



NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

TRAVELER

November 2014

OUR

30

GREATEST TRAVEL PHOTOS

SPECIAL 30TH
ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE

PLUS: OFF THE WALL IN BERLIN | LOST IN BOTSWANA



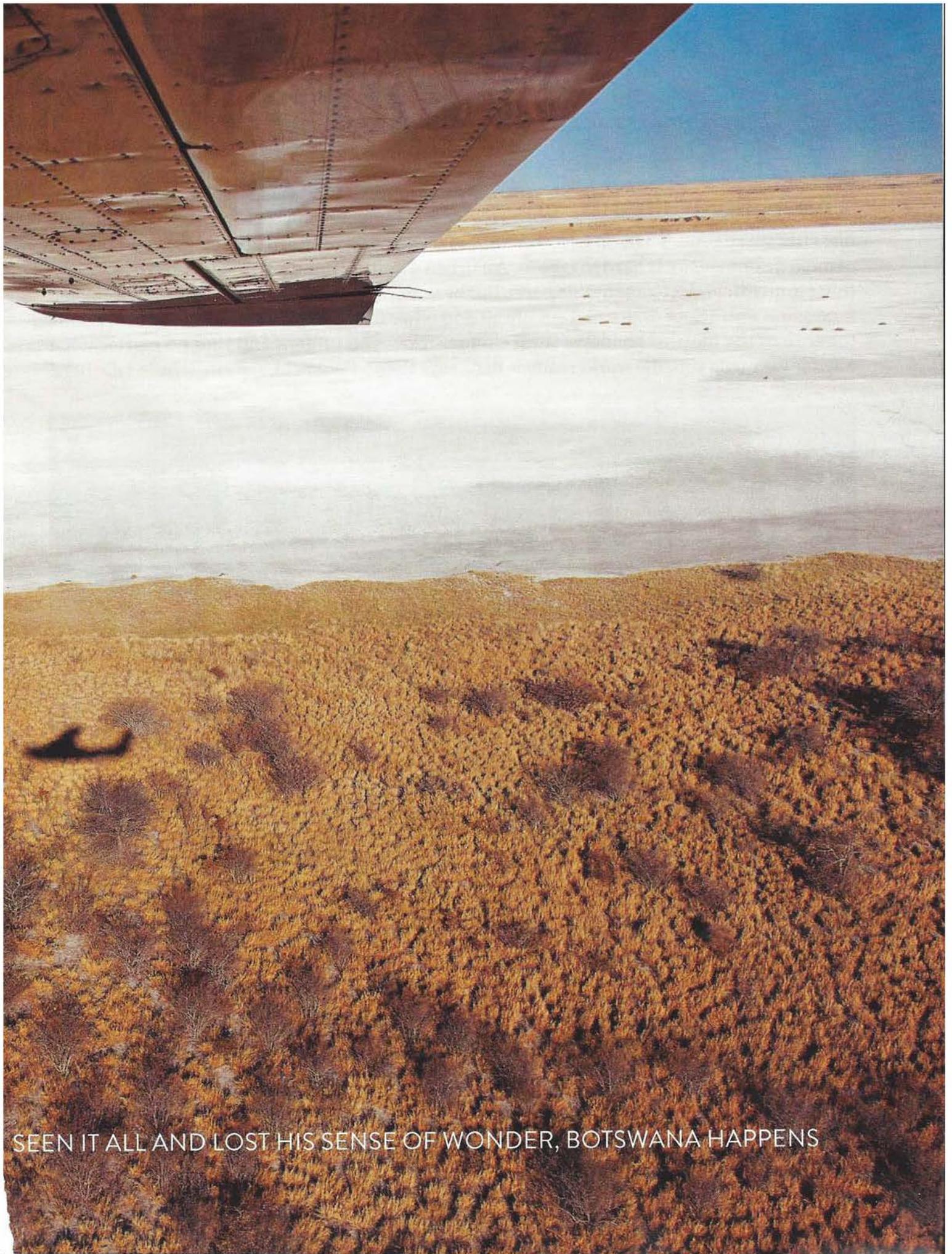


Vast and otherworldly,
the salt pans of Botswana's
Kalahari Desert dwarf
a bush plane's shadow.

