

# BOTSWANA

## *A wildlife adventure*

BY CHARLES WILSON

*Special to The Commercial Appeal*

**B**OTSWANA, IN THE heart of southern Africa, may be only two plane changes from Memphis, but each change took our group of Memphis Zoo travelers not only farther from home, but farther from civilization.

And this was just the beginning of our safari last month that would take us from the dry Kalahari Desert to the swamps of the Okavango Delta and finally to Victoria Falls.

Upon arrival in Maun in northern Botswana, a thriving city of more than 150,000 people, we made our final change to board a small 12-passenger plane. Flying south over green, but increasingly sparse, summer grasslands, we headed for the even drier reaches of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, where we would spend three days and nights in a remote 12-tent camp.

Beautifully appointed with king-size beds, all the tents were equipped with electrical outlets, even though the camp was totally solar powered. While each tent felt remote, they were only a short walk down a sandy

trail from the main lodge and dining area.

Kalahari means "the great thirst" or "the waterless place." This remote and unspoiled reserve is the second largest game reserve in the world at more than

*Please see SAFARI, M8*

20,000 square miles. The Kalahari Desert, fourth largest hot desert in the world, was once the heartland of the Bushmen, or San people, but nearly all have been relocated in recent years. The human population in this region is less than one person per 100 square miles.

The reserve has flatlands and undulating hills interspersed with ancient dry riverbeds covered now with short grasses, bushes and spotted islands of bigger trees. Brown and forbidding in the dry season, it turns beautifully green during the short rainy season.

On our first evening game drive we encountered a pride of seven lions headed directly toward our vehicles. We quickly moved out of the way and followed the pride for several miles before we realized they were headed for a water hole just in front of our tents. We hurried back to camp in time to climb onto the balconies atop our tents and watch the pride march by in the sunset.

The next morning just as the sun began to peek over the horizon, we spotted three cheetahs boldly headed for the same water hole. A large herd of Springbok antelopes calmly watched the cheetahs from less than 50 yards away, apparently fully aware that the cheetahs were on business other than

hunting. An afternoon was devoted to a walking safari with a local Bushman, who explained his culture and demonstrated his tribal survival techniques.

On our third day, a two-hour drive from our Wilderness Safari base camp took us to Deception Valley, made famous in the book "Cry of the Kalahari." The name "Deception" is derived from the mirage effect of the pan, an ancient dry lake bed covering nearly half the valley, deceiving thirsty travelers to believe that it is full of water. Fifty miles long, the valley at this season is covered with grasses that attract an incredible variety of grazing animals like giraffes, zebras, Springboks, Steenboks, blue wildebeest and impalas. These herbivores in turn attract a variety of carnivores like lions, leopards and cheetahs. Here also are found the infamous and charismatic meerkats that allowed us to approach on foot to within 20 feet before darting into their burrows.

Bird life also abounds with more than 220 species recorded in the region, and although snakes of any kind are seldom encountered, a puff adder caught near our camp reminded everyone that we were in the African wilderness.

We boarded our light

aircraft once again to fly into one of the world's most distinctive regions, the Okavango Delta — earth's largest inland water system. The Okavango River is the fourth largest river in Africa and unique in that it does not have an outlet flow into the ocean. Geologic faulting millions of years ago interrupted the flow of the river, and the seasonal rains from as far away as western Angola now annually flood a delta or swamp area of about 7,000 square miles (the size of Massachusetts). This area is essentially a flat sandy basin that falls in elevation only about 3 feet in 150 miles. The annual flooding reaches the Kalahari Desert border and supports a vast array of animal and plant life that would otherwise have been part of the dry savannah. These vast waters eventually percolate back into the earth or simply evaporate.

Our lodgings here for the first two nights were at Chitabe, a luxurious camp of eight tents on elevated teak decks connected by boardwalks with the thatched dining room and living area. Each tent overlooks an open flood plain viewable from your balcony or private outdoor shower. Chitabe Camp is located on one of the larger islands of the Okavango alongside the Moremi Game Reserve and herds of elephant, giraffe, red lechwe antelope and zebra can be frequently seen from the walkways.

