

Rick and Mona's S. Africa and Botswana Safari

Sept 4 – 19, 2025; organized by National Geographic's GeoEx.

Our first time in S. Africa, we flew Aspen – Denver- Dulles – Capetown, over 24 hours flying.

Capetown, population 6 million, is called the Mother City of South Africa being the first European settlement in 1652 by the Dutch India Company.

We took the Cableway to the top of Table Mountain – the iconic flat-top mountain that frames Capetown and in 2011 was voted by millions as one of the 7 Wonders of Nature.



Not far from center of town is a beach which is home to a Penguin colony that immigrated from Antarctica years ago – and oddly enough was our first animal sighting of the trip.

We stayed at the Nelson Hotel, the 5-star “Pink Lady” hotel that dates to 1899. It was wonderful.

We had a guide for the day, making sure we hit the highlights and markets and explaining the colorful history of the area. I asked lots of questions and was fascinated by some of the answers. For example, why isn't there more tension between blacks and whites given the awful period of Apartheid and 27-year lockup of Nelson Mandela. The answer was, when Mandela was released from prison and became South Africa's first president in 1994, he

advocated strongly that there was to be reconciliation and not revenge and the populace largely followed his lead.



We went to the wine area of S. Africa that is centered on the beautiful town of Stellenbich. It is a large wine-growing area of many varieties – from what I tasted I liked the Syrah wines the best although a small sampling.

Safari



Ok this is a Safari trip, enough about the city. We flew charter on increasingly smaller airplanes, starting with a King Air out of Capetown.

Our first stay in the bush was the Loapi Tented Camp in the private Tswalu Kalahari Reserve.

This is a large wildlife preserve created by the Oppenheimer family, known best for its ownership of the DeBeers and Anglo American interests. This had been a ranching and hunting area resulting in depleted wildlife. The ranches are now mostly gone and hunting ended in 1999. The Loapi camp was created in 2024 and it is over-the-top magnificent. We had seen the words “tented camp” –



but when we arrived, we were blown away. That is our “tent” – all of it and just look at the inside.

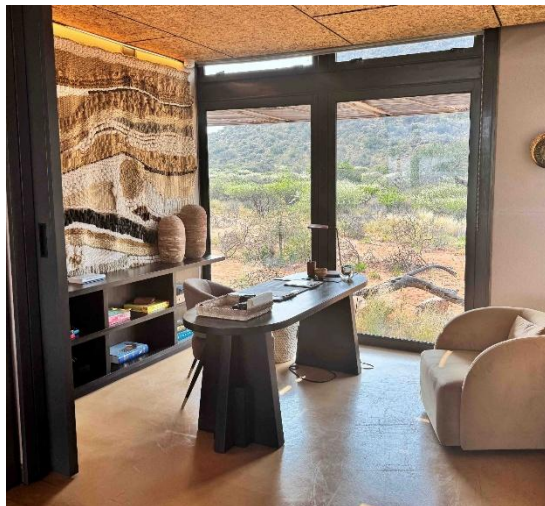
The living room



The kitchen



The Study



The bar and entry to bedroom



But it doesn't end there. It came with a private chef (!!), a full time butler, a private guide, vehicle and a tracker for the 3-day stay. If you lifted this tent and put in Aspen somewhere it would go for \$ millions. The chef was awesome – our first night ...

The appetizer



The entrée



The dessert



The safari routine is to get up at 4:30am, eat some fruit and yogurt and get picked up by our guide and our tracker at 5am for coffee and then hop into a special version of Toyota Land



Cruiser. It has TRD-Pro suspension and a seat mounted on the front bumper for our tracker.

What did we love best in addition to the animals? It was the tracking. They use a combination of looking over the side at tracks in the dirt, listening to animal noises and watching animal behavior (birds, giraffes, baboons and the flight of the impalas). From those clues we head out on dirt “roads” and across the bush to find animal contact in their natural setting.

I’ll be consolidating animal encounters across all three camps to group in animal species.

The African Wild Dogs or “painted dogs”

The top of our list for experiences was the dogs – which are actually African wolves. They travel in packs, are highly mobile and are among the most endangered of species. Every one has different markings. They are predators feeding on antelopes, impala, kudu, etc. They eat their prey as fast as possible after the kill before being chased off by hyenas



which we witnessed. They can reach speeds of 60 km/hour (37 mph). We had the experience of racing through the bush, alongside a pack of 11 dogs – it was thrilling.

