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# Botswana's newest safari is truly life-changing – but it's not for the squeamish

The remote Mababe region is home to vast herds of elephant and buffalo – with lions in close pursuit

Sue Watt  
Travel Writer

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Mababe offers a front-row seat to the eternal feud between buffalo and lion

I was parked up in a hot, dusty truck with wildlife film-maker Russell MacLaughlin, looking back and forth between a huge herd of (notoriously unpredictable) Cape buffalo, and eight lions from the Chobe pride lurking nearby.

Among the latter group were the Golden Boys, two brothers who were everything you imagine a lion to be: all rippling muscles, vivid amber eyes, and voluminous manes that swayed with every step as they sussed out their options for attack.

They had plenty of choice. Russell's [drone had revealed](#) one of Africa's biggest herds of buffalo, a solid black line around three miles long and roughly six animals deep, looking like an army of giant ants storming the plains of [Botswana's](#) Mababe Depression.

"I'd guess that's about 12,000 buffalo," he said. "The lions are just looking for the right one to take off..."



Film-maker Russell MacLaughlin's drone revealed a herd of approximately 12,000 buffalo

Nature's eternal feud between buffalo and lion plays out almost daily in Mababe's harsh dry season. This new safari destination lies between the eastern fringes of the Okavango Delta and Chobe National Park, a 40-minute helicopter flight from Maun. A former hunting area, the community-owned concession switched to photographic tourism in July last year, with Wilderness Mokete Camp having exclusive access to its 193 square miles of vast plains, marshes and mopane woodlands.

Russell has worked in wild places on every continent, filming documentaries for the BBC, National Geographic and Netflix, among others. "Mababe is special," he said. "I came here for a week and I've stayed for three years. It's the Holy Grail of Botswana wildlife."

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It wasn't always like this. The Depression was once a vast, ancient lake that had gradually dried up. From 2007, the movement of tectonic plates and earthquakes shifted the flow of the Mababe River and the swell of the Okavango floods, creating a whole new ecosystem. Particularly from August to November, when all around is dust, parched earth and choking heat, this expansive basin sustains a heady mix of wildlife on its now permanent, nutrient-rich wetlands, drawing huge herds of buffalo and elephant along with formidable prides of lions. In the dry season, it's not a place for the squeamish.

"I've seen one pride kill 11 buffalo in a single hunt," Mokete's head guide Vasco Tebalo told me. "People think they want to see a kill, but it's a tough watch. Some guests have been in tears."

In 18 years of writing about Africa, I'd never witnessed a kill: I wondered how I might react.

I was soon given a taste of the answer. Five minutes into our game drive, the stench of rotting meat led us to the first of three elephants we would see that had died from old age and exhaustion. This exquisite, intelligent animal had now become a free feast for hungry hyenas.

"They've opened her up and pretty much cleaned her out," our guide Jonah Seboko said, explaining the gaping hole by her ribs. Flies were buzzing inside and with masses of squabbling vultures and gawky marabou storks, hyenas were doing their job as nature's bin men, clearing up the carcass bit by smelly bit.



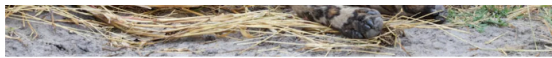
Vultures descending on the carcass of an elephant Credit: Will Whitford

Nearby lay the corpse of an unlucky hyena. "She'd probably gone inside the elephant and didn't hear the lions coming," Jonah suggested. Unsavoury in life, they're even more so in death, all bloated, black and bloody with a stomach-churning stink.

Still, there was beauty here among the blood and gore. As the sun rose, we were treated to a serene, almost surreal murmur of thousands of robin-sized, red-billed queleas swirling above us in clouds, sounding like waves lapping sand. We saw myriad antelopes grazing together on golden plains, from impala and dainty steenboks to shiny black sable and roans with sweeping horns, along with a 300-strong herd of russet-coloured tsessebe, known as Bush Ferraris for their ability to run up to 55 miles per hour.

On the marsh edge, [giraffes](#) drank awkwardly, legs splayed to reach the water, and elephants mooched around, shuffling their babies between them. The six lion cubs of the Mokete pride played mischievously while mum looked on and seven wild dogs, all uniquely patterned in shades of black, brown and gold, rested by the roadside.





The Mokete wild dog pack huddled together Credit: Will Whitford

But buffalo were never far away. Jonah spotted a thin black line on the horizon. As we got closer, some of the 3,000-strong herd encircled our Land Cruiser. Regarded as the most dangerous of [Africa's Big Five](#), they simply stood and stared in an intimidating, almost silent stand-off. The only noise came from a female braying quietly away from the throng.

"Perhaps she's the mother of that calf we passed," Jonah whispered, referring to the remains of a tiny buffalo we'd seen beside an old lioness crunching its ribs, her jaws and paws smothered in breakfast bloodstains.

Suddenly, a warthog popped out of the grasses, spooking a buffalo. They all started running, braying loudly, their thundering hooves kicking up the dust and disturbing flocks of cattle egrets. "It's just a mass reaction," Jonah said calmly, sensing our concern. "When one buffalo runs, they all run and they'll ask questions later."



Most of the staff at Mokete Camp are from the local village

I'd never been a huge fan of the lumpy, grumpy Cape buffalo, but now I saw a certain allure in their uniquely shaped and patterned horns, their slow, steady marching, and in the power and speed of their frenzied stampedes.

