

AROUND THE OKAVANGO – PART 2 Text: Geoff Earnshaw Photography: The Earnshaws

A winding way

The Earnshaws spent their two-week July holiday circumnavigating the Okavango Delta. In the first part of the article, they travelled from Francistown through Maun, Moremi and Chobe to the Caprivi Strip. The story ended as they were headed for Tsodillo Hills

Day nine – Ngepi to Tsodillo Hills (200km)

As I mentioned at the end of the previous article, I had been to Tsodillo Hills before. But that, it must be added, was a long time ago.

In fact, the last time I was in the region, the only way to get to Tsodillo Hills was by using one of three small and sandy tracks. The camp – if one could call it that – consisted of a warden's hut, a long-drop toilet and a grass runway.

Today, much has changed. Firstly, the access road is better. It is smoother than it used to be, and travelling the 38km to the entrance gate took us about 45 minutes.

The camp itself had also been improved on. There is a small museum, decent camping sites under trees and ablution facilities. A few of the sites even offer access to electricity!

Despite these improvements, use of the campsite was still free, but this had its drawbacks. The additional facilities were in a pretty sad state. The ablution block's solar power wasn't working, and the sites themselves needed attention. Water supply is apparently erratic, though we had no problems.

Most annoyingly, though, a herd of cattle grazed in the campsite day and night. All the cows had bells around their necks, so getting some sleep wasn't easy!

Day ten – Tsodillo Hills walk

The area's designation as a World Heritage Site is due in large part to its San rock art.

Apparently there are about 4000 paintings scattered around 400 sites in the area. There are four guided trails, and we decided to spend the day on the Rhino Trail.

The walk can be completed in about two-



and-a-half hours, but thanks to our frequent photography stops, it took us more than three. We also asked our guide to make a brief detour so that we could view a rock painting known as the "Panel of the dancing penises", which amused him tremendously.

Overall, the walk was very rewarding. We saw the remains of ancient villages, an old rain-making site and an interesting cave shelter with evidence of Iron Age workings.

The highlight of the walk was the "Van der Post Panel" – a large rock-face that sported a multitude of paintings.

Day 11 – Tsodillo Hills to Maun (400km)

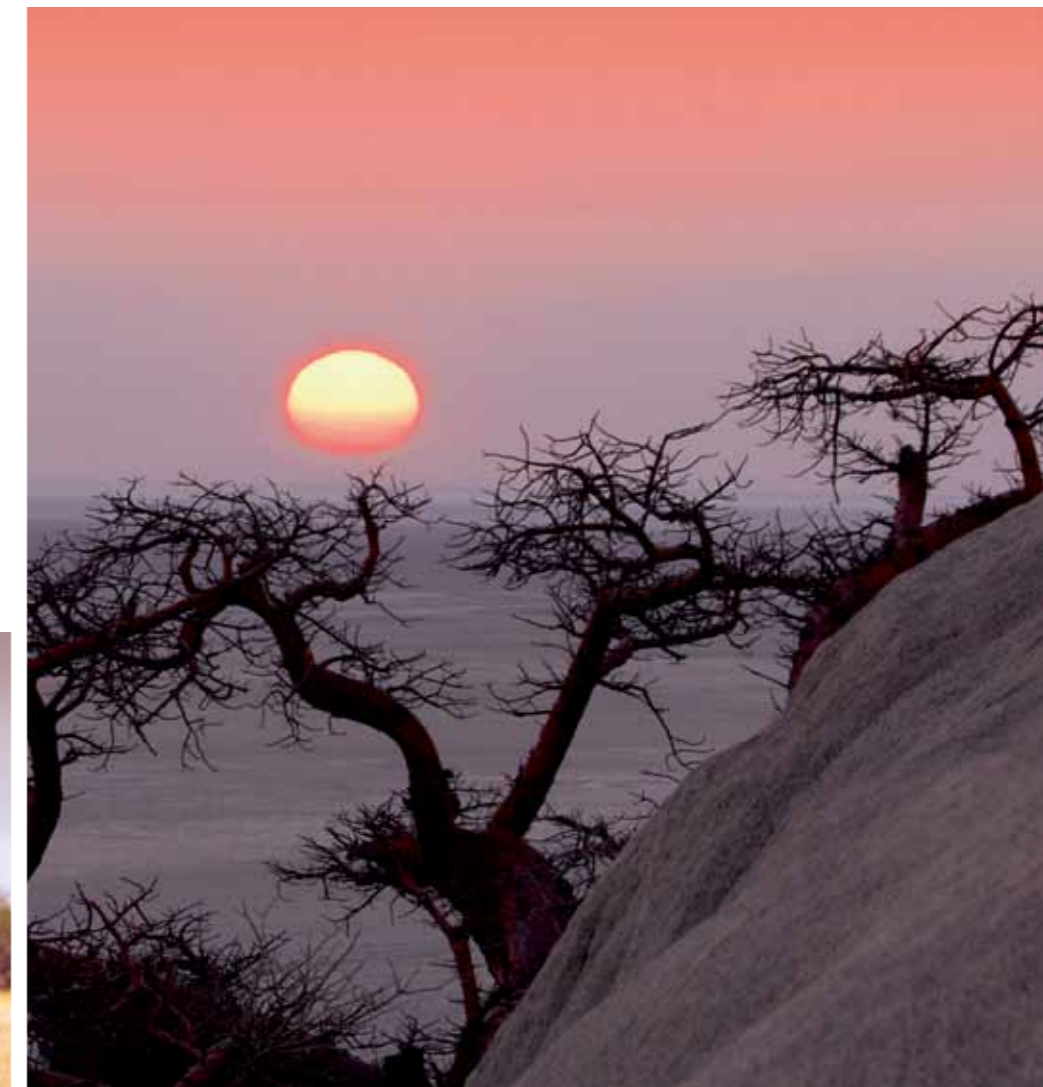
After breakfast, we retraced our steps to the main road and headed for Maun. The road was excellent, and we travelled the 400km in about four hours.

