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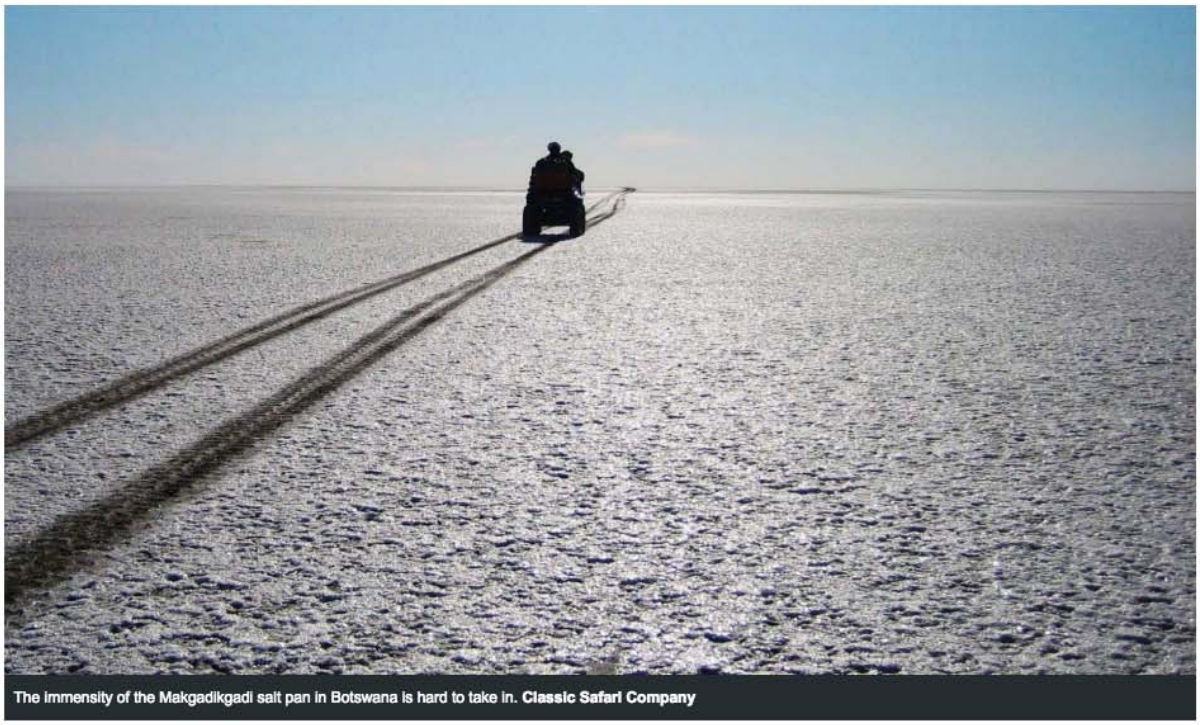
In Botswana's Makgadikgadi, a quest to feel awe again



The immensity of the Makgadikgadi salt pan in Botswana is hard to take in. **Classic Safari Company**

by **Todd Pitock**

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.

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 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 has led me here. "It is completely flat – an undeniable fact, as you can see."

"Now you understand that the world really is flat," guide Ralph Bousfield says of the Makgadikgadi. **David Crookes**

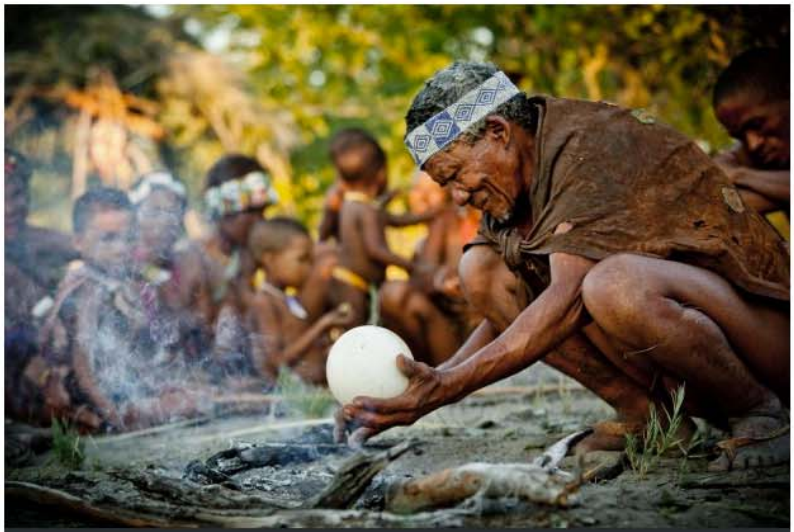
We are steering quad bikes along a single set of tracks that trace a line to the far horizon, like a seam stitching together the primordial and the post-apocalyptic.

