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The Okavango Delta is an extraordinary place – an inland river delta of pure, clear water that, unexpectedly, is mainly dry grasslands in the wet season and filled with water in the dry season.

THERE MAY BE VAST EXPANSES OF WATER, THERE MAY BE HUGE GRASSLAND FLOODPLAINS. THERE MAY BE BOTH. IT ALL DEPENDS ON THE UNPREDICTABLE WATERS. GO WITH A MIND WIDE OPEN TO ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACES ON EARTH, SAYS **LORRAINE KEARNEY**

DELTA FOR BEGINNERS



The Okavango Delta, in far north-western Botswana, is one of those legendary places at the top of many bucket lists. It is a massive draw, people lured by its remoteness and vast, untamed wilderness. But more than tourism, it has deep significance, culturally, historically and, crucially, geologically and hydrologically.

WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT

It’s made up of permanent marshlands and seasonally flooded grasslands and is one of very few major interior delta systems that do not flow into a sea or ocean; and its wetland system is almost intact. The annual flooding from the Okavango River is during the dry season, which is not what you’d expect, and the plants and animals have adapted their life cycles to the annual cycle of rains and flooding.

In essence, it’s an extraordinary juxtaposition of a vibrant wetland in an arid landscape, with an astounding transformation of massive sandy, dry and brown depressions by winter season floods.

The Delta is home to some of the world’s most endangered species of large mammal, such as the cheetah, elephant, white rhino, black rhino, African wild dog and lion. Because of the annual rhythms of the water, game viewing is seasonal.

But come with an open mind. It’s more than just the floods and the water. Some may be disappointed when they arrive and there are not the floodplains full of water they have seen in photographs. ‘The

water and floods are so unpredictable that many experienced and wise people bet on them and place regular updates every year,’ says Tessa Bell, who hosts the *Beautiful Botswana* podcast. ‘This unpredictability is the beauty of the Delta: you may have a vast expanse without a drop of water that is prime cheetah hunting ground waiting for you, or you may have a flooded plain of water lilies to float over or a combination of the two.’

‘Whatever the floods are doing and no matter where the water is, you are in a beautiful location.’



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LEFT A *mokoro* is poled quietly through the many water channels.

BELOW The king of the jungle surveys his territory.

RIGHT The view from a bedroom in one of Omogolo’s Hideaways.

MAPPING THE DELTA

The Okavango River rises in the Angolan Highlands to the north and meanders through Angola, Namibia and, finally, Botswana, where it ends in the Delta. There are three geographical areas: the Panhandle, the Delta and the Drylands.

The Panhandle begins as the river crosses into Botswana from Namibia at Mohebo and the surrounding swamps are flooded annually. Then it flows into the Delta at Seronga. Eventually, the permanent swamps become seasonal marshes and then the Drylands.

It is generally – and falsely – thought that the entire Delta is a protected area, and that the Moremi Game Reserve is the place to go. But much of the Delta is unprotected and is home to the people who have lived there for hundreds of years, who fish in the rivers and are ruled by its water cycles.

And there are other really special places to go, too, such as the Panhandle, the Selinda Spillway and the Kwando Private Concession. Speaking of concessions, there are many of them, all offering their own specialities and camps.

GETTING THERE

You’ve booked your trip, all good and well, but one of the best things about the Delta is that it is so remote and inaccessible. Best idea is to get to Maun, and set off from there.

Air Botswana, the national airline, flies from Johannesburg, Gaborone and Kasane. FlyAirlink also flies into Maun from South Africa, and CemAir flies into Maun and Kasane. MackAir is the business. It’s been operating in northern Botswana for 25 years, and does charter flights and schedules around Botswana and Zimbabwe.

Once there, transport is by six-, nine- and 12-seater Cessnas (or toy planes as some would have it), or helicopter. This means your maximum luggage allowance is 15 kg in soft, squashy bags, and 5 kg hand luggage. Hard suitcases will not cut it because they don’t fit in the cargo pods of the small planes, and certainly not in the helicopters.

Of course, you can also drive; arriving in Maun is a little like riding into a dusty Wild West town. This is probably because it’s a frontier town and the gateway to the Delta. And it’s a favourite of veteran safari folk – guides, pilots, those simply hooked on Africa’s wildlands.

It’s a fun place to hang out, but you can’t tarry, a safari is calling. Moremi Air is your best bet here. The dinky planes ferry you to most places in the area, where the landing strips are tracks in the bush and it’s not uncommon for animals to amble along them. Charter flights generally take between 20 to 50 minutes, depending on your destination.

