



Okavango Delta delights: Exploring by *mokoro* and (left) an elephant takes a watery walk.

Big on Botswana

Serious sustainability efforts are luring wildlife lovers to this southern African refuge.
By Steve Jermanok

Mention Botswana to seasoned safari-goers and they're bound to get dreamy-eyed – this small nation, with a population of just over 2 million, tops savvy travelers' lists for wildlife viewing on the continent. It's not just that the country, which celebrated 50 years of peaceful independence last year, has somehow managed to avoid the political strife that has beset many of its neighbors. Such devotion also stems from Botswana's commitment to sustainable tourism: Banning trophy hunting and ensuring that local communities benefit from a small number of high-revenue, low-volume safaris are two strategies that have clearly paid off in terms of decreased poaching. Elephants, for example, now number close to 200,000 in Botswana – that's almost a third of Africa's entire elephant population. "What I love best about Botswana is the diversity of its landscapes and the variety of its game viewing," says David Bragg, a Virtuoso travel advisor based in Nashville, Tennessee, who recently

visited the country. "In a single trip, travelers can go from four-wheeling in the Kalahari Desert, which is filled with leopards, cheetahs, and other animals that have adapted to the parched landscape, to boating in a *mokoro* (an indigenous dugout canoe) in the Okavango River." An expansive inland waterway, the Okavango empties into a delta carpeted with grassy plains that's home to large numbers of elephants, lions, rhinos, and enough variety of vibrant birdlife, such as the lilac-breasted roller, to turn "big five" enthusiasts into card-carrying members of the Audubon Society. By limiting the number of its safari camps, Botswana also abounds in seclusion. Unlike Kenya's Masai Mara or Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater, which can often be overcrowded, an entire morning might pass by on game drives, walks, or canoe rides without a glimpse of other travelers. If your idea of a safari is spending an hour in pristine wilderness watching a leopard all by your lonesome, then Botswana beckons.

(ELEPHANT) PETER ADAMS/GETTY IMAGES. (MOKORO) ABERCROMBIE & KENT

BUSH BOUND

Three ways to get wild in Botswana.

Living with Elephants, a nonprofit committed to creating a harmonious relationship between people and pachyderms, is one of the organizations you'll meet with on **Abercrombie & Kent's** ten-day Botswana tour. You'll also visit a village where A&K trained locals to become bike mechanics, refurbishing used bicycles for children who need to get to school. Accommodations include swanky lodges such as the newly revamped Sanctuary Chief's Camp in the Okavango Delta. *Departures: Multiple dates, August 2 through December 20, 2017; from \$7,995.*

Virtuoso's on-site tour provider, **Wilderness Safaris**, can work with your travel advisor to craft a customizable ten-day Botswana program that includes experiences such as a guided walk in the Kalahari with members of the local San Bushmen clans. Guests can also spy wildlife in the Okavango Delta aboard a *mokoro* and explore the woodland habitats of the private **Linyanti Concession**.

Wilderness Safaris allocates a portion of its revenue to its Wildlife Trust, which supports conservation projects, and also closes some of its camps each year to host underprivileged local youth and teach them about wildlife conservation. *Departures: Any day August 1 through October 31, 2017; from \$13,540. Or November 1 through December 19, 2017; from \$10,000.*

Five days cruising the crocodile- and hippo-laden waters of Botswana's Chobe River highlight **AmaWaterways'** southern Africa journey. Before boarding the 28-passenger *Zambezi Queen*, you'll spend three nights in Cape Town and then cap off the ten-day journey with a two-night stay in Zimbabwe to behold breathtaking **Victoria Falls**. Near Chobe National Park, you'll meet with locals to learn about their day-to-day life, including the value of wells that supply fresh water to their villages. *Departures: Multiple dates, August 4 through November 17, 2017; from \$8,399.*



Clockwise from left: The Geoffrey Kent Luxury Suite at Sanctuary Chief's Camp, San Bushmen in the Kalahari, and suite views on the *Zambezi Queen*.

(KALAHARI) DANA ALLEN/WILDERNESS SAFARIS. (CALENDAR ICON) ADRIEN COQUET/THE NOUN PROJECT. (HEALTH ICON) TO UYEN/THE NOUN PROJECT

THE ESSENTIALS



WHEN TO GO
"The best time to visit is typically **June through October**," notes Bragg. "Although the weather is cool and dry, during the austral winter the Okavango Delta floods due to rains earlier in the year, attracting vast amounts of wildlife. Game spotting also tends to be a bit easier with the lack of tree foliage."



WHAT TO PACK
"It's important to **bring lay-ers**, but to do so smartly, as the luggage restrictions on safari planes are tight," says Bragg. "And don't worry about having too few clothes, because most camps provide laundry service – and the animals don't care how many outfits you have! Though you may find yourself very close to big game, don't forget **binoculars**. I also highly recommend investing in a camera with a **zoom lens** so you can get those up-close details."



GOOD TO KNOW
Prior to your trip, Bragg recommends consulting with your doctor to make sure your **travel vaccines** are up to date. "You'll likely be in an area with malaria and will want to bring medication with you," he adds. **VT**