

Eager to do her bit to protect Africa's wildlife and nature, Margaret Holding joins a Conservation Project in Botswana, where she learns how to dig waterholes, meets elephants and discovers an amusing use for Impala dung

Legodimo – paradise in Botswana? I was about to find out! With the future of my grand-children to think about I felt it was about time I did something to help preserve the animals and land in other parts of the world, and so I trawled the internet for volunteer opportunities. Projects Abroad's conservation trip in Botswana caught my eye. The main requirements: aged between 18 and 100 and must be fit and well!

For most volunteering trips, it's normal to pay a weekly fee for food, accommodation, insurance and something towards the running of the project itself. The airfare is also separate. After flying in from New Zealand to Johannesburg, I decided to set aside some free time before the project started and flew on to Livingstone in Zambia. This a must-do; the Victoria Falls are amazing, I took a micro light flight over the falls, which even at US\$90 is worth it. The people in Zambia are poor but their Zimbabwean neighbours are even less fortunate. Many Zimbabweans had marked stalls in the Zambian town, selling their beautiful carvings. They would happily have swapped their wares for my socks ("if dirty we will wash them," they said!) or anything else for that matter.

I can highly recommend the clean accommodation at Jollyboys Hostel in Livingstone. Rooms ranging from singles to dorms (with tent space for campers) were between £4 and £7 a night and there was a kitchen available, or cheap meals on offer for those after a night off the cooking. A variety of trips could be booked from here so I went on a three-day, two-night safari to Chobe National Park in northern Botswana. We travelled by bus and boat and camped out in tents in the park. But beware, being in the southern hemisphere means June is actually mid-winter and the nights get very cold! In Livingstone I met a retired Canadian couple who've been sailing the world in a yacht since 1993. We spent several days together enjoying the markets and getting wet at the falls.

The next month was spent on a South African conservation project, where volunteers hired old cars at the weekends to enable trips to Kruger National Park. Chobe (the less commercial and unfenced of the two), Blyde River Canyon, Swaziland and St Lucia – all great places to visit.

First Impressions

By now it was nearly August, so I flew from Johannesburg to Polokwane in north-eastern South Africa to start my next project in southeast Botswana. Gerritt met me at the airport a 27-year-old white South African who wore many necklaces and copper bracelets, and had a charming smile and great sense of humour – oh how I wished I was 40 years younger! We still faced a four-hour journey in a safari truck to reach the Botswanan border. We would have made it in time before the border closed at 6pm but for my backpack, which hadn't arrived – not unusual at all with luggage coming from Johannesburg. I arranged for it to come on the next flight, but we were definitely not going to make it to the border in time, so we travelled to the small town of Alldays instead. A hunting lodge in town which had separate huts was only £8 per night served great meals and boasted an even better bar where drinks seemed to get bigger and better value as the night went on.

Thankfully my belongings were delivered so the next day we could continue our way to the border where we were met by the friendly border staff. The final leg of our journey to the project site covered rough roads. I don't really know what I was expecting but it was definitely had a 'wow' factor on arrival: buildings were built in gold-coloured sandstone in a semicircle looking down to the Limpopo River. The camp itself had female and male dorms, single rooms, open-fronted dining and kitchen areas, a camp fire area and a braai (BBQ), and the showers were open to the sky with 'donkeys' (a steel drum with a fire underneath) for hot water. A large Nyalla tree spread its branches over the riverside and tiny squirrels played up

and down its trunk. I already understood why this place is called paradise and I had only just arrived.

I soon learnt that I was the first ever volunteer at Legodimo, as the property had only just come under the wing of Projects Abroad. Gerritt told me a little about the place; 15,000 hectares, totally unfenced (in Botswana people, not animals, are usually fenced in) and originally used for cattle. It was bought by a South African family who turned it into a conservation area where school children could come, hence the buildings here. Living on the property were Botswanan couple Janni, who was born here and knew every part of it, and his wife Rosina. Their English may have been somewhat limited but we spent several hours conversing with the help of various hand signals.

That evening Gerritt cooked a traditional meal of BBQ steak with boiled maize meal ('or pap') and gravy made of cooked tomatoes and lots of onions. The meat served was generally steak (often marinated) or spicy sausages, and the pap, while filling, certainly wouldn't make it as one of my favourite foods. As there was no electricity, all cooking was done on the wood BBQ or on gas rings, and as more volunteers arrived we took it in turns to cook for each other. It always amused me in Africa that most of the food was saltless – even the cheese. It seems that salt is a precious commodity as it has to be imported from overseas, I was told "It is not good for you" but noticed that almost everyone here smokes and "that is okay", or so it seems!

Wildlife Encounters

On weekends nobody works, so we would take a packed lunch and drive to one of the nearby 'dams'. These huge circular water troughs with a lower rectangular trough below were originally filled with water pumped from bores for the cattle. Now, in the dry season, these troughs are essential for elephants.

In the space of just a few hours, we watched two herds of elephants, numerous birds, warthogs, impala and kudu come to drink. The animal kingdom has its protocols; if a herd of elephants is drinking and another group of animal arrives, the late arrivals wait patiently in the wings until the former has finished. After all the elephants have drunk, it's the next group's turn.

But little did we know that they'd prepared a whole comedy sketch for us that day! As a young elephant drank, a troupe of warthogs arrived and, according to protocol, stood back. Obviously baby warthog had not yet been taught about the order and approached the lower trough, heaving himself over the side. The elephant swung its trunk at this insolence, sending baby warthog running quickly back to its parents. Determined not to be intimidated, the young hog returned to the trough several times more and we laughed as the entire cartoon-like scenario was replayed over and over again.