There are other places that are so remote – or so wet – that only a helicopter will do. And here, Helicopter Horizons is the go-to. If you are driving, don’t drive at night, for the donkeys, elephants and other creatures roam around.



OMOGOLO HIDEAWAYS offers three luxury self-catering homes in a 1 600-ha conservancy on the south-western edge of the Okavango Delta. This pristine bush environment, rich in bird and wildlife, benefits from Botswana’s conservation efforts.

The hideaways, spaced 1–4 km apart, provide privacy and comfort. Each house overlooks a private waterhole and accommodates two to six guests, featuring wooden structures, thatched roofs, and canvas walls. Central areas include a lounge, dining area, and well-

equipped kitchen, with spacious bedrooms offering en-suite bathrooms and bush views. Mangwane, one hideaway, has a private pool. Additional services include a shopping service and pre-booked in-house meals.

Located 28 km from Tsau Village (route A35), Omogolo is accessible by 4x4, helicopter or road transfer. Activities include Bushman nature walks, spa treatments and helicopter flights. Private and guided game drives are available. relax@omogolohideaways.com omogolohideaways.com



WATER CROSSING

You can't visit the Delta without spending time in a *mokoro* – though they don't work year-round, being dependent on the water levels. They're at their highest during July and August. Traditionally, mekoro (the plural) are dug out from trunks of large straight trees, such as ebony or kigelia, aka sausage tree. But to save the trees, they are now generally made from fibreglass.

This is the most peaceful way to safari. It is utterly quiet, the only sounds being the birds, grunting hippos and the soft splash of the *nkashi* (the pole). You sit just centimetres above the water, a magnificent place from which to view the world. And from here you can spot the tiny, colourful reed frogs that make these waters their homes. And the dragonflies on their gossamer wings.

You might initially be a bit concerned about falling in, but the people here learn to wrangle a *mokoro* at a very young age – as young as seven years old – and they're experts at it by the time they're adults.

Delta Rain offers fully catered trips, and Okavango Kopano Mokoro Community Trust does guided trips, but you must bring your own food and gear.

Like being on the water? Book a houseboat through Okavango Houseboats – get yourself to Sepopa and a boat transfer to the Okavango Houseboats.



Or maybe horse riding is your thing. Ride Botswana is a top-notch choice. Its seven-night Delta Ride is not a permanent riding camp; instead, a mobile camp is taken to your next stop each day by a flotilla of *mekoro* poled by folk who live on the fringes of the Delta and know it intimately.

ABOVE Hippos spend their days lolling around in the water, occasionally grunting and roaring – do not swim in the Delta.

THE PANHANDLE

The long, green Panhandle in the north-west is not your usual safari destination because it's not part of a reserve or protected area, but there are still massive inviting areas of unspoilt wetlands and papyrus-lined lagoons. It's a permanent waterway, which means fantastic birdwatching and fishing. For serious twitchers, Pel's fishing owls are frequently spotted here. And there are hippos, elephants, crocodiles, otters and sitatunga antelope.

Communities live along the Panhandle as they have always done, their lives and livelihoods unfolding as ever.

MOREMI GAME RESERVE

Moremi, which covers a third of the region, is the only officially protected area of the Okavango Delta, proclaimed as a game reserve by the Batawana people of Ngamiland in 1963.

It's in the central and eastern areas of the Okavango and includes the Moremi Tongue and Chief's Island. It's got spectacular game viewing and birdwatching. Black and white rhino have recently been re-introduced, making it a Big Five destination.

It's particularly good if you're self-driving, and the Third Bridge campsite is a good spot to pitch a tent.

It's a diverse place, with mopane woodland and thorn scrub to dry savannah, riparian woodland, grassland, floodplain, marsh and permanent waterways, lagoons and islands. Keep your eyes peeled for the rare and secretive Pel's fishing owl.



CHIEF'S ISLAND

It is the biggest island, so named because it used to be the sole hunting grounds of the local chief. There's plenty of wildlife, which head for its higher land when the floods come. Given these attractions, it is home to some of the most exclusive lodges and tented camps you're likely to find anywhere.

XAKANAXA LEDIBA

Heaven for twitchers: it's home to one of Africa's largest heronries. But there's more. Sightings include storks, egrets and ibises. And lots of fish.

POOLS

Go in the dry season, when trails at Paradise Pools take you past forests of dead trees and along the perimeter of swamps. The waterholes recede and it's easier to spot antelope, and if there are antelope, there are predators. Dombo Hippo Pool, just south-west of North Gate, is best for hippo watching.

LEFT Third Bridge Camp at Moremi Game Reserve is a favourite for campers as a great place to start their Okavango safari.



