Welcome to Botswana, where the parched sands of the desert meet the cool waters of the delta, wildlife documentary-style thrills are an everyday occurrence, and the madding crowds are far, far away.

Words by Anthony Ham

Botswana is one of the premier wildlife-watching destinations on earth. This is where the sands of the desert meet the waters of the delta, where predator and prey dance in the eternal battle. It’s the sort of place where your imagination takes you back to what Africa must have been like before human beings walked the earth and where the stuff of thrilling wildlife documentaries are everyday encounters.

Part of the country’s appeal for lovers of wildlife lies in the astonishing proliferation of large mammals in the Okavango Delta, where the topography is an endlessly shifting interaction between dry land and water. This is the domain of the black-maned lion, stalking across the golden grasses of the Kalahari, lord of all he surveys. It is a world without horizons, one of the largest networks of salt pans on the planet. There are echoes of epic battles between lions and elephants on the plains of Savuti, and endless surprises lurking amid the kopjes of the Tuli Block.

If you’ve been on an African safari before you’ll immediately notice that Botswana is different. That’s largely because Botswana is so… quiet.

Concerned about the potential pitfalls associated with mass tourism, the Botswana government long ago decided to focus on high-end tourism as a means of preserving its stunning natural environment.

Yes, it is possible to travel the country in a rented 4WD and camp out in the wilderness – but as you do so you’ll be struck by the emptiness of the roads and bush trails. It’s in the exclusive lodges, tented camps and private reserves (so remote that few can be reached by road) that the heart of Botswana’s safari experience can be found. You will be deep in the wilderness, surrounded by pristine natural habitat and having Africa’s most charismatic mega-fauna all to yourself.

You’ll notice it as you fly in over the delta and detect no signs of the human presence as far as the eye can see. Or it will hit home as you watch in unbearable suspense as a lion stalks a buffalo and there’s no other vehicle but your own in sight.

Welcome to Botswana, where the experience of wildlife watching is all about you, the animals and being in one of the wildest and quietest places to be found on the planet.

Left: A cheetah stalks in the game-rich grasslands of the Kalahari region of Botswana. Wildlife thrives thanks to the remoteness of the area and the lack of any human presence.

© Johan Swanepoel/Alamy
Okavango Delta

The Okavango – even the name rolls around in the mouth in a very African way – is an African heartland of the highest order. Look at any satellite map of Africa and the Okavango Delta is one of the continent’s most curious features. It appears as a claw, clutching at the African interior as if searching in vain for an outlet to the sea. The Okavango is one of the largest inland deltas on the planet and it owes its existence to rains that fall far away, in the highlands of Angola, in January and February. These rains feed down into the delta from March through to June. With very few hills, the delta’s waters fan out, slowly and inexorably, until they can go no further, halted by the dry wastes of the Kalahari Desert. The ebb and flow of the waters create a world that is constantly in motion, its islands and dry land never the same from one year to the next. The waters reach their peak in July and August, when the area submerged can be three times the size it is in the dry season. The delta’s essential statistics are easy to recite – this watery world is home to more than 2,000 plant species, 450 bird species and 65 kinds of fish, not to mention an estimated 200,000 large mammals. But the story is much richer than even these impressive figures suggest.

While you’re there...

