

# See the smaller things on a slow safari

Forget bush planes and racing from camp to camp – go at a leisurely pace and you will experience much more than the Big Five, says Sue Watt

Over four days, we had been following Saxwapa's tracks to no avail. At the end of Botswana's rainy season, his huge leonine paw prints on the sandy roads around the Moremi Game Reserve would disappear once he had wandered onto the plains full of tall, dew-kissed grasses that obscured any lions prowling nearby. But we still had time to find him – one of the many benefits of our "slow safari".

Instead of jumping on bush planes every couple of days and flitting between camps and parks in a safari version of speed-dating, my partner Will and I were spending six days in just one place: Khwai Leadwood, a new luxury tented camp from African Bush Camps (ABC), a half-hour flight from Maun, gateway town to the Okavango Delta.

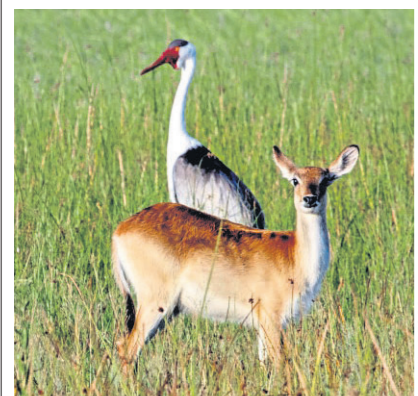
ABC is actively encouraging longer stays of four nights or more at its 17 properties in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia. "The usual two-night stay doesn't do justice to a place," said Beks Ndlovu, the safari company's founder. "We like guests to see where they can



## Essentials

Far & Wild Travel (01768 603715; farandwild.travel) offers a tailor-made tour with five nights' all-inclusive at Khwai Leadwood and one night B&B at the Sedia hotel, Maun, from £6,199 per person sharing. The price includes all domestic and international flights. From April 1 to November 30, a 30-minute scenic flight with Helicopter Horizons (helicopterhorizons.com) is also included on stays of three or more nights

◀ Stay put: Khwai Leadwood camp exudes 'a soothing sense of calm'



WILL WHITFORD

make a difference to the challenges and projects in our areas." Last year, he co-founded the Africa Change Makers movement (africachangemakers.org) in a bid to protect conservation and community projects from the economic fallout of the pandemic.

Khwai Leadwood lies within the community-owned Khwai concession. With abundant wildlife on the doorstep, a range of activities and a friendly team, it has all the ingredients needed for a slow safari. Lying beside the eponymous river and a grove of ancient leadwood trees, the solar-powered camp has just seven rooms and blends the contemporary with the traditional, including basketwork made by women from the community and antiques such as a gramophone and old binoculars adorning the lounge.

The candlelit boma, which has tables set around a firepit, hosts sizzling braais and make-your-own-pizza dinners while sunsets cast a fiery hue in reflections on the river and swimming pool. Animals wander around the unfenced camp, but guests are advised not to do so, lest they encounter elephants, crocodiles or Henry the resident hippo.

From the air, you truly appreciate the vastness of the Okavango: when the floods arrive from Angola, the

◀◀ Out and about: on unhurried game drives, Sue Watt encountered animals including reedbuck and wattled crane

▶ Air time: a helicopter trip revealed the vastness of the Okavango Delta

▶▶ Pride of place: Saxwapa the lion was finally spotted in the Moremi Game Reserve



world's largest inland delta spans nearly 6,000 square miles. "It's green and soggy today, but from June this area will all be water," said Matt Cocker, our pilot from Helicopter Horizons, on a scenic flight from the camp. With doors removed for unobscured photography, our four-seater chopper was tiny and breezy. We circled around snaking water channels, above giraffes browsing acacias and giant crocs basking on sandbanks. From above, the distinctive white rings resembling lavatory seats on the backsides of waterbucks seemed even more conspicuous and the tusks of elephants shone like sabres in the sun.

We noticed the smaller things on our

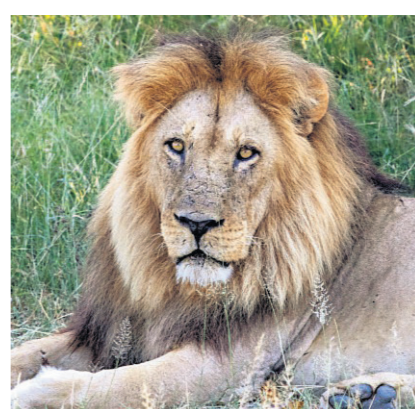
Tiny painted frogs clung to reeds and malachite kingfishers flashed exuberant orange and blue

mokoro trip, drifting silently along the inky-black Sable Alley Channel in fibreglass versions of the traditional wooden dugout canoe. Waterlilies brushed our boat and tiny painted frogs clung to reeds, while dragonflies fluttered around and little malachite kingfishers flashed exuberant orange and blue against stormy grey skies.

On unhurried drives around our concession and neighbouring Moremi, we had seen lone bull elephants and breeding herds mooching around the plains. Zebras and antelopes, including reedbuck, lechwe and impala, provided ample fodder for predators – although waterbucks weren't popular. "They smell so musty that lions just ignore them," said our guide, Kutlwano Banda. On night drives we spotted hyenas, hares and a rare African wildcat, and we would often be serenaded by bubbling kassinas – tiny frogs that make a melodic popping noise similar to a xylophone.

