



Chobe Surprises

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"It's going to be really hot," a knowledgeable friend advised. "Boiling, in fact. But you should have great elephant sightings."

All I could do was take his word for it. After all, Dave used to be a full-time guide in Botswana and, as he is now running a travel company specialising in sub-Saharan safaris, I figured he ought to know.

The opportunity to re-visit the Chobe National Park had been a dream of mine for 15 years. It had poured with rain when I first visited the area, and I left as quite possibly the only person not to see a single Chobe elephant.

I need not have worried this time round. Kasane Airport is bathed in sunlight as I arrive. Other than some cumulous clouds, the forecast for the next few days is good. "We've had great sightings," Dikeledi Robson, one of the all-female guide team from Chobe Game Lodge, tells me. "And," she says, pointing at the green shoots as we drive along a dry, dusty road towards the lodge, "a first little drop of rain."

The wheels of our vehicle churn heavily as we drive through the Kalahari sands of the woodland of Zambezi teak. We are travelling in the heat of the day, and few animals are out and about. I spot the odd group of impalas and a family of warthogs here and there, feeding on the browse in

the relatively cool shade. Clasp a bottle of cold water between both hands, I realise that Dave was right: it is pretty hot.

Checking in at Chobe Game Lodge, I revel in the blast of cool air emanating from the air conditioning system before changing into shorts and heading for the jetty.

I needn't have worried about seeing elephants. As our boat skims along the river's edge we see several herds, numbering hundreds, coming down to drink, play and bath. One cannot help but smile when observing the antics of some of the youngsters. Dribbling around and in-between mothers' and aunts' legs, little trunks waving in the air, the calves are unmistakably happy and excited.

But the river is not the only place to see elephants in Chobe. A few days later, based at the delightful Chobe Under Canvas tented camp, we come across elephants deep in the bush. At night, inside my tent as a sweet breeze wafts through the fly screen that separates me from the African wilderness, I hear hyenas calling in the distant darkness. It is pure magic.

My third stop is Muchenje Safari Lodge, which is situated West, in the forest reserve. This area is less busy, since most safari lodges operate outside the eastern gate of the national park.

Nature sometimes yields, and sometimes she doesn't. Joined by a young British couple in the vehicle, we don't see much that day and, shortly before dusk, leave the park through the Ngoma gate. Just as we resign ourselves to heading back to the lodge for (an admittedly delicious) dinner, we spot a small herd of elephants making their way across the tarred road, hurrying in the direction of the park. We stare with open mouths as, out of seemingly nowhere, a little baby warthog appears, having veered away from the rest of his family, to give chase. A major rumpus ensues. Trumpeting and running fast across the tar, the elephants are completely spooked by this little guy. But all's well that ends well: the colossal creatures eventually calm down and head deep into the woodland as the little piglet rejoins his family.

Who knows why a tiny little warthog would want to run after Earth's largest land mammal. Chobe is indeed a wild and unpredictable place.

For more information visit www.chobegamelodge.co.bw, www.andbeyond.com, and www.muchenje.com.