



Goodwill Hunting

The name of the game is sustainable, low-impact contact in a wild world that is fast disappearing.

Safari is a Swahili word meaning 'journey', and, in by-gone days, adventurers travelled on safari through unchartered lands with armed guards and native porters carrying their home-away-from-homes, their main aim being to shoot big game. Thankfully most big game today are shot with cameras, as safaris have become big business and millions of people visit Africa's game reserves and national parks each year to get a taste of nature in a world fast losing its remaining wilderness. As safari tourism increases however, it's very easy to find yourself part of a large group, viewing animals in game reserves that are little more than glorified zoos.

Botswana offers the other end of the spectrum: high-end, low-impact, environmentally-sustainable safaris aimed at the luxury market, perfect for those who want to dissolve into the bush and view a wide range of game with their own knowledgeable guide, with no curfews or restrictions (beyond those necessary for safety) and rarely another vehicle in sight. Despite a more peaceful modern history and higher living standard than most of Africa, much of Botswana remains a roadless wilderness, where supplies and guests reach camps by light planes, and emails and telephones are completely absent.

The undisputed star of Botswana's tourism is the amazing Okavango Delta, an inland delta covering 15,000 square kilometres. Heavy summer rains in Angola's highlands fill rivers and channels, which flow across Namibia and into the Okavango River (forming the 'pan handle' of the Delta) and, instead of unleashing devastating floods as one might imagine, spread out into the vast sands of the Kalahari, creating the world's largest inland delta.

While some of the lowest lying land in the Delta remains permanently flooded, most of it fluctuates between a largely aquatic environment from about May to late September dotted with green islands teeming with wildlife, and dry savannah grasslands from about December to February dotted with lagoons, swamps and waterholes. One constant is the giant termite mounds, so essential to the formation of the Delta's habitat. The islands that dot the plains in both dry and wet seasons have built up over thousands of years on the back of these mounds. Newer, unwooded mounds provide ideal vantage points for cheeky baboons that want to be 'king of the castle', or create stark modern sculptures when topped by twisted dead tree trunks. There aren't any fences in the Okavango Delta, so

animals roam freely following ancient migration paths and interacting in their natural habitat. Elephants and hippos are the keystone animals of the Delta, as they modify the habitat: elephants by tearing down trees and toppling vegetation, enabling other animals to take advantage of the changed landscape and lower greenery, and hippos forging through time-worn channels keeping them open so that the waters continue to flow.

The first luxury lodge to open in the Okovango Delta (in 1999), and still one of the most beautiful, is Jao Camp. Built on an island, it shares a 60,000-hectare private reserve in the central west of the Delta with just three other luxury camps. Guest numbers are restricted to 48 guests at any one time between the four camps, making it possible to drive all day and rarely



see another vehicle. The owners of this private reserve have purchased both photographic and hunting rights; although they don't exercise their hunting rights, this ensures that no one else can hunt the animals within the concession. Wildlife at Jao varies with the water levels; lion, antelope (impala, tsessebe, red lechwe, kudu, steenbok), zebra, giraffe, elephant, wildebeest and buffalo dot the plains and troops of baboons and monkeys make mischief. The bird life in the Delta is colourful and diverse, the flash of bright blue kingfisher wings and the flurry of rust from the feathers of a coppery-tailed coucal add colour to the natural tones of trees and scrub.

Service is very personal, with guides collecting guests from the small landing strip and then escorting them on morning and afternoon activities for the duration of their stay. The whole camp is raised on wooden decks above lush palms with a canopy of ancient trees overhead. This keeps it cool, provides an excellent vantage point, and allows the local elephants to roam freely around (and under) the buildings. Rooms are luxurious, thatched canvas and wood, letting all the sights, sounds and smells of the African bush in, but keeping

unwanted insects and other wildlife out. King-size beds and en-suite facilities including a large bath, flush toilet, twin hand-basins and an outdoor shower with a wonderful view add to the sense of luxury.

Days start early on safari with a gentle knock on the door at 5.30am from your guide. A light breakfast follows and by 6.30am, you're out enjoying a beautiful African sunrise. Driving through the savanna in the early morning light in an open 4WD, wrapped in a cosy blanket for comfort, savouring the earthy, herby, peppery aromas of the bush and spotting a herd of elephants, a dazzle of zebras or a journey of giraffes out for a morning graze is an unforgettable experience. Vehicles are often able to get very close to animals, shut off the engines and allow guests to sit and observe the interaction among the group. The hierarchy within various groups and the care and grooming of the young are fascinating. Guides are well trained, knowledgeable about animals' habits, habitats and family structures as well as local flora; one of the goals of tourism within the Okavango Delta is to educate people about this unique and diverse wilderness. By about 11am it's becoming too warm

for animals (us included) to be out and about, so vehicles return to camp for a substantial brunch. Siesta time is spent on the sala (a daybed with an amazing view), relaxing in the cool main lodge with a book and a tall drink, by the plunge pool with a view of the lagoon's bird life, or in the capable hands of the resident masseuse and beauty therapist.

Afternoon tea is served at 4pm, after which you're off on another game drive (as the animals come out again in the cool of the afternoon), or a mokoro (flat-bottom dugout canoe) ride with the guide poling gondola-style through narrow water channels. Guided walks are another option or, water levels permitting, motorboat rides between the many islands of the flooded Delta. Camp-outs, where a day and night is spent in the bush with a guide (meals and all) and sleep-outs (the chance to sleep under the stars after dinner in the main lodge) are exciting options. The beauty of an African sunset sounds like a cliché, until you are mesmerised by your first one with the fiery sky slowly fading to ebony.

Service at Jao is very personalised and friendly; with a guest to staff ratio of less than two to one, there's always someone on hand to advise, direct, or just sit and chat about the wonders of life in southern Africa (and the Okavango Delta in particular)—time moves delightfully slowly on safari! "It's a pleasure" is



something you hear often at Jao, and you can tell by the joy people take in their roles that they really mean it!

Botswana has such a diversity of landscapes and eco-systems that it's wise to visit several different camps to get a good overview of the region and see a wide diversity of game. Three days in each of three camps is considered ideal. Two other camps that make a great package with Jao are Mombo and Kings Pool.

Mombo and Little Mombo camps, on Mombo Island in the Moremi Game Reserve in the Okavango Delta, have an abundance of plains animals, including all the big cats, especially lions. Even more exciting is their work to reintroduce the endangered white rhino. In May 2004, they celebrated the first white rhino to be born in that area in at least 15 years. They offer game flights and inter-camp transfers by helicopter, for a chance to get much closer to the Delta's scenery and wildlife than is possible by light plane.

Leaving the Delta behind, Kings Pool is located in the very north of Botswana on the Linyanti River, which forms the border with Namibia. Rooms are beautifully decorated with wooden furniture from all over Africa and have an outdoor area consisting of sala, plunge pool and balcony overlooking Kings Pool Lagoon where pods of hippos keep cool. Their grunting and snorting are one of the highlights of Kings Pool, combined with the trumpeting of elephants, screeching of baboons and calls of the bird life. They make this one of the noisiest, but most exciting, camps in Botswana.

Wilderness Safaris are the largest organisers of safaris in Botswana specialising in high-end, low-impact safaris in small camps www.wilderness-safaris.com. Their agent is The Classic Safari Company, +61 2 9327-0666 www.classicsafaricompany.com.au. South African Airways flies to Johannesburg daily and Air Botswana have daily flights to Maun. Travel to the lodges is then by private charter on 6 - 12 seater planes.