

AFRICAN MYSTIQUE

THIS PAGE The enigmatic, undulating Selinda Spillway in northeastern Botswana only recently started to flow again, and this year the flood waters from the Okavango and Linyanti met for the first time in over three decades

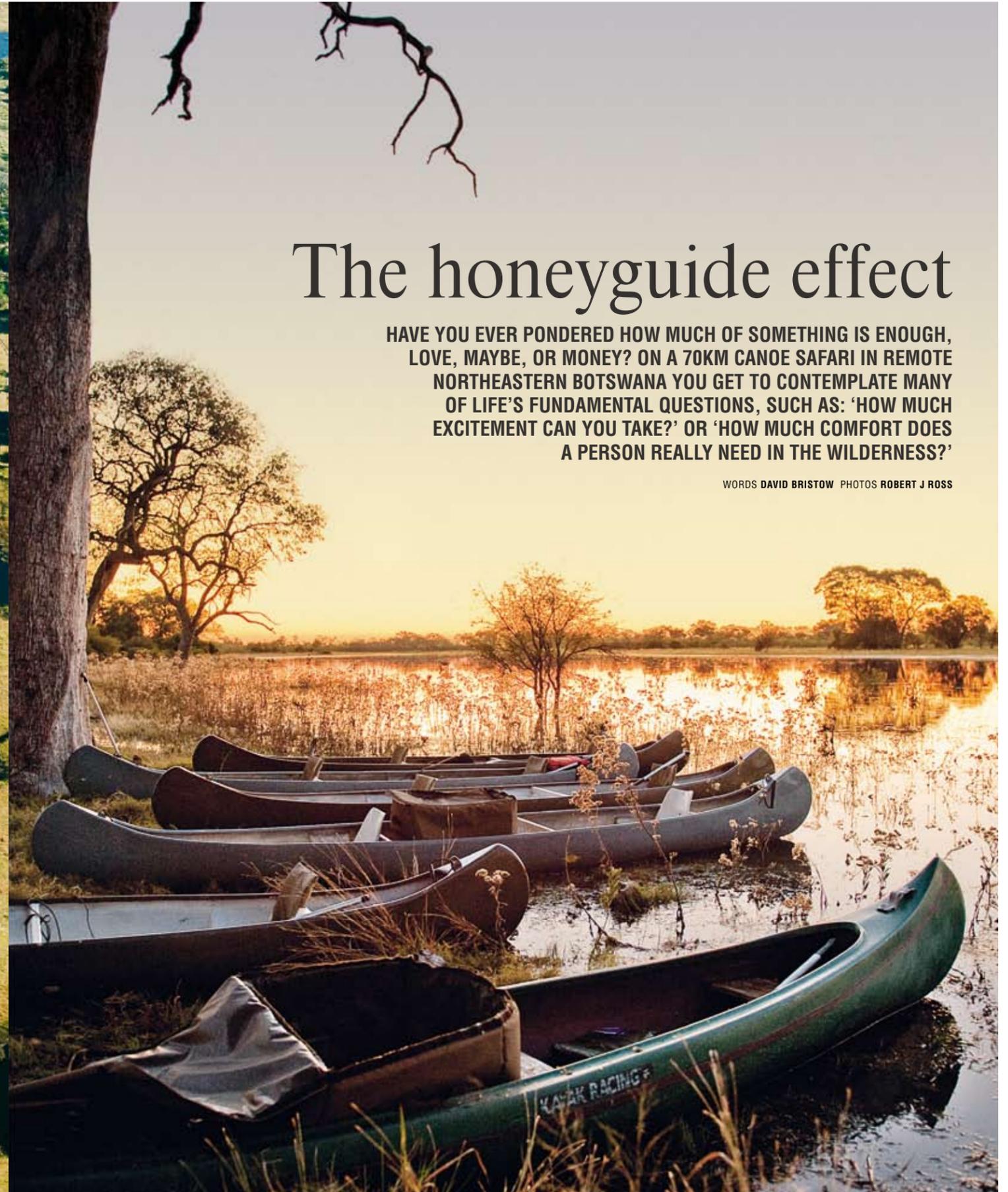
OPPOSITE Sunset was truly welcome, as canoes made landfall each night after a hard day's paddle



The honeyguide effect

HAVE YOU EVER PONDERED HOW MUCH OF SOMETHING IS ENOUGH, LOVE, MAYBE, OR MONEY? ON A 70KM CANOE SAFARI IN REMOTE NORTHEASTERN BOTSWANA YOU GET TO CONTEMPLATE MANY OF LIFE'S FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS, SUCH AS: 'HOW MUCH EXCITEMENT CAN YOU TAKE?' OR 'HOW MUCH COMFORT DOES A PERSON REALLY NEED IN THE WILDERNESS?'