ABOVE Kwando Safaris' Moremi Crossing camp is on the banks of the Boro River. *Mokoro* trips are only possible when the water level is high.



Red lechwe live on the widest, flattest floodplains and migrate great distances as the water rises and falls to feed on the grasses that grow as the floodwaters recede.

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Botswana is home to the largest elephant population in Africa, with about 132 000 of the great pachyderms roaming its lands.

BELOW Elephants are crucial to the ecosystem, digging waterholes used by other wildlife in dry riverbeds when rainfall is low.

KWANDO PRIVATE CONCESSION

In the far north, with only two safari camps in its 2 300 km², is the Kwando Private Concession. The Kwando River, the border between Botswana and Namibia, flows along its eastern side and the Linyanti Swamp is on its southern flank. It's got riverine forests, marsh, floodplains, islands of palms and patches of wooded savannah. Which means prey and predators; and it's known for sightings of wild dogs.

Look out for red lechwe, impala, kudu and tsessebe, wildebeest and zebra herds from June to November, and big breeding herds of elephants range around in the second half of the year.



SENYATI is an experience that transcends the ordinary. Not every lodge boasts a resident banded mongoose family and elephants who visit daily, some known by names. Then again, Senyati Safari Camp isn't your typical retreat. Step into the lively atmosphere of their camp where 'animals are just beautiful people' and 'trees are constantly in deep, daily conversations with each other'. Let the gentle night sound rhythms beckon you to join in the frogs' chorus, or let the trumpeting of elephants, the running of buffalo or a laughing hyena rock you to sleep and insects strum their instruments beneath the benevolent African skies.

The name 'Senyati Safari Camp' originated from the many buffalo in the area. Senyati means Place of the Buffalo. It naturally evolved into an animal paradise as wildlife is not hunted or hurt at Senyati. Humans are merely visitors to their territory, and animals are part of the lodge's family.

In rural Botswana, people gather around fires at night for storytelling and singing, often accompanied by drums or other instruments. At Senyati, the animal kingdom provides such entertainment.

Join them for an unforgettable experience that harmonises with the heart of Africa.
senyatisafaricampbotswana.com



TSODILO HILLS

Not in the Delta, but if you’re in the Panhandle, set time aside to go to Tsodilo Hills, a Unesco World Heritage Site, just 35 km away. Wildlife is less prolific around here, so it is rarely visited. Not to do so would be a mistake, though.

The three central hills, called Male, Female and Child, are sacred sites and there is an inexplicable spiritual atmosphere around them. It is here that the ancestral spirits of the San, the original inhabitants, and the Hambukushu, who have periodically occupied the hills for the past 200 years, dwell. The hills are a place of ritual and communing with the spirits.

It is estimated that Tsodilo has been inhabited for the past 100 000 years, and pottery, iron, glass beads, shell beads, carved bone and stone tools dating back more than 90 000 years have been found.

In keeping with the sacredness of the site, there are more than 4 000 rock paintings in the hills, comprising red finger paintings and geometrics. Most are believed to have been painted by the San, and some by the pastoral Khoe people who later settled in the area. Two of the most famous images are the rhino polychromes and the Eland panel, but there are also paintings of penguins and whales.



It’s all about the walking trails here, which include the Rhino Trail, Lion Trail and Cliff Trail. But you need a guide. San and Hambukushu live near the hills and guides hail from their villages.

SELINDA SPILLWAY

The Selinda Reserve is another less visited area, meaning it is pristine. It is in the north-east, between the Okavango and Linyanti water systems, protecting the Selinda Spillway that runs through it. It’s all about palm trees, open grasslands in the east and leadwood and mopane forest in the west, with brilliant game viewing in the dry season.

The Selinda Spillway, known as Magwegquana round these parts, is a fossil channel that routes water between the Linyanti Swamps and the Okavango Delta, though it is often dry. **6**

ABOVE There are bodies of permanent water in the Delta and vast grasslands that are seasonally flooded.

LEFT The Rhino Trail is one of several trails at Tsodilo Hills, a sacred site known for its incredible rock art.

BELOW Xaro Lodge is in The Panhandle.

Nestled in Botswana’s Okavango Panhandle, **XARO LODGE** is the perfect balance of luxury, tranquillity and adventure. This exclusive, 24-bed meru-tented lodge, accessible by boat, offers an immersive wilderness experience amid the serene landscape of the magnificent Okavango River. Accommodation in spacious, tented suites blends seamlessly with nature, ensuring a tranquil and unforgettable stay.