THE
REBIRTH
OF

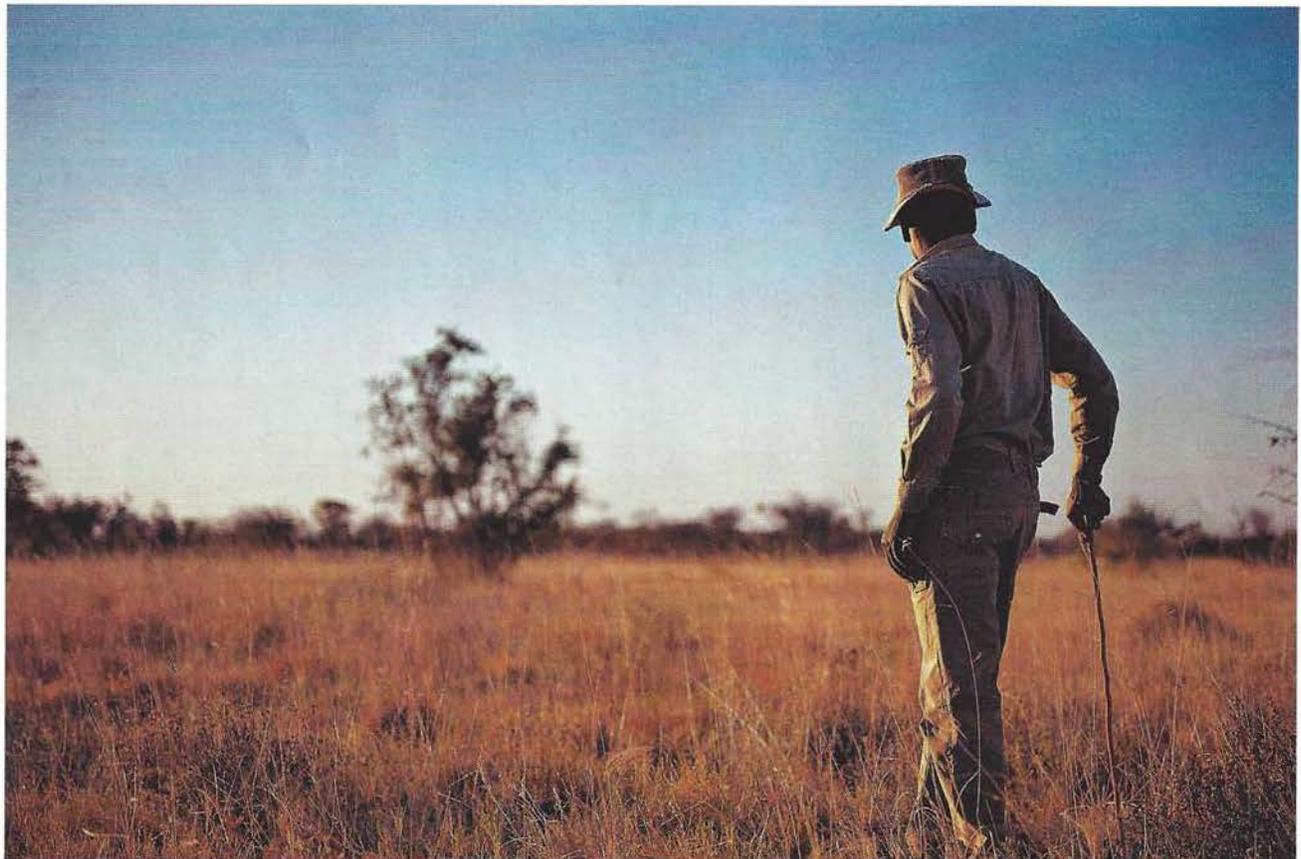
Awe

JUST WHEN HE'S



SEEN IT ALL AND LOST HIS SENSE OF WONDER, BOTSWANA HAPPENS

The Makgadikgadi, a vast salt pan deep in Botswana, must be what the planet looked like before humanity appeared, and what it will look like after we're gone. ¶ This is what I think as I try to wrap my head around the sight in front of me. The immensity is hard to take in. An urban dweller's mind needs signs, or trees, something to give the world measurable parts. But here, horizon to horizon, lies an undifferentiated landscape, an ancient desiccated sea of salt and other minerals without any reference points other than the mottled shadows from clouds. "Now you understand that no matter what anyone ever tells you, the world really is flat," says Ralph Bousfield, the guy who led me here.



"It is completely flat—an undeniable fact, as you can see." We are steering quad bikes along a single set of tracks that trace a line into the far horizon, like a seam stitching together the primordial and the postapocalyptic.

