

Tuli's guarantee

The renowned elephants of the Northern Tuli Game Reserve had long been calling to **Marcus Leach**. Yet, when he finally arrived, there was something else hiding in its midst that captured his attention.

The roofless and battered Toyota lurched forward before coming to a sudden and unexpected stop as my guide Fish slammed on the brakes, almost catapulting me over the dashboard and out onto the dusty riverbed. A quick grind of the gears and my backside was once again on the move, this time sliding to the seat's edge as we reversed. Pinned back into the seat with our second swift stop, I sat in silence as Fish studied the baked ground directly next to him. "There," he said, pointing at what appeared to be nothing in particular. "Lion's urine, and a print. It's fresh, we're close now."

I had come to the 72,000ha Northern Tuli Game Reserve in the far eastern corner of Botswana to follow elephants, but the news of newly born lion cubs in the area had unexpectedly changed the focus of my visit. Fish, whose hard wiry body and weathered face belied his gentle nature, had put his twenty-eight years experience as a ranger on the line with a promise, that in truth, he was not guaranteed to keep. "Before you leave you will see the lions, I promise." That was three days ago, and with still no sign of the evasive lion family, time was running out.

Within the reserve, swathes of trees stand guard along the meandering river banks, vast stretches of savannah are punctuated by acacia and gnarled Baobabs, and boulders lay strewn sporadically as if thrown by petulant gods. The grandeur of scale leaves

you feeling wholly insignificant, yet the landscape envelops you in its warm grasp, coaxing you in with a unique feeling that you are a part of the picture, and not on the edge looking in.

The gravel crunched under the tyres as Fish and I set out that morning onto the vast expanses of the reserve's grassy plains, which stretched endlessly into the distant orange-tinged horizon. A crisp early morning wind licked my face with its icy tongue, and the shrill chatter of birds punctuated the soft hum of the engine. A pair of impala nuzzled each other nearby, while a family of hungry warthogs hunkered down on their haunches, chomping excitedly on the abundance of lush green grass. Ahead the sun began its lazy arc towards its throne high in the sky, all the while Fish's beady eyes scanned the land for evidence of lions.

A lone red-billed hornbill flitted along beside the truck, lazily surfing the thermals, chirping away oblivious to the world around. Fish wore an expression of hope on his face, hope that we would locate the lions before the heat of the day sucked all life out of the air, rendering any activity other than sleep on their behalf as useless. A few zebra grazed nervously, ears pricked, alert to the slightest movement or sound that could signal impending danger. The noise of the truck caused momentary alarm before they returned to eating, leaving us to pass and penetrate further into the wilderness.

Fish cut the engine and let the truck roll to a >



Marcus Leach is a freelance travel writer based in London. Having travelled throughout Africa over the past two years, he has developed a passion for the continent and for seeing what lies off the beaten track.



DAVE SOUTHWOOD

Plan your trip

Getting there

The Northern Tuli Game Reserve is a two-hour drive from Polokwane, South Africa, which is connected to Johannesburg with regular flights by Airlink (www.saairlink.co.za). Light aircraft can also be chartered to bring guests directly into the reserve, landing at the Limpopo Valley Airfield. By road from Johannesburg, it's a 500km drive, which takes about five hours. It is a similar length's drive from Gaborone.

When to visit

March to October, when the skies are at their driest, is a great time to visit the Northern Tuli Game Reserve. If you don't mind getting a bit wet, the birding is phenomenal between November and February.

Visas

Visas to visit Botswana and South Africa are not required by citizens of most western European countries,

USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand for stays of up to 30 days. For drivers from South Africa, the Botswana border facilities at Pont Drift are open daily from 8am to 4pm.

Accommodation options

Tuli Safari Lodge (www.tulilodge.com) Located along the Limpopo River on the reserve's south, this lodge offers something for all budgets: a top-end lodge, self-catering bush camps and camping facilities.

Nitani Safari Lodge (www.nitani.co.za) Five lavish suites, complete with a pillow library to ensure you get a good night's sleep.

Mashatu (www.mashatu.com) Its main camp has 14 luxury suites, while its tented camp nearby has eight comfortable tents.

Find out more

Northern Tuli Game Reserve (www.notugare.com)



Above: Lush it is not, but beautiful it most certainly is

Below: Just one of the species that is raising the Tuli region's profile



TULI SAFARI LODGE

A bead of sweat escaped his hat and trickled down the side of his face. His eyes flicked back and forth as we traversed the parched river

▷ standstill in front of a clutch of Mashatu trees, their shaggy branches drooping heavily to the arid floor. The ground beneath us began to vibrate softly as a low guttural rumble reverberated up through the truck. "Elephants," Fish softly informed me at the exact moment the branches rustled and parted to reveal a colossal granite-like head. The elephant let out a long slow grumble before slinking back into its camouflaged hiding. "The lions have been seen here, but they may have moved because of the elephants," Fish explained as he slowly eased the truck towards the dense foliage that the elephant had disappeared into.

Once through the other side, we saw a family of elephants frolicking by the river, taking advantage of an isolated pool of water. Unaware of our presence, a young calf rolled joyfully in the mud, spraying the thick sludge around wildly as two young boisterous bulls tussled with each other in a mock battle for supremacy. At the edge of the herd was an uninterested-looking female, flicking her tail at flies, her trunk hung low to the ground, all the while twitching with every sniff of the air. "No lions yet, but you have your elephants," Fish said as he gazed lovingly at the gathering of elegant giants in front of us.

Our previous forays into the bush had proved fruitless as far as lions were concerned, and I began to wonder if I would have to settle for tracking elephants after all. On this, our last drive, Fish was still expectant, having picked up the fresh tracks of a male. Set against the fading glow of the burnt copper sky, and air sweetly infused with the smell of wild thyme, his face was occupied by a stern look. A bead of sweat escaped his hat and trickled down the side of his face. His eyes flicked back and forth as we traversed the parched river. With the eye of an eagle hunting for prey Fish's face lit up as he brought the truck to an abrupt halt. "Don't move, or talk," he whispered, at a barely audible volume. "Straight ahead of us," he motioned with a short, slow nod of his head.

TULI SAFARI LODGE



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No more than eight metres ahead lay a male lion, head resting thoughtfully on its outstretched paws, a look of menace glistening in his eyes. My heart thumped deafeningly against my ribcage as my gaze met his – I was scared to even breathe. The soft rasp of the lion’s heavy breaths filled the warm, still air. Framed by a thick, gold and black mane, his face was a picture of concentration, body taut and ready to pounce at the slightest movement on our behalf. Behind, in the clearing that this male laid guard to, an elegant lioness attended to a pair of fledgling lion cubs.

After what seemed like an eternity, and with adrenaline still coursing through my veins, Fish said it was time to move on. The sun had left the horizon, and the warm glow of dusk was hanging in the air. I sat speechless as he we drove back through the dry brush. “Next time you come we will try and find leopards,” Fish said through a beaming smile, “but I’m not making any promises this time.” 🐾



MARKUS LEACH

Top: Elephants make striking accompaniments to Tuli’s astounding natural landscapes
Above: The male lion that Marcus Leach observed guarding the new lion cubs