

THE TIMES

LUXURY TRAVEL

Safari chic in Botswana's bush camps

Lavish tents and incomparable game — it's the glam way to see Africa

By Lisa Grainger

September 15 2018, 12:01am, The Times

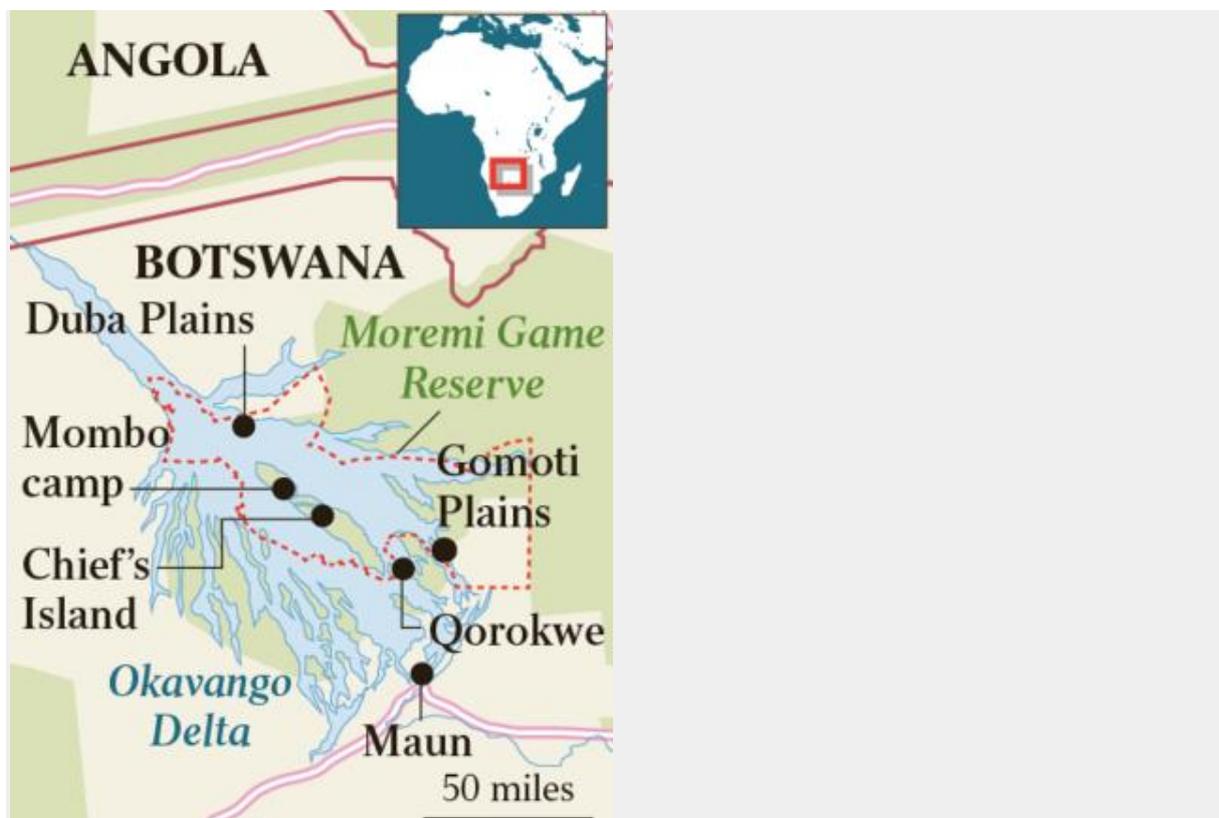


The viewing deck of a residence at Duba Plains

DOOK PHOTO

I feel as though I'm in an opening sequence in David Attenborough's *Planet Earth*. I'm in a 12-seat Cessna, soaring over a vast watery wilderness that has been set aside exclusively for wildlife. There aren't many holidays in which the journey is as thrilling as the destination. A flying safari around the Okavango Delta, though, is one of them.

