



BOTSWANA'S
OKAVANGO

THIS THRILLING DELTA IS A MECCA FOR GAME
WATCHERS, BIRDERS AND OTHER NATURE LOVERS

_by Bill Whitman

WHILE AFRICA BRIMS with unspoiled landscapes written in big, bold strokes, Botswana's Okavango Delta proves especially dazzling. The 6,000-square-mile Delta is formed by the mighty Okavango, "the river that never finds the sea," which roars down from neighboring Angola and spills out into the sands of the perpetually barren Kalahari Desert. The Delta is a Connecticut-sized oasis teeming with elephants, predators and an astonishing variety of bird life—a Mecca for game watchers and birders.

To protect the wildlife by minimizing tourism's impact, Botswana was the first African nation to adopt a selective environmental policy of restricting the number of visitors it allows. According to Colin Bell, founder of Wilderness Safaris, "The results have been dramatically successful. Botswana's initiative has become the model for governments all over southern Africa, from Namibia to Mozambique. By doing away with those crowds of visitors, the footprint of tourism on the Okavango's delicate ecosystem has become much lighter and infinitely more protective of the animals."

That's good news for the discriminating traveler as well. Botswana's environmental plan limits the number of the Okavango's lodges and camps, and many are high-end enclaves that accommodate fewer than 20 visitors at a time and have their own wildlife concessions. That means your game drives will be private and personalized, without the flocks of safari vehicles that plague wildlife viewing at many African camps.

Because the Okavango is essentially unreachable by road, your visit will begin in Maun, a sleepy outback village with a busy airport, where a single-engine bush plane will take you to your lodge's airstrip. As soon as you're aloft, these flights become the first leg of your safari. Your pilot becomes your tracker by swooping low over a maze of crystal-clear lagoons, waterways and grassy islands teeming with elephant, antelope and giraffe before landing on a dirt strip where warthogs graze on the runway.

At your camp, you'll find that ecotourism, Okavango style, is a far cry from Spartan. I stayed at two newly opened lodges, Xudum and its sister camp Xaranna (the Xs are pronounced like Ks), located on the same 62,000-acre private reserve and also run by the safari company AndBeyond (formerly known as CC Africa). Both camps are stylishly decorated with contemporary flair.

OPEN-SIDED DINING AND VIEWING AREAS overlook a lagoon where you'll likely witness a floorshow when herds of elephants lumber through the savanna while noisy

hippos frolic in the reeds. And you'll stay in ultra-chic, air-conditioned digs of canvas and timber with a private plunge pool, an outdoor terrace perfect for watching the Okavango's wildlife pageant and an immense bed looking out over the lagoon. There, after sunset, you'll hear the volume rising on the night sounds of Africa, many of them originating just a few yards away. Both Xaranna and Xudum, like many Okavango lodges, are "open camps," meaning that everything from hyenas to elephants roam through freely at night. That's why it's verboten to walk in the camp after dark without an escort.

Guests in the Okavango lodges find the daily four-hour safari drives to be the high points of their stay. The first excursion begins just after dawn, when your guide and tracker will take you out searching for lion, leopard and other predators. After a whopping breakfast back at the lodge, and after the animals (and probably you) take a noontime snooze, a late-afternoon drive seeks the predators as they prepare for another night on the prowl. You're likely to get that Jurassic Park feeling as your 4x4 wheels through dinosaur-ready grasslands dotted with towering, volcano-shaped termite mounds, millennia-old baobab trees and forests of wild palms.

The game drives aren't the Okavango's only can't-miss experiences. Another is a trip in a *mokoro*, a dugout canoe carved from a large tree, to explore the Okavango's labyrinth of waterways and lakes. Your boatman will guide you through dense stands of papyrus and a myriad of lily pads for up-close views of antelope, elephant and floating "logs" that turn out to be giant crocs.

Another option is picking up your tent and going out to

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ACCOMMODATIONS (A):

Accommodations range from the Sandibe Lodge (www.sandibe.com), where the atmosphere harkens back to Hemingway days, to stylish, contemporary camps like Xaranna and Xudum. And for a taste of early 20th century "roughing it," try the luxurious Nxabega Camp (www.nxabega.com), an Edwardian world of burnished teak and brass.

FOOD (A):

Okavango lodges and their chefs don't disappoint. Meals tend toward "Pan African" dishes featuring grilled meats, shrimp and chicken, which are often Asian-inflected. Fresh salads and vegetables are other high points on the menu, along with rich desserts.

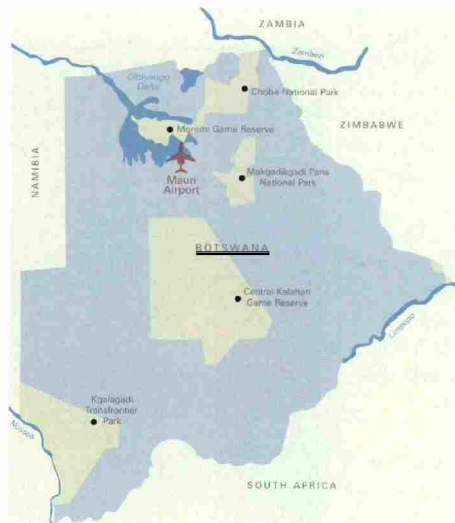
ACTIVITIES (A+):

Beyond traditional game drives, your lodge manager can organize expeditions to view the Okavango's spectacular bird life, and helicopter rides for a panoramic overview of the delta. Or try game viewing on horseback through Okavango Horse Safaris (www.okavangohorse.com). And for a real thrill, consider Abu's Camp (www.abucamp.com) to search for game on elephant back.

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search for the animals instead of letting them come to you. Savute under Canvas, a tented camp, changes its location every few days to track the wildlife as they move through one of Africa's most remote and game-rich grasslands. And if you go in January or February you'll watch the annual migration of thousands of zebra and wildebeest across the plains and the large concentrations of lion that follow them with fine dining in mind. And don't let the "tented" part fool you—Savute is downright luxurious, with candlelit dinners served on crystal and china and six well-appointed tents, each with its own butler.

Bill Whitman welcomes comments and suggestions at:
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traveler fast facts

WHAT IT IS:

An inland delta in northern Botswana, just south of the country's border with Namibia. Located where the Okavango River flows into the Kalahari Desert to form a 6,000-square-mile oasis of streams, lakes and islands.

CLIMATE:

Expect hot, wet summers from October to April, when temperatures often exceed 100 degrees F. Winters (May-September) are dry and cool with chilly evenings. The best time for game viewing is the April-to-October dry season, when the animals gather at watering holes. For the best bird watching, go during the December-to-March rainy season.

HEALTH AND INOCULATIONS:

This is a malaria area, so talk to your doctor before going. Also, bring insect repellent and plenty of sunscreen. Vaccinations aren't required, but the Centers for Disease Control suggests immunizations against yellow fever, tetanus, hepatitis A, polio and typhoid.

FLYING IN:

Maun Airport (MUB) has a 6,500-foot asphalt runway and jet-A fuel. Botswana's Civil Aviation Department (267-365-5100, fax 267-390-3348) requires that a flight plan be filed 48 hours before arrival.

BOOKINGS AND PLANNING:

Many travelers arrange their safaris by dealing directly with AndBeyond (www.andbeyondafrica.com), which operates luxury-adventure lodges in Botswana, including Xaranna, Xudum and Savute under Canvas. Recommended travel agents include Adventure Travel Desk (www.african-safari.com, 800-552-0300) and outfitter-tour operator Micato Safaris (www.micato.com, 212-545-711). Botswana doesn't require visas for U.S. citizens.