

BOTSWANA—THE “IN” PLACE FOR SAFARIS

by David Skillan

Bob Hope and Bing Crosby once fished there. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton got married there the second time. Where? In Maun, a once obscure, isolated town on the banks of a tributary of the Okavango River in Botswana, southern Africa.

In recent years, Botswana has become a favourite safari destination for Africa aficionados, thanks to its sustainable tourism, luxurious tented camps, and daily game drives in open safari vehicles piloted by highly qualified local guides. The authorities wisely acknowledge that they want high-end tourists, rather than budget travellers. Botswana has also become better known through a series of widely read mystery novels by Alexander McCall Smith, the most popular being *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. Yet, despite the influx of visitors from around the world, most of the country remains totally unspoiled.



Formerly the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland, Botswana used to be a relatively poor country, known mainly for its cattle industry and its famous Kalahari Desert. Today it is best known for its diamond, tourism, and manufacturing industries, as well as for its peace and tranquility. Thanks to these favourable factors and stable government, Botswana is one of Africa's great success stories.

Entirely landlocked, Botswana is bordered in the south and east by the Republic of South Africa, in the northeast by Zimbabwe, and in the north and west by Namibia. It covers 220,000 square miles, which is comparable to the island of Madagascar. Its climate is subtropical. Unlike many African countries, which are hilly or mountainous, Botswana is mostly flat and dotted with grey termite hills, some as high as houses.

The capital city, Gaborone, which was literally hacked out of the bush in the early 1960s, is the largest town in Botswana, followed by Francistown.

Several native tribes, the largest being the Tswana, make up the country's population of nearly two million, including the few-and-far-between Bushmen who inhabit the Kalahari (now called the San people and, sadly, dying out) and several thousand Caucasians, mostly from South Africa. The official language is English, with Setswana the most widely spoken African language. After independence from the British in 1966, the first prime minister and subsequent president of the Republic of Botswana was Sir Seretse Khama, a former paramount chief and leader in the independence movement who went to Oxford to study law and made headlines in 1948 when he married Ruth Williams, an English woman. Both are now deceased. Today, their eldest son, Seretse Ian Khama, former vice-president of the country and head of the Botswana Defence Force, as well as a dedicated conservationist, is the president, having taken over the role in 2008 from the internationally respected Festus Mogae.

The country is dominated by the vast Kalahari Desert in the southwest, the Okavango Delta in the northwest, and the Makgadikgadi, a massive salt pan, in the north. In the northeast lie the Chobe and Linyanti Game Reserves, with a diversity of habitat and famed for their predators and large concentrations of wildlife. Chobe National Park is named after the Chobe River, one of the main tributaries of the Zambezi. It's a 90-minute drive from the town of Livingstone—Zambia's safari capital—and the world-famous Victoria Falls.

In the extreme northeast lies the area known as Ngamiland, whose main feature is the Okavango River. Rising in Angola, this considerable river dissipates most of its flow into 6,500 square miles of the desert to form the Okavango Delta, or Okavango Swamp. This inland delta, soon to become a World Heritage Site, consists of open floodplains, waterways, marshlands, dry acacia, mopane woodland, riverine areas, and open grasslands. It is home to hippo, crocodile, the Big Five, many species of antelope (including sable, kudu, waterbuck, impala, eland, tsessebe, lechwe, and sitatunga), buffalo, wildebeest, zebra, giraffe, hyena, and warthog, as well as the big cats, leopard, lion, and cheetah. Nocturnal creatures include the civet, serval, and genet cats, bushbabies, porcupine, and the seldom seen armadillo and armadillo. This is also a birdwatcher's paradise, with no fewer than 350 species,

including the hammerkop, tawny eagle, bateleur, pale chanting goshawk, crested francolin, blue crane, saddle-billed stork, African jacana, grey lourie, malachite kingfisher, carmine bee-eater, trumpeter hornbill, crested barbet, and the not-often-seen Pel's fishing owl.

Maun, an insignificant, sleepy little town consisting of just a few wood and metal buildings when I first went there, is a stone's throw from the edge of the swamp. Today it is not much bigger but slightly livelier, and the centre of Botswana's safari and tourism industry.

Big-game hunting, now long restricted—and, if President Khama has his way, soon to be illegal—used to be one of the country's most valuable resources. Between the mid-1960s (after Kenya and Tanzania achieved independence) and the mid-1970s, several well-known East Africans, including Harry Selby, Kenya's most famous white hunter, expanded into the region to establish their own hunting camps. They have since been replaced by photo-safari companies and exclusive tented camps with romantic-sounding names like Duma Tau, Savuti, Kwetsani, Xigera, Little Mombo, and Macatoo.

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The safari camps are dotted throughout the country, with the majority in the Okavango's Delta region. Picturesque and invariably set among mahogany, ebony, marula, and tamarind trees, they are artfully constructed to blend into their natural surroundings while offering every amenity under the sun. Cheerful, well-trained local people prepare gourmet meals, pour sundowners, and attend to a hundred and one other duties, creating exclusive and intimate atmospheres that accommodate 10 to 30 guests. The bedrooms and bathrooms—with either indoor or outside showers, and some with both—are comfortable and luxurious, some with private plunge pools and private balconies or verandahs. You can sit quietly with your binoculars and watch a pride of lion or colourful birds, either up close or in the distance.



The spacious rooms are connected to open-plan lounge and dining areas by elevated wooden walkways, some mere centimeters off the ground, and others three or four meters high, to allow big game to pass beneath. Come nightfall, campfires invite everyone to relax after dinner with gin and tonics or whiskey sours, swapping stories about the day's events.