"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, for the chance to look beyond the sclera of the everyday and be reminded of much bigger things. But travelling for that feeling of wonder has become ever more elusive.

Consider how travel has changed. When 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 images of the world's special places; we're overexposed before we've even arrived.



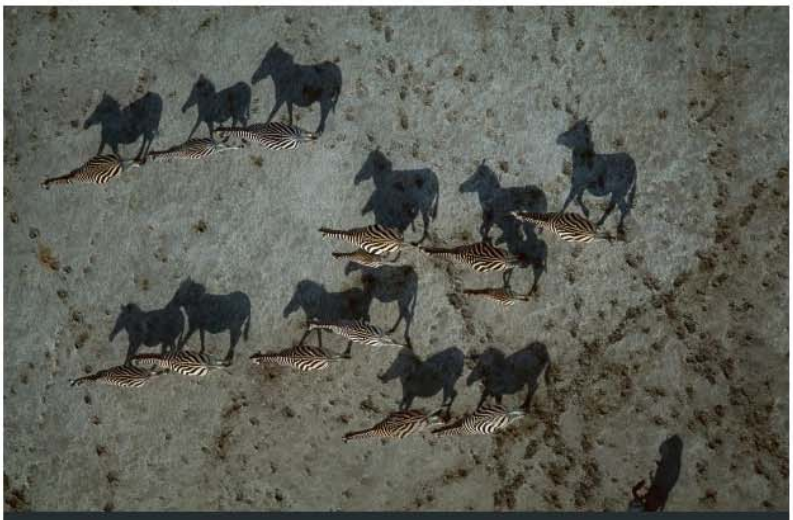
Ancestors of the Bushmen have been in the region for millennia, but the modern world is encroaching. **Classic Safari Company**

We know vaguely what we are supposed to feel. And in some ways that is also a problem. "Just wait till you experience it in person," people exclaimed before I visited the Taj Mahal last year. "Pictures can't do it justice."

Oh, the anticipation! But for me the photos were better than the reality. They were taken at times of day when the light brought out the resplendent colour of the marble, when tour guides weren't herding people eager to take photos that could never do it justice. The one thing I couldn't feel at the Taj Mahal was a sense of wonder, a failure symptomatic of this modern affliction.

In search of wonder

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?



There are only two seasons: dry and wet. At the end of the rainy season, thousands of zebra migrate across the Makgadikgadi. **Minden Pictures / Alamy Stock Photo**

This nation in southern Africa seemed the place to seek it, and now exhilaration quickly takes hold of me on the Makgadikgadi (meh-CAH-dee-CAH-dee). It looks like the Great Nothing.

In fact, this 16,000-square-kilometre wedge of the Kalahari – the Earth's fifth-largest desert – was covered by an immense lake 10 million years ago. Neither is it entirely barren.

Within the great pan grow grasslands; palm and baobab trees reach for the sky. Animals from big cats to meerkats roam. 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 inspired by people, especially people who connect to the essence, the wisdom, of a place.

