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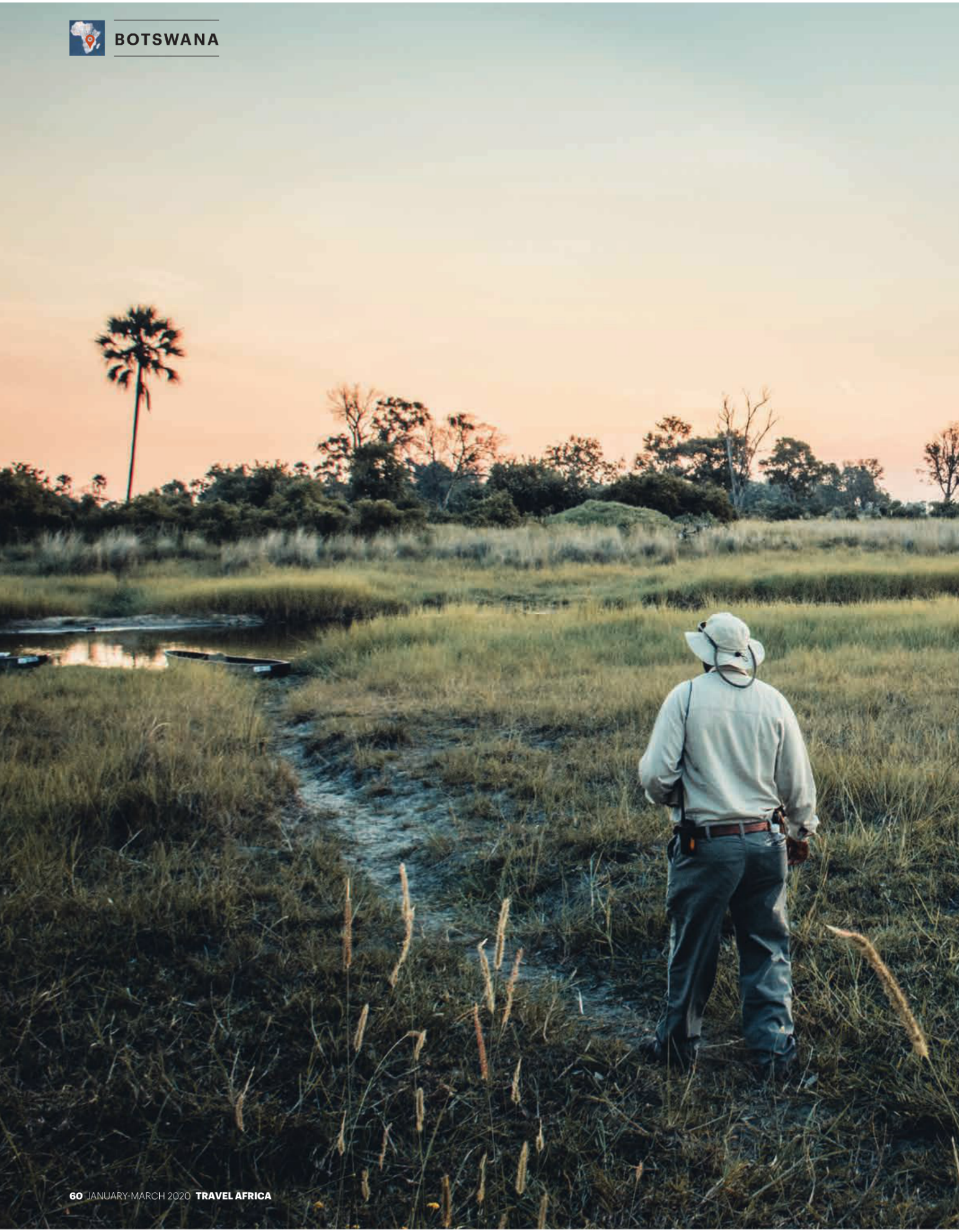
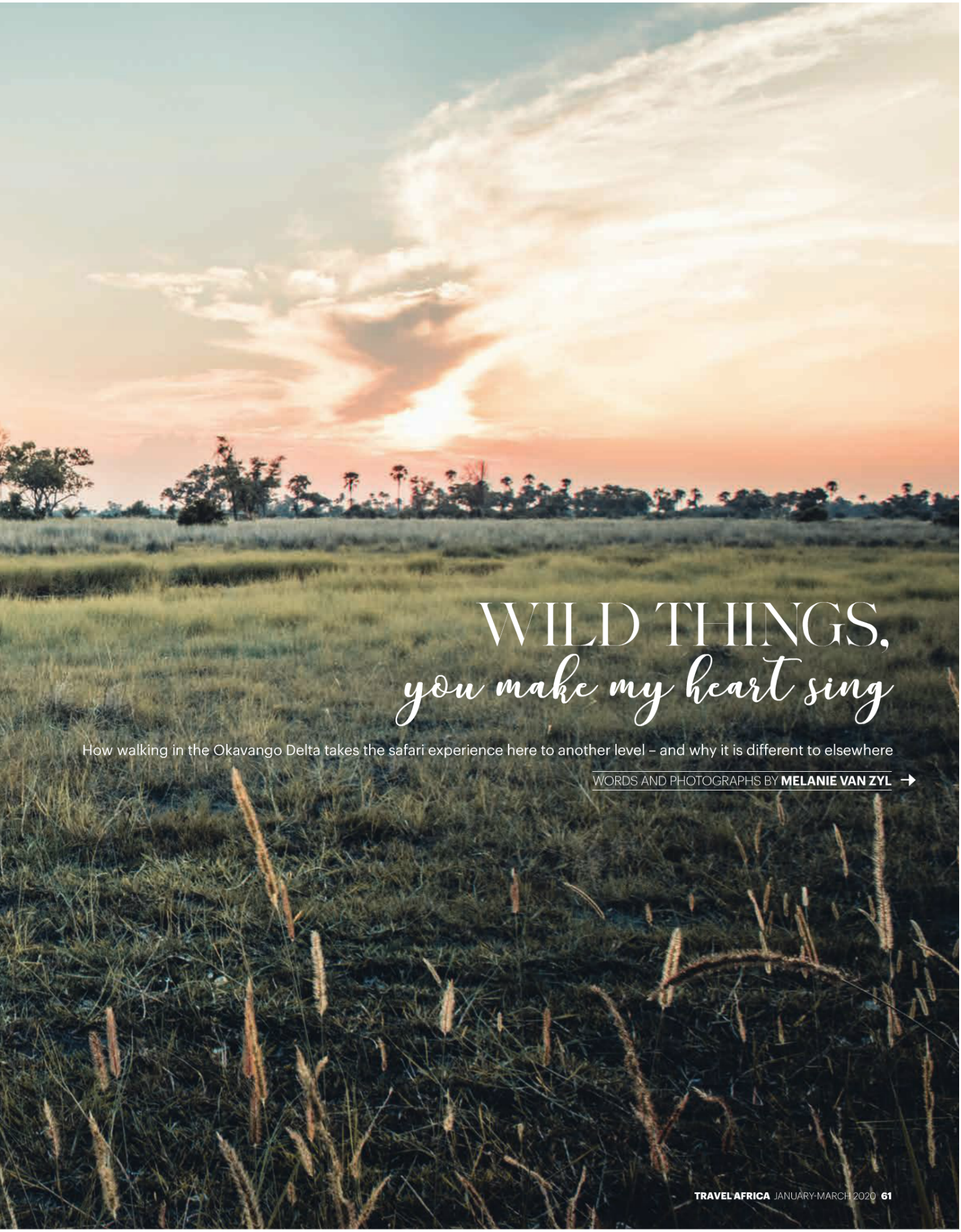




