

Travel

TORONTO STAR

SECTION 1
SATURDAY
OCTOBER 15, 2011
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AFRICA



DREAMTIME PHOTO (ABOVE); STEVE ALLEN TRAVEL & WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY (BELOW)

A herd of African elephants, seen here drinking at a waterhole, and leopards, such as the adult female below, are among the wildlife in Botswana, home to a safari guide training school.

Are you game for safari school?

MARK SISSONS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

MASHATU RESERVE, BOTSWANA—It's growing dark and you're lost in the African bush with a Land Cruiser full of nervous guests.

The nocturnal predator shift is starting. What do you do?

If you're Alden Trollip you must not panic or you risk failing your mid-term exam. Just moments earlier, the 20-year-old from Johannesburg was tracking a black-backed jackal and confidently fielding questions from fellow students playing the part of safari clients.

But his practice game drive in eastern Bo-

tswana's Mashatu Reserve, 33,000 hectares of pristine wilderness bordering South Africa and Zimbabwe, has gone seriously off-course on this day.

Desperately scanning the dusty terrain with a hand-held spotlight for the faint fire tracks that lead back to base camp, Trollip inadvertently drives us into the middle of a herd of

grazing elephants that materialize in the dusk like a thicket of giants. One adult female trumpets her extreme displeasure as we inadvertently come between her and her panicky offspring.

"Chantelle? Chantelle? What do I do now?" whispers Trollip nervously as one mad mama makes to charge us.

"Just keep driving forward, slow and steady, and we'll be fine," instructor Chantelle Venter replies in a calm voice.

She is a 20-year safari industry veteran from South Africa.

SAFARI continued on T14



TRAVEL

Education — and then some

SAFARI from T1

Along with her partner, Brian Rode, a former South African Defense Forces wilderness survival specialist, Venter has mentored top guides in camps all over southern Africa — and encountered this scenario plenty of times.

During the next few months, Venter and Rode hope to instill enough knowledge into a dozen 20-something bush babies like Trollip to secure them internships at reputable game lodges in southern and eastern Africa.

Trollip and his fellow students, hailing from Africa, Europe and North America, have signed on to undergo a year of professional safari guide training conducted by Eco-Training, Africa's pioneer and leader of professional safari guide and nature training programs.

Established in 1993 with a mission to raise the standard of guiding in Africa, Eco-Training has access to nearly 140,000 hectares of true African wilderness areas in South Africa, Botswana and Kenya.

Field training ranges from seven-day wilderness survival, tracking and birding courses to the one-year professional field guide certification course. In sampling, a 14-day EcoQuest course gives participants a taste of a safari guide's daily experience. A 28-day Trails Guide course focuses on exploring the wilderness on foot and learning how to lead walks in dangerous game country. And a new 60-day field guide course offers adventurous travellers the opportunity to get a real taste of bush craft basic training without making a long-term commitment.

All courses are structured to maximize practical experience in the bush. Taught from modest, barebones unfenced tents called thatched huts, the focus is entirely on authentic working bush experiences rather than champagne sundowners and designer thread clothing.

Each day allows for hours spent in the field gaining in-depth knowledge about nature, ecology, conservation and wildlife on driving and walking safaris. Lectures and self-study round out the curriculum, which heavily emphasizes respectful interaction with the surrounding environment, an environmentally conscious approach that is at the core of Eco-Training's teaching philosophy.

Students are also expected to help with daily running of the unfenced camp, equipment and vehicles, just as a safari guide would in a commercial operation.

"If you want a career in the safari industry, or even just a unique adventure break, this is an incredible opportunity," says Eco-Training's Corne Schalkwyk as we sit around the campfire decompressing from our nocturnal elephant encounter.

"Our shorter courses give you practical experience in the bush, while our year-long courses allow you to become a safari guide, get into lodge management, or into different kinds of conservation efforts throughout Africa."

According to Schalkwyk, Eco-Training's courses don't just appeal to people hoping to become professional safari guides. Wildlife photographers, conservationists, students looking for a gap year or summer adventure, executives taking a career break, and travellers seeking a truly authentic and educational African bush experience also enlist. Applicants range anywhere from 18 to 60, and include everyone from bartenders to bankers. For some, like 34-year-old Karen Tison, this is their first visit to Africa.

"I'm learning so much, but about it there's so much to absorb it



Instructor Brian Rode, right, leads students on a walking safari, during which they learn to "interpret the bush."

can be heard," Tison says as we climb out of "Betsi" Camp Mashatu's battered old Land Cruiser. "It's also a bit scary because you're in the middle of nowhere in the wilderness among huge animals with nothing but your tent and a suitcase full of clothes."

Lying in my tent at 3 a.m. listening to the nocturnal cacophony of the

African bush — the guttural rumble of lions, hyenas breaking into diabolical laughter, baboons shrieking their warning cries — I have time to reflect on how scary and exhilarating it can feel living in an unfenced camp like Mashatu.

