

Botswana Wildlife Safari | Trip Report

September 16 – 28, 2017 | Written by Peg Abbott



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Peg Abbott, tour host, with Ewan Masson & Peace Shamuka of Masson Safaris as local expert guides and 8 participants: Dottie, David, Nancy, Dan, Carol, Helen, Janice & Chuck



Fri., Sept. 15 Early Arrivals

Several of the group came in early so we could rest up from the journey. Poor Nancy and Dan were stuck back in Atlanta, sending us a rather shocking note that their Delta flight from Atlanta had to turn around, about three hours into the flight! Luckily, they were safe, and put up in a hotel, and they had planned the extra day so had some leeway. Peg and Chuck and Janice enjoyed the wonderful hospitality of Royal Tree Lodge in Maun. They relaxed over tea after getting settled, and walked along the river trail about 4:30 PM; we had dinner and then listened to the wonderful sounds of the night from comfortable beds in luxury tents — a gentle start to safari.

Sat., Sept. 16 Arrival in Maun | Riverside Walk | Royal Tree Lodge

There was time this morning for a walk for those in early, and our trio at Royal Tree chose the inland loop marked with Red and Green. We went out early to avoid the heat and birds were very active. We took photos of each other by giant termite mounds, watched hornbills and plovers and doves, found Zebra, Impala, and Giraffe. A walk after the long flight was great.

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Peg and Janice went in with the vehicle going to the airport and visited the Quality Basket Shop in Maun, a wonderful spot for anyone looking for some fine craftsmanship. They had a lot of fun with the owner and were delighted when some of their choices turned out to be hers.

There was a bit of panic when the driver called still not finding Nancy and Dan, but luckily, they were just some of the last to come out of customs, and all was well. The third time was a charm, they had actually been turned around twice for the same mechanical issue and got through only when Delta put on a new plane and crew. What a fiasco! At least they had a good rest night ahead here, and finally our flock was united.

Peg led a quiet river walk and helped some of the more eager birders to sort out birds at the water pool just outside the dining area. It was a busy place with Bearded Woodpecker, Hartlaub's Babbler, Crested Barbet, Lesser Masked Weaver, and Swamp Boubou coming in fairly regularly.

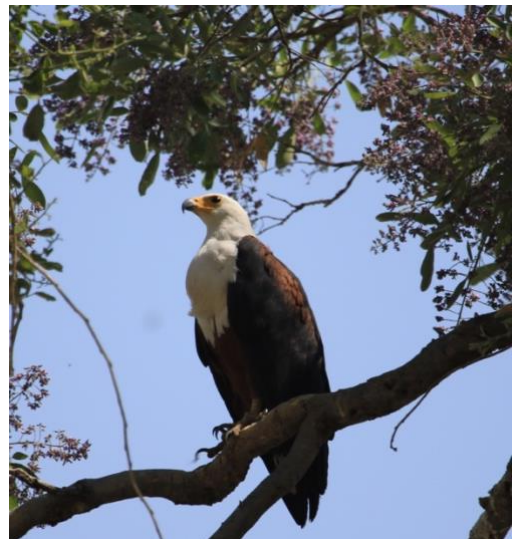
The walk was a loop, and we found 30-plus species with ease. We saw the first Red-billed Hornbill, Red-billed Spurfowl, Meve's and Burchell's Starlings, and in the wood, Green Wood Hoopoe. In the rushes and reeds, we found a Zitting Cisticola, and spooked up an African Snipe that made a circle above our heads. Coppery-tailed Coucals were impressive and Nancy found the first African Fish Eagle. Just about back at the lodge a Black-crowned Tchagra put on a good show.

Dinner was a lovely stroganoff of farm-raised Kudu, with a variety of vegetables, and homemade ice-cream for dessert.

Sun., Sept. 17

Maun to South Gate, Moremi National Park | Xini Lagoon & Camp New 14

Morning at Royal Tree was a joy, a serenade of song from so many species. They started early, before dawn, and by first light this dawn chorus reached a crescendo. Swamp Boubou was one of the most memorable sounds, joined by African Hoopoe, Hartlaub's Babbler, Red-billed Francolin, and more.



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We went up for breakfast at 7:00 AM, anxious to be on the road to beat the heat a bit. The bird bath by the patio had several species, most notable were White Helmetshrike, Crested Barbet, Southern Masked Weaver, and a Bearded Woodpecker, all coming in to drink.

The staff here was so sweet, making sure we got a good start on the day with a hot breakfast, including homemade biscuits with butter and marmalade. Ewan and Peace came to collect us, and packed up as we settled accounts and got our daypacks. By 8:00 AM we were off for our adventure.

We were in open safari vehicles and the road was paved at first, so it was a windy ordeal, broken up by our interest in the local farms along the way, seeing how day to day life went in this part of the world. We made a pitstop at a craft store where people saw local baskets, textiles, and more. The next pit stop was at the park gate, South Entrance, where we had a picnic lunch.



Ewan introduced us to Scotch Eggs, and had nice fresh vegetables to snack on. And homemade cookies. Fortified, we continued on, finding the first clusters of species as we got to the water's edge of several pans and lagoons. All the soil was sandy, while the pans held some clay, and were fast drying up.

Where there was ample water we met our first Gray Heron, Squacco Heron, African Jacana, Long-tailed (Reed) Cormorant, and African Fish Eagle. Around the palms, we found African Palm Swift, and on the route several stunning birds of prey: Martial Eagle, Tawny Eagle, and Dark-chanting Goshawk. We saw the giant nests of Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, and the round hanging ball nests of White-browed Sparrow Weaver. It would take a few days to sort out all the ground birds: Helmeted Guineafowl, and three species of francolin, Red-billed, Swainson's and Crested. Little Red-billed Quelea were numerous, joined by a few colorful Red-billed Firefinch.

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Number 14 Lagoon was absolutely chock full of species, and Peg got very excited to find a pair of Lesser Jacana, in plain view, often a very difficult species to see. There was an African Openbill, our first Hammerkop, and so much more!

Mon., Sept. 18

Xini Lagoon Area in Depth

About 5:00 AM, a pair of African Barred Owl started duetting in the trees overhead. From our beds, we could hear the guys start breakfast, our wake-up call was 5:30 AM. By the time we got up they were quiet. All night long we'd had quite the symphony, the main instrument being Hippos, big Hippos, grunting through the night. Dan had one come right up by the tent, making myriad sounds, all keeping him quite awake! He heard it challenging another large male ... camp was a busy place. Some slept right through this visit of the behemoths.