All meals are included during your two- or three-day stay, as well as snacks such as sausage rolls and biltong (beef jerky) on game drives, and all liquor, bottled water, and soft drinks. The camps also supply sunscreen, insect repellent, flashlights, umbrellas and ponchos for the occasional shower, blankets for cold morning game drives in winter, and daily laundry, which allows you to take minimal luggage. Just as well, for the aircraft taking you from camp to camp, usually a five-seater Cessna 206 or a 12-seater Cessna Caravan, has strict weight restrictions. Depending on which ones you choose, the camps, while remote, all have their own or shared airstrips, and are just ten minutes to about an hour apart.

A typical day on safari starts with a knock on your door by your driver-guide around five o'clock, followed by a quick shower and then tea, coffee, and a continental breakfast of juice, fresh fruit, just-baked

muffins, toast and marmalade, yogurt, and cereal or porridge in the dining area. As dawn breaks, the chirping chorus of birds begins, an orange sunrise slowly appears, and a multicoloured sky fills the horizon.

By six o'clock you're off with your eagle-eyed driver-guide in an open safari vehicle. Shortly into the drive, you're busy shooting close-ups of elephant, buffalo, water buck, zebra, and, if you're very fortunate, leopard and cheetah. Halfway through your three- to four-hour game drive, you'll stop in a safe spot for a snack and coffee or hot chocolate.

Or, instead of a game drive, you might choose a boat ride. You can take a launch through the waterways, or enjoy a more leisurely morning in a canoe or *morokoro* (dugout) poled along by a local guide.

A safari is always a game of chance. What and how much you see depends on luck, your own keen eyesight, and your guide's experience. But you can pretty well guarantee that you won't be disappointed. Unlike many other African countries, where numerous safari vehicles sometimes surround one exotic animal, in Botswana only three vehicles are permitted to view wildlife at close quarters at the same time. When a fourth vehicle arrives, one has to leave. A wise policy.

On your return to camp, after a visit to the "loo with a view" (a three-sided private toilet overlooking a river or plain), you'll sit down to a hearty brunch with fellow travelers who hail from all parts of the world, brought together through a common interest in natural history and the great outdoors, and talk about what you've just seen. Afterwards you can wander back to your room to relax and, as it's invariably hot and sunny, take a dip or a nap, or sit on your deck in shorts or swimsuit with a book or binoculars. There you might see a lone male elephant ambling across the distant landscape, three or four giraffe peering your way over the top of papyrus reeds, or a pack of wild dog trotting through water in search of prey.



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At around four o'clock you'll repeat the procedure, heading back to the dining room for high tea (a choice of quiche, sandwiches, carrot cake, and jam tarts) before heading out for an afternoon game drive. Three or four exhilarating hours later, after seeing countless animals and birds and enjoying a cold beer or whisky sour in the bush as the sun sets and turns fiery red, you'll head back to camp. There, after another quick shower, feeling a little tired but completely content, you'll sit down with your hosts, the camp management team, to a three-course candlelight dinner with fine South African wines. You may also be entertained with a staff singsong.

At around ten or eleven o'clock, earlier or later if you prefer, and if you're not chatting to fellow travellers or dozing by the campfire, a member of the camp staff will escort you back to your quarters, where you'll almost certainly fall asleep quickly and blissfully to the sounds of the African night. Later, against the background of croaking frogs and hissing crickets, you may awaken suddenly to the yelping of a hyena or the growling of a lion.

There are two ways of getting to Maun—by air and by road. A number of African airlines fly into Francistown and Gaborone. Regular daily service operates to both cities, where you'll transfer to a light aircraft to complete your trip. The main roads today



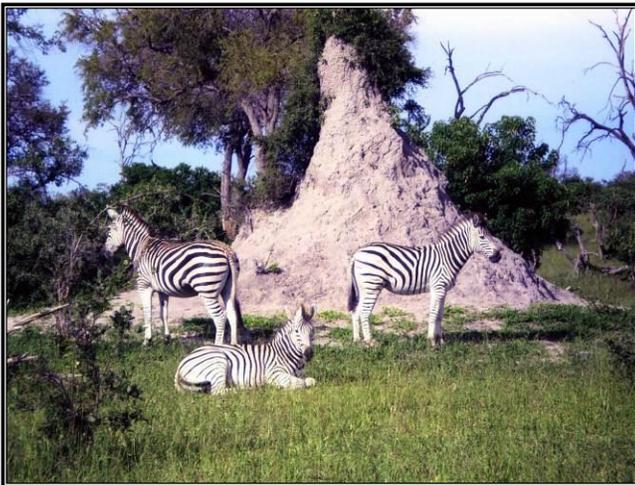
are all tarred, but there are few of them, and a journey by automobile is invariably long and tiring. You have to stop frequently to give way to impala, giraffe, zebra, and huge elephant herds. It's much quicker and more convenient to go by air.

The majority of visitors arrive in Botswana by way of South Africa. Since it's so close, most like to conclude their safaris by visiting the spectacular Victoria Falls in neighbouring Zambia. An awe-inspiring sight and well worth a visit.

The all-inclusive cost for a Botswana wildlife safari depends on which camps you choose—some are more luxurious than others—and the length of the tour. The all-inclusive cost for a safari in Botswana that you access by air is a real bargain, compared to safaris in other countries that you access by road. Prices range from several thousand dollars for a nine- or 10-day trip to \$15,000 to \$20,000 for 18 to 21 days. Most visitors happily say it's worth every penny and describe their journeys as “the trip of a lifetime.”



I first went to Botswana in 1965, after spending a little over a year working in nearby South Africa, and have been back a number of times over the last 10 years, leading photo safaris. It's one of my favourite safari destinations.



For information about David Skillan's frequent safaris in Botswana and Zambia, please visit

www.skillansafaris.com/david-skillan-tours.html.