Before they become part of the delta, the waters from Angola funnel down into Botswana by means of a narrow strip of swamps, vast reed beds and lagoons thick with papyrus. This area is known as the Okavango Panhandle. Although some of the delta’s wildlife is present here, the animals are far more elusive. So, instead, travellers come for the fantastic birdwatching – most delta species are found here but they’re concentrated into a 15km wide strip of land, making it easier to track them down. Fishing, too, is a highlight and big business here, with anglers coming from all over the world to catch tigerfish (right) from September to June, pike, barbel and catfish from mid-September to December, and bream. Accommodation ranges from campsites run by local cooperatives to official organised parks and reserves. Although there is a growing patchwork of private concessions and conservancies, only the Moremi Game Reserve, which covers one-third of the delta, is government-run and protected. Wherever you are in the Okavango, it’s the getting there that can be half the fun. The views from the lodges’ private aircraft or joy flights that fly over the delta are staggeringly beautiful. Walking safaris are often part of the package offered by the luxury camps, and everyone, regardless of budget, can drift silently along within clear sight of hippos and elephants in a dugout canoe that is known as a mokoro. Whatever way you travel, it all adds up to one of the greatest wildlife shows on earth.
The Kalahari has the ability to surprise you. A couple of years ago I was with friends in a remote campsite in the middle of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. We hadn’t seen much wildlife by the time we set up camp to the familiar sounds of barking geckos and black korhaans. After sunset we lit a few paraffin lamps and cooked dinner. While we were eating we noticed a moving shadow by the Land Rover, and shone our torches on a magnificent leopard, which promptly lay down by the vehicle. After a half minute of stunned silence it moved off into the bush. We were thrilled, but regretted not taking the video camera off the back seat before our guest arrived…

The Kalahari is the arid heart of southern Africa, the largest unbroken stretch of sand on the planet and the arid alter ego to all those greens and blues up in the Okavango Delta. For all its sand, the Kalahari is an atypical desert. This is a land of ancient, fossilised river valleys that lead into chains of salt pans, where waters haven’t flowed in decades in some places, in millennia in others. It is a land of swaying grasses and shimmering white dust bowls watched over by the massed ranks of dense thorn scrub and thinly spaced acacia. Close to one thousand lions are thought to inhabit the Kalahari, and you’ll also find leopards, cheetahs, African wild dogs, giraffe, gemsbok and numerous species of hyena. For the most part, they find refuge in the three parks and reserves that run like a nearly unbroken chain through the Kalahari. In the heart of the country, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve is roughly as large as Denmark and, at 52,000 sq km (more than 20,000 sq m), is one of Africa’s largest protected areas. Although wildlife densities are low, a host of desert-adapted species thrive, among them gemsbok, springbok, bat-eared foxes, jackals and the loping brown hyenas. Eland inhabits the fringes while ostrich and kori bustard, our heaviest flying bird species, are common.

Most of the trails through the park pass through the former river valleys of Passarge and Deception – the latter is where much of the book *Cry of the Kalahari* is set. I once spent an entire day in the Passarge Valley, watching cheetah, communing with lions, without seeing another vehicle or human being.

Even so, it’s the empty trails of the reserve’s south that are the Kalahari’s true wilderness. Go far enough south and you’ll be in the smaller, contiguous Khutse Game Reserve. More easily accessible from the human population centres of Botswana’s south-east,
Amid the wide empty horizons of the Trans-Kalahari Highway, the small village of D’Kar is a centre for the San people who were controversially relocated from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (right). The Kuru Art Project is an impressive initiative that supports local San artists, many of whom are women and whose work ranges from paintings to linoleum woodcuts. Animal and other traditional African motifs (below, left) strongly evoke the Kalahari world of the San, and although most of the works are sold to museums around the world, many can also be bought at the small gallery on site (www.kuruart.com). Two of the local camps – Dqae Qare Game Farm (dqae.org) and Grassland Safari Lodge (grasslandlodge.com) – have a strong San component to their activities, including safari walks with San guides.

Khutse is home to a full complement of wildlife that roams among the 60 mineralised clay pans that once belonged to Africa’s largest inland lake. ‘Khutse’ means ‘where one kneels to drink’ in the local dialect, but water exists only as an echo of a long-distant past.

South again, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park shares the southern Kalahari with South Africa – the Botswana part was once called Mabuasehube-Gemsbok National Park. Here in Kgalagadi, unlike elsewhere in the Kalahari, there are sand dunes to bring aesthetic relief from the unbroken wastes that gave the land its name – ‘Kgalagadi’ means ‘Land of Thirst’. Birds, too, are a Kgalagadi speciality, with over 250 bird species recorded in this fine wilderness.
Makgadikgadi & Nxai Pans

There is something elemental about Makgadikgadi and Nxai Pans on the northern fringe of the Kalahari. Acting as a buffer zone between the desert sands and the waters of the Okavango Delta, these seemingly endless salt-encrusted expanses comprise the largest network of salt pans in the world, covering an area the size of Switzerland.