We left just at sunrise, pausing to watch a bright red orb rise from the smoky horizon. The temperature was perfect, and air so crisp — after almost melting yesterday we were happy to be so comfortable. Rounding a bend, we saw a large animal, and marveled at what it was, a Honey Badger! This nocturnal animal is known for its bad temperament and being elusive. In all her trips, Peg had only spotted it at night in a spotlight. And here it was digging up a root, absolutely so intent on it that we had several minutes with it, enough to capture video as well as still shots. Ewan says it digs to get water from the root more than to eat it. He really worked at the digging, bending down and throwing all its weight into it. After a few strong chews and our second vehicle arriving, it took off, at an easy trot, beautiful through long grass and over a maze of roots overlying a termite mound. What a start!



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Our guides were both determined to find lions, and their tracks were all over the place. We had them coming and going, both on top of our vehicle tracks the night before. We had heard a male lion quite loudly through the night, and knew of a large pride of 23 residing in the area. This was the same group Peg had seen last year with very small cubs. Hopes were high, but extensive searching did not prevail. We headed on to survey the lagoons. At the first we had a family group of Hippo. The huge male had a couple of skin wounds, with water levels declining this late in the dry season, he may have faced a challenger for this still deep pool. Everyone wanted photos of them opening their massive jaws. It was nice to wait and survey all the birds as we did so. Many White-faced Whistling Ducks stood gleaming in the soft morning light. There were Glossy Ibis, a Goliath Heron, several African Spoonbill, African Jacana, Blacksmith Plover, and Gray Heron. We continued on past a beautiful group of Impala, also gleaming in the sun, then Red Lechwe, all too relaxed for any Lion to be active in the area. There were Tsessebe, Wildebeest, and African Buffalo.

We went to the large open water area of #14 Lagoon, where we found a half dozen Pink-backed Pelican, and surveyed the reed patches for new species. Little Grebe were there, many African Jacana, a huge Water Monitor Lizard, two Nile Crocodiles, Yellow-billed Storks, a Green Sandpiper, and many of the species seen at the previous lagoon.



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At this point the vans split up: Peace's vehicle continuing on and Ewan's returning to the Lion-rich plains. With Peace we found a few other birdy wetland areas, saw a gang of Green Wood Hoopoes, and then saw two small birds working on a nest — Chinspot Batis, fun! We had to do some gymnastics to see it well from both sides of the vehicle but we enjoyed the action. We had also seen Magpie Shrikes working on a nest so the season was coming on.



Ewan and crew kept the Lion watch on, and Nancy became the hero of the day when she saw a pile of golden color under the tree. They passed it and she said, "can you back up?". Fifteen lions, almost missed! Eight were missing, two adults and six offspring, then we had nine adults and six that were a year, plus, the same ones Peg had seen the previous year as tiny cubs. They radioed Peace and we reunited and spent the rest of the morning watching this amazing sleeping pile of female Lions with their young.



It was HOT, and we were amazed that their bond was stronger than the need to stay cool. Several lions were sleeping belly up and feet to the sky. The young ones were sandwiched between adults, pressed to the max and obviously content to be so. A big female got up and groomed another licking her face and ears and neck extensively. They started to get restless, having chosen a sparse shrub that gave little shade. First one, then another moved to the back of the bush. We repositioned by a larger sausage tree that promised dense shade. By now some other vehicles has spotted us so we had company, but for the most of the morning we had them to ourselves. These Lions are used to people, and they were not bothered by us at all. What a joy to watch all their interactions.



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We had to pull ourselves away to return for lunch, showers, and a siesta. The guys were ready for us, a lunch of tender pork, noodles, fresh salad, shredded carrots, and homemade bread. Peg led a three-day catchup on the checklist. We had sixty-five species just this morning, with great looks at so many individuals.

Many of us hung around the table writing trip notes. Carol and Nancy played some cards. A few heat-tolerant souls took a nap. Peg looked up to see what looked like doves mating, then no, not mating, a small hawk had a dove held down. This equated to a melanistic Gabar Goshawk taking a Green Pigeon, a bird almost its full size. There was a lot of wing flapping and this determined small predator would not let go. A flock of Meve's Starlings located the struggle and tried mobbing it. The raptor dragged it a short way, and the intruders did not prevail. We grabbed cameras and watched the drama; it took some time for the pigeon to succumb. Not wanting to spoil his meal, Peg could not get to her tent, so just watched and recorded the event. Eventually it flew off, leaving a big pile of feathers in its wake.



Tea time, fruit and cakes, and off we went at 4:00 PM.

We wanted to return to the sleeping lions we had left in the shade that morning, but did some other scouting first, as they were not likely to be active before it cooled down at day's end. We drove through the grass areas separated by islands of trees including stately palms. One van spotted a juvenile Ovampo Hawk and had to study it a bit to be sure— great views perched on a prominent dead snag. At a wetland area we saw two Regal Fish Eagles sitting together on a low stump, brilliant white plumage against deep green. There were Long-toed Plovers and Black-winged Stilts, the usual assemblage of herons and egrets. New for us this day was getting good looks at four Black Crake. A herd of Red Lechwe seemed quite alert, but in tall grass we could not find what they were watching... Ewan's van found the Lions first and we joined up to watch them again. They were doing what Lions do well: sleeping. Occasional heads came up, and our photographers delighted in getting a few good yawns, but for the most part they were sacked out and going nowhere. We caught wind that a Leopard we knew was working the area, had been found in a densely branched Sausage tree. We went over to see it, as golden light played through the thick limbs, dense green leaves, and lush deep purple flowers. Within this beautiful matrix were feet, a tail that twitched ever so often. By working one's eyes through the foliage you could put the parts together, a view of an eye, an ear, then a full face, but never a full Leopard. But a wonderful, evocative memory for us and one that really defined just how well a Leopard's camouflage works.

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Back to the sleeping, caramel-colored Lions. We were starting to recognize a few by a torn ear, or a scar, or for one being the youngest one, still a runt. We stayed as the sun turned into a bright red orb, sunset arriving early due to smoke in the sky. While smoke had cleared up a lot in the afternoon, it seemed to close back in. We were unsure where a fire was burning, but could feel its affects even if it was far away.



