

# Kubu Island

Botswana



Flowering succulent plant on the top of Kubu Island with the pans behind

**The granite island of Kubu lies in the Sowa salt pan in the great Makgadikgadi Pans National Park in Botswana. The area is the site of one of the ancient world's largest lakes, which silted up thousands of years ago, and is a vast and empty void the size of Switzerland. As you travel endlessly across its bleak emptiness you will realize it is literally an eternity of nothingness. The cracked white crust of the pan merges into a blinding, featureless glare and mirages shimmer, looking for all the world like cool, thirst-quenching lakes.**

The sight of Kubu on the horizon is a welcome relief. More correctly known as Lekhubu (ridge, in the local Setswana language), it is a gnarled granite outcrop topped with ancient baobab trees. Some of these are monsters, older than Christianity – they have been growing here for over two thousand years. Their gnarled and wizened branches reach out, offering some shade in this parched region.

Kubu is particularly atmospheric at sunrise and sunset, when the granite is tinged pink and the baobabs glow red as if they are about to burst



Looking towards the granite bulk of Kubu Island

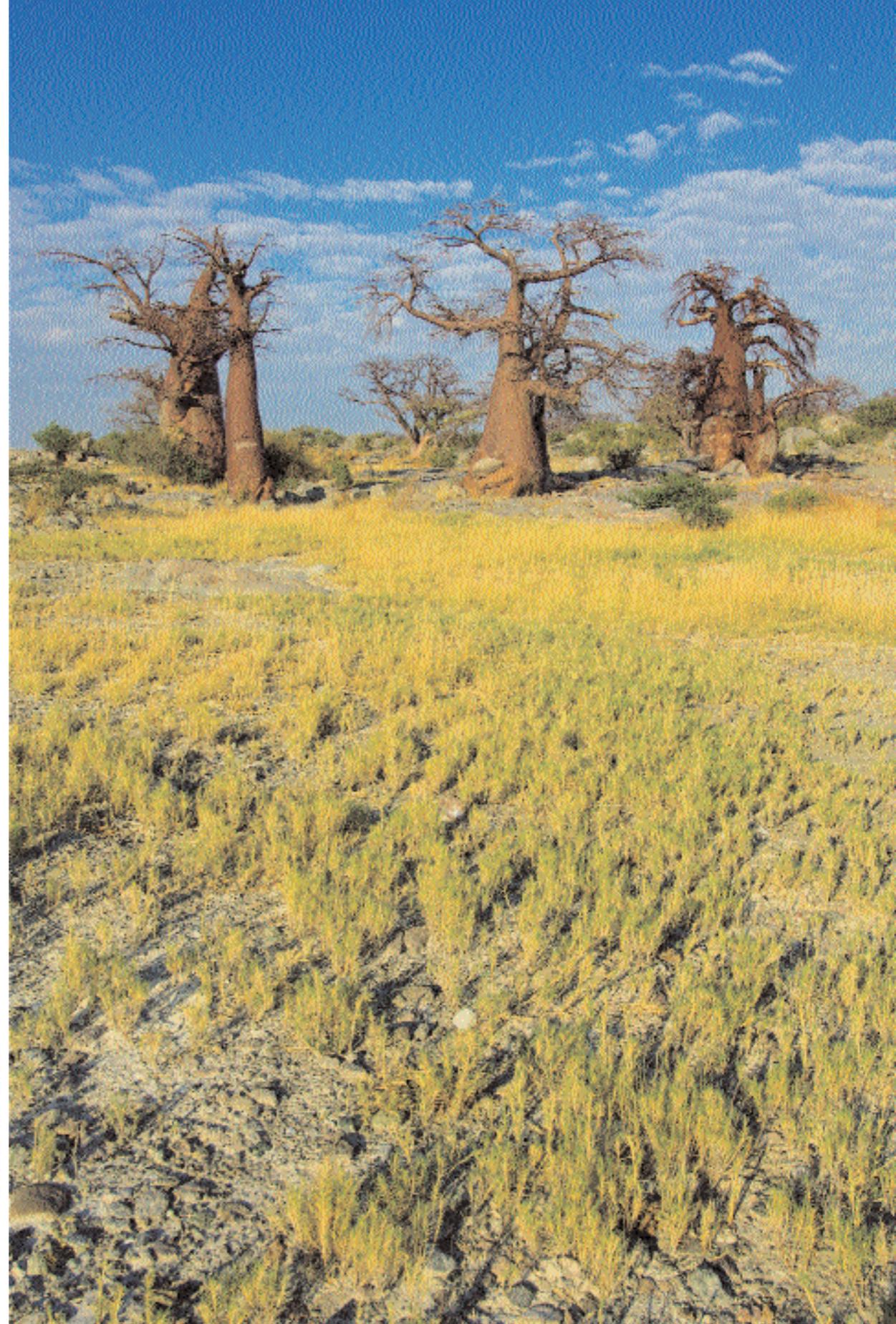


San bushmen trackers working for Uncharted Africa at Kubu Island

into flames. The horizon is so flat that the sun sinks into, or rises from, it as if it were water, spilling a burning mirage like liquid over the land.

