

Trip Report for Sarah Taylor's Group Safari to Botswana Mashatu, Selinda, and Little Vumbura

After several years as being a Senior Safari Consultant for AAC, I am delighted to be in a new capacity as Special Projects Coordinator. One of the huge advantages to being in the Safari Industry is that your friends are always wanting to join you on an adventure. This year, six of my friends packed bags and went on their first safari that I had planned just for them.

May 28 (Wed)

The long awaited day had arrived! Our African adventure was about to begin! After months of planning – it was finally here!

Five of our group met at the Fort Myers airport for our flight to Atlanta on Delta Airlines (the other two members were flying via Dulles and arriving an hour before us on the 29th). Everything went smoothly and upon arrival in Atlanta, we had plenty of time to make it to the international terminal, enjoy lunch and then before we knew it – it was time to board our flight to Johannesburg .



Barbara & Dena killing time



**The long flight begins!
(Barbara & Larry across the aisle)**

From reading past client trip reports I borrowed the idea to check one bag and let everyone put their cosmetics/liquids in it so we could all carry on our small duffel bags. This worked out perfectly! Nail clippers, liquids, pocket knives, etc were all checked and then we knew we would have our proper safari attire with us upon arrival.

May 29 (Thu)

We arrived in Johannesburg and checked through passport control, grabbed my extra suitcase and then proceeded out to be met by the Wilro Rep. He escorted us over to the Inter -Continental, which was a welcomed sight! Check-in was a bit confusing as they only wanted one credit card for everyone's room and then said tomorrow morning each room could pay on their own card or cash.

We met the rest of our party (Karen and her daughter, Nikki) in the lobby. They were already enjoying cocktails so everyone ran up to their rooms, dropped off their bags and came back down for a much needed drink. Spirits were high as we were so relieved to be off the long flight and looking forward to a much-needed shower.



Dena & Ralph



Meeting Nikki and Karen at the hotel



Karen

The hotel is in excellent condition and I am so glad we stayed there as it really got the safari off on the right foot. They gushed about the fantastic showers, the deep tubs, the eclectic bar and gourmet restaurant. We all ate together as a group and then everyone went their separate ways to go to bed. The following morning was going to be an early one with our flight to Polokwane.

May 30 (Fri)

This morning was hectic! We had a 7:20 am flight to Polokwane so we had to be there by 6:20, meaning we had to physically walk out the hotel by 6:15 am. I had everyone whipped into shape and told them they needed to be checked-out of their rooms by 5:45 am and down in the lobby with their bag by 6:00 am. It worked great!

I was greeted with smiles from everyone and we walked into the restaurant for a super fast breakfast of cold cereals, fruit, salmon, bagels, etc. (There was no time to special order the eggs and pancakes that are available to those on later flights).

I appreciated the fact that I had been in and out of the JNB airport so many times as I knew exactly where to go and with couple carts, we made it over to check-in within a few minutes. We checked our small duffels and then walked to the gate and before we knew it, we were boarding. The plane held about 25 people and took less than an hour. Upon arriving at Polokwane "International" airport (which made us all laugh because it looked like we were the only flight of the day), we had to wait a few minutes for our charter pilot to find us.



Charter flt Polokwane to Mashatu



Mashatu's Airport

He was a gregarious fellow and escorted us to our plane. Our charter plane was very nice! It looked brand new and everyone had a chance to spread out. A few seats had to sit backwards and one person got to sit up with the pilot. The scenery from the air was lovely with lots of neat rock formations to look at. It was a short flight and before we knew it, we were landing at Mashatu Game Reserve.

The first things we saw upon landing were army guys and machine guns. No joke! A military plane was parked by the entrance area and men carrying machine guns were milling about. I could not have been more surprised. My friends looked at me like “where the heck have you taken us, Sarah?” It all made sense when we heard that the President of Botswana was arriving shortly and would be staying at the Mashatu Main Camp. Whew!

We met our guide, Richard. We liked him right off the bat! He had a very calming personality with a streak of humor, the perfect combination for our group. We were told that it would take about an hour to get to the camp and he asked if we were hungry as tea would not be until 3:00 pm so he radioed the camp to ask them to have snacks prepared for us.

