Sleep with one eye open

At the bottom edge of Botswana’s Central Kalahari Game Reserve, like a rudder beneath a sailing ship, is Khutse Game Reserve, a place where the lions don’t adhere to personal boundaries...

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Purple lightning flashes, followed by a peal of thunder. Villiers clings to one of the support struts of our gazebo as a stray blast of icy wind snatches the canopy away. Then the angry sky unleashes its deluge. Minutes later the storm has passed, leaving in its wake a twisted canvas wreck, the fresh smell of rain and a shimmering double rainbow. Welcome to Khutse.

Grinning like idiots and dripping from head to toe, we set to work repairing our shelter in the unfenced campsite, Molose 2. With two nights at Molose 2 and another two at Moreswe 2, I wonder what else Khutse has in store for us.

Directly translated from Seserwa (a Khoe dialect spoken in parts of the Kalahari) Khutse means “going down on one knee to rest”. You might think it’s just a sleepy little reserve in the shadow of its enormous neighbour, but Khutse has an unpredictable charm all its own.

A sudden thundershower might wreak havoc on an unsuspecting awning, but it makes for easy tracking. Bumping along in the thick sand the following morning, we come across the spoor of a big male leopard heading in the opposite direction. Instead of turning around, we decide to follow his route backwards towards the Mahurushele campsites. After yesterday’s rain, the sandy road is lined with emerging Kalahari Crinum lilies as we count the kilometres the unseen leopard walked in the night. The tracks go on and on! After an impressive 10 km, they finally duck into the grass and we push on to Mahurushele 3, a campsite next to Sekushuwe Pan and just the place for a leg stretch and a cup of Nescafé.

Get on the satphone

Thanks to our GPS loaded with Tracks4Africa maps, we eventually reach the entrance road to Mahurushele 3, where we stop briefly to let a lemon-sized Kalahari tented tortoise cross the road. Khutse is so sparsely populated with other tourists that we don’t only check for animals before we alight – we also check for other campers. We’d hate to intrude on their privacy.

Luckily there’s no one here. Mahurushele 3 has the same long drop and bucket-shower cubicles as Molose 2, but it’s also home to a sprawling tree that casts a nice circle of dappled shade.

“What do you think? Should we change our booking?” Villiers asks.

Just then we notice a pair of young lions a couple hundred metres from the tree, ogling a newborn hartebeest calf. I watch the action, hoping impossibly for both a kill and a safe getaway for the calf. A shift in the wind saves the day and the hartebeest beats a hasty retreat.

That’s it – decision made. We’ll only spend one night at Moreswe 2 and we’ll come here to hang out with the lions for our last night in the park. Villiers unpacks the satellite phone to make the necessary calls.

Everybody needs good neighbours

We surf back through the sand to Molose 2 and spend a simmering afternoon in the shade of the McGuppyred gazebo. The campsites in Khutse are entirely unlike those in South Africa’s national parks. Fences? Flush toilets? Running water? Pah! Those are all unnecessary luxuries. In Khutse you must bring absolutely everything you’ll need, including water, power, fuel and food. The trade-off is that you’re almost guaranteed not to see another soul for days at a time.

That’s why it’s a bit of a shock when we bump into another vehicle at the waterhole close to the campsite. It belongs to our neighbours, Dawie Jacobs and Yosta Zandfliet, who are camping at Molose 1…
GOTCHA! You’d think it would be difficult in the branches of the trees. A herd of springbok on the ground, watched by fork-tailed drongos in the heart of the reserve. Looks like a giraffe all the way to Moreswe 2, deep in the reserve. I knew they were there! Of course about the lions behind me. I knew they were there again! The two adult lionesses had disappeared leaving a relaxed group. Walt surrounded by lions, their eyes glinting in the light from the camera flash. We went to visit him at his home in Pretoria to find out what happened. Over the past five years I’ve visited Khutse at least twice a year. On most trips you see very little game, but the isolation makes every trip worthwhile. That said, Khutse has a way of surprising you. This pride of lions woke us up at midnight when they decided to make toys out of our tents.”