Our pack of 11 dogs on one hunt



We spent nearly four hours tracking, then hunting with them – here they are munching on a Roan Antelope.

We were fortunate enough to be on three such hunts with the dogs at two different camps – unusual since they are nomadic, highly mobile and rare.



In another hunt a different pack of six got an impala, ate quickly and here the spotted hyaenas took over. A Jackel was trying to butt in for a taste but had little luck.

Hyaenas mostly hunt at night – here’s what that looks like ... and in the daylight.



Roan
Antelope



On foot with the dogs resting after eats

When we were off-roading along side them in the bush which did not distract them at all!



Dogs cornering a Cape Buffalo – see the 3 dogs in circle with the others heading in.



After getting faced down by the buffalo, the dogs thought again and passed on this one.



Black Rhino

Another fantastic tracking experience had the goal of finding the rare Black Rhino. The more prevalent Rhinos are called White Rhinos – but that’s not about color. The common Rhino has a broader head/horn template and were originally called “Wide Rhinos” but eventually



it got mispronounced as White Rhinos. The rare one needed a common name and so became “Black Rhinos” – both are grayish beige.

We finally found some tracks that were a day old, but as we followed they got fresher. Our tracker got out of our Toyota and walked the bush as we followed – after over an hour he signalled “fresh tracks!” Our guide – who could see things with the smallest partial sighting – found the target. Got the photo, but after we were stopped for a while the Rhino spooked and started charging us – so we split.

Cheetah

We love the cats – so beautiful, dangerous and can be fast moving. We certainly hoped to see Lions, Cheetahs and Leopards on the safari.

How awesome to see a full-grown mama Cheetah up close!



Here she is with one of her cubs.

Another cub – they were climbing trees and jumping on each other just like kids.



We were cautioned to stay in the car, don't stand up in the car and bring only green or khaki clothes. Colors and especially white can aggravate the animals. Apparently, the whole of car and people look like one and not something they typically want to eat.

Here we are in our greens.

This first camp was in the Kalahari – a semi-arid desert and savanna. There are dunes but there's also green plant life, a stalwart being the Shephard Tree that sends its roots down even 80 meters to find water. There are deep subterranean water reserves likened to an underground ocean despite desert conditions above.

After 3 days in the Kalhari, we flew from a dirt airstrip sporting just a windsock. These were single-engine Beechcrafts jumping from one strip to another. We headed to the Linyanti



Bush Camp in north Botswana close to the Namibia border. It is in the Okavango Delta which is a vast inland delta in Botswana. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site as one of the few interior delta systems that does not flow into the sea.

This camp was rougher, but anything would be. No fences so animals walked through the camp. It was a tent but with hardwood floor and common area for breakfast and dinners, still very nice and about what we normally would have expected.

This is what happy hour each evening looked like. Behind Mona you can see the savanna



that comes right up to the common area. We saw elephants, impala, etc. as we sat and had drinks and munchies.

This is where we discovered a fantastic gin made locally in Botswana – Okavango Gin.



It is made from Juniper berries like other gins but including local Mopane seed and other spices. It won double gold at the World Spirits competition in San Francisco. We brought back 2 bottles.

From this camp we saw huge herds of animals that are in the Linyanti during dry season, eating everything and then migrating inland during wet season to access more food. The wet season enables more growing ready for the returning herds

in the following year.





While it is the dry season – there's still water here and there. Those are impala in the back – one of the most popular foods for the cats ... and dogs.

Elephants on the march.



Herds of Cape Buffaloes



Up close the Cape Buffaloes look tough and they are but lions do eat them. They track them, sometimes for days until one buffalo strays off – and the lions pounce. We followed some lions following a buffalo herd but didn't have the days of patience that the lions do.



Huge herds of Zebras too – here is an awesome action shot of two males fighting for dominance. That happens a lot among males in many species.



Oh yes, and Giraffes too – easy to spot as they tower above most vegetation in the Delta.





