

Botswana's Great Nothing

The salt pan of the Makgadikgadi, a vast and peculiar 6,000-square-mile wedge of the Kalahari, is among places in the world that can still inspire awe.

By Todd Pitcock
FOR THE INQUIRER

THE MAKGADIKGADI PAN, Botswana — This vast salt pan must be what the planet looked like before humanity appeared, and what it will look like after we're gone.

The immensity of the Makgadikgadi, deep in this Texas-size nation in southern Africa, is hard to take in. Here, horizon to horizon, lies an undifferentiated landscape, an ancient desiccated sea with no reference points but cloud-thrown shadows.

"Now you understand that no matter what anyone tells you, the world really is flat," says Ralph Bousfield, the guide who led me here. "It is completely flat — an undeniable fact, as you can see."

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 he trembled. If anyone trem-

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bles now, it's upon seeing the many purveyors of souvenirs and camel rides. We're dulled by curated experiences. We have access to too many photos of the world's special places; we're overexposed before we arrive.

On a visit to the Taj Mahal last year, I heard people exclaim,

"Just wait till you experience it in person." Just wait. "Pictures can't do it justice."

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, 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 awe.

A certain spirit is slipping out of our grasp, and I'm intent on not surrendering it. The question is, where on Earth can we still experience transcendent wonder?

Botswana seems the place to seek it.

Exhilaration quickly takes hold of me on the Makgadikgadi (meh-CAH-dee-CAH-dee). It looks like the Great Nothing.

In fact, this 6,000-square-mile wedge of the Kalahari — Earth's fifth-largest desert — was an immense lake 10 million years ago. According to DNA markers, our human ancestors might have emerged here.

The great pan is not barren. Within it grow grasslands. Palm and baobab trees reach for the sky. An unexpected variety of animals roam, meerkats to big cats. The pan has two seasons: dry and rainy. As the latter ends, thousands of zebras migrate across the flats.

Awe isn't limited to landscapes. It also is sparked by people, especially those who connect to the essence, the wisdom, of a place. People of awe perceive shapes and stories in stone mountains, hear animals speak, and gaze at stars for personal messages from their ancestors.

The indigenous San, or Bushmen, whose nomadic ancestors crisscrossed the desert for millennia, are now mostly subsistence farmers. One afternoon, Bousfield introduces me to some of them.

The men wear beaded headbands, are girded in antelope skins, and carry sticks. Bous-

field notes they don't always dress like this — the modern world has reached here — but it's their heritage. The sticks, used to clear paths and pull up roots, seem also to keep them in touch with their cultural roots.

The elder, Kgamxoo Tixhao, has a bulbous belly suspended over a thong. He speaks only Taa, the Khoisan language of clicks, so a young woman named Xushe translates. 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.

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, playfully blowing the plant on a man named Cobra. He appears to be twice her age and speaks English.

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 says.

Kgamxoo — his brother starred in the award-winning 1980 comedy *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, about a tribal people's encounter with a Coca-Cola bottle — squats and twists a stick between his palms over a nest of twigs. In seconds, the nest is smoking. Not long ago, people gasped when the throw of a switch lighted up a city. I have the same reaction now as fire comes into being in the way it has through most of human history.

Cobra picks up the smoking twigs and blows. Soon, hand-rolled cigarettes are being lighted. Smoking is one of the Bushmen's few pleasures. Their people are poor — a reality that has made them vulnerable to 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 mi-

nority of that minority is still connected to life in the bush.

Returning to the scorpion "house," Cobra digs out a dust-covered creature as long as his palm with pincers and a tail curled to strike. He subdues it, then stuffs it into his mouth and works his jaws as if chewing. 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.

One measure of a Bushman is his ability to take pain. It's through suffering that the ancestors decide who 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 before dropping us into darkness. Tonight, the Bushmen are preparing to visit their ancestors. Piling up pieces of dry wood, they make a fire. The women 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. Then the singing, clapping, stomping, and rattling rise in intensity, turning into what sounds like a lamentation. The fire's intensity also grows, 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. Maybe it's the exertion of the dance or the heat. Whatever, Kgamxoo is here, yet not here. He staggers forward, toward the fire. It's not quite right to say he walks on the burning embers, because he moves so slowly, almost as if he is standing on

them. He is not tolerating pain; he doesn't notice it.

Suddenly, he bends to gather dust, and wipes it on his face. Then he walks behind us, puts his gritty hands on our heads, and recites an incantation. All I can think is that here, awe — that blend of astonishment and reverence — is the true quest.

As I walk back to the camp, stars shoot through the blackness. After the high energy of the ceremony, everything seems absolutely silent. But as my senses adjust, I realize the atmosphere is vibrating. It is a rising hum of insects. Then, an awesome sound tears the curtain of the dark: a pride of lions roaring into the night.

The next day, we're deep in the Great Nothing. Bousfield and I navigate our quad bikes across horseshoe-shape dunes and past ancient riverbeds and lakes at the bottom of the Okavango Rift, an incipient fault. We press 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 kikoy, and I wear sunglasses, but sand invades me anyway. I taste dirty salt; 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.

