



THE WAITING GAME

Whether it's the antics of birds at the water's edge, the rumbles of elephants congregating for a drink in the heat of the day or the thought of unwinding with a cuppa in the early hours, safaris would be incomplete without waterholes. Dust off the binocs, pack the rusks and get ready to park off at seven of Southern Africa's best game-viewing waterholes. By Villiers Steyn.



Nowhere will you get as close to wild elephants as Elephant Sands. Relaxed herds quench their thirst in front of the restaurant throughout the dry season.

ELEPHANT SANDS BOTSWANA

✧ Best for close encounters

The biggest surprises are often found where you least expect. This is certainly the case with Elephant Sands, a small private lodge about 50 kilometres north of Nata, just off the tar road to Kasane. For the past few years, owner Ben Moller has undertaken the monumental task of supplying drinking water for herds of elephants migrating between Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park in the east and Chobe in the west by filling a small man-made trough in front of the communal dining area throughout the dry seasons.

Benjamin Mpinyane's sole duty is to fetch fresh water from a borehole 30 kilometres away. With only a 5000-litre JoJo tank on a truck, he travels back and forth up to five times a day to satisfy the thirst of hundreds of parched pachyderms.

The result is nothing short of astonishing. Wild elephants, waiting patiently for the trough's tap to be opened, stand within trunk's reach of gobsmacked onlookers. If you're really lucky, the resident wild dogs will swing by for a drink, bravely dodging the hordes of five-ton giants to get a sip or two.

The performance continues after sunset, entertaining spectators around the buffet table and bonfire until they're lulled to sleep by deep rumbles, only to be woken by a loud trumpet or yelp in the middle of the night.

 **PHOTO TIP:** With wildlife less than 15 metres away, you don't need a long zoom lens to take great photos at Elephant Sands; you'll fare better with a wide-angle lens.

 **WHERE TO STAY:** Elephant Sands has various basic, but comfortable accommodation options. There is a small camping ground with communal unisex ablutions, no electricity and very little shade and the bar, restaurant, salt-water swimming pool and chalets are set around the waterhole. Electricity and free Wi-Fi is available at certain times of the day. Camping costs from R78 a person a night, twin chalets with an en-suite bathroom are from R641 a unit a night and four-sleeper family chalets are from R763 a unit a night. There is also a government bed levy of R11 a person a night. Tel +267-7344-5162 (Inge Dijkstra) or +267-7307-9896 (Roan Claase), email bookings@elephantsandsbotswana.com, www.elephantsands.com.

 **GPS:** S19° 44' 56.5" E26° 04' 18.7"
(waterhole)



The best time of day to see sandgrouse drinking at Cubitje Quap is between 08h00 and 10h00.

CUBITJE QUAP IN K GALAGADI TRANSFRONTIER PARK SOUTH AFRICA

✧ Best for birdwatching

There are few displays as memorable as a flock of sandgrouse descending on one of the Kalahari's waterholes and there's no better place to witness this frenzy than Cubitje Quap in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

As with most of the park's waterholes (which consist of man-made cement hollows filled with borehole water), Cubitje Quap, about 10 kilometres north of Nossob Rest Camp, can seem unanimated and rather forgettable at first glance. But if your timing is right you'll be treated to an incredible aerial show.

To the delight of wildlife photographers, the opening act takes place year round shortly after sunrise as hundreds of Cape turtle-doves quench their thirst in the golden morning light at the edge of the water. The birds are rambunctious and clumsy, the scene almost chaotic as they fly back and forth between the water and nearby trees.

About an hour later, an air of suspense descends as the turtle-doves make way for the much more co-ordinated main event. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of Burchell's and Namaqua sandgrouse begin circling the waterhole in perfect formation, scoping out the surroundings for ever-present lanner falcons which swoop in for breakfast at least once a morning.

Once they're sure the coast is clear, the sandgrouses land for barely a second to drink a few gulps of water and wet their

chest feathers (they carry these droplets of water to their chicks kilometres away). The extravaganza repeats itself again and again before ending abruptly a few hours later.

Patient game viewers who hang around until midday are often rewarded with a host of raptors, including secretary birds, bateleurs and various vulture species that quench their thirsts during the heat of the day.