We enjoyed conversation around the campfire, thinking back on all we had seen this day. Dinner was very tender beef, with potatoes, vegetables, and salad. Dessert fruit with custard sauce — no one starving here!



Tues., Sept. 19

Moremi National Park

We left at dawn, though first grabbed our binoculars when Dan and Nancy spied the Honey Badger once again, this time running across the small meadow below our camp. We drove out past the lagoon we were perched in view of and waved at the trio of Hippos relaxing there, having kept up their grunting and commotion for much of the night. White-faced Whistling Ducks, part of the dawn chorus, fanned out to feeding areas from this nice wetland oasis, their roost site.



We knew the Lions had not fed for several days, so thought we might find some action with both the Lions and a Leopard being in a relatively small area, one that held lots of prey. We found them already sleeping in piles, fairly spread out with one prominently splayed out over a termite mound, the only one we could see from a distance and thus were able to find them. Several had bellies up to the sky, legs splayed, obviously contented. We saw telltale signs of a kill, blood on a face, a paw, distended bellies when they walked from one nap spot to the next. With this many Lions there would be no leftovers, but we did spy a curious Spotted



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Hyena across the sunlit marsh, and coming in for a view, a sleek Black-backed Jackal. One of the yearlings was perched on a mound and in the golden morning light we must have taken a hundred plus photos, rating the cuteness factor as very high.

There was a loud alarm bark from Baboons across the marsh and instantly up came 15 heads, all alert, all searching. A few of the big females stood up for a better view. Likely the Baboons had spotted the Lions and thus called, but as there was no easy way across the marsh, we would never know. We lingered awhile by the resting Lions, then took off to see what else we could find.

We went quite some ways through the dry Mopane, heading west, to another arm of the delta at Bodumatau Lagoon. There were groups of Helmeted Guineafowl, three species of francolins: Red-billed, Swainson's, and Crested, Magpie Shrikes, a soaring Bateleur Eagle, and some grazing mammals: Kudu, Wildebeest, Impala, and Steenbok along the way.



We stopped at two lagoons where time just vanished as we scanned and spotted many species. The first was our tea time, so out of the vehicles in a safe spot we could really scan well. We found a good variety of shorebirds including Marsh and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stint, Ruff, Three-banded Plover, and then the typical assemblage of waders and water birds seen on other days. At a second lagoon, we had Pink-backed Pelican and African Spoonbill feeding vigorously, endlessly entertaining to view. There was a Marabou Stork that dropped on its knees to rest like a sitting dog. And many Yellow-billed Storks, some in prime breeding plumage but most non-breeding juveniles. Slaty Egret were here too — alongside a massive Goliath Heron they seemed quite small.

At a third lagoon in a quiet place, we found a small group of Elephants, a dozen or more matriarch-led adults with variously aged youngster. They seemed wary by the water's edge and anxious to get back to

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the forest, our presence likely made that urge stronger so soon they were off. Then Zebra wanted to cross and we watched as several regally made it through, then a youngster splashed and leapt — the motion causing a large Nile Crocodile to come over. The next youngster was not having anything of it, far too wary to venture in, it kept turning back. The band brayed back and forth to each other, another part of the group considered a crossing, only to give up and return to feeding. Amazing to be immersed in their dramas and forget totally about our own!



The morning passed quickly, we had seen Southern Ground Hornbill and a nice array of species, two tern species, Dwarf Mongoose, and many hornbills. Lunch was a hamburger stew with local spices served on rice, with a light cabbage and raisin salad, yum!

We went out again at 4:00 PM, the two vans spreading out to search for possible Wild Dogs. The camp staff had seen one lone dog (unusual) at 9:00 AM right from the camp, chasing an Impala. We wanted to check two lagoon areas that attracted potential prey for them. Helmeted Guineafowl scampered out of the way as we left Camp, and our first mammal sighting was a huge bull Elephant, up to his belly in grass and water, feeding. Around it we found Gray Heron, Intermediate Egret, Blacksmith Plover, and two large Saddle-billed Storks. Close to our van were Black-winged Stilt and Pied Kingfisher, the latter of which we watched hover and dive, finally catching a fish. Our extensive scanning produced Red Lechwe and Impala by the score, but no sign of predators of any ilk, so we decided to split up, checking two areas where the larger pack of dogs might be. One group went back to the marsh where we'd had repeated views of Lions, and the other group went with Peace into some new country, dry country with tall grass, broken by trees between meadows. We found two Black-backed Jackals, and near them signs of a fresh den, but no young ones came out to view. We watched a one-horned Giraffe feeding as Yellow-billed Oxpeckers fed on it. We also found Burchell's Sandgrouse, new for the trip. Ewan's group found Stonechat, male and female, also new for the trip, and had good looks at Bearded Woodpecker and Crested Barbet. They were able to watch the Spotted Hyena again. The afternoon passed quickly and we wanted to get back to check the immediate Camp area before it was dark, in case the Wild Dog was still there. We pulled into the



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most likely spot right at dusk, and about a half-mile off Peace spotted an animal the right size and gait, running along the bank of an island. Peg got on it, but light was so poor, there was not a chance to know for certain if it was indeed the lone Wild Dog.

We relaxed around the table, munching popcorn and enjoying cocktails. This was an open-air supper as the guys had started the pack-up process, taking down the shade tent. The air temperature was delicious and many stayed around the fire afterwards, relaxing. We would pack up ourselves and leave tomorrow, heading on the River Khwai.

Wed., Sept. 20 Moremi National Park: Xini to Khwai via Third Bridge

We left pretty close to the usual time, about 6:30 AM, checking the area for Wild Dog to no avail. We had tracks of Lion, and a big male Giraffe stood at the exit, as if to say goodbye. It and the Impala were likely waiting to get in and munch on the Sausage tree flowers that had rained down on the kitchen for several days now — many juicy flowers and new pods littered the ground below its crown.

The morning temperatures are idyllic; cool, fresh air pouring in as we drove out to explore, heading around a loop that would take us past Second Bridge, Third Bride, Xan ..., and on to the Hippo Pools area



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of Khwai. Driving by the first wetland area, two African Fish Eagles greeted us, two Black Crake, and a beautiful Saddle-billed Stork. Crowned Plover were in a dry land area not far along and atop the huge Baobab tree that had been our landmark for these past three days we found a Tawny Eagle.