Clearly, we had already seen a ton of animals – but we still wanted more cats and hippos too. Fortunately, we still had one more camp to go. After these 3 days in Linyanti, we headed out to the local airstrip, only to find it blocked by another herd – of Impala!



The local bush pilots knew the drill – just wait, they eventually move.

Sanctuary Chief's Bush Camp

We puddle-jumped about 30 minutes further south (wetter and a touch cooler) in the Okavango Delta to another amazing camp – the Sanctuary Chief's Camp created by John Kent of Abercrombie & Kent. This camp was back to “amazing.” Our private guide (Ken for short) with 19 years' experience, 11 of which at this camp, was clearly the senior guy. We had him to ourselves for three days. We didn't need a tracker here – Ken did it all.



We not only bush-whacked, we water-whacked too – since we were deeper in the Delta. That black snorkel near Ken’s head is how the engine breathers and stay running even in deep water.

Here is our Chief’s “tent”.





Not quite the full cabin we had in the Laopi camp, but pretty amazing to find it in the bush nonetheless.

Here the staff was unequalled in service from anything we had experienced elsewhere. They tended to every need and some we hadn't thought of.

The best example is what happened on the second day of the stay – September 16, which was our 3rd anniversary. We must have mentioned it at some point – or maybe we were just obvious.

But that day, out in the bush with Ken – he pulled around a clump of trees and there was quite a setup – the staff arranged and set up an anniversary celebration lunch in the wild!



That was beyond sweet. And notice our Okavango gin ready to pour.

Not to be outdone, our housekeeper had a surprise for us in the evening after dinner – all made from towels. Swans and Lotus Flower.



That was special.

Leopard

Next morning we were off tracking. Ken saw some Leopard tracks and after some time he



spotted what we never would have seen.

Is that stunning or what? That is a teenager.

Leopards sleep in the trees to be safe from the ground animals at night, such as hyenas.

Later as the sun went low, we found:



Turns out she's a mom – and here are her cubs:



Furthering our luck, Ken spotted another ... who then showed us her teeth.



Each day, in each camp, there was a tradition to stop in the bush as the sun sets and have a “sundowner” drink – at home we call it happy hour. Drinks and interesting snack tidbits. Here Ken set up ours on a flip-down table. Those Toyotas have it all.



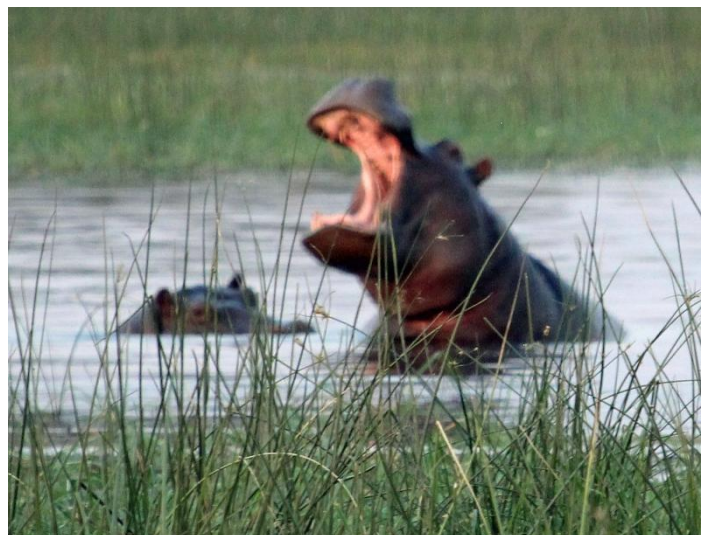
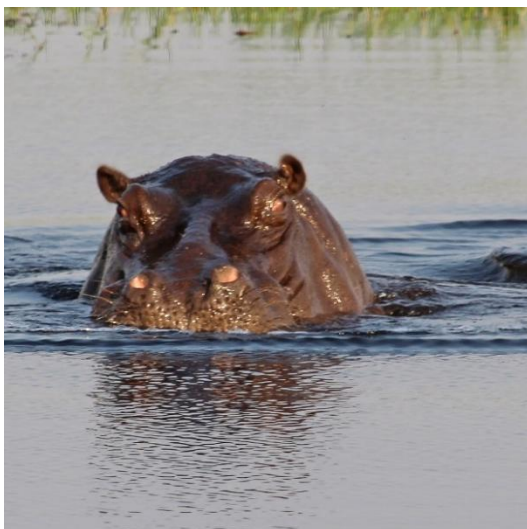
Part of our orientation when we arrived at Chief's was that like Linyanti, this is a camp with no fences. The wildlife walk right through camp which at times could be dangerous even if we stayed on the wooden pathways. Each room was equipped with a compressed-air horn for emergency and a radio to call for help if animals were breaking in.