Finally, the storm is gone. Bousfield and I 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 will leave no visible sign they were ever here, except a patch in the ground.

We settle in to sleep among the trees. I look to my right, to my left. Everywhere, I see stars. Bushmen say that when you die, you become part of the stars.

When I awake, I gaze at a

dawn sky. Maybe this is what awe is: a portal to revelation, coming into landscapes 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.

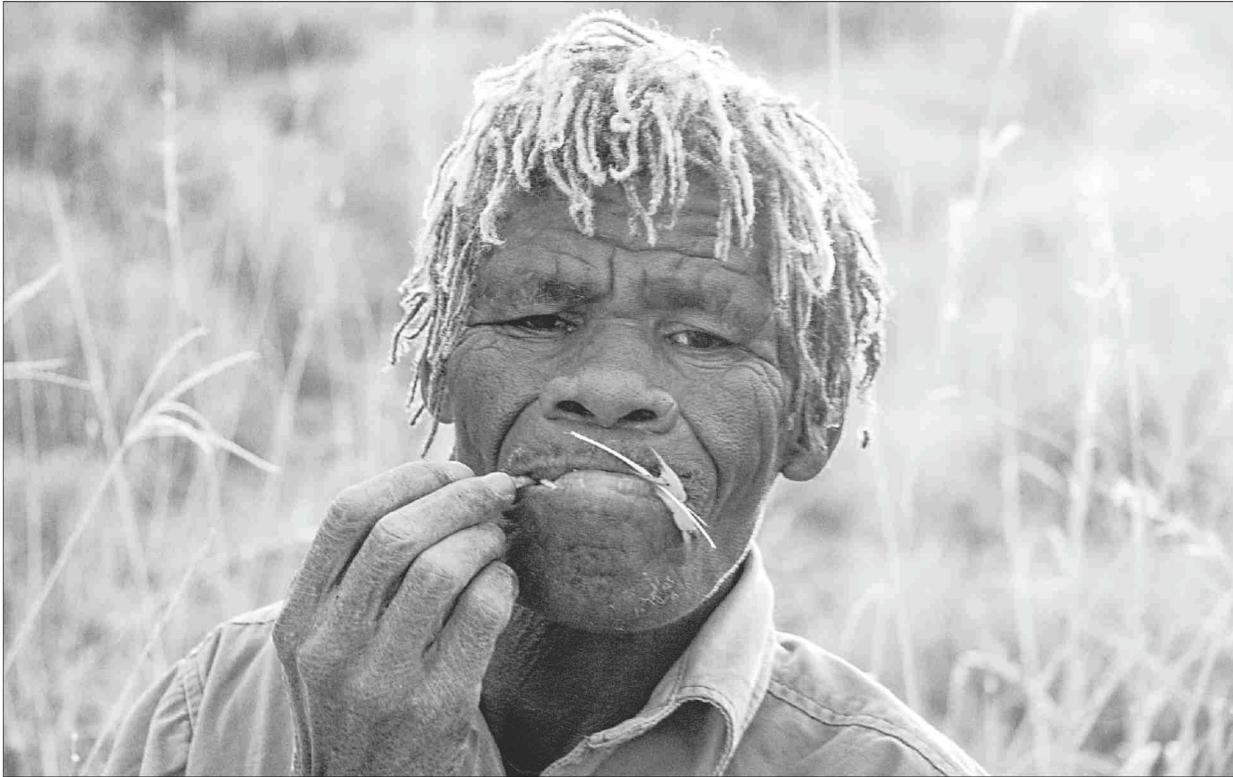
IF YOU GO

► In Botswana's Makgadikgadi salt pans, four camps offer lodging: Jack's Camp, with 10 guest tents; sister site San Camp, 14 guest tents; nearby **Camp Kalahari**, 10 guest tents; and the Meno A Kwena Tented Camp, eight guest tents. For lodging in Makgadikgadi Pans National

Park, try Leroo La Tau. All the camps have a dining tent (Camp Kalahari has a dining lodge) and guides.

► First-time visitors should consider traveling with a safari outfitter, which organizes travel arrangements and customizes itineraries. Visitors not traveling with an outfitter can rent vehicles in Maun, Kasane, and Francistown.

► No airlines 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.



Cobra, a Bushman in Botswana, puts a scorpion in his mouth to rinse off the dirt and reveal the creature's bright yellow color. TODD PITOCK

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TRAVEL



The Makgadikgadi salt pan of Botswana was an immense lake 10 million years ago. When its rainy season ends, thousands of zebras migrate across it. TODD PITOCK



A scorpion is handled by an indigenous San, or Bushman, named Cobra, who lets the creature pinch him. The Bushmen believe pain is a test by spirits of a person's worthiness. The San, whose nomadic ancestors crisscrossed the desert for millennia, are now mostly subsistence farmers.