Pink flowers of the Rain tree gave the landscape a sense of being decorated. We searched each Sausage tree for possible Leopard. At one we found the one-horned Giraffe again, striding about with a herd of Impala beneath him. He could barely reach the lower branches of the Sausage tree, but where he could, he trimmed leaves and flowers. It looked like the ultimate yoga stretch to see him reach up; he was an aerial trimmer programmed to do a close clip.

There were a lot of birds to see: Meyer's Parrots, White-crowned Shrike, and Gray Hornbill. Carol finally got a good look at Hammerkop, and Peace with his keen eyes found a group of Tree Squirrel all cuddled up and sunning themselves on a tree trunk, very cute. We found a lone Hooded Vulture perched on an open branch for excellent views. We passed through short grass pans that had just dried out, with some fresh green grass. There we spied two species that like the short grass, Capped Wheatear and Rufous-naped Lark. Warthogs were grazing, on one Helen spotted its white whiskers of a fancy moustache.

Across one barren pan we saw a group of Elephants, a nursery band with several very small young, this year's and last, pressed between giant adult females. They must have been moving toward water as they moved with purpose, really elegant against such an open landscape. Peg got some wonderful video. We also saw resting Wildebeest, out in the open, obviously oblivious to the hot sun.

We caught up with Ewan's vehicle to find them searching about some tall grass, with the incredible story that they had come upon a large group of Starlings mobbing something. Ewan expected a snake, and instead found a very small cat. It was wobbly in its movements, and moving toward taller grass where it could hide. We had a lot of questions, would the mother return, was it off moving the rest of the litter, or was this a solo cub and she was out hunting, or — hard to think about — was it doomed to die. Young cats usually stay



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put, do not move, when left by their mothers. This one seemed lost and was quite vulnerable. There was a lot of frenzied looking over Chucks very good photos and short video. It had facial marks not unlike a Cheetah, but no white coloring as young ones typically have. It was very spotted, with round ears, but if young, too big to be a Spotted Wild Cat. Peg got a peek at it in its grassy lair, we did not linger long, and saw distinct black and white stripes behind the ears. Possible Serval? We were days away from time on the Internet to try to find cub photos; our collection of mammal books had only adults. What a mystery!

We paused for tea, and continued on, surprised when an Osprey flew by overhead. David exclaimed at the size of the fish it carried in its talons. Farther along we found three large female Ostrich. Then, it was time to press on a bit; we wanted to get to either Third Bridge or Xakanaxa Camp for lunch and it was already late in the morning. So much to see!

Our next sighting was a very stuck vehicle and trailer that had tried to cross water and sunk in past the axels. Ewan tried a tow, with no success and all we could do was promise to give word to the park gate to call their lodge for a larger assist. At the pond near this site we saw Red-breasted Swallows and Banded Martin and the usual cast of wetland characters. Red Lechwe were very numerous here. Once in the forest, Peace spotted another beautiful bee-eater, the Swallow-tailed, a pair, wow! They posed so well for us ... it was just a delight.

The bridges were adventures, large logs lined up to bounce over. They seem like major landmarks on the map, but are simple structures that seem to work in the constantly changing water levels of Okavango. We stretched legs and did a pit stop at Third Bridge, then went another 20 kilometers through Mopane Forest to Xakanaxa, a public campground with several parties camping. Lunch (late) was a nice spread of cheeses, sandwich fixings, salads, and beets. Peg found a Scarlet-chested Sunbird feeding in a flowering tree, but none of our hungry travelers opted out of the line to come see it. Wattled Starlings joined day-glow jade-colored Cape Starlings in profusion around the tall trees of this camp.

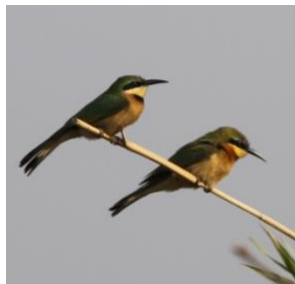


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After lunch, we still had about 30KM to go. We passed Buffalo, Giraffe, Impala, several Steenbok, and a large bull Elephant. Around one bend we found a troop of Vervet Monkeys with small youngsters actively playing. They hung from branches, jumped and intertwined themselves like puppies, and at times plopped to the ground only to race up and initiate another round. Underneath them was a troop of Banded Mongoose; we got good looks as they dug for insects.



Winding through the forest, this time a very mature and well-shaded realm, we spied Arnott's Chat, a signature species of the area, and several groups of Green Wood Hoopoe. Little Bee-eaters were bright gems that Peg described as jewelry with wings.



The final part of our drive was quiet, driving through some lovely and very tall woods. There were many Banded Sandgrouse on the road, and one pair had a tiny, egg-sized chick. It went into hiding mode and was near impossible to find, even just a few feet away. We had a river crossing to make, but did it with ease.



What a wonder to come into camp, all set up for us, luggage in our tents, shower water hot and ready to go, a fire set up for our cocktail hour. The table was set with fresh linens, napkins like swans at each place setting. We faced the river, and before dusk closed in we heard the first Hippo grunting away, neighbors again!

Thurs., Sept. 21 Dmobo Hippo Pools Camp to Khwai Gate and East

Our camp was across the Hippo Pools that we'd often stopped at to spend time in the large bird blind. Our tents faced the pool,

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and almost immediately on waking up we could tell that Elephants had made a visit to our camp, not lingering but checking out their new company. We left early, as this area was great for predators and we had real hopes this morning of sightings.

We saw a couple of hundred Helmeted Guineafowl on the shore of one pond, drinking and bathing. At the next lagoon we saw a regal-looking African Fish Eagle and a Pied Kingfisher both on hunting perches. Peace picked up tracks of a Leopard, showing us how it had come down to drink, and walked back over its own prints, this time dripping water. We proceeded on, all eyes keen on finding the Leopard. We went some ways, seeing Tsessebe, Impala, and many Red Lechwe. It was the lechwe all looing one direction that tipped us off to the Leopard's whereabouts, and Dan was the first to spot it. Right at the base of a large termite mound, lounging on it as a cat would a couch, was the Leopard. It was across an open plain, a stretch for the camera but fine for binoculars and we enjoyed watching it, calling to the others. We held back not wanting to disturb it but the other vehicle came up the opposite road, and perhaps two vehicles was too much for it to stay relaxed. It got up and peered around the mound, then took off for the trees. We followed at quite a distance away, watching it wind through another meadow at a leisurely pace. Peg and Chuck got some decent distant shots and all of us were thrilled to see it.