We did hear loud snorts from nearby elephants and barking from baboons. The Baboons are the bad boys – if they get in, they can destroy a place.



One afternoon Mona was trying to get to the main lodge and right outside our door were some elephants. One was acting like a protector male. No way was she going to walk along the walkway about 6' from that elephant. So Mona got on the radio, and they came for her from behind the tent and got her out – they didn't want to tangle either.

The Hippos

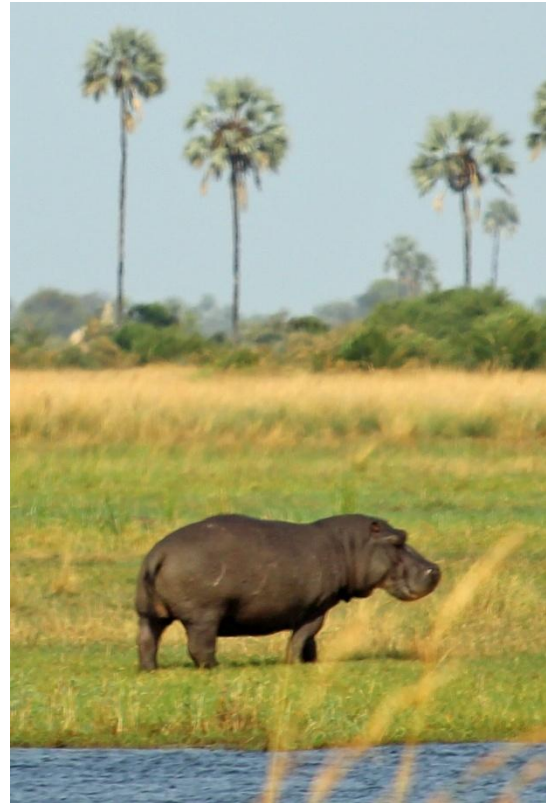


During the day Hippos are in the water, with only their head showing, often completely submerged. They come out of water at night to feed. When we saw them, they quickly opened their mouths to “show us their weapons.”

This one got exuberant.



Then we got lucky and saw one out of water.

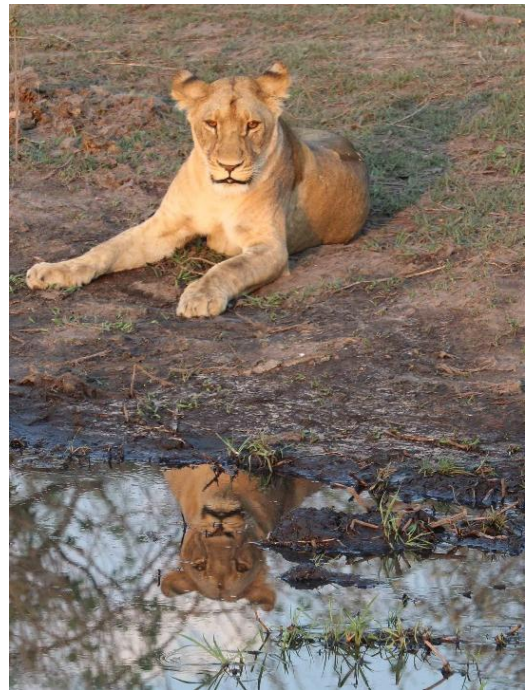


The Lions

You're probably wondering, where are the lions? We saw lots of lions. Some were in a tree!



And some were in the water.