While the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia is the largest single pan, these contiguous pans in Botswana have no peers.

The pans once formed the lake bed of a vast inland African sea that covered 60,000 sq km (over 23,100 sq m). When the climate dried out around 10,000 years ago, the lake evaporated entirely – only the salt remained. Even so, signifiers of this more fertile past are still evident. The meerkats were beyond his control in the heat. sweated paints were running around scent-marking everything and everybody. At last we thought it was a martial eagle, perched 500m away, but then all hell broke loose and the group attacked. It was a male from a neighbouring clan attempting to sneak a mating with the females!

Although it may not have felt like it to the prince at the time, running paints are forever attached to the paintings of Thomas Baines, a former disgraced member of Dr Livingstone’s journey of discovery across Southern Africa.

Another mirage-like apparition is that of Gabasta Island, a stunning dune-like formation which promises from its summit some of the biggest blue-sky vistas in all Africa. Rumour has it that Prince Charles was so impressed by the views that he took out his paint palette to commit the panorama to canvas, only to find that his paints ran beyond his control in the heat.

Clockwise from far left: On Sowa Pan, at the eastern end of the Boteti River begins to flow, drawing Hottentot (right), kingfishers, martial and black-breasted eaters (above), birds into one shimmering, hallucinatory void, is one of Africa’s least-known and most underrated birding spots. Some 165 bird species have been recorded here among the zebras, jackals and antelopes. Waterbirds are a speciality, though they don’t have a monopoly – carmine and blue-cheeked breckens, lesser and Cape teals, kori bustards are year-round residents. And things get really interesting when the rains arrive. That’s when the Nata Bird Sanctuary, one of Africa’s best places for cheetah sightings, with elephants and all manner of gazelles regularly sighted against a backdrop of umbrella acacias. South of the highway, the Boteti River has again begun to flow in recent years, and the riverbank and its hinterland now draws abundant wildlife to them in the dry season that runs from May to October. But with the rains beating down from December to April, and paying no heed at all to park boundaries, one of Africa’s least-known but most spectacular migrations begins. Zebra and wildebeest march out onto the pans, heading east, followed inevitably by hungry predators. It may not rival the Serengeti in terms of numbers, but it’s still extremely impressive. And best of all, in this country you’re likely to have it all to yourself.
There is an epic quality to Savuti and Chobe Riverfront. Their landscapes, both of which fall within the vast Chobe National Park, are quintessential African terrain – the former is an archetype of semi-arid savannah with flat-topped acacia silhouetted against the blood-red setting sun, the latter is a natural amphitheatre set up for watching wildlife from both the land and the water.

Savuti, to which the waters of the Savuti Channel miraculously returned in 2008 after an absence of 26 years, is reliable leopard and lion country. And these are some of the most formidable of the species on the planet. It was the lions of Savuti who became famed for hunting elephants – anyone who has seen Dereck and Beverly Joubert’s Ultimate Enemies, with its footage of lion prides bringing down subadult elephants, will know that this is one of nature’s most compelling encounters. The large free-standing rock monoliths not far from the channel – among them Gobabis Hill and Leopard Rock – and the marshes found in Savuti’s south are also the ideal habitat for lions and leopards.

If big cats hold sway in Savuti, along the Chobe Riverfront, just up the sandy trail from Savuti, it’s the elephants who rule. No-one knows for sure, but the last estimate suggested that an astonishing 71,000 elephants inhabit Chobe National Park. Pound for pound, these are some of the largest elephants on the planet. And a fairly high proportion of these, at some stage in their peregrinations, come down to the riverfront to drink.

