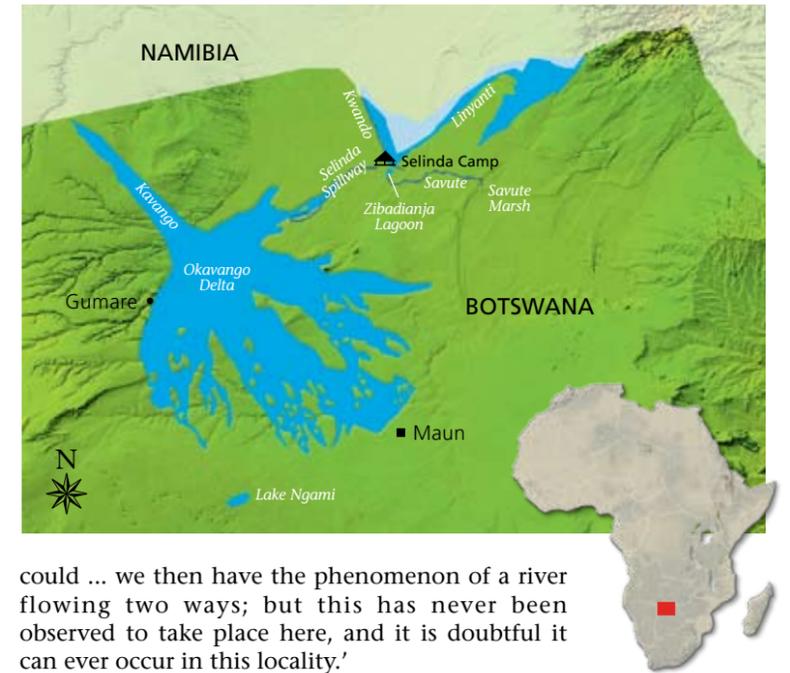


SELINDA

— in my soul —

For the past three decades, the Selinda Spillway to the east of Botswana's Okavango Delta has been a dusty 4x4 track. That is, until earlier this year when, unexpectedly, water coursed along the riverbed, bringing life and hope to this arid region. Travel writer **David Bristow** took to the waterway and rekindled his empathy with Africa's courageous earlier explorers and his sense of connectedness with the natural world. ▶

TEXT BY DAVID BRISTOW
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT J. ROSS



ABOVE Although dugout *mekoro* would have been paddled on the Selinda Spillway in past times, fibreglass canoes are preferred nowadays to conserve the remaining big trees.

PREVIOUS PAGE The spillway spreads out across a wide flood channel. Take a wrong turn and you could become lost in a maze of smaller waterways.

While *mzungus* (white people) have not cared much to understand the deeper rhythms of Africa. From the time when the first caravels from Lisbon dropped anchor off a southern Cape shore, we've been extremely busy filling up with water and fresh meat, carving out colonies, erecting fences, paving highways and accumulating. But we've done precious little to open ourselves to the rich spirit world that defines the lives of the people who have dwelt here since *Mohlodi*, the creator, left his footprints in the mountains.

Our family names do not celebrate the wild creatures, taking their essence into our own. We do not communicate with our spirits through the smoke of burning everlastings, *ipepa*. We do not dance the land, or sing its praises much.

There have always been exceptions, like David Livingstone, who was a dismal failure as a missionary but fell under

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Africa's spell; or Raymond Dart, who could see our ancient past in a small skull dug out of the earth at Taung in North West Province; or his field assistant Adrian Boshier, who went positively native.

But sometimes, when even we ordinary folk travel with open minds, we catch a glimpse of the powers that lie everywhere but we are too busy to see. Not long ago, I had to pass up on one of those once-in-a-lifetime, all-expenses-paid trips to the wildlife hotspots of East Africa. Obviously I was grouching, because my partner said, 'Don't worry, these things work out, you'll see. Something will come up that will make sense of it.' Within the hour my phone rang.

'Hey, Davey boy, it's Colin. I'm putting together a small group of people to do the first trip down the Selinda Spillway for, I dunno, maybe 35 years. Are you interested?'

My mind's eye teleported me back to a serpentine, dry waterway, about 100 metres

wide, with leadwood-adorned, three-metre-high banks. It snaked through a sea of mopane woodland linking the Okavango Delta with the Linyanti Swamp, a somewhat smaller inland delta where the Caprivi sticks its thumb into Botswana. When I'd last been there it had been a 70-kilometre 4x4 track between shrinking Lake Zibadianja and Motswiri on the Okavango's eastern edge.

Failed missionary that he was, David Livingstone must have been driven over the edge by the intensity of his passions. Why else would he have abandoned his wife and child to the ravages of tsetse flies and mosquitoes south of the delta at Lake Ngami and set off to find the source of the Nile?

