

Green Travel

By Christopher R. Cox

Photography by George Steinmetz

# 70,000 Elephants, 600 Birds, Thunder of Hippos—All in a

A safari in Botswana explores one of Africa's

# 50-pound Porcupines, and a Nation the Size of Texas.

most spectacular concentrations of wildlife.



A herd of hippos, otherwise known as a "thunder," congregates near Botswana's northern border with Namibia. Hippopotamuses—from the Greek "river horse"—submerge themselves in cooling waters for up to 16 hours a day to endure the hot African sun.

## Arid and landlocked, Botswana is

an unlikely success story. Once a poor, obscure British protectorate, it achieved independence in 1966 during the wholesale dismantling of colonial Africa. The following year the discovery of enormous diamond deposits cemented its economic prosperity. Unlike neighboring South Africa or Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Botswana avoided racial strife—its first president, Sir Seretse Khama, had married a white woman while a student in England. Stable civilian leadership unmarred by corruption, along with visionary environmental policies and a well-managed parks system, have resulted in one of sub-Saharan Africa's highest standards of living and an ecotourism-based travel industry to rival any nation.

Botswana's jewel is the Okavango Delta, which, from the vantage point of our bush plane, spreads to the distant horizon, a moss-green plain cut by a lacework of game trails, oxbow lakes, and meandering river channels. From the air the river seems to be choked with smooth brown boulders; as the plane descends, I realize these water hazards are actually pods of grazing hippos, just one of the many animals abounding in the world's largest inland delta.

Like most visitors to this world-famous wetland in northwest Botswana, I'm delivered to a remote airstrip—in my case, the faint gravel trace of Xakanaxa on the delta's eastern fringe—via a puddle jumper from the central town of Maun, a burgeoning ecotourism hub. There's no baggage claim, no arrivals hall—just Brent Reed, the lanky, laconic co-owner of Letaka Safaris, waiting in an open-cab Land Cruiser packed with equipment for almost every occasion, from birding scopes to a picnic basket complete with gin-and-tonic sundowners. After regarding a warning sign as we exit Xakanaxa airstrip—"Please Keep Your Tents Closed, Or Wild Animals May Eat You"—we wind south, traveling six miles through mopane woodland, a dry, open forest dominated by 100-foot-tall hardwoods with butterfly-shaped leaves. We reach our campsite near a pond where hippos trade chuckling calls as if sharing a joke.

"Botswana's probably the only place in southern Africa where you can still do this kind of thing on such a large scale," says Reed, a South African who quit a lucrative IT job in London to guide mobile safaris with his brother, Grant. "There's such a massive amount of wilderness. There are very few parks in Africa where you can drive around and not see anyone else."

The allure of these wild, wide-open spaces—this Texas-sized nation has just two million people—has brought me to Botswana for a 10-day safari of its untrammelled scenery. I'll visit Chobe National Park, followed by the Okavango Delta and the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, which all teem with dense, diverse populations of animals and birds. Nearly 40 percent of Botswana is set aside in national parks, game reserves, and wildlife-management areas. Almost entirely unfenced, the preserves allow one of Africa's greatest concentrations of wildlife to roam free across an immense landscape that doesn't strain for superlatives: the 6,200-square-mile Okavango is the world's largest Ramsar site (a wetland of international importance); at nearly 20,400 square miles, the Central Kalahari is bigger than Switzerland.

## One of its must-see destinations

is 4,080-square-mile Chobe National Park, in the northeast, which has few African equals in terms of big game and birds. Established in 1967, the Jamaica-sized national park, the country's first, holds an estimated 70,000 elephants, including what is considered the largest bull elephant population in the world. Its spectrum of undisturbed habitats—riparian forest, seasonal pans,

swamps, and savannah—also supports approximately 450 bird species, three-quarters of Botswana's nearly 600 recorded species.

The two-and-a-half-hour flight from the capital, Gaborone, to Kasane crosses the Makgadikgadi Pans, at 11,500 square miles the world's largest salt pans, which shelter tens of thousands of nesting greater and lesser flamingoes during the summer rainy season. At the 48-room Chobe Game Lodge, warthogs and bushbuck browse the lawn rolling down to the river separating Botswana from Namibia's Caprivi Strip, a cartographic curiosity created at the 1890 Berlin Conference to give Germany, its colonial-era master, access to the Zambezi River's eastern trade routes.

During my April visit, the rain-swollen Chobe River is busy with birds: an African darter using its pointed bill to spear fish; a green-backed heron employing a fly-fishing technique—placing an insect upstream in the current—to attract a catch; and overhead, an elegant African fish-eagle, with its distinctive white head, chestnut-hued forewings, and piercing, gull-like cry—one of the signature sounds of the African wild.