The drive from the airfield to the camp was fantastic! You can only imagine that no one (except for myself) had been on safari so the first elephant, warthog and the hundreds of impala were all met shrieks of glee! It was so fun to see the excitement in their faces, cameras poised to take photos.

The vehicle was not covered and with the strong sun I could feel my skin cooking but it was so lovely I wouldn't have changed it for anything. (And here is a note, we had covered and non-covered vehicles at the various camps and hands down...the non-covered worked better for us!!! With a covered vehicle, the viewing and photography was very limited if we were sitting on the other side of the lion or whatever. We actually requested a non-covered vehicle at Little Vumbura after having a covered one at Selinda and hated it).



The 1st game drive



A dry river bed at Mashatu

I cannot begin to describe how beautiful the topography was at Mashatu! I don't know what I expected but I was so surprised. There was such variety; rock formations, dried river beds, and even lush green areas near the Limpopo River – I LOVED IT!

We arrived at Mashatu Tented Camp and were met by the Camp Manager (Hannejie) and Assistant Manager (Hilda). Again, I don't know what I expected but it was so much more than I could have hoped for! The camp was charming and the open-air lounge and dining area were the perfect way to ease my group into the safari experience. Snacks of open-faced sandwiches with roast beef and tomatoes with cucumbers on homemade bread were offered and disappeared within minutes. They were delicious!

We had our camp orientation and then were escorted to our tents. Barbara and I had tent #1 and they used our tent to show the various features. The tent was large with two twin beds separated by a table (which was lovely as some of the other camps I have stayed at are pushed together), a dresser and even a make-up table – complete with blow dryer! Ladies – you know how nice that is to be able to blow dry your hair and not look like a hag around the dinner table (ha! ha!).

To reach the bathroom you unzipped the back of the tent and stepped out onto a small privately fenced patio to the small toilet and open-air shower (both of which are nice during the mid-day sun but a little chilly for a midnight bathroom run!)

We had several hours siesta and I know jet lag had begun to catch up with us so most of the group retreated to their tents for a nap. At 3:30 pm we met down at the main lounge and after a 30 minute tea (which had a tasty sweet potato and goat cheese tart plus some sort of cake to eat). Richard, our guide, and his tracker had the vehicle all cleaned up and we headed out on our first full game drive.



I would like to give Mashatu major bonus points for equipping their guides with head sets so the chatter on the radio between guides was not audible to guests! This was so incredibly nice and one of my biggest pet peeves on previous game drives at some of the reserves I have visited over the years.

Our first game drive was especially rewarding! We saw three lions and one of the largest and most gorgeous female leopards that I have ever seen, not to mention elephants, and large herds of eland, impala and giraffes. It spoiled the group as they thought this was an average game drive and we should expect that each time.

The staff had been notified that we were celebrating two birthdays during the trip, Dena and Nikki's. They had included a bottle of champagne during sundowners and we christened the safari in style! Back to camp and the temperature had dropped significantly (we are talking cold!) but such a nice change of pace from hot Florida. We had a few minutes to change clothes and head to the boma for dinner.



Birthday girls with Richard

C'est Moi!

Another series of gold stars for Mashatu...the food was outstanding! Dinners were a highlight with it being served outside under the stars, the dishes were placed on the large grill which kept everything wonderfully hot.

We all appreciated having two meat dishes to choose from and the four or five vegetable dishes were superb! The camp has a visiting porcupine that seems to enjoy the vegetable dishes too as the staff put out some ratatouille and he gobbled it up – too cute!



The resident porcupine enjoying ratatouille

May 31 (Sat) – Jun 02 (Mon)

We had three more days at Mashatu Tented Camp (4 nts total). It wasn't enough - I could have easily spent a week there! The topography and scenery was so diverse and the reserve so large that you couldn't see it all.

One of the top highlights during these days were seeing wild dog! A pack of 21 was obtained from South Africa and brought in at the beginning of 2008. The alpha female and at least two or three others were collared and they were let free to roam the area. Within days the dogs had traveled out of the region and had not been seen until May 31st. Richard (guide) got the call on his headset and mentioned quietly that they had been spotted and did we want to go see them? Absolutely! I told the group to hang on and we drove the 45 minutes at full speed to the opposite side of the reserve. When we arrived they were having a confrontation with a wart hog which was incredibly entertaining as the wart hog was really giving them a “run for their money” and then would fly back into his burrow. It was incredible!



