



Safari in Botswana

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By Anne Z. Cooke



MAUN, Botswana

Guests who've traveled with Sanctuary Lodges, Abercrombie & Kent's group of African safari lodges, tend to agree: Chief's Camp, in the Okavango Delta, comes as close to the classic safari lodge as you can find in Botswana.

Sanctuary, in fact, operates four luxury lodges in the Okavango Delta, in woodland settings near streams, ponds or lagoons.

We visited three of them. But we were fortunate enough to spend most of our vacation at Chief's Camp, on Chief's Island, in the Moremi Game Reserve.

Formerly Chief Moremi's hunting grounds, the Island's plentiful water means abundant food sources and the region's greatest concentrations of wildlife. Streams and lagoons support hippos, crocodiles and birds. Lions, leopards, wart hogs, rhinos, African buffalo and antelope live and graze on broad grasslands and on the tree-shaded mounds around which annual spring flooding flows.

Our most memorable wildlife encounters occurred while we were out on early-morning or late-afternoon game drives, rattling through the bush in an open-sided 4X4 safari vehicle.

There were the three bull elephants that raised their trunks and trumpeting, made a couple of bluff charges in our direction. There was the hyena, neck-deep in a tiny pond, cooling off. And the 50-strong herd of tiny impala that, on some silent signal, began to dash through the trees, circling four or five times before they slowed down and returned to grazing.

But the lodge's front deck, tucked into a grove of jackalberry and rain trees, ran a close second. We spent a meditative morning there, with the binoculars, and counted three elephants, a half-dozen giraffe and an assortment of antelope and gazelle passing by.

Somehow I'd imagined the lodge to be a pitched-roof, high-ceiling structure with trophy heads, zebra-skin throw rugs and dark colonial furniture.

Instead, the lodge at Chief's Camp, built on wood decks eight feet above the ground, is a wood, pole and canvas structure. Like all safari lodges here, it complies with environmental protection laws designed to protect the Okavango's fragile terrain and unique ecosystems. When any area shows signs of over-use, the lodge can be disassembled and moved to a new location.

Brown on the outside, like a Kiwi fruit, the interior is cool and plush.

African art decorated the spacious lounge where we gathered before dinner to chew over the day's animal sightings. Upholstered wicker sofas and chairs, and coffee tables made intimate conversation groups. Dining tables were set up at one end, with the bar close by. A room divider created the curio and sundries store, where we all pored over regional art and collectibles, safari clothing, toothpaste and sun lotion. A small swimming pool and a massage treatment room were located on a lower deck.

We were lodged in one of 12 tent cabins, also built on raised decks and arranged in a semi-circle. But we weren't roughing it.

This cabin had a covered porch with a meadow view, an interior wood frame and canvas walls, a ceiling fan, framed-in windows with mesh screens and a solid front door with screens and a latch. We had excellent twin beds (some cabins have kings), two comfortable lounge chairs, a dresser and shelves, private bath with shower and two sinks, a hair dryer, safe, flashlight and mosquito repellent.

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Though the camp has 240-volt electricity, our computer (which we use for downloading digital photos) runs on both 110 to 240, making the conversion automatically. Yours probably does, too.

As for packing tips, we didn't wear half of what we brought because soiled shirts, socks and khakis disappeared daily, and were returned washed and folded.

Mealtimes, served by a staff of gracious, good-humored ladies, were outstanding.

Candlelit tables, croaking frogs and the occasional lion's roar added a special fillip to the cook's four-course dinners, served with wine or beer.

Nor does Sanctuary stint when they're hiring guides.

Our guides were well-spoken fellows who'd completed the state's naturalist training course and earned a certificate. Some of them grew up in the bush; others in town.

Each group of six guests thought their guide was the best. In fact, all were informed, courteous and capable, making our game drives as much fun as they were informative. The guides' primary task, of course, is to locate and approach the animals, and to bring you back safely. And they do. Every time.

REPORT CARD:

BIGGEST SURPRISE: Giraffes on the airstrip.

SPECIAL MOMENT: A mother elephant bathing her baby.

BEST BUY: Hand-woven Zambian baskets for \$5 each.

PRIMITIVE PLEASURE: Falling asleep to grumbling hippos.

MEMORABLE: Delicious meals with continental and local ingredients.

FORGETTABLE: The 17-hour flight to South Africa.

INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE:

SANCTUARY LODGES:

Recession-blues discounts make this year the time to go.

Daily rates, per person, run about \$850 and include roundtrip transportation from South Africa, lodging, meals, game drives, emergency evacuation insurance, daily laundry service and extras.

Special brand beverages and flights to non-Sanctuary camps are not. Look for "value" discounts on the Website, at www.sanctuarylodges.com.

GETTING THERE:

South African Airways flies non-stop from New York and Washington, D.C., to Johannesburg. Other airlines connect through London and Nairobi. Flights to and within Botswana will be part of your package.

Anne Z. Cooke relives her travels at home in Venice, Calif.

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