

TRAVEL + LEISURE

THE ACCESS ISSUE

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to make travel dreams come true...

▼
A coalition of cheetahs near Botswana's Okavango Delta.



TRAVELERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

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EXPERIENCES

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Spoiled in the Wild

Tracking down a creature as evasive as the cheetah is never guaranteed. **Jeff Ch** treks to southern Africa to find big cats and fulfill a long-held family promise.

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HEN MY NEPHEW Caleb was five, I promised to take him anywhere he wanted when he turned 13. My childhood travels, particularly a trip to Paris with a generous aunt and uncle, sparked my lifelong wanderlust and

curiosity about the world. I hoped to give him that same gift.

“I want to go see cheetahs,” Caleb said. And every time I’ve asked in the years since, he has repeated: “I want to go see cheetahs.” He’s 15 now. The pandemic postponed our trip, but last summer, we finally made it to southern Africa.

As every safari-goer knows, spotting big game is never a sure thing. But this uncle wasn’t taking any chances, especially with a creature as endangered—and elusive—as the cheetah. So after landing in Johannesburg, we drove an hour northwest to the **Ann van D k Cheetah Centre**, which has bred more than 600 big cats in the past four decades, helping to repopulate reserves across South Africa.

The center does a noble bait-and-switch: folks might come for the cheetahs, but they learn about fragile ecosystems and less charismatic species like the caracal, serval—both wild cats—and vulture.

“Vultures are very misunderstood,” explained our head guide, Nicole Wilson, as she showed us three species that live at the center: Cape Griffin, lappet-faced, and Egyptian. “They clean up, making sure there are no carcasses left on the ground. Their guano is acidic, so it helps stop the spread of disease.”

The cheetahs inhabit a rolling, scrub-covered terrain that simulates a natural environment, but visitors rarely lose sight of the fences. The cats we saw will likely never leave the center, because of medical conditions or genetic traits that make them unfit for the wild. To us, they were amazing nonetheless, living works of art in motion.

“So cool,” Caleb said. From a taciturn 15-year-old, that’s wild exuberance.

STILL, I HOPED we might see cheetahs in the wild. So with the help of Natural Selection, a conservation-minded safari operator that runs two dozen camps across southern Africa, we headed for Botswana, home to the world’s second-largest population of wild cheetahs. (Namibia has the biggest.)

Our excitement began before our small plane had even landed. Flying low over the Okavango Delta, we marveled at the curling, meandering watercourses, the land a riverine filigree. We spotted what seemed like ants



▲ The author and his nephew on the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans, in northeastern Botswana.

▲ The tented accommodations at North Island Okavango.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF JEFF CHU; COURTESY OF NATURAL SELECTION



▲ Observing elephants from the water near North Island Okavango.

until we flew lower and realized it was a family of elephants trundling across the terrain.

A dozen more elephants welcomed us when we landed, as did our guide, Motswasele “Diesel” Tshosa, who explained that the herd had gathered not for us, but for a nearby buffet of fruiting jackalberry trees. We hopped into a Land Cruiser and not five minutes later, Tshosa cut the engine and pointed. Under a leadwood tree, two lionesses were napping.

“So cool,” Caleb said.

Our first camp, **North Island Okavango** (*doubles from \$1,395 per person, all-inclusive*), which opened last June, delighted Caleb, too. Set amid ebony trees on the edge of a lagoon filled with hippos, the property has just three tents. To call them “tents,” though, undersells their opulence and design. Each has its own plunge pool and deck, multiple places to sit, indoor and outdoor showers, Nespresso machine, and soaking tub.

After we had a quick snack of tea sandwiches and pastries, Tshosa ushered us back into the vehicle for a game drive. He sensed that Caleb was laser-focused on spotting cheetahs in the wild. That afternoon we saw giraffes, wildebeests,

kudu, warthogs, eagles, buffalo, and baboons, but the cheetahs remained invisible—though Tshosa did spot fresh tracks. We set out again the next morning and our list of sightings grew even longer: a stunning young male lion, hyenas, storks, ostriches, bushbuck, and so many lilac-breasted rollers—a wondrous, multicolored bird that looks as if it could have been designed by Missoni.