Spectacular wild dog sighting!

By now you know I love leopards so I signed up for the “Predator Drive” (\$40/each drive) for the last 3 nights of our stay (my roomie Barbara also signed up for this). You leave camp around 4:00 pm with a different driver/guide from camp and drive over to the Main Camp to pick up our specialist guide, Andrei. (We actually got to wave and say hello to the President of Botswana one of these nights as he passed us. Pretty neat!) Anyway, we met Andrei...ladies – he is absolutely adorable but who cares about looks when the real goal is to see some leopards.

We learned a lot about leopards, how they are trapped and collared, interesting stories about a male leopard that actually killed two female leopards in region, etc.

The diverse scenery of Mashatu was not beneficial when pursuing leopards as often we got their signal but could not drive to where they were. One of the collars is actually a similar frequency of an elephant that is part of the pachyderm research so we got to follow that particular elephant a couple times. (We saw a lot of mice, spring hares and impalas so the “Predator Drive” was renamed “Prey Drive” – or even “Pray Drive” as we prayed we would see something! It’s good to find humor in these situations.) And I know you are dying to know how many leopards we saw? Well...(wait for it)...on the very last night, during the very last five minutes before we had to head back and lo and behold – we finally found our first leopard! Sweet Victory! Needless to say, that is the thing about game viewing in Africa...there are no guarantees.



Locating leopards



Day 3 – still searching!

Other highlights – the camp is electric fenced as the vegetation is so dense and lush that the elephants would decimate it in days if allowed. Bushbucks and wart hogs have found a way in and these delightful creatures roam around the camp and provide some neat up-close moments for guests. I had three bushbucks take a nap by my tent and one that was so close when I walked to my tent I could have hugged it.

Jun 03 (Tue)

We had to bid farewell to Mashatu which made everyone really sad. We had bonded with the staff and had such a wonderful time. We left following a delicious brunch and headed off to Main Camp to stop by their gift shop for some power shopping. Then it was off to the Point Drift border crossing. The plan was to drive back to Johannesburg as this was going to keep the cost more manageable for my friends (I was trying to keep the cost under a certain amount and flying back would have increased it beyond this).



Farewell to Mashatu



Crossing the Limpopo at Pt Drift

A note to travelers on the fence between driving back and flying back – do not drive back to Joburg. It took the wind right out of our sails after a magical stay at Mashatu.

Crossing the Limpopo River on a cable was entertaining but that is where it ended. The scenery was interesting for the first hour but after that the fun was over and the drive was a long five hours.

Thank goodness we were heading back to the Inter -Continental Hotel for another night as I knew a great shower and a fat cocktail would calm everyone down. I think almost everyone in the group got room service that night as well.

Jun 04 + 05 (Wed+Thu)

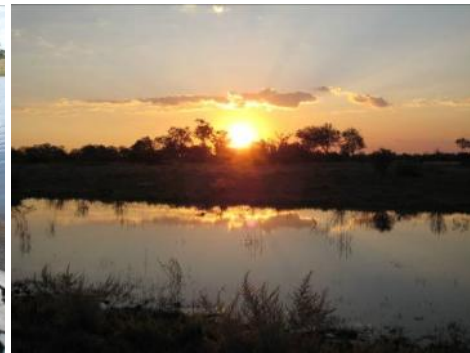
We were able to have a normal wake -up and actually enjoy breakfast at a leisurely pace which was delightful. Then it was to the airport for the BP212 at 10:10 am to Maun. Upon arrival in Maun we met Brooks Kamanakao, our specialist guide that would be with us for the next 4 nights. We were immediately drawn to his fun sense of humor! We were driven out by golf cart to our plane on the runway and boarded our flight to Selinda Camp.



