

With water flowing in the river for the first time in six months, we admire Solomon's Wall

Baobabs and lightning

LUCY HIGGINSON gets more than she bargained for when she visits Botswana's Limpopo valley

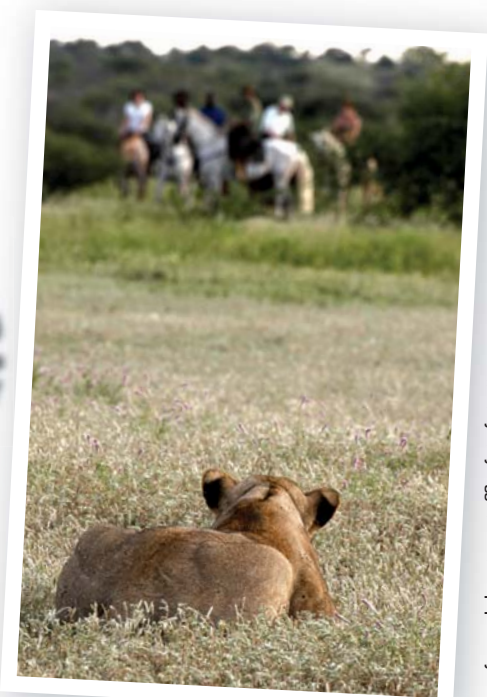


“AND this,” said Cor Carelsen at the border point, “is the mighty Limpopo.” Less “great, grey and greasy” than Kipling observed it, we peered instead at a drab, dry riverbed. Southern Botswana’s summer rains had failed to arrive. Instead of plains deep in grass, we found the Mashatu reserve stripped bare – arid expanses strewn with rocks, dead, upended, trees (felled by elephant), marshes reduced to muddy mosaics, and much of the bush game foraging elsewhere.

“But what can you do? It’s Africa,” said Cor, philosophically.

In a sense, this is Botswana’s beauty. It’s Africa in the nude; you take your chance with it. At an earlier meeting in England with Louise Carelsen, Cor’s wife and co-owner of Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris (LVHS), I’d asked why British tourists would drive five hours from Johannesburg to the Limpopo when within two hours you can enjoy great riding safaris in South Africa’s Waterberg.

“Fences and elephant,” she’d replied; none of the former and lots of the latter. Botswana



Botswana’s reserves are huge and its surprises plentiful. Here, a mounted group watches lion

Pictures by Lucy Higginson and Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris



Spacious new tents, with adjacent loo tents, make the camping element of the trip distinctly luxurious



is not home to myriad smaller, highly managed reserves of the kind you find in the Waterberg. It is wild and open, and nature is left to determine the game's population levels, even if that means a lot of elephant damage along the way. It's also about half the price of visiting the famous Okavango Delta.

Drought had in no way compromised the comfort of the Carelsens' horses at least. Dividing their time between a shady compound at their base, Fort Jameson, and adjacent airy stables with fans overhead, is a 30-strong herd of geldings: ex-polo ponies; native boerperds (farmer's horses); and some young Shire crosses bred by a canny South African who has realised that western riders often top 11 stone.

Louise — who was born American, raised in the UK, and sounds pure South African — manages and schools the horses beautifully. Apart from the odd compulsive water roller, they were the best mannered horses I've met on a riding safari.

We'd come to ride the Tuli Trail, a seven-night camping tour of a region that was one of the first peopled in Africa. After a brief test-run of horses and tack the evening we arrived, we rose at five to set off in golden sunlight before the heat built up. Selous, my ride, liked a light contact and to be up with the pack in a canter. We got on instantly.

Our group, encompassing a GP, a riding teacher, environmental health officer and IT specialist, were a diverse bunch, with horses the common interest. I was amused and impressed to note that some of the riding school regulars rode better than some of the horse owners.

We covered 17 miles on the first day in intense heat. The week beforehand, clients had worn fleeces; we could barely cope with sleeves on our T-shirts, and many of us peeled off our chaps at night to find angry heat rashes.

The dust was unbelievable — with vegetation so scant it rose in clouds that clung to your teeth and filled the creases of your clothes, particularly during the plentiful, long, twisting canters that are a highlight of this trip.

▀ The storm arrived after dinner; the sort of storm film directors send back to special effects saying 'easy, guys' ▀



We dutifully follow Cor into the teeth of another storm while he, oblivious, discusses palm trees

But wildlife sightings more than compensated for any discomfort — a black-backed jackal, a pair of fish eagles and a stupendous giant eagle owl, plus a whole herd of giraffe munching on the brow of a hill.

