

STILL

A Saffer's greatest travel motivation?

WATERS

To chill. Rivers and lakes are fantastic places to do just that.

RUN

Here are two very different experiences in

DEEP

KwaZulu-Natal's northernmost region



1. IN KOSI BAY

'Quick Teagan, come. Bring that cat. I'm in terrible danger!'

I grabbed her by the arm. 'There is a black mamba eating another smaller, paler black mamba and I know I am next.'

Teagan, intrepid *Getaway* photographer, walked up to the writhing mass of snake and said, 'Those are mole snakes.'

She tried to untangle the two and save the victim (knowing snakes, probably its own child). She then saved them both from the cat. Success – with minor lacerations, some from me gripping her arm, some from the cat. I decided the best way to deal with all of this stress was to have a bath. This was, after all, my mission: 'Jess, go to northern KwaZulu-Natal and sink yourself into as many various waters as you can. Observe your surroundings from this fluid dimension.'

Perfect. Overcome by life? Get out of town. If possible get into water. Often John, my husband, comes home from work and finds me in the bath. He says, 'Jess, there is a drought.' Here at Kosi Bay Forest Lodge, snake stress or not, I had been told to get into water. It was actually my job to get into the bath. Lanterns had been lit. The bath was outside. The bath was in a forest. I could take *shinrin-yoku* to the next level. How jealous my Japanese and eco-hipster

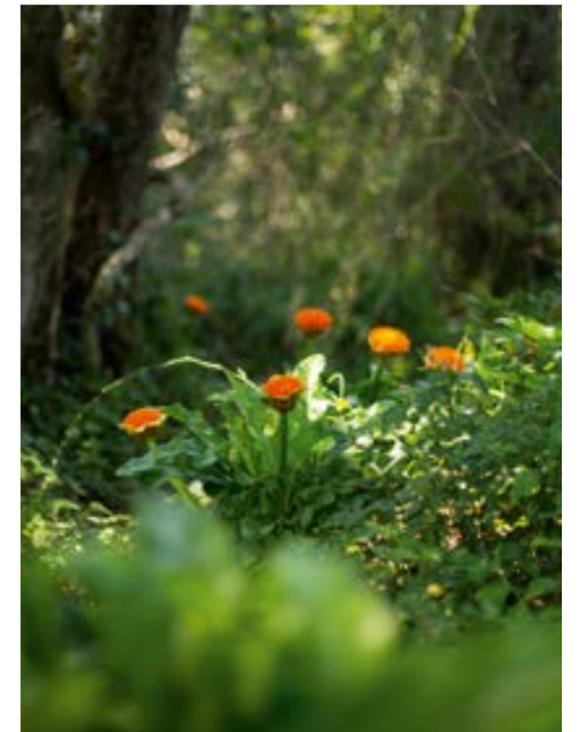
friends would be. (For readers not fluent in Japanese, *shinrin-yoku* means 'forest bathing': enter a forest as you would a bath, and remain there, submerged. No hiking or looking for geo-thingies or naming plants or ticking off birds. Just be in the presence of trees. You will gain health and illumination.) Here I was in an actual bath, within an actual forest. Double illumination coming for me.

I consoled myself, in the warm bubbles, that travelling in Africa is never without an edge. South Africa can be a nail-biting place. Everyone needs time – and water – in order to stop seeing mambas and instead recognise mole snakes. In the water I went easy on myself. I forgave myself for another misunderstanding where Teagan had once again settled my nerves.

On a walk through raffia palms to the lake (a must), with an eagle-eyed guide to point out palm-nut vultures and antlions, I had nervously asked if anyone else had heard the low, dark grunt of a hippo. Our guide said the sound was at least two kilometres away – and as an informative aside, the very path we walked upon had been kindly carved out for us by the night foraging of these deadly vegetarians. Teagan then took me aside to explain,



ABOVE Fish traps in Kosi Lakes, beautiful by design, and a sanctioned and sustainable method of fishing. LEFT Colossal raffia palms line the water's edge, providing a stately welcome after boating on the Kosi Lakes. RIGHT Blood lilies along the hippo paths.



in a whisper, that one of our companions was suffering from indigestion (the food at Kosi Lodge is very delicious and tough to resist), and the sound I'd heard was really nothing to be afraid of.

