

Safari secrets

A new Botswana camp opens up a vast, untapped safari destination, writes **Sue Watt**

On my first drive in the Mababe Depression, we come across a mass of mischief and mud in the form of 14 lions, including six cubs all rolling around in the afternoon sun, their two-tone coats a combination of matted black soil and golden fur. Meanwhile, two of the larger lions try climbing a stunted mopane tree far too small for them, and they both tumble gracelessly to the ground.

These are a few of the majestic members of the Chobe pride, named after the wildlife-rich national park that borders Mababe to the north. Once a hunting area, Mababe – an ancient lake on the eastern edge of the Okavango Delta – has

recently made moves into luxury safari tourism. The new Wilderness Mokele opened last year, gaining exclusive rights to this expansive concession, which measures almost 200 square miles.

On my 40-minute helicopter flight from the safari launchpad of Maun to the new tented camp, I'd glimpsed a fascinating bird's-eye view of the great, green Mababe Depression, with its reputation for spectacular wildlife. It wasn't always this way. At various points in the 20th century, the Mababe River dried up, leaving a grassy plain that was only a habitat in the rainy season. But when the river's waters trickled back in 2007, it became a year-round haven for thirsty wildlife. ➤

lion cubs and
lioness, Mababe
© Will Whitford

DESTINATIONS

AFRICA | BOTSWANA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Mababe wildlife; private plunge pool and sundowner firepit, both Wilderness Mokete PICTURES: Dana Allen/photosafari-africa.net; Paige Fiddes



ASK THE expert

"I recommend visiting at the end of the dry season, when you're most likely to witness the drama of lion versus elephant or buffalo. At night, clients can roll back the roof and soak in the moonlight; in the afternoon, the sunken photographic hide is a must as wildlife gathers to drink. Mababe isn't for the faint of heart, so pair it with something softer; Wilderness Little Vumbura Camp offers delta water safaris and a slower pace."

Andrew van den Broeck
brand manager and safari guide,
Yellow Zebra Safaris



TALE OF TWO SEASONS

In the dry season, hundreds of elephants and Africa's largest herd of buffalo – numbering in the thousands – are drawn to Mababe, closely followed by formidable prides of lions. The vast wetlands never completely dry out, even during the hottest months of July to November, providing the only source of water and nutrient-rich grasses for miles around.

When I visit in April, after the heaviest rains in 45 years, water is abundant and wildlife has dispersed around Mababe. In this vast landscape of lush, long grasses, I find it difficult to imagine never-ending buffalo herds traipsing right across this same horizon during dry season, braying incessantly amid the dust, fear and tension in the air.

"I've seen one pride kill 11 buffalo in a single hunt," says my guide, Vasco Tebalo. "People think they want to see a kill and many guests find it fascinating, but I've had others in tears saying they didn't think it would be like this."

He shows me a video on his phone of five lions attacking a buffalo amid the chaos and cacophony of the herds: it's a tough watch. We all know kills are integral to nature's circle of life, but don't necessarily want to witness them.

Our drive back to camp is thankfully more serene, passing herds of wildebeest, impala and red lechwe antelope grazing peacefully on fresh pastures.

SIMPLE PLEASURES

Back at Mokete, the Wilderness camp has a soothing ambience, the decor all natural and neutral tones. It's simpler in style than the brand's other properties around southern Africa's prestigious wild places.

"You want guests out in the field – that's where the magic happens," Mokete owner Cobus Calitz tells me over a delicious bush lunch. "When you come back, you have a nice camp that's nothing over the top, but comfortable, open all around and fits into the environment. It all becomes one with nature."

At Mokete, that means an unfussy, solar-powered camp with a light footprint and understated luxury at its core. The nine spacious tented rooms have plunge pools, air conditioning over the beds and ceilings that can slide back to reveal star-studded night skies. The public area is open-plan, light and airy, with a relaxing bar, lounge and dining room serving superb vegetarian meals among meaty options, plus a pool and spa.

Clients are looked after by a friendly team, 90% of whom hail from nearby Mababe village. For many of the staff, this is their first experience of working in tourism, and their enthusiasm shines through. The community owns the Mababe Concession, so the village's 300 residents benefit from Wilderness's lease fees and contributions.

"We ensure that we do responsible tourism and uplift the community, but we support rather than dictate: they choose their projects, for their benefit," Cobus ➤

DESTINATIONS

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FROM LEFT: A hippopotamus in Mababe's wetlands; one of the nine guest tents at Wilderness Mokete

PICTURES: Will Whitford; Paige Fiddes

explains, with initiatives under development including an airstrip, small guesthouses and a cultural village selling crafts.

A WILD RIDE

Carnivores are ever-present in Mababe. One afternoon, we pass seven sleeping wild dogs, each sporting their uniquely patterned coats of brown, black, gold and white. Hyenas whoop into the night, encircling a tree near the

Mokete camp where a leopard had deposited a dead impala. And every day we see lions: one time unsuccessfully stalking red lechwe in the river, another giving up on a lumpy old buffalo that spotted them before they could pounce.

On our last day, while driving towards the border with Chobe National Park, we spot dozens of giraffes strutting across the plains and elegant elands dashing away. A hundred or so buffalo

eye us suspiciously, while small herds of elephants mooch around as silent as ghosts. Perched on skeletal leadwood trees dotting the landscape are myriad birds, from multi-coloured lilac-breasted rollers to African fish eagles and vultures.

It feels like the calm before the imminent carnage, as the dry season looms and even more animals will flock to Mababe's watering holes, but it proves there's plenty to see without the kills. **TW**

BOOK IT

Yellow Zebra Safaris offers a four-night trip in the green season (December to March) from £5,259 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes one night's B&B at Grays Eden Sanctuary in Maun, three nights' all-inclusive at Wilderness Mokete, return helicopter transfers between Maun and Mokete, and international flights. yellowzebrasafaris.com



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