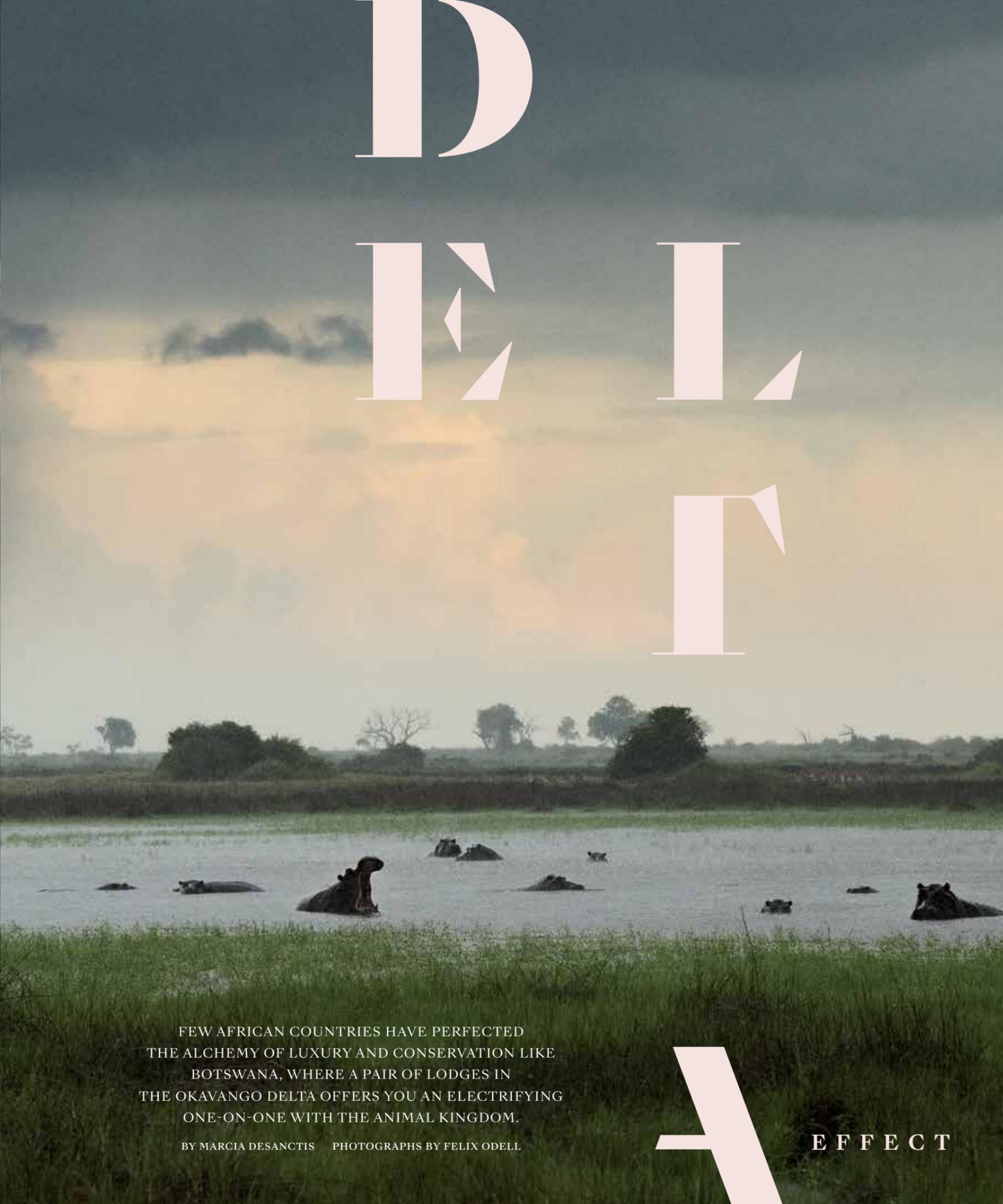




An elephant herd eating from a fallen tree near Duba Plains Camp. Opposite: A nearby water hole filled with hippos.



D E L T A

FEW AFRICAN COUNTRIES HAVE PERFECTED THE ALCHEMY OF LUXURY AND CONSERVATION LIKE BOTSWANA, WHERE A PAIR OF LODGES IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA OFFERS YOU AN ELECTRIFYING ONE-ON-ONE WITH THE ANIMAL KINGDOM.

BY MARCIA DESANCTIS PHOTOGRAPHS BY FELIX ODELL

A EFFECT

Below, from left:
Zebras grazing in plains surrounding Mombo Camp; a vervet monkey close by; one of the nine suites at the newly renovated Mombo Camp; a local man canoeing on the Okavango Delta.