The pilot has agreed to fly just a few hundred feet above the ground and, only ten minutes after taking off from the dusty little town of Maun, I can't see a road anywhere. Below, little whirlwinds of terracotta dust skud across dry patches of earth. A herd of elephants ambles through an open stretch of grassland. And then, suddenly, as far as the eye can see, lies the great Okavango Delta: 10,000 square miles of reedbeds and silvery pools, winding rivers and papyrus swamps, dotted by an occasional rust-coloured island or hillock of thick trees.



“Not a bad place to call your office, is it?” says the young female pilot with a grin as, 30 minutes later, we swoop down on to a dirt runway, scattering giraffe on the plains beyond as we land.

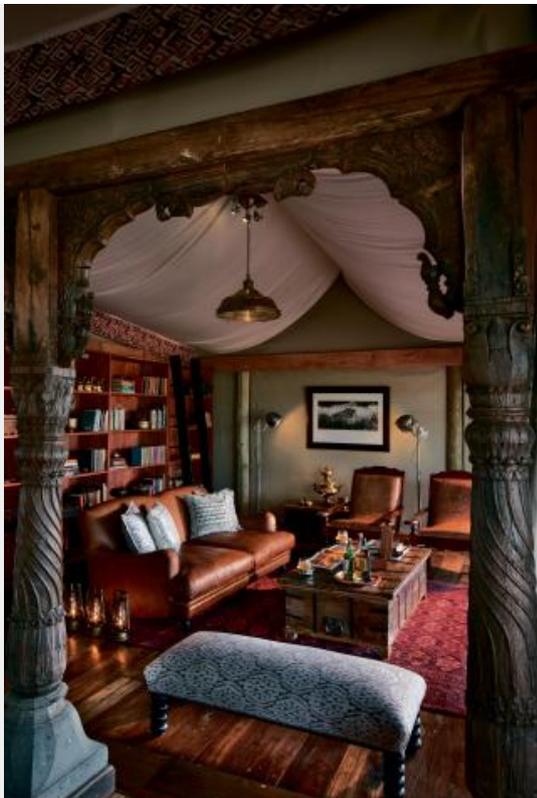
When Wilderness Safaris opened its first photographic safari camp in this northwest Botswana territory in 1990, it soon became clear why the local people called the area Mombo, or “Place of Plenty”. On Chief's Island, which was once the hunting grounds of local chiefs, the area is not only forested with thickets of ancient trees linked by rich grasslands, but flanked by rivers that every year bring rainwater from Angola to the north. In a country that's 80 per cent desert, it's a precious oasis: an area in which creatures are almost guaranteed to find food and water — and tourists equally sure to see good game.

In other wildlife havens, such as the Maasai Mara in Kenya, healthy animal populations often mean large numbers of safari camps and dozens of vehicles at wildlife sightings. In Botswana, thanks to the enlightened leadership of the Khama family — who produced the nation’s first and fourth presidents, as well as the present minister of wildlife — the country follows a model of high-value, low-volume tourism, attracting fewer, wealthier visitors who help to protect wildlife and to enrich local communities.

Which explains why on the 70km-long Chief’s Island, at the heart of the Moremi Game Reserve, there are only two camps: Mombo and Chief’s.

Mombo has become legendary not only for its game, but its hospitality. It’s the Claridge’s of the bush, and its most recent refurbishment, its fourth since it opened in 1990 as a simple bush camp, has raised its levels of luxury yet again.

Designed by the South African interior designer Caline Williams-Wynn — celebrated last year for her Bisate lodge in Rwanda and Jabali Ridge in Tanzania — each of Mombo’s nine enormous canvas-roofed rooms provides every comfort a guest might want in London, from marble-topped basins and a brass bath made for two to an elegant living room stocked with champagnes and wines. In fact, after tea, with its delicate melon-ball kebabs and silver platters of cake, the managers, Matt McCreedy and Robyn Dreyer, confide that it’s all so cossetting that many guests opt to spend the last days of their (\$3,000-a-person-a-night) safari in their rooms, being attended to by a butler or masseuse, or relaxing in the cocktail bar with a bottle of wine from their extensive cellar.