I knew with the help of the forests and the water (and the Japanese masters) I would soon relax – travel Zen was just a splash or a wallow away. It was, in fact, impossible not to achieve at Kosi Forest Lodge. The place is all soft sandy paths underfoot and wind in the trees. Each bedroom is hidden from the next, with flourishes of sherry, woven grass for holding loo roll, insect repellent, an umbrella. A little further along, the swimming-pool deck looks onto the lake. >

TRAVEL NORTHERN KZN

The next day we were in the river, canoeing through fields of water lilies, past wild figs and waterberries, listening to fish eagles and turacos and watching baby cormorants learn to fly. I began to hope that logs were crocodiles and even reached out to stroke a leguaan, although he got away. Our boat trip through the four Kosi Lakes was just as magical. The water changes as you motor through the third lake, where the hippos breed in the fresh water, through the winding channel to the second lake where stumpnose, mullet, rock salmon and kingfish cruise the clear water above the white sandy floor spotty with the dens of sand prawns. Moving towards the sea, the lake gets saltier, mangroves line the edges and the fishtraps crochet paths through the water.

Needless to say by that evening, back at the lodge, I was blithely shooing away flamingos and wading out in the pristine warm water to talk to the fisherwomen. Never mind the hippos now. I was ready for anything.

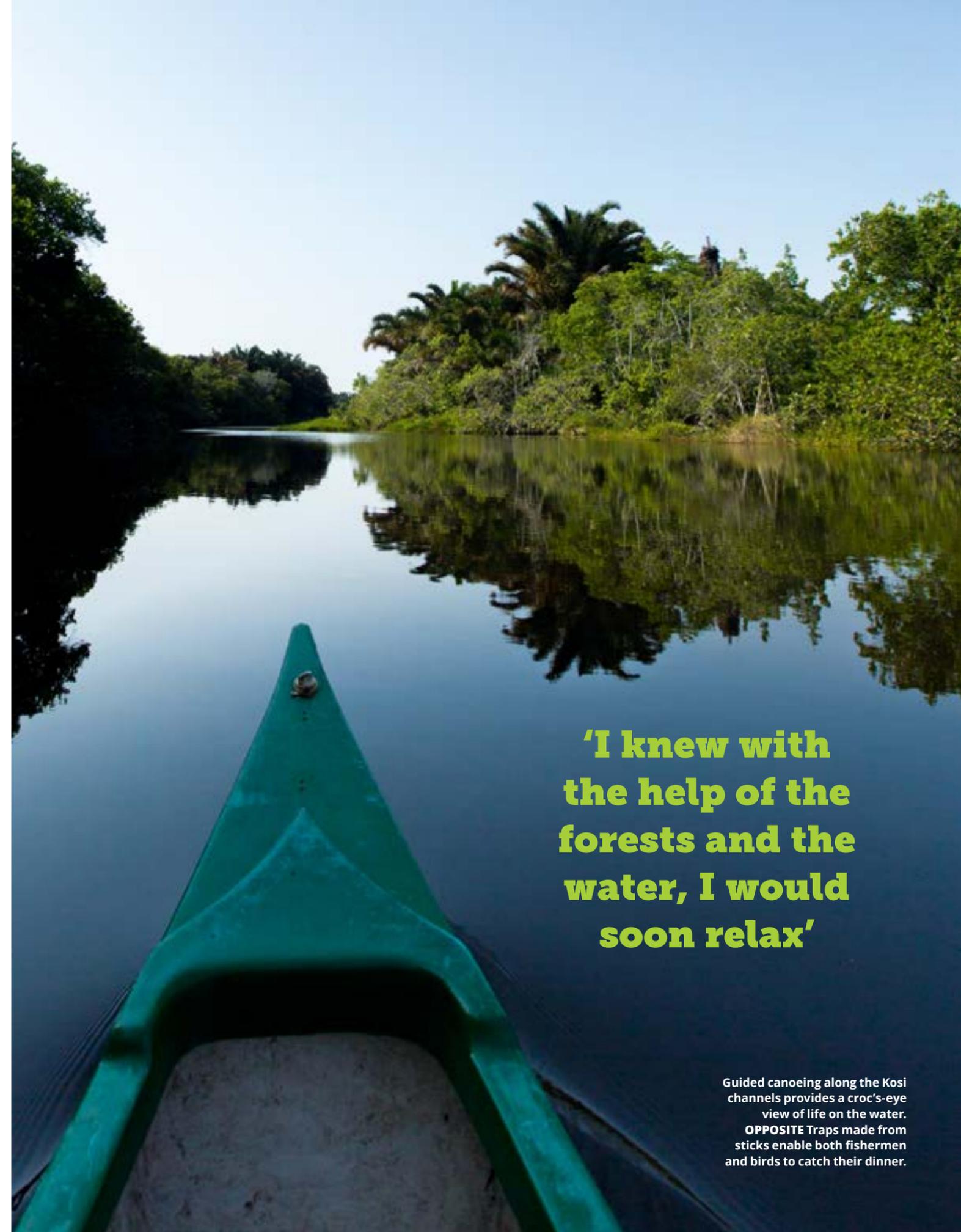
And so, fortified, Teagan and I ventured alone to the Kosi River Mouth. We took a picnic and snorkels. No one else was there. A warm waist-deep wade with our stuff on our heads took us to the reef. Here, at low tide, a current kindly escorts you over enormously bright and silver fish, from the middle of the estuary down towards the sea. You simply lie there, floating over the coral, pointing and breathing. I'm not sure what the Japanese masters would call this type of bathing – sharks could come at you from one end, crocs from the other, maybe moray eels from the side, but in that moment, it absolutely didn't matter. Anyway, they kept to themselves. >



Ford Everest XLS 2.2 6MT 4WD