The pan is not entirely barren: a clump of baobab trees reaches for the Milky Way. **Ben McRae / Alamy Stock Photo**

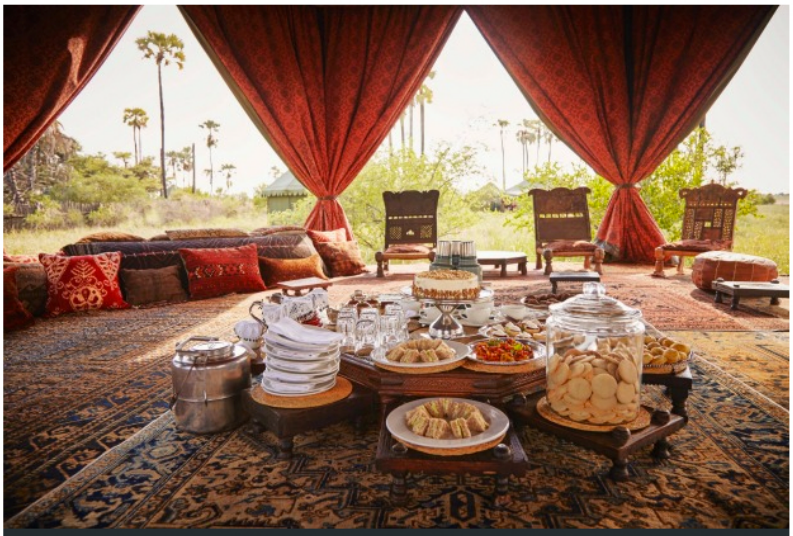
One afternoon Bousfield introduces me to some Bushmen. Their ancestors have crisscrossed the desert for millenniums. The men wear beaded headbands, are girded

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 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.



Afternoon tea awaits guests at Jack's Camp, located on the edge of the salt pan. **Classic Safari Company**

"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 grey 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 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 room; I have the same reaction now as I watch a fire come into being the way it has for most of human history.

Simple pleasures

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 2 million citizens. Only a small minority retains a connection to life in the desert.

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 jaw as if chewing. I hardly know what to say. However, he isn't eating the scorpion, he's 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, oddly expressive

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, my face pinched into a wince just watching him.

He shrugs as if to say, no, not really. The measure of a Bushman, he says, 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.

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 piece of performance art. As an outsider, it's hard for me to know.

Tonight the Bushmen are preparing to visit their ancestors. They make a fire, and the women sit and begin to clap and sing. The men tie rattles around their legs and march in short, hard steps, stomping the ground, circling the women. At first the mood is lighthearted. Then the song rises in intensity, turning into layers of lamentation and pleading that I feel through my whole being. The fire's intensity is also growing, the flames crackling in a dance of their own.

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.

(Later, I'd ask Kgamxoo if communicating with ancestors was through words or something one just understood. Were the ancestors people one knew or from a general past? The only part of his answer I'd make sense of was that ancestors sent pain and sickness to test a person's worthiness to enter their realm.)

A profound quiet

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.

Slowly, the fire flickers out and the night-time air feels like cold breath.

As I walk back to the Jack's Camp, our luxury tented accommodation, I hear only the sounds of my footsteps on the crusty desert floor. After the high energy of the ceremony, everything seems silent. But as my senses adjust, I realise the atmosphere is vibrating. It is a rising hum of insects, of nocturnal creatures taking over the landscape. Then an awesome sound tears the curtain of the dark: a pride of lions roaring into the night.

The following day we're 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 but sand invades anyway. I taste dirty salt and my eyes feel as if someone is trying to strike a sulphur match on them. I want to close my eyes and stop, but we need to get through it, so I squint at the ground and keep going, hot tears pouring down my cheeks.

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 can live more than a thousand years. After they die, they leave no visible sign they were here except

a patch in the ground.

We settle in among the trees. The Milky Way, visible through baobab branches, spills across the heavens. Everywhere there are stars.

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 didn't really answer my question about communicating across worlds. Maybe this is what awe is – coming into landscapes that are peculiar and vast, where the absence of external barriers breaks down the internal ones, and we feel something universal.

"If 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.

NEED TO KNOW

- **Where to stay** Jack's Camp, a safari operator and luxury tented camp on the Makgadikgadi salt pan.
- **How to get there** Safaris to the Makgadikgadi are offered by naturalselection.travel and classicsafaricompany.com.au.