 **PHOTO TIP:** Capture more detail and texture in your images by photographing the sandgrouse in side light rather than front light. This can be achieved by parking on the inconspicuous little loop immediately north of the waterhole. Make use of a very fast shutter speed to freeze the birds in flight.

 **WHERE TO STAY:** Nossob Rest Camp has a large campsite with ample shade, communal ablution facilities and both electrified and non-electrified stands. There's also a variety of self-catering units with roof fans, a small shop, a filling station and a swimming pool. There's no cellphone reception. Camping is from R195 a night for the first two people (R62 for each additional adult) and self-catering is from R680 a night for the first two people (R186 for each additional adult). Two stand-alone guest houses are from R1 380 a day for up to four people and various other accommodation options are available at other camps in the park. There's also a daily conservation fee of R50 a person a day (Wild Card holders are free). Tel 012-428-9111 (central reservations), email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org.

 **GPS:** S25° 22' 15.6" E20° 32' 57.0"
(Cubitje Quap Waterhole)



Kumasinga waterhole attracts a steady flow of general game during the dry season, including zebra, impala, blue wildebeest and nyala.

KUMASINGA BIRD HIDE IN UMKHUZE SOUTH AFRICA

✧ Best for species diversity

Unlike most hides, Kumasinga Bird Hide between Mantuma Rest Camp and Nsumo Pan in KwaZulu-Natal's uMkhuze is located 150 metres from the parking area. This reduces vehicle disturbance and, since only half of the pathway is fenced, doubles your heart rate as you casually stroll through leopard, rhino and elephant country. If you're brave enough, take a moment to look for pink-throated twinspots and gorgeous bush-shrikes, both of which are common in the sand forest that surrounds Kumasinga.

The hide itself was not built next to the waterhole, but over it, with open window ports on three sides giving you a 270-degree view. During the late dry season (September and October), Kumasinga attracts a constant flow of animals, so leave your copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* at home and pack a picnic basket and perhaps an extra memory card instead, because you're not going to want to leave once you've made yourself comfortable.

Warthogs and vervet monkeys squeeze through the animal traffic jam of ungainly white rhinos and large herds of impalas, nyalas and blue wildebeest. Even shy species such as zebra and giraffe, which are generally very cautious around waterholes, don't think twice about dropping their heads.

Trying to keep an eye on all the action around you is like try-

ing to follow two tennis matches at once, so rather focus on one individual or herd and watch as a parched red-billed oxpecker grips onto a white rhino's wrinkly lip while it drinks or water splashes from a giraffe's mouth after it's had its fill.

Also, keep your bird list close by because clownish crested guineafowl and rainbow-coloured purple-crested turacos are frequent visitors, as are little sparrowhawks, yellow-bellied greenbuls and black-collared barbets, along with more than 450 other species. In fact, only Kruger (roughly 50 times the size of uMkhuze) contains more bird species in one reserve.



PHOTO TIP: Because it's west-facing, the best light on the edge of the water is early in the morning when the sun is behind the hide. Take along a tripod or beanbag to support the weight of your camera as chances are you'll be here for a long time.



WHERE TO STAY: Mantuma Rest Camp, in the uMkhuze Section of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, has a variety of self-catering units as well as a shop and pool. Emshopi Campsite has 65 stands with reasonable shade, communal ablutions and a pool. Power is generated early morning and late afternoon. Camping costs R230 a stand a night for up to three people (R75 for each additional adult, up to a maximum of eight a stand). Self-catering units are from R410 a night for a two-sleeper hut to R2350 a night for a six-sleeper chalet. There's a daily conservation fee of R60 an adult. Tel 033-845-1000, email bookings@kznwildlife.com, www.kznwildlife.com.



GPS: S27° 37' 44.1" E32° 14' 04.4"
(Kumasinga Bird Hide)

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Grootkolk Wilderness Camp frequently attracts leopards, especially early in the morning shortly after sunrise.

GROOTKOLK IN K GALAGADI TRANSFRONTIER PARK SOUTH AFRICA

✧ Best for leopard

If it's leopard you're after, you needn't look any further than the waterhole at Grootkolk Wilderness Camp at the northern tip of Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Although nothing in nature can be guaranteed, this tiny waterhole right in front of the camp's four desert cabins gives you a sporting chance to admire the cats from your doorstep – in daylight.

