

Elephants under my bed

A tall tale?

Hardly.

This is exactly what happened at Abu camp in Botswana's Okavango Delta: I spent a night in a bed on top of a family of elephants.

Let me explain.

We were having cocktails on an elevated platform above the camp where Abu accommodates its herd of habituated elephants.

"So why the bed," I asked. "Is it for guests who get so wasted on Amaroela that they cannot make it down the steps?"

"No," our hostess Nina explained, "this is for anyone who wants to spend a night with the elephants instead of sleeping back at the lodge."

"I'm in," I said, rather impulsively.

After dinner I was escorted to my luxury tent to collect my PJs and toiletries and returned to the elephant camp.

"We'll wake you at six in the morning at which time you will be having your next elephant back ride. Not far to go. They are right below," my guide Jacko explained as he waved goodbye from below.

Pictures by the author

There was the occasional rumbling noise as the elephants communicated among themselves. (Were they gossiping about me?). But this was much less intrusive than the snorers that I have had to endure during fly camping expeditions in the past.

Imagine yourself on a heavenly soft bed with a flimsy mosquito net above and around you, sleeping on top of elephants and staring into a brightly lit star-studded sky and you will know why this experience defies description. The folks at Abu dubbed this unusual abode the "Star Bed."

Established twenty years ago on a half million acre concession in the Okavango Delta, Abu Camp has a family of "in-house" elephants that graze freely during daytime with the wild elephants in the area. Offspring like the recently-born rambunctious Verona are actually fathered by wild bulls in musth that mate with these habituated females when they are in estrus. In the elephant world deadbeat Dads are the norm. Males are kicked out of the matriach-run breeding herd when they reach puberty to join bachelor groups or go it alone only to visit with the females when ready to breed.



The story behind Abu Camp is as fascinating as the experience itself. Founder Randall Moore hails from Oregon in the United States. A self-proclaimed drifter and draft-dodger his life got in gear when a friend introduced him to animal training. This led to his fascination with elephants. He soon proved himself to be a natural in handling these animals. After a spell in Kenya where he introduced elephant-back riding and was eventually ordered to remove his animals because two of them were from “apartheid” South Africa, he was asked by a film producer to find trained elephants to feature in a story set in the Southern Cape Knysna forest. He returned from the United States to South Africa with two bulls, Benny and Abu—both Kruger National Park orphans that were living confined and constrained lives in Texan safari parks—and a Ugandan-born cow, Cathy, then in captivity in Canada.

Abu was an accomplished actor. After starring with Clint Eastwood in *White Hunter Black Heart* he featured in numerous feature films, documentaries and television commercials, earning the nickname “One-Take Abu” for his ability to get it right the first time. In the South African film, *Circles in the Forest*, Abu saves the life of Saul Barnard, who finds himself at odds with other culling-obsessed wood-cutters.

Moore had planned to stay in the Knysna forest with his elephants after the completion of their assignment. However, when the local authorities turned him down he sought and got permission to settle them in Botswana at what became today’s Abu Camp.

The original Abu died several years ago at the age of forty-four but the name lives on not only in the camp’s designation but a playful young bull, Abu Jr, born in 2006. Cathy, now fifty-one, is still there and has assumed the role of matriarch. Having had the privilege to go on two rides with her I can understand why they refer to her as “the limousine.” Very comfortable and smooth riding.

While we were cruising along I marvelled at the excellence of game viewing from elephant back as I observed giraffes, wildebeest, warthogs and a number of other animals from this elevated lookout—all looking relaxed and unafraid. The other guests who opted to “walk with the elephants” were totally oblivious to this wildlife obscured by the thicket. And then there were the wild elephants that no one saw but heard in the distance communicating with Cathy and her crew. I could actually feel the vibration underneath me as she



answered the calls from the wild. Frank, my mahout or elephant handler, reminded me that what had most likely preceded this “conversation” would have been inaudible to our human ears. The experts claim that discoveries have showed elephants can communicate over long distances by producing a sub-sonic rumble that can travel for miles over the ground faster than sound through air. Other elephants receive the messages through the sensitive skin on their feet and trunks.

Today Abu Camp is under Wilderness Safaris management. “Abu is obviously devoted to the pursuit of bush luxury, great style, service, comfort, and food,” *New York Times* travel writer David Story observed. “And while it embraces as many up-to-date eco-green initiatives as possible, all this is merely a backdrop to the real reason for coming: sharing a few days of your life with some of the most wonderful creatures on earth.”

