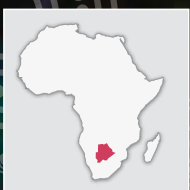


PRECIOUS' PLACE

Although **Cindy-Lou Dale** travelled to Gaborone to investigate its most-famous fictitious investigator, Precious Ramotswe, she discovered something much more concrete – the city's charm.



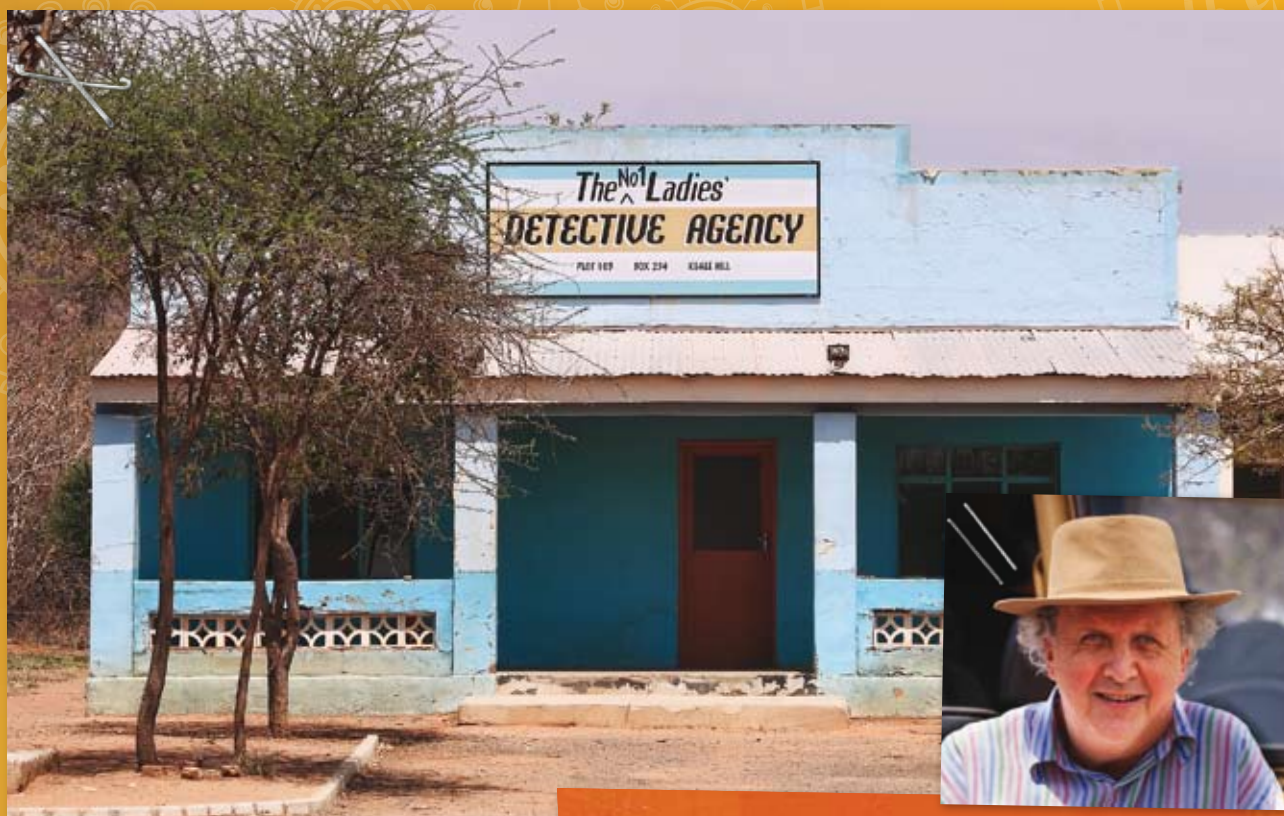
Cindy-Lou Dale believes her roots are buried deep in southern Africa, which is a good thing as it compels her to return regularly. She's in love with the kindness of its people, and their ability to smile.



