



Botswana's Okavanga – a lush paradise in the middle of a desert

The world's largest inland delta is one of Africa's top wilderness attractions

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Botswana is one of the few places left in Africa where large numbers of wildlife roam free through unfenced wilderness areas. Initially a British protectorate, Botswana, achieved independence in 1966. At that time, it was one of the most impoverished countries in Africa, but has since transformed itself to a middle-income country with a stable political system and a rapidly developing market economy. Eighty percent of the population is rural.

Geographically it is landlocked and bordered by South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia. It is approximately the size of France but with a population of only 1.8 million. Seventeen percent of Botswana consists of national parks and game reserves.

The Kalahari Desert, which covers up to 70% of its land surface, is the largest continuous stretch of sand in the world. Situated in the northwest of the country is the Okavango Delta, the world's largest inland delta.

Its source, the Okavango River, arises in the distant central highlands of Angola. After traversing through Namibia, it enters Botswana.

At first, the river flowed into a vast inland lake before emptying into the Indian Ocean. However, subtle changes in the earth's crust over millions of years cut off the route to the sea. Thus the Okavango is one of the few major rivers in the world which is totally divorced from an ocean-bound river system and its waters empty into the sands of the Kalahari Desert, forming a maze of channels.

This creates a permanent swamp as well as a seasonable swamp where an extensive area is flooded annually. Vegetation flanks the channels with tall papyrus and grass. In some places, the channels open up to form lagoons, which support water lilies.

The purity of the Okavango waters creates mirror-like reflections of clouds, reeds and sky. This vast area of secluded waterways, papyrus, thickly wooded islands and stupendous wildlife is one of the major wilderness attractions of Africa.

Roads in Botswana in general and in the delta in particular, are only accessible by four wheel drive and in the wet season, they are often non negotiable and barely passable. Because of this, the delta remains wild and relatively unpopulated. Only a few sandy tracks and isolated camp sites disturb the pristine nature of these areas. The only practical form of transportation is by small planes.

The delta is host to vast numbers of game and bird species. The annual rains and flooding ensure adequate water sup-

ply to the animals living in a lush paradise with the abundant vegetation in the midst of a desert.

There are large populations of elephants, buffalos, baboons, hippos, cheetahs, lions, leopards, wildebeest and many species of antelope and birds. It is one of the last strongholds of the African Wild Dog, considered to be one of the continent's most endangered carnivores.

The most stealthy and secretive of the big cats is the leopard. These magnificent animals are solitary. Males and females live in different defined territories and only come together to mate.

Lions, in contrast, are the only truly social members of the cat family. A pride typically consists of five adult males with their offspring and two males to ward off competitors.

Of the wild life, three species are essential to the ecosystem. First is the large African elephant. A single elephant will consume up to 300kg of vegetation every 24 hours. Many other species are dependent on modifications brought about by these animals.

The bare and brittle branches left by the elephant provide nesting for a host of birds. Broken branches on the ground are consumed by millions of termites. Droppings (about 30kg per day) attract bacteria, insects and worms making high quality compost. In addition, ingested seeds excreted in their droppings serve to propagate the vegetation.

The second animal crucial to the ecosystem is the hippopotamus, one of the heaviest land mammals. Emerging from the water at night, they take the same course daily leveling the grass and creating channels which allows water to flow.

Returning to defecate in the water during the day, the hippo fertilizes the aquatic habitat by providing essential nutrients.

Finally, the termites play a crucial role in shaping the savanna ecosystems. These industrious creatures build tall spire-like mounds, which are seen all over the delta. The raised ground that they create is the starting point for bush clumps and island formation. Each year the mound gets a little larger, as silt deposits build up on the fringes. Eventually, two or more raised mounds may become bridges, and so an island grows.

Our touring arrangements to this fascinating country were made by &BEYOND, an international high-end company recognized globally as one of the world's pioneering luxury ecotourism companies.

It owns and operates nearly 50 luxury lodges and camps. The majority are in Africa, but they have recently expanded into India and central and South America. In addition, &BEYOND have established a foundation which focuses on projects to empower communities neighboring the

reserves. This foundation has implemented numerous projects to support education and health care.

The company operates 4 luxury camping lodges (Sandebi, Nxabega, Xaranna, and Xudum) in private concessions situated in the heart of the Delta, with their own private landing strips.

Xaranna and Xudum are situated on lagoons. Xaranna is only accessible by boat. All lodges have sweeping views of the vast plains or channels and lagoons.

Each lodge has eight to nine luxury sleek ensuite African-inspired cottages or luxury safari tents with breathtaking views over the channel.

The majority have elevated viewing decks, perfect for observing the delta as well as for intimate candlelit dinners. In some of the lodges, each suite boasts a private plunge pool.

The intimate guest sitting area comprises a spacious reading area and many dining areas feature shady verandas overlooking the channels of the delta.

These guest areas are all positioned carefully to maximize the sweeping views. All serve delicious African meals, bush breakfasts and elegant dinners. There is a full component of knowledgeable rangers in each lodge. The ratio of guests to staff is in the range of 2:5.

Each lodge operates morning as well as afternoon/early evening game drives in open safari vehicles as well as guided bush walks, bird watching, and *mekoro* (traditional dugout canoe) excursions in the Delta.

The *mekoro* dugout canoes used at the lodges are replicas of those that allowed many of the tribes to explore and survive in the delta. The pace of the *mekoro* excursions is much gentler, allowing time to appreciate the small wonders and the spectacular delta scenery. A stop is made on each bush drive for cocktails.

There is perhaps nothing more beautiful and satisfying than relaxing with a beer on the terrace of an &Beyond lodge staring across a lagoon into the magnificent hues of a sunset. It is no wonder that Botswana's popularity as a major tourist destination is gaining in leaps and bounds. This is a real paradise on earth.

Irving Spitz, emeritus professor of medicine, is an avid traveler and photographer. He frequently writes, reviews and lectures on medical topics, music, art, history and travel. Additional pictures from this as well as other trips can be seen on www.pbase.com/irvspitz <http://www.pbase.com/irvspitz>

WONDERFUL WILDERNESS: (from top to bottom) Sunrise over the Okavanga Delta, two giraffes and a leopard enjoys its kill. (Irving Spitz)