We filled up with fuel and provisions at Riley's Hotel, and then booked our campsite at Nxai Pan at the Xomae Group offices. We also paid our Nxai Pan entrance fees at the Parks reservation office (near the police station).

With all our administrative duties completed, we checked in at Audi Camp, where we had stayed earlier in the trip. This time, however, we opted for a large safari tent with comfortable beds and electricity for only P140 (R148) per person, including breakfast.

Day 12 – Maun to Nxai Pan (180km)

We left Audi Camp early to avoid rush hour in Maun and arrived at Nxai Pan early enough to do a morning game drive. Since we had already paid our camping and entrance fees, all we needed to do was sign in.



Main photo: Geoff exploring Baines Baobabs. The baobabs offer great opportunities for stunning photographs. Left: A group of Ostriches at Nxai Pan. Above: The sun rises over Kubu Island.

The early light was great for photography, so we decided to head for Baines Baobabs for a quick photo session. We travelled north on the only road, which sported very deep sand, until we reached the Baines turnoff.

We then turned east on a sandy, single-track road that continued for 12km. In the process, we crossed several small pans until the exceptional panoramic view of Baines Baobabs (made famous by traveller and artist Thomas Baines) appeared before us.

After this, we travelled to Nxai Pan's public campsite. Getting there required us to traverse 18km of challenging sand roads, but the campsite was well worth the effort. The site was beautiful and the ablutions were in excellent condition. We all agreed that this was the best campsite we had encountered on the trip.

It was quite early, so we decided to try our luck at a nearby watering hole. No animals came to drink, but we did spot a male lion under a tree. He was probably also waiting for unsuspecting animals to visit the water hole!

Back at camp, a large elephant was waiting for us. It grazed around our site during the evening, and once we went to bed, inspected our camp thoroughly.

Day 13 – Nxai Pan to Lekhubu Island (260km)

On our way out of Nxai Pan, we saw a decent amount of wildlife. In addition to about 20 gemsbok just begging to be photographed, we spotted ostriches, wildebeest and springboks.

Once we reached the main gate, we turned left and headed for Gweta. On a previous trip to Lekhubu, I had taken the more popular route from Gweta to the Gumba veterinary gate via Xanxara village and the Ntwetwe Pan. To widen our knowledge of the region, however, we decided to carry on towards Nata, and then turn south. Our plan was to get to Lekhubu via Sexara, Thabatshukudu and the Tswagong veterinary gate.

There are plenty of ill-defined roads along this route, so unless you know the area pretty well, I wouldn't recommend it. You

would need a GPS and a compass.

By navigating carefully and keeping our sights on the Tswagong gate, we managed to get to the spot where the main route from Gweta joined our route. And once this happened, reaching Lekhubu was easy.

The scenery at the Lekhubu Pan was awesome, so I dropped off the family to take pictures, and headed for Lekhubu's little office to secure a campsite.

Contrary to rumours that the local community had taken over the campsite, Lekhubu was in a great state. It was well organised, reasonably priced and clearly very popular.

Day 14 – Lekhubu to Martinsdrif (430km)

Like Tsodillo Hills, Lekhubu is steeped in history. Over the years, tools, bones, pottery pieces and beads have been found, dating back to the Stone Age. The place is dotted with cairns – about 400 in total. The reason for their existence is unclear, though some scholars believe they were constructed during initiation ceremonies.



Left: Traversing a typical road at Nxai Pan. Top: The Earnshaw family poses for a picture. Above: The Van Der Post Panel of ancient drawings at Tsodillo Hills is very impressive.

Above: The Earnshaws weren't very happy with the campsite at Tsodillo Hills. The solar heating didn't work and the ablution facilities needed attention. A herd of cattle also grazed in the campsite and kept them up all night!