A quick read-through your cabin's sightings book will reveal the remarkable frequency with which Africa's most elusive big cat pays the camp waterhole a visit, especially early in the morning. While a morning game drive gives you a decent chance to spot lion, cheetah and a host of Kalahari game, you're best off pouring yourself a cup of coffee, wrapping up in a blanket (especially in winter when temperatures drop to -5° Celsius) and putting your feet up on the veranda to wait for a leopard to amble down for a drink. It can happen anytime from half an hour before sunrise to mid-morning and, if you don't keep your eyes on the water, you might miss

it altogether. While you wait, red hartebeest, kudu and brown hyena could make an appearance.

Pass the time by pouring a bit of fresh water into a saucer and placing it on the veranda wall. It will attract all sorts of birds, including red-headed finches, sociable weavers and grey-headed sparrows.



PHOTO TIP: The distance from the cabins to the waterhole is about 100 metres, so you'll need a long telephoto lens of at least 400mm to get reasonably close to the animals. Since there's no ledge to balance your camera on, you'll need a monopod or tripod to support the weight of your telephoto lens.



WHERE TO STAY: Four comfortable self-catering cabins with roof fans and outdoor braai areas overlook the waterhole, which is floodlit for a few hours each night. There's no cellphone reception, shop or fuel. Costs from R1 135 a two-sleeper cabin a night. There's a daily conservation fee of R50 a person a day (Wild Card holders are free). Tel 012-428-9111 (central reservations), email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org.



GPS: S24° 53' 26.4" E20° 08' 42.1"
(Grootkolk Wilderness Camp)



Lions are common in the south of Kruger and are often seen on the plains surrounding Kwaggaspan waterhole.

KWAGGASPAN IN KRUGER NATIONAL PARK SOUTH AFRICA

✧ Best to see (most of) the Big Five

Of all the waterholes in the Kruger National Park, Kwaggaspan is arguably the most underrated. Located 20 kilometres south of Skukuza Rest Camp, it's not nearly as close to a camp as Sunset Dam (Lower Sabie) or Matjulu (Berg-en-Dal).

It's next to the tarred H3 in a patch of open grassland dotted with gigantic leadwood trees. Most visitors stop only to scan the scenic surroundings before continuing on with their game drives. However, with careful timing and a bit of patience you won't find a better place in Kruger to see the Big Five. (Okay, to see leopard you might also need a big dollop of luck.)

Visibility is great and animals have two places from which to drink: a man-made trough about 80 metres from the road and a natural pool about the size of a tennis court (a pair of regal saddle-billed storks have made their home between the two). Buffalo prefer to drink from the pool and won't hesitate to flop down on its bank for a mid-afternoon nap, while white

rhino and elephant choose the trough, where the water is somewhat fresher. Lions are often seen next to the water's edge early in the morning, but hang about even if you don't spot them right away because they frequently rest in the gullies across the road.



PHOTO TIP: Leave Skukuza when the gate opens and don't linger on the way to the waterhole because most of the action happens very early. The light is also best at this time.



WHERE TO STAY: Skukuza is Kruger's capital and has everything from a post office to a library. There are also two pools, a riverside restaurant, a large campsite with power, a large shop, ATM and filling station. Camping costs from R200 a stand a night for two people (R62 for each additional adult up to a maximum of six) and self-catering is from R420 a night for a two-sleeper safari tent to R5 184 for an eight-sleeper guest house. There is a daily conservation fee of R50 a person a day (Wild Card holders are free). Tel 012-428-9111 (central reservations), email reservations@sanparks.org, www.sanparks.org.



GPS: S25°08' 41.8" E31°33' 27.4"
(Kwaggaspan Waterhole)

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A flock of immature great white pelicans work together to catch fish in one of Mamili's countless natural waterholes.

MAMILI NATIONAL PARK NAMIBIA

* Most scenic

Mamili National Park in Namibia's Caprivi Strip is anything but conventional. Park entrance fees are inexpensive, visitors can camp under a tree of their choice and there's no single waterhole that attracts most game in any specific area.

Instead there's a natural waterhole around every corner, each with a resident bloat of hippos, an elephant bull or two munching on lush grass at the water's edge and, of course, a contingent of waterbirds. For much of the wet season (November to May), Mamili becomes mostly inaccessible to the public as water levels rise, flooding many of the sandy tracks.