MEANWHILE, ON LAND...

Driving to the Kosi Bay estuary along the sandy, bumpy road was no problem for the big Ford Everest XLS 2.2. With its Terrain Management System taking care of all the 4x4 guesswork, it was actually impressively easy. All we needed to do was cycle through its four modes – default, snow/grass/mud, sand and rock – via a rotary dial on the centre console, pick which one we needed, and go! And it was just as great for cruising on tar. In addition, being high up was brilliant for game viewing – within an hour of entering the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve, we'd seen four of the Big Five. ford.co.za



'I knew with the help of the forests and the water, I would soon relax'

Guided canoeing along the Kosi channels provides a croc's-eye view of life on the water. **OPPOSITE** Traps made from sticks enable both fishermen and birds to catch their dinner.

2. ON LAKE JOZINI

By the time Teagan and I got to Lake Jozini (officially, the Pongolapoort Dam) and were now fishing, we had been in: two forest baths, an infinity pool, a river, some lakes and an estuary. Trees looked like coral to us, the birds like fish (although she did call a trumpeter hornbill a flying banana – so also fruit). We had faced crocodiles, hippos, snakes and a moray eel. I did not, however, feel this gave my travelling companion licence to tell me I looked like an old man. She tried to justify it by saying it was just that I looked so natural holding a fishing rod and staring at the water – and she happened to be reading *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Sure, I've done a bit of living, I consoled myself once we retreated to our cabins aboard the houseboat *Shayamanzi*, but I was feeling youthful again after forest bathing at Kosi Bay. Maybe it wasn't really the ageing Cuban and his battle with the giant marlin I reminded her of but the fisherman's creator, 'Papa' Hemingway himself. I considered the evidence. Like the famously macho novelist, I:

- (a) would be the only guest onboard to catch a tiger fish; pound for pound the best fighting fish this side of the Gulf Stream.
- (b) seldom shy away from heavy drinking on boats.
- (c) never use adjectives.

