



Canvas Botswana

Traversing Chobe by tent is a safari experience fit for royalty, writes Stephen Cunliffe



In recent times the African safari experience has increasingly come to mean opulent lodges with gigantic, air-conditioned suites and private plunge pools surrounded by acres of wooden decking. But, fortunately, there are a handful of safari operators swimming against the tide. Stephen Cunliffe travelled to Botswana with &Beyond for a firsthand taste of what it is like to 'rough it' under canvas in one of the continent's premier conservation areas.

As our Air Botswana flight made its final approach into Kasane, I craned my neck and squinted out the window at the languid Chobe River down below. Seeing the plethora of hotels and lodges crammed cheek by jowl along the Botswana bank, I smiled and thanked my lucky stars that we wouldn't have to brave the madding crowd of Chobe's popular safari gateway town. Instead we would be sampling one of Botswana's newest and most exciting safari products deep within the national park.

Chobe, a Mecca for elephant enthusiasts from around the globe, has been heaped with superlatives and praise. The perennial waterway creates a green swathe of rich grazing that acts like a veritable magnet for wild animals from the parched hinterland. With herbivores thronging on the wide, grassy floodplains adjoining the river, the reserve's riverfront real estate enjoys one of the highest wildlife densities in Africa.

Watching the procession of elephant families coming down to drink and bathe in the river is an unforgettable experience, but when vast herds of buffalo, huge rafts of sunbathing hippos and armadas of gigantic crocodiles join the fray... there's no disputing that this is one of Africa's greatest game parks.

Sadly, most safari enthusiasts experience nothing more than a couple of doses of this wildlife extravaganza during their twice-daily forays into the reserve from Kasane. Because no permanent camps or lodges are permitted within the national park, game drives are forced to concentrate in the popular eastern sector of the park within easy striking distance of Sedudu Gate. Thankfully, this was not to be our fate. Wild places still abound in Botswana; the challenge is knowing how to access them.

A handful of mobile safari operators, such as &Beyond and Wilderness Safaris, answered the call and have made these tracts of wildlife-rich wilderness their domain. It was here – among the wild animals and vast, uninhabited expanses of nature – that we would be camping deep within Chobe National Park.

I use the term 'camping' in the absolute widest sense of the word, because Robert Baden-Powell and his boy scouts would surely snigger at the mere mention of 'Chobe Under Canvas' and 'camping' in the same sentence.

After all, these temporary tented camps boast all the modern conveniences for a handful of privileged guests to relax and soak up the solitude and rejuvenating energy of a secluded wilderness campsite.

Upon arrival, camp manager Robson Chongwe was on hand to show us to our spacious safari tent. As we entered the airy abode, he announced with pride, "Welcome to your Chobe Palace with en-suite flushables; I'm sure you will be enjoying your stay with us!"

He was not exaggerating: Chobe Under Canvas is the 'Safari of Kings'. Our tent sported a large double bed draped with fine Egyptian cotton linens and opened into an en-suite bathroom with flushing toilet and hot shower. Once upon a time I too had been a boy scout, but we certainly never even dreamt of tents like this back in my day. However, what really made the whole setup so impressive was the fact that the well-appointed camp gets completely dismantled and reassembled when it moves site every five days!

Although advertised as a "rustic mobile safari camp", I have to say that, in my humble opinion, the fully serviced camp's elegant simplicity, friendly atmosphere, ultra-comfortable accommodations, personalised service and delicious cuisine would be better billed as "Botswana's ultimate 'glam-ping' [glamorous camping] experience!"

But camping in style is only part of the Chobe Under Canvas experience. The real value of a mobile-tented camp is that you are able to follow the great elephant and buffalo herds to the current game-viewing hotspots where you reside with all manner of wildlife right on your doorstep.

After a delicious lunch of cold meats and salad, we retired to our tented palace to enjoy a sumptuous siesta.

Despite the sounds of elephant and kudu noisily pruning the nearby trees, we awoke refreshed. Collecting our cameras and binoculars we climbed aboard the open-top safari vehicle of expert nature guide Stanza Molaodi and headed off in search of more of Chobe's wild inhabitants.

Botswana basics

Best season to visit: Wildlife sightings peak during the cool, dry winter months from June to October but a Botswana safari never disappoints at any time of the year.

Getting there: Air Botswana (www.airbotswana.co.bw) and South African Airlink (www.flyairlink.com) fly into the safari gateway towns of Kasane and Maun. Round-trip return fares from R5 047.

