



Elephants are happy to call Mombo home

MOMBO CAMP IS aptly named, since 'Mombo' means 'Place of Plenty'. The jewel in the crown of Wilderness Safaris' operations in Botswana's Okavango Delta, it is managed by a young South African couple, Matt McCreedy and Robyn Dreyer (affectionately known as 'Mattman and Robyn'). Its nine rooms (wooden huts with stretched canvas roofs) contain the latest in luxury fixtures and fittings – voluminous beds, marble-topped wash basins, brass baths, retro double showers, private decks and plunge pools – making the camp deserving of its title as the Claridge's of the bush. There is a cocktail bar which serves craft gins and beers, and a restaurant which offers the best in South African meat and wines. This camp embodies Botswana's avowed values of high-quality, low-volume safari tourism.

But what we are here for is the abundance of game. Mombo is located on Chief's Island, 70 kilometres long and 15 kilometres wide, with rivers that flood all around it. It is a former royal hunting reserve (all hunting is now banned in Botswana, and plastic bags

can no longer be brought into the country), and boasts the nation's richest concentration of game.

My guide for the next couple of days is Ndebo, or 'Endy', a native Botswanan and a guide since 2000, and one of thousands in the Botswanan Guides Association. He has been at Mombo since the end of 2017. The camp employs seven guides, all of whom drive Toyota Land Cruisers with customised canopies. 'Careful – branches!' says Endy. This is to become a regular warning – we passengers need to lean in, in order to avoid being lashed by vegetation as we are driven along.

We've not been out for long on our first game drive in the afternoon when we come across a male black rhino that has wandered down to a watering hole. It is feeding on leaves, soft twigs and smaller plants. We park up and sit quietly as he approaches our vehicle. He sniffs the bumper, and one of our passengers whispers anxiously that he is going to headbutt us. But, after a minute more of sniffing, he wanders off.

Next, we see a pride of lions, including Big Boy, the alpha male, and two of his

brothers. Cubs of different ages suckle from either of the two females in the pride, helping ensure their survival. There are four prides of lions in the area. Endy tells us that Big Boy moves between all four.

The following morning we first come across a harem of impala. 'Hello, beautiful ladies,' says Endy. Then, at around 6.30am, we are told by walkie-talkie that a pack of wild dogs is headed towards the Mombo airstrip. We pull up at one end of the strip and spot a single male wildebeest. There are several giraffes at the other end of the airstrip, with some warthogs grazing alongside them. Suddenly, about a hundred yards to our left, a wild dog lollops onto the airstrip, followed by other members of its pack, 10 in all. They are being slowly followed by another one of Mombo's vehicles, and we drive our own vehicle up a little closer. The wild dogs are now all lying in the middle of the airstrip, scattered across an expanse of 30 yards. The alpha male is trying to climb aboard a female in oestrus, who is maintaining an attitude of sublime indifference. >>

GAME OVERLOAD

A day spent among the leopards, rhino and giraffe will show you why Mombo means 'place of plenty'

Words Christopher Silvester

» He keeps mounting her, failing to lock, then slipping off. After a few eager attempts, and registering her continued lack of interest, he wanders off and lies down. Within a couple of minutes, a foraging hyena wanders past our vehicle and gingerly approaches the pack, though keeping its distance. The wild dogs soon wander off on the other side of the airstrip, with the hyena following them at a discreet distance.

We head towards the far end of the airstrip, where we now see a male kudu among the giraffes and warthogs. There is a tower of 17 giraffes, including babies. 'Giraffic Park,' quips Endy. When they start running up the airstrip, we drive alongside them.

The guides sometimes like to hoodwink the guests. 'We've just seen some zebras hunting a hippo,' says the guide in a vehicle that pulls up alongside ours. With four lady guests in the back, he resembles a male impala with his harem.

