



DELTA

DELIGHTS

A wildlife safari in Botswana's Okavango Delta ensures an enthralling connection to the beauty, intensity and raw power of the African wilderness, writes Dan Avila.

An African safari delivers more than a traditional vacation and the Okavango Delta is more than a typical safari. It can provide a change to the state of mind through an immersion into another world, like being wrapped in a wildlife documentary. Part of the allure is the uncertainty, the sense of chance. Rolling out of camp before dawn in the open safari vehicles, there are no guarantees. Although there is game everywhere, the nature of the contact and wildlife experiences for the day is a function of chance as much as the skill of our local born and raised Botswanan guide and tracker. And that's the thrill – the uncertainty of the results of our hunt for unique experiences and extraordinary moments.

A natural marvel

We're in an open vehicle approaching predators and prey around every corner. Our guides exude pure professionalism, confidence and knowledge – comforting, as deftly navigating

an elephant's challenge is par for the course, and being directly eyeballed by a massive marauding lion walking a few metres from the open vehicle triggers a primal emotion that will quickly unplug anyone from a prosaic state of semi-participation. And therein lays an attraction to safari – feeling a sense of humility and uncertainty while being discernibly mid-tier in the food chain. The Okavango Delta is a natural marvel. Floods from the Cubango and Cuito rivers in Angola charge the waterways of the Delta. The result is diverse abundance on a massive scale. Yet the storms are not guaranteed, and in dry years the landscape changes, creating challenges and opportunities. Our visit in November came at a time of significant drought with the landscape begging for rain. The high grasses of the plains were grazed lower and areas usually only accessible by mokoro (traditional canoe) and boats, were easily accessible by safari vehicle.

Game that may have been harder to spot after an abundant wet season, are easier to find on

the drier and expansive range. Tracking game is also aided by these conditions, which our guides King and Atti use to their advantage. Their vast knowledge and experience, combined with a near-supernatural ability to spot wildlife, meant that we spent considerable time with the 'big five', including large prides of lions, and about a dozen leopards following along during a hunt. And guides ensure you have the best possible position to capture photos and videos. King would place the vehicle in the right position to ensure we had the best angle and light, always responding with a wealth of information to our endless questions.

Home away from home

Tented camps of Xaranna and Nxabega are our home and it only takes a day or so to settle into the routine of life in a luxury camp. The beautifully appointed camps are carefully placed on the Delta to provide guests with privacy while remaining within the heart of the wildlife action zone. For this reason, guides are required when walking about the camp outside of daylight hours. Even during the day, encounters about the camp can occur, with elephants and other game wandering through whenever they please.

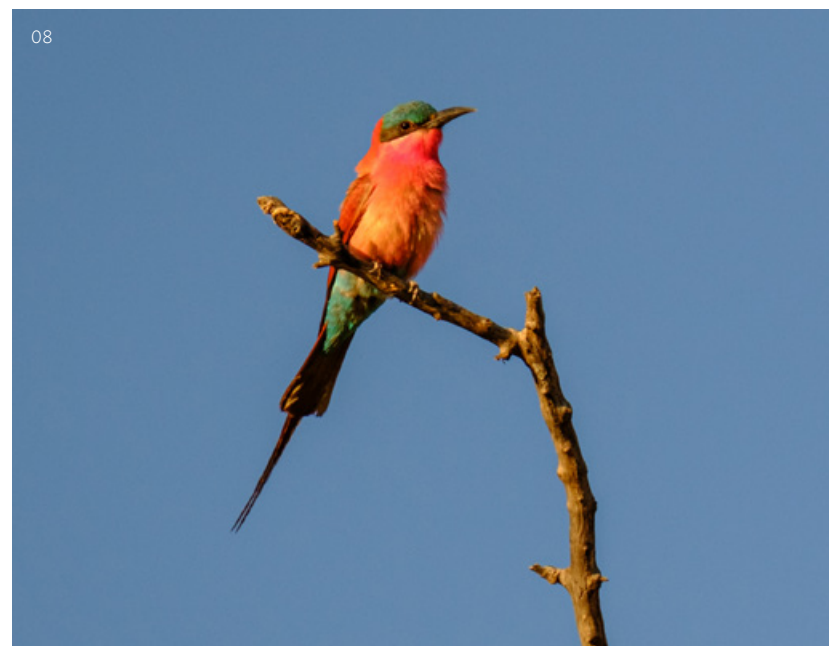
This means excellent game spotting from the open restaurant or the private pools while we eat morning tea, or sip coffee spiked with Amarula liqueur (still waiting for this to catch on in Australia) and there are sunset G&Ts in stunning locations that cap off thrilling days. Particularly noteworthy is the refined dining, all the more impressive given the remote location.

For those new to safari, the experience can be surreal and overwhelming. For those experienced safari regulars, this region offers an extraordinary environment with such a density and diversity of wildlife and a variety of landscapes that it feels like multiple safaris in one.

After some days, we began to understand the poetry of the delicate interdependence of species, terrain and environment, and the ubiquity of each animal's existence in the wild. Life on the Delta is a system of interrelated battles. Beyond the obvious and enthralling predator/prey relationships, each species contends with trying to survive and pass on its genes. It's no picnic for the predators either. Even the dominant pride of lions have to contend with a Shakespearean level of plot and counterplot in their internal battles for dominion and survival. These struggles, observed in isolation, can appear malevolent and cruel, but zoom out and they are a formula for ecological balance and the enhancement of the respective gene pools. A harmonious, primal balance that imparts a lasting impact on those lucky enough to visit. ♦



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to watch what life
is like on safari in
the Okavango Delta
with andBeyond.



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01, 02, 04, 06 and 08 Close wildlife encounters are made possible by experienced and knowledgeable guides
03 & 09 Camps are like a home away from home
05 The striking golden glow of a sunset on safari
07 Friendly guides become your constant