At 3 A.M. I am awakened by a motorcycle gang revving their Harleys. Or so I imagine. It is Day 1 of a private safari through Botswana's Okavango Delta, an oasis roughly the size of Delaware in the Kalahari Desert. Sleep is out of the question, so I toss the duvet, grab a flashlight, fumble for the door, and step barefoot onto the deck of my tent. Chomping away below my veranda is a pair of hippos, two tons apiece and slick as matching Boteros.

Disney dressed them up as ballerinas, but hippos have assassins' jaws and are deceptively fast. It's just the three of us in the darkness, and I know who owns the turf. Even so, I'm safe—the sturdy veranda is six feet above ground. Still, what if I faint or trip? Debating whether to retreat into the cocoon of a warm bed, I instead lock gazes with four pink-rimmed eyes and cannot look away, thanks to the adrenaline spikes that seem to have rewired my neural network after only 12 hours in the country. Here, alarm and delight dovetail thrillingly.

Such stirring, intimate encounters with one of the world's most iconic mammals are one reason Botswana stands apart in the realm of ultra-high-quality safaris. There are other

factors, including political stability, number and diversity of wildlife, and rigorous conservation policies. But perhaps what most distinguishes the country is its unwavering stand against mass tourism. That, and the Okavango Delta, an ecosystem that rivals the best in Africa, even the world, for its pristine beauty.

I'm here to experience a safari in the way that only Botswana can offer, touching down at two newly renovated camps and floating for a few days in the far-flung floodplains. I'll get my feet muddy, but what is most pleasing about this adventure is to do so in grand comfort, furnished so quietly one hardly realizes it's luxury. Yesterday, when I arrived at Duba Plains Camp, the tent flaps were open to silver afternoon light. Rooibos tea and fresh lemonade were set out with ginger cakes, and Belgian linen curtains rippled under a fan. I was tempted to sink into a deep leather armchair facing the view, but the bush beckoned.

Today my fingers are crossed to spot a baby giraffe and a leopard, but rather than checking boxes, I crave something more abstract. I have explored much of Africa—Senegal's shores, Rwanda's volcanoes, South Africa's cities, and Algeria's desert. But Botswana is different. People who had traveled here choked up when I asked them about it. There seems to be an element of the transcendent here, and I hoped it might reveal itself.

It is the end of the rainy season, and the savanna is a blanket of green. "Animals are happy this time of year," says Isaac Seredile, my guide. "They are eating and drinking to their heart's content." A young bull elephant sprays himself with mud and bugles his way across our path, inaugurating my safari. My body trembles at the sheer foolish pleasure of seeing this gorgeous creature showing off like teenage boys everywhere. An hour later, Seredile parks behind two lounging postprandial lionesses, so close that I feel the vibrations of their snores.

"We are completely, perfectly safe," Seredile says in response to my two-handed death grip on his shoulders.

The tawny giants make running motions in their sleep. "Are you sure?" I ask.





Opposite: Two young lionesses rest on a tree close to Duba Plains Camp.

“One hundred percent.” Should I approach, he explains, the dynamic would change. “But we are not a threat, and they know it.” Seredile reaches inside a cooler. “How about a G&T?” he asks.

Our vehicle has no windows, and it is not obvious how big cats mix with cocktail hour, but I settle into it: the taffy-pull sunset, a breeze churning up just so, the silhouette of a single acacia tree. I have no idea how to toast the unfathomable, so I raise a glass to Botswana, a country that has been perfecting the alchemy between visitors and nature for decades.

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1966, Botswana is the rare African nation to have experienced neither bloodshed nor tribal warfare—all the more remarkable because the country is the world’s second-largest producer of diamonds. Its tourism strategy—keep the value high, the number of visitors low, and the environmental impact minimal—is one of the most emulated in the world. Poachers are shot on sight, and safari camps are built on government concessions, with mandatory lease renewals every 15 years. The result is a sweet spot rarely encountered in African game reserves, where lion sightings can take place amid a battalion of other vehicles.

“Our ideal guest leaves here a conservationist,” says Dereck Joubert, the co-owner of Duba Plains. “We want dinner conversation to be about lion numbers and the rhino trade.” In 2017, Joubert and his wife, Beverly, renovated and reopened the new camp in homage to early safari camps, when British aristocrats repaired to Africa after fighting in India. “They fell in love with adventure, and we drew on that sense of style,” says Joubert. “One hundred twenty years ago, there was one reason to come here, and that was to shoot the animals,” he says. “Now people come to shoot photos.” Today, predator and prey carry out their animal kingdom duties safely and with abandon.