A short flight took us to our next camp even farther into the vast swamplands of the Okavango. Xigera Camp is built in a shady grove and consists of 10 luxuriously furnished walk-in tents, each with en-suite bath and outdoor shower, all elevated

and connected with boardwalks. This is a water activity camp, with game drives in vehicles only during the dry season. All other times game drives are conducted by power boat or the mokoro ( a small, dugout canoe).

A mokoro ride is mandatory at Xigera Camp. The only sounds are the rustling of the wind through the reeds, the lapping of the water against the boat, and the call of the African Fish-Eagle. The blue of the sky is mirrored in the water, which is rarely deeper than 2 feet, broken only by large round water lily leaves and their stunning purple and white flowers. A quick eye can catch the famous spotted reed frogs. Birding in the area is excellent, as well as views of leopards and lions.

Another short flight then took us to the northern border town of Kasane, where we crossed the Zambezi River into Zambia. The 350-foot border between Botswana and Zambia is the shortest in the world and can be crossed only by power boat or ferry. A short drive east in Zambia brought us to Toka Leya Camp in Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, about 8 miles upstream on the Zambezi River from Victoria Falls. Toka Leya Camp consists of 12 safari-style tents, en-suite facilities and magnificent views and sounds of the Zambezi River, located within the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. The park's premier wildlife attraction is a small herd of recently reintroduced wide-lipped or white rhinos, which we were lucky enough to view and approach quite closely on a special walking safari. In the evening a boat cruise on the Zambezi provided up-close viewing of elephants drinking while

hippos snorted and myriad birds challenged the photographers to catch them.

The main attraction for this region was only a short drive away. Mosi-oa-Tunya Falls — The Smoke that Thunders — is the name that Zambia's local people have given to this awesome natural phenomenon and is certainly more appropriate and descriptive than "Victoria." The five distinct falls are nearly a mile wide during high water and the masses of thundering, swirling water plummets more than 300 feet into a chasm that separates Zambia from Zimbabwe. The mist or 'smoke' from the crashing waters could be seen high in the sky for several miles before we reached the falls, and true to its name, the sound was like thunder. The mist from the falls was so intense it felt like it was raining.

Our safari ended, but great memories were created from "the waterless place" of the Kalahari to the "smoke that thunders" of the Zambezi.

*Charles Wilson is director emeritus of the Memphis Zoo and has traveled in 45 countries. He volunteers to lead eco-trips to raise money for the zoo's conservation fund. He and his*

Memphis Zoo Director Emeritus Charles Wilson's next eco-trips, open for Mid-Southerners, will be to Thailand in November and Tanzania in May 2011.

A free travel night is scheduled at the zoo Monday at 6:30 p.m. in the Rendezvous Room. It will include a slide show about the upcoming "Flavors of Thailand" trip.

That trip, which costs \$3,995 per person, double occupancy, features a combination of culinary, cultural and wildlife

experiences led by Wilson, with visits to a working elephant camp, the famous bridge on the River Kwai and a bamboo raft trip down a

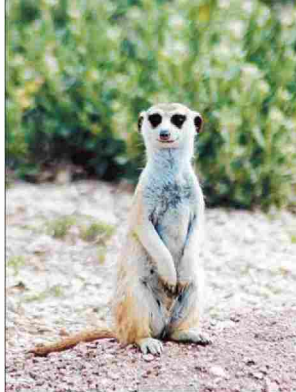
jungle river.  
Call Wilson at 268-1445 or e-mail at Zooemeritus@comcast.net for more information.