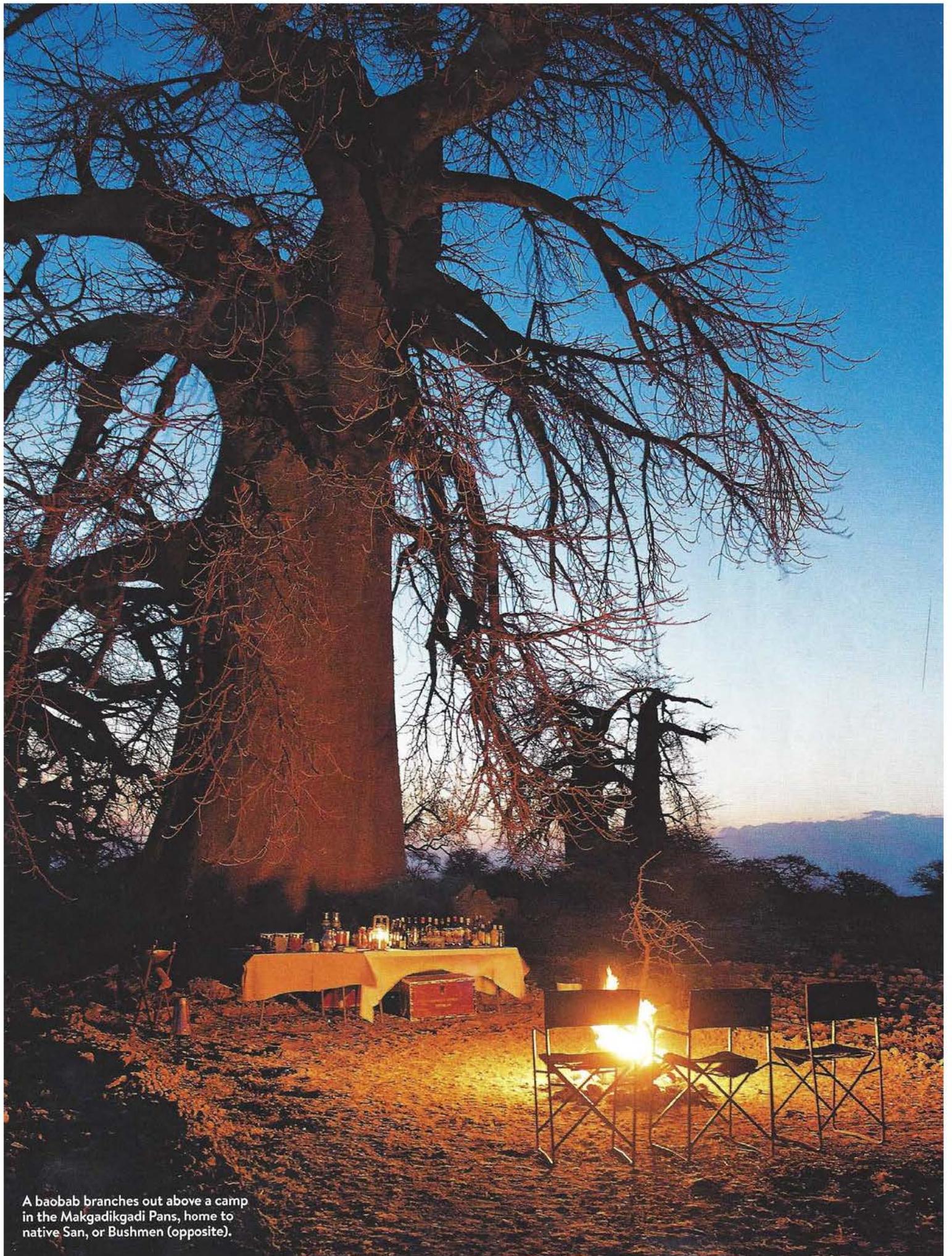
"Columbus didn't know what he was talking about," I say, "because he never came here."

"Exactly."

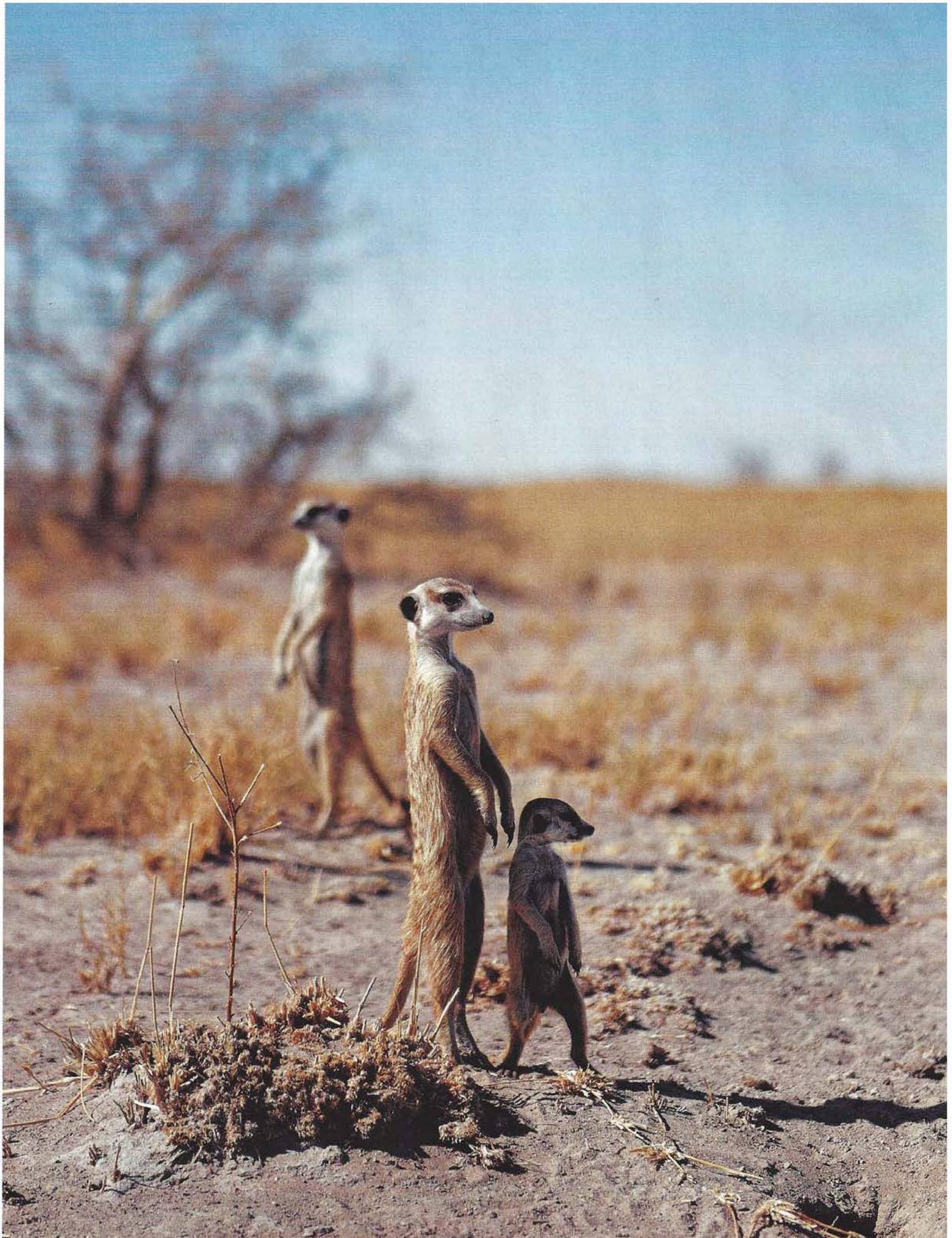
I TRAVEL TO SEE PLACES of epic scale and numinous beauty, to leave the world I'm used to for the chance to look through the

