

# CALL of the JUNGLE

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For those who feel the tug of wilderness, there is no better place to forage in than Botswana. In the heart of this unadulterated paradise, you will be left to your own devices, with no one but its wild inhabitants for company.

Botswana boasts the largest population of elephants in Africa, with River Chobe providing water for up to 50,000 during the dry season.



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Similar in size to France and with a population of just two million people, Botswana is synonymous with wide-open spaces and prolific animal life. It is arguably Africa's finest wildlife country, boasting the continent's largest populations of big herbivores, such as elephants and buffaloes. Eighty-four per cent of the country is carpeted by the semi-arid Kalahari Desert, while the perennial waters of River Chobe and the sprawling Okavango Delta create a rich swathe of greenery that functions as a veritable magnet for wild animals from the surrounding desert during the long dry season. Attracted by Botswana's fearsome wildlife reputation, my wife and I set off on a two-week wildlife safari—the best way to sample this African eden.

### A WILD PROCESSION

Proclaimed Botswana's first national park in 1967, Chobe has one of the highest wildlife densities in Africa. This is especially evident during the dry season when herbivores flock to the wide, grassy floodplains adjoining River Chobe, creating a wildlife-viewing experience that is truly in a league of its own. Watching countless elephant families bask in the river is an unforgettable experience, and when they are joined by vast herds of buffaloes, rafts of sunbathing hippos and armadas of gigantic crocodiles, there's no disputing that this is one of Africa's greatest game parks.

Chobe, a Mecca for elephant enthusiasts, has been heaped with superlatives and praise. The only criticism I have is that vehicle congestion around the popular Sedudu Entrance Gate can dilute the nature experience associated with the park. Overcrowding arises from the fact that there are no safari camp concessions inside the park, so a

plethora of big lodges and hotels have proliferated around the gateway town of Kasane, with everyone then forced to use the same entrance and well-worn eastern sector of the reserve for their game drives.

Luckily, this long-standing problem has been overcome with the inception of luxury mobile safaris. We stayed in one such intimate tented camp, situated deep in the secluded wilderness of the park. Upon our arrival at Chobe Under Canvas, all ten staff members—along with a curious lone male baboon—greeted us with big smiles and waving hands. After a delicious lunch and siesta, we gathered our cameras and binoculars and climbed aboard the open-top vehicle for our first game drive. In the company of expert nature-guide Stanza Molaodi, we were

**Above: Emboldened by thirst, giraffes usually only leave their preferred woodland habitat and venture out onto the Chobe floodplain when they need to drink.**

**Below: The maternal instinct is strong in primates and this Chacma Baboon is no exception. She cares for her baby while another member of the troop removes fleas from her coat.**



Clockwise from right: During Botswana's dry winter months, the Okavango Delta swells up to three times its size; The colourful Lilac-breasted Roller is Botswana's national bird; The rich grazing and perennial water of the Chobe floodplain attract buffaloes by the thousand.

treated to an outlandish wildlife experience over the next five days. Twice daily, game drives were interspersed with highly memorable boat cruises along River Chobe. The rains were late, ensuring a daily procession of elephants, buffaloes, giraffes, zebras and the like trekking to and from the life-sustaining river. Lions lying in the nearby shade kept a lazy eye on the passing menu of antelope until the sinking sun finally galvanised them into action.

The sight and sounds of powerful lionesses devouring a stately sable made for an experience we certainly won't forget in a hurry; a young leopard snoozing in the fork of a shady tree was another Chobe highlight. But it wasn't all about the predators; my wife—like most of the other ladies on the safari—was enamoured by all the babies being



dropped to coincide with the arrival of the imminent first rains: tiny warthog piglets and gangly impala lambs being the most ubiquitous of the newcomers.

When a highly successful tracking escapade on our penultimate game drive led us to a regal lioness, Stanza once again took the time to share his in-depth wildlife knowledge. His comment before we left the tawny feline summed up how everyone on the vehicle was feeling on the eve of our departure: "Nature, she is beautiful and fascinating, and the best part is that you never know what's coming next".

On the final night, my wife and I tucked ourselves into crisp linens and listened to the primordial roars of a distant lion pride filter through the canvas walls, feeling both overwhelmed and intimate with our surroundings.