Brooks



High water levels



Selinda sunset



The group on a night game drive



Ella, hostess (dressed in black)



Selinda main lounge



Sundowners with Brooks

Selinda is gorgeous! Beyond gorgeous! The camp looks like a Premier camp and the main lounge area oozes luxury and all tents and main areas overlook the Selinda floodplains, which were loaded with hippos! We met the hostess Ella and the camp manager, Julia, and were welcomed like members of a family. Tea was served, we had our camp briefing and were shown to our tents. The highlight of each tent was the spectacular tub in the bathroom and I know several of the group were eager to fill it up with bath salts and give it a try.

When we first arrived we were picked up in a covered vehicle which seemed nice as the sun was scorching. We quickly grew to not like the covered vehicle as it severely limited the photography for everyone (not to mention you felt very disconnected from the sky on the night game drives).

We had two fantastic sightings during our stay at Selinda. The first night two male lions walked right in front of our vehicle and then headed for the water where they proceeded to cross (incredibly cool!) The other was a pack of eight wild dog that we found, again – when they crossed in front of us on the road, and we followed them for a while. Brooks reported that they had come from Savute and had not been seen in a long time in this region.

The food at Selinda was gourmet! Lunches were great (lots of salads, ostrich burgers, quiche, etc) but dinner was a real treat! They go over the main courses with you at lunch time so they could let the chef know and our first night we all selected Lamb Tagine. I still have dreams of this dinner – it was that sublime! The Bar Manager selects the wines that compliment the main courses and serves them throughout the meal (in addition if you wanted a cocktail, the bar was available too).

The highlight of our stay at Selinda was a surprise bush dinner on our last night there. We drove up at the end of our game drive and saw a road lined with paper bags filled with votives, lanterns were hung in trees and there were at least three bonfires. It was spectacular! We were greeted by Ella and Julia who had hot water, soap and towels to wash our hands. The full bar was set up and wine was quickly served, and then we moved over to the long table for a wonderful traditional dinner. It was the singing and dancing from the staff at the end of the night that brought tears to our eyes. It truly was one of the most magical nights I have ever had in Africa.



The ultimate "Bush Bar"



The staff dancing

Jun 06 + 07 (Fri+Sat)

We said goodbye to everyone at Selinda and drove to the airstrip. Our plane arrived and we were off to our last safari camp...Little Vumbura. I booked this entire trip around camp availability at Little Vumbura. It was my first Wilderness Safaris camp that I got to see on an AAC safari (back in 2001) and I have such fond memories of it for the game.



The "terminal" at Selinda



Sefofane plane on the airstrip

So we were picked up at the airstrip and drove to the boat where we boarded it for our short boat ride through the reeds to camp. This was a lovely change of pace and I know everyone was excited about our arrival to this camp. We were greeted by the hostess, Sarah and had our camp briefing.



Ralph & Brooks on the boat to camp



Main walkway to Little Vumbura

After a short discussion we decided to go on the mokoro ride that afternoon so we could focus on game drives the rest of the time. This was lovely and such a nice relaxed pace that I think everyone really enjoyed it. The camp had packed a cooler with cocktails (our crowd was loyal to the G&T's) and snacks and we had a perfect sundowner moment on this deserted island.



Our group perfecting sundowners



Brooks plays bartender



Mekoros on our private island



The camp has been rebuilt and is stunning! Open decks and a slightly raised boardwalk take guests to the new tents. Really perfectly done! Now if only the food matched the great accommodations. Unfortunately, that night's dinner was a bit "off". It was some sort of beef steaks but the meat was so tough that we had to use Ralph's pocket knife to cut our food (which ended up being hilarious watching everyone take turns with the knife). Brunches and afternoon teas were quite good though (my favorite being the little Bobotie tarts).



Larry's & staff



Thank God for this pocket knife



New friends

So after a restful night's sleep it was another early morning wake -up and off for our first game drive in the region. We were greeted by a spectacular sunrise which burned off a thick layer of fog. Within minutes of our game drive Brooks found a pride of lions (4 males and 3 females) and they seemed to pose for us. We were also treated by them playing and snuggling up on each other.