It is hard to track Livingstone's movements from the time he left the lake until he reached the Victoria Falls in early 1852. (Of course, he never did find the source of the Nile.) But clearly he went by way of the Okavango Delta. In his diary, published in 1857, he notes: 'The Teoughe and Tamunal'le [Thamalakane], being essentially the same river ... can never outrun each other. If either

could ... we then have the phenomenon of a river flowing two ways; but this has never been observed to take place here, and it is doubtful it can ever occur in this locality.'

He never mentions the Selinda Spillway, but then why should he, since that is not its African name? Also, until the spillway came under the microscope of seismologists, Livingstone could not detect that much deeper structural forces were at work. We now know that the entire region was once part of a vast and shallow inland sea that was fed by all the major rivers of south-central Africa. Although it is incredibly hard to piece together a definitive timeline, records indicate that from the 1880s both the Savute Channel and the Selinda Spillway (which are fed by water disgorged by Lake Zibadianja, itself fed by the Kwando River's annual floodwaters from the west) started drying up.

A 1998 government inventory of Botswana's wetlands states: 'The hydrology of the Savute Marsh is dominated by only one process – the occasional spill from the Linyanti Swamp during times of high water in the Linyanti-Chobe river systems. That source has not flowed for more than a decade now. The Savute Channel has in fact ceased to exist.'

Clearly those government researchers had not consulted the historic literature. Just three years previously, a report by the Royal Geographical Society on 'Lake Palaeo-Makgadikgadi: the great inland sea of ages past', noted: 'Preliminary dating suggests that a 936-metre level was attained from 17 000 to 12 000 BP. [The depth was attributed] to increased precipitation and possibly increased inflow, whilst tectonism must have played a part.'

And that's pretty much what drives the unpredictable waters of the Okavango, Kwando, Linyanti, Savute and Selinda wetlands today. It has been established that the entire Ngamiland area is underscored by faultlines in the bedrock that lies beneath a deep cushion of Kalahari sand. These fractures in the earth's crust are the most south-westerly extension of the Great Rift Valley. ▶



ABOVE The hippos in the spillway have not seen boats for decades, so paddlers have to be extra cautious to avoid the irascible 'water horses'.

RIGHT A perfectly intact elephant carcass, with tusks still attached, appears beneath one canoe like an antediluvian beast preserved in amber.

When Africa burps, the bedrock rumbles, almost imperceptibly; the ground shakes and ripples. And as the fall of land across Botswana from north to south is only several hundred metres, water that once flowed one way stops, then flows backwards. A waterway that previously flowed from delta to lake alters to empty the lake and the marsh it fed. Or it inundates it.

One clue to the capricious nature of the Selinda Spillway is its local name, *Magweqana*, meaning 'many small pools of water'. This reveals that in recent decades, as in centuries past, the spillway has flowed, then stopped, dried to form hippo pools and then become a grassy memory – over and over again.

Kasane-based tourism operator Grant Nel spent many years as a safari guide in the area now known as the Selinda Reserve. He recalled campfire conversations with his Bayei tracker, Letota Motoloki, who hailed from Gudigwa village on the north-eastern edge of the Okavango Delta: 'He frequently mentioned that when he was a child, every winter during the flood his father and grandfather would travel by *mokoro* along the spillway from Seronga, past Lake Zibadianja to the Linyanti to hunt hippos. They would dry the meat, load the dugouts to the gunwales and pole all the way back again before the water receded.'

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The last such hunt would have taken place in the early 1970s, concurrent with the drying up of the Savute Channel. By 1982 it was no more than a channel with 'many small pools of water'.

'When I first saw the Selinda Spillway in 1995,' Nel recalled, 'it had receded past Selinda Camp, forcing masses of hippos into rafts that stretched from bank to bank. By early 2003 the spillway had gone and Zibadianja Lagoon was a massive grazing paddock for game. The last stinking ooze of water could be seen from the air as a star-shaped depression with the remaining hippos squeezed in nose to tail.' He added, 'We appealed to Ian Khama, then the vice president [now the president] of Botswana, for the Department of Water Affairs to unblock channels on the Kwando River. He gave us his support and by August water was flowing into the Zibadianja and trickling into the spillway again.'

'In late 2004 we were gripped by another drought – the worst on record – and we fully expected that the water that had managed to replenish the system would dissipate rapidly. However, in the first week of 2005 I noticed that the Selinda Spillway had started to flow – with no appreciable rainfall to account for it.'

However, Nel does remember an incident that had taken place the previous week, in December 2004, while he and



some friends were quaffing a few ales on the lead-wood balustrade at Selinda Lodge. He describes how they heard a low rumbling, like a large herd of buffaloes stampeding, and felt the wooden uprights beginning to shake. People sunning themselves on the beaches around the Indian Ocean at the time remember it all too well as the great tsunami that highlighted the fragility of human beings when faced by the immensity of the forces of nature.