The library at Duba Plains Camp
DOOK PHOTO

Most, though, come here for treats you can't find elsewhere, which in this area includes white and black rhino. While other countries struggle to keep the highly endangered black rhino alive, the Botswanan government has devoted significant energy and funds to their protection. Tourism is the country's second-biggest revenue generator (after diamonds) and the government has deployed its army to protect its reserves — a rare national commitment to wildlife on a continent plagued by poaching (even so, last week 80 elephant carcasses were discovered after an aerial survey).

As a result, since 2001, with the aid of safari organisations such as Wilderness Safaris, &Beyond and Great Plains Conservation, as well as private donors, dozens of black and white rhinos have been flown out of South Africa (a country in which 1,028 were killed in 2017 alone) and relocated to safe areas in Botswana, including Chief's Island. If you are going to see a rhino anywhere in Africa, it's here.

While these prehistoric-looking creatures are probably the best-known of Africa's endangered animals, they are not the only ones. Giraffes for instance, not previously on danger lists, are now thought to number fewer than 97,000, a drop of 40 per cent in 30 years. Wild dogs, estimated once at 500,000, have been reduced to about a hundredth of that. Even numbers of the great lion — the king of the African jungle — have dropped to about 20,000 in the wild, and are officially classed as vulnerable.

Although in Botswana conflicts between man and animal are as stark as anywhere else on the continent, in the Okavango there are fewer signs. In fact, at my next three stop-offs — Gomoti Plains, Qorokwe, and Duba Plains, all refurbished or built in the past year — I see so many elephants and giraffes that I stop taking photographs of them. I also see a pack of lions hunting and killing an impala, and watch a pair of wild dogs tearing across the plains in pursuit of an antelope, a sight that a fellow guest, who has lived in Africa for 70 years, hadn't witnessed before.



Lioness and cub in the Okavango Delta
MICHAEL VILJOEN

The variety of game in the delta is a result not only of the varied water levels at different times of the year (water flows into the southern delta only from June to September), but its landscape. My next stop, Gomoti Plains, to the south of Chief's Island, is in an area thick with mopane woodland and savannah; on the way to camp, not only do I see dozens of giraffe and zebra, but on the big pans fronting the camp, buffalo, grazing on the waterweeds, looking up disdainfully as we cautiously approach.

Unlike Mombo, which is in a national game reserve where only vehicle-based safaris are permitted, Gomoti's ten airy, modern tents, with their light, contemporary interiors, are within a local community-owned concession where canoeing and walking are allowed. One morning, after tea and oat porridge round the campfire, Janet, one of the female trainee guides, takes me out on to the water by canoe and explains the effects of tourism on her life. As she poles gently, like an African gondolier in the soft dawn light, mist rising in the freezing dawn air and darting kingfishers making ripples in the silvery water, she explains that she is the only person in her family with a job. Her salary supports a family of eight; since this safari camp opened in 2016, more than 65 people from her village have been trained as housekeepers, chefs and guides.

As a result of the camp's investment in her community, she says, a nursery school was built, vehicles have been acquired and fellow villagers are far more educated. As she puts it: "People know now that tourism is good, and killing animals is bad."

While Janet is at the start of her career, at both of my next camps I am put in the care of guides who are so knowledgeable that there seems to be little they can't tell me, whether it's about birds, trees or wild dogs.

Not that I really want to venture into the wild, so exquisite are the camp's interiors. Qorokwe camp opened last December on another former hunting block, about two hours' drive southwest of Gomoti Plains. Designed by Michele Throssell, the daughter of the South African golfer Gary Player, the nine raised wood-and-glass rooms are ultra-contemporary, each of their sliding-glass fronts, egg-shaped baths and beanbag chaises longues facing a pretty pan in which hippo snort and cavort.

With its infinity pool, shaded swing sofas and tempting jewellery boutique, Qorokwe is the sort of camp where one wishes there wasn't quite so much to see or do in the bush. But there is, and, under the expert guidance of John Nshimane (a favourite guide, I'm told, of the writer Alexander McCall Smith), I spend all day, from dawn to well past dinner time, being educated about this extraordinary and varied wilderness.



