

PUMP IT ON THE

# Mashatu WILDERNESS TRAIL

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU STICK A FEW FRIENDS ON MOUNTAIN BIKES IN BOTSWANA'S MASHATU RESERVE? A LOT OF FLAT TYRES AND AN ADVENTURE HOLIDAY YOU'LL NEVER FORGET. BY VILLIERS STEYN AND TABBY MITTINS.



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n elephant ambled closer through the fever-berry thicket, slowing to denude a branch or two along the way. Our guide waved a finger to signal for quiet and led our group of 12 cyclists in a broad circle to a safe spot to observe the oblivious bull. Pedalling hard to keep up, I fervently hoped I wouldn't need the killer calves of the cyclist ahead of me to survive the weekend.

#### RIDING IN GOOD HANDS

It's a special kind of madness, the desire to explore the African bush on a bicycle, with elephants and lions potentially around every corner and behind every thicket, but this extraordinary way to experience Africa isn't nearly as daunting as it sounds.

'You don't need a huge amount of skill or experience to do it,' Joe (Johan) Rakumako told me later, as we coasted past a herd of big-eyed giraffes. In board shorts and cycling shirt, slick helmet and funky red-rimmed glasses, it was only the .458 slung raffishly over his shoulder and the practised ease

with which he dodged elephants that set him apart as our cycle safari guide. But I wasn't complaining – halfway through our second ride, I wasn't dead yet, so I had no reason to doubt him. In fact, even with only a ride and a half under my belt it was clear that anyone with a sense of adventure and a love of the wild would find it much like a bowl of Häagen-Dazs ice cream – impossible not to want more.

Mashatu forms part of the privately owned, 72000-hectare Northern Tuli Game Reserve in the eastern tip of Botswana's Tuli Block and lends itself to cycle safaris in a way that many other destinations can't.

Besides the fact that the reserve's game is remarkably relaxed, the region combines the best of open, gently undulating, semi-arid veld for mild, comfortable rides, with trickier dongas, dry riverbeds and rocky koppies, making it easy for guides like Joe to tailor each safari to a specific group.

#### ALWAYS WEAR YOUR HELMET

For our combined party of old-hand and amateur riders, Joe set

ABOVE: You always ride in single file on the Mashatu Wilderness Trail, with the lead guide in front and a backup guide bringing up the rear. Riders stick to elephant paths where possible, because they're generally free of obstructions. TOP RIGHT: This is not a race! Cyclists stop often to catch their breath and stretch their legs, usually in the shade of a large tree.



*'What's the time?'  
'Who cares? Have another beer.'*

a restful pace, stopping often for game sightings (including a nonchalant lioness in a dry riverbed and the occasional path-blocking ellie), to pump numerous flat tyres, or to wait for those halted by the odd patch of Mashatu's typical fine, loose sand that grabs at your tyres like millions of tiny, sticky hands.

'Just get into granny gear and keep the machine moving,' he told us, weaving along random game trails and hopping in and out of deep dongas with sickening ease. Urging him to take us deeper into

the veld, sand soon became the least of our concerns. Water crossings, rocky climbs and mud wallows were much more formidable foes. By midday on day two, very few of us hadn't taken a tumble – some more spectacular than others – and, besides Joe and backup guide Alistair Bassett (who proved that gravity really isn't such a hard habit to shake off), nobody's shoes came off clean or dry.

Nevertheless, with the camaraderie that only 25 kilometres and a few bruised bums and egos can build, we arrived back at camp on the banks of the Limpopo River with high spirits and broad smiles. They grew even wider when Max and Baker, camp attendant and cook, stepped out to welcome us with trays of facecloths and icy beers. The tone for the rest of that eventful Saturday can be summed up in one brief snippet of conversation:

'What's the time?'  
'Who cares? Have another beer.'

**BAIL OUT OR PUSH ON**

A rainy dawn on your average safari can be cause for concern and, truth be told, my first instinct was to curse the overcast sky to which we woke on day three. But on a cycle safari it's not just another challenge; it's a blessing. Though we had to scrap our plans to sleep under the stars at Kgotla Camp, an uncovered boma deep in the reserve, and despite being mud-spattered and soaked to the skin, I praised every drop that kept the savage sun off our backs.

The unanticipated cold breeze was another thing altogether, and by the time we'd splashed up to Max's mobile refreshment station with his mugs of steaming coffee and fresh muffins, I wasn't the only shivering cyclist grateful for a lift back to camp. The die-hards among us whipped out their neon raincoats, set their faces to grim determination, and pedalled back to camp to our cheers of encouragement and admiration.

There's nothing quite as rewarding as a long, hot, bucket shower in the bush after a muddy morning's ride, except perhaps a sumptuous, guilt-free lunch and a lazy afternoon under an enormous Mashatu tree beside the Limpopo River, with fish-eagles calling overhead.

Top that off with sundowners out on a nearby koppie, a chance lion or leopard sighting, a hearty dinner, good company and conversation around a crackling fire and you've got yourself a serious contender for the perfect day in Africa. Stick a couple of those days back to back and you have the ultimate adventure getaway.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Tackle the tricky river crossings last so you can learn from the other riders' mistakes; it's a great experience to share with close friends, but even strangers don't stay strangers for long on a cycle safari; with elephants around almost every bend, it's great to have trustworthy guides; carbo-loading, bush style. Camp attendants Max and Baker know how to put on a spread for a horde of hungry cyclists.

**PLAN YOUR TRIP**

**DO IT YOURSELF**

The Mashatu Wilderness Trail is a four-day, three-night mountain-biking safari that starts on Tuesdays or Fridays throughout the year. Pick-up time on arrival day is 1pm at Pont Drift and drop-off on the day of departure is between 9am and 10am at the same spot, so it's not necessary to arrange accommodation before or after the trip if you live in Gauteng. Accommodation is in an unfenced camp with comfy two-man dome tents for the first two nights and, weather permitting, an open-air boma on the last night. Ablution facilities include hot-water bucket showers and neat pit latrines complete with toilet seats. Costs R5 350 a person, including three meals a day, guided excursions (bike rides in the mornings and short game drives to a sundowner spot in the evenings) and vehicle backup. No children under 12. Maximum 16 riders. [www.mtbsafaris.com](http://www.mtbsafaris.com)

**WHEN TO GO**

The best time is between April and September, when daytime temperatures are generally pleasant. It can become unbearably hot and very wet between October and March. Pack warm clothes for evenings, especially from May to August.

**NEED TO KNOW**

You're welcome to take your own mountain bike (tubeless tires are highly recommended) or rent a 29-inch GT Karakorum trail bike for R250 a day (for three days). Also order a Cycle Mashatu cycling shirt for R450.

You need to be relatively fit. Rides are between 15 and 35 kilometres a day at a leisurely pace for game-viewing and, though you don't need to be super fit for the trail, it's recommended that you spend some time on a bike leading up to the trip.

**EXPLORE**

Northern Tuli Game Reserve also offers horseback safaris ([www.limpopohorsesafaris.com](http://www.limpopohorsesafaris.com)) for experienced riders, walking trails ([www.tulitrails.com](http://www.tulitrails.com)) for those who wish to explore the region on foot, and luxury accommodation ([www.mashatu.com](http://www.mashatu.com)) with morning and afternoon game drives. Mashatu guests can also book a session in one of the reserve's photographic hides ([www.c4photohides.com](http://www.c4photohides.com)). No self-drive exploration is allowed in Northern Tuli. **G**

