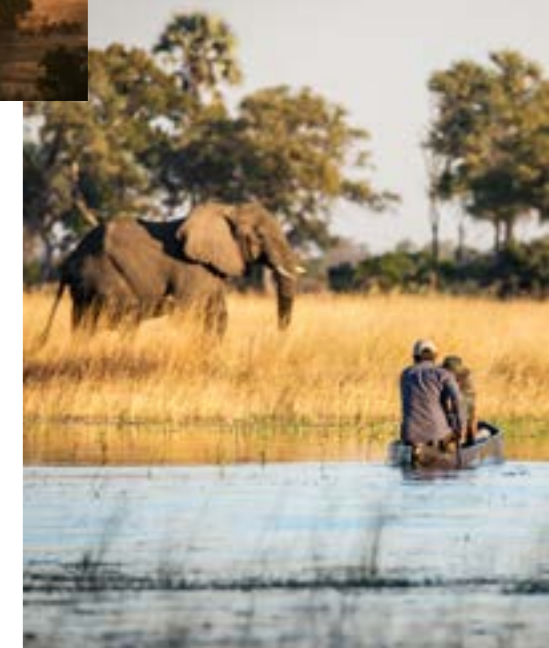




From far left: helicopter trip in the Okavango Delta; evening light there; Kweene Trails camp; watery expanse nearby; watching the sun set; aerial view of the delta; campfire; wildlife spotting from a canoe



# BRAGGING RIGHTS

ANDREW MCCARTHY TAKES HIS NINE-YEAR-OLD CAMPING IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA

“THERE.” THE WHISPER IS URGENT. The Land Cruiser stops. “What?” asks Rowan, looking up from his manga comic. “Lion,” says our guide Will Jones, his tone still hushed, pointing into the yellow grass ahead. “Where?” Rowan shouts. “Shhh,” says everyone in the vehicle, in unison.

A large male emerges from the waist-high grass with languid purpose and crosses our path on the sandy track we’ve been bouncing over – he’s no more than 30 feet in front of us. A large open wound is visible on his right flank. We’re silent as he passes. When the cat slinks back into the grass my nine-year-old turns to me, a wide grin on his face. “Bragging rights,” he says.

I’ve brought Rowan to the Okavango Delta in northwest Botswana in southern Africa to see exactly this – as well as whatever else the bush might offer up – entrusting this mission to Jones and his Journeys by Design, a curator of bespoke African adventures. I’ve asked Jones to get us as far off the beaten path as one might reasonably take a nine-year-old city slicker who’s never stepped foot on this continent before. So rather than stay in one of the posh permanent camps that Botswana is famous for, Jones has brought us to Kweene Trails, a mobile, seasonal camp in a remote corner of the delta on a private concession that can handle 10 visitors, but hosts only one group at a time. We see no sign of other human life during our stay. This is highly supervised low safari in action, led by head guide Ace Gabanakitso and Kweene cofounder Botswana native Simon Byron.

“The privilege here is in the space, and the personalised experience,” Jones tells me over sundowners under a leadwood tree while a bull

elephant makes his way to a nearby seep for an evening drink. The air is clean with the smell of wild sage as two dozen baboons chase over the floodplain. A black-and-white fish eagle alights from the tree above while the orange sun drips toward the hazy horizon. Rowan perches on a large outcrop sipping a normally forbidden Coke. He looks up at the twisting funnel above him. “What’s this chimney thing?” he asks. “That’s a termite mound you’re on,” replies Byron. Rowan jumps up. “You know, I love nature, but this might be a little too much nature for me,” he says.

Later that night we devour a succulent fillet steak cooked over an open fire as Byron points out the Southern Cross in a star-spangled sky. When we zip into our fly tents, Rowan sums up his day. “This camp is crazy. This Africa is crazy.”

The next morning, the aroma of coffee fills the predawn while two helicopters sit in the grass nearby. At first light we’re racing low over the Okavango. It’s just at the beginning of the wet season, the annual flood hasn’t reached this area yet, but within weeks this golden-green savannah will be threaded with rivers and lakes, rewriting the landscape for several months. From above we see a troop of giraffes casting improbably long silhouettes. “Look at their neck shadows,” says Rowan over the scratchy helicopter intercom. “Crazy.” Coming upon wildlife in the vehicle is “super-cool”; spotting a herd of elephants from above is “insane”.

Late afternoon has us following Byron on foot along a game trail, a long rifle slung over his shoulder. The rewards here are more subtle:

a fresh leopard print, a porcupine’s quill. A lone ostrich turns its head to watch us pass, then a herd of Cape buffalo, backlit by the late-day sun, turns heel upon detecting us, kicking up dust that shimmers like diamonds in the dying light.

Rowan turns to Byron, “Can I hold your gun?” “Probably not a great idea,” Byron replies. Rowan shakes his head. “I didn’t think so.”

The days fall into an easy pattern of early morning and late afternoon game drives. Chess matches and boules tournaments fill the quiet times when the heat is too intense. Sundowners at a different pristine spot each day announce the evenings.

## A HERD OF CAPE BUFFALO, BACKLIT BY THE LATE-DAY SUN, TURNS HEEL UPON DETECTING US, KICKING UP DUST THAT SHIMMERS LIKE DIAMONDS IN THE DYING LIGHT

One morning we’re tracking a leopard. The air is suddenly alive with screeching. “That’s a distress call,” Byron tells us. “The monkeys are alerting everyone that a predator is near.” He turns the Land Cruiser in their direction. Creeping through bush so dense no vehicle was made to traverse, we’re all silent, scanning.

“Leopard,” Jones whispers and points. The spine of the spotted animal is slinking through long grass. The cat is difficult to detect, but in time we all see him, except Rowan. Disappointed, my son slumps back as the animal vanishes. Byron takes up the challenge. I become distracted by a nearby mother elephant and her calf. “Look at them, Rowie.” “We’re tracking a leopard, Dad. Come on, focus.” I’ve given

up hope and Rowan is doing his best to shake the disappointment. Then comes the whisper, “There.” And gliding through dense bush, first one leopard and then a second, make their way. “Yes,” Rowan pumps his fist. “Bragging rights.” He climbs over the seats to high-five Byron.

On our last evening Rowan is interested to see if we can find the wounded lion again. He’s not far from where we first encountered him crossing the road, asleep in the shade. We park nearby and sit. The heat of the day loses its edge. The sun begins to sink. The lion wakes, yawns, and eyes us with indifferent interest. An elephant emerges from the nearby trees and glides the way elephants do, moving in what appears

to be slow motion, yet covering huge tracts of land quickly. The sun drops and night begins to come on. The lion watches us watching him. In the gloaming he rises and stretches. “He’s ready to hunt,” Byron whispers. The lion takes a few steps toward us, and I pull Rowan close. It’s almost too dark to see.

The shadow of the cat in the night veers off and strides through the long grass and we track him until blackness and bush become one. “Bragging rights?” I ask my son. “Way past bragging rights, Dad.” [Africa specialist Journeys by Design curates private family adventures and safaris. A seven-night trip to Kweene Trails in the Okavango Delta starts from £10,860 per person; \[journeysbydesign.com\]\(#\)](#)

PHOTOGRAPHS: KYLE DE NOBREGA; MELANIE VAN ZYL