sclera of the everyday and be reminded of much bigger things. But traveling for that feeling of wonder has become ever more elusive. Consider how travel has changed. When French writer Gustave Flaubert first glimpsed the Sphinx, he was so overcome that he trembled. If anyone trembles at the Sphinx now, it's on seeing the many purveyors of souvenirs and camel rides. We're dulled by curated experiences. We have access to too many photos and paintings of the world's special places; we're overexposed before we've even arrived. We've already seen it all.

We know vaguely what we are supposed to feel. And in



A baobab branches out above a camp in the Makgadikgadi Pans, home to native San, or Bushmen (opposite).





A San woman wears traditional bead adornments. Meerkats (left) thrive in the dry climate of the Makgadikgadi.

some ways that also is a problem. On a visit to the Taj Mahal last year, I heard people exclaim, "Just wait till you experience it in person." Just wait. Oh, the anticipation! "Pictures can't do it justice," they'd add.

For me, photos of the Taj Mahal were better than reality. They were taken at times of day when the light brought out resplendent color in the mausoleum's white marble masonry, when tour guides weren't herding people eager to take the photos that could never do it justice. The one thing I couldn't feel at the Taj Mahal was a sense of wonder, a failing symptomatic of this modern affliction. A certain spirit is slipping out of our grasp. I call it the death of awe, and I'm intent on not surrendering to it. The question is, where on Earth can we still experience that sense of transcendent wonder?

"THIS COUNTRY FILLS my heart." My friend Staci was Skyping from Botswana. "I don't want to leave."

