

Africa

Killer views: Botswana's thrilling new safari spot is not for the faint-hearted

The remote, unspoilt Mababe region is wild Africa at its best, full of prowling lions on the hunt. This is the real deal, says Sue Watt

I was parked up in a hot, dusty truck with wildlife film-maker Russell MacLaughlin, looking back and forth between a huge herd of (notoriously unpredictable) Cape buffalo, and eight lions from the Chobe pride lurking nearby.

Among the latter group were the Golden Boys, two brothers who were everything you imagine a lion to be: all rippling muscles, vivid amber eyes, and voluminous manes that swayed with every step as they sussed out their options for attack.

They had plenty of choice. Russell's drone had revealed one of Africa's biggest herds of buffalo, a solid black line around three miles long and roughly six animals deep, looking like an army of giant ants storming the plains of Botswana's Mababe Depression.

"I'd guess that's about 12,000 buffalo," he said. "The lions are just looking for the right one to take off..."

Nature's eternal feud between buffalo and lion plays out almost daily in Mababe's harsh dry season. This new safari destination lies between the eastern fringes of the Okavango Delta and Chobe National Park, a 40-minute helicopter flight from Maun. A former hunting area, the community-owned concession switched to photographic tourism in July last year, with Wilderness Mokete Camp having exclusive access to its 193 square miles of vast plains, marshes and mopane woodlands.

Russell has worked in wild places on every continent, filming documentaries for the BBC, National Geographic and Netflix, among others. "Mababe is special," he said. "I came here for a week and I've stayed for three years. It's the Holy Grail of Botswana wildlife."

It wasn't always like this. The Depression was once a vast, ancient lake that had gradually dried up. From 2007, the movement of tectonic plates and earthquakes shifted the flow of the Mababe River and the swell of the Okavango floods, creating a whole new eco-system. Particularly from August to November, when all around is dust, parched earth and choking heat, this expansive basin sustains a heady mix of wildlife on its now permanent, nutrient-rich wetlands, drawing huge herds of buffalo and elephant along with formidable prides of lions. In the dry season, it's not a place for the squeamish.

"I've seen one pride kill 11 buffalo in a single hunt," Mokete's head guide Vasco Tebalo told me. "People think they want to see a kill, but it's a tough watch. Some guests have been in tears."

In 18 years of writing about Africa, I'd never witnessed a kill: I wondered how I might react.

I was soon given a taste of the answer. Five minutes into our game drive, the stench of rotting meat led us to the first of three elephants we would see that had died naturally from old age and exhaustion. This exquisite, intelligent



▲ Butter wouldn't melt: sister lions of the Chobe Pride take a post-prandial snooze

animal had now become a free feast for hungry hyenas. "They've pretty much cleaned her out," our guide Jonah Seboko said, explaining the gaping hole by her ribs. Flies were buzzing inside and with masses of squabbling vultures and gawky marabou storks, hyenas were doing their job as nature's bin men, clearing up the carcass bit by smelly bit.

Nearby lay the corpse of an unlucky hyena. "She'd probably gone inside the elephant and didn't hear the lions coming," Jonah suggested. Unsavoury in life, they're even more so in death, all bloated, black and bloody with a stomach-churning stink.

Still, there was beauty here among the blood and gore. As the sun rose, we

▲ Safe and sound: Mokete Camp is an oasis of calm after the raw drama of the safari

were treated to a serene, almost surreal murmur of thousands of robin-sized, red-billed queleas swirling above us in clouds, sounding like waves lapping sand. We saw myriad antelopes grazing together on golden plains, from impala and dainty steenboks to shiny black sable and roans with sweeping horns, along with a 300-strong herd of russet-coloured tsessebe, known as Bush Ferraris for their ability to run up to 55 miles per hour.

On the marsh edge, giraffes drank awkwardly, legs splayed to reach the water, and elephants mooched around, shuffling their babies between them. The six lion cubs of the Mokete pride played mischievously while mum looked on and seven wild dogs, all uniquely patterned in shades of black, brown and gold, rested by the roadside.

But buffalo were never far away. Jonah spotted a thin black line on the horizon. As we got closer, some of the 3,000-strong herd encircled our Land Cruiser. Regarded as the most dangerous of Africa's Big Five, they simply stood and stared in an intimidating, almost silent stand-off. The only noise came from a female braying quietly away from the throng.

"Perhaps she's the mother of that calf we passed," Jonah whispered, referring to the remains of a tiny buffalo we'd seen beside an old lioness crunching its ribs, her jaws and paws smothered in breakfast bloodstains.

Suddenly, a warthog popped out of the grasses, spooking a buffalo. They all started running, braying loudly, their thundering hooves kicking up the dust and disturbing flocks of cattle egrets.

"It's just a mass reaction," Jonah said calmly, sensing our concern. "When one buffalo runs, they all run and they'll ask questions later."



▲ Safe and sound: Mokete Camp is an oasis of calm after the raw drama of the safari

I'd never been a huge fan of the lumpy, grumpy Cape buffalo, but now I saw a certain allure in their uniquely shaped and patterned horns, their slow, steady marching, and in the power and speed of their frenzied stampedes.

Mokete Camp is the perfect antidote to Mababe's often intense interactions. It's calm and soothing in natural tones with friendly staff, mostly from the local village. Our spacious suite had a plunge pool and views of the stars at night, thanks to ceilings that slide open above the bed. It may not be as luxuri-

Essentials

Yellow Zebra Safaris (yellowzebrasafaris.com) offers a four-night Botswana itinerary from £4,229pp, based on two sharing, featuring a one-night B&B at Grays Eden in Maun, and three nights at Wilderness Mokete all-inclusive in the Mababe Depression

The price includes game drives, walking safaris and helicopter transfers between Maun and Wilderness Mokete. International flights not included



▲ Cool water: mother and baby are safe for now, but lions wait for their prey near isolated watering holes

HIGH CAMP: BOTSWANA'S BEST NEW OPENINGS



Maxa

Opened in March in the north-eastern Okavango Delta, this laid-back camp has just five tented suites, a natural swimming pool, and hammocks and sun loungers overlooking the Maxa Lagoon popular with birds and hippos. It's ideal for dug-out canoeing, walking safaris and fishing. From £525, all-inclusive; kerdowneybotswana.com



Grays Eden

An ideal stop-over before or after safaris, Grays Eden raised the benchmark for luxury accommodation in Maun, the gateway to the Okavango Delta, when it opened last year. Its five villas and seven cottages have a Greek Island feel, decked out in shades of blue and white with bougainvillea in the extensive gardens. From £220, B&B; grayseden.com



Mbamba

Mbamba opened in April as a sister camp to Jack's Camp in the Makgadikgadi Pans, with a similar "old-world" safari style: elegant suites with mahogany furniture, antiques and artefacts in the main area. It's in the northern Okavango Delta, known for its excellent wildlife sightings. From £745, all-inclusive; naturalselection.travel



Sediba Sa Rona

This highly anticipated new property opens in March 2026 on the site of the former Khwai River Camp, one of Botswana's first camps to focus on photo tourism more than 30 years ago. Along with a wellness spa and swimming pool, it will have 15 luxury tents overlooking the river, which draws prolific wildlife. From £476, full-board; desertdelta.com



Monachira

Situated in Moremi Game Reserve, Monachira opened in May with 10 en-suite tents in woodlands overlooking the floodplains. As well as game drives, birders will love the boating safaris to the nearby heronry where thousands of birds come to nest (September to December). From £690, all-inclusive; machabasafaris.com. All prices are per person, per night