In the process of providing ultimate bush chic to guests the original purpose has not been lost, namely, to give guests the opportunity to interact with these fascinating creatures. Serious research is also ongoing as I discovered when I had the privilege to be joined at my dinner table by one of the foremost experts, Prof. Rudi van Aarde of Pretoria University.

As a compassionate opponent of culling he actually convinced the authorities at Kruger National Park to cease and desist. He maintains that we are too often misguided in our efforts to try and manage nature.

“Personal opinion, hearsay, anecdotes and individual interpretations of research findings all too often dominate heated debates on elephant management,” he argues in his very informative publication, *Elephants: Facts and Fables*. “General statements such as ‘there are too many elephants’, or that ‘elephants destroy biodiversity’, motivate calls for management. Media reports often boost such calls and often describe the ‘elephant problem’ in terms of numbers and the rates at which numbers change over time.”

At the turn of the 20th century, there were a few million African elephants and about 100,000 Asian elephants. Today, the African population is estimated



A FEW FACTS

- **Two African elephant species are recognized: the larger more widespread savanna elephant (*L. africana*), described in this article, and the smaller West African forest elephant (*L. cyclotis*).**
- **At the turn of the 20th Century there were a few million African elephants and about 100,000 Asian elephants. Today, there are an estimated 450,000 - 700,000 African elephants and between 35,000 - 40,000 wild Asian elephants.**
- **Male African savannah elephants grow up to 25 feet long, stand up to 11 feet tall and weigh up to 14,000 pounds. They are usually larger than females.**
- **The average life span of an African savanna elephant in the wild is 60 years.**
- **Females and young males live in cohesive herds of about ten related adults and their offspring. The matriarch, normally the oldest and largest female, sets the pace of the group's activities. Males leave herds at puberty, around their 13th year, and live alone or in bachelor groups.**
- **Mating is usually during the rainy season and gestation takes 22 months resulting usually in one calf weighing between 200-250 lbs at birth.**
- **Before young cows have their own calves they will take care of other animals in the herd. Known as “all mothers” they will rush to protect or assist any calf in trouble. Orphans will be adopted.**
- **Elephants consume about 5% of their body weight (on average 300 to 450 pounds) and drink 30-50 gallons of water per day.**

TRUNK CALLS

Of all the elephant's specialized features, the muscular trunk is perhaps the most extraordinary. It serves as a nose, hand, extra foot, signaling device and tool for gathering food, siphoning water, dusting, and digging. Among their many uses, elephants' trunks sometimes serve as snorkels, allowing submerged swimming elephants to breathe as they cross deep rivers or lakes. At birth, a calf's trunk has no muscle tone, therefore it will suckle through its mouth. It takes several months for a calf to gain full control of its trunk. Some have likened the tendency of baby elephants to suck the tip of their trunk to thumb-sucking in human infants.



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Man has found many ways to use and abuse the world's largest land animal. In 218 B.C. Hannibal used elephants to cross the Alps in his famous invasion of the Roman Republic. These animals have been used to cultivate land, haul heavy loads, perform in circuses and, sadly, slaughtered in large numbers for their ivory. The slaughter continues despite efforts to contain and combat poaching.

Abu is not the only place where elephant-back rides are offered in Africa. For those who visit Victoria Falls there is the option of an hour-long ride along the Zambezi Elephant Trails in Zambia's Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. I have done that as well and can attest to the professionalism of this venture and, above all, the kindness with which these animals are handled by their trainers.

While traversing the shallow side of the Zambezi River during this ride I was thinking about the description of these creatures by the man who not only established Abu but spawned elephant-back riding in Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa as well.

"I have been let down time and again by humans," Randall Moore noted. "But very rarely by an elephant."

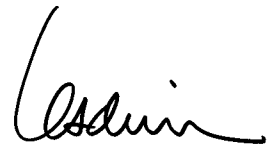
Our Creator in His wisdom has made the largest land creature into one of the kindest and the gentlest. Pity that post-Adam and Eve too many *home sapiens* turned out to be the opposite.

So what do we do to create a greater awareness for the need to preserve and protect the gentle giants? Going for a ride on the habituated ones and observing their wild relatives in their natural habitat are ways of getting involved.

If it is your desire to do so I stand ready to assist.

Let me assure you this will be an unforgettable experience regardless of whether you end up sleeping with them, riding along or simply observing them in the wild.

Please feel free to visit our website or to contact me by e-mail if you need further information.



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