Shock waves from the earthquake reached all the way to the East African coastline. The continent gave a tiny rattle, just enough for the Great Rift Valley to throw up some ancient dust. And those cracks lying under 1 000 metres of Kalahari sand gave a shimmy and a shake. Still backwaters in the Okavango and Linyanti rippled, then began to run, almost imperceptibly, searching out ancient flow pathways. Nel and his friends felt the shudders and saw the first tentative trickles stuttering down the Selinda Spillway.

'Hey, David, are you still there...?' 'Ah, ja, I was just thinking.' My caller is an old acquaintance, Colin Bell, who part-owns (with wildlife film-makers Dereck and Beverly Joubert) the Great Plains conservation and tourism organisation, which runs the 150 000-hectare Selinda Reserve concession where this primeval drama is playing itself out.

'Well, do you want to join us? Our small group will hopefully be the first people to paddle the Selinda Spillway in recent times.'

Bell estimated that the two waterways would meet some time in early July; if I wanted to be there I'd better start blowing up my waterwings. After that, he told me, Great Plains aims to run luxury canoe safaris until the waters recede – if they do – later in the year, and as long as the spillway continues to flow.

Just one week later, my back is aching from three days of hard paddling, with another day and 20 kilometres to Selinda Camp. Our four canoes cut through the intense afternoon heat, the rhythmic strokes of our paddles in the water making a hypnotic beat. Hippos snort explosively as we slice by, jacanas bustle on the waterlily pads, larger birds ply the aquatic trade route this way and that and the heady aroma of wild sage permeates the air.

For the third time it seems the sun will beat us to bed. The light just begins to burnish the landscape when Nel holds out his paddle to still us. A breeding herd of about 30 elephants is emerging from the green-gold curtain of riverine bush on the bank ahead, where the channel makes a 90-degree bend.

'There's a big bull elephant on our right that wants to cross the channel just ahead of us; we need to give him space,' he cautions.

The big boy catches our scent and hesitates. Then he plunges in shoulder-deep, ploughing diagonally across our line. He moves fast, directly towards the herd. As he approaches it, a younger male breaks away from the group to confront him. We hold our formation and our breaths, but instead of a crunching of ivory ►



For the first time in 35 years, floodwater from the Okavango Delta reaches out to connect with that from Lake Zibadianja.

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WHEN TO GO

The Selinda Canoe Safaris will be run from June 2010, when the annual floodwaters fill the Selinda Spillway, until around October, when they are expected to subside.

HOW TO GET THERE

Air Botswana flies twice daily from Johannesburg to Maun or Kasane. The Kasane flight is slightly cheaper and allows you to spend some time in Chobe, or to stay an extra night at Selinda Camp. If you have your own 4x4 you can also drive to Selinda, via either Maun or Kasane.

HOW MUCH IT COSTS

The four-day, three-night canoe safari costs US\$1 300 per person sharing. This includes air transfers from Maun or Kasane, as well as airport taxes and VAT. These prices are valid until the end of November 2010.

WHO TO CONTACT

For more information about Selinda Reserve and the canoe safaris, visit www.selindareserve.com. For background information about Great Plains, go to www.greatplainsconservation.com. To make a reservation, contact Wilderness Safaris at tel. +27 (0)11 257 5200 or e-mail enquiry@wilderness.co.za

The experts at Africa Geographic Travel can help arrange tours to the Okavango Delta and other destinations in Botswana. Contact them via e-mail info@africageographic.com or tel. +27 (0)21 762 2180.

and elephant bone, the two bulls entwined raised trunks and trumpet with obvious joy. This is not the territorial joust we were anticipating, but the reunion of old friends, probably family, separated by the vagaries of seasons and cycles of flood and famine.

A raindrop falls in Angola and joins others in the journey southwards into the Kavango River. Months later, acted upon by forces both cosmic and atomic, they follow a line parallel to the Gumare fault, past Motswiri, and gush into the Selinda Spillway, which has not seen so much water for many, many years.

In the east, another rain droplet finds its way into the Kwando River. It crosses the Caprivi Strip and eventually reaches the Linyanti wetland. There, instead of taking the well-followed path to the Chobe River, it veers south and west, into Lake Zibadianja, which, too, has not seen so much water for many, many years.

Those two little drops race to a molecular conclusion, and meet with many others to swirl along Selinda in the time-old dance of life. The spillway's ancient voice calls us and we paddle through the door. ■

When the author canoed the spillway in July 2009, the flows from west and east were still 10 kilometres apart. They finally met on 17 August at 14h30.