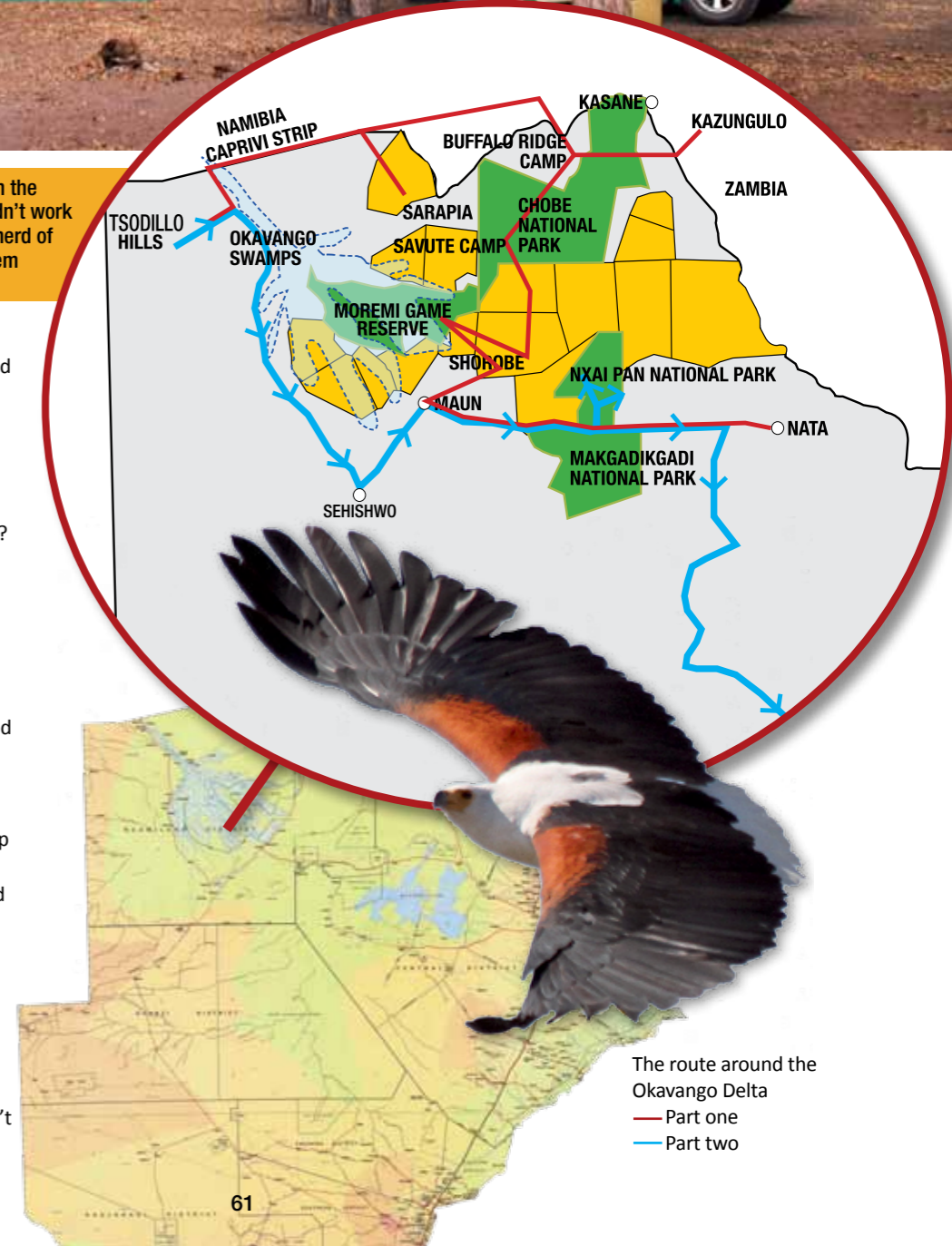
After we'd had a good look at Lekhubu's sites, it was time to hit the road. We travelled through Mmatshumo, Serowe and Palapye, until we reached Martinsdrif and the KwaNokeng campsite. Sadly, our trip was at an end. The following morning we would be heading back to Johannesburg.

So had the whirlwind trip been rewarding? Absolutely! Some overlanders would probably find that circumnavigating the Okavango in two weeks is too much of a rush, but for us the pace was perfect. We were always on the move and things never got boring.

Botswana also impressed us as an overland destination. We had heard that it had become ridiculously expensive, but this isn't necessarily true. It depends on where you go, but we found it affordable. The entire trip (excluding fuel) cost us R8000 per person.

We were also surprised by the widespread availability of fuel and supplies. If you plan on doing a similar trip, travel with as few supplies as possible and simply buy items along the way. You will find that South African rands and credit cards are widely accepted.

So if you have a two-week holiday coming up, head for Botswana's Okavango. You won't be disappointed! 🍷



The route around the Okavango Delta
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 — Part two