We followed the flowing Khwai River, spotting all the regular water birds, an African Openbill, a Rufous-bellied Heron, Slaty Egret, and several Saddle-billed Stork. A real treat was finding a pair of Wattled Crane with a chick, brown and almost chicken-sized, it stuck tight between the two adults which were intent on feeding. They were on short clipped fresh grass around a termite mound and quite content there. We later found one more pair, up at the Horseshoe Bend area, wonderful to see two pair of this very rare species. There were many Sacred Ibis and Pink-backed Pelican at one of the pools, and we spied both Nile Crocodile and Water Monitor Lizards. Peg picked out some Barn Swallows, while Ewan's van, going through the woods, found a Pearl-spotted Owlet. We found a Hooded Vulture and several



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White-backed; one safari vehicle had seen the pack of dogs that stays mainly outside the Khwai Gate on the other side of the river, early that morning.

We took a break at the gate, then headed up to Horseshoe Bend, where our guides were aware of a very large Wild Dog pack traveling with five puppies. It was a good drive up there, close to an hour, so we kept at it, scanning the marshes alongside the river, and particularly herds on a small island there, where there had been a kill earlier this week. With luck and a tip from another driver, Ewan's van found the pack near a cool water pond, holed up under the shade. Peace's van was a good 15 minutes away (Africa time) and there were some tense moments wondering if we'd get to the site before they left. We did, and all of us marveled at seeing the dogs so well. They seemed pretty oblivious to our two vehicles; no other viewers came by. We stayed and watched as several walked over to the pond to soak their bellies. Several had very full bellies so we knew they had recently fed. Each had distinctive markings, and at least three of the pack had plain brown radio collars, which must have been tough not to get chewed off by the others. They lay in groups so an exact count was not easy, but we think we had 22 this morning. The five youngsters were very cute, playful, and heard making sounds as various adults greeted them. A few of the adults found the shade inadequate and moved over behind us. Our attentions were taken by a huge bull Elephant that came down to the mud baths. What a choice, watch dogs, or this comical giant throwing mud and water on his belly, his back and eventually his face. He also liked to flip his heavy trunk over one tusk, and stood as if doing yoga poses, relaxing by taking weight off one leg, and then another. At one point the back legs were crossed and in the mud, it looked like he might go down. The dogs ignored him, trotted by him to



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reach the water edge. They did rise up when two Warthogs got close by, but somehow, they must have sensed the pack would not rally to hunt, and they simply passed on by. It was quite incredible, and in time we left them be to head back for lunch and a break.

Some clouds developed today with a nice breeze, a really welcome break from the intensity of mid-day heat. Back at camp all were in line for a refreshing shower. It's amazing what a ten-minute soak can do to recreate the spirit! We'd all gotten quite good at the system, and a bucket full was plenty for hair washing and still some leisurely washing.

The afternoon drives were mellow; we elected not to return to the dog area since it was a good hour over there from camp and in the afternoon, we only have a few hours. Better to focus in on our own part of the park and explore from there. We moved slowly, able to do some birding for those that wished in the Mopane Woodland, finding Bennett's Woodpecker, Arnott's Chat, an active pair of African Hoopoe, and other species. We watched Kudu, groups of Elephants, Impala, Warthogs, and Wahlberg's Eagle and drove over to the other side of the Hippo Pools hoping to see Hyena, but finding only lots of tracks.

Dinner was free-range chickens from the Masson's Farm, potatoes, veggies, and fruit with custard sauce. We ended the day by sitting around the campfire, where a Hippo started up the path to join us, quickly discouraged by our guide's strong flashlight. Another night in Africa!

Fri., Sept. 22 Khwai Area of Moremi National Park

With a full morning available to us, we started working our way back to Horseshoe Bend, aiming to see if we might locate the Wild Dog pack again. Almost immediately out of camp, Peace spotted the tracks of two big male Lions, walking side by side down the two tracks of the road. We followed them for quite



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some ways, finally losing them at a road junction where they went off into dense Mopane woodland. We also picked up tracks of the large male Leopard of the area. Another vehicle got a glimpse of him, but today he did not pose in the open. The river floodplain was teeming with life, both bird and mammal. Huge herds of Red Lechwe were in the wettest areas, in more grassy areas we found a mix of Wildebeest, Zebra, Tsessebe, and Impala. There was dustbathing going on for the Zebra, then an altercation between two males broke out and two went pretty aggressively at each other, raising up on hind legs, biting, and going down on knees, still biting. The herd just kept moving along, carrying the squabble along with them until far across the plain.

Many areas that held water ten days ago were now dry, this drying would continue through October, until the rainy season began, typically in November. Pans and ponds with water were busy spots to observe. Deeper pools held up to 15 Hippo and numerous Nile Crocodile as well. One shallow one was alive with wading birds, two elegant Saddle-billed Stork, many Marabou Stork, African Spoonbill, various herons and egrets, and a White Pelican. There was a lot of behavior to observe, feeding styles, interactions, a lot of fun to witness.

We covered a lot of ground, ending up at Horseshoe Bend by 9:30 AM for a stretch and coffee. We stayed about 45 minutes, taking in sightings of Wattled Crane, Slaty Egret, many African Jacana, a pile of Hippos and numerous grazing animals. An African Fish Eagle perched overhead, and a Pied Kingfisher hovered constantly, feeding. There were more African Openbill here than at other locations.

Stops were numerous coming back, another gorgeous Lilac-breasted Roller, little groups of Carmine Bee-eater, herds of animals in long lines, heading to shade. At a water crossing we had two large African Buffalo. Always in the background was the call of Ring-necked Dove, "Botswana, Botswana."

Lunch was a tuna mac and cheese, just like home real comfort food. Sallie had made pickles and we devoured them, along with fresh tomatoes.