Especially when the spectral shape of a leopard passes by my tent. Heart racing, I dare not

breathe as the big cat pauses a few feet from the thin strip of mesh separating us.

As far as careers go, it doesn't get much wilder than being African safari guide, living on a big game reserve and taking strangers' lives in your hands every day. The basic requirement for entry into this growing industry, where well qualified

guides are in high demand as more and more African nations expand their tourism infrastructures, is an adventurous spirit.

You also need enough mental and physical toughness to spend years learning to master ecology and zoology, track game, handle a rifle, routinely put in 18-hour days working in safari camps, stay cool under pressure, and be okay with spending your working life in a part of the planet where you fall somewhere in the middle of the food chain. Looking feverishly sexy in crisp khaki shorts is a bonus.

"Ultimately, being a successful safari guide comes down to attitude. And the willingness to get down to it and do the job," explains Rode as we head down to the riverbank one evening for an impromptu astronomy lesson. "But if your passion is nature, it's all there."

Dominic de Sousa's passion is snakes — the 22-year-old student is a veritable David Attenborough when it comes to slippery serpents. A former life insurance salesman from Johannesburg with no previous experience living raw in the bush, de Sousa plans to use the safari industry-recognized certification he hopes to receive as a stepping stone toward a career in the industry.

"Most of us came here not knowing much about how our planet works," says de Sousa as he pores over flora and fauna textbooks by

Continued on next page

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Tour Presentation:
CHINA TOUR
Oct. 23 (Sun) 11:30am



MARK Sissons PHOTO FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Mashatu Reserve in southern Africa is a fitting setting for elephants. It has the largest population on privately owned land on the continent.

Continued from previous page

the flickering of a kerosene lamp in the mess tent. "Now we have this new understanding of these incredible animals all around us. Conserving their interconnected ecosystem has become a lot more important because they are now in our hearts." Across the table, Leigh Becker, 20, a former medical student from Pretoria and the only woman in the class, pauses from preparing her presentation on giraffes to chime in.

"When I was in Grade 5 we had to do these 'what I want to do when I grow up' speeches," she recalls. "I found mine recently and it was about wanting to be a safari guide. Reading it again made me decide that I really have to do this."

What better place to realize that dream than Mashatu Reserve, nicknamed "Land of the Giants" — its vast territory provides sanctuary to the largest population of elephants (about 700) on private land in Africa. Mashatu is also home to the eland (the world's largest antelope), the ostrich (the largest bird) and the kori bustard (the largest bird capable of flight).

Toss in leopard, cheetah, lion, hyena and more obscure species like aardwolf, bat-eared fox, African wild cat, honey badger and black-backed jackal and you have a predator-packed classroom.

Class begins the next morning at dawn. Half the students join Venter for game-drive assessments. The rest set out on a walking safari led by Rode. The hunting rifle casually slung over his shoulder could mean the difference between life and death.

"What is the gestation period of a spotted hyena?" Rode asks as we walk single file toward a distant sandstone outcrop from where we can survey the surrounding countryside for wildlife. "How much does an adult male lion weigh?" Over the next three hours, Rode leads us through scrub savannah and mopane forests toward the dry

riverbank that borders camp. At every turn, he shares his knowledge of this environment, which is also an ornithological paradise with more than 350 bird species.

"They still have a lot to learn," admits Rode over dinner that evening. "At this point, if I was running a lodge and any of them came looking for a job, I wouldn't employ them."

Eleven months from now, some of the students will embark upon their dream careers as junior guides at the safari lodges and camps

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING South African Airways (www.flysa.com) has daily non-stop flights to Johannesburg from New York and Washington. From Johannesburg it is a six-hour drive north to the Port Drift Border Crossing between South Africa and Botswana. Crossing is possible in four-wheel-drive vehicles across the Limpopo riverbed during the dry months, or via two-person cable car when the Limpopo is flowing. From there it is a two-hour drive to Mashatu Camp.

SLEEPING Mashatu Camp consists of two simple dome tents, each with two mattresses with pillows (two students per tent). There are shared bathroom facilities and a central communal area overlooking the dry riverbed. Students bring their own bedding. There are no mosquito nets at Mashatu and no electricity. Paraffin lamps are used for all lighting.

where they've been interning. A few will have dropped out and returned home, realizing they're unsuited to life in the wild.

Others, armed with the extraordinary skills and knowledge they have acquired, will return to their lives indelibly changed from their experience in the bush. And they will know first-hand that somewhere out in the eternal wilderness of Africa exists a life less ordinary.

Mark Sissons is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.

EcoTraining's African camps
South Africa Setai Camp is situated on the banks of the Setai River in the 33,000-hectare Setai Game Reserve to the west of the Kruger National Park. Karongwe Camp is situated on the banks of the Karongwe River in the 9,000-hectare Karongwe Game Reserve to the southwest of the Kruger National Park. Kruger Park Makuleke Camp is situated in the 24,000-hectare Makuleke concession in the far northern part of the Kruger National Park and the Limpopo Transfrontier Park.