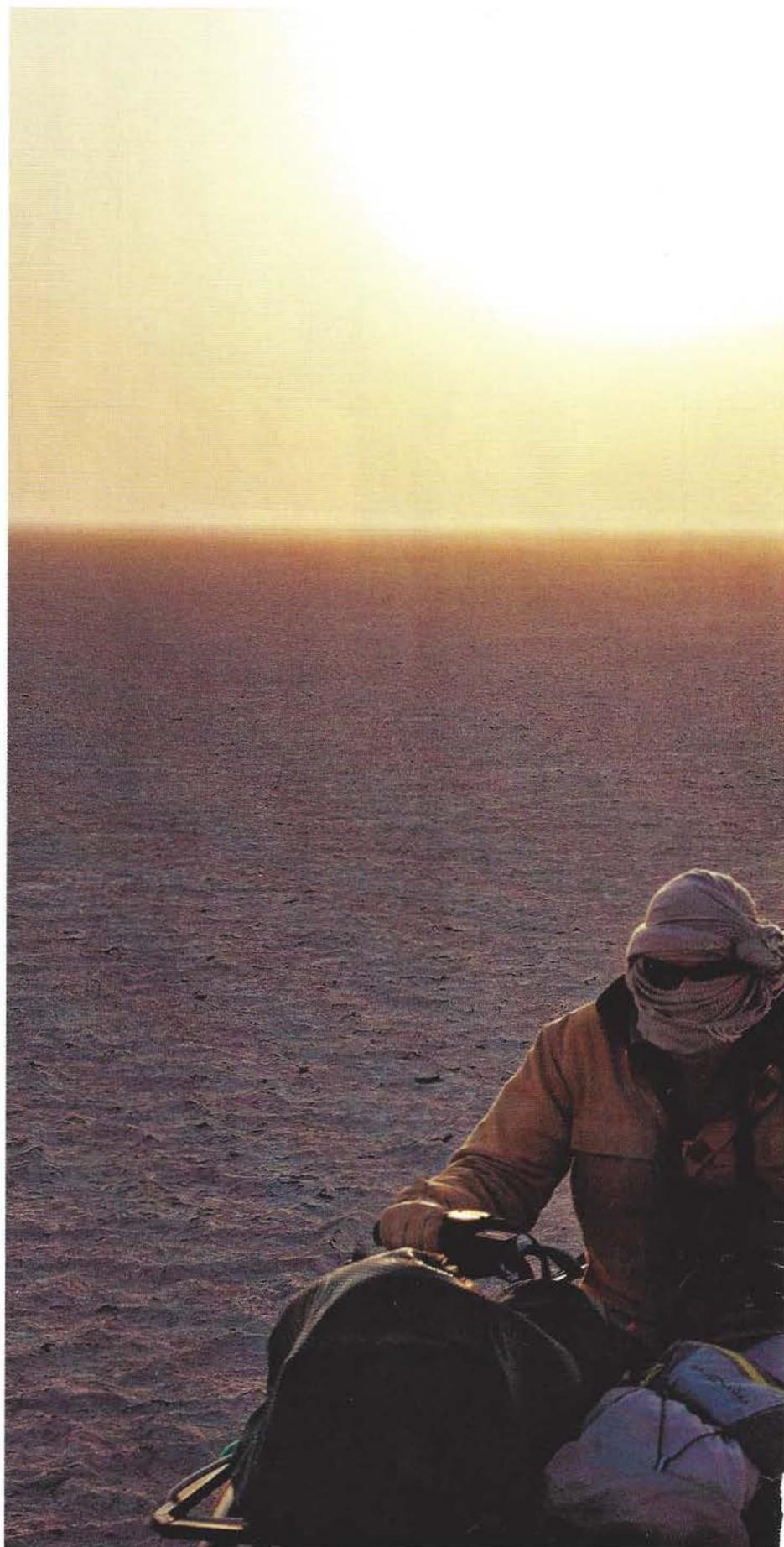
The more she talked, the more this Texas-size nation in southern Africa seemed the place to turn me around. So I've come to Botswana with the hope—tentative—that awe awaits. I've craved its exhilaration and discombobulation.

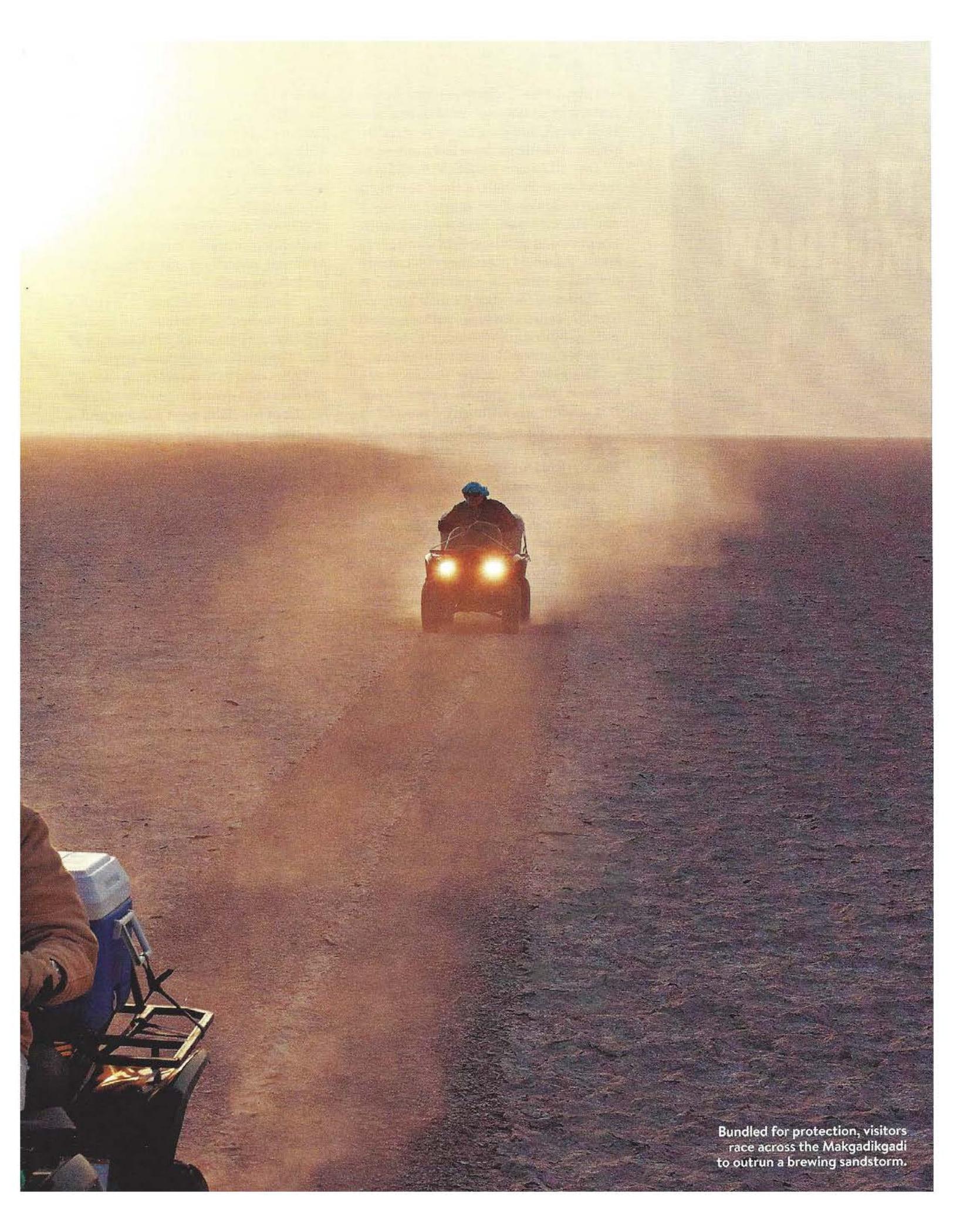
Exhilaration quickly takes hold of me on the Makgadikgadi (meh-CAH-dee-CAH-dee), one of the bleakest landscapes at what feels like the end of the world. It looks like the Great Nothing.