Mokete Camp is the perfect antidote to Mababe's often intense interactions. It's calm and soothing in natural tones with friendly staff, mostly from the local village. Our spacious suite had a plunge pool and views of the stars at night, thanks to ceilings that slide open above the bed. It may not be as luxurious as other Wilderness camps like Vumbura Plains in the Delta's Panhandle, but it doesn't need to be: Mokete's luxury is its location, far from other camps yet close to the action.



Mokete Camp's chief selling point is its location

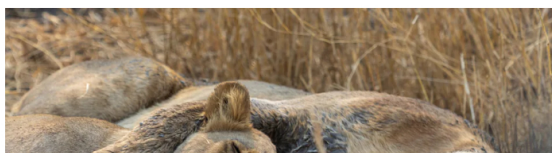
On my last day, Russell had invited me to see his take on Mababe. Over the years, he's come to know the Chobe and Mokete Prides, filming their lions grow from fluffy cubs to fearless hunters. "They were just nine months old when they were jumping on the back of buffalo," he said.

Russell checked the Depression by drone. "Lion on buffalo. Let's go..." he suddenly called out, and off we sped – in dusty 40C heat – to the aptly named Buffalo Corner. "There are several thousand buffalo and the Chobe pride, trying to find a weakness in the herd."

When we arrived, the buffalo stood motionless, suspicious, watching and waiting in an impenetrable block of black as the eight lions moved closer. I felt nervous – was I about to witness my first kill?

A Golden Boy then flopped down beside our truck, borrowing its shade, and a lioness walked past so close I could have stroked her. "They're waiting for the buffalo to go to the water, then they'll make their move," Russell said. "It's easier to attack in the mud..."

We waited too, for two hours, until we had to leave. Just before we went, in a moment of pure tenderness, the lioness – that super-efficient killing machine – lay down beside her sister and wrapped her front paws around her in a gentle spooning cuddle.







Two lioness siblings of the Chobe pride embracing each other Credit: Sue Watt

"F---, I love this place..." Russell said as we left them sleeping.

So do I. Sometimes upsetting, sometimes uplifting, Mababe is unspoilt, unrelenting wild Africa at its best.

## Essentials

[Yellow Zebra Safaris](#) offers a four-night Botswana itinerary from £4,229 per person, based on two sharing, featuring a one-night B&B at Grays Eden in Maun, and three nights at Wilderness Mokete all-inclusive in the Mababe Depression. The price includes game drives, walking safaris and helicopter transfers between Maun and Wilderness Mokete. International flights not included.

## Botswana's new camp openings

### Grays Eden



Grays Eden's cottages, villas and pool – decked out in shades of blue and white – have the feel of a Greek island

An ideal stop-over before or after safaris, Grays Eden raised the benchmark for luxury accommodation in Maun, the gateway town to the Okavango Delta, when it opened in July last year. Its five villas and seven cottages have a Greek Island feel about them, all decked out in shades of blue and white with copious bougainvillea in the extensive gardens.

*From £220, B&B.*

### Maxa



The scenic Maxa offers views over the Maxa Lagoon, popular with birds and hippos

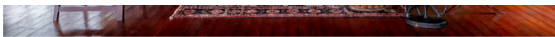
The latest offering from Botswana specialists Ker & Downey, Maxa opened in March this year in the remote north-eastern Okavango Delta. The beautiful, laid-back camp surrounded by ebony and jackalberry trees has just five tented suites, a natural swimming pool, and hammocks and sun loungers overlooking the Maxa Lagoon popular with birds and hippos. Maxa is ideal for tranquil mokoro (dug-out canoe) trips along the network of nearby channels, along with game drives, walking safaris and fishing trips.

*From £525, all inclusive.*

### Mbamba







Mbamba is full of plush drapes and mahogany furniture

Part of Natural Selection's portfolio, Mbamba opened in April as a sister camp to the famous Jack's Camp in the Makgadikgadi Pans, with a similarly eclectic "old-world" safari style favoured by owner Ralph Bousfield. Think elegant suites with plush drapes and mahogany furniture, and antiques and ancient artefacts in the main mess area. Located in the northern Okavango Delta, the area is known for its excellent predator sightings.

*From £745, all-inclusive.*

### Sediba Sa Rona



Sediba Sa Rona offers 15 luxury tents as well as a spa and swimming pool

This highly anticipated new property from Desert & Delta Safaris opens in March 2026 on the site of the former Khwai River Camp, one of Botswana's first camps to focus on photographic tourism over 30 years ago. Along with a wellness spa and swimming pool, it will have 15 luxury tents overlooking the river which draws prolific wildlife.

*From £476, full-board.*

### Monachira



Monachira has 10 en-suite tents

Machaba Safaris' latest camp lies in northern Moremi Game Reserve beside the permanent channel after which it is named. It opened in May with 10 en-suite tents in woodlands overlooking the game-rich floodplains. As well as game drives and mokoro trips, birders will love the boating safaris to the nearby heronry where thousands of birds come to nest between September and December.

*From £690, all inclusive.*

(All prices are per person, per night)

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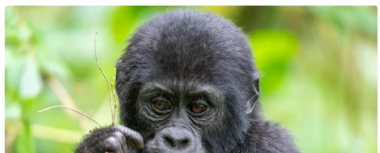


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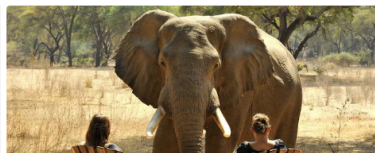


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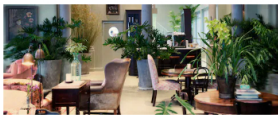
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