

It is not a dog's life...

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Let's face it, there aren't many places that you can promote with confidence as 'One of the World's Last Great Wilderness Areas', but you can certainly do that with the legendary Okavango Delta deep in the heart of Botswana. The only inland delta of its kind in the world, it's formed by the Okavango River, which floods down from the Angolan highlands once a year to fan out into northwestern Botswana in a meandering complex network of papyrus-lined channels, deep still pools where crocodiles lurk and hippos snort, secret waterways where reeds and grasses almost meet over your head, palm-fringed islands and natural lagoons. The limpid, lily-studded crystal-clear water is so pure that you can drink it.

It's a perfect travel destination because there's so much to see, to do, to wonder at, to enjoy, and Botswana's policy of low-impact, high-cost tourism, means that the wilderness remains pristine and exclusive. Botswana's infra-structure is excellent, the standard of parks and accommodations high, and the hospitality and friendliness of the local people are a byword in the tourist industry.

So it's no surprise that visitors are choosing this landlocked country, roughly the size of France or Texas, flanked by Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia and Zambia, as their dream destination.

Very importantly – and safety is an issue on many travellers' minds – it's safe. Forty years on after Independence in 1966, Botswana is not only the world's leading producer of gem quality diamonds and one of Africa's richest countries, but it's also a role model for a peaceful, stable democracy. You might have lions, hyenas and leopards outside your lodge or tent, but there certainly won't be predators of the two-footed kind.

And nearly everybody speaks English – so you won't have difficulty in making yourself understood.

Botswana is passionate about conservation – almost 18% of its total land area is set aside for conservation and tourism, and if you're looking for big game, you certainly won't be disappointed. The Delta itself has many lodges and camps, ranging from water camps, to land-and-water camps. The water camps, often based on islands, offer wonderful water experiences such as boating, being poled in a mokoro, birdwatching and fishing. To drift along in a mokoro is the ultimate perfect water wilderness experience. Once upon a time the indigenous nomadic Bayei people would carve this traditional wooden craft from the trunks of the ancient jackalberry, wild ebony or morula trees that line the waterways. Today, in order to protect the trees, a modern fibre-glass canoe takes its place. If you're a fisherman, then the prized fighting tigerfish will certainly be on your wishlist.

However, if it's big game you're after, then rather choose a land-and-water-based camp, where you'll get the best of both worlds. You'll be taken on thrilling morning or evening game drives in an open-sided game-viewing vehicle, as well as being offered a guided walk with an experienced ranger to see nature close-up and in miniature. There's great excitement to be had when you find that first lion spoor yourself, or spot a dung beetle rolling its ball of dung – beetle-wife clinging on gamely – to its sought-after nesting place. The Moremi Wildlife Reserve, deep in the Okavango Delta, was the first place in southern Africa to be designated as such by the local BaTswana community and teems with game, as do the Linyanti and Savuti areas further north. You'll certainly see predators here – from lions and leopards to hyena and cheetah – and Linyanti and Savuti in particular are famed for their wild dog packs, although they move so far and so fast, it just means being in the right place at the right time to spot them. Elephants are everywhere,

wading, bathing, munching and chewing. Lions call at night, competing with the whoops of the marauding hyenas, and more than one lucky visitor has seen lions and cheetahs chasing prey through the water, and even swimming. Leopards are common – listen for their characteristic sawing-wood sound at night – and there are hippos galore. Deep in the Delta is one of the world's rarest and most elusive antelopes, the aquatic Sitatunga, with its splayed feet especially adapted for foraging in the reeds and wading through mud.

Winter - June to October – is probably the best time game-viewing time, because the grass is low, many trees and shrubs have lost their leaves, and it's easier to spot animals. But it can be bitterly cold – it's essential to bring warm clothing for those early morning and late evening drives – although you'll be kept snug and warm in your tent, hut or chalet by ever-attentive staff. But this is high season, so prices are at their highest. The 'Green Season' – when there are great economy deals and packages offered by most of the lodges and camps – is when the bush is at its greenest and loveliest, and there are baby animals everywhere.