The Moorish-style lodge, which opened in 1974, is in the midst of a sweeping retrofit. Some of the "green" improvements are small, such as installing long-life compact fluorescent bulbs. Operations manager Johan Bruwer, a South African native and an avid reader of *Popular Mechanics*, has also undertaken ambitious DIY projects, including a home-built solar-heated water system

and an organic-waste incinerator (honey badgers and baboons wreaked havoc on composting). He's also field-testing South African-built electric four-wheel-drive trucks for game drives.

"It's in our interest to look after the environment," Bruwer says. "Your market wants to see you be more accountable for your business, and be more sustainable."

Given the lodge's choice location, wildlife wanders everywhere. When I return to my room after dinner, I notice a large, furtive shadow on the walkway ahead. Lion? Leopard? The creature passes a spotlight and I relax: just a 50-pound Cape porcupine, Africa's largest rodent.

The next morning the property's environmentalist, Wouter Theron, an affable, rugby-sized Afrikaner, takes me on a game drive in an open Land Cruiser. Theron, an avid birder since his childhood in Pretoria, heads south into a woodland of Zambezi teak and leadwood, passing a spiral-horned kudu and a troop of baboons, and then parks and turns off the truck's ignition. Above us, a Technicolor-plumed male lilac-breasted roller rises from a dead tree, then suddenly banks and dives earthward. He blurts a raspy call and turns from side to side to reveal his turquoise and cobalt-blue primary feathers. For a female roller, it's an irresistible sight.

Soon a half-dozen South African giraffes emerge from the bush. Vultures festoon the tops of the surrounding trees, waiting for the temperature to rise enough to allow them to catch a warm updraft and search for carrion. Chobe supports southern Africa's highest densities of many raptors, says Theron, including the bateleur eagle, known for its distinctive canting flight action (bateleur is French for "acrobat"), and the lappet-faced vulture, identifiable by its bald, reddish head.

The route leads us toward the river, past two scarce, lyre-horned antelope species: the red lechwe and the puku. Their oily

Large animals, including elephants and buffalo, are abundant during the Southern Hemisphere's summer (January to March), when the Okavango Delta's landscape is lush from the wet season. Bottom: With dusk approaching, a family of elephants returns to dry brush land after a day of feeding near the Chobe River.



skin and shaggy hair are adaptations to a semiaquatic life along river floodplains. We're in time to see scores of elephants drinking at water's edge and then sauntering back into the forest. I've seen elephants in the wild but never in such profusion—or unnerving proximity. A large bull eyes our vehicle and then blocks the track, allowing a string of cows and babies to cross undisturbed. Luckily, the male isn't in musth, a hyperaggressive period associated with breeding. He gives us a dismissive shake of his massive head and follows the group into the trees.

In a nearby clearing, hundreds of female impalas stand in tight clusters; around each group, a snorting male in rut circles like a border collie. "They're starting to get the ladies in order," Theron explains. "The chances these males will die in the next few months are quite good. They get so preoccupied with the females. It's the perfect opportunity for predators. Also, they don't spend a lot of time feeding, so they're exhausted."

We pass a pair of juvenile males, clacking horns as they practice sparring. Soon enough, they'll get the brief opportunity to fight and mate before becoming a meal for a big cat or an African wild dog. Few impalas reach old age. My safari guide lists their life expectancy as "unknown."

On a final, late-afternoon game drive with another guide, we approach a small pride of lions—a big male and a half-dozen females—lounging in the bush. The cats soon rise to their feet and pad stealthily through the dry forest, ready to pounce. Their quarry is a baby elephant that has strayed from its herd. But a wary old bull elephant spots the impending ambush and trumpets an alarm call; the commotion flushes a caracal, a rarely spotted lynx-like wild cat that can weigh 40 pounds, and calls in the first responders—another old bull and a juvenile male—who rush in and escort the youngster back to the main herd. The old bull thunders into the bush, thrashing at trees in a raw, primal rage until the lions melt away in the fading light.

**Unlike most rivers, which ultimately** drain into the sea, Angola's Cubango River flows more than 1,000 miles into Africa's interior, transecting the Kalahari to spread across a vast alluvial fan in northwest Botswana, where it dissipates into countless dead-end channels before vanishing completely amid the fringing desert sands. At the heart of this astounding oasis lies the 1,880-square-mile Moremi Game Reserve, a peninsula on the east side of the wetland where Bushmen hunted for almost 10,000 years. In 1963, however, the BaTswana people declared it a preserve to protect it from poaching and cattle grazing—the first refuge in Africa created by local residents.

The Moremi has since become Botswana's ultimate wild-life destination, attracting rustic lodges, exclusive fly-in "water camps," and multiday wilderness camping adventures, like the one I'm undertaking by truck with birding specialists Letaka Safaris. Among the species I'm hoping to see in the reserve are several specialties, such as the slaty egret, a charcoal-gray wader rarely seen outside the Okavango, and the Pel's fishing owl, an elusive species notable for its large size and ginger coloring.