Botswana Mashatu Camp is located in the "Land of Giants" in the Tuli reserve of Botswana, bordering South Africa. Tuli, which spans more than 25,000 hectares of wilderness, forms a key part of the proposed Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier

Conservation Area. It is an area of outstanding natural beauty with majestic rocks, diverse vegetation, abundant wildlife, a profusion of birds and a rich archeological heritage.

Kenya Lewa Camp is located in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, a private reserve in northeast Kenya near Mount Kenya National Park, Samburu and the Aberdares. **Rukinga Sanctuary** Camp Tsavo is situated in the centre of Rukinga Sanctuary, a 34,000-hectare area next to Tsavo East and West National Parks, which are managed by Wildlife Works for the benefit of wildlife, which includes a large variety of predators, including lions and one of the largest populations of elephants on private land in Kenya.

Web Surfing Visit the EcoTraining website at www.ecotraining.co.za.

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Fort Lauderdale \$22 <small>Travel Oct 29 - Nov 6/11</small> Ottawa <small>Travel Oct 29 - Nov 6/11</small> Amsterdam <small>Travel Oct 29 - Nov 6/11</small> Glasgow <small>Travel Oct 29 - Nov 6/11</small> Bahamas <small>Travel Nov 13 - Nov 20/11</small> Puerto Vallarta <small>Travel Nov 13 - Nov 20/11</small> Calgary <small>Travel Nov 13 - Nov 20/11</small> Costa Rica <small>Travel Nov 27 - Dec 4/11</small> Boston <small>Travel Nov 27 - Dec 4/11</small> New York <small>Travel Nov 27 - Dec 4/11</small> Las Vegas <small>Travel Nov 27 - Dec 4/11</small> Buenos Aires <small>Travel Nov 27 - Dec 4/11</small> Bangkok <small>Travel Nov 13 - Nov 20/11</small>	Puerto Plata 7 Nights 3.5-Star \$247 <small>Departs Nov 12/11. UPGRADE to the 5-Star Rio Bachata for \$45 per night.</small> Santa Lucia 7 Nights 4-Star \$267 <small>Departs Nov 12/11.</small> Samana 7 Nights 4-Star \$275 <small>Departs Nov 14/11.</small> Varadero 7 Nights 4-Star \$315 <small>Departs Nov 14/11.</small> Panama 7 Nights 4-Star \$375 <small>Departs Nov 14/11.</small> Riviera Nayarit 7 Nights 5-Star \$475 <small>Departs Oct 31/11.</small> Jamaica 7 Nights 4-Star \$497 <small>Departs Oct 21/11. UPGRADE to the 5-Star Rio Montego Bay for \$51 per night.</small> St. Lucia 7 Nights 4-Star \$768 <small>Departs Nov 14/11.</small>	Orlando Family Special Air + 7 Nights \$89* <small>Includes: World's Best Beachfront resort. Price per person based on family of 4. Departs Oct 30/11.</small> Daytona Beach Air + 7 Nights + Car \$360 <small>Includes: Beachfront resort. Price per person based on family of 4. Departs Oct 30/11.</small> Lake Buena Vista Air + 7 Nights + Car \$369 <small>Includes: Beachfront resort. Price per person based on family of 4. Departs Oct 30/11.</small> Orlando Long Stay Air + 21 Nights \$479 <small>Includes: Beachfront resort. Price per person based on family of 4. Departs Oct 30/11.</small> Miami Air Air + 4 Nights + Car \$59 <small>Includes: Beachfront resort. Price per person based on family of 4. Departs Oct 30/11.</small> Florida Keys Air + 4 Nights + Car \$59 <small>Includes: Beachfront resort. Price per person based on family of 4. Departs Oct 30/11.</small>	Mediterranean 7-Night Cruise \$399 <small>Includes: Cruise, Chateaufort roundtrip and visit Messina, Kusadasi, Athens and Crete. Sails Oct 30/11.</small> Canada & USA Niagara Falls Family Special 2 Nights \$54* <small>Includes: Cruise, Chateaufort roundtrip and visit Messina, Kusadasi, Athens and Crete. Sails Oct 30/11.</small> Montreal 3 Nights 4-Star \$179 <small>Includes: Cruise, Chateaufort roundtrip and visit Messina, Kusadasi, Athens and Crete. Sails Oct 30/11.</small> Blue Mountain 3 Nights 4-Star \$244 <small>Includes: Cruise, Chateaufort roundtrip and visit Messina, Kusadasi, Athens and Crete. Sails Oct 30/11.</small> Las Vegas Air 4 Nights \$335 <small>Includes: Cruise, Chateaufort roundtrip and visit Messina, Kusadasi, Athens and Crete. Sails Oct 30/11.</small>

LOWEST AIRFARE GUARANTEE