The Riverfront is altogether different from Savuti, but it, too, carries echoes of much-loved African landforms. Hippos and Nile crocodiles lurk with menace in the reedy shallows. On land, large buffalo herds reinforce Chobe’s reputation for heavy herbivores, while even giraffes draw near, stooping to drink in ungainly fashion. And not far away, lions and leopards watch and wait in the shadows.
As far east as you can go in Botswana without stumbling into South Africa or Zimbabwe, and far removed from well-worn safari trails, the Tuli Block is an unusual wildlife destination. Private wildlife concessions share the land with small-farm freeholdings along the west bank of the Limpopo River. In some places, these concessions extend barely 10 to 15km into Botswana from the riverbank. Only in the north, in the larger Northern Tuli Game Reserve, is there anything approaching a large-scale habitat where wildlife can roam freely.

And yet, in spite of this flimsy patchwork of protected areas interspersed with farms, wildlife somehow flourishes in an area that runs almost 300km from north to south. Elephants are a highlight, many of the family groups having found refuge here from rampant poaching across the border in Zimbabwe. There’s also kudu, wildebeest and impalas as well as lions, cheetahs, leopards and hyenas. More than 350 bird species have also been recorded here.

But as much as the wildlife, it’s the landscape, unlike any other in Botswana, that is the attraction of this area. Within sight of the riverbank, the terrain and colour palette of reds and browns call to mind Utah or the Australian Outback. Boulders, piled high, frame exceptional sunsets, alongside seasonal water courses that trickle down into the Limpopo, with wildlife drawing near to drink and to hunt.

There are plans for a larger reserve, for the joining up of the concessions to one day form a new and uninterrupted game reserve that may even connect with protected areas across the borders. Until then, the Tuli Block remains one Botswana’s most unlikely wildlife success stories.
Ostrich

*Struthio camelus australis*

The southern African subspecies of ostrich is most commonly seen in the Kalahari and open country elsewhere, such as Savuti and the Makgadikgadi and Nxai Pans area. It is also known to inhabit the Tuli Block and Okavango Delta. The ostrich is the largest bird species on earth, and it can reach speeds of up to 70km/h when under threat, making it the fastest two-legged animal in the world. Its keen eyesight and good hearing mean it can both see and hear lions and other predators from a great distance, which is why it is rarely seen in woodland areas where the signs of the presence of predators are more easily concealed. If unable to escape, ostriches may lie down with their necks flat along the ground.

**Spotting tip:** If you see an ostrich running at speed, turn immediately to look where it came from – chances are that there’s a lion or leopard not far away.

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ELEPHANT

*Loxodonta africana*

Kalahari elephants are smaller than their counterparts in the north and are remarkable for their tusks, which are white, rather than the ivory colour of those in the north. Kalahari elephants are also known for their wide, flat heads and their extensive use of the river valleys, even when there is no permanent water. Kalahari elephants have been documented as travelling up to 50km a day in search of food and water, covering more territory than any other elephant population on earth. Just like their northern counterparts, Kalahari elephants can become problem animals when they are pushed too far out of their range and start to frequent the farms and villages of the region.

**Spotting tip:** When searching for elephants, listen for the sound of an elephant breathing, which can be heard up to three kilometres away. Look for elephant dung – their dung piles can be up to 100 square metres in size. No matter how obvious these signs are, remember that elephants are wild animals and should be treated with respect.

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Lion

*Panthera leo*

Kalahari male lions are renowned for their dark, luxuriant manes encircled by a distinctive blond ring – the reason for such a mane in such a hot climate remains a mystery. Kalahari prides have the largest home territories (1,080 square miles) and have one of the most fluid social structures of any lions on earth. During the dry season, lions in the Kalahari have been known to abandon pride life for a nomadic existence, sometimes even joining up temporarily with other prides. And if you’re witness to a Kalahari lion hunt, watch closely – they have the highest hunting success rate (38.5%) of any lions in Africa. All three of the Kalahari’s main reserves have large lion populations, with the river valleys and salt pans of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park and the central and northern reaches of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve fairly reliable lion-spotting terrain. But lions are possible in all of the areas we cover here.