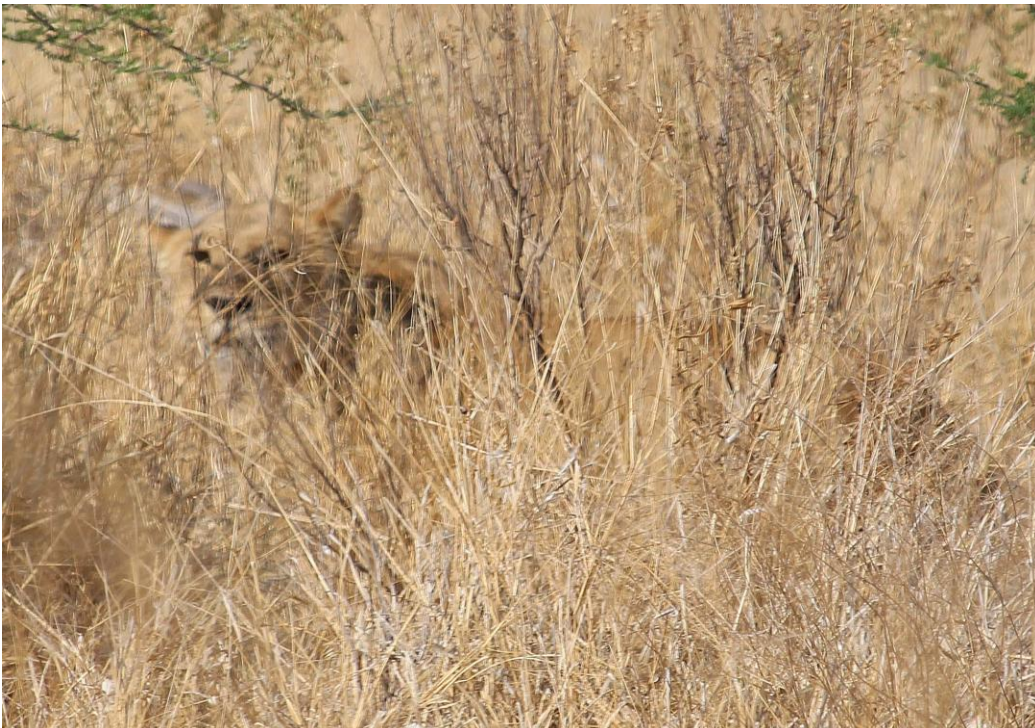
Some were big, beautiful males with full mane.



Some were on a hunt.



Or hiding in the bush grass.



They didn't seem to care much if we were in the car close-by but they still wanted to show their teeth.

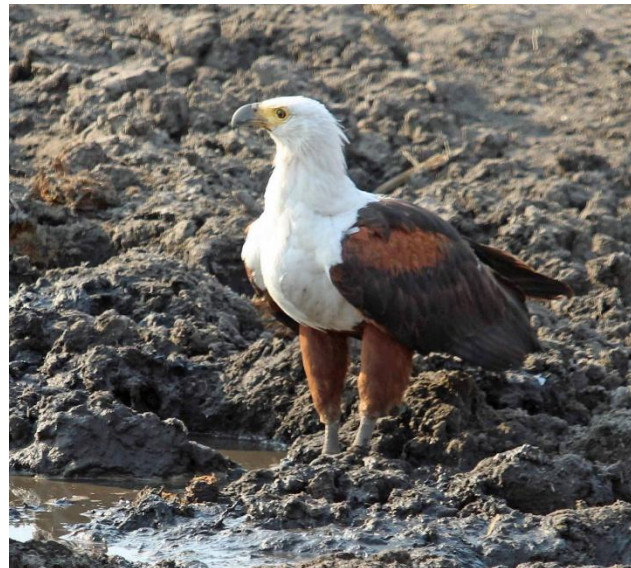


The Birds

And then there were the birds – an incredible variety, here's a few:



