

The landlocked country of **Botswana** has been Africa's tourism success story for decades. Now, with the opening of two camps in the famed Okavango Delta and the makeover of a desert classic, the luxury quotient is about to reach new heights. By Maria Shollenbarger Photographs by Russell Smith

DELTA



The Okavango  
Delta as seen  
from above during  
a flight to Xaranna  
Tented Camp.

# DAWN



# Nine thousand feet below me, Botswana is invisible. A handful of large bush-fires have been burning for days in the sere expanse of the interior, erasing the landscape under layers of thick smoke. From my vantage point in the passenger seat of a tiny Cessna 172, the nation touted as one of the African continent's most thrillingly gorgeous could look, for all I know, like Greater New York, so completely shrouded is it in a silver-brown haze. "Nothing to do but go above it," my khaki-clad pilot says apologetically as the plane bumps along on scorching thermals. "Shame we can't fly low, so you could see the view." A shame indeed, since according to the map, we're tracing a neat northwesterly line from the white emptiness of the Makgadikgadi Pans to the verdant permanent water channels of the Okavango Delta—which is to say, directly from one ecosystem that's replicated nowhere else on the planet to another that's also unique.

That both are within Botswana's borders, with just an hour-and-a-half plane ride separating them, goes a long way to explain why this country ranks among the world's top destinations. So does its unprecedented prosperity; Botswana is a manifest success in a day and age when intertribal violence, economic crisis and political meltdown tend to be sub-Saharan Africa's lead stories. The evidence of forty-two years of progressive multiparty democracy is everywhere you look: an 81 percent literacy rate; the highest teacher-student ratio in Africa; an average per capita income of more than \$6,000, comparable to that of South Africa. Even the sole statistic marring this otherwise glowing résumé—Botswana's HIV/AIDS pandemic, afflicting an estimated 24 percent of the population—is the target of four massive antiretroviral-drug-distribution and education initiatives (the first of their kind in Africa) involving joint efforts between the federal government, the pharmaceutical company Merck and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Political stability helps any African country raise its profile among travelers; what makes Botswana Africa's premier luxury destination is its government's farsighted conservation policy. More than a third of the country is protected under state, private or community auspices; the tourism model that prevails here—fewer visitors paying higher rates—not only limits human population and the number of heavy vehicles on reserves (i.e., no twenty-cruiser scrums around every lion kill, à la South Africa's Kruger National Park) but also funnels revenues from private concessions and parks right back into protection and upkeep of land. "The extent to which the government and private interests invest in environmental protection is unmatched," says Cherri Briggs, owner of custom-safari outfitter Explore and an on-and-off Botswana resident for almost two decades. And

there's significantly less corruption than in neighboring countries, "so once you're set up," Briggs says, "it's easier to operate in Botswana than in any other country in southern Africa."

During our descent through the gray-brown nothingness, shapes begin to vaguely form; then, at about 2,000 feet, the haze abruptly dissipates and the Okavango Delta stretches all around us, vast and viridescent. Swaths of floodplain flare with the glimmer of sun on water. A huge African fish eagle kites in leisurely circles above emerald date palms and acacias in full lime-green spring flower. "This is more like it, eh?" says my pilot with a smile. Off to the right, a herd of elephants strides trunk to tail through the floodplain, a pair of newborns at the center of the chain. As we touch down, a tsessebe antelope gallops in the grass parallel to the runway for a few exhilarating seconds before veering off into the bush with an enormous leap.

It's a spectacular arrival; but then, there is virtually no exaggerating the spectacle and beauty of this place, a 6,000-square-mile alluvial forestland improbably growing in the middle of the desert, born of the Okavango River's source, hundreds of miles to the northwest in Angola. (Botswana itself lies at the center of southern Africa, with Namibia to the west, Zimbabwe to the east and South Africa below it.) As the motor skiff, driven by the guides who met me at the airstrip, buzzes lightly along papyrus-lined channels, details in the water's crystal-clear depths—the leaf of a lily, glimmering shoals of bream—are photographically vivid. Tiny frogs the colors of semiprecious stones perch on the sedge grasses; one, silver white with scarlet spots, leaps into my lap for a minute or two, then pops calmly over the boat's edge.

