

'Barn Owls and Baobabs' – A Visit to the Seven Sisters

Baines Baobabs as it is more commonly known, is an atmospheric corner of the Nxai Pan National Park in Botswana. Steeped in history, this region has changed little over the millennia and bears testament to the enduring nature of these mighty trees.

The gigantic tree stretched skywards, shrouded in elephantine skin. Behind it, Kudiakam Pan shone pale and cold in the moonlight. Stars crackled across the cavernous sky. Suddenly a demonic shriek sliced the silence – the barn owl was back! I flicked on my torch and there she was in the wan beam, beak stuffed full of mouse for her chicks. She dropped silently into the nest and I switched off the light. I did not want to disturb the feast. Wheezes of enthusiasm from deep within the stomach of the mighty baobab greeted her arrival.

We were camped at 'The Seven Sisters' or Baines Baobabs as this venerable group of baobabs are more commonly known, guardians of Kudiakam Pan since time immemorial in the Nxai Pan National Park, Botswana. Their presence in that flat, uninspiring landscape made such an impact on explorer/artist Thomas Baines, that he recorded their enormity in watercolours on 22 May 1862 while travelling from Walvis Bay to Victoria Falls. This famous painting demonstrates the resilience and longevity of these giants as although painted over 130 years ago, the fallen tree included in his composition is virtually unchanged to this day, still producing masses of large, velvety fruits from its reclining position.

Conveniently situated just off the main tarred road between Francistown and Maun, Nxai Pan National Park provides an ideal stopover for visitors to the Okavango Delta, Moremi and Central Kalahari Game Reserves and western Botswana. Two campsites (imaginatively named North and South Camp) are situated near to the pan after which the reserve is named. Facilities include small ablution blocks with flush toilets and cold showers, picnic tables and braai sites. Apart from that, no fuel, food or other goods are available and the nearest point of purchase is Gweta, nearly 100 km away. During the dry season roads within the park are good, but the access road is a thick sand track for which a 4x4 vehicle is essential. Because many of the roads within the reserve traverse clay pans, this does render driving interesting during the rains although this definitely is the best time to visit.

Originally proclaimed in the 1970s, this 1 676 km² park was enlarged in 1992 to incorporate Baines Baobabs and today covers an area of 2 578 km². Nxai Pan once formed part of an ancient lake system which included Lake Makgadikgadi and Sowa Pan in the south, Lake Ngami in the west and the Okavango Delta to the north. During a period of geological upheaval and dessication that effected southern Africa many thousands of years ago, Nxai Pan and other nearby pans were left high and dry and today only hold water in the rainy season. Some of these pans are however, covered in short nutritious grasses while others offer mineral 'licks' that attract and support a wide range of animal species. Several permanent, man-made waterholes also add to the attraction of the area. Springbok and impala occur here, an unusual phenomenon as these species are usually separated by widely differing

habitat preferences. Giraffe, gemsbok, hartebeest and blue wildebeest all occur here. Predators are represented by the magnificent, black-maned, Kalahari lion, cheetah, leopard, brown hyaena, black-backed jackal and bat-eared fox.

This region is also of historical interest as it is situated on the old trek route used to herd cattle from Ngamiland, via Mpandamatenga to Livingstone in Zambia. The route was still in use in the early 1960s until the infamous Veterinary Control Fences, which now dissect all the wild areas of Botswana, were erected in an attempt to curb the spread of diseases from wild animals to cattle. Apparently some of the old boreholes that existed along the route still contain water, although today very few people remember the exact locations.

And not only people used this route. While photographing the famous trees I discovered dinner-plate-sized tracks deeply incised in the brittle surface of Kudiakam Pan. This area is on the elephants' migration route from the grasslands of Makgadikgadi to the well watered reserves of the north. The stately *Hyphaene* palms growing near Makgadikgadi and Ntwetwe Pans, hundreds of kilometres to the south, bear witness to the length of time the elephants have been making this pilgrimage as their seeds could only have been deposited there by these great pachyderms.