I was also suffering again from an overactive imagination, common for novelists, suspect in journalists however. And now a new anxiety gripped me. Who would be on the houseboat with us? Two nights is a long time to be on a boat among strangers. Six cabins, possibly 12 people. As the guests stepped awkwardly on board from a wobbly small boat, I clocked them: Colonel Mustard, Mrs Peacock. Yikes. Miss Scarlett. With a coat hanger. In the Jacuzzi. It might be one hell of a struggle and then 'Death in the Afternoon' as Papa used to say.

It is easy to avoid this kind of stress when choosing to step aboard the *Shayamanzi*. Either be a different kind of person or choose a group of friends and go together to Lake Jozini. But it turned out well for us. Our group bonded over delicious food and exchanged tales of our travels in Africa.

Anyway, if your new friends become too chatty, from your bed in a spacious cabin with Bar-Ones on the pillow, and fishing hooks and a tiger fish embedded into the resin toilet seat, you can open the sliding doors, gaze at the land and watch elephants glide by. You can wave at the hippos and be glad all the rhinos you see have their horns. Or you can go to the kitchen and talk to the chef, Michael, for as long as you want to (like a taxi driver, there is nowhere for him to go). He has many stories to tell. Adam will take you fishing any time, tell you which birds are calling, and that if you fall off the boat you must not wiggle when the crocodile takes you. It will be worse for you if you do. >

All is calm on Lake Jozini ... until you stick your toes in the water or put a sardine on the end of your fishing line. All kinds of teeth are lurking under the surface for a game of catch.

'You can open the sliding doors, gaze at the land and watch elephants glide by'

TRAVEL NORTHERN KZN

When you get desperate to swim, but know you cannot because of huge crocodiles, you can instead grab a glass of Chardonnay and jump into the Jacuzzi. If you are lucky, Teagan will decide to join you rather than taking photos of you or sending the drone up to see how you appear from outer space.

Then, from this warm, bubbly and potentially exciting position you can watch Adam prepare the fishing rods, think again of Hemingway and bull fighting and fishing. And then drift on to men versus women and then the moon, and whether water really is feminine 'as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them'. (Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*.)

As I learnt once we were out with Adam, who took us on a small boat to several fishing spots, this sport requires patience. It requires knowing how to flick without making your fingers bleed, and then how to wait. The 'striped water dog', as the tiger fish is known in these parts (strangely, not water cat) is a fierce and acrobatic enemy. It has massive teeth. The instruction for this game is to catch and release. But deep down you absolutely know that if you lose, this particular fish will not follow the rules.

After what seemed like days but was only about half an hour, almost just as Papa described it, I felt a light delicate pulling... I shouted out, 'What will I do if he decides to go down?' (Hemingway again.) Adam stood next to me. We held the rod together and fought that fish all the way around the boat. It jumped and bared its teeth.

Adam said, 'It's a monster.'

I repeated, 'What will I do if he decides to go down?'

Teagan tried to take a picture. With a final twist and a wink the fish released itself.



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE The safest water to immerse yourself in at Lake Jozini is in the Jacuzzi; Adam Mereki never tires of fighting the 'striped water dog' and will take you along in a second; the houseboat's cabins are super comfy and spacious, with a direct view onto the water.

And on the triumphant journey back to the houseboat, I decided that Teagan had not meant that I was haggard and wrinkly but had in fact intuited that I was both a great fisherman and a sparse writer. And everyone gave me a lot of attention and we all ate another splendid meal and drank bubbly and were rocked to sleep in our cabins on the water.