Our first work task was to free up the view from camp down to the river so we would see when there was running water below. Armed with machetes we went forth and cleared a large area of trees and shrubs. As we sat quietly satisfied around the fire that evening we heard branches cracking and were amazed to see a herd of approximately 100 elephants approach in the light of a full moon. Normally silent when on the move, it's only the sound of tree branches being broken as they eat which alerts you to their presence. One elephant came within ten feet, seemingly unaware of us, it was an amazing sight.

We travelled over the border again a few days later to collect the next volunteer – David, a 19-year-old lad from New Orleans, USA. Together, we cleared further areas down to the river and along the edges of tracks running through the reserve, pausing only to watch the amazing wildlife. A porcupine visited the camp one night, searching the kitchen for food, I found myself in the path of the visitor's escape route, up went its quills, and at about three-foot long fully extended I decided against valour and quickly retreated. And my luck (or bad luck, whichever way you look at it) held as on another occasion also at night I disturbed a baby bushbuck curled up in the ladies' toilets.

The next person to arrive was Harry, the Desk Officer from Projects Abroad in the UK. He was staying for three months to evaluate the new project. Harry, it quickly became clear, was not a lover of spiders, snakes, flies or any bugs for that matter, and although at this time of year there are very few of these, he remained apprehensive of the coming wet, hot season. On the up side, his fears were often the source of friendly banter between our little group.

Other volunteers arrived over the next ten days – Luc from Holland, Alice from NYC and Lauren from France, all aged between 19 and late 20s. “It’s a huge cultural shock coming from New York,” Alice confided to us one day and I could understand this – no food places just around the corner, limited email access, no electricity, basic living conditions and manual work. But it wasn’t all hard labour. Indeed, Gerritt introduced us to a game that he played with all newcomers in which we’d get some impala dung (tiny solid round balls) and see how far we could spit them – imagine the reaction from all the city folk in our midst! But fear not, Impala only eat clean vegetation so it was quite safe.

And if this wasn’t enough amusement, there was a ‘flying fox’ or zipline near the camp. Starting at a great height, it ends very close to a terrace near the river, and we were warned to lift our legs before we reached this part. Initially a bit wary of going down, I took up the challenge when Gerritt told me that one of his similarly aged relations had done it. I came down at a colossal speed and swiftly forgot to lift my legs, only to hit the bank with a tremendous ‘whoomf’ – I carried the scars on my shins for many days after! Gerritt later admitted that his relation was a man and five years younger than I, so it seems I now hold the record!

We built mud holes for the elephants, cleared tracks, marked the area on GPS, named roads, climbed hills to look at 4,000-year-old Zulu rock paintings and had hours of fun. We spent our evenings listening to animal sounds and playing cards or board games by the light of paraffin lamps. It’s worth taking note never to play ‘Kings’ with Gerritt – believe me, your hangover will be far worse than his the next day! Each night as we played, we’d hear the baboons putting the ‘kids’ to bed. On one such evening, we heard terrible screaming and the next morning watched as the baboons moved camp. Gerritt said it had most probably been a leopard making a kill during the night. No wonder the baboons weren’t waiting around.

Our scariest moment came while four of us were sitting quietly on a water trough waiting for it to overflow and fill the mud hole we just dug. I looked up and there suddenly in front of us stood an elephant only 50 feet away. I really don’t know who was more startled, the elephant or us. Gerritt told us to get up quietly and walk back to the truck – but slowly. We made it to safety with sighs of relief all round.



Herd of elephants



Harry and hungry porcupine

Crossing into South Africa, our five-day trip to Mapungubwe National Park was amazing. Gerritt made use of a reciprocal agreement with the park that meant we could camp, enjoy a guided tour, travel through the park and visit an archaeological site in return for a couple of days’ work. This form of payment involved wrapping many of the protected trees with chain-link netting to stop the elephants de-barking them as well as rebuilding a water trough.

No matter where went, we were always escorted by a South African armed with a rifle – in case of attacks from animals. I gave our guide and protector a New Zealand pen; it was humbling to behold his immediate joy at receiving this gift. Apparently he told everyone about it afterwards, saying “when it runs out I will still keep it”. We also visited Venetia, where we were lucky enough to find a wild dog den with four-week-old puppies, and we tracked down two lionesses and their beautiful cubs.

Back home at Legodimo it was beginning to get warmer. We'd filled the swimming pool before leaving for South Africa in the hope of a dip on our return, but the elephants had visited and severely depleted it. Each week we either went across the border to Polokwane or to Selebi-Phikwe in Botswana to do our shopping, and at last find some internet facilities and restaurants! Selebi-Phikwe is a small, friendly town and being in Botswana, it's safe and crime free.

I'll forever remember the daily evening climb up one of the hills at Legodimo to access our emails, a beer in hand and the sun setting in the distance. (Returning after dark one evening, we saw an aardvark on the track – a very rare sight, I'm told). Other unforgettable highlights included hunting for diamonds in a dry riverbed, climbing the big baobab tree, even the dust that infiltrated everything. But, of course, also the many friendships I made with Janni and Rosina, quiet David, fly-hating Harry, culture-shock Alice, poor Luc who went without his luggage (the airline lost it for ten days!) and Lauren who refused to drop her spade and just worked and worked. Needless to say, there were many tears when I left.