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We were sitting comfortably beneath a large leadwood tree growing right in the water channel. By its size we estimated it to be several hundred years old. And the fact that it was now standing in flowing water suggested that during all this time, the Selinda Spillway had flowed less rather than more often.

So there we were calf-deep in Okavango water, about halfway down the Spillway in northeastern Botswana, on a four-day canoe safari. It is a mysterious and sinuous channel, looking from above like an extremely long green water snake. It runs 70 kilometres from one end at Motswiri on the eastern edge of the Okavango Delta to Selinda near Lake Zibidianja, which is fed from the Linyanti wetlands to the east. Until then, for some unfathomable reason, it had not flowed for some 35 years, which is why we were there. The flimsy folding camping table was laden with just-off-the-coals chicken kebabs, salads, fruit, freshly baked sour-dough bread, cold meats and chilled beers. Many things about this were unusual, not least the fact that we hoped to be the first people to navigate the spillway end to end in recent times.

And then there was the honeyguide bird. We quickly recognised it as *Indicator indicator*, the more common greater one of the six southern African species. Of course its call was the real giveaway: an

insistent whit-purr, whit-purr, repeated over and over as it darted back and forth, hovering over us as we sat under the ancient leadwood, then dashing across the waterway in the direction he wanted us to follow.

After about 10 minutes of frantic urging, the bird flew off in search of a more appreciative audience, perhaps a honey badger. It is well documented that honeyguides have developed species-old relationships with both humans and honey badgers, leading them to hives. In return the guided must leave them chunks of comb, bulging with fat honey-bee grubs. The story goes that if you omit to leave them their titbits, next time around they'll lead you to the hole of a stinger of another complexion – a cobra or black mamba. Although this part of the story has never been verified, a question to one of the local Bayei back-up crew left little doubt. They should know – their ancestors lived off the land here before the Great Flood. It's what we came to call the Honeyguide Effect, a phenomenon that is not well documented but a powerful force nevertheless.

The great safari myth

Nowadays the term safari is mostly a parody of any meaningful bush experience, with the lodge and reserve operators tending to cater to

the lowest common denominator so everyone is spoon-fed the African safari experience. Added to that is the noise of a large 4x4 and the fumes cutting you off from the smells and sounds, sights and thoughts that you would otherwise appreciate. The game guides and trackers interpret everything for you. And then there is always the pressing matter of getting back to the lodge for another sumptuous meal.

But when you embark on a canoe safari down the Selinda Spillway, you have to paddle your own boat, in more than one sense. This, our inaugural trip, was planned to coincide with the first modern meeting of flood waters moving east from the Okavango with that flowing west from Linyanti. With luck we would reach the halfway mark just about the time the waters met; it would be a momentous occasion for a waterway that was known to flow for decades, then stop, perhaps reverse direction, dry up for decades, even centuries, at a time and then, mysteriously, start flowing again.

Meeting of canoe and kubu

In fact, the waters did not meet on that trip, the apocalyptic day coming sometime later in August, so we had to walk the intervening stretch while our canoes and *katunda* were ferried by belching metal pachyderms. What we had to do was make sure the trip was do-able: we had to find suitable camp sites, test the paddle-friendliness of the local hippos that did not know a canoe from a crocodile, and generally set the pace for those who followed.

And just as well, because we paddled from early morning, finding landfall for the night only after the sun had set each evening, and were dog tired when we did. A bit too much for paying clients, perhaps, so the daily paddling distances were adjusted accordingly for the later commercial trips. And you also have to paddle your own canoe all 70 kilometres if you want to reach the pampering luxury of Selinda camp at the end to soothe your aching muscles.