And when they asked how I was the only one to catch a fish, I replied: 'Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognise her?' (Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*). **G**

Plan your trip

GETTING THERE

KOSI BAY From Durban you drive all the way up the North Coast for five hours, then turn right just before Mozambique. The last bit requires a 4x4; if you don't have one, there is safe parking and transfers twice a day from Manguzi.

LAKE JOZINI It is 3½ hours from Durban on the N2. Boarding the houseboat is at 2pm, so there is plenty of time to get there. The route passes Hluhluwe and Mkuze, so you could visit the game reserves.

WHEN TO GO

KOSI BAY

Winter temperatures are moderate with beautiful days; March to June is best, October can be windy (the lakes can get too choppy for boat trips). Swimming and snorkelling are possible all year round. Summer has more rain and temperatures can rise to 30°C, but mid-November to mid-January is the only time to see turtle hatchlings.

LAKE JOZINI

Game viewing and birding are always good. Fishing is a bit slower in winter so it's best from September to March. Breeding season in October brings large tiger fish (strictly catch and release). The summer is exceptionally hot.

NEED TO KNOW

Both Jozini and Kosi are geared to protect you from mosquitoes, with spray and lotion and nets, but do cover up. Wi-Fi is slow and patchy at Kosi and non-existent on the houseboats; in some parts of the lake there is no phone signal. It can get cold on the water, whether in small boats or on the houseboat, so pack a windbreaker. If you don't want to cruise with strangers, book the whole houseboat.

The view over Kosi Lake.

STAY HERE

KOSI BAY

Kosi Forest Lodge

Sandy paths lit by lanterns at night lead to your bedroom and heavenly outside bath and shower. Interleaving family rooms are available. The lodge has a swimming pool and deck overlooking the lake, and a lounge at the restaurant (although dining is outdoors when the weather holds). From R2 170 pp sharing, including all meals, guided walks and a canoe trip. isibindi.co.za

LAKE JOZINI

Shayamanzi Houseboat

The cabins are spacious and comfortable with huge glass doors opening onto the lake. Each sleeps two and has a private loo and shower. Two decks and lots of windows in the communal areas mean you constantly have a view onto the water and of wildlife on the shores. The food was delicious and plentiful. From R1 975 pp sharing including

all meals, small-boat trips and fishing. shayamanzi.co.za

DO THIS

KOSI BAY

Go snorkelling at Kosi Mouth.

Low tide is best. The lodge will pack a picnic lunch, all the gear you need and arrange transport for R715 pp (or you can go alone if you have a 4x4; car guards charge R50).

A permit to get to the estuary is R58 pp and R53 per vehicle.

Canoe through the water lillies.

A guide will do the paddling while you sit back and drift along the river.

A must for nature lovers and bird watchers.

Motor around the Kosi Lakes.

Boat trips are a half-day or full-day excursion through the channels and lake systems. R550 pp including lunch.

Follow hippo paths through the raffia palms.

Palm-nut vultures and antlions can be very difficult to spot. The lodge guides are entertaining, have better eyesight and are clued

up on all the flora and fauna. The walk takes two hours.

Fish the lakes and the sea.

You'll need your own fishing gear and a permit approximately R95.

Find the turtles. In summer you can join an evening transfer to Bhanga Nek beach to see the hatchlings. R825 pp.

LAKE JOZINI

Watch the game go by.

The banks of the dam are lined with animals – crocs, warthogs, elephants, rhinos, buck. The further towards the Pongola River you go, the more you see.

Fight the 'striped water dog'.

You can fish off the houseboat or motor out to a quiet spot in one of the two smaller boats. No experience necessary!

Learn your birds. Staff on board are very knowledgeable and can help you identify species and calls.

Chill out. In your cabin with its huge windows, on either of the two decks (in the Jacuzzi) and in the living room/bar area.

* Prices correct at time of going to print.

