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Safaris in style at Botswana camps



Sundown at Sanctuary Chief's Camp, which offers 12 separate guesthouses overlooking a small pond that becomes a lake in winter.

By Barbara Redding

We came to Botswana to see leopards and lions, zebras and giraffes, rhinos and elephants. And we did. But we left savoring the gourmet meals created by the chef at Sanctuary Chief's Camp, admiring the courage of the female safari guides at Chobe Game Lodge and remembering the family-style hospitality at Kwetsani Camp.

On a safari last December, our itinerary took us to three remote but upscale lodges in Botswana. This southern Africa country, known for its political stability and harmonious people, has become a favorite destination of Goway Travel, whose Africa Experts team arranged our trip.

"A South Africa safari is cheaper, but here the environment is pristine," explained Mandy Sunderland, a manager at Kwetsani, during our visit. "There are no fences and very few people. You get the comfort of home in the middle of the bush. That's hard to find."

Kwetsani, located in the Moremi Game Reserve in the Okavango Delta, didn't seem much like home at first. To get to northwest Botswana we spent 30 minutes in a small bush plane. At a deserted landing strip, we piled into a Land Cruiser and fishtailed for an hour along a road that was little more than two tracks in the sand. (A boat ride may also be required in winter when water from Angola creates this inland flood plain in the Kalahari Desert.)

But warm smiles from the Kwetsani staff, along with wet towels and refreshing drinks, set the tone for our stay. By the time we left we felt like we'd been staying with friends.

The main open-air lodge resembles a cozy family room, with leather sofas and a small library. Drinks from a well-stocked bar are self-serve. Meals are buffet-style at a long table, where guides and guests review the day's animal sightings.

The lodge and six separate tented chalets are built on wood platforms under a canopy of trees. Long, raised walkways connect the chalets, allowing water to flow underneath. Wildlife, including elephants and baboons, roam the camp freely day and night.

Thatched roofs conceal rustic but elegant rooms with king or twin beds, bathrooms with double sinks and indoor and outdoor showers. Ceiling fans cool the open-beamed rooms, while mosquito netting keeps the bugs away. East-facing sun porches offer amazing sunrises.

Generators supply reliable but limited power; there are no hair dryers, and communication is via satellite phone and two-way radio. Each chalet has an air horn for emergencies.

To see animals, where you go and how depends on flood levels. Our stay was in the drier summertime, but the permanent delta contained enough water for boat trips. In the narrow channels or "hippo highways,"

which are literally created by hippopotamuses walking in shallow water, we spotted colorful birds and hippos playing hide-and-seek amid papyrus reeds.

On a game drive we watched a young leopard stalk a baby zebra in the tall grass for 45 tense minutes. A kill is often the highlight of a safari, but we were mostly relieved when the herd galloped to safety. We toasted our adventure with gin and bitter lemon at a "sundowner" while the sky turned fiery red.

If Kwetsani offered our most intimate contact with wildlife, Sanctuary Chief's Camp delivered the most luxury, with a spa and gourmet meals. Each room had a

crystal decanter of sherry, dark chocolates in a small refrigerator and Africology beauty products in roomy bathrooms with raised-bowl sinks and tiled showers. The staff decorated our beds with elephants outlined in beads.

Sanctuary Chief's, an Abercrombie & Kent lodge ranked among the top camps in Botswana by Conde Nast, has 12 separate guesthouses overlooking a small pond that becomes a lake in winter.

Starting early is usually rewarded at the lodge, which is located in the predator capital of Africa. We saw rare African wild dogs sleeping in the sunshine, a leopard lounging in a tree and a pack of young hyenas fight-



A room at Kwetsani Camp in the Moremi Game Reserve.

PHOTO BY DIANA ALLEN

ing over a stick. The highlight was a grumpy rhinoceros that briefly charged the truck.

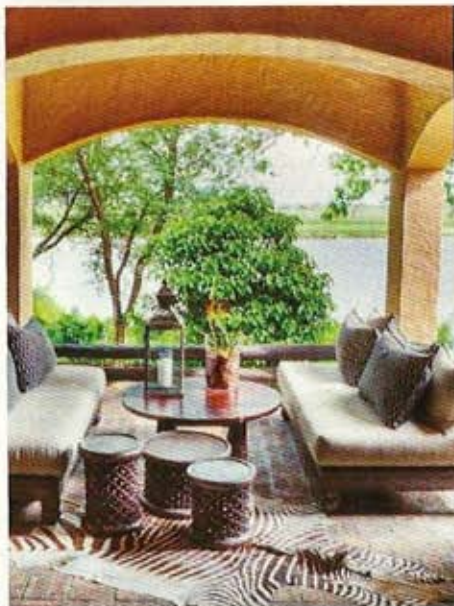
Music and food are integral to Chief's. The first night the staff serenaded us with native songs and dances before we dined around an open fire at a traditional African "boma," or feast. We devoured chef Harry Feiersinger's fish in curry coconut milk, braised lamb chops and chocolate eclairs.

"Fine dining is totally part of the safari experience today," Feiersinger told us over coffee. "People save their whole lives to go on a safari. They will not be disappointed at Chief's." His cookbook, "What's Cooking in the Okavango Delta," is available on Amazon.com.

Though we spent most of our time in the Okavango, our safari began in northeast Botswana at Chobe National Park, after a brief stopover at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. We'd barely crossed into the park when we spotted our first herd of elephants — about a dozen drinking at a shallow watering hole. Chobe bills itself as home to more elephants than anywhere else in Africa. We weren't disappointed.

Chobe Game Lodge is an impressive Moorish-style resort camouflaged amid trees along the banks of the Chobe River. The only permanent lodge inside the park, Chobe's expansive lounge areas and sprawling wooden decks enable guests to view wildlife over lunch or a sundowner drink.

On a sunset cruise we watched a dozen hippos, including several youngsters, grazing on the Namibia side of the river before



Left, accommodations at the Chobe Game Lodge, an impressive, Moorish-style resort camouflaged amid trees along the banks of the Chobe River. Right, Chobe guide Emily and her four-wheel-drive Land Cruiser. All 14 of the lodge's safari guides are women.



slipping into the water. Rare birds, nesting crocodiles, playful baboons, a huge monitor lizard, impalas and kudu seemed mostly oblivious to the low drone of the motor.

The Chobe lodge's 42 guestrooms have river views; four have private splash pools. Rooms are air-conditioned with safes, mini-bars and soaking tubs. Lounge areas, with arched doorways and quarry tile, are full of plush sofas and chairs covered in bright Middle Eastern fabrics. A small library contains a treasure trove of books and maps.

You can get a pedicure, a massage or work out at the gym.

Wake-up calls are early: 4:30. Our guide, Emily, joined us for coffee and sweet rolls before we headed into the bush. Guides have traditionally been men, but Chobe pioneered hiring women, and it has reduced its vehicle repair bills and cut turnover while earning praise from guests, according to Chobe manager James Wilson. Currently all 14 of the lodge's safari guides are women.

Emily's knowledge of animal behavior was impressive. She tracked our first lion pride and patiently cruised Chobe the last day until she found another herd of elephants.

We departed Botswana with our memory cards crammed with pictures of wildlife. What our cameras couldn't capture was how much we'd learned about the animals, the land and the people.

Contact Goway's Africa Experts at www.goway.com or (800) 665-4432.