WILD THINGS, *you make my heart sing*

How walking in the Okavango Delta takes the safari experience here to another level – and why it is different to elsewhere

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MELANIE VAN ZYL** →

Neither Amos or the backup trails guide, Jacob Kesotegile, carried a weapon, and it changed the whole experience for me

"Lion tracks", Amos Disho murmured. My walking guide pointed to a feline pair of pad marks that sat crisply in Botswana's Kalahari sand. Insects had yet to crisscross the pawprint and no botanical debris littered the indent. All signs indicated the tracks were fresh as the morning dew that clung to my trousers. "Do you mind if we follow them?" Amos asked.

I shook my head (nervously, I admit) and we set off in pursuit. Watching my own feet, I made sure to follow Amos' footsteps exactly to mitigate any undesirable crunching or branch snapping – just as he'd briefed us at the start of our walking safari in the Okavango Delta. "Stay in single file and remain silent. Keep behind me at all times and watch for my hand signals. If I stop, you stop", he had advised on our sunrise departure.

We were tracking through a particularly dense tangle of young palms and jackalberry forest and my adrenaline had shot to heart-fluttering heights. What if we did come across that lion? On foot, to boot. Nothing heightens human ineptitude out in the wild more acutely than knowing there's a predator nearby. All five senses on high alert, a constant mantra of "what was that?" passed like a news ticker strip through my brain at any utterance. At one point, I realised I'd even stopped breathing.

It was at that moment that an emerald-spotted wood dove burst from the undergrowth in a cacophony of crispy leaf matter. Convinced we were done for, I found myself frozen to the sand. Amos, on the other hand, barely flinched. He calmly identified the culprit and we kept moving.

Born along the northern fringe of the Okavango Delta in a village named Betsha, Amos has been trails guide at Moremi Crossing for over a decade. The lodge sits on the boundary of Chief's Island in Moremi Game Reserve, a park covering one third of the sprawling UNESCO World Heritage Site. Proclaimed in 1963, residents named this cherished reserve after the late Chief Moremi III's wife, Mma Moremi. Once Moremi's sole hunting preserve, Chief's Island is the largest in the Okavango Delta (roughly 15km wide and 70km long). That's where we discovered the lion tracks.