Next, we come across a watering-hole. There are a pair of sacred ibis pecking the ground at the water's edge, some white-face duck, some spur-winged geese, a solitary wildebeest, some zebra, five warthogs, and no fewer than three hippos partially submerged in the water. 'This is a Mombo combo banquet,' says Endy.

Driving away, we nudge some road-running doves and spurfowl out of our path, see a crowned lapwing, and then, in the middle of the road ahead of us, Endy spots a large tortoise. It turns out to be a female leopard tortoise. We disembark and Endy picks her up. She weighs about 30 pounds, and we take turns to be photographed holding her. Endy then shows us the underside of her shell, known as the plastron, which is concave so as to allow a male tortoise to mount her more easily. We put her down in the grass at the side of the road. 'Bye-bye, Gorgeous,' says Endy (this is how he speaks to all the ladies).

Back at my hut, a troop of baboons is playing around underneath the raised structure and skittering across the hard, stretched fabric of the roof, while a large male baboon is cheekily slurping water from my plunge pool.

In the meadow facing my deck I can see an elephant feeding about 300

yards distant. Then, about 100 yards away, a group of four zebras, three of which are nuzzling together, while a fourth is lying on the ground and using its tail to flick dust across the annoying flies on its back. In the foreground, about 50 yards away, there is a bachelor herd of impala. A couple of the males face off and engage in a long staring match, before locking horns. It is all over in seconds, with one chasing the other away.

On our second late-afternoon drive, Endy takes us into a wooded area, where he spots a dead animal suspended from a tree. It turns out to be a half-eaten impala carcass, which has been dragged up into the branches by a now-absent leopard. We resolve to return later, and then we meet up again with the pack of 11 wild dogs, now on the hunt. We watch them pursue, first, a small family of wart hogs, who notice them in good time and easily outrun them. Next, they regroup and stalk a small herd of wildebeest, thinking to pick off a calf. From a distance of about 300 yards, the alpha male wildebeest faces them off. A black-sided jackal appears, eager to see whether the dogs will have any luck, and whether he might benefit. He howls for his mate, who duly responds with similar howls. Driving away in the opposite direction, we find the wild dogs overtaking us, this time in pursuit of a herd of impala, who also outrun them.

It's plainly not their evening, but it is most definitely ours. Returning to where the impala carcass was suspended in a tree, we spy a female leopard up in the branches, feeding. We shine a torch on her, but she carries on chewing, oblivious to our attentions. We are eventually forced to retreat by a cloud of mosquitoes.

Back at camp, over cocktails and dinner, I meet George Njunja James, the rhino monitor for Chief's Island, who joined Wilderness 14 years ago as a carpenter but has been working with rhino conservation for 12 years now, and counts Prince Harry as a friend. He has an army unit to protect him when out doing his stuff. Rhino used to be indigenous to Chief's Island, but were driven out. White rhino were re-introduced to this habitat in 2001, with black rhino re-introduced in



The accommodation at Mombo is so lush, the animals invite themselves in



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WE SPY A
LEOPARD
IN A TREE.
EATING



CROOKES AND JACKSON

2003. There are now close to 300 rhino, mainly white, and George believes they need to re-introduce some more black rhino from South Africa and Zimbabwe. He is patriotic and proud of what Botswana has achieved in the field of conservation under the presidential leadership of the recently retired Ian Seretse Khama, who came from the same village as George.

As he escorts me back to my room at 9.45pm, I spot two flashing eyes in the darkness. George's torch picks out a female jennet, who stops and stares at us for 20 seconds, briefly fascinated, before heading off to find some rats or mole rats. It has been a long day, crammed full of game. I am whacked, and I must be up tomorrow morning at 5.30 for another early morning game drive with Endy before packing my bags and heading for the airstrip. Truly, Chief's Island is the place of plenty. 📍

Wilderness Safaris Mombo Camp, Botswana (from £4,513 per person for two nights, all-inclusive)
africaodyssey.com
wilderness-safaris.com