I'm en route to Xaranna (kah-RAH-nah) Tented Camp and Xudum (KOO-doom) Delta Lodge, both opened just weeks earlier by AndBeyond, the safari company formerly known as



A majestic  
giraffe, a fairly  
common sight  
on a game drive  
through Xaranna's  
62,000 acres.











The lantern-lit open-air lounge at Xudum Delta Lodge. Opposite: One of Botswana's 100,000 elephants, ready for its close-up near the Xaranna grounds.



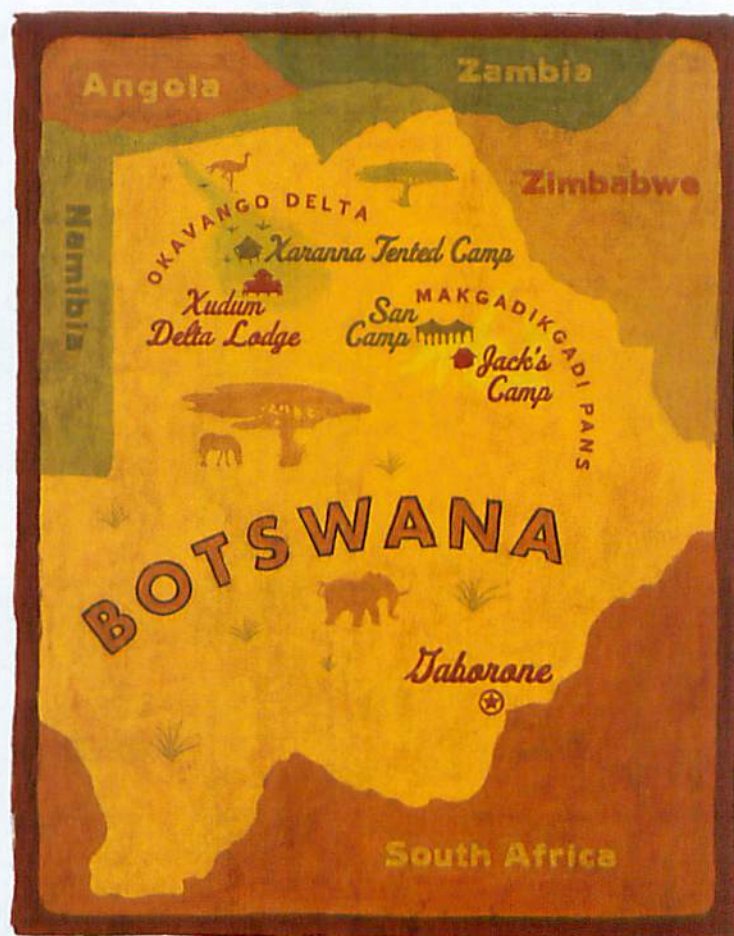
Conservation Corporation (or simply CC) Africa. The advance word is promising: just nine tents at each camp, both on the same 62,000-acre reserve. AndBeyond's properties, some of the most luxurious in southern and eastern Africa, range from sleekly minimal (Ecca Lodge, in South Africa's Eastern Cape) to baronially splendid (Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, in Tanzania), so I'm curious to see which direction they take here.

As it happens, both camps lean strongly toward the contemporary. In the lounge areas at Xaranna, blocky modern sofas in sage green and dusty pink are arranged around Lucite tables under white canvas ceilings. Semicircular leather swing chairs with chrome frames face the floodplain; pale-pink sisal runners cover teak planks underfoot. The look—shabby chic meets Design Within Reach—capitalizes on the light, the breezes and the water views. The guest “tents” are huge, with indoor and outdoor lounges and nine-foot-long plunge pools. Because of hippo activity—the animals migrate by way of the channels at sunset—excursions are strictly limited to the daylight hours, which lends a resortlike feel to the place. You can sleep past 5:00 A.M.; you can spend the sunset hour in one of those groovy leather swing chairs, scanning the horizon for pied kingfishers.