Providing the rains don't come early, October is the best time of the year to pitch your tent under one of the park's gigantic sausage trees, primarily because you can then concentrate more on tracking fresh spoor than trying to keep water out of your Land Rover's air filter.

If you explore far and wide enough, you should come across hordes of great white and pink-backed pelicans, sometimes in flocks of more than a thousand, teaming up to catch what fish are left in whichever pond they're dining at that day. On the shore, you'll probably see marabou storks, squacco herons, African spoonbills and if you're lucky, wattled cranes,

Southern Africa's most endangered crane.

There are few better ways to spend an afternoon than in a comfortable camping chair at the edge of the water, listening to the snorts of hippos and calls of African fish-eagles in one of Southern Africa's last true wetland wilderness areas.



PHOTO TIP: If you spot a family of relaxed hippos in the late afternoon, park off on the eastern bank of the waterhole, wait for sunset and start clicking. Make sure they're between you and the sunset and underexpose by one to two stops (use the exposure compensation function on your camera) to create darker silhouettes and a more colourful sunset.



WHERE TO STAY: Nkasa Lupala Tented Lodge (tel +264-8114-77798, email info@nkasalupalalodge.com, www.nkasalupalalodge.com) is on the park boundary and consists of 10 luxury safari tents around a communal dining area (from R1 450 a person a night sharing, excluding activities). There are no facilities inside the park, but you can camp under any tree as long as you're entirely self-sufficient (R25 a person a night). The nearby Rupara Campsite (call Luscious Maezi on +264-8139-71932) has four stands, each with its own ablution block (R80 a person a night). Entrance into the parks costs R5 a person and R10 a vehicle a day.



GPS: S18°20'04.0" E23°39'47.8"
(Sisintze Registration Office at the park entrance)



At the end of the dry season, visitors can expect to see up to 200 elephants congregating at Nyamandhlovu waterhole, especially in the late afternoons.

NYAMANDHLOVU PLATFORM IN HWANGE NATIONAL PARK ZIMBABWE

✧ Best for elephant interactions

If the noble elephant is close to your heart, Nyamandhlovu in the east of Hwange (about 11 kilometres from the main camp) might just become your favourite waterhole.

Early mornings are generally the quietest, at least when it comes to elephant action. You'll probably see a few lofty giraffes, a zebra family or two and perhaps a rare sable or roan antelope, along with the resident herd of blue wildebeest which fancies the surrounding short grass plains (except if the local lion pride pops in for a drink too).

As the day starts to warm up, elephants stream in and by late afternoon anything without a trunk has to walk circles around the waterhole as hundreds of pachyderms make space only for the biggest, most dominant bulls.

The interactions are captivating: thirsty herds race down to the water's edge, family groups greet or chase one another, massive bulls fight over fresh water at the inlet pipe and calves face down gargantuan crocodiles. All that trounces these theatrics are the noises that accompany them – rumbles, grumbles, screams and squeals and, of course, the odd

insanely loud trumpet to say, 'Get out of my way!'

With such an entrancing view from your vantage point in the four-metre high, shady hide overlooking the waterhole, all you really need is a camera, a coolbox, a pair of binocs and perhaps a pillow for your bottom.



PHOTO TIP: If they're a safe distance away, take some eye-level shots of the elephants from the parking lot below the platform. By using low aperture values (f2.8 to f5.6), this angle will allow you to get images with a wonderfully shallow depth of field, with the elephants in focus and the background blurred.



WHERE TO STAY: The campsite at the main camp is large, but ablution facilities are very rundown; don't expect hot water or power. Most fixed units are basic, but always sparkling clean. There's also a small shop and restaurant, but no filling station or pool. There is cellphone reception. Camping is from \$15 (about R131) a person a night and self-catering costs from \$35 (about R306) a two-sleeper chalet a night to \$100 (about R872) a night for a four-sleeper family lodge. Entrance costs \$15 (about R131) a person (SADC citizens) and \$10 (about R88) a vehicle a week. Tel +263-470-6077/8, email reservations@zimparks.co.zw, www.zimparks.org.