### A JEWEL IN THE ROUGH

After five incredible days exploring Chobe, it was hard to imagine that the next stop on our safari



schedule could match up. But 40 minutes into our charter flight, the sun-baked desert abruptly morphed into a rich green and I got the feeling we were in for another treat. Surrounded in every direction by endless desert sands, the perennial River Kavango twists, turns and meanders its way through a parched wasteland before eventually reaching an impasse. With nowhere to go, it

## Safari



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empties its waters into a gigantic pan-shaped delta, spreading out as gnarled fingers that claw their way across the terrain, transforming the desert into a verdant oasis. Known locally as 'the river that never finds the sea', Botswana's tranquil freshwater ocean deep in the heart of the desert is teeming with wildlife.

We touched down on Pom Pom airstrip and were whisked away to our lodge through a palm-peppered landscape with only the omnipresent kudu and honking hippos for company. For the next five days, we were based at Nxabega Okavango Tented Camp. Nxabega, meaning 'Place of the Giraffe', consists of nine east African-style safari

tents situated alongside the wildlife-rich Moremi Game Reserve. The safari camp is ideally positioned for nature enthusiasts to explore the diverse magnificence of the Okavango Delta, with access to both the permanent swamp and seasonally inundated floodplains. The delta comprises a maze of shallow reed-fringed channels, papyrus-choked swamps, grassy floodplains and lagoons interspersed with islands that together sustain a staggering abundance of wildlife.

Over the course of four action-packed days in the 'Jewel of the Kalahari', we enjoyed some sensational sightings; exotic avifauna, herds of elegant red lechwe and a shy sitatunga ram feeding

**Clockwise from above: There is no better safari than one on an open-sided 4x4 vehicle; The lush green grass in the Okavango Delta floodplains provides an idyllic habitat for grazers like the Burchell's Zebra; The kudu's huge dish-like ears enable it to hear predators from afar.**

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Above: A female leopard spends her day resting in a shady sausage tree before venturing forth to hunt in the late afternoon.

Below: A spotted hyena's jaws are powerful enough to crush a giraffe's femur, but here, a young one displays submissive and trusting behaviour to a dominant clan member.

on aquatic vegetation in the shallows. Later, rounding a bend, we came face-to-face with an old elephant bull feeding on bulrushes shoulder-deep in the channel. The boat cruise culminated with us floating on the crystal clear water, watching distant thunderstorms vie with an incarnadine sunset for our attention: it was the quintessential end to another awe-inspiring day in Africa.

#### A SIGHT ABOVE THE REST

There were, however, two sightings that stood out: dawn visits to an active hyena den with three exuberant cubs had become a daily ritual, but



our final visit to the clan proved most rewarding. Arriving at their termite mound, we found no one home, but the distant whoop of a hyena alerted us that they hadn't gone far. Our guide, Max Tidimalo, immediately set off in the direction of the contact call and guided us to the clan's new lair, alongside the remains of a male reedbuck. The larger and more powerful females dominate hyena society, and for the next hour, we sat spellbound as the clan matriarch viciously guarded the kill, allowing only her cubs to feed.

It was a superb viewing, but a female leopard ultimately stole the show. We first spotted the majestic feline reclining in a sausage tree, and after an agile descent, the stealthy cat proceeded to stalk a gang of banded mongoose before upgrading to an impala shortly thereafter. Hours whizzed by as we sat mesmerised by her prowess.

Home to iconic national parks, wild denizens by the dozen and world-class lodges, Botswana is regarded by many to be Africa's premier safari destination. And certainly, if my experiences in the elephant stronghold of Chobe and world-renowned Okavango Delta are anything to go by, I wholeheartedly concur. ■

#### QUICK FACTS

##### BEST SEASON TO VISIT

Wildlife sightings tend to peak during the dry winter months from June to October.

##### GETTING THERE

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Doha from Mumbai, Delhi and Kochi. From Doha, you can catch a connecting flight to Johannesburg using our codeshare partner Qatar Airways. Botswana is connected to Johannesburg via road and rail.

##### ACCOMMODATION

There is no dearth of operators catering to wildlife enthusiasts in Botswana. &Beyond is one such organisation, with seven luxurious safari camps scattered throughout northern Botswana. Visit [www.andbeyondafrica.com](http://www.andbeyondafrica.com) for more details.

##### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to [www.botswanaturism.co.bw](http://www.botswanaturism.co.bw)