us, raising up and flapping his big ears. It's time to retreat and head off to another spot to enjoy our sundowners. Later still, we enjoy a bush dinner under the stars, with Ron and the other guides discussing the constellations above – and the relative merits of English Premier League football teams, which the guides follow on satellite TV.

Africa Odyssey offers two nights each at Jao and Vumbura Plains, including air transfers from Maun, starting from £5200 per person sharing. International flights on BA from London to Maun starting from £1200 per person. For more information, visit www.africaodyssey.com, write to info@africaodyssey.com or call +44 (0) 20 8704 1216.