The waters are rising in the Okavango, flooding shallow depressions and sandy tracks, part of an epic, annual inundation that continually recasts the dynamic delta—with a major assist from

Red lechwe are drawn to the Okavango Delta's marshy waters, where the grasses they depend on are abundant. The fur on this antelope's legs is covered in a water-repelling substance that helps them dash through a knee-deep river with a lion at their heels.



hippos. The two-ton herbivores play a crucial hydrological and ecological role across the virtually flat delta: The trails they tramp between streams and pans keep the channels free of vegetation and the water flowing into areas for fish and invertebrates to breed.

“Without hippos,” says Reed, “the delta would fail.”

I’m eager to spot a Pel’s fishing owl, but Reed says the bird is more common along the narrow panhandle of the Okavango River near the Namibian border. Our best chance will come in the early morning, he adds, before the rising light and heat compel the nocturnal birds into the jackalberry trees.

Reed is a fount of encyclopedic details and arcane anecdotes about every plant, insect, and animal we encounter. To protect their bark from elephants, marula trees grow football-sized cal-luses around their trunks, relates Reed.

He points out a yellow-billed stork hunting in a nearby pan. “Its Afrikaans name, Nimmersat, means ‘never full,’ ” Reed says. “They always seem to be feeding.”

We meander through mopane forest, cross a clear stream, and spot a vervet monkey pulling leopard-lookout duty in an acacia tree. And then, good fortune finds us under a jackalberry tree, in the form of a two-foot-tall, rufous-hued bird.

“Unbelievable,” Reed whispers, “there’s a Pel’s right here.”

It’s a fabulous sighting: a full-body scan that lasts several minutes before the owl takes wing. A lucky encounter, too: Reed says he sees the bird “maybe one in 10 times” inside Moremi.

On another circuit, we check a copse of feverberry trees for leopard after hearing a ruckus made by reedbuck and foot-tall, henlike francolin, then break for *rooibos*, or red bush tea, in the shade of an acacia. In a nearby pan, a solitary slaty egret stalks the shallows for frogs. A pair of stately, five-foot-tall wattled cranes take flight, banking so close to our vehicle that we can hear the

Large numbers of cattle egrets gather in trees while staying close to a Cape buffalo herd traveling through the Okavango Delta. These egrets feed off insects stirred up by approaching buffalo.

as twilight descends. Although extremely rare, fatal encounters do occur with Botswana’s untamed animals: an American boy dragged from his tent in the Moremi by hyenas in 2000; a South African woman fatally bitten by an Okavango hippo in 2003. One of the first European explorers to Botswana, 19th century Swedish naturalist Johan August Wahlberg, was killed east of the Okavango by a wounded elephant—“Run through with \$80,000 worth of ivory,” in Reed’s colorful terms.

By the time we reach camp, a star-filled night spills across the southern sky. The frog-like chirp of an African scops-owl—at six inches the region’s tiniest owl species—serenades us over a hearty dinner of corn chowder and beef filet, only to be drowned out by the grunting and thrashing of two territorial male hippos in the nearby bush. We’re polishing off the chocolate mousse when Reed’s cook appears.

“There’s a hippo in the kitchen,” he solemnly states.

We drop our plates and follow him 20 yards to the outdoor cooking area. Sure enough, standing in the shadows lurks several thousand pounds of very glum, dejected hippo. After sulking for a few minutes, the vanquished animal turns and shuffles off to the nearest pool.

wind surging through their black-edged wings.

We ford a stream where two large crocodiles slither across a hippo highway just in front of our truck’s half-submerged hood; somewhere in the track-less woods we warily ease through an elephant herd

“For me, the attraction of the Okavango is sitting out in camp under the stars, having hippo passing through without actually feeling threatened,” muses Reed. “When we leave tomorrow, you’d never know there was a camp here. You just feel much more immersed in the wilderness than a lodge.”

**I’d expected the Kalahari, the so-called “Great Thirstland,” to be a lifeless desert.** But a two-hour flight south from Maun has set me amid a semi-arid savannah filled with herds of springbok, hartebeest, and gemsbok stalked by cheetahs and black-maned lions. There are scores of birds, including thrushlike dusky larks, a summer visitor found in freshly burnt grassland, and tawny eagles, an opportunistic omnivore that eats everything from termites to elephant carcasses.

I’ve wanted to travel here ever since reading *Cry of the Kalahari*, the adventure-filled 1984 book by Mark and Delia Owens recounting their seven years studying lions and brown hyenas in this epic, unforgiving wilderness where Bushmen have thrived for thousands of years.