Unbelievable sunrise over the mist



Lions posing in the morning sun



During our afternoon game drive the sun began to set and we were all getting a little concerned...when are we stopping for our sundowners? I mean, come on...our last night in the camp and we were missing one of the best sunsets of the trip. Around a bend and under a huge tree we discovered why they were so specific about where we stopped. Several staff members had driven out and set up a wonderful spread of delicious hors d'oeuvres and full bar – we joked that this made up for the average game viewing that day.

On the way back to camp luck was on our side as we saw the pride of lions again, out hunting. This was especially cool when disembarking the vehicle and running for the boat - as they were really close. A nice adrenaline rush!



Larry & the girls



The last sundowners



Tony, Dena and me

Jun 08 (Sun)

We couldn't believe the safari portion of the trip had come to an end.

The plan was to enjoy a bit of a “sleep-in” and get up for a nice breakfast and then head out for the game drive which would continue until it was time to go to the airstrip. This worked out perfectly...now if only the game had gotten the memo of our plan. We saw some baboons, elephants and some red lechwe.



Nikki showing the high water levels



Stretching our legs



Red lechwe

We had to bid farewell to Brooks as he was taking a different flight to start another safari and we were headed to Kasane. Upon arrival in Kasane, I saw a familiar face – Esther was there to greet us! She looks amazing! It’s like she hasn’t aged a bit over the years (and it has been many years since I had seen her) but she jokes that she is getting old.

We drove across the border (the border crossing provided some entertainment to see how many men could sit around in the office and do nothing – ugh!). We got our passports stamped and continued to Vic Falls.

Originally, I had the group booked at the Vic Falls Hotel but changed it when the Vic Falls Safari Lodge (VFSL) was including dinner with the room rate. So the switch was made. I have to say – I am so glad I did! The VFSL was the perfect way for our group to feel like they were still on safari, it was nice and laid back. Believe it or not, we saw more game at the watering hole during our cocktail time than we did on some game drives (a huge herd of buffalo numbering several hundred strong plus a really large herd of elephants were both impressive – all from the comfort of the hotel’s bar).

Esther had informed us that our sunset cruise pick-up was at 3:30 pm which gave us enough time to drop off our bags and either take a quick shower (which I did) or go to the bar for a drink (which everyone else did).

We drove the short distance to where the sunset cruises depart. There were almost no tourists which was sad as this used to be crowded with people boarding their vessels. Big thanks to Alison for upgrading our group to the Ra Ikane! What a beautiful little boat! It puts everything else on the river to shame. The vessel only holds 12 people plus 2 crew and there were 2 other couples with our party of 8. Drinks started flowing and small plates of hors d’oeuvres were given to each person. The cruise was wonderful and I know everyone had a great time.

Wildlife was great! Saw a couple elephants come down to the river to drink and eat, a large monitor lizard, several nice size crocs (which was great as we had only seen small ones prior to this) and some hippos that posed for us (photo below).



Yvonne enjoys a G&T



Hippo showing off!



Dena & Nikki

We returned to shore and the hotel where changed clothes and headed back to the restaurant where Wilderness Safaris had made sure we had the BEST table in the house for dinner. The Makuwa Kuwa Restaurant is located on the 2nd floor of the lobby and overlooks the waterhole. Our table was right along the railing and we could see the herds coming up for a drink.

Now about the food...in a word – WOW! It was fantastic! I had the bream in a lemon butter sauce and it bordered on gourmet. You could order anything off the menu, from a starter, salad, main course and dessert and just sign it to the room – it was all included (drinks were paid for separately). The wine list was quite nice, with several fine South African wines to choose from. Everyone enjoyed something different, from tenderloin to filet of wart hog and even antelope. It was one of the few times everyone was silent which is always a good sign that people are enjoying their food.

We all retired to our rooms at a reasonable hour as 5 of us (all but Dena and Ralph) were getting up early for the elephant-back safari.

Jun 9 (Mon)

Anyone who says a safari is a vacation is insane. A vacation is where you sleep in and get room service before wandering out to the beach. A safari is pure adventure and everyone knows adventure requires early wake-ups. So at the hour of 6:00 am we met in the lobby for our long road transfer outside of town for the elephant-back safari.

