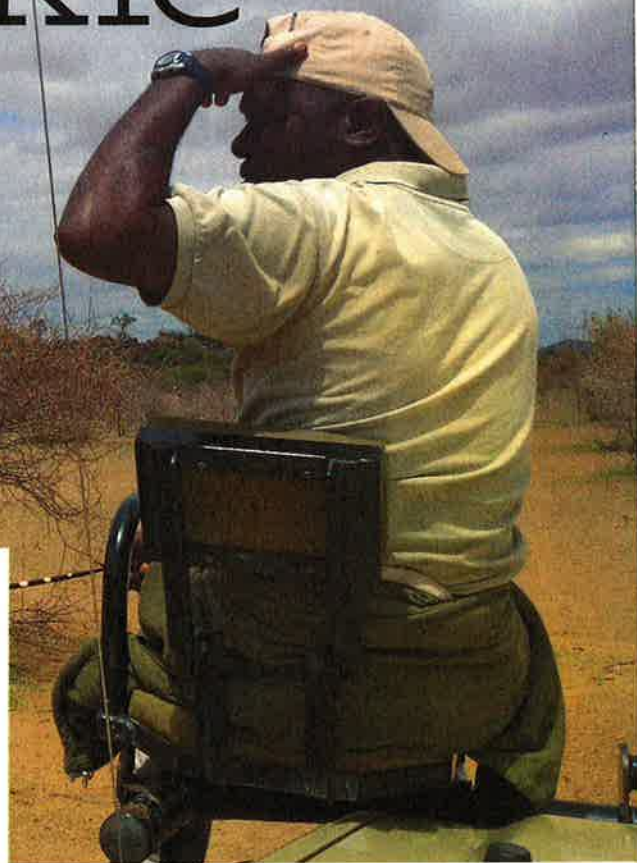


Tracking a toktokkie



Tracking is a form of forensics: you have to establish beyond a shadow of doubt that an imprint is that of a kudu and not an impala. And searching for elephants and beetles in Botswana proves no different.

WORDS: INGRID JONES
(@JONESINGRID)

The seven-hour drive from Joburg to the Botswana border post is not for sissies. It's hot, the pit stops are few and the road has seen better days. Imagine my shock and frustration when one of the team was refused entry at the Pont Drift border post because she had a temporary passport. We hadn't checked beforehand, so we didn't have a leg to stand on. No amount of begging and pleading could sway the border officers. Rules are rules and they will not bend them.

She would have to travel back to Joburg while the rest of us made our way to Mashatu Game Reserve in the Northern Tuli reserve, which forms a key part of the proposed Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area. The camp is designed for trainers and those wanting to learn about animals and the bush. I was looking forward to viewing the largest

free-roaming elephant population on private land in Southern Africa. I could picture them rambling across the African savanna while we followed them discreetly, ducking behind the mopane trees at regular intervals to avoid detection.

I kept telling myself we were going to sleep in a luxurious tented camp perched high on a hill overlooking the plains. Well, there were tents and the amenities were within walking distance – but it wasn't quite the comfort I had envisioned. I was quite taken by the idea of bushwhacking, early mornings and long walks to find tracks, though – I could show friends I'm a real trouper.

Our unfenced bush camp was next to a dry riverbed in the middle of nyala and apple-leaf trees, with the trained rangers always on alert. I didn't sleep at all on the first night; I could've sworn hyenas were sniffing at the seams of my tent. On the second night, however, I slept straight through. And the elephants really walked on cushioned feet through our tented camp. Awesome. The dinner by candlelight and great conversations under a starlit night cemented the trip as one of my most fantastic.

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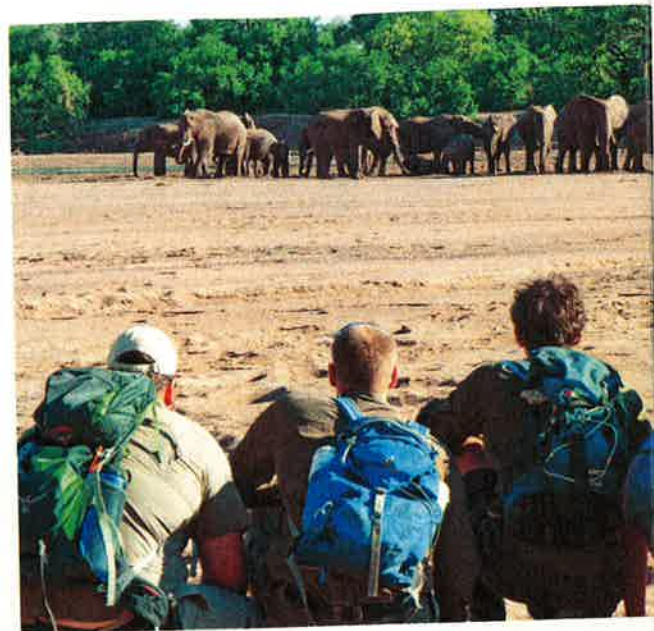
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Making tracks