Xudum, a half hour by boat from Xaranna, is a more masculine affair with a heavier footprint. Black and brown substitute for Xaranna's pastels; wood and thatched roofing replace screen walls and canvas. The suites have austere platform beds tented in slate-gray linen and—the trump card—fifteen-square-foot rooftop viewing decks complete with king-size lounge beds. It's an earthy, more grown-up complement to Xaranna's aqueous, billowing prettiness.

But a great-looking camp is only half the equation; the heart of any safari is the wildlife experience, historically AndBeyond's strong suit. Despite having had mere weeks to learn the lay of the land (until just before the lodges' openings, the property on which they stand was a private concession and thus inaccessible to safari vehicles), the guide-tracker teams can already exploit the reserve's finer points. At Xaranna, I'm in the care of Pat and Chris, two self-possessed, delta-born twentysomethings with an encyclopedic knowledge of bird and animal calls. Malachite kingfisher? Southern ground-hornbill? Amorous Cape buffalo? Both men instantly identify the bird or beast in question and tell me which page of the field guide it's on without so much as looking up from the salmon-and-chive scrambled eggs they prepare for us each morning on some island or other. We venture miles from camp in the motor skiff in an attempt to get up close and personal with hippo and crocodile; we take tranquil birding rides in *mekoro*, traditional fishermen's dugouts, tracking bateleurs and saddle-billed storks and hoping for a glimpse of the elusive Pel's fishing owl.