Saddle-billed Stork



African Fish Eagle



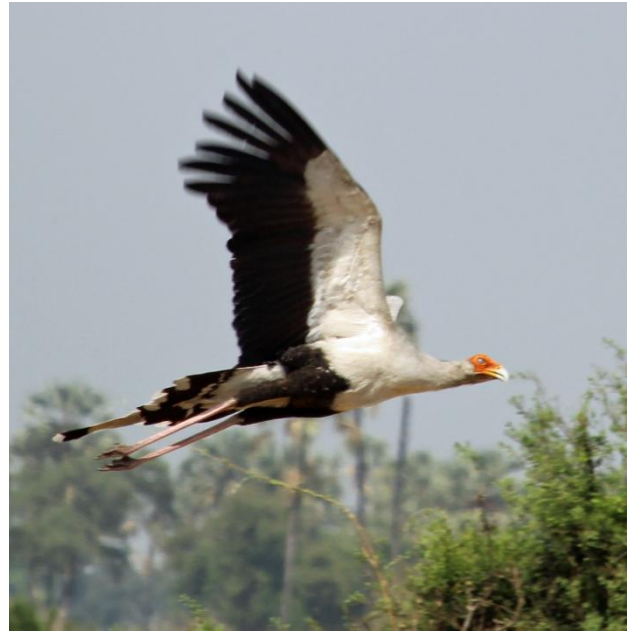
Lilac-breasted Roller



Giant Eagle Owl



Great Egret

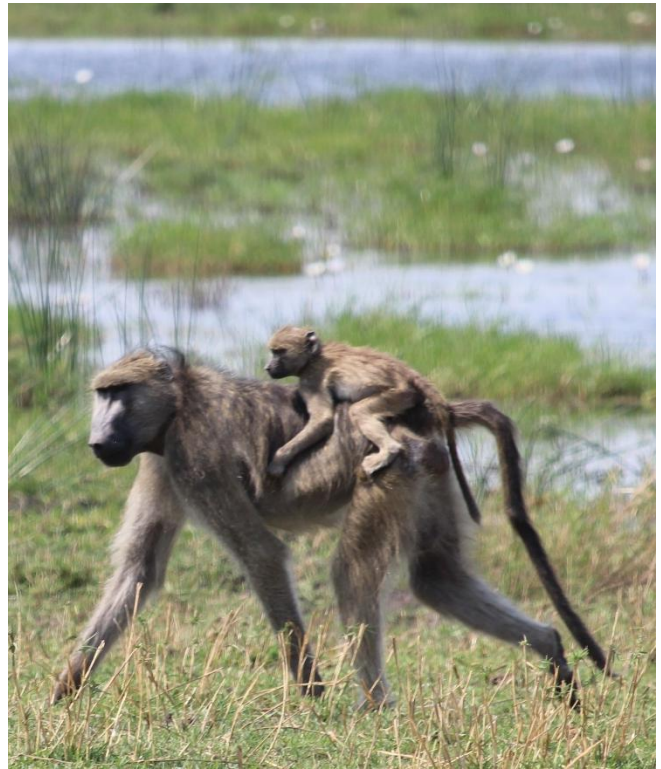


Secretarybird in flight

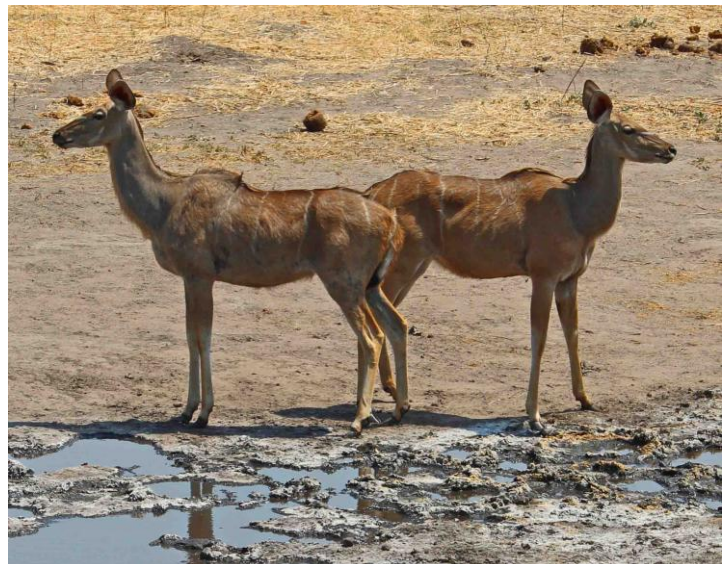
Some of the other animals



Baboons are everywhere, here with their kids



Funny Meerkats, without whom Africa would be over-run by termites. They eat their body weight in bugs each day!



Impala

Warthogs



Wildebeest



And the list goes on – but I'll stop it here.

We have heard many friends say their safari was their best trip ever – ours was certainly up there, it was amazing in so many ways.