"That's made my week," said Tania from Kent. Not bad for 7.25am on day one.

We were nevertheless pleased to arrive at camp in time for a late lunch (the food was outstanding all week) followed by a siesta and bushwalk. Cor set lumps of elephant dung smouldering to deter moisture-seeking flies, and we got changed in our immaculate new tents set up by the Jwala riverbed, complete with

cot beds, floor rugs, washbasin, chairs etc under the awning.

"I could get used to this," I decided later over a G&T as the evening cooled and a vibrant sunset illuminated a distinctly African sky. Munching quietly behind us, the horses tucked into the second of three overnight hard feeds. I little suspected that our first camp sunset would also be our last.

The following day we spent eight hours in the saddle en route to the "kgotla", a fabulous timber encircled boma (animal enclosure) beneath a vast Mashatu tree where guests can

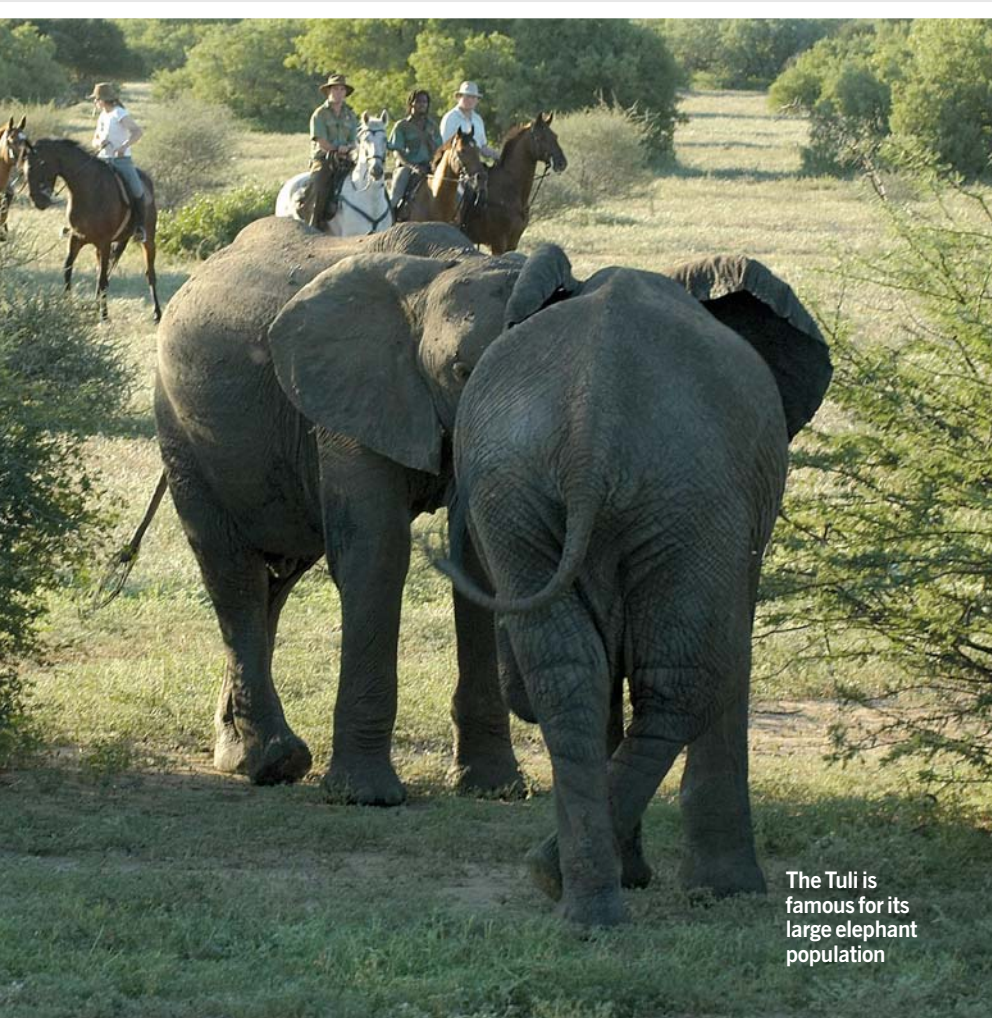


Cor watches a giraffe in lush, sunnier times. Usually there is thick vegetation by March

sleep under the stars, our billet for the next two nights.

By this stage the question "How are the nether regions?" became legitimate conversation, and everyone had their own survival system, be it sub-joddie cycling shorts to "pre-emptive painkillers" self-prescribed by Sally the GP.