If you're a birder (Botswana has over 400 species of birds), this is the best time to visit, as all the migrants have returned. You'll be dazzled by the colours of the Carmine Bee-eaters, amazed at the intricate nest weaving of the different kinds of Weavers, wonder at the abundance of waterbirds, and tick off raptors non-stop – from falcons and kestrels to the great eagles. Cuckoos and kingfishers will be calling everywhere, sunbirds are sipping the blossoms of the flowering trees, and the huge ginger-coloured Pels Fishing Owl is a mega-tick on any serious birder's life list. In the early mornings, you'll be overwhelmed by the tumult of bird song, and at night, the tiny painted reed frogs add their 'tink, tink' to the night chorus of animals and birds.

But be warned, if you can't stand the heat, stick to the winter months, as Botswana now becomes very hot – up to 40 degrees in December, January and February – although many camps have aircon, and most have pools.

At any time of year, especially if you come from a city, you'll be awed and astounded by Botswana's night skies. The Kalahari San/Bushmen say that you can hear the stars sing, and if you're in any doubt, as you sit in the boma sipping your nightcap after a wholesome, hearty dinner, just gaze up at the blue-black dome of the sky. A myriad of stars dance and pulse as the Milky Way shimmers across the heavens. An experience such as this is true soul-food. If you're lucky, you'll not only hear hyenas whooping and jackals yipping, but maybe the screech of Pel's Fishing Owl, which sounds like a soul in torment.

Botswana has it all. Watch the African sun go down in a blaze of glory as a lion roars in the gathering darkness. Smell the earth after the long-awaited rains have come. Let the crystal-clear water of a lagoon slip through your fingers. Draw magic natural energy from giant riverine trees. Laugh at the antics of a baboon.

Sometimes being on safari *can* be like being in the middle of a National Geographic television special, at other times the bush is quieter, but still food for the spirit and soul. There's an old African Proverb which says "No One Tests the Depth of a River with Both Feet." If you visit Botswana and the Okavango Delta take it one step at a time, but be prepared to be inundated – not by a river – but by a flood of sometimes almost incredible wilderness experiences.

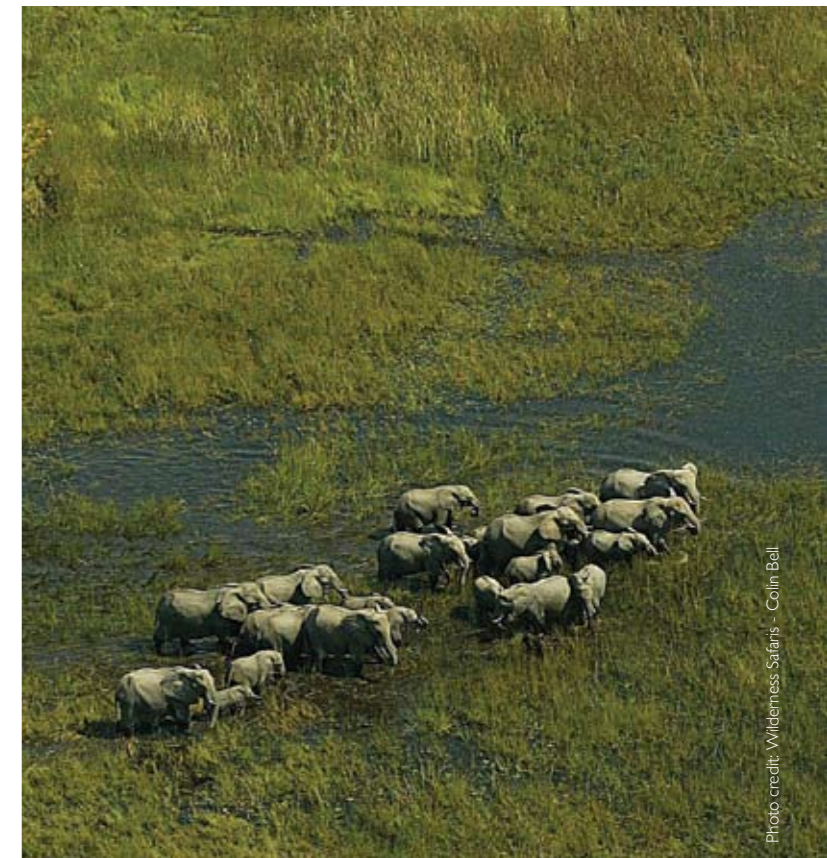


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