At Xudum, which is spread out along the edge of the reserve,

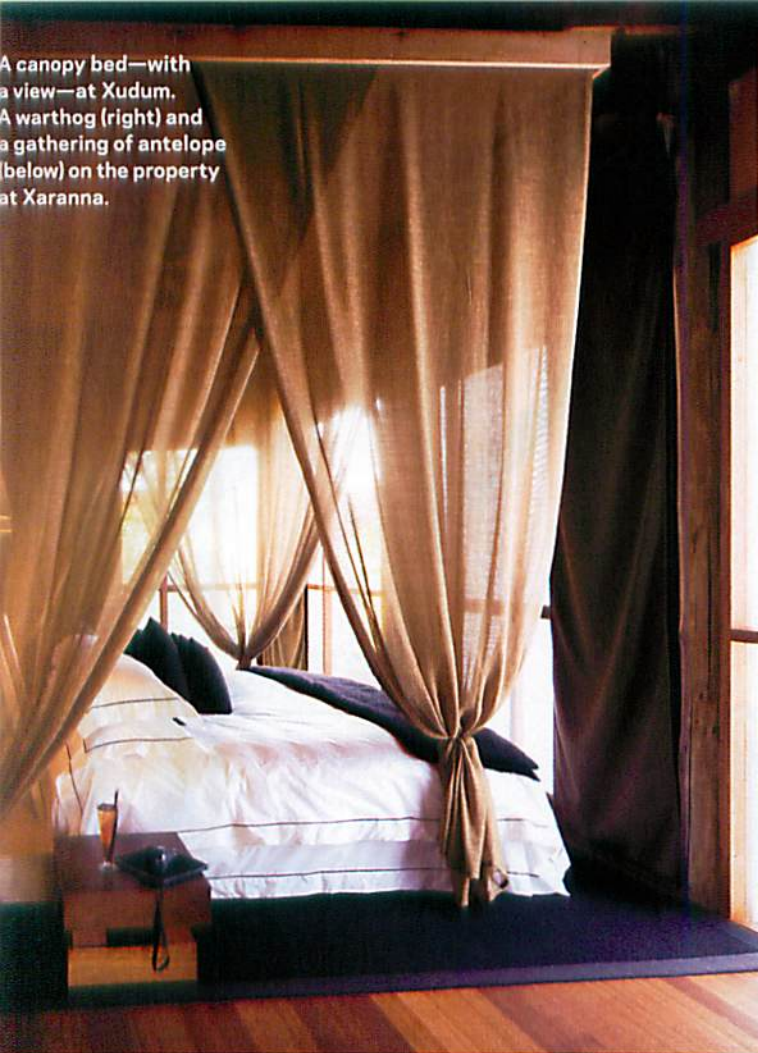


the focus is more on land animals, which are seen from the comfort of a well-appointed Land Cruiser. In two days my guides, Stanza and Ona, and I find giraffes and zebras, Cape buffalo and several antelope species (kudu, impalas, red lechwe, the enormous tsessebe) as well as a dozen birds, most indigenous only to this region. Normally, there's a substantial population of big cats, as evidenced by the lion-research institute that's the lone other tenant of the reserve. But sightings are scarce when I'm there (not surprising, Stanza tells me, since it's the wettest spring on record in almost thirty years).

Elephants, on the other hand, are ubiquitous at both camps (Botswana is home to the largest population in Africa, numbering some 100,000). Guests at Xaranna, for their safety, are escorted to and from their tents even in broad daylight, thanks to the fairly reliable presence of a curious and persistent adolescent male who took a liking to all the activity during the camp's construction. The day I arrive at Xudum, we watch an eighteen-strong breeding herd cut a grazing path right past the dining terrace while we lunch on fresh hummus and salads and an excellent Sauvignon Blanc from South Africa's Constantia Valley. And the next morning on a game drive, we hear two bulls tussling in their distinctive brawl-dance of superiority before they crash out of the trees fifty feet from our Land Cruiser, tusks locked.



A canopy bed—with  
a view—at Xudum.  
A warthog (right) and  
a gathering of antelope  
(below) on the property  
at Xaranna.



**Writ-large** moments like this, in the vibrant lushness of the delta landscape, are special enough on their own. But they're particularly vivid when contrasted with the parched nothingness on the other side of the country, from which I arrived five days ago. The Makgadikgadi salt pans are 6,757 square miles of ancient lake bed coated with a thick alkaline crust—a haunting, mesmerizing lunar plain, punctuated along its edges by tawny islands of bleached grass and desiccated palms that sigh and chatter in the wind.

It's almost impossible to invoke this place in a well-traveled group without someone blissfully extolling the virtues of Jack's Camp, my base here in the salt pans. Jack's was created by Ralph Bousfield in 1993 with his partner, Catherine Raphaely, on the site of the base camp of his deceased father, the legendary explorer, hunter and proto-conservationist Jack Bousfield. They opened a more intimate sister property, San Camp, in 1995; to this day the two camps are the sole luxury accommodations in the area. The reason isn't a lack of opportunity (the pans are about the size of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined, and viable parkland abuts their boundaries elsewhere) so much as it is the sheer matchlessness of the Jack's-San experience, which is in debt equally to the history of the flamboyant Bousfield family and







Earthy details, including brass lamps and sculptures from North Africa, on display in Xudum's lounge. Opposite: The tented dining area at Xaranna, on a lagoon thick with reeds.









The dining tent at Jack's Camp, in the Makgadikgadi Pans. Opposite: A Jack's Camp guest tent.

to the unreproducible ecosystem, both intrinsic parts of any stay.

And then there's the chicness quotient, which is, considering the epicenter-of-nowhere coordinates, absurdly high. Raphaely, a stylist who worked in New York and Sydney, knows how to art-direct the Bousfield legacy to stunning effect. She has just proven this again with a total renovation of San Camp. The original site—running up to the pans' edge, oriented to those end-of-the-world views—hasn't changed. But the dining pavilion is three times its former size and now has twin octagonal lounging tents. There's an abundance of horizontal surfaces: swing beds and daybeds and chaise longues, all covered in the same subtly striped custom-made ticking used to line the canvas roof. Every piece is white on cream, wood and leather, light and unadorned. The six tents are sparsely furnished with carved dark-wood four-poster beds dressed in Irish linen; on each veranda sits an extra-long leather Roorkee, a British campaign chair. You can peek through the slats of your shower up at the milky-blue sky.

