



# Water and wilderness

Photojournalist Stephen Cunliffe goes on safari in Botswana

**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 one of Africa's finest wildlife countries, boasting the continent's largest populations of big herbivores, such as elephant and buffalo.

With 84% of the country covered by the semi-arid Kalahari desert, the perennial waters of the Chobe River and sprawling Okavango Delta create a green swathe of rich grazing that acts as a veritable magnet for wild animals from the surrounding desert. I kicked off the quintessential Botswana safari itinerary in Chobe National Park and found an African Eden that more than lived up to its billing.

## Chobe

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 the perennial Chobe River, producing an unrivalled wildlife spectacle. Watching countless elephant families 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 doubt that this is one of Africa's greatest game parks.

Chobe, a Mecca for elephant enthusiasts from around the globe, has been heaped with superlatives and praise. The one small criticism I came across while researching the place ahead of our trip was that vehicle congestion around the popular Sedudu Entrance Gate dilutes the Chobe nature experience.

Overcrowding arises because there are no lodge concessions inside the park, so a plethora of big lodges and

hotels have sprung up around the gateway town of Kasane with everyone then forced to make use of the same entrance and well-worn eastern sector of the reserve for their game drives. This long-standing problem, exacerbated by the park's ever-increasing popularity, has finally been overcome with the inception of luxury mobile safaris in Chobe.

The temporary tented camp I stayed in afforded me the opportunity to soak up the relaxing solitude of a secluded wilderness campsite deep inside the game-rich national park. After a delicious lunch and sumptuous siesta, we gathered our cameras and binoculars before climbing aboard the open-top vehicle for our first game drive.

In the company of expert nature guide Stanza Molaodi, we were treated to an almost gluttonous wildlife extravaganza over the course of the next five days. Twice daily game drives were interspersed with a couple of highly memorable boat cruises along the Chobe River. The rains were late, which ensured a daily procession of elephant, buffalo, giraffe, zebra and the like trekking to and from the life-sustaining river. Lions lazing in the nearby shade kept half an eye on the passing antelope menu until the sinking sun finally galvanised them into action.

The sight and sound of a couple of powerful lionesses hungrily devouring a stately sable was an experience I 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 ladies – 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 highly successful tracking escapade on our penultimate game drive led us to a regal lioness, Molaodi took time once again to share his in-depth wildlife knowledge. I believe his final comments, shortly before we left the tawny feline, summed up how everyone on the vehicle 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."

## Okavango Delta

After our Chobe wildlife extravaganza, it was hard to imagine the next stop on our safari schedule could match up, but I needn't have worried. Forty minutes into a chartered flight, the sun-baked Kalahari abruptly gave way to a rich green landscape. Flying low over a hundred-strong herd of elephants slaking their thirst below, I had a premonition I was in for another wildlife treat in the Okavango Delta.

Surrounded in every direction by endless desert sands, the perennial Kavango River twists, turns and meanders



**Forget roughing it out. Chobe's tented camps are equipped with all the comforts of a hotel room**

its way through a parched wasteland before eventually reaching an impasse. With nowhere to go, it empties its life-giving waters into a gigantic pan-shaped delta. As the floodwaters spread out in gnarled fingers that claw their way across the sun-bleached terrain, they transform the desert into a verdant oasis. 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.

Our little plane suddenly banked sharply right on its final approach and snapped me from my musings; two minutes later we touched down on a tiny dirt airstrip where a vehicle was on standby to whisk us away to our lodgings. Driving through the picturesque palm-peppered landscape with only the omnipresent kudu and honking hippos for company, I knew our Okavango safari experience wasn't going to disappoint.

The world's largest inland delta comprises a maze of shallow reed-fringed channels, papyrus-choked swamps, grassy floodplains and water lily-carpeted lagoons interspersed with tree-covered islands that together sustain a staggering abundance and variety of wildlife. The one animal that's in short supply is the rhino, but these beleaguered pachyderms were given a welcome boost with a recent &Beyond-sponsored donation and translocation of six white rhino from South Africa to the delta.

Although the rhino eluded the group I was with, the rest of the Okavango's wildlife was out in full force. Over the course of four action-packed days exploring the jewel of the Kalahari, I enjoyed some sensational sightings in the care of Max Tidimalo. From the boat we saw prolific birdlife, herds of elegant red lechwe and a shy sitatunga ram feeding on aquatic vegetation in the shallows. Later,

### Botswana basics

#### **Best season to visit**

*Wildlife sightings peak during the cool, dry winter months from June to October.*

**Getting there** *Airlink ([www.flyairlink.com](http://www.flyairlink.com)) flies directly to the gateway towns of Kasane and Maun in Botswana.*

#### **What to do In Chobe**

*Daily guided game drives and boat cruises on the Chobe River are the order of the day. Boating, fishing, mokoro [traditional dugout canoe] trips and night drives are on offer in the Okavango Delta.*

#### **What to bring**

*Binoculars, camera, sunglasses, sunscreen, hat, insect repellent, rain jacket and neutral-coloured clothing for safari activities; warm attire is essential in winter.*

#### **For more information**

*[www.discover-botswana.com](http://www.discover-botswana.com).*



*Hyena packs are led by the female of the species. Here the matriarch displays her intention to protect her cubs at all costs*

rounding a bend in the Boro River, we came face-to-face with a big elephant, shoulder-deep, feeding on bull rushes and blocking the channel ahead. We sat and watched him munch reeds until he was ready to move on. In the Okavango animals have the right of way.

The boat cruise culminated with us floating on the crystal clear water, gin-and-tonic in hand, watching distant thunderstorms vie with a blood red sunset for our undivided attention: it was the quintessential end to another tough day in Africa.

Highly memorable sightings were a dime a dozen, but for me there were two wildlife encounters that stood out above the rest. Our dawn visits to an active hyena den with three exuberant cubs became a daily ritual, although it was our final visit to the clan that proved the most rewarding.

Arriving at their termite mound home, we found no one home. As we sat alongside the deserted den, the distant whoop of a hyena alerted us that they hadn't gone far. Tidimalo immediately set off in the direction of the distinctive call and guided us to the clan's new lair alongside the remains of a male reedbuck. For the next hour we sat spellbound as the clan matriarch viciously guarded the kill, allowing only her cubs to feed. The larger and more powerful females dominate hyena society and watching the interactions between the clan members was fascinating and entertaining.

The hyena viewing was superb, but it was an elegant female leopard that ultimately stole the show. My wife spotted the majestic feline reclining in a shady sausage tree and, after an impressively agile descent, the stealthy cat proceeded to stalk a gang of banded mongoose before upgrading to impala shortly thereafter. The hours whizzed by as we spent a privileged afternoon in her graceful company.



Home to a plethora of iconic national parks with abundant wildlife and world-class lodges, Botswana is regarded by many to be Africa's premier safari destination. And certainly, if our experiences in the elephant stronghold of Chobe and watery wilderness of the Okavango Delta are anything to go by, I wholeheartedly concur.

Text and photography | **Stephen Cunliffe**