In the cool of dawn, I leave Kalahari Plains Camp with Tshepo Phala, a young guide at the exclusive, 10-unit resort, for a 20-mile drive to Deception Valley, site of the Owens’ fieldwork. We find the paw prints of lion and brown hyena near the solar-powered lodge, and then cross a broad pan, where gemsbok joust and a pair of black-backed jackals tend two playful kits.

“Everybody’s happy,” says Phala. “It’s been raining.”

In the distance, two honey badgers dig furiously while a southern pale chanting goshawk hovers overhead. Phala speaks of their “special relationship”; the harrierlike bird waits to snatch the rodents and lizards bolting from the badgers’ excavation. From the flatlands we enter a rolling landscape of ancient sand ridges and riverbeds overgrown with giant speargrass and hoodia cactus, flushing a four-foot-tall, speckle-winged kori bustard. Weighing nearly 40 pounds, the world’s heaviest flying bird makes a slow, gravity-defying climb resembling the laborious takeoff of a fully fueled Boeing 747.

Standing in stark contrast to the waterlogged Okavango, the Kalahari is a desert without oases. There are no lakes, streams, or springs. When we arrive at Deception Valley we find only an illusion—a dark-gray clay pan that seems to be filled with water. The mirage can still deceive: a gray heron circles, then lands in the mud, expecting a shallow, frog-filled pond rather than this morass.

We return to camp in time to witness a classic Kalahari tableau of grazing antelope, roosting vultures, and jackals gathered at a manmade waterhole and backed by a red, molten sunset. To the east, a dark-violet dusk pulses with heat lightning. As we tuck into an al fresco dinner of *seswaa*, a savory Botswana beef stew spiced with curry powder, ginger, and chutney, the jackals yield to a pride of 10 lions. The dominant male, an enormous cat with a luxurious black mane, strolls between the tents, announcing his presence with a deep, rumbling roar—an arresting call he will sustain throughout our meal.

As a precaution, the lodge escorts all guests to their rooms after sundown. I return to my tented bungalow without incident. After midnight I’m awakened by a cool wind pushing against the window panels; it sounds like a ruthless honey badger scratching to gain entrance. Birds alarm-call in the distance, and a low growl reverberates from the direction of the dining area. The lion does not sleep tonight. ■

*Author and frequent contributor Chris Cox last wrote about how Cambodia is now experiencing a renaissance as a world-renowned nature travel destination (“Paradise Found,” July–August 2011).*



## BOTSWANA: MAKING THE TRIP

**Getting there:** There are no direct flights to Botswana from the United States. Visitors usually fly to Johannesburg or Cape Town, South Africa, then connect on regional flights to Botswana’s capital, Gaborone. Visas are available on arrival in both Botswana and South Africa; the latter requires at least two clean, facing pages in your passport. A passport with at least six months of validity remaining is required upon entry to Botswana.

**Getting around:** Most travel within Botswana is done by air. National carrier Air Botswana ([airbotswana.co.bw](http://airbotswana.co.bw)) connects from Gaborone to Kasane and Maun. Wilderness lodges are usually serviced by bush planes; your camp or tour operator will be able to arrange these charters. With limited cargo space, bush planes will accept only soft-sided luggage. Botswana offers a range of accommodations to suit any budget, from five-star Okavango ecolodges, such as Orient-Express’s fly-in, \$1,000/night Eagle Island Camp (a favorite of Alexander McCall Smith, author of the No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency mystery series, who even set part of *Double Comfort Safari Club* here) to mobile camping safaris, homestays, and guest houses. Companies such as Wilderness Safaris, Orient-Express, and Desert & Delta Safaris operate highly regarded lodges at Botswana’s premier game-viewing destinations. They can arrange multi-park itineraries, including air transport. It’s also possible to rent a vehicle for a self-drive safari, but make sure you pack a GPS, satellite phone, extra fuel, at least a five-day water supply, and spare tires before tackling the backcountry. Denver-based Africa Adventure Consultants ([adventuresinafrica.com](http://adventuresinafrica.com); 303-778-1089) specializes in small-group and custom African safaris, including to Botswana.

**More info:** For general country information (immigration and customs, attractions, tourist activities), visit the Botswana Tourism Board website ([botswanaturism.us](http://botswanaturism.us)). Information about specific parks is available on the Botswana Department of Wildlife & National Parks website ([mewt.gov.bw/DWNP](http://mewt.gov.bw/DWNP)). Contact the Embassy of the Republic of Botswana at 202-244-4990 for up-to-date information on entry requirements.

**For birders:** The best birdwatching is in January to March, during the rainy summertime, when migrants boost the species headcount. It coincides with the low tourist season, so hotel rates are at their most affordable and parks at their least crowded. For fact sheets on Botswana’s 12 Important Bird Areas, visit BirdLife International ([birdlife.org](http://birdlife.org)). Maun-based Letaka Safaris specializes in multi-day birding safaris in Botswana’s avian hotspots.