The earliest inhabitants of the area were thought to be the San people, evidenced by hunting pits discovered to the west of the reserve. Holes were excavated from which the San dispatched spears or poisoned arrows at approaching game. A similar technique, although on a far greater scale, was also used by the Zulu tribes. Examples of which can be seen at 'Chaka's Hunting Pits' in the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Throughout our night at Baines Baobabs the barn owls shrieked and screamed and flitted about on silent wings like giant moths. Jackals howled mournfully on the pan and the temperature plummeted. The baobabs towered overhead, frozen legacies of an ancient, primitive past. On such a night it seemed as if Africa had shrugged off its thin veneer of civilization and reverted to Joseph Conrad's dark continent. I remembered the San custom of abandoning their old and infirm when they could no longer keep up with the rest of the clan's nomadic wanderings. How brave these tiny people must have been, left to die, alone, on a night such as this. Shivering, I shut my eyes. If I continued with such morbid thoughts I might soon see old man Baines emerge from behind a baobab, paintbrush in hand!

Because the southern section of Nxai Pan National Park consists mainly of grass covered dunes with little or no tree growth, Baines Baobabs are a great attraction to birdlife. Large flocks of pied crows are ever present in the canopies of these giants, Kalahari robins hop about below, dining out on insects attracted to the fallen fruit. Woodpeckers, tits and woodhoopoes clamber about the trunks in search of grubs hidden below flaking strips of bark, while Gabar goshawks hunt from favoured perches in the mid-stratum. Korhaans, larks and cisticolas abound in the surrounding grassland and stately Kori bustards and secretary birds may be seen, striding purposefully along as if late for an important

meeting. Even a lone fish eagle put in an appearance. It materialised early one morning, a tiny cross drawn above the horizon and grew steadily in size until its bright plumage was clearly visible as it flapped heavily overhead. It landed in a baobab across the pan from the famous seven and stared, as if in disgust at the parched and fishless surface below. Where had it come from? The nearest surface water of any consequence was several hundred kilometres away. Where was it headed? This place with its eerie atmosphere and stark beauty seemed so full of mysteries and unanswered questions. I wondered if Thomas Baines had thought so too.

Visitors Information

Unfortunately overnight camping at Baines Baobabs is no longer permitted due to the impact visitors to the area have had on the sensitive ecology. However day visitors may still enjoy day trips to the trees if they obtain permission from the Game Scout Office near South Camp. This is a wild area and caution should be taken when approaching wild animals. Lion and hyena are common and it is highly unwise to sleep in the open at night even around a campfire. Bookings for Nxai Pan National Park may be made through the Botswana Parks and Reservations Office, PO Box 20364 Boseja, Maun, Botswana tel: (09267) 661 265 or fax: (09267) 661 264. Please bear in mind this is a malaria area so contact your chemist regarding prophylactics.

LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. For time immemorial this mighty giants have guarded Kudiakam Pan.
2. The setting sun glows russet on the bark of the Seven Sisters.
3. Although camping is now prohibited amongst the baobabs we were fortunate to be amongst the last to enjoy this setting.
4. This baobab had a huge hole in its trunk in which a family of barn owls were nesting.
5. Although camping is now prohibited amongst the baobabs we were fortunate to be amongst the last to enjoy this setting.
6. We felt these lionesses were doing a sterling job upholding the law here at Nxai Pan.
7. Springbok are plentiful around Nxai Pan and their range overlaps here with the impala.
8. This dilapidated sign is all that notifies you that you are entering a National Park.
9. The imaginatively named South Camp at Nxai Pan is set in a grove of shady trees complete with ablution block.
10. The sun sets on a young baobab.
11. Elephant spoor crossing Kudiakam Pan towards Baines Baobabs – we missed them by days as they made their way back into the Okavango Delta for the dry winter months.
12. Lions as they spend most of their time – snoozing.
13. This threesome of lionesses gave us quite a chorus.
14. The ‘Fallen Tree’ as Thomas Baines painted it over 130 years ago has changed little from its reclining position and continues to bear fruit.
15. The endearing antics of the common ground squirrels will keep visitors enthralled for hours.

16. Black-backed jackal are common throughout the region and their eerie cries echo across the pans at night.