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That's what I call a REAL walk in the park: JANE SLADE explores the Botswanan bush on foot - and is warned to 'run like hell' if a buffalo charges

- Jane spends nine days in the Okavango, Botswana's 'game-rich oasis'
- She sees some remarkable animals, including the endangered pangolin
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By JANE SLADE FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY
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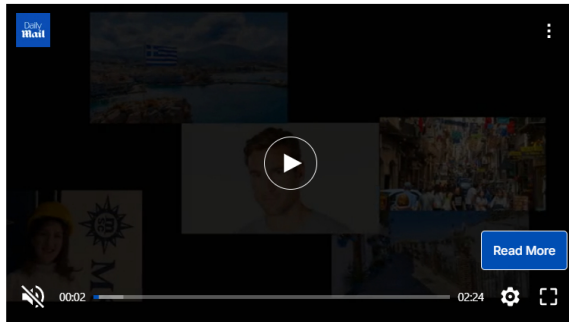


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Our walking-safari guide told us to keep in a straight line behind him and if we saw a big cat or elephant to stand still. 'If you run, they will think you are game and will chase and kill you,' he warned. 'Stand still and they will back off.' Then, he added: 'Except the buffalo – he won't stop, so just run like hell.'

While you are much safer travelling in a big vehicle, there is nothing like exploring the bush on foot or in a canoe.

Walking safaris are not so much about spotting wildlife but analysing footprints, learning about trees and plants, and finding out what to do if you meet a wild animal. You soon realise why guides carry a rifle.



We mixed walking and canoe trips with game drives in vehicles. Nowhere in Africa can you combine all three except in the Okavango in Botswana. We went a step further and stayed in a tented, fenceless camp. So if you didn't zip it up properly, you may discover a baboon in your bed – or worse.

Frankly, it was a miracle we were in Africa at all. After being diagnosed with **cancer** two years ago and enduring two operations and a round of chemotherapy, my 66-year-old husband Neil thought he would not live long enough to revisit his homeland.



Jane Slade travels to the Okavango in Botswana (pictured) for a nine-day walking safari holiday

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African wonders: Okavango has the highest concentration of endangered large mammals in the world, reveals Jane. Above, a snarling lion captured by Jane's husband, Neil

Neil was born in Zambia and spent his childhood there. He would go fishing with his two elder brothers and sister in the Zambezi, play with their pet ducks and rabbits in their garden and help care for an orphaned elephant that his animal-loving mother had briefly adopted.

Africa is embedded in Neil's DNA and has lured him back many times. It is the smell of the scorched earth and sage that beguiles him. We had been to many game reserves in South Africa but never to the Okavango, Botswana's game-rich oasis which has the highest concentration of endangered large mammals in the world.

During the summer months, water pours down from the Angolan highlands, creating an inland wetland covering vast tracts of the Kalahari Desert, which attracts herds of big beasts and huge numbers of game.

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After each exhilarating morning drive in the bush, we would retreat from the heat and sit on our terrace chatting through what we had just experienced.



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Jane was warned about the belligerence of buffalo. 'Run like hell,' was the advice if one charged

We took boat rides in mokoros – canoes traditionally carved from dug-out tree trunks – and paddled up to a cheetah lunching on an impala, the blood on her face. We also witnessed the rare sight of two lionesses swimming.

We stayed in three camps run by Machaba safaris over our nine-day adventure in different parts of the Delta; Little Machaba, Gomoti Plains and Kiri. We wanted variety to maximise our chances of seeing as much wildlife as possible on land and in the water.

Each camp varied in size, ranging from Little Machaba, which had just four rooms, to Kiri, which had 12. We flew in four-seater Cessnas to tiny airstrips between each one.

Machaba specialises in classic safaris centred around a boma (large fire) overlooking a savannah which is floodlit at night.

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Jane and Neil stayed in three camps run by Machaba safaris. Above is Kiri, which had 12 rooms



The rare and endangered pangolin was among the many remarkable animals that Jane saw during her trip (stock image)



Jane took boat rides in mokoros – canoes traditionally carved from dug-out tree trunks (stock image)

The cuisine is simple. Meals of local dishes and fresh fruit and vegetables served with delicious South African wines.

Our tent was like an opulent suite with an indoor and outdoor shower, huge comfy bed, and large terrace.

But nothing could have prepared us for the rawness of the Okavango. A hyena with the leg of a baby elephant in its mouth. A dozen lion cubs and their parents gorging on a zebra. Male lions beating up a younger male and plovers dive-bombing a female cheetah and her cubs. We even saw the rarest creature of all, the endangered pangolin.

We especially loved the evening drives, watching hippos and elephants silhouetted against a brilliant purple and orange sunset. With a gin and tonic in hand, we luxuriated in the stillness. This was all Neil needed. Suddenly fears for his future fell away.

TRAVEL FACTS

Rhino Africa packages at Machaba camps from £934pp per night, including internal flights, full-board, two guided game drives daily, and transfers. Visit rhinoafrica.com and machabasafaris.com. Flights to/from Botswana included in packages. Heathrow to Johannesburg with Virgin Atlantic from £680.



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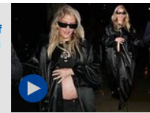
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