Steering a canoe through a genuinely wild game area, you have to move like a hunter, senses alert, even when the sun is up and mopane sweat bees are driving you crazy. We were paddling hard, trying to catch up with the catering crew who were setting up camp on a bank somewhere: G&Ts would be waiting, followed by red wine and braaied steaks, then whiskies with ice. Africa can remain dangerous, but it doesn't have to be uncomfortable.

But the sun does get hot and the paddling tiring, and in the afternoons after a long lunch on the river bank it's hard to keep that hunter's focus. And of course that's exactly when we met our Waterloo, or *kubu* – the local lingo for hippo. The hippo was snoozing underwater when the first canoe slid right over him. He woke up and lurched at the closest foreign object, the second canoe in our tiny flotilla, and sent it and its contents flying. Then it ploughed off into the reeds on the opposite side of the river in fright and embarrassment, as did we.

'We don't love Africa because it is safe,' mused our intrepid guide Grant Nel, as we regrouped on the bank. (In hippo-infested waterways where canoe safaris are regularly conducted, a working relationship has developed whereby as long as you stick to the rules – don't get between a hippo and deep water – you are sure to survive.)

Trapped in time

At one place we pulled our canoes into a huddle to have a quick dip and a beer and to photograph a road sign in the middle of what was now a river. Whenever we found a quiet backwater, our guides would whip out their fishing rods and we'd enjoy bream fillets for starters that evening. Another time we drifted right over a completely intact elephant carcass – first the hips and back legs, then the rib cage, shoulders and front legs, huge skull and the large tusks pointing downstream in the chimerical water. Each of the canoes backed upstream a few times to make sure it was not a mirage. It looked like a fantastical creature trapped in liquid amber, reminding us just how big an elephant is, as well as just how recently the water had arrived in this parched swathe of mopane veld deep in the Botswanan wilderness.

Call of the wild

The secret of the temperamental Selinda waterway, and indeed the entire hydrological system of northeastern Botswana, is veiled in a deep mystery. It's a 1 000-metre deep one, the depth of the Kalahari sand mantle here. Under that, the bedrock reveals numerous fractures that are the hairline cracks where the geological fault that is the Great Rift Valley splays to an end.

Grant has lived and worked in the area for nearly 20 years, and he remembers exactly when the Selinda started to flow again. He was sharing frosties with a few friends at Selinda camp around New Year 2005, sitting on the leadwood balustrade when it started to shudder. There was a low rumble, like a herd of buffalo passing in numbers not seen around there for decades. But no buffalo was to be seen.

It lasted, he reckons, about 30 seconds. Being out there in the bush, it was only some days later he learnt about the great tsunami that devastated parts of Indonesia and the Indian Ocean islands. A week later, flood water flowing into the Okavango Delta found its way to Motswiri for the first time since the mid-1970s. From there it poured into the dry Selinda channel and kept flowing for several kilometres. The following year the annual flood pushed further up the Spillway, from both the Okavango and Linyanti sides. And further the next. In 2008 the two flows came within about 10 kilometres of touching.

Grant's tsunami theory is in fact the Honeyguide Effect revealed: a heart tremor in the bedrock unblocks an old constricted artery, sending liquid flowing down senescent veins, which feed capillaries that have been dry for so long the land tissue they feed has been left for dead, resuscitated only briefly each year by reluctant summer rains. The new order brings lifeblood to the wrinkled old body, which in turn attracts elephants and hippos and little honey-loving birds among the thousands of animals, the tens of thousands of birds and the millions upon millions of insects and finally people, all interacting in the great dance of the Kalahari.

It reaches deep down into our collective unconscious and, in the most profound way, it is calling us home. It's the honeyguide call of the wild, come at long last from a place called Selinda – synecdoche for our home in the wilderness.



GETTING THERE: Selinda canoe safaris run from June to October as long as the Spillway is flowing. The cost, including transfer ex Maun or Kasane, is \$1 300 (R9 800) a person sharing for a four-day, three-night trip (add-ons available). Wilderness Safaris 011 257 5200, enquiry@wilderness.co.za; www.greatplainsconservation.com.