On the day we were due to go tracking, it was icy cold – the African sun had done a disappearing act – and we didn't see any animals. There was lots of spoor but it seems the Big Five went into hiding. There were enough tracks to show they were somewhere but we just couldn't find them. In the absence of elephants (or even a hyena, for that matter), we tracked a toktokkie. It was fascinating following the squiggly crawls of the black beetle – where it rested, where it changed direction. An entire nocturnal story unfolded before our eyes. Our Shangaan tracker and instructor, Robert Hlatshwayo, shared his exceptional knowledge of tracking with enthusiasm.

We each got the chance to lead a track, which is way more difficult than it seems. We learnt about the ancient skills of tracking and how these rare skills can be used in modern conservation. The purpose of the experience was to follow spoor, identify and interpret the different animal tracks, look for peculiarities, understand what animals do and why they do it – and just as important – why they should be protected. Why do people gun down rhinos and elephants for a tusk or horn that supposedly improves sexual prowess (men should know it's a fallacy that your phallus will be elongated) or to adorn the handle of a letter opener? We had two professional hunters with us and the fireside debates were fiery.

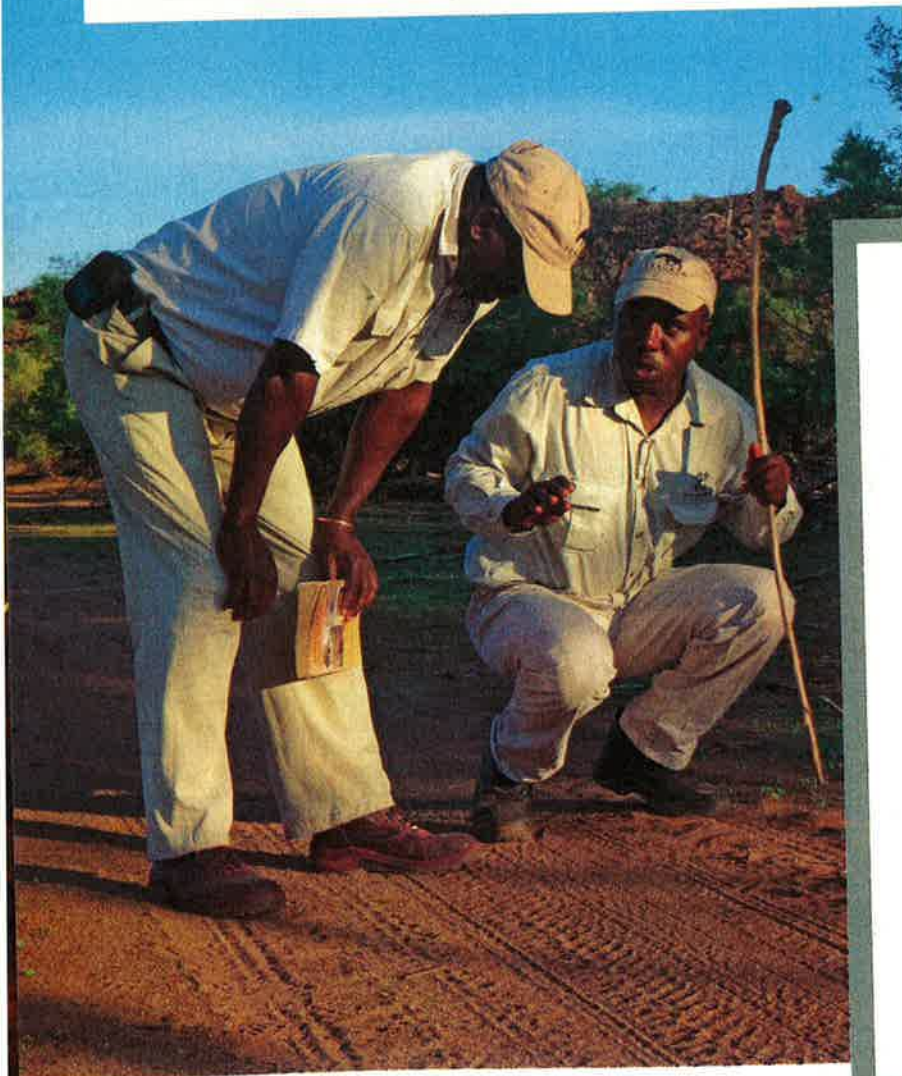


Previous page Tracker and instructor Robert Hlatshwayo leading the pack.