Ah, there you are… An early morning drive to the waterhole finally reveals the phantom giraffe, which leaps off into the sunrise followed by a small herd of giraffes and a shy African wollycat. We’re tempted to follow, but instead we pack up quickly and head all the way back to the dappled shade of Mahurushele 3 for our final night in Khutse. Khutse might be the border and far away, not to mention frustratingly expensive for what you get, but there’s a feeling here that’s impossible to find in South Africa’s bustling national parks. Perhaps because camping in Khutse feels a bit like camping from, but some have little privacy or shade. Three of these are the best:

- Moreswe 1: for views
- Moreswe 2: for scenery and isolation. This campsite looks out over the Moreswe Pan. If you stand on the roof of your bakkie you can see the nearby waterhole. GPS: S23.5061 E24.42083
- Molose 1: for wildlife. This campsite is spacious and located a stones throw from a permanent waterhole that often attracts lions and other animals. GPS: S23.5043 E24.16086

What should you pack? You must be totally self-sufficient, so bring your own food, drinks, water and extra fuel. If you’re worried that some of your food may be confiscated at the border post, buy your groceries in Gaborone. The last reliable place to fill up at is Letlhakane, approximately 100km from the park’s southern entrance gate.

Do I need a 4x4? Yes, preferably one with low range.

Rent a safari car. There’s no cellphone coverage in the reserve and a satellite phone is the only way to contact the outside world in the event of an emergency. Rent a phone from Safirent. Rates from about R40 per day; airstime from about R19 per minute. Contact Shawna Coetzee 011 023 4294; Shawna.coetzee

What does it cost? Camping rates: You pay your camping fees in advance to a private company called Bigfoot Tours. If you’re an SADC citizen, it costs R185 per adult per night, R93 per child aged 8 – 15, free for children under 8. The rate is cheaper if you’re a Botswanan citizen and more expensive if you’re an international visitor.

Entrance fees: R31 per adult, R26 per child aged 8 – 15, free for children under 8, plus R5 per vehicle per day. Entrance fees are paid at the gate upon arrival.

Where should I go? Get your photoGraph

PhotoGraph

Photoshop! No way, what you see is real! A smiling Stefan van der Walt surrounded by lions, their eyes gleaming in the light from the camera flash. We went to visit him at his home in Pretoria to find out what happened.

“The past five years I’ve visited Khutse at least twice a year. On most trips you see very little game, but the isolation makes every trip worthwhile. That said, Khutse has a way of surprising you. This pride of lions woke us up at midnight when they decided to make toys out of our tents. “

In search of the phantom giraffe

The next morning, baring successfully avoided the attempts of a pair of luminous yellow scorpions to join us, we track the spoor of a lone lion and what looks like a giraffe all the way to Moreswe 2, deep in the reserve. The giraffe tracks lead across Moreswe Pan, flat and wide, and a thought strikes me: Where could a giraffe possibly hide out here? Moreswe 2 has an exceptional view of the pan. At this time and sea-birds breed. Beaches hug around the ground, washed by feet-tailed dragonflies in the branches of the trees. A herd of springbok and a couple of goshawks graze their way towards Moreswe’s waterhole as the late afternoon sun turns the grass around the pan into a rippling golden lake.

On a long, slow evening drive, we witness as a frenzy of little swifts, glossy starlings and grey-headed quails annihilate a swarm of butterflies spanned after the rain. A couple of bat-eared foxes lies in the middle of the pan, too full to move after a similar feast. But the cunning giraffe is nowhere to be found. Back, in camp, a refusively nightjar clears its throat in preparation for a night of engine-like chunting.

Tonight, you’d expect people who camp in Khutse to be crazy loners, but not Dawie and Yosta. Within minutes they invite us over for dinner. In March 2011, a photo of a grinning man standing next to a pride of lions went viral online. And this is where it happened! The box on page 22 above. The lions shred their quills at the sight of titbits spawned after the rain. A couple of bat-eared foxes lies in the middle of the pan, too full to move after a similar feast. But the cunning giraffe is nowhere to be found. Back, in camp, a refusively nightjar clears its throat in preparation for a night of engine-like chunting.

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