**Spotting tip:** Studies have found that the human ear may only hear a roar from as far away as four kilometres. So if you can hear them roar, they may be closer than you think. Also check vehicle trails for footprints where they can be easier to see in the dust - lions often use such trails on their nightly marches through their territory.

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Forget the Big Five, here are Botswana’s Big Seven to look out for during a safari.
Gemsbok

_Oryx gazella_

Just about anywhere you go in the Kalahari, you’re likely to encounter this most elegant of creatures – it’s the area’s most striking herbivore and the largest of the world’s oryx species. It is believed that it was its extravagantly curved horns, when seen side-on, that were largely responsible for legend of the unicorn. In the Kalahari, gemsbok live in groups of up to 40 individuals and their size (up to 300kg or 660lbs) means that few predators other than lions can bring one down. Vulnerable to attack from behind, gemsbok defend themselves by backing into a thicket of bushes and presenting their formidable horns to those who would hunt them. They are the most prevalent form of large antelope in the Central Kalahari, Khutse and Kgalagadi reserves, with some also straying up into Makgadikgadi and Nxai Pans.

**Spotting tip:** Gemsbok prefer the open country but usually stay within sight of thickets on the fringes of the salt pans that punctuate the Kalahari, particularly around sunrise or sunset when lions are most likely to be hunting.

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African Buffalo

_Syncerus caffer_

No-one really knows where this lugubrious creature (also called the Cape buffalo) comes from – it is related neither to domestic cattle nor Asian buffalo species. It is also one of the most formidable creatures of the African wild as it weighs in at around a tonne. It usually moves in large groups and has been known to kill lions and other creatures that get in its way. Its horns, up to a meter across, are fused across its forehead.

The African buffalo has adapted to a wide range of habitats – only in desert regions are they absent, as they must drink every day. In Botswana, the buffalo’s heartland is the Okavango Delta, Savuti and Chobe. They’re also present in the Tuli Block, although sightings are less common than in the country’s north.

**Spotting tip:** Chief’s Island and the Duba region of the Inner Okavango Delta are where the most famous footage of buffaloes has been filmed for wildlife documentaries, and their encounters with lions often take place within sight of the luxury lodges there.
Botswana is one of the last great refuges for elephants in Africa and no country on earth has more of the animals within its borders. An estimated 130,000 elephants wander across the land, with more than half of these in Chobe National Park alone. Elephants are also present in great numbers all across the Okavango Delta, and with relatively high densities to be found in the Tuli Block. They inhabit only the fringes of the Kalahari and the Makgadikgadi and Nxai Pans – this is a creature that drinks up to 300 litres of water every day and there are no such supplies in the desert. The ivory-poaching holocaust that is sweeping South Africa and elsewhere has, thankfully, yet to significantly affect Botswana, not least because the country’s elephant habitat is often remote and difficult to access.

**Spotting tip:** Sit in wait by the water’s edge anywhere along Chobe Riverfront in late afternoon. The setting sun will turn the whole riverbank to gold and give you some of the best elephant photos you can imagine.

**ESSENTIAL BOTSWANA WHAT?**

Elephant

*Loxodonta Africana*

Arguably Botswana’s most curious inhabitant, this splay-hoofed, medium-sized swamp antelope is southern Africa’s wetland specialist. Perfectly adapted to the watery terrain of the Okavango Delta, particularly in the delta’s north-east, the sitatunga has a shaggy, water-resistant coat and can escape predators by manoeuvring quickly over soft mud and soggy, submerged plant life. It is also an adept swimmer and, when frightened, will ‘do the hippo’ and submerge itself almost entirely beneath the water, with just two tiny nostrils in view above the surface. Males are much larger than females, have a mane and grow horns.

**Spotting tip:** The sitatunga is easily confused with the far more common waterbuck, but it has a shaggier coat and the female sitatunga has a coat that is more rufous-red than can be seen on the waterbuck.