Bumping along the road in the dark, I second guessed my plan for this but all of that fell away when we arrived and were greeted by “Ma”, a beautiful 8-year old impala who enjoys tea biscuits and standing near the fire pit. That got us off on the right foot and before we knew it, the elephants were lead in for a “meet and greet” where we got to touch them and get to know them. We learned about the various babies that had been rescued and how the operation works. Then we climbed up a large platform to get on our “saddle”. People should know that there were only 2 elephants that could be ridden solo so your guests usually are paired up.

Following a fun hour long ride through the wilderness and several great photo ops, we returned to camp for a home cooked breakfast (toast, eggs, a type of meat chili and coffee or tea). One of the little orphan elephants still on a bottle came up for feeding time and we got to go hug it (way too cute for words!) Then it was the obligatory stop in the gift shop where they had some neat wooden carved wild dogs that someone on the staff had made and proceeds go to the Wild Dog Foundation.

We returned to the VFSL by 10:15 am and had 1 hour before our next adventure.



At 11:30 am we met back in the lobby for our tour of Victoria Falls with Esther. Everyone was looking forward to this!

Esther was spectacular, taking the group through the history of the falls and what they could expect to see today. Rain ponchos in hand, we started down the path. Everyone in the group had a marvelous time! That is until right at the end of the tour, Dena slipped on some moss and injured her knee.



Barbara



Nikki and Karen



Ralph

The group had enough time to regroup, eat a quick lunch, grab our cash and we met back at the lobby at 3:00 pm for an afternoon of shopping. Esther would be our escort for this which was lovely as it meant we all got to spend more time with her. The market is one of the reasons we stayed in Vic Falls and not Livingstone as the shopping cannot even compare. The mood of the market was quite mellow and I was surprised to not be engulfed by eager vendors (and beggars) like in years past. Instead, people were courteous and did not approach you until you seemed interested in their stuff. Esther later credited the Tourist Police for the change.

Being a seasoned pro at bargaining and maneuvering around, I broke off from the group as I knew they were in great hands with Esther. For Larry and Barbara this was their first market experience and they were a bit overwhelmed. I had a wonderful time buying baskets, batiks, wood carved bowls, and some necklaces. Dena was quick to buy a carved cane so she could hobble about. I was thrilled to see the guy that packaged up tourists' purchases in cardboard and bubble wrap and make it possible to carry them on your return flight home.

We had 2+ hours in the market and everyone had a wonderful time. Karen and Barbara must have seemed more sympathetic than the rest of us as they were hit up for their socks and clothes. (Barbara did give her socks away).



Shopping



George, the guy who wraps up pkgs

None of us wanted the day to end so we didn't even go back to our rooms and instead proceeded to the outdoor deck for farewell cocktails and talk about our favorite moments of the safari (favorite camp, favorite game sighting, favorite meal, best cocktail, best sunset, best purchase in market, etc). It was fun to listen to because everyone had something different.

We had to run back to our rooms to change for dinner as tonight we were taking the shuttle to The Boma for our last meal. I can't believe during all my trips to Vic Falls I have never done this. It was SO MUCH FUN! Touristy, of course, but the food and music (not to mention watching lost tourists wander around looking for their table) were pure entertainment. They wrap you up in a colorful batik upon arrival and showed us to our table. Again – the power of Wilderness Safaris, we had the best table in the house! Everyone ate the dried Mopane worms and got certificates for it, badges of honor from the safari.



Nikki, Larry & Dena at The Boma



Nikki



Barbara and Me

Jun 10+11 (Tue+Wed)

I couldn't believe our adventure has come to an end. Everyone is in a bit of a funk today. We got to sleep in a bit and even make it through a relaxed breakfast (the buffet at the hotel was fantastic and included a bloody Mary bar and made to order pancakes!) I included a photo of the luggage below because when we started we each had 1 bag. Boy, had the pile grown!

We had to leave for the airport at 11:00 am and began the long day of travel. The only good thing about the journey home was the Duty Free shopping in the Joburg Airport. We had already sussed out the shops we wanted to return to so it was a last minute marathon of shopping. And then it was back on the especially long flight home.

I know the group had a wonderful time as there is already talk of a return adventure!



Our ever-growing pile of luggage

