

chobe

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LAST GLOW: The setting sun looms in amber over the Chobe Reserve.

UP CLOSE WITH NATURE

Be in the thick of it all at Under Canvas wild campsite and interact with diversity under the sun, writes FRANSJE VAN RIEL

TUCKED away deep into the teak woodland, at one of the Chobe National Park's designated sites, @Beyond's Chobe Under Canvas camp has got to be one of the most intimate wildlife spots I've ever seen.

Nestled in the lap of nature's luxury, the small, semi-circle of Meru tents overlooks a dining area that pretty much consists only of a sturdy wooden table beneath a canvas canopy. That's it. Ah for simplicity! But, lest you'd be mistaken, the authenticity of what resembles a rustic safaris of olden days is in fact a little treasure trove of luxuries.

The Chobe Under Canvas camp changes its location every six days, and there are no more than five tents at any one time, with each setting being equally pristine. Being unfenced, it is a wonderful way to



WARM WELCOME: Joy and Alice, along with other staff, ensure guests are well taken care of.

have as little impact on the bush as possible, while keeping the sense of adventure each new area provides.

I arrive in the heat of the day,

just after lunch in late November. The air is thick and laden, furnace-like, but there is not a cloud in the sky or any promise of rain. It seems so typical of the literature I have read about Botswana's magnificent wilderness; hot, beautiful and relentless.

A cool hand towel and a colourful welcome drink later, I join Robson, the camp manager, for a brief chat before he guides me to my tent. Following him inside, I glance over the simple, yet lovely interior. The bed is massive and is flanked by nightstands supporting lanterns running on solar energy, mosquito repellent and a flask of drinking water. There is also a chest of drawers and a small table and chairs.

The en suite bathroom houses a canvas cupboard with open-faced compartment drawers and a hanging rail for my clothes, and a towel



STILLNESS: Seeking shade from the hot African sun.

rack with plenty of fluffy towels. There are even two bathrobes. Explanations how to operate the bucket shower, with warm water being provided twice a day, follow suit. There is also a flush toilet and hand basin with bath products.

Under any other circumstances I would have loved to spend a good chunk of time inside the tent, making notes, reading a book or just lounging and listening to the sounds of the bush, but with temperatures rising in the late 30s and early 40s, it is simply too hot to stay in camp. And so, the other guests and I meet with our guide for the afternoon game drive.

Chief Marota turns out to be one of those people one never forgets. A naturally engaging conversationalist, bearing an unmistakable twinkle in his eye, Chief is both extremely knowledgeable and



LETHARGIC: Thrilling sightings of lions during a drive.

entertaining. Virtually every animal, tree, bush or bird is subject to a colourful story or anecdote. We are hanging on to his every word.

Leaving open scrubland dotted by woolly caper bushes, we enter a stunning area of teak woodland supported by soft Kalahari soil and, humming along the road, I hold on to the seat as the vehicle pulls to an abrupt halt. It takes a fraction of a second for my mind to process that we have unwittingly come across a pack of wild dogs tugging at an impala carcass.

The feeding frenzy on the still largely intact carcass, Chief explains, indicates that the dogs have made their kill only minutes earlier. Secretly, I am glad that we didn't see the kill. As if given a secret signal, the dogs are suddenly off, running towards the Chobe River. In only a few short minutes, they are no more than a distant collection of dark shapes, lingering on the floodplain.

A crackling campfire welcomes us back and, after a quick change into long pants, we sit by the fire with a glass of wine in hand before sitting down at the dinner table. The privacy of dining with a handful of people, surrounded by the soft glow of paraffin lamps in the darkness of the Chobe bushveld, is pretty unique.

Leaving the Chobe Under Canvas camp on the morning of the third day, my next destination is Muchenje Safari Lodge, a more traditional safari lodge that is built on an escarpment just outside the national park. As intimate and rustic as the Under Canvas camp is, I admit that it's pretty nice to enjoy the relief that air-conditioning and a ceiling fan provide into my room.

Taking a short night drive after dinner, we encounter a massive herd of buffalo heading down the gorge upon which Muchenje is privately perched. From what I can gather with only a sliver of the moon visible, there must be a good few hundred of them.

We turn back on to the national road to return to the lodge, and just as I think the day's excitement is over, our guide points to two lionesses, lying as if without a care in the world a few metres from the tarmac.

It seems a ludicrous situation; an old squeaky sedan car overtakes us and just carries on driving past. Of course, we are driving in the Forest Reserve, where wild animals



CAMP SERVICE: Staff prepare breakfast in the centre of the campsite before exploration drives.

We saw a pride of lions which suddenly exploded and, like arrows, they bolted forward, running past every side of our car

are free to roam wild. Still, it's the first time I've seen lions in combination with traffic lights and road markers.

Once back inside my room, the sound of rumbling thunder rolls closer by the minute. I flinch a little as daggers of lightening fill the night air shortly later, followed by fierce thunder.

Perhaps not altogether unsurprisingly, it rains the next morning. Looking through the wet-stained window down the mountain slope, I spot a family of warthogs and a few kudu traipsing down the valley in the pouring rain. What a

different world Chobe is today.

I wonder if we can even go out, but any concerns I may have are replaced by ponchos and blankets. The suggestion is to have a hearty, warm breakfast first, then head out for a full day's drive.

It's on this far western stretch of the Chobe riverfront that I notice the first baobab tree towering over the bush. Unlike the busier eastern side, zebras, too, make their first appearance. Snuggled warmly beneath my poncho, with my camera securely dry on my lap, I sit back, wondering what we are likely to see in this weather.

About half an hour's drive later ahead of us, dashing and swerving against the backdrop of a dark and broody grey sky, I see countless dark flitting shapes. Upon closer observation, they are carmine bee-eaters, hunting termites as they open their wings to take to the air.

Forgetting the rain, I pull back the poncho over my head. I don't think I have ever seen that many birds in flight at one time in my life. Ascending like helicopters, thousands of termites take to the air almost simultaneously, only for a vast number of them to be snatched up by the swooping carmines. It's a scene from another world.

On our way back to the lodge, we find a good-looking pride of lions



BRIGHT PATH: Lanterns light the way. Inside each tent, solar-powered lanterns are supplied.

on the floodplain. The juveniles appear alert, watching the movements of pigeons almost playfully until the dominant lioness, although heavily pregnant, signals that something has caught her attention in the riverine grass.

Suddenly, the pride explodes and, like arrows, lions are bolting forward, running past every side of our car. Fortunately for the warthog, the lioness' attack was ill-timed.

It's time to leave the next morning. There isn't a hint of any clouds and once again it's sunny and hot. Rather reluctantly, I start to pack my assembly of shorts and T-shirts, and dress into more formal, city clothes.

Kasane International Airport, small as it is, is literally packed with international visitors. There are more people inside the tiny terminal building than what I have seen over the last few days.

Goes to show that there are still some pretty intimate places in Chobe left.

● For more information or reservations on Chobe Under Canvas and Muchenje Safari Lodge, see www.andBeyond.com and www.muchenje.com



TERMITE EATERS: Carmines out after a refreshing rain.



IN CONTACT: Guests can enjoy a treetop view from the deck.