Highlights of the afternoon drive for one van was seeing a baby elephant about 3 months old, and near



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the river crossing we'd gone through, fabulous looks and a chance for photos of Dwarf Bittern! The other van spotted a Lesser Moorhen, Slaty Egret, and Rufous-bellied Heron, and had fun watching a Pearl-spotted Owlet at pretty close range. We lined up with Hippos for sunset, and recorded a great array of game.

The camp had huge arching trees over it, we were glad not thick Mopane as we passed through a greeting group of Elephants. All in all, it was a pretty quiet night. One treat in having to get up in the night was the stars – they were so bright, and so many. We would miss many aspects of our camp life, but looked forward to clean-up and relaxation. What a week we'd had!

Sat., Sept. 23

Morning in Moremi | Flight to Pom Pom | Afternoon Game Drive

A final morning in Moremi National Park, one of the great parks for African wildlife on the continent. We had seen so much, but continued to search, finding tracks of two different Leopards that crossed each other, as well as Lions. We did not find the elusive predators, but saw a lot of species, including big herds of Red Lechwe and Zebra. Hundreds of Helmeted Guineafowl occurred at a couple of lagoons. At the dry down pond visited the day previous, the cast of characters was quite different. A band of Kudu, including a large male with spiral horns were drinking. About 20 Vervet Monkeys came in to drink, including an amorous male with bright blue balls, the first we had seen this season. Marabou Storks came in from a distant tree roost; landing was fun to capture in our images as they would stall, lower their landing gear (long legs) and bounce on contact.

We had tea and coffee by the gate under the big shade trees, then headed to the airstrip, crossing past a village where we could see the thatch material in bundles, ready to renew the roof construction. We said our goodbyes to the wonderful camp staff, and then to Peace and Ewan, whose guide skills we were very grateful for — we had seen so much!

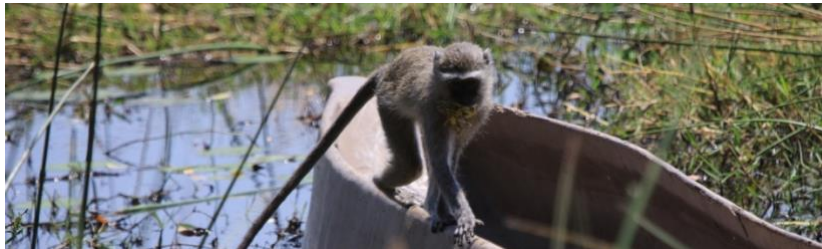


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Our planes came in, two small ones, four in one, five in the other. We had no trouble loading the luggage and they did not weigh our gear or count our bags, phew! The pilots flew low enough we kept Elephants and African Buffalo in view, but the landscape looked extremely parched. The impact of the dry-down ponds was so much more obvious than from a vehicle on the ground; from the air they were regularly spaced, and when holding water, the habitat could be productive. At this second to last month of the dry season, only one in ten held water, if even that. Long game trails radiated out from those. We flew west, and soon started to pick up palm trees, then palm islands, then large channels of water. Hippo trails radiated out from each island, making wonderful patterns on the landscape. Elephants were now in groups, with water so plentiful their lives must have been much easier. It was a thirty-minute flight, our new guides were there to greet us, Rams, Dalton, and others.

A group of women from the lodge met us with song and smiles, quickly sorting out our luggage. What a joy to arrive to such comfort. A large great room overlooked an expansive lagoon filled with water lilies, three massive bull Elephants grazing and splashing in the center of our view. Comfortable couches and tables invited relaxation. Lunch was ready, with many fresh salads and fruits. Bushbuck grazed on the green grass lawn near the entry, a new mammal for the trip.



We had no activities planned until 4:00 PM, and everyone reveled in long showers, some a swim in the little pool, others a nap on their big comfortable beds. All the tents had porches, and two rooms — a sitting area with upholstered chairs and a desk in the front, large bedroom, and behind that a bath — outside showers with mirrors — it had been six days since we'd seen ourselves so that was a little shocking!

At 4:00 PM we gathered for snacks and tea and coffee, then went out for a game drive. Our guides were well-trained to interpret the common wildlife of the area, and while we had seen quite a few of the species, it was nice to have their commentary and keen eyes. Those more enthusiastic about the birding banded together, taking time to work out a Tinkling Cisticola, a Sedge Warbler, and an African Stonechat male and female in the reeds. A highlight was distant but very good looks at a pair of Black Coucal that were calling. We saw Waterbuck, Red Lechwe, Impala, Reedbuck, and Wildebeest. We got very close to

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a nursery herd of elephants with a two-year old. Black-collared Barbet and African Green Pigeon were two new, colorful species.

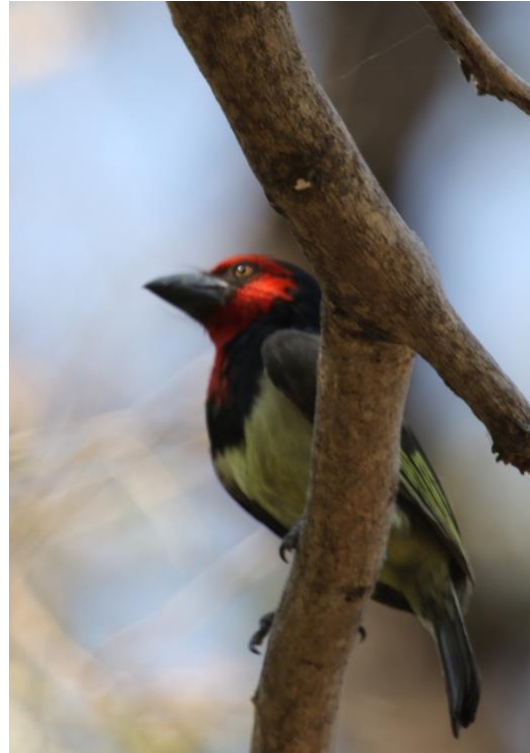
We had proper sundowners here, with the table cloth and wine glasses, pewter mugs for gin and tonics, a nice view, and the social time was fun. We drove back in the dusk, spotting a Common Civet running quickly away, a distant view of a Pel's Fishing Owl perched on the side of a down dead snag, we sure wished we could have gotten closer but a deep-water channel was between us. We heard an African Scops Owl call, also across a water channel.

Back to dinner and a relaxing evening for those that wished around the campfire with our local hosts.