GPS: S18°46'29.6" E26°53'18.2"
(Nyamandhlovu Platform)





A NEW PERSPECTIVE

An underground hide was opened in Botswana's Mashatu Game Reserve by C4 Images and Safaris in 2011. Visitors have the unique opportunity to photograph everything from drinking guineafowl to mud-bathing elephants at water level, providing an angle wildlife photographers have until now only dreamed of. For more information on this waterhole, read 'Shooting stars', *Getaway*, February 2013 .



Give yourself the best chance to spot predators by going on game drives around sunrise and sunset.

TAKE PERFECT PHOTOS AT A WATERHOLE

- **PLAN AHEAD**
Before you go to a game reserve, determine whether the waterhole(s) you plan to visit are ideal for morning or afternoon photography by checking their relative positions on Google Earth.
- **GET THERE EARLY**
Get to the waterhole before the wildlife. If you rock up while they're drinking, you'll probably scare them away.
- **TAKE SUPPORT**
Pack a beanbag or tripod to support the camera's weight. Chances are you'll be pointing your zoom lens at that stalking crocodile for longer than your arms can hold it up.
- **FREEZE THE FRAME**
Select continuous shooting (burst mode) and a fast shutter speed to freeze the action which often takes place at waterholes.



Wet-season photography is usually great for photographing young animals in green surroundings.

TOP TIPS FOR A MORE ENRICHED GAME-VIEWING EXPERIENCE

1 CHOOSE THE RIGHT SEASON

The advantages of the dry season (generally May to October in Southern Africa) are obvious: waterholes attract more animals, visibility is better and animals tend to be active for longer during the day. However, the wet season (from November to April) often brings with it a host of migrant bird species, newborn animals and colour as greenery replaces dust.

2 CHECK SIGHTINGS BOARDS

Monitor the rest camps' boards for trends. For instance, open plains give you a good chance of spotting cheetah, so a road through such a region would be a good place to start searching for these big cats.

3 DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK

Ask staff in camp about where the nearest spotted hyena den is, where they last saw a big herd of buffalo, or which waterhole is most productive.

4 TIMING AND DIRECTION IS KEY

During regular game-viewing hours (sunrise to sunset in most parks), large cats are usually seen early morning and late afternoon. Avoid the morning rush by leaving camp 15 minutes after the gates open and try to plan your route so you don't drive directly into the sun at sunrise or sunset because this can greatly reduce your vision as the sun reflects off your dirty windscreen (or simply because it's too bright).

5 DON'T DRIVE TOO FAST

Driving slowly (20 to 25 km/h) gives you a better chance of spotting well-camouflaged creatures such as leopards and owls and decreases the possibility of spooking animals.

6 BUT DON'T DRIVE TOO SLOWLY EITHER

In parks such as Kgalagadi, where small animal populations are widely dispersed, you're often rewarded for covering more rather than less ground. Try to get to fruitful waterholes for the

early-morning activity peak. Always stick to the park speed limit.

7 SEARCH IN THE RIGHT AREA

Read up on the ecological needs of the species you're dying to see. For instance, black rhino prefer dense acacia woodland, leopard choose riverine thickets and klipspringer favour rocky outcrops.

8 PLAY THE WAITING GAME

If you decide to sit at a waterhole for hours, make sure there's no other surface water such as rivers, pools of rainwater or waterholes close by. Prepare to be patient and make the stakeout as comfortable as possible by parking in the shade and packing drinks, snacks and a good book. Try to park so you're close enough for a good view, but not too close to scare off timid species such as giraffe or eland.

9 RELY ON MORE THAN JUST YOUR EYES

Keep your ears open for the alarm calls of prey species such as impalas, vervet monkeys and helmeted guinea-fowl. When they make a racket, there's usually a predator in the vicinity.

10 TAKE A WALK AROUND CAMP

Rest camps can be extremely good for game viewing. Their lush gardens attract wildlife from the surrounding areas and animals are more relaxed around humans as they've become habituated over the years. Camp animals are used to the shapes and sounds of humans and therefore allow us to get much closer than those animals outside camps. Most camp birds, reptiles and small mammals are relatively relaxed when you compare their behaviour to those outside camp, but that doesn't mean that you won't come across the odd very shy snake or bird inside camp. Stake out the bird-bath, scan the tree trunks for lizards and agamas or take a stroll along the fence footpath. However, resist the temptation to put out food. ■



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