In fact, this 6,000-square-mile wedge of the Kalahari—Earth's fifth largest desert—was covered by an immense lake ten million years ago. From this area, according to ancestral DNA markers, our human ancestors may have emerged.

Nor is the apparently bleak expanse barren. Within the great pan grow grasslands; palm and baobab trees reach for the sky. Through them an unexpected variety of animals roams, meerkats to big cats. The pan experiences two seasons: dry and rainy. As the rainy season ends, thousands of zebras migrate across the flats. Then there are the indigenous San, or Bushmen, nomadic once but mostly subsistence farmers now, who know how to find what they need to survive. The entire chain of life is playing out here.

Awe isn't limited to landscapes; it also is sparked by people, especially people who connect to the essence, the wisdom,





Bundled for protection, visitors race across the Makgadikgadi to outrun a brewing sandstorm.

#FOLLOWTHEFROG

WE'RE ALL VITAL TO A BETTER TOMORROW



Choose better.
Choose Rainforest Alliance.

RAINFORREST-ALLIANCE.ORG/FOLLOWTHEFROG



of a place. People of awe perceive shapes and stories in stone mountains, hear animals speak, and gaze up to the stars for personal messages from their ancestors.

One afternoon Bousfield introduces me to some Bushmen; their ancestors have crisscrossed the desert for millennia. The men wear beaded headbands, are girded in antelope skins, and carry sticks. Bousfield notes they don't always dress like this—the modern world has reached here too—but it's their heritage. The sticks, used to clear pathways and pull up buried roots, seem also to keep them in touch with their cultural roots.

The elder, Kgamxoo Tixhao, has a bulbous belly suspended over a thong. It is evident his authority comes from his advanced age and his knowledge of traditional customs. He speaks only Taa, the Khoisan language of clicks, so a young woman named Xushe translates for us. I learn that Kgamxoo doesn't know how old he is because Bushmen don't mark time in years. He figures he's pretty old, though his skin is smooth and the others still admire his hunting prowess. With each question I pose, he and Xushe volley a few exchanges, laughing. She then gives me very brief, sober translations that leave me thinking something is lost in transmission. Or, maybe, that I'm not yet worthy of fuller answers.

So we walk. Xushe grabs a plant she believes is an aphrodisiac.

"If you like a boy and want him to like you, do this!" she says, and playfully blows the plant on a man named Cobra, who appears to be twice her age and speaks English. His gray hair is arranged in miniature dreadlocks.

Cobra stops and points. "House of a scorpion," he says. "It is sleeping now. We make a fire, and it will come out."

"I think they want to stop and have a smoke," Bousfield confides.

Kgamxoo, whose brother starred in the award-winning 1980s film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, squats and begins twisting a stick between his palms over a nest of twigs. In seconds the nest is smoking. It wasn't so long ago that people gasped when the throw of a switch lit up a city; I have the same reaction now as I watch a fire come into being the way it has for most of human history.

Cobra picks up the smoking twigs and blows. The fire ignites, and soon

some hand-rolled cigarettes are being lit. Smoking is one of the few pleasures for Bushmen; they and their people are poor. This reality has made them vulnerable to the intrusions of modern life, threatening their ancient ways, animistic beliefs, and hunting skills. The Bushmen population of 55,000 is a tiny fraction of Botswana's two million citizens. Only a slim minority of that minority retains a connection to life in the bush.

