

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
 A
 LINYANTI
 LION



IMAGES: Lauren McShane

Here in the heart of Botswana's Linyanti region, LAUREN MCSHANE looks beyond these majestic creatures and discovers who truly holds the true magic of this remote wilderness.

I

AM BOLT UPRIGHT AT 2AM, woken by the sound of a nearby lion. Here on the southern banks of the Linyanti River, transparent mesh is all that separates me from the starry black night and as I eye a giant tree's silhouette above my tent, I remember exactly where I am. Heart thudding in my chest and too alarmed to move beneath the white duvet, I hold my breath as I hear a second lion calling to the first. Can they smell me? Do they know I'm here? If I turn my head on the pillow, will I see them watching me in my 'star bed'? All it takes is an elephant trumpeting in distress as a lion tries to take a calf down and I've jumped into the adjoining canvas tent where I listen to the symphony of Botswana's wild until dawn breaks.

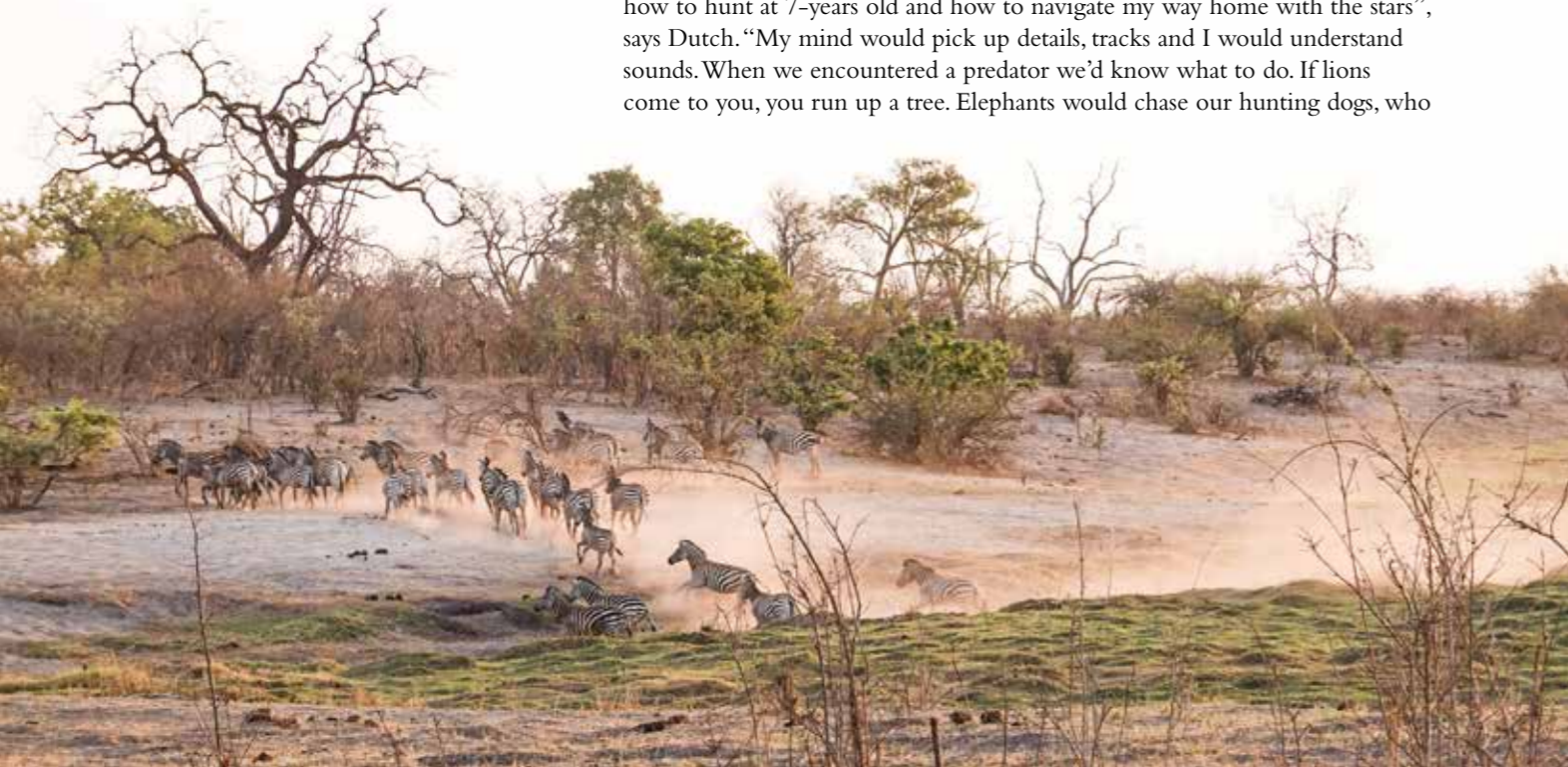
That same morning, my day began when I followed the tracks of a lion on foot with our two guides, James '007' Tsietsi and Dutch Kasale. With a hint of wild basil in the air and the feel of a leadwood tree trunk rubbed smooth by an elephant, I size up a lion's paw prints against my own feet. Armed with rifles they've never had to use, Dutch scans the sandy trail for tracks, while James keeps his eyes on the path ahead and we follow instructions to walk silently. Any crunching of dry leaves, snapping of fallen branches or even the click of a camera may alert animals nearby to our presence.