**African wild dog**

*Lycaon pictus*

One of Africa’s most charismatic predators, the African wild dog (also known as the Cape hunting dog) lives in packs of up to 28 animals and has one of the highest success rates (up to 70 per cent) of any predator in Africa. It is also highly endangered – as few as 3,000 and no more than 5,300 survive in the wild, spread thinly across 14 countries. One-third of these inhabit the Okavango Delta. Although their numbers are dwindling elsewhere, small populations also inhabit the Tuli Block and the Central Kalahari Game Reserve.

**Spotting tip:** The Linyanti Marshes, north of Savuti in the delta’s north-east are widely considered the best place in Botswana to see the species.
**Factfile**

**COUNTRY FACTS**

Location: Southern Africa  
Capital City: Gaborone  
Terrain: Mostly flat with a mix of desert, arid savannah, light woodland and delta  
Highest point: Otse Hill (1,489m), near Gaborone  
Population: 2.16 million  
Most widely spoken languages: Setswana, San  
Currency: Botswana pula (the name means ‘rain’ or ‘blessing’ in Setswana)  
Time zone: Central African Time Zone; GMT/UTC plus two hours  
Flight time from UK: 13-14 hours  
Visas: 30 to 90-day visas issued on arrival for free for UK and most other passport holders  
Vaccinations: hepatitis A, tetanus, typhoid, yellow fever (if arriving from infected area); malaria not usually a problem but can be an issue in the north during the rainy season  

**CLIMATE**

The rainy season runs from December to April, give or take a month at each end, with the dry season the rest of the year  

**WHEN TO GO**

June to August: generally fine weather, cold nights, most trails open and good wildlife watching  
December to April: good for zebra migration in Makgadikgadi, but getting around is difficult  
September & October: extremely hot with wildlife concentrated around waterholes

**TIPS & WARNINGS**

Medical facilities in remote areas basic to nonexistent  
Know your blood group and carry a sterile medical kit, including surgical needles  
If venturing into remote areas alone, always notify someone of your intended itinerary and carry a satellite phone at all times

**LODGES & CAMPS**

OKAVANGO DELTA  
Eagle Island Camp – remote, luxury outpost in the Inner Delta. www.belmondsafaris.com  
Mombo Camp – Arguably the premier delta camp on wildlife-rich Chief’s Island. www.wilderness-safaris.com  
Third Bridge Camp Site – For self-drivers in the heart of Moremi. www.xomaesites.com

KALAHARI  
Kalahari Plains Camp – the Kalahari’s most luxurious and blissfully remote digs. www.wilderness-safaris.com

Deception Valley Camp Sites – self-drivers have prime position in Central Kalahari Game Reserve. www.bigfoottours.co.bw  
!Xaus Lodge – run by the San community and the essence of Kgalagadi isolation. www.xauslodge.co.za

MAKGADIKGADI & NXAI PANS  
Uncharted Africa – three luxury tented camps on the pans of Makgadikgadi. www.unchartedafrica.com  
Leroo La Tau – luxury lodge overlooking the Boteti River. www.desertdelta.com  
South Camp and Baines Baobab Camps – self-drivers have some of the best views in Nxai Pans. www.xomaesites.com

SAVUTI & CHOBE  
Camp Savuti – entry-level luxury overlooking the river with lower-than-average prices. www.sklcamps.com  
Chobe Game Lodge – Exclusive lodge with views over Chobe River. www.chobegamelodge.com

TULI BLOCK  
Wild at Tuli – intimate tented camp located on an island in the middle of the Limpopo. www.wildattuli.com  
Mashatu Game Reserve – one of the largest Tuli concessions with stunning accommodation. www.mashatu.com

MORE INFORMATION  
www.botswanatourism.co.bw

TOUR OPERATORS  
Nature Trek, Tel: 01962 733 051; www.naturetrek.co.uk  
Expert Africa, Tel: 020 8232 9777; www.expertafrica.com  
Wildlife Worldwide, Tel: 0845 130 6982; www.wildlifeworldwide.com  
Tribes Tailormade Travel, Tel: 01473 890 499; www.tribes.co.uk