

Botswana



Tusk force

An elephant's kiss is an experience not to be missed, **Frank Walker** writes.

THERE is something magical and truly wonderful about being kissed by an elephant. Perhaps it's the blast of warm elephant breath in your ear that goes on for minutes at a time. Maybe it's the bristles on the surprisingly soft trunk that gently muzzles your face.

It could be the bit of elephant spittle from the tip of the trunk left in your hair or the dank smell of drying mud left from the last mudbath.

Then again it could be the feeling of 55,000 muscles that make up an elephant's trunk all squirming away on your cheek and patting you on the head.

But moments like this should not be broken down to their integral parts. Whatever the particular ingredients, a pachyderm's smooch is an unforgettable experience.

The trunk action came at the end of an amazing day in Africa during which I had walked trunk in hand with three elephants through Botswana's fabulous Okavango Delta, a rich, vast wetlands with some of the most spectacular wildlife in Africa.

The elephants are the family and that word is very appropriate, of Oregon-born elephant expert Douglas Groves. Seventeen years ago he began raising two baby elephants, Jabu, a male, and Thambi, a female, who were left orphaned by culling operations in South Africa's Kruger National Park.

Doug and his wife Sandi moved the elephants to Botswana and they have been living with them since, camping beside them and walking with them as they make their daily trek foraging for food. A second orphaned female, Morula, joined the group from Zimbabwe a few years ago and has settled in very well to the small herd led by 19-year-old Jabu.

Doug and Sandi decided to dedicate their lives to building a better understanding of elephants among both local people and



tourists. They allow what they call "elephant encounters" where Doug introduces the elephants to tourists and groups of local schoolchildren and explains how they live. The elephants rumble and allow themselves to be patted, show their teeth and lie down to allow their feet to be felt. To the delight of visitors, the elephants lift off the visitors' hats and place them on their own head.

"The majority of Africa's elephants live outside protected wildlife areas and come into contact with humans all the time," Doug said. "Most people are afraid of them and see them wrecking crops - and of course poaching for tusks is a huge problem."

"But if kids can grow up understanding elephants they are less likely to grow up to be poachers. So we set up Living With Elephants



TRUNK LINES: Clockwise from above, elephant walk, expert Douglas Groves has a chat with one of his 'tribe', and the author loses his hat.

as an educational program to promote harmonious relationships between elephants and local people."

Doug is extremely close to his elephants and the couple haven't had a holiday away from them in 15 years. The couple are trying to train a substitute to take over for a few weeks, but Sandi admits it is a tough task to drag Doug away from his beloved elephants.

There is a good reason. He owes them his life.

"It was after we'd had a picnic lunch with visitors," he said. "The herd had moved on and were feeding in a thick growth of trees and I was walking alone outside the trees about 150 metres from them."

"As I was walking I accidentally disturbed a young male lion who was resting under a tree. He suddenly charged at me, snarling and growling. To me it seemed like it was in slow motion. I thought, 'This is real Doug, wake up'. He was very close to me, just a few metres away."

"I called Jabu, but I think when I called him he must have already been on his way as they came running as fast as they could. All three came together, shoulder to shoulder, and dropped their heads right down to the

ground tacking their trunks up under their chin. As they did that the lion turned around. He turned tail and they chased him across the field trumpeting loudly. There is no doubt they saved me. The lion saw me as an intruder and he would have attacked if the elephants had not intervened."

Doug reached out his hand and patted Jabu's trunk that had stretched out to him as he told his story, almost as if the huge elephant knew what Doug was saying.

Elephants can live for 70 years, so Doug and Sandi know their elephants will outlive them. They are looking for someone they can teach to take over the care of the herd.

The Groveses try to give the trio a life that is as close to an elephant's natural life as possible but cushion them from the enormous pressures, insecurities and challenges that confront wild

elephants. The trio do bump into wild elephants, but Doug and Sandi supervise the meetings like protective parents at a school dance.

"If it looks like getting heated we know how to defuse the situation and gently move the herd away," Doug said.

There are more elephants in Botswana than any country in Africa

- more than 150,000 and they are increasing at 5 per cent a year. That inevitably leads to some clashes with locals, but Doug hopes the 300 or so schoolchildren who meet his elephants each year learn to understand the elephants' needs.

You can learn a lot more about the remarkable work of Doug and Sandi by seeing their website:

www.livingwiththeelephants.org
The writer travelled courtesy of the Africa Safari Company.

> TRIP NOTES

- Doug and Sandi Groves and their elephant project can be seen if you stay at Baines Camp, run by Sanctuary Lodges, on the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Accommodation starts at \$420 a night, including meals, drinks and activities.
- The Africa Safari Company (www.africasafari.co.za) runs packages from Sydney that include Baines and other wildlife lodges in Botswana. Phone 9564 0520. Also, see www.livingwiththeelephants.org.

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