"Never Run", warns James in our safety briefing. Even if faced by an elephant mock charging, we're told to stand our ground, whether it's behind our guide or behind a fallen tree. I regularly scan the terrain for fallen trees and nervously find very few. "We want to steer clear of breeding herds with calves and will try and approach male elephants instead. Unlike the elephant's telltale warning signs, the buffalo gives none before charging so we're all afraid to encounter a lone bull in the bush," says James. Despite walking through one of the wildest places on earth, I feel completely safe. One whiff of an animal's urine, a single call or a gentle graze in the sand and both guides instinctively know where an animal is and where its headed.

"I had to walk 12km to school each day and sometimes begged my parents to let me take the donkey, telling them I was sick and it was too hot. I learnt how to hunt at 7-years old and how to navigate my way home with the stars", says Dutch. "My mind would pick up details, tracks and I would understand sounds. When we encountered a predator we'd know what to do. If lions come to you, you run up a tree. Elephants would chase our hunting dogs, who



Previous pages: the Giau Pass is a high mountain pass in the Dolomites in the province of Belluno in Italy; opposite, clockwise from top left: main street of Cortina d'Ampezzo; Sorapis Lake; dish of *Casunziei*; mountains near Cortina d'Ampezzo; cattle resting in a field surrounded by trees



would then return to us, so you would always get over a fallen tree,” says Dutch with an air of relaxed confidence.

He tells us how the Bushmen would put poison from moth lava on the tips of their arrows when hunting. When shooting prey, they wouldn't follow it as it would run further away. Instead they would wait for the tranquiliser to kick in before it dropped dead only 500m away.

Swapping the dusty trails for shallow swamps, we're floating past the blue water lily in a mokoro, a traditional canoe, and I'm convinced there is no place more tranquil on earth. I resist the urge to skim the water with my fingertips as tired sunlight dances on the surface. Our trusty polers, Kemofilwe Keabetswe, a Khoi man, Morgan Motsamai, an Etsha man of the Delta and Botsang Keagile, a San man from Eretsha reassure us that this water is too shallow for crocodiles or hippos.

“When pollinated, the lily submerges to form a fruit the size of onion. The root would be cooked like a potato and cooked with beef”, explains Morgan. “My parents would pull out the flower to tell the depth of the water and used the stem like a straw to drink water. Our fathers would refresh themselves covering their heads with lily pads in the heat and also use them to keep their caught fish fresh.

When dried and pounded, the leaves were used medicinally for fire blisters [burns] and high blood pressure.”

“Our forefathers lived nomadic lives and tied big bundles of papyrus to a log to form a raft and use it as transport,” says Kemofilwe. While they would eat papyrus like sugar cane, sucking the sweet juice out and spitting the fibre out, he points out that now the water level is too low which would make it very bitter.

Back at our glamping-style expedition camp, I wash off the dusty day in my alfresco bucket shower with a jugful of allotted water for the day, and I get a taste of a bygone era of safari goes without running water. From my deck, I watch herds of buffalo, zebra and elephants migrate inward to the marshlands in the honey glow of fast approaching dusk. Turns out we never found the lion we were tracking on foot, but the guides were sure it was one who visited our camp that same night.

Here in the Linyanti with James and Dutch at the helm, there is never a dull moment. “I didn't say it was a wild dog. I said it could be a warthog or a wild dog and you said, wild dog”, says one half of the brotherly duo, James. Without a moment's hesitation, Dutch replies “I wanted to support you.” A warthog scurrying through the bush sends

THE ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

Wildlife viewing is good all year-round, but the best time to visit Botswana's Linyanti Region, Okavango Delta and most parks is from May to September, during the dry, winter season when temperatures are more moderate.

WHERE TO STAY

Linyanti Expedition Camp is open between May and October. It's built sustainably with minimal impact on the environment.

africanbushcamps.com

WHAT TO DO

Add a Community and Conservation Safari onto your trip. Visit nearby villages and be a part of conservation project's ABC Foundation. You can request to keep your guide while visiting multiple camps in Botswana. This really enhances the experience.

africanbushcampsfoundation.org

COSTS

Linyanti Expedition Camp rate per night ranges from \$546- \$790 per person per night. (Rates incl accommodation, meals, drinks, laundry, all game drives, mokoro trips, walking safaris)

TRAVEL TIPS

Botswana is a malaria region, so consult your local travel clinic before visiting. Pack lightweight cotton clothing in unobtrusive colours, comfortable walking shoes, sunblock and a hat.



GETTING THERE

•• **FLY** SAA flies direct to several destinations in Botswana daily with codeshare partner Airlink. Visit **flysaa.com**