Accommodation: Chobe Under Canvas is a seasonal operation accommodating a maximum of ten people. Rates from R3 747 fully inclusive; call 011 809 4314 for a quote.

For safari aficionados who find the thought of camping – no matter how comfortable – concerning, the permanent canvas camps of Sandibe and Nxabega occupy private concessions within the delta. These lodges offer visitors more in the way of comfort and facilities while still retaining the advantages of canvas for hearing and experiencing the sounds of wild Africa. Check out: www.nxabega.com and www.sandibe.com

Recommended Tour Operator: &Beyond (formerly CC Africa) – recently voted Africa's Leading Responsible Tourism Company and Africa's Leading Game Reserve Brand in the World Travel Awards – offers a choice of seven luxurious safari camps and mobile safari operations scattered throughout the prime wildlife-viewing areas of northern Botswana.

For more information: www.discoverbotswana.com and www.andbeyondafrica.com





TENTING

The game viewing was superb and over the course of the next five days we were treated to an almost gluttonous wildlife show.

The action-packed game drive routine was enhanced with a couple of highly memorable boat cruises along the Chobe River, while the late arrival of the first rains ensured a daily parade of elephant, buffalo, giraffe, zebra and warthog trekking to and from the life-giving river.

Lions lazing in the shade kept half an eye on the passing antelope menu until the sinking sun finally galvanised them into action.

By this time all the other vehicles had long since vacated the park and we were left all alone to enjoy the sight and sounds of a couple of powerful lionesses bringing down and hungrily devouring a stately sable antelope. Spotting a curious, young leopard snoozing in the fork of a shady tree was another Chobe highlight.

But it wasn't all about the predators... my wife was enamoured by all the babies being dropped to coincide with the arrival of the first rains: tiny warthog piglets and gangly impala lambs being the most ubiquitous of the diminutive newcomers.

When a successful tracking escapade led us to a regal lioness on our penultimate game drive, Stanza once again shared his in-depth wildlife knowledge and passion for Chobe's wildlife. There was no denying we were in the company of one of Botswana's top safari guides. But it was his final comments, shortly before we left the tawny feline, that best summed up how everyone was feeling on the eve of our departure: "Nature she is very beautiful and totally fascinating, and you never know what could be coming next... But this is Chobe and she is very special!"

Later that evening as we reclined under crisp linens and listened to the primordial roars of a distant lion pride filter through the canvas walls of our 'Chobe Palace', my wife and I were in complete agreement: there can be no better way to get up close-and-personal with Botswana's wildlife than a mobile safari excursion. For wildlife connoisseurs wanting to explore one of Africa's premier game parks without the safari hordes, Chobe Under Canvas offers the perfect solution. And when the Kasane traffic exits the park shortly before dusk, you will be left in peace to enjoy one of

Africa's most iconic reserves with only its wild denizens for company.

Ever since William Cornwallis Harris first set out on safari in 1836, an African safari under canvas has been recognised as one of the great adventures the world has to offer: a thrilling journey of learning and discovery. I believe this ethos and spirit has survived to this day in &Beyond's Under Canvas safari offerings.



Stephen Cunliffe

Moremi and Savuti

Chobe is not the only place to go for luxury mobile safaris. From Kasane a short hop takes you into the world renowned Okavango Delta. Known locally as 'the river that never finds the sea', Botswana's tranquil freshwater ocean is a watery wilderness teeming with wildlife deep within the arid Kalahari Desert. It is also home to two other top quality mobile safari options: Moremi Under Canvas and Savuti Under Canvas.

'An invasion of the senses'



There is something very special about an African bushveld safari, that lies not only in the physical, but how it makes you feel. The sights, sounds and smells of Africa can be overwhelming and are often such, that you simply want to go back again and again and again.

At Buffalo Ridge Safari Lodge we recognize that whilst you go on Safari to see the wildlife, fauna and flora of Africa, you also are also there to relax, unwind and recharge the batteries.

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Company Profile - Out of the Blue Air Safaris or OOTBAS for short was Established in 1995, we have been flying thousands of clients to destinations ranging from private game lodges to major international airports in the Southern African region. We maintain our own aircraft to the highest degree of serviceability to ensure you peace of mind. OOTBAS is a small operation based at Lanseria Airport, one of the busiest small airports in the Johannesburg Gauteng area. We have a wide variety of aircraft and crew, able to take passengers or freight, pressurized or unpressurized, single or twin engine. We strive to give our clients the very best personal attention.

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