



NACSO PICTURE STORIES

LEARNING ON THE JOB

JOINT VENTURE LODGES BRING JOBS TO CONSERVANCIES

“The boat is easy, I learnt it in an hour,” says Benito. We are on a cruise up the Chobe River looking for hippos – we have already seen the elephants just across the river from Serondela lodge where Benito is a tour guide.

But it wasn't always easy. Benito used to be a fisherman. “You haven't been baptised until you have been capsized.” He says, referring to the hippos. Fishing is done from mokoros: wooden canoes dug out from trees, and a hippo can capsize a mokoro with a toss of its head.



The money from fishing was never good, and it was always uncertain. For much of the year Kabulabula Conservancy is flooded, and for reasons a fisherman can't quite explain to a tourist, you can't fish in the flood season.

So when private sector investor Michelletti teamed up with the conservancy to build a lodge, Benito was one of the first to look for a job on the building site. He learnt quickly there too. He can lay bricks and weld: new skills that may have helped him find a job in town.

But Benito loves the river.

“I want to go further with guiding,” he says. He knows all of the river birds and the creatures on the bank.



Serondela Lodge: built with local effort



A fish eagle takes flight

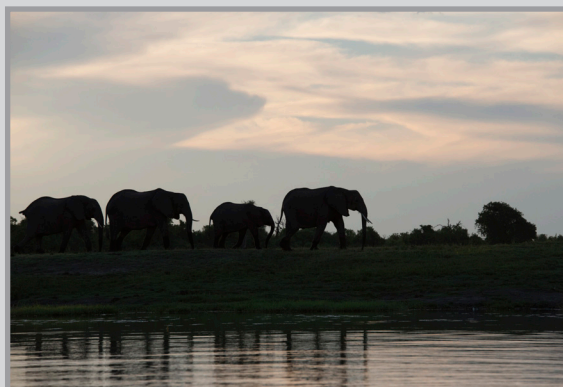
We spot a croc before Benito turns the boat back to avoid an approaching storm and rustles up gin and tonics from a cool box while steering us on a safe course.

Although guiding courses are available in Namibia and South Africa, they concentrate on nature knowledge, not in interaction with tourists who come from far away with many different expectations. The lodge owner intends to bring in an experienced guide to teach Benito how to interact with people from Europe, Asia and the Americas.



Photo: Gareth Bentley

Benito loves talking to tourists and learning from them about the world beyond the Chobe. The river is home, and he still fishes when he is off duty, but now he says “my money is certain at the end of the month.”



The sky darkens with rain and the lodge suddenly looks very inviting in the sunset. As Benito prepares for tomorrow morning's tour he says: “Every day new things are coming.”