Sun., Sept. 24 Mokoro Ride on the Okavango Delta | Motorboat Ride

This morning we made a radical change in our mode of transportation, trying something very unique to the region, shallow-water boats known as mokoros. Ours were fiberglass renditions of traditional craft made from large trees. They are flat-bottomed, so very steady, and there are polers rather than paddlers. Boys learn to pole at the age of 10 – 12, and all of our local staff were very good at it. Balanced and strong, they took us through the watery realm of the Okavango. We paddled out through reeds and rushes. Hundreds of water lilies decorated our path. We learned how they are pollinated by bees, and then turn a lovely purple color. We found Painted Reed frogs, and a tiny emerald jewel, another frog the size of your fingernail.

There were many birds, and what was fun was seeing them from the angle of the water. Watching African Jacanas walk on lily pads 30 feet away gave us a whole new perspective. Above us soared African Openbill, Long-toed Plover, both Great and Little Egrets and the king of all — the African Fish Eagle. We heard, and then found a beautiful Malachite Kingfisher. Carol was able to get very close and get a wonderful photo. Our field of view had to get larger for Elephants; the big males came



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down to cool off in the water and feed on lily tubers as the morning progressed and it got hotter. We watched them use their huge feet to stir up the roots, pull them up with their trunks, wash the lilies with a side to side motion and then up to the mouth by the bundle. Our guides said they could eat well over 100 KG of these delicacies in a day. People also like to eat them, much like a potato. We sat very quietly in the boats and the Elephants moved by us, listening to them feed at close range was quite something!

Time passed all too quickly. We spooked up a roosting group of Black-crowned Night Heron before landing on a small island for a break. They set out a table with coffee and tea, and had some fun with us telling us jokes and puzzle stories. A pair of Crested Barbets were in the trees, as well as a Southern Swamp Boubou.

The motion was gentle, the views mesmerizing, a quiet beauty best absorbed on the water. African Pygmy Geese were common, as were African Openbill Storks. A lovely morning!

Before we returned for brunch, one more highlight — again spotted by our eagle-eyed Nancy ... Lions! They were known to have been in an area with numerous termite mounds. We found their tracks first, and then she spotted ears — a mother and two cubs. We were able to park by them and not alarm them at all. We watched the cubs wash up, licking paws vigorously and opening their mouths to show off definitely baby teeth. One could barely keep its eyes open, but the mother was very alert. This was a pack of eight, so likely the others were in her sights and she checked on them fairly often.

Back to a pasta dish, a beautiful fresh salad, cooked mixed vegetables with peppers and eggplant, cheese plate, and fruit plate, homemade bread. No going hungry at Pom-Pom Camp!



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We were finished by Noon, which left time for showers, naps, field notes and photo sorting, or just time to sit and watch the lagoon, restful yet engaging.



We met at 4:00 PM for tea and snacks, then headed out to the boat landing, where we got into two boats to head into the Okavango Delta on an open water channel that would take us back to the palm islands and through reed-lined channels. African Fish Eagles watched our progress and we saw many African Openbill Storks, Great and Little Egrets, and Squacco Herons. Peg noticed the Great Egrets had dark black bills and Kelly-green ceres, it turns out the Botswana birds make this beak color change for breeding, very impressive! We all got good looks at the tiny and brilliant colored Malachite Kingfishers, several of them. One boat went to a lagoon to check for Hippos, but they were spread out in the marsh and not at home. The other boat was lucky to find a Lesser Jacana, close enough for some photos. To avoid clogging the engines with grass, the boats moved quickly through the channel, then slowed down in more open passages. We returned at sunset, gorgeous light on this landscape of grasses, palms, picturesque termite mounds and reeds.



We had cocktails on the grassy bank where we put in, while Fiery-tailed Nightjars called and made quick flyovers, and fireflies danced shining their lights close to the ground. Back for dinner, which included the local fish, Bream, as well as a meat dish and other fixings. We had planned on a night drive, but after drinks and a big meal, the majority elected to just relax or turn in to bed having had a full and already wonderful day.



Mon., Sept. 25 Morning Game Drive at Pom Pom Camp | Flight to Kasane | Afternoon Game Drive

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Chobe National Park

We fanned out in different directions this morning at Pom Pom; one van followed Lion tracks that had come through the camp in the night, over towards the air strip. We were able to see the resident Side-striped Jackal, but found no-one active at this year's Hyena den. The other van spotted a well-known, ten-year old Leopard and her daughter in the totally opposite direction, so we made a dash to catch up. Along the way, Peg spied a Dickenson's Kestrel and we all marveled at two beautiful Saddle-billed Storks. The younger Leopard was gone by the time we caught up, but we were able to watch the old female, now blind in one eye and totally tolerant of humans at very close range. Indeed, she left a termite mound and walked towards the vehicle, sniffing us and looking Dottie in the eye at her front seat location. We left her to rest, and all went for tea under a big Baobab tree. There were many species of grazing mammals, from Tsessebe and Zebra to Warthogs, more beautiful birds to see, but our plane was to arrive mid-day, so we headed back to pack up and grab a bite to eat.

This plane was the Caravan, a 12-seater, which fit all of us and the luggage with ease. It came in later than expected, so our arrival at the modern Kasane airport, complete with paved runways and a control tower, was about 2:30 PM. We were met and got checked in to the hotel, and switched our sunset boat cruise (which left at 3:00 PM) for a game drive.

Our rooms were large and modern, with lovely African furnishings and a view of the river. Warthogs and Banded Mongoose were well-acclimated and in view on the lawn. Our guide, Motaa, was friendly and seemed to understand we had seen many of the more common species. We all marveled at the terrain, now a different rock type and hilly. He posed for a grand view of the Chobe River, and headed down to the river floodplain. Fun to find was the nest of a Verreaux's (Giant) Eagle Owl with an adult and one large chick at home. We watched Elephants and Buffalo on the island opposing us, and many of the



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wading birds we now knew well. As we turned into the drier uplands, Peg spotted a Kori Bustard, backlit in the sun and striding through the shrubbery. This is the national bird of Botswana and an imposing species. From here we met up with a big group of Elephants and watched them feeding by digging a bit with their feet, then pulling roots up with their trunks. Time passed quickly. We retraced our steps to follow the river route out, and encountered a female and young male Lion moving along the same corridor.