A bedroom at the Qorokwe bush camp
DANA ALLEN/PHOTO SAFARI

There's certainly lots to see around here: palm groves in which elephants are sniffing out fallen palm nuts; golden grassy plains over which a pair of wild dogs romp; watery pans in which a grumpy old buffalo ruminates; anthills on which two cheetahs lie, full after a kill; and finally, thick woodlands in which we watch three lionesses kill an impala. So close to the camp are the feasting, bloody-faced cats that when night falls, no one walks between the living room and bedrooms without a guide and a very bright torch. As the cheery manager puts it: "You don't want to be dessert, do you?"

I don't — and the next day I don't want to leave, either. I am, however, being transferred by Helicopter Horizons — which, if you are very wealthy, will create an entire heliborne safari in the delta — and for the next half-hour am treated to views from my private glass bubble of one of the most pristine tracts of wilderness imaginable. Below me lie great swathes of green reedbeds cut through by snaking blue channels of water; wide plains dotted with zebra and wildebeest; long lines of ancient palm trees, silhouetted on the horizon.

In the midst of this, just north of Chief's Island, where there are more reedbeds than land, is Duba Plains. There can't be many places in the African bush more sumptuous than this camp. Originally built on an island to be the home of the National Geographic film-makers Dereck and Beverly Joubert, whose dramatic wildlife documentaries on buffalo-hunting lions have made them stars in America, the camp is a decadent combination of African and colonial, on a shaded island in the heart of 30,000 acres of private watery wilderness.

It's one of five Jouberts camps in the delta, and they clearly understand the classic *Out of Africa* aesthetic that many people want (one guest has been 33 times). Stepping through the antique carved Zanzibari doors into my canvas cottage — the word tent doesn't do it justice — is like entering a grand colonial bush manor house, with its four-poster bed, beaten copper bathtub, antique-style campaign desk and wooden boxes fitted with crystal drinks decanters. Rather brilliantly, as well as loungers on a waterside deck, there's also an exercise bike, for spinning off calories while watching warthog snuffling in the grass below.

Of course, while such comforts are tempting diversions, it's the wilderness one comes here to see. With guides such as Kebonyemodisa Mosepe, or "KB" as he's known, that wilderness soon becomes the star attraction.



**The bathroom of a canvas cottage at Duba Plains
DOOK PHOTO**

KB has guided for 20 years, and I would return to Duba Plains to go on safari with him again. Behind his quiet, dry, gentlemanly manner is a brain that holds a wealth of bush knowledge and over 48 hours he does his utmost to immerse me in the wonders of what he calls "my beautiful wild home". From a private vehicle, fitted for guests with state-of-the-art Canon cameras and lenses, we drive and walk, all day at my request, over islands and through channels, water sluicing over our feet, thick flame-red grasses swishing by, relishing the luxury of having 77,000 hectares to ourselves.

One morning we spend hours watching a pair of lionesses stalking (and then, rather hilariously, missing) a family of warthog, then sit, totally still, as 50ft away two big male lions, one bleeding from a leg wound, fight over territory, their snarls and growls echoing in the dawn air.

Best of all we see five rhinos grazing contentedly, one of the groups relocated from South Africa by Rhinos Without Borders. The sight is surprisingly moving, not only because these great creatures are so rare, but because so many people — conservationists, vets, rangers and donors — have devoted their time, their lives and their money to keep them safe.

It's at moments such as this that the extraordinary luxury of these African camps makes sense. Without them, wealthy travellers wouldn't come here and donate huge sums to protect Africa's wildlife. And without the camps, the brilliant KB wouldn't have a job or a platform from which to pass on, so eloquently, his knowledge and passion to tourists and his fellow citizens, so they too see its value.

It isn't often I get to say that \$3,000 a night to stay in a tent is worth every cent, but in Botswana it is. Not for the duck confit or the cashmere, lovely as they are, but for the incomparable wildlife.

Need to know

The Explorations Company (01367 850566, explorationscompany.com) can organise two nights each at Duba Plains, Mombo, Gomoti and Qorokwe from £16,600pp, including activities, full-board accommodation and internal flights between camps, but excluding international flights.