I've walked through several wild wonderlands in southern Africa, dodged hippos along the Olifants River in Kruger National Park, stumbled over honey badgers in Madikwe Game Reserve, plodded with pachyderms in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and tracked cheetah in the Karoo. What made this walking safari unusual, however, was the fact that my Motswana guide did not carry a rifle.

Guns aren't permitted inside Moremi Game Reserve, even by accredited guides. Neither Amos or the backup trails guide (there are always two on any given walking safari here), Jacob Kesotegile, carried a weapon, and it changed the whole experience for me.

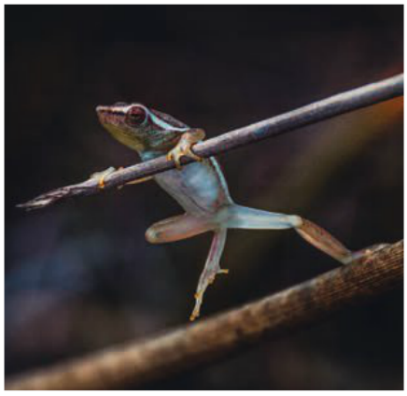
There's an adage that prevention is better than cure. Still, I've walked into situations with experienced professional field guides who have ventured too far inside a creature's fight-or-flight zone. Too many rely on the 'security' of carrying a rifle. In my experience, safari bravado persists in the guiding world, and a gun can significantly exacerbate the machismo of being authorised to lead others through the wilderness.

Thanks to the belief (and, granted, specialised training) that you can always shoot an animal if things go awry, sometimes safari-goers get too close. Did you know, for example, that the criterion for guiding in Zimbabwe is the same as the qualification for professional hunter?

This might be comforting to some, but without this weaponised 'security' (although noise-makers or bangers are kept on hand as a deterrent) I found Amos and Jacob exhibited a profound respect for the wild. They remained mindful of the spatial boundaries that might agitate wildlife and →

Opposite, top: Guiding light. Amos Disho took advantage of termite mounds to gain perspective over the otherwise flat landscape

Opposite, bottom: One of the advantages of walking through the bush is the opportunity to spend longer watching the animals you encounter than you might otherwise; and to take the time to discover, admire and learn about the smaller joys that you wouldn't see from a vehicle



navigated the Delta without disrupting the natural rhythms of the animal world.

One morning (before our lion-tracking adventure) the rustle of dry riverbed reeds sent our walking party into a hush. The enormous bruise-purple rear of a hippopotamus had emerged across our route. Caught between the water and the herbivore, Amos guided us carefully behind a termite mound (after all, hippos cannot jump) so it could return to the safety of its hydrous home.

The creature took its time, but there was plenty of entertainment to wile away the wait. Without the noise of a vehicle engine, the deep rumbles of Southern ground hornbills reached us over the plain and, in the branches above, Swallow-tailed bee-eaters snapped their buggy breakfast from mid-air with an audible clack.

We continued our walk, roaming like cheetahs between lofty termite mounds to gain perspective over the otherwise flat landscape. A breeding herd of elephants to the west – best to give them a berth, Amos and Jacob agreed – and loping giraffe in the east. Making our way towards the latter, we swished through bristle broom grass that emitted clouds of seed dust in the early honey of sunrise. The giraffe stood tall, silhouetted like the palms that line the Okavango's horizon.

We swished through bristle broom grass that emitted clouds of seed dust in the early honey of sunrise. The giraffe stood tall, silhouetted like the palms that line the Okavango's horizon

"The Batswana use the young shoots of the fan palm tree to make baskets", Amos stopped to inform us. "First, the ladies boil them to get rid of tannins and poisons. The small leaves are easier to weave and rip into smaller pieces. Then, they are laid out to dry and woven together. This plant is not indigenous to our country. It originally came from the Congo and made its way here to Botswana via waterways and elephants".

Amos revealed how palms tend to grow in a straight line, shadowing an elephant's path after dropping its seed-rich dung on the move. This rite of passage – a pachyderm passing, if you will – is essential to the tree's successful germination. We saw several examples up close and caught a whiff of that unmistakable elephant aroma.

On another occasion I stopped Amos to enquire after an unfamiliar smell. The pungent, slightly rotten scent turned out to be from the fever-berry tree, but while explaining this Amos spotted a python centimetres from Jacob's boots. Unlike the dove debacle, this time I hopped away in a hurry.

The moment illustrated what I loved most about on-foot animal encounters. Walking transforms the safari into a sensory experience. Although technically active, bush walks tend to be more relaxed because there is no rush from one Big Five sighting to another. (The flat terrain of the Okavango Delta is also very forgiving on lower fitness levels.) Leaving the confines of a vehicle, you're forced to slow down. And that's when you start to treasure creation – even if that is a smelly python.

In light of the recent removal of the hunting ban in Botswana, a safari that's utterly free of rifles serves as solace. Walking affords an extraordinary one-on-one encounter with the wild on nature's terms – and isn't that what a safari should be all about?