

Discovering untamed luxury



ON THE EDGE OF PARADISE

THE OKAVANGO DELTA IS A WEB OF WATERWAYS – A NATURAL WONDER OF THE WORLD THAT TEEMS WITH WILDLIFE AND IS HOME TO TWO OF AFRICA'S FINEST LUXURY CAMPS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS
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It's a natural spectacle and a UNESCO heritage site that attracts people from all over the world. An ancient conversation between rainfalls thousands of kilometres away in the Angolan mountains and the watery wilderness of Botswana's Okavango Delta. This previous life-giving water traverses a continent until the Delta's two fault lines coerce it into slowing down, dramatically fanning it out over the land. The result is virescent slivers of landscape, intersected by blue-veined canals and shrubbery.

Along these waterways, wildlife revels in the annual rainfall. Elephants swim, pods of hippos protect their territories and the lechwe – the aqua-adapted antelope – leave magnificent sprays of water as they dart along the water edges.

I'd earmarked four nights to celebrate my 200th assignment as a travel journalist, and I hoped it would be something remarkable. When an invitation to "discover Earth's ultimate untamed places" in the Okavango Delta was offered, I knew the immense African sky of stars had aligned.

The accessibility from South Africa couldn't be more convenient – just over two hours from Cape Town, and I'd landed in Botswana's Maun. A breathtaking 30-minute flight north, and I was in camp and ready for the magic that lay ahead.



VUMBURA PLAINS

With its waterside setting and recent refurbishment of both the camp's exterior and interiors, it's no surprise that Vumbura Plains is a favourite destination in the Wilderness Delta collection. Even though I was visiting outside of the flood season (June to August), Vumbura Plains has perennial water, so the camp is an enticing choice for year-round visitors.

The rooms are luxurious and offer all the creature comforts, including a splash pool and outdoor showers. They're also built directly onto the water, and when opening the door to our suite for the first time, we were greeted by three elephants happily grazing on the water's edge beside our pool.

Itching to head out and explore, there was no better way to initiate my Delta experience than with one of its most iconic experiences – the Mokoro. These traditional dugout canoes are used to navigate the shallow waters of the Delta and allow you to meet some of the smaller water-bound creatures. It's a safari at a slower and more attentive pace.

Staying on the water, we safaried by boat down the water canals. Turning a corner, we came across more elephants splashing about – clearly as surprised as we were. Ten minutes later, we were given one more parting shot. A sunrise that effortlessly painted every inch of the sky and the clouds.

On safari, one usually spends a fair amount of time of the day bouncing on the back of a game vehicle, so it may as well be done in style. Wilderness game-viewing vehicles offer comfy extra touches: charging points on board for when the phone battery strains from all the wildlife snapping, six-seaters instead of the usual nine-seaters with convenient central storage units, and plush armrests, which doubled up as great stabilisers when taking photographs.

Perhaps Vumbura Plains' best-kept secret, however, is the daily sunrise spectacle: the camp is east facing and every morning the sky glows red. Sitting beside the fire with freshly brewed coffee as the sun rises, one is reminded every few minutes by the camp's resident hippos that there isn't a more fitting African wakeup routine.

M O M B O

After enjoying the watery wilderness of Vumbura Plains, it was time for a 10-minute flip across to Wilderness' flagship camp.

Mombo is often touted as one of the Delta's finest original luxury camps, and guests have experienced the magic of the Delta here for more than three decades. As the very affable Gee Gee led us to our tented suite, she heard me gasp and was quick to offer a "Welcome to the camp of plenty".

Each ultra-spacious suite is a marriage of three tented spaces – a lounge with a bar, bedroom area and a wonderful large bathroom. A balcony with a plunge pool, sala (outdoor daybed), dining area, and outdoor shower wraps itself around the entire space.

Mombo is surrounded by an abundance of wildness. During the flood and rainy seasons, the water approaches the luxury camp, attracting countless game species. The months between the annual winter flooding and summer rains are known as the green season, as once the water recedes from the plains, it transforms them into lush fertile lands teeming with life.

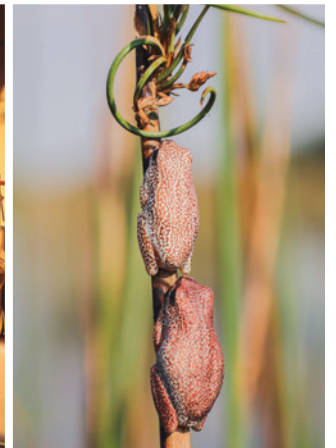
Our first game drive alone took in bat-eared foxes, hyenas, giraffes, elephants, leopards, and a variety of antelope species. The ecosystems here create a varied safari with the unique combination of riverine forest, woodland, marsh and floodplain.

The staff takes immense pride in the flagship camp – perhaps no one as much as head chef Tonderai Chipfupi. In addition to a shift towards sustainable menus, the Wilderness camps offer a celebrated focus on plant-based eating. Seasoned safari-goers will know that constant eating can be a challenge, and the combination of these persuasive and highly nutritious meals meant I never felt uncomfortable or lazy.

Elevated boardwalks connect the central lodge to the suites – this includes two towering bridges from which you can observe the wildlife below – they're even high enough for elephants to pass underneath. Dining and lounge spaces are many, and there's a separate spa and 12-metre infinity pool. The lodge has also benefitted from some recent additions such as a new fire deck, intimate dining pods and a walk-in wine cellar.

Days before leaving for the trip, I mentioned to a friend in the safari industry that I was heading to Mombo. Being one of the most seasoned safari travellers I know, his immediate response was: "Mombo is my favourite camp in Africa. When I retire, I'll happily offer my time as a barman, just to be there." I now understand his sentiment, and who knows, when you do have the privilege of visiting this paradise, you may just find him behind the bar, and a travel writer behind the coffee machine.

wildernessdestinations.com ■



TOP RIGHT:
The Okavango Delta from the sky
PREVIOUS, ABOVE AND RIGHT:
The luxurious suites and surroundings of the Wilderness camps make them the perfect safari setting