Banda grew up in the nearby village of Khwai. On our visits, he seemed to know everyone and pointed out his childhood home and his auntie's shop adorned with waterlily murals. "Before tourism, there was nothing here – just people living in mud houses," he said.

Today, through tourism activities, donations and lease fees from safari operators, including ABC, the



community benefits from solar power, a mobile health clinic and a primary school and kindergarten. ABC's latest initiative is a comprehensive training programme for female guides – a rare breed in Africa – to help empower local women.

Our slow safari gave us time to learn about birds with Banda, particularly at Waterlily Pan, where the water bubbled like champagne – unromantically caused by rising methane gas from dung disturbed by hippos. It became our favourite spot as we snapped away at reflections of egrets, herons and pied kingfishers, watched hamerkop storks taking rides on semi-submerged hippos, and a

pin-tailed whydah fanning his long tail in a flamboyant courtship dance.

Some days, we would simply enjoy our camp, luxuriating in a lie-in and relaxing by the pool. The rainy season's long grasses meant walking safaris were unsafe; instead, we would stroll around camp with Banda, taking in the birds and trees and the soothing sense of calm that Khwai Leadwood exudes.

"The baboons are complaining," Banda said, amid distant panicky squeals on one of our morning drives around Moremi. "There must be predators around."

He was right. Fresh prints eventually led us to two lions, one with a bloodstained mane and an older one with a gammy eye. Later, we spotted two brown ears moving through tall grasses. They belonged to a gorgeous leopard with ice-blue eyes, which nonchalantly crossed our path.

Finally, we found Saxwapa panting heavily in the shade near Dombro Pan, his tawny stomach rising and falling with each breath. We stayed with him, watching him quietly, until he eventually walked away. His huge paws kicked up the scent of wild sage and his luxuriant dark mane swayed with every step, reminding me that all you need for such special moments is a good guide, patience – and time.

## FIVE OF THE BEST SLOW SAFARIS

### Founders Camp Marataba, Marakele National Park, South Africa

The exclusive-use Founders Camp in Marataba, within Marakele National Park, combines both relaxing luxury and thrilling first-hand conservation experiences. Wannabe Attenboroughs can join in monitoring and tracking collared cheetah, compiling individual elephant identikit, helping with nocturnal wildlife counts under a full moon, and walking to the beautifully remote Star Camp. Or you could just take in the dramatic views of the Waterberg mountains, drift along the languid Matlabas River by boat, and enjoy

yoga, swimming and game drives from Founders Camp. *Aardvark Safaris (01980 849160; aardvarksafaris.com) offers four nights at Founders Camp and three at Star Camp from £4,636pp all-inclusive for four sharing, including flights*

### ▶ El Karama Lodge, Laikipia, Kenya

Take the family on safari to El Karama in the foothills of Mount Kenya. While you are relaxing by the eco-pool, walking or watching wildlife, your children can attend Bush School where activities include beadwork and making paw-print casts. Older children can enjoy horse riding and patrolling with rangers. After game



drives with children's guides, enjoy a night of fly-camping with suspended tree tents for the children. *Far & Wild Travel (01768 603715; farandwild.travel) offers one night in Nairobi, private road transfer, and five nights at El Karama from £8,549 all-inclusive for*

### a family of four (horse riding and spa treatments cost extra), excluding flights

### Bomani Tented Camp, Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe

Imvelo Safaris, owner of Bomani Tented Camp, works closely with communities and conservation projects around Hwange National Park. Walk and talk with children going to school, meet village headmen and women's groups at local markets, and join the Cobras anti-poaching unit on a dawn patrol. You will have time to connect with nature too, whether on foot or on game drives with picnic lunches and

sundowners, or from a sunken hide where elephants drink. Visit the new Imvelo Ngamo rhino sanctuary or spot wildlife at a waterhole in the camp. *Expert Africa (0203 405 6666; expertafrica.com) offers a nine-day safari with six nights at Imvelo's Bomani Tented Camp from £3,260pp all-inclusive, excluding flights*

### ▶ Singita Sabara Tented Camp, Serengeti, Tanzania

Be warned – you may not want to leave Sabara, even with the great wildebeest migration thundering nearby. In Serengeti's Singita Reserve, Sabara's suites have been transformed into soothing



sanctuaries with wildliferich savanna views and private meditation decks. Have a massage, go for a swim, try wine tastings and cookery classes or fly in a hot-air balloon. More energetic activities include bush walks and tennis at sister lodge Sasakwa. You

can also join Singita's scouts on a trek and visit villages benefitting from its projects. *The Luxury Safari Company (01666 880 111; theluxurysafaricompany.com) offers five nights at Singita Sabara from £8,887pp all-inclusive, including flights*

### Tafika Camp, South Luangwa National Park and Shoebill Camp, Bangweulu Wetlands, Zambia

Stay at the beautifully rustic Tafika camp with its reed and thatch rooms, excellent dining and exciting activities including micro-lighting and mountain bike safaris in South Luangwa National Park. Visit

Mkasanga village and enjoy day and night game drives and walking safaris, or simply sit by the river or in the camp hide watching elephants and antelopes ambling nearby. Combine this with a stay at Remote Africa Safaris' new Shoebill Camp in the Bangweulu Wetlands, Zambia's mini-Okavango Delta, to spot its avian namesake – the elusive and extraordinary shoebill. *Safari Consultants (01787 888590; safari-consultants.com) offers an eight-night trip to Tafika and Shoebill from £6,795pp sharing, including one microlight flight (May only), international flights and transfers*

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