**ONLINE**

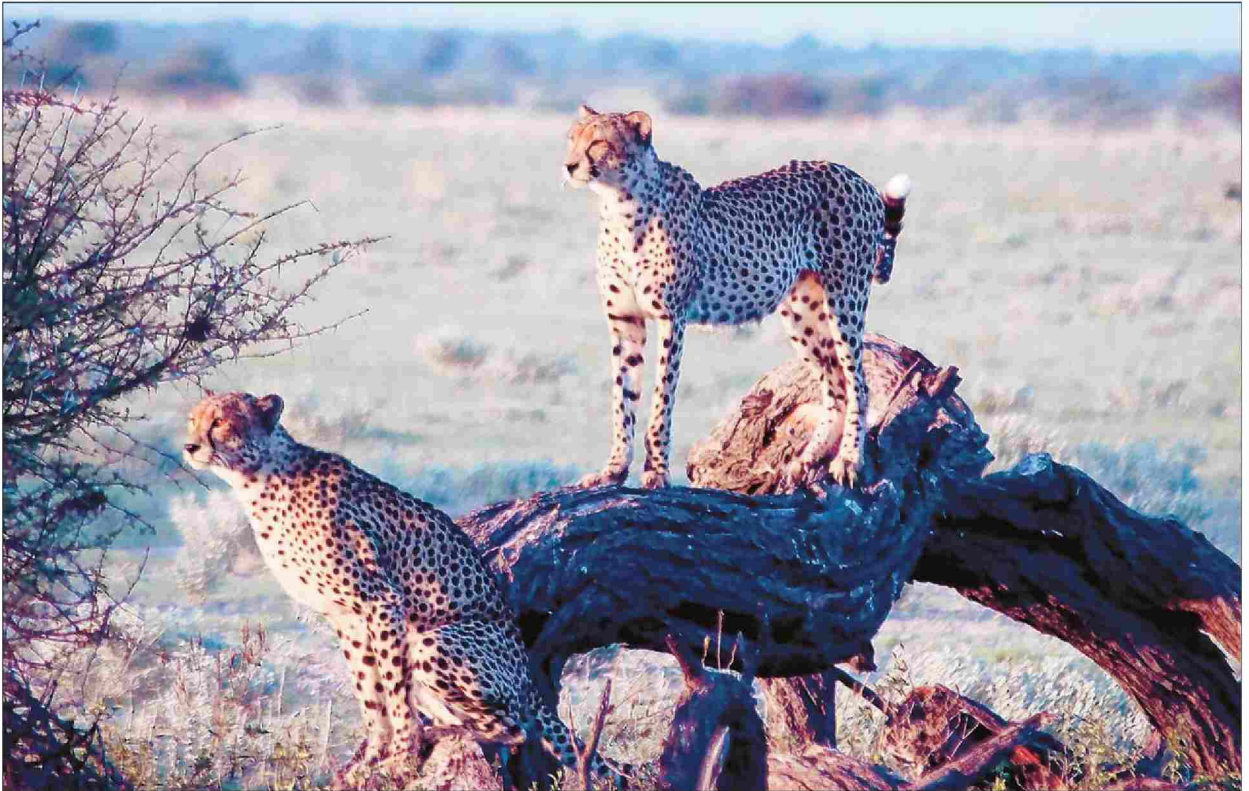
Go to [commercialappeal.com](http://commercialappeal.com) to see a photo gallery with more pictures from the trip.



**A Bushman provides cultural and survival insight on a walking safari in the Kalahari Desert.**



**Meerkats (center) are perhaps the most famous residents of the Kalahari Desert. And spotted reed frogs are a colorful find while cruising the Okavango Delta waterways.**

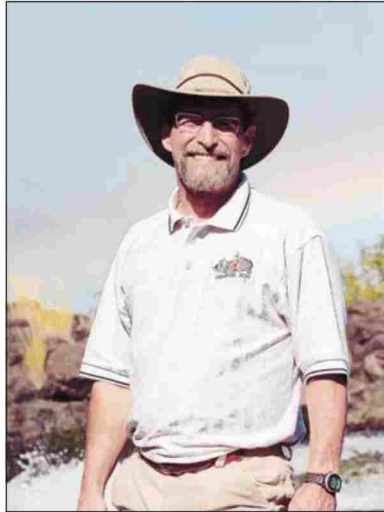


**Two cheetahs survey their surroundings from a fallen tree in the morning light of the Kalahari Desert.**

Photos by Charles Wilson/Special to The Commercial Appeal

*From dry desert to  
breathtaking  
waterfalls, safari gives  
Mid-South tourists an  
up-close view of Africa*

**Charles Wilson of Hernando,  
director emeritus of the  
Memphis Zoo, is  
photographed at  
Mosi-oa-Tunya Falls in Zambia.**



**Two young bull elephants pause while eating to test their strength by locking horns with each other.**



**Sam and Stephanie Russell of Olive Branch, Miss., demonstrate how mokoros, or dugout canoes, provide an ideal and quiet means to explore the waterways of the Okavango Delta.**

Photos by Charles Wilson  
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**Tented rooms, like this one in Zambia, are luxurious with king-size beds, mosquito nets and private views of the African bush.**