Then, high in a strangler fig tree, Tshosa noticed another remarkable bird. Tucked amid the leaves were two black orbs staring at us from a dappled brown-and-cream body: a Pel’s fishing owl. Tshosa told us that a previous guest had arrived with the sole goal of seeing this shy, mostly nocturnal creature. He failed, and yet it had appeared for Caleb and me. “That’s safari,” Tshosa said as we drove back to the lodge, cheetah-less.

Suddenly, he stopped the truck. “Look!” A few feet away was a solitary leopard, shimmeringly beautiful. We followed her for a good 20 minutes, until twilight turned to night. “So cool,” Caleb said.

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▲ Exploring the salt pans at Camp Kalahari with members of the Zu/hoasi tribe.

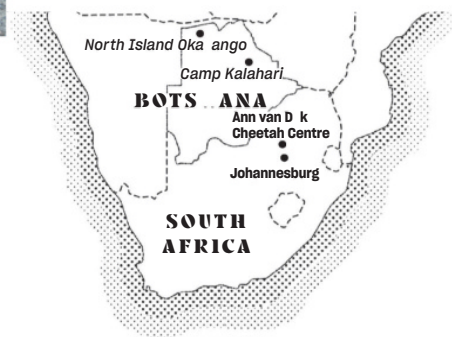
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THE FOLLOWING MORNING, we flew south to **Camp Kalahari** (doubles from \$725 per person, all-inclusive), a more rustic but still comfortable compound on the edge of the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans—the flat, crusty remnants of an ancient lake. “I know it looks lifeless, but there is life,” said our guide, Shathi Mosojane. He was right. Once we knew where to look, we saw elephants, ostriches, wildebeests, and countless desert-adapted springbok, which survive by drinking morning dew. To compensate for the sparser wildlife, Camp Kalahari caters to families with children and teenagers by offering other activities besides game drives. On our first afternoon, we rode quad bikes onto the salt pans. Caleb loved every second, pushing the speed limit while his boring uncle in the back seat begged him to slow down.

The next day we took a walk with a group of Bushmen from the Zu/hoasi tribe. Their leader, Xhamme, explained how his tribe coexisted with the land. That pile of elephant dung? They dry and burn it, then use the ash to heal wounds. That tree? African myrrh. Its fruit is an analgesic, the resin a disinfectant, and the roots edible. “One of the trees that holds our life,” Xhamme said. At one point, a tribesman named Xixae crouched down, dug a hole, and scooped up a scorpion, which he deposited in Caleb’s hand.

On our final afternoon, we visited a family of habituated meerkats that starred in the 2020 BBC nature documentary, *Meerkat: A Dangerous Special*. The rules of engagement: you can’t touch the meerkats, but they can climb on you. Caleb sat on the ground and stilled himself. Within moments, a half-dozen meerkats were clambering all over

▼ Guests at Camp Kalahari can also commune with meerkats.



him. “Take pictures!” he said to me, trying not to move or disturb the animals.

As our trip neared its end, I asked Caleb whether he was disappointed that we hadn’t spotted a cheetah in the wild. “No,” he said. He’d had high hopes but no expectations—a wise formula at any age.

I asked what had been the trip’s most unexpected sighting.

“The warthog,” he said.

I gave him a quizzical look. Warthogs aren’t rare or unusual. We’d seen tons of them, usually scattering and scrambling away from our safari vehicle.

“Why the warthog?” I asked.

“I forgot they even existed,” he replied.

In that moment, I felt so proud—proud because my nephew seemed to have grasped one of the joys of travel. Seeing the world is not about checking things off a list, but about opening yourself up to unexpected wonders. Caleb was right: while the big cats might get the most attention, the humble warthog is no less extraordinary. 🌍