I'm on a different kind of safari. Instead of tracing spoor through the wilds of Africa to witness iconic animals, I'm in the outskirts of Gaborone on the gentle literary trail of Precious Ramotswe. Made famous by Scotland's Alexander McCall Smith in his best selling series *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Precious Ramotswe is Botswana's most famous fictitious private detective. She has endeared herself to a worldwide audience by tenderly mending broken hearts and unravelling the mysteries that stain the happiness of her fellow countrymen.

Ramotswe's tour starts soon after sunrise with a drive along the paved highway that winds up a hill overlooking Mochudi, a village some 20km north of Gaborone and our heroine's childhood home. En route I pass the church where Ramotswe's disastrous first marriage to Note Mokoti took place and cross the teal-green Notwane River, which reminds me of the mystery Ramotswe solved of a man who went missing following his baptism there.





CINDY LOU DALE

CINDY LOU DALE

THERE IS A FAIRY TALE QUALITY ABOUT THE HOUSES, AS IF DRAWN IN THE HONEST SIMPLICITY OF A CHILD'S HAND

The air in Mochudi is hot, hanging with smoke from wood fires and spiced with black tea and cut tobacco. There's also an aroma of a traditional Setswana meal cooking somewhere. A buxom African woman clad in flamboyant colours, with a baby blanketed to her back, is on her hands and knees, laying a new patio of sun-hardened dung outside her home. Her glossy goats snooze under the eaves, and nearby her chickens loiter in the hedge, critically examining the earth. She smiles kindly and waves, wishing me well on my voyage.

At the village *kglota* (a meeting place where tribal matters are discussed and ruled) some fifteen men are animatedly debating a local issue. The case under deliberation involves a truant husband who has moved back into his home, much to his wife and her new husband's dismay.

Across the way are traditional homes built of thatch and clay and surrounded by neatly swept yards. Green tendrils of creeper cling to the walls, sending out flurries of golden stars on slender stalks. There is a fairy tale quality about the houses, as if drawn in the honest simplicity of a child's hand. It is such a home I imagined the young Precious Ramotswe would have lived in. I can see where McCall Smith found the inspiration for his novels as, at this very spot, the idea of *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* was born while he marvelled at the perseverance of a woman pursuing a fowl for his dinner.

After the parched landscape of Mochudi the soft greenness of Gaborone's leafier suburbs is striking. Here Ramotswe's little white Datsun van drove her around on case-cracking escapades, creating off-the-peg, easily-identifiable locations and stopovers for a literary tour. There is no Zebra Drive, the quiet, prosperous street where Ramotswe lives, only a Zebra Way. But there is a garage markedly similar to Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, the laid-back establishment of JLB Matekoni, Ramotswe's kindly second husband. ▸

Top: The fictitious home of *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*

Inset: Alexander McCall Smith, author of *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series

Below: In reality there is no Zebra Drive, only a Zebra Way



© KARIN DUTHIE / ALAMY

THE AIR IN MOCHUDI IS HOT, HANGING WITH SMOKE FROM WOOD FIRES AND SPICED WITH BLACK TEA AND CUT TOBACCO

▷ I visit Precious Ramotswe's favourite place to shop, the chaotic and exciting African Mall. It's a sensory experience for sure, and my ears are filled with vibrant African music and shrieks of hilarity at the gossip being told, my nose assaulted by the pungent aromas of garlic, ginger, cloves and cinnamon, and my eyes embrace the colourful explosion of skirts and tribal beads.

The Orphan Farm, as it's referred to in the books, is in reality the SOS Children's Village. Buried under flowering jacaranda and fragrant frangipani, it is currently home to 180 children, divided 12 to a house, each group sharing a house mother. The village father Mr Biekie and his posse of half a dozen village children excitedly show me around. The youngsters immediately drag me to their rooms, proudly displaying their toys (some even in working condition). After they've patted me down for sweets they take me further to show me their play area and vegetable garden.