This long ride took in more zebra, wildebeest, kudu and a warthog. And though it was baking hot, we saw clouds gathering



The Tuli is famous for its large elephant population

in the distance. I silently prayed they would come our way, though heat huffs are quickly vanquished, I found, by spontaneous detours to jump fallen timber.

After blissful showers (human and equine) we climbed, baboon-style, up a majestic kopje (rocky outcrop) above the Mocloutse riverbed nearby for memorable sundowners, and bubbly had thoughtfully been stowed to help myself and my husband celebrate our eighth wedding anniversary.

A few drops of rain on our return suggested my earlier prayers were being answered. Tents were rapidly thrown up, and beds transferred to them from the kgotla. Cor's assessment that it was "too late for the rains to come now" was looking doubtful.

The storm arrived properly after dinner – a real storm, the sort of storm that a film director might send back to special effects with the rebuke: "Easy on the pyrotechnics guys, we want this to look real." It rained so hard our tent floor became a waterbed, and at one stage lightning struck so close by we convulsed in our beds. We thanked God for Cor's hardy new tents, and pitied the horses outside.

Next morning it was as though Narnia had thawed. The dust had settled, the rivers flowed for the first time in six months, and our three-hour ride to a fabulous natural rockface known as Solomon's Wall, passed in a flash.

The shallow stream in the Macloutse also threw up an unexpected opportunity. "How about a canter through the water?" asked Cor, and we splashed after him without hesitation, grinning from ear to ear.

We rode again after lunch, but the skies grew apocalyptic once more. We returned to the kgotla just as another storm unleashed its



We stop for mid-ride snacks in the shade of a Baobab, one of the features of this region

fury, and holed up in our tents for the night, emerging briefly for a hot dinner whose production was nothing short of miraculous.

Standing in pools of water with lightning flashing all around them, I feared for the horses. So did Cor, who with his team cleared the lorry for them to be loaded into if the lightning came close again.

Things were not quite going to plan. The horsebox transporting our party's feed, tents and so on, was stuck. The horses had now had two all-night drenchings. On top of this, one had developed a foot abscess and needed driving home. Cor broke it to us over breakfast that we'd have to head back to Fort Jameson for a night, and we readily agreed.

Even when retracing your steps, the bush is full of interest and new surprises – an abandoned ostrich egg, strong enough for a man to stand on; bright white shells of huge African snails, a terrapin making for the river, even a leopard tortoise loitering by a bush, no doubt invisible in thicker foliage. Then there are the baobabs, iconic features of this region. We call them trees but in fact they are succulents, and surely the inspiration for the triffids?

You also realise, riding with Cor, that you are travelling with a naturalist who can be as entertaining talking about a beetle or pointing out the changing geology as he is talking about lion. He frowned when someone cited a tour agent enthusing about "cantering alongside giraffes". Not on his watch, was the inference – it basically frightens them.

Thus far we had seen little of the beast the Tuli is most famous for. Their calling cards were everywhere – droppings, scratching posts, tracks, tree damage – but ellies saw we none, bar one brief, distant sighting of a lone bull on day two. It was on our return trip to Fort Jameson that we finally put that right, as a family group ambled past with eerie quietness for beasts so big.

Our unplanned return to base was sweetened with another surprise – an evening game drive in a borrowed Landy, during which we had fabulous sightings of cheetah and lion.

But the following day it rained again, and we returned from riding soaked to the bone, content to give best and retire with a book (Alexander McCall Smith, naturally). With the horse truck still stuck in the bush, one night at Fort Jameson became two, then three. But Cor drove us to see the stunning new Two Mashatus camp he and his team had just finished building, more fun than Fort Jameson, which Tuli Trail riders now stay in for two nights.

We were sorry not to do so ourselves, and a little unlucky to encounter such unseasonal weather (a week later, Louise reported that the bush was ablaze with wildflowers). But with good horses and kind hosts you can make your own fun. We twice enjoyed an improvised team chase round Fort Jameson's enterprising "Bush Badminton", and if our last two days became more riding holiday than riding safari it was no fault of our hosts.

I will always have great memories of Selous reaching for mouthfuls of mustard bush, of scrambling up and down sandy river banks, of gigantic Maribou stalks browsing after the rains... But Botswana runs to nature's plan – what can you do? It's Africa. **H&H**

COSTS AND CONTACTS

Contacts: the writer travelled with In The Saddle, www.inthesaddle.com (tel: 01299 272997)

Costs: from £1,330 for seven nights, all inclusive except tips, or from £2,186 including flights and transfers

Riding: quite long days, challenging in parts, plentiful canters and some jumping. Decent riders only

Pack: half chaps, loads of jods and T-shirts, ventilated riding hat, binoculars