"*The Gods Must Be Crazy* is not this country today," Jeff Ramsay, an adviser to Botswana's president, Ian Khama, told me. "That really doesn't exist anymore."

Cobra returns to the scorpion "house" and digs out a dust-covered creature the length of his palm with pincers and a tail curled to strike. He subdues it, then stuffs it into his mouth and works his mandibles as if chewing. I hardly know what to say. However, he isn't eating the scorpion; he is rinsing it with his saliva so we can see it better. When he pulls it out, the scorpion is bright yellow, with black eyes on a tiny, eerily expressive black face.

Cobra lets it pinch his finger.

"Doesn't that hurt?" I ask.

He shrugs as if to say, no, not really. I wince, but one measure of a Bushman is his ability to take pain. It's through suffering that the ancestors decide whether a person is worthy of crossing into other worlds and visiting them. Cobra is an elevated individual. He is also, I think, a bit of a performer, despite being dressed in ordinary work clothes, not bush skins.

The sun sits on the edge of the horizon, spraying saffron and pink light, then rolls off into the night, dropping us into darkness. What comes next is either a mystery or an astonishing bit of performance art; as an outsider, it's hard for me to know.

Tonight the Bushmen are preparing to visit their ancestors. Piling up pieces of dry wood, they make a fire. The women sit and begin to clap and sing; I sit with the women. The men tie rattles around their legs and march in short, hard steps, stomping the ground, circling the seated women. At first the mood is lighthearted. Everyone laughs, the singing is cheerful. Then the singing, clapping, stomping, and rattling rise in intensity, turning the song into what sounds like a lamentation, layers of singing and pleading

that I feel through my whole being. The fire's intensity also is growing, the flames crackling in a kind of dance of their own. I can feel the heat on my hands and face.

Kgamxoo's body glistens with sweat. His face, etched and furrowed now, like an ironwood carving, has changed. His eyes appear distant and haunted. I reassure myself there is a rational explanation. Maybe it's the exertion of the dance, or the heat. Whatever, Kgamxoo is here yet not here. He staggers, listing forward. He steps toward the fire. It's not quite right to say he walks on the burning embers because he moves so slowly; it almost is as if he is standing on them. He is not tolerating pain; he doesn't even notice it.

Back in the bush, I'd asked Kgamxoo if communicating with ancestors was through words or something one just understood. Were the ancestors people one knew, such as a mother or a father, or people from a general past? The only part of his answer I'd been able to make sense of was that ancestors sent pain and sickness to test a person's worthiness to enter their realm.

The desert has become so profoundly quiet that when there's sound, it seems to bounce back off walls of surrounding darkness. Suddenly, Kgamxoo bends down, gathers dust, and wipes it on his face. Then he walks behind us, puts his hands on our heads, and recites an incantation. I feel the grit of dirt on my scalp. All I can think is that here, awe—that blend of astonishment and reverence—is the true quest.

Slowly, the fire flickers out. Soon, the nighttime air feels like cold breath.

As I walk back to the camp, stars shoot across the dark horizon. At first, after the high energy of the ceremony, everything seems absolutely silent. I hear only the sounds of my footsteps on the crusty desert floor. But as my senses adjust, I realize the atmosphere is vibrating. It is a rising hum of insects. Whereas we diurnal creatures perceive the night as inactive, here nocturnal creatures are taking over the landscape. Then an awe-some sound tears the curtain of the dark: a pride of lions roaring into the night.

THE FOLLOWING DAY finds me deep in the Great Nothing. Bousfield and I navigate our quad bikes across dunes shaped like horseshoes and past ancient

riverbeds and lakes at the bottom of the Okavango Rift, an incipient fault in the landscape. We continue on to a broad savanna. Then the salt pan begins. A light wind kicks up. In the distance, little white cones of dust are gathering into a big brown sandstorm that dims the wattage of the sun. My head is swaddled in a cotton *kikoi* and I wear sunglasses, but sand invades me anyway. I taste dirty salt, ingesting what must be a multiple of the recommended daily allowance, and my eyes feel as if someone is trying to strike a sulfur match on them. The storm sails over us. I want to close my eyes and stop, but we need to get through it, so I squint at the ground and keep rolling, hot tears pouring down my cheeks.

The world is coming to an end.

Bousfield and I push on, and finally the storm is gone or we have escaped it. We find our way to a grove of baobab trees, their elephantine trunks topped by gnarled branches. Baobabs, iconic of southern Africa, can live more than a thousand years. After they die, they will leave no visible sign they were ever here except a patch in the ground.

We settle in among the trees. A profusion of stars perforates the black cosmos. The Milky Way, visible through baobab branches, spills across the heavens. I look to my right, to my left. Everywhere, I see stars. Bushmen say when you die you become part of the stars.

EVENTUALLY I FALL ASLEEP. When I awake, I gaze at the dawn sky—and it occurs to me that there may be a reason why Kgamxoo, the elder, didn't really answer my question about communicating across worlds. Maybe this is what awe is—a portal to revelation, coming into landscapes that are peculiar and vast, where the absence of external barriers breaks down the internal ones, and we feel something universal. Awe points us back into ourselves.