Xaro Lodge is a paradise for twitchers, with the enchanting melodies of the fish eagle, white-backed night heron, and elusive Pels owl, among others, filling

the air. Engage in captivating bush walks and boat cruises, and indulge in world-class cuisine. Beyond luxury, Xaro is committed to sustainability and conservation, operating with a minimal ecological footprint.

Experience the true essence of Botswana at Xaro Lodge, where every moment is an adventure. Discover the Okavango River’s magic, the beauty of the wilderness, and the comfort of the secluded, nature-immersed Xaro Lodge.

+267 72807476
reservations@xaro-lodge.com
xaro-lodge.com



Trip Planner

Good to Know

The best time to visit the Okavango Delta for wildlife viewing is from July to October (the dry season), when water levels are at their highest – good for *mokoro* trips. Because of the time it takes for the water to reach the Delta, the flooding is highest in the dry months of April to October. July and August are the busiest months, and the campsites fill up.

The wet months, from January to March, are less ideal for visiting because some areas become inaccessible. From November to March, a lot of wildlife remains in the heart of the Delta, which has permanent water. There is less wildlife around and water levels may be too low for mokoro trips. But there are loads of baby animals, which attract predators. And it's the best time for birdwatching.

The best weather is May to August, when it is not

too hot; and the worst is October, when it is scorching.

Malaria, including cerebral malaria, is common in northern Botswana, the Okvango and Chobe areas, particularly during and immediately after the rainy season in November to April.

Pack for hot and cold and dress in layers. Mornings and evenings can be chilly, but days hot to very hot.

Foot and mouth disease is a real problem, and can wipe out whole herds of livestock, and hence livelihoods. Official fence boundaries, known as buffalo fences, are designed to keep domestic and wild animals separate so diseases can't pass between them. When you cross the border or buffalo fence, you must disinfect your shoes and stamp them in a sanitising station to stop the potential spread.

Advice from Those Who Know

'The Okavango Delta has a strange magic that keeps pulling me back, no matter how many times I visit. There's something about the water here that seeps into your soul, and you feel its presence long after you've left,' says Jillian Blackbeard, the chief executive of Africa's Eden Tourism Association, and a Motswanan who visits the Delta as often as she can.

Her advice: pack a hat for the sun, even in winter, and lip balm for the dry lips you'll get at the back of a game viewer, whether it's a boat, vehicle or helicopter. Don't forget a pack of cards and a book for those peaceful afternoon siestas.

Black Book

- Botswana Tourism botswanatourism.co.bw
- Air Botswana airbotswana.co.bw
- Airlink flyairlink.com
- CemAir flycemair.co.za
- Moremi Air moremi.com
- MackAir mackair.co.bw
- Helicopter Horizons helicopterhorizons.com
- Africa's Eden africaseden.travel
- Ride Botswana ridebotswana.com
- Delta Rain Safaris deltarain.com
- Okavango Kopano Mokoro Community Trust okmctng32.com
- Okavango Houseboats okavangohouseboats.com
- KAZA uncoverkaza.com



Stay Here

Kwando Safaris has camps scattered across the Delta and beyond. **4 RIVERS** (above) is its newest, and is a rather special place, with exclusive use of the western side of the Kwara Private Concession. The 4 Rivers area is probably the last pristine and unexplored prime part of the Delta, and 4 Rivers camp is the first brand-new camp to be opened in the Delta in years.

It's built around hard timber trees, such as tall mopane and jackalberry, and the design, which is based on a termite mound, specifically makes nature the star of the show. The interiors use natural light as much as possible and are set up to allow for natural airflow to help with cooling. The camp sits on raised wooden decks, with nine large meru tents, including a family room.

It's a gorgeous place, with the added benefit of being able to watch hippos cavort in the river, while you are lolling in the pool.

SADC rates from P6 900 pps pn (about R9 200)
kwando.co.bw
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Camps in the Delta can be rustic and simple (even just a campsite), or luxurious and simple. **CHA CHA METSI** (right) is in the latter team.

It's a private camp set in a community area in NG32, the largest concession in the Delta swamp. It's known for its large resident populations of elephants, leopards and lions – their rumblings and roars the soundtrack to your night. There are also buffalo, giraffes, zebra and more, across a varied landscape. The camp is set up in a leadwood forest on the edge of a large permanent lagoon that forms part of the main Santantadibe Channel. The local name is Gama tau, which means gathering place of lions.

It's thoughtful, stylish and elegant, with more than a nod to what it terms 'the golden years of safaris' in a deliberate return to the '20s.

From \$450 pp pn (about R8 140)
chachametsi.com
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