Dinner was fun, a marvelous buffet with fresh fish, several meats, and great stir-fry. The lighting was lovely in the open-air setting. Back to civilization, many clustered into the lobby looking at their emails, recent news, and making connections to their personal lives. Others enjoyed some retail therapy in the resort's nice gift shops.



Tues., Sept. 26 Chobe River: Morning Private Boat | Afternoon Sunset Cruise on Party Boat

Today was a day on the river, both morning and afternoon. Peg arranged for a private boat for the morning, just our group with a super guide, Berensel. Without binoculars, he found an array of species that would marvel us all. Almost first on his list was a much-sought after species even in Botswana, a life-bird for Peg, the White-backed Night-Heron. He did not announce the species as he slid under the dense branches of a tree hanging over the river, within sight of our hotel! This elusive and mainly nocturnal species had a nest here, just starting it, and we got wonderful views. It stayed on a branch near the nest, standing, and we did not linger long.



He took us over to the island where we had African Fishing Eagles paired up and resting on the shore, they took off in flight with sun dappling their russet wings. Wire-tailed Swallows



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surrounded the boat and were brave enough to land on the pontoons. A few Lesser Striped Swallows joined them. We had an African Marsh Harrier go by, and pulled into shore where we could see Yellow-billed Storks, African Jacana, Malachite Kingfishers, Little Bee-eaters, and other species with ease.

Moving to a new location, we found a Black Heron, which has a behavior unlike other herons, that of quickly pulling its wings around it like a tent, thought to shade fish and aid it in hunting. The tent goes up so quick it is as if you pulled a string. We watched it feed alongside African Spoonbill and Yellow-billed Stork, repeatedly getting into position and throwing wings out, then back in to try a new spot. We got photos and Chuck captured a video — wow!

Other treats of the morning included watching a Goliath Heron strut between Buffalo, finding graceful African Skimmers on a sandbar, getting close up time with Purple Herons, well-camouflaged in the reeds. There were Elephants to watch, and just so much life going on that David suggested the morning might be the highlight of the whole trip. It passed quickly, and we finally had to make a dash back to get brunch before they closed it at 10:00 AM.

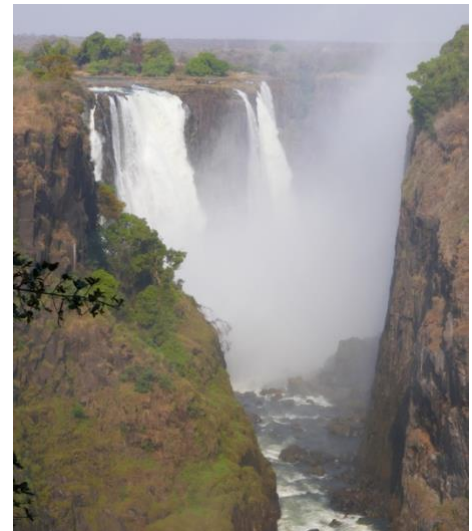
After a nice break for a swim, repacking, birding on the grounds (Violet-backed Starlings — wow!) we joined with about 30 others to go back out on a large party boat. It was fun to see this group's happiness at finding large toothy Nile Crocodiles, Water Monitors, Elephants with babies, and more. We sat back and enjoyed it all, a bit of a repeat performance to the morning, but who minds seeing these gorgeous combinations of bird and mammal life in close proximity! The island in the river was closely grazed by Puku, Lechwe, Buffalo, Elephant, and Impala. Thankfully the border dispute for it with Namibia went Botswana's way — just across the river were domestic cattle, eyeing the lush grass

Our flock would disperse tomorrow. David and Dottie were heading on home, the main tour completing with this stay in Kasane. Seven would go on to Victoria Falls, taking a shuttle bus over in the morning. We enjoyed a final dinner, some nice wine and conversation, and memories of our journey.



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Wed., Sept. 27 Drive to Victoria Falls | Border Crossing to Zimbabwe | World Heritage Site

Morning wake-up along the river was lovely, and we joined together for breakfast in the open air dining room with a view of the Chobe River. Peg found a pair of Brown-hooded Kingfisher just out from our rooms ... to the very last minute still finding new species!

We left for Victoria Falls at 8:00 AM, made a pretty easy border crossing and arrived in time for lunch and some down time. We decided to wait until it was cooler and go over to the falls about 3:30 PM. All walked at their own pace, the whole experience of these massive falls so emotional and mesmerizing! Despite it being a low-water time, they were roaring. We could see the mist from our lovely hotel, and nearing the park gate, about ten minutes away by walking, the roar was loud. The falls span a long chasm, and a trail has many offshoots for viewpoints, each just a slightly different view. We did see two sought after bird species, the Trumpeter Hornbills were vocal and flying back and forth at the forested end of the chasm, joined by two day-glow Shallow's Turacos. But the main activity was gawking, marveling, and just enjoying this true wonder of the world.

We were in two hotels but could go back and forth with ease, except for the vendors hawking goods and tourist souvenirs close to town. Poor Dan forgot his hat at dinner and had to run the gamut twice!

The historic Victoria Falls hotel was a wonder of its own, its colonial majesty still bearing enormous charm. The hotel is 113 years old and the sense of history is there in every segment, including the massive blooming Jacaranda trees. The furnishings, photos, and art give the feel of a museum. One

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restaurant had a wonderful buffet and a show that Chuck described as extraordinary. It was done by various tribes in full costume, including one act on stilts, all quite moving. Peg, Carol, and Helen chose to have a meal in the quiet and elegant Livingstone Room, a total treat and great way to end the journey.



Thurs., Sept. 28 Morning at Victoria Falls | Departures

We thought we'd return to the falls again this morning, but having had such a great show of light and a good walk and view the afternoon before, most decided to just chill, relax, wander about the grand hotel, enjoy a leisurely breakfast, and get ready for the long journey home. A flowering tree attracted White-throated Bee-eater and African Black-headed Orioles, plus a vocal and large Crowned Hornbill.

Saying good-bye to Africa is never easy, sort of melancholy, as it's such a long trip to return. Janice, Chuck, Nancy, and Dan were off to Uganda, via Nairobi, to extend their adventures. The others returned home, flying out of the Victoria Falls International airport mid-day.