"[I]f you gaze for long into an abyss," wrote philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, "the abyss gazes also into you." I grasp for some intimation of meaning, but it stays just beyond the reach of words.

Writer **TODD PITOCK** lived in South Africa during the 1990s. Photographer **RAYMOND PATRICK** found baobab trees magical; "they seemed to protect us."



Discover THE MANY SIDES OF O'AHU

From song and dance to *lei* and laughter, there's more to see and do.

Vans Triple Crown of Surfing

Mid November–Early December 2014; North Shore

One of the professional surfing world's premier competitions, held at three different venues on O'ahu's fabled North Shore.

Xterra Trail Run World Championship

December 7, 2014; Kualoa Ranch

Held across Kualoa Ranch's spectacular terrain and open to runners of all ages, this is the culminating event of the Xterra Trail Run Series.

Wanderlust Festival

February 25–March 2, 2015; Turtle Bay Resort

This unique yoga festival combines leading yoga teachers, top musical acts, and powerful speakers for an adventure of mind, body, and soul.

Honolulu Festival

March 6–8, 2015; Honolulu

A showcase of arts, culture, and entertainment, Hawai'i's foremost cultural festival highlights the people and diversity of the Asia-Pacific.

Events subject to change.
Visit gohawaii.com/oahu/events.

The Island of
O'ahu
The Heart of Hawai'i.

THE INSIDER

Botswana

WITH ITS MIX OF NATIONAL PARKS and private game reserves, Botswana offers visitors a range of experiences, from the Makgadikgadi salt pans (part of which is protected as Makgadikgadi Pans National Park) to the water-rich Okavango Delta.

WHEN TO GO

The salt pans are at their most evocative, with mirage-like conditions, in the dry season, June to September. Rains begin mid-November and stay into March, flooding the pans and hydrating nutritious grasses that attract thousands of zebras from Namibia, a 300-mile round-trip considered the longest of zebra migrations.

WHAT TO KNOW

Travelers to Botswana need a valid passport; currently U.S. visitors don't need a visa. Along with other African nations, Botswana is subject to malaria and other tropical diseases. For health precautions and travel updates,

visit the U.S. State Department website, travel.state.gov. First-time visitors should consider traveling with a safari outfitter; outfitters organize travel arrangements and tailor itineraries to your specifications.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

No airlines currently fly directly from the U.S. to Botswana; a common route is via South Africa. From there, Air Botswana and South African Airways fly to Maun, the regional hub in Botswana. Visitors not traveling with an outfitter can rent vehicles (four-wheel drives are best) in Maun, Kasane, and Francistown.



LODGING IN MAKGADIKGADI

Four camps offer lodging in the Makgadikgadi salt pans: **Jack's Camp**, in the central pans, with ten guest tents; sister site **San Camp**, just to the northwest, with 14 guest tents; nearby **Camp Kalahari**, with

ten guest tents; and, on the other, western side of the Makgadikgadi Pans, the **Meno A Kwena Tented Camp**, with eight guest tents. For lodging in Makgadikgadi Pans National Park, try **Leroo La Tau**. All of the camps have a dining tent (Camp Kalahari has a dining lodge) and on-site guides, available for local or overnight sightseeing excursions.

OTHER SIGHTS

Botswana is home to ten national parks and game reserves, and the **Okavango Delta** World Heritage site. National Geographic Explorers-in-Residence Beverly and Dereck Joubert, who founded Great Plains Conservation, operate four

camps around the Okavango, including the **Zarafa and Selinda Camps**. Also operating camps and lodges in northern Botswana is Desert & Delta Safaris.

ATLAS



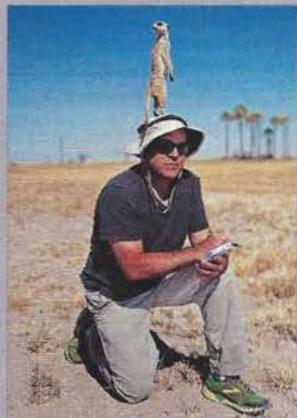
Botswana's **Jwaneng Mine** is the world's richest diamond mine by value, with up to 15 million carats dug annually.

One of Earth's top concentrations of rock art—more than 4,500 drawings—lies in Botswana's Kalahari Desert.

Botswana's currency is the pula, also a local word for rain, which is critical to this often dry nation's survival.

PARTING SHOT
MEERKAT HIGH

"I took this fun photograph in the Makgadikgadi Pans around San Camp," says photographer Raymond Patrick, "where a clan of meerkats has become habituated to the presence of people. This meerkat had climbed onto author Todd Pitock's head because the height offered a lofty vantage point for a survey of the area. Meerkats always are on the lookout for predators that hunt them, such as jackals and martial eagles. I think Todd enjoyed being of strategic use."



RAYMOND PATRICK (MAN); INTERNATIONAL MAPPING