The island is also striking by moonlight, as the baobabs cast eerie, long, spindly shadows and all colour seems to drop away in the flat, pale light. But be careful walking around at night. Although there is no wildlife most of the time, animals such as hippo and antelope, drawn by mirages, occasionally wander over the pan. Sometimes they find their way back to its edge; at other times they wander off to die in the great emptiness, leaving tracks that tail off into the distance.

In places the surface of Kubu is stained white with guano, testament to the ancient bird population that used to live here before the lake dried up. Fossils of marine creatures can be found, and pebbles rounded by the action of waves. But as you stand on the island's summit, looking out into the vast nothingness, it is inconceivable to imagine Kubu surrounded by water. The horizon is so empty, and so silent. All you are able to hear is the wind in your ears and the sound of your breathing. Yet, if the annual rains are heavy the pan will flood,



Giant baobab trees at Kubu Island



KUBU ISLAND

albeit with just a few short-lasting centimetres of water, and thousands of flamingos will congregate near the island to nest.

The rainy season generally lasts from November to February, although it is unpredictable and can last longer. During this time it is impossible to get to Kubu. The surface of the pan is treacherous and even a four-wheel drive will be bogged down in minutes. However, a couple of months after the rains, when the island can be reached again, there should still be flamingos only a few kilometres away.

southern Africa and there are precious few who still live in the traditional way. Many were killed by early European settlers and still more have recently been moved from their land to resettlement camps where they fall prey to alcoholism and drug abuse. However, there are people with San blood living in the area adjacent to the pan, and they still sometimes travel to Kubu to leave offerings.

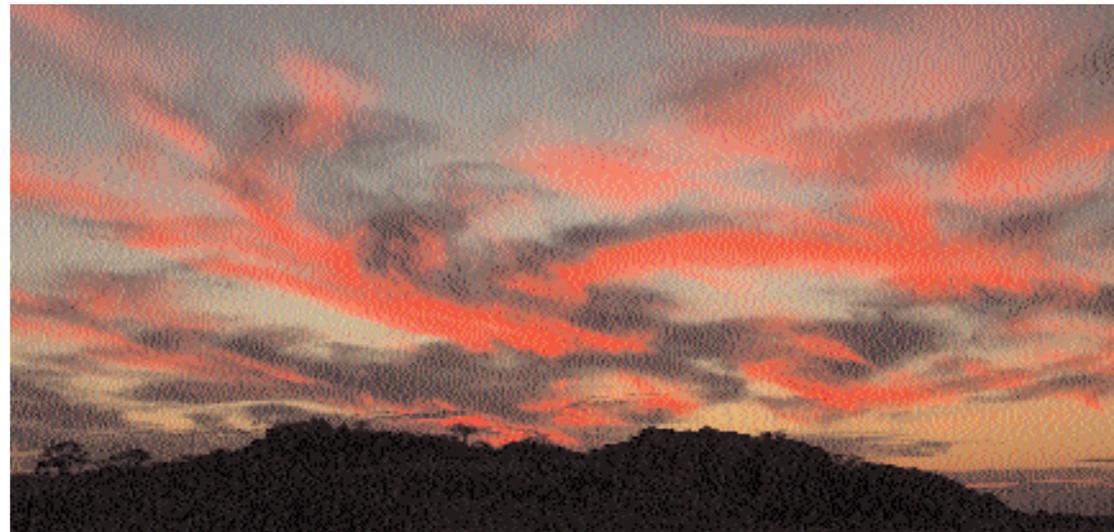
The island is an intensely spiritual place, and the absence of the usual distractions seems to make this more exaggerated and



Flamingos in flight near Kubu Island



Ostrich silhouetted by the setting sun near Jack's Camp



Clouds lit by the setting sun over Kubu Island



Baobab trees silhouetted by the sunset

Kubu has been sacred to many peoples over the centuries. The remnants of Stone Age cutting tools and pottery shards dating back two millennia have been found here, and there is also a stone enclosure, believed to date back to the Great Zimbabwe dynasty of the 14th to 15th centuries, that was used as a circumcision area. Cairns left by initiates can still be seen. Later Kubu became a sacred site for the San. Although it was too late in their history for them to leave rock paintings, they left beads made of ostrich shell as offerings between the great boulders that once formed a cave on the highest end of the island.

Over the centuries the San have been persecuted throughout

poignant. Silence in the modern world is difficult to come by – and here it is absolute. The link with history is palpable, and it does not take much to imagine spirits moving through the great baobabs that have stood sentinel on Kubu for so many generations.

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**Uncharted Africa runs Quad Bike Safaris to Kubu Island from its legendary Jack's Camp. Camping facilities at Kubu are very basic, but the company provides all the comforts of home including comfortable sleeping bags, hot showers and an alfresco bar. The food is incredible. Don't miss the chance of a couple of nights at Jack's Camp afterwards.**