One of the children, a young farmer at heart, enthusiastically shows off the small patch of vegetables that he has coaxed out of the dry soil. One day, he claims, when he is grown up, he will move out to a village and find land to plough and cattle to tend. Then there would be time to sit outside and watch the life of the village. "This," the six-year-old confesses, "would be a good way of spending my days, in peace and happiness."

"There's so much their hearts need to learn," Biekie says, searching the sky for inspiration. "These are all children of Africa, none better or more important than the other. There is no room in their hearts for hatred." As the character who stands proudly for all things African, and for all the love that Africa contains, Ramotswe would say: "Clever people might laugh at such simplicity, but I ask myself, what would their solution be?"

While sitting on the verandah of the President Hotel, I introduce a little red bush tea to my lips, along with a thick wedge of fruitcake. I sit quietly, just as Precious Ramotswe does in the book, contemplating the day, completely absorbed in thought. I recall the street vendors; I am in a city of entrepreneurs, everyone has something to sell. Spontaneous places for purchasing wares spring up on the curbs and offer up a rainbow of choice: red tomatoes, orange pumpkins,

Images: Plenty of creative signage and artwork adds a little colour to the walls and businesses of Gaborone

Opposite page: While searching for clues of Precious Ramotswe, you'll find plenty evidence of the city's virtue



PATRICK B BARR



CINDY LOU DALE



CINDY LOU DALE



THERE IS SOMETHING VIRTUOUS ABOUT THE CITY.
YOU FEEL IT WHEN YOU STEP OFF THE PLANE – IT HAS
AN AMBIENCE OF DECENCY, OF GOODNESS BEING DONE

golden cooking oil, yellow bananas, green beans, blue batteries for portable radios, purple sugar cane and violet bolts of ornate fabric. I smile inwardly, recollecting the ingenious and bizarre business names I'd seen – Knock Out Gas, Try Again Wedding Dresses, Taliban Forces Hair Salon.

As the evening merges into the blackness of night, I decide to return to my accommodation in Mokolodi. After spending some time sitting by a log fire and exchanging Botswana travel stories with fellow guests, I decide to stand off to one side and reflect on my trip while tending to the BBQ.

Instead of heart-stopping wildlife encounters, I discovered the story of Gaborone, one layer at a time. It may be on the cusp of the developed world, but it is still steadfastly holding onto traditional ways. There is something virtuous about the city. You feel it when you step off the plane – it has an ambience of decency, of goodness being in the air. I eventually start to catch wisps of the conversations around me and it is clear that the telling of African folk tales has begun. I study the dynamics of our UN-like gathering and come to the quiet conclusion that this is how Botswana should be experienced. Precious Ramotswe would have liked that way. ★

PLAN YOUR TRIP

The tour

No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency Tours are operated by Africa Insight (www.africainsight.com). There are half-day walking tours of Gaborone, as well as one- and two-day driving tours, which include a visit to Mochudi and a night at the McCall Smith rest camp in Mokolodi Nature Reserve.

Getting there

South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) and Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) both link London to Gaborone via their respective hubs of Johannesburg and Nairobi. Air Botswana (www.airbotswana.co.bw) operates regular domestic flights to and from Maun (to access the Okavango Delta) and Kasane (for Chobe National Park).

When to visit

Gaborone, like the country itself, is a great destination year-round.

Visas

Most visitors do not require a visa to visit.

Books

Lonely Planet's *Botswana & Namibia* (2nd ed, 2010) by Matthew D Firestone and Adam Karlin is the most authoritative guidebook that includes Gaborone.

Find out more

Botswana Tourism (www.botswanatourism.co.bw)
Africa Insight (www.africainsight.com)

Author tip

If you want 4-star comfort at McDonald's prices, check out Mokolodi Backpackers. Housed in a secure compound, and decked out in tasteful tribal art, soft earthy tones, and with much attention to detail, this boutique accommodation option offers all the comfort and atmosphere of a traditional African home. Look for Mokolodi Backpackers on Facebook or pick up the phone (+267-74111164).