Above Watching the elephants drink and bath in the mud of the riverbed next to the tented camp.

Left Robert Hlatshwayo (pictured on the right) has a mesmerising way of relating and constructing a story around the tracks he come across.

Opposite page The tracks of a lion (top) and hyena (bottom).



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- 1. Make sure you have a permanent passport.** No temporary versions are accepted from South Africans or Zimbabweans. You will be turned away on the Botswana side.
- 2. Take head torches** with the strongest possible batteries, plus spares. It's pitch black at night when you want to go to the loo.
- 3. Pack a warm yet light jacket** because the nights are chilly.
- 4. Pack light** – no-one is going to carry your GHD for you.
- 5. It's useless taking a book** because it's too dark to read in your tent. Rather listen to the symphony outside.
- 6. Remember the mosquito repellent.**
- 7. Malaria tablets** are essential.
- 8. Forget the creature comforts** of home.
- 9. Replace your Louboutins** with hiking boots.
- 10. When you chance upon a lion or hyena** walking through the camp, don't sprint in the opposite direction. **Scream and one of the guides will come running.** Really? True.

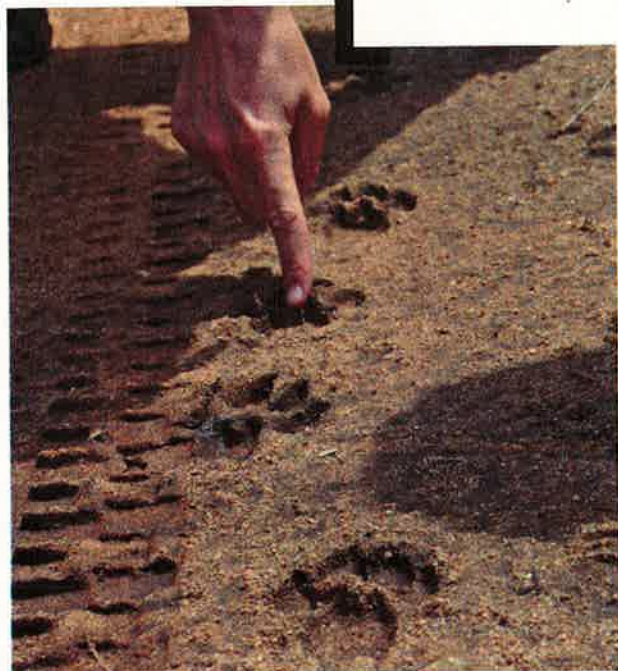
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WHO SHOULD GO?

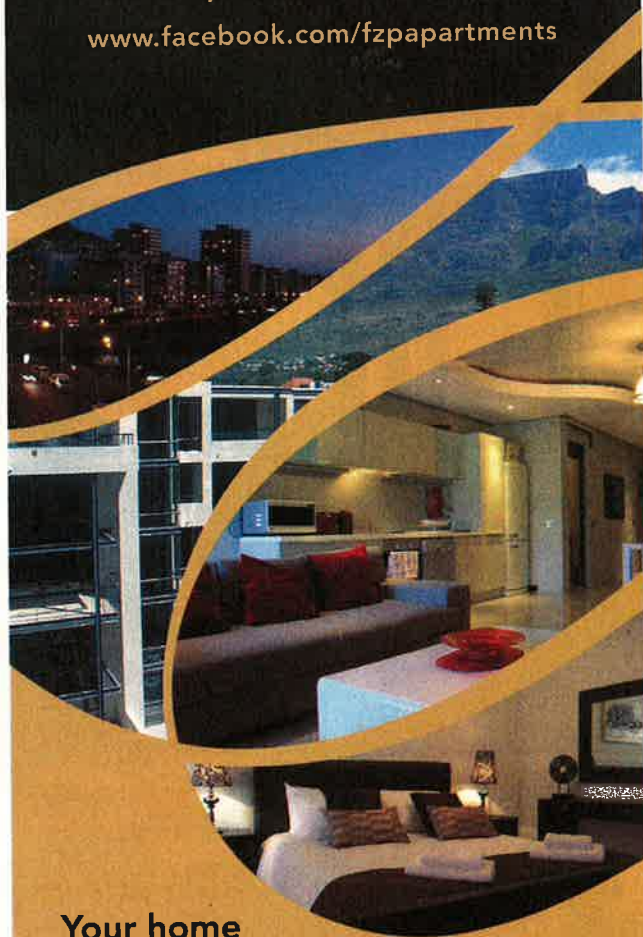
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