

The safari on everyone's bucket list

Lucy Higginson went to ride in the renowned Okavango Delta — and found a famously watery paradise ablaze

LIKE many of you, perhaps, I've read about Macatoo camp in Botswana's legendary inland delta. Noting the big-name riders who've visited, such as Mary King, Mark Todd and the Funnells, I've wondered how good a place has to be to lure a full-time rider away from the yard — and back on to a horse. Finally, I was to find out.

Macatoo is almost invisible until you're in it. Guests' tents are laced cleverly between trees, and the main lodge is a chic, open-sided canvas and timber affair. Though you wouldn't guess it from brochures, the Okavango is not a watery, lily-strewn paradise year round, but floods each March for several months, after which it reverts to a verdant region strewn with mini islands.

My visit fell in the drier (and cheaper) Okavango summer. If splashing through spray and water lilies was off the agenda, a major upside was the chance to enjoy long canters, only limited when aardvark and elephant holes (dug to help them tap the freshest water) are obscured.

Within hours of arrival we prepared for a first evening ride, shorter and more sedate affairs than the morning ones. Gathering us around as if we were cub scouts, our

guide, Sekongo, talked us through his hand signals. "This means 'Let's trot'; this is 'canter'; this is 'stop'; this is 'giraffe ahead'; this is 'warthog...'"

Our group gelled instantly. Along with two Berkshire Lucys was a daughter (Rose), mother (Fiona) and grandmother (Diana) from one family, who had all evented or hunted. Diana, 78, was a Cornish vet. If I ever felt sore, I had only to think: "Pull yourself together; it's a lady 34 years your senior is doing fine."

Together we shared an incredible week-long wildlife odyssey, our rides encountering quizzical giraffes, straight-tailed warthog, giant monitor lizards, reed buck, eland, tsessebe, wild dog, buffalo and so much besides.

Macatoo is one of only three lodges in an area of half a million hectares. This is safari as it should be; there are no rangers radioing each other discreet updates; no WiFi, no mobile phone signal, no concrete. There is a generator, but one feels surrounded only by hurricane lanterns and wood fires, though guides carry satellite phones with which to call a chopper if anyone comes a cropper.

On horseback, blistering, twisting canters and hops over elephant-flattened trees provide abundant

excitement, no matter how much or how little game appears. No Toyota can rival a warm horse brushing past wild sage, or teach you quite what an impact hippo tracks and porcupine holes have on the terrain.

It is fascinating to learn about the plant and birdlife too; the marula, mopani and baobab trees; the storks, kingfishers, hornbills, sandgrouse and francolin seen on every ride, besides Botswana's gorgeous national bird, the lilac-crested roller.

But it was only two days before we savoured our best champagne moment, visiting a watering hole so full of activity, one half expected David Attenborough to pop up to complete the scene.

A croc slunk away, half-submerged hippo ears flickered. Then, as fish eagles skimmed the water, 24 ellies arrived to drink and cool off.

'Reed buck alert'

SWAPPING to a new member of the forward-going Macatoo horse herd every third ride, we soon learnt where to be on "reed buck alert", given this antelope's habit of springing up almost from under your feet. Only once was anyone unshipped by a spook, but another day a shout halted us mid-canter to see Rose's grey upended in the grass having tripped, his hooves in the air. Rose invisible beneath it. Happily, both stayed calm and emerged unscathed.

We soon settled into the rhythm of a Macatoo day;

waking at 5.30am; munching fire-roasted toast as the sun rose; then exploring the bush for four hours with a mid-ride flapjack and apple stop. Then home for an early lunch, siesta and sunbathe, watching visitors to the watering hole by camp — until one day the routine was rudely interrupted.

'Do you think we should abandon camp?'

BOTSWANA; unfenced, truly wild and managed only by nature's whims, is good at surprises. Last time I visited, unseasonal downpours bogged down our support truck and scuppered our ride. This time the issue was fire, started by lightning strikes on the eve of our arrival. Normally, seasonal rains would soon extinguish them. Instead we had a mini heatwave and stiff breezes pushing flames across tinder-dry bush.

Increasingly, our rides took in charred, still-smouldering bush, dense leadwood trees burning for days as if they were bizarre modern sculptures. Then the fires came closer. Ash-filled smoke made everything smell bonfirey, and our open-air suppers were backlit by a not-too-distant wall of flame.

"It won't get through that greenery in front of the lodge," said Macatoo's owner John Sobey. But it did, sending him scuttling for a 12-hour-plus shift on his tractor, cutting extra firebreaks.

Eventually, in the bikini-and-book interval after lunch one day, I could not only smell and see flames but hear them crackling.

Normally nonchalant Macatoo staff were spied sprinting round, and Lucy in the tent next-door was already staring intently into her binos when I arrived on her deck to say: "This is starting to look serious."

In an impromptu guest powwow, we debated whether we should throw a few things into bags. But within hours, the panic was over. The wind changed, the firebreaks worked and our guides were soon back in camp sipping tea, unperturbed.

Welcome surprises and noisy nights

MINDFUL that the best holidays throw up something unexpected, Macatoo springs more welcome surprises.

One evening we rode to a magnificent table set up in the bush to dine on pizza baked in a converted termite mound. Another ride ended at a tree-top platform where lunch awaited, along with fresh clothes dug out of our tents and laid out ready. Another night, John erected a "bush cinema", allowing us to watch a BBC programme on the delta under a starry Okavango sky.

Night is scarcely less exciting than day and certainly noisier. With only canvas and mesh windowpanes between you and the bush, it thrums with nature's chirrup, tick, buzz, screech and bellow. My top three nocturnal interruptions? The sawing rasp of a nearby leopard; the rising "Wooooop" of the scops owl; and the elephants that once came browsing through camp (raiding the staff kitchen tent en route). So close were they to our tents, their stomach rumbles were deafening and sent me cowering beneath my sheets.

What is it then that puts the Okavango on so many wishlists? It's the isolation and authenticity, the way it requires you to concentrate only on your surroundings. It's the sumptuous but Edwardian feel of your tent; the confidence you feel riding excellent horses for some 40 hours in a week. It's the thrill of watching a bush baby's extraordinary trapeze tricks in a tree as the sun sets; or finding a glass of bubbly and a pair of shorts suddenly waiting for you at the end of a hot ride. It's as good as they say. I strongly advise you to go. **H&H**

COSTS AND CONTACTS

- In The Saddle: 01299 272997 or www.inthesaddle.com
- A week at Macatoo costs from £3,185 per head for a week, plus flights
- Recommended for experienced riders