Jack's Camp, which has ten tents, is a certifiable museum, housing taxidermic specimens, antique maps and early photo-

graphs by Peter Beard (a family friend and occasional drop-in guest). The smaller San Camp has far less of the cabinet-of-curiosities feel of Jack's. Both dispense with most modern conveniences; too many of those and you won't connect to the place, Raphaely likes to say. There's no electricity in the tents, for instance, a bit of information that leaves some of the less wash-and-go ladies among the clientele looking stricken. But your silver-plated tea service is delivered to you each day at dawn, the pot snuggled in a tasseled cozy made by hand in India exclusively for Raphaely.

The nature experience here, like the camps, is about the small details. Which isn't to say there are no big thrills: on a trip into the bush north of camp, my guide and I literally drove into a herd of several hundred zebras, and later we trailed two towering male ostriches sprinting along the road for almost a mile. But parlaying the more nuanced aspects of desert wildlife—tracks and spoor of sandgrouse, porcupines, jackals, genets—into quietly captivating dramas is what the guides excel at.

Bousfield also employs local Bushmen to escort guests >127



Mekoro, traditional  
dugout canoes,  
ready for a sunset  
paddle at Xarar









# NATIVE INTELLIGENCE: BOTSWANA



## ■ WHEN TO GO

High season—when the days are mild, the Okavango Delta is at full flood and animals gather at water sources—runs from July to the end of October. November through February is an ideal time for birders to visit the delta, though regular heavy rainfall is sometimes a deterrent.

## ■ GETTING THERE

**South African Airways** ([flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com)) and **Delta Air Lines** ([delta.com](http://delta.com)) fly direct to Johannesburg from New York's JFK Airport. From there, SAA and **Air Botswana** ([www.airbotswana.co.bw](http://www.airbotswana.co.bw)) connect daily to Gaborone airport, in Botswana's capital; Air Botswana also flies to Maun Airport, the gateway to the Okavango Delta. Charter flights to and from both airports, as well as between camps and regions (from the delta to the Kalahari Desert, for example), can be arranged by your operator or outfitter.

## ■ PLANNING YOUR ITINERARY

**AndBeyond** The premier, newly global safari operator and outfitter previously known as CC Africa has six properties in Botswana, ranging from a mobile tented camp in the Savute game reserve to luxe Xaranna and Xudum. Custom programs, including

private guides and birding and animal drives (accompanied by specialists), are par for the course. *Eight-day itineraries during high season from \$4,000 per person, double occupancy.* 888-882-3742; [andbeyond.com](http://andbeyond.com).

**Uncharted Africa Safari Co.** The owners of Jack's and San camps outfit one-of-a-kind trips that take in the whole country. You can view

wildlife in the Moremi Game Reserve in the delta, join a seven-day Bushmen Initiation Hunt in the Nxai Pan or venture deep into the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. *Five-day itineraries from \$4,625 per person (four-person minimum).* 011-27-11-447-1605; [unchartedafrica.co.za](http://unchartedafrica.co.za).

You should also consider using one of the following major safari operators to plan

your Botswana itinerary; all offer customized luxury experiences.

**Explore** Owner Cherri Briggs has been creating itineraries all over southern Africa for almost two decades and can personalize them based on wildlife season, geographical interest and desired level of adventure. *Five-day itineraries from \$2,600 per person.* 888-596-6377; [info@explore-africa.net](mailto:info@explore-africa.net).

## **Orient-Express Safaris**

Its lodges—Khwai River Lodge, Eagle Island Camp and Savute Elephant Camp—offer splendid decor and no-holds-barred service. Orient-Express's relationships with other privately owned camps and hotels allow it to tailor any itinerary to suit clients' individual requirements. *Ten-day itineraries from \$12,175 per person.* 800-957-6137; [orient-express-safaris.co.za](http://orient-express-safaris.co.za).

**Wilderness Safaris** The operators of two of Botswana's most venerated properties, Mombo Camp and Abu Camp, put together safaris of all kinds, arranged by camp, guide, animal interest (its specialty: elephants) or adventure level. Great for families with older kids (many safari camps don't accept children under eleven). *Three-day itineraries from \$5,310 per person.* [wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com).



A juvenile hornbill standing sentry over the delta.

