



BOTSWANA

CALL OF THE WILD

THESE SAFARI LODGES OFFER A PERFECT MIX OF LUXURY AND ADVENTURE

BY LISA ALLEN

Jumping between two tinnies in the middle of Africa's Okavango Delta is not for the faint of heart, but it has to be done. This area in Botswana throngs with two of the continent's biggest killers – the Nile crocodile and the hippopotamus – so it's a particularly fraught manoeuvre. But our guide, a descendant of the desert-dwelling Kalahari San bushmen, is insistent. If we don't jump from one gently rocking aluminium tinnie into another we'll miss our flight onwards to the

upmarket Savute Safari Lodge in Chobe National Park – a place famed not so much for crocs and hippos, but for something far more exotic: leopards and lions.

Leopards and lions? Yes. For us that means lone leopards feeding off their kills, and a lion mother



and her three rambunctious teenage cubs. Plus two lion brothers escaping the heat of Africa's midday sun by lazing under bushes, gnawing on a dead impala. Or a big male lion calling out to his wives for his lunch, which is likely to be a small impala from a nearby herd.

Also elephants. Apparently Chobe boasts more jumbos than anywhere else in Africa's south.

A trip to far northeast Botswana offers four-hour-plus game drives morning and night. Other lodges in Botswana,

particularly Camp Okavango, specialise in cruises in the company of crocs and pods of hippos, named after the ancient Greek for river horses.

We are in Botswana during new year, in the hot summer, at a time when clouds gather, lightning streaks the sky and sudden thunderous rainstorms break more than 12 months of brutal drought. Some days, while out on the plains or the delta, we are forced back to camp by the monster storms, while at midnight in the luxury camps surrounded



Luxe: Camp Okavango; below, a lioness with her cubs; hippos

JOURNEYS

by canvas-sided walls, it is more than an authentic experience as loud thunder explodes seemingly just above our heads. Here we will revel in a wildlife documentary’s worth of sightings on grassy flood plains populated with elephants, hyenas, giraffes, all types of antelopes, and best of all (in my opinion), leopards and lions.

We start out in Botswana’s Camp Xakanaxa (pronounced *Ka-ka-na-ka*) reached by a nine-seater Cessna Caravan turboprop from the Botswana tourist township of Maun, itself just under two hours’ flight from Johannesburg.

Arriving on Christmas Eve, our first wildlife encounter at Camp Xakanaxa is with Oscar, a resident hippo, who is small, benign and lives by himself wandering between various lagoons – many of them bedecked with lily pads – around the luxury camp.

It seems he’s been rejected from the local hippo pod by one of the superior males, but is popular with camp staff and guests – as long as they keep their distance.

The Xakanaxa Camp’s reception areas and restaurant are set on raised platforms extending over the Khwai River on the Xakanaxa Lagoon, with a fire deck for relaxing after dinner, and the luxury canvas tents or suites are well placed away from the main

reception and dining areas. Although electric fences surround the camp, staff escort guests to dinner at night because there may be leopards or other wildlife such as hyenas lurking.

Individual one-bedroom suites with canvas walls are replete with every luxury, including four poster beds, and separate bathrooms with showers and toilets. Our fellow guests include a boisterous party of cashed-up Norwegians, Texans, New Yorkers and New Zealanders. You can hear the lions and leopards roaring in the distance and the hyenas laughing and whooping.

In other camps in more remote Zambia – without electric fencing – we hear the lions right up close against the canvas walls at night.

Camp days consist of what can be the visceral experience of Big Five game drives. Wake-up calls come at 5.30am, then there’s 6am coffee and cakes, followed by a three-hour morning drive punctuated by stops for more morning coffee and biscuits. At 4pm the evening drive starts. Drink stops occur a few hours out from base camp, with canapes including the obligatory beef biltong washed down with gin and tonic out on the lonely flood plain.

At Camp Xakanaxa boat trips are accompanied by a packed



Up close: elephants at Savute Safari Lodge, left; a bedroom at Savute, above. Top, giraffes; Okavango Delta; leopard

CHECKLIST

Getting there: Qantas operates direct flights from Sydney to Johannesburg and it’s easy to overnight at one of the airport hotels such as the Intercontinental Johannesburg O.R. Tambo Airport Hotel, which is a short walk across the road from the International Airport. Fly to Maun in Botswana the next day on Airlink. Note: most safaris impose a luggage limit of 15kg per person as you will be flying in light planes between each camp.

Stay: All three camps – Camp Xakanaxa, Camp Okavango and Savute Safari Lodge – are owned by Desert & Delta Safaris and are listed on the Botswana Stock Exchange. Rates differ dramatically according to the season. Our trip was organised by Tammy Chaplin of Remarkable Africa. remarkable-africa.com

PREVIOUS PAGE: MAUN: DESERT AND DELTA SAFARIS. OTHER IMAGES: MARK GOLDSTEIN. THIS PAGE: TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: MARK GOLDSTEIN. OTHER IMAGES: DESERT AND DELTA SAFARIS.

cooler overflowing with champagne and beers, and perhaps an elephant wandering along the riverbank for added excitement. One day we see a leopard up a tree feasting on an impala - its plan, evidently, to secure the deceased antelope off the ground and away from marauding lions and hyenas which would steal the leopard’s

freshly caught dinner.

Having said adieu to Oscar, we head to the Okavango, the world’s largest inland delta where the waterways are fed by both the Okavango River and the rains from the highlands of Angola.

The luxury Okavango Camp is set on elevated platforms beneath thick vegetation, allowing swarms of monkeys to play beneath the chalets, which are connected by timber bridges. Each abode is hidden among ancient mangosteen trees with views over the delta.

The days are punctuated by excursions in the aluminium tinnies dodging the hippo pods, fishing, or mokoro (canoe) excursions through the lily pads to watch the African Jacana – also known as Jesus birds because they walk on water. Suffice to say the islands are rich with bird life.

One of my favourite activities is the guided walking safari.

Armed with a single-shot .375 H&H Magnum rifle, designed back in 1912, Kalahari bushman named Tao and his mate Days take us on a three-hour walking expedition where we are unexpectedly surrounded by a herd of hundreds of Cape Buffalo, also top of the pops on the list of Africa’s most dangerous animals. Known as the “widow maker”, the Cape Buffalo is entirely unpredictable – attacking first and asking questions later. A family of elephants including mothers and young ones are also closing in behind us. Amping up the pressure, lions roar in the distance.

Thankfully Tao keeps a cool head and navigates us out of what could have been a tricky situation – and so, moving at the speed of a cheetah hunt, we make it safely back to our boat and then to camp. Tao later admits it was the trickiest outdoor adventure he’d

been on all year.

After our third night at the animal-packed Camp Okavango we head to the 12-chalet Savute Safari Lodge with its plethora of lions and leopards. Here we meet plenty of Americans, Brits and Swedes – many in big, multi-generational groups. As Australians, we feel outnumbered not so much by the animals as by the other guests.

And yet the animals are out in force and Savute’s open air restaurant, firepit and meeting area – overlooking a lake that is pumped with bore water when necessary – attracts plenty of savvy game looking for a drink or to wash. One clever elephant works this out and comes at night to refresh himself with freshly pumped bore water, putting on a spectacular display for the guests who by this stage are heavily fortified by South African wines. The waterhole is also popular with groups of smart giraffes – by day you can watch them frolicking from your perfectly fitted sheets or from the verandah of your supremely comfortable chalet.

I also look out to the waterhole and the vast swathes of land in front of Savute – but most of all I look forward to making plans to return to Africa – a return trip to Botswana beckons.

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