



*Text and Pix  
by Priya Edirisinghe*

**M**y wife, my sons and I were at Mashatu Game Reserve for two nights in late December 2009. My son drove from Gaborone, the capital of Botswana starting at around 6.00 a.m. and it took only five hours to drive the 500km, even after breaking journey for breakfast. The roads are very good - well maintained, usually with four lanes and most drive at around 120km/h! Even the last 30km of gravel road was maintained in a very good condition. At the left of the entrance is an exclusive air field for the park. On the right further down is the park office where one could park the vehicle and go with the driver/guide in the open 4x4 land-cruiser. Because of the heat, we opted to drive the remaining 40 minutes drive to the main camp in our vehicle, following the guide's vehicle. Situated in the northern-eastern 'finger' tip of Botswana, bordering Zimbabwe and South Africa, in the Tuli Block is the Mashatu Game Reserve. Mashatu - named after the locally revered Mashatu tree - at 33,000 hectares (75,000 acres), is said to be the largest private game reserve in Southern Africa. Quoting from brochures, Mashatu will be in the core of the proposed Limpopo-Shashe Trans-frontier Conservation area, sharing boundaries with the Mapungubwe National Park, a World Heritage Site in South Africa and the Tuli Safari area in Zimbabwe. The Limpopo-Shashe Trans Frontier Conservation area, which is expected to be finalised soon, promises something new for the seasoned safari goers. Mashatu is sanctuary to the elephant, lion and leopard - three of the 'big five of Africa' (other two being

wild buffalo and rhino), with many other mammals such as the giraffe, eland the world's largest antelope, zebra, kudu, impala, hyena, wild dog, aardwolf, bat-eared fox, African wild cat, honey badger, black-backed jackal and to 350 bird species such as, the ostrich, the world's largest bird, kori bustard, the world's largest flying bird, secretary bird, seven blue shaded lilac-breasted roller and so on. On the first afternoon drive, after about 45 minutes we had our first surprise. Parked on the dry river bed, we spotted two leopards, a male and a female in mating. We did two more game drives with a 'no show' on the last morning due to continuous rain. We were fortunate to see many animals during these drives, including a resting pride of lions at very close range minding their own business, herds of elephants, many giraffe, spotted hyena, jackal, zebra, wilder beast, eland, kudu, impala and many birds, including ostrich, kori bustard, secretary bird. It was fantastic. In the evening drive after dark, with spot lights on, we stopped near a pride of lions about 10 feet away on the prowl for food. An unbelievable experience! We were not fortunate to spot a cheetah or a male lion. The Mashatu Game Reserve at 33,000 hectares is quite large and as a comparison, our Uda Walawe National Park consists of 30,821 hectares and Yala National Park consists of 97,880 hectares, of which Block I - the popular visitors block, is 14,100 hectares. The game drives are in open 4x4 Landcruisers without roofs and the tiered seats are fitted facing the road and not sitting sideways. Morning drives start around 6.00 a.m. after biscuits and tea/coffee and are of average four hours. The afternoon drives are around 3.00 p.m. and is of much longer duration, returning around 7.30 p.m. The driving after dark is with the vehicle lights on and also with two spot lights given to the guests for spotting

animals. The guide drivers are really very good and knowledgeable, taking a lot of interest, unhurried, stopping the vehicle for sighting and photography for any length of time, explaining various aspects of animals and even about trees. Their driving is unbelievable - driving through dry river beds, crossing rivers, going down ravines etc.. The vehicle and driver/guide is exclusive to each party for the entire stay and usually there are no shared game drives with other guests. After the morning drive, brunch (combination of breakfast and lunch) is served. Dinner is around 9.00 p.m. The guides sit with the respective parties for meals. The dinners are more elaborate with excellent food and service. All meals are buffets. Quite surprisingly, unlike some of the other African Wildlife Parks where it is mainly savanna or open plains, Mashatu, landscape, terrain and plants were much diverse. From towering hilly vantage points, down to valleys, sandstone outcrops, flattened plains, savannah, riverine forests, marshland and bordering two rivers; the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers. This game reserve has two types of accommodation, one called the 'main camp' consists of 14 lodges built on a hillock and looking down to a tank and the other called 'tent camp' consists of eight tents. The term tent is a misnomer, as these are permanently built units with all the modern conveniences. Both, which are located miles apart, have the usual public/dining areas and swimming pool. The prices are inclusive of game drives. We spotted quite a few animals like zebra, impala and kudu

from our rooms. The lodge bay windows overlook miles of jungle and open plains. Mashatu also offers adventure tourism in the form of horse safaris, mountain biking safaris and walking safaris, all of which add a new dimension to the traditional safari experience. The Mashatu Game Reserve is owned and managed by Rattray Group, who also own and manage Mala Mala Game reserve in South Africa, bordering Swaziland. More details are available on the Web: [www.mashatu.com](http://www.mashatu.com) Here are some of the photographs we took.



Designed by Thushara

# That memorable visit to the Mashatu Game Reserve



Monday 15th February 2010  
**The Island Leisure LAND**