The next afternoon, I depart on a 23-foot aluminum swamp cruiser for the second leg of my journey, guided by 35-year-old Simon Byron, the owner of Beagle Expeditions. With his wit, intellect, and style, Byron could be the most popular professor on campus. Raised in Botswana, he grew up camping in the Okavango, “the last place of its kind anywhere in the world,” he says. We are motoring to a camp on an island complex only

he can find, navigating allées of towering papyrus and date palms, past water lilies with petals like white spears. When seven hippos turn their eyes on us, Byron cuts the engine, then shifts and skirts the opposite shore, and soon we are at our campsite.

I confess that it’s been decades since I slept *en plein air* as a Girl Scout, and the 15-foot crocodile earlier seen patrolling the banks is making my palms sweat. Byron leads me to my zip-up tent, where I find a handsome bedroll with fine linens, a carpet, and an overhead light. “We have fantastic food, a comfortable bed, an amazing staff—all the simple but important luxuries,” says Byron about the tailor-made safaris he designs. “We want everything, from the outdoor shower to the filtered water in your thermos, to be an experience.” Incredibly, the whole kit—seven tents, food, supplies, and several cases of booze—fits in the back of a Land Cruiser (with a small trailer), leaving virtually no footprint.

The delta has a hypnotic rhythm, and I move with it dreamily. We head to the bush on foot, into the strong scent of wild basil. “See the malachite kingfisher?” Byron asks. Mother baboons slink about, babies clinging to their backs. The soundtrack is the crazed laughter of the hadeda ibis, although earlier our waiter reported hearing a leopard call.

“If you spend all your time on safari chasing wildlife, you miss out,” says Byron later over a lantern-lit dinner of bream, baked vegetables, quinoa, and caramelized bananas. “It’s intimacy we seek, with each other and with nature.”

The following day, we set out for the tiny village of Jao, the launch point for a spin in a *mokoro*, a flat-bottomed dugout canoe. Byron stands like a gondolier, propelling us through the reeds, on which cling hundreds of tiny frogs ringing like gift-shop bamboo chimes. We anchor on an island clearing, and set up elevenses with a Bunsen burner and sweet biscuits.

The next day, I hear the thrump of an incoming chopper, which ferries me to the serene opulence of Mombo Camp, where I will spend the last days of my trip. Wilderness Safaris recently renewed its lease in the Moremi Game Reserve, and opened the refurbished camp in January. From above, the structure seems to curve and undulate. “Everything has a soft, bowed shape,” says Robyn Dreyer, who manages Mombo Camp with her partner, Matt McCready. “There are no harsh angles, because they don’t blend with the landscape.”



Below: An entrance to one of Mombo Camp's suites. *Opposite, from left:* Isaac Seredile, a guide at Duba Plains Camp, making coffee in the morning; the accompanying breakfast spread.

Like the Jouberts, Wilderness Safaris takes Botswana's conservation priorities seriously and has many of its own. Among the initiatives are rhino relocation, community education programs, and protecting endangered breeds such as the African painted wolf. The new camp is entirely solar-powered, and the low volume of guests ensures a light environmental impact.

Luck has a restless energy, and like Seredile and Byron, his eyes are telescopes, spying color and movement deep in the brush. At once we see the cartoony head of a giraffe above the tree line, and then, calves—four in all—wobble into the clearing. I could swoon for the sublimity of the tableau, the sweet toddlers and their mothers, the purest display on earth of birth and renewal.

At cocktail hour, Luck swirls pink gin with pink tonic, and we are ringed by 360 degrees of matching rosy sunset. Wind washes over us, the sky darkens, then thunder, lightning, and torrents of rain. When we drive away, we must stop for elephants

crossing. Twenty-five of them, massive tuskers and miniature toddlers, walking unencumbered through the savanna, so quietly they could be clouds.

On my last morning, I gobble down breakfast and head outside under a spray of stars. The air is thick with the smell of earth washed clean. "It's called petrichor," Luck relates. Mist burns off as the sun appears, and I have that strange sense of nostalgia for the moment as I'm living it. Earlier in the week, Segametsi Monnamorwa, the sustainability manager for Wilderness Safaris, taught me the local translations of animal names. So I gasp when someone says "*ingwe*" on the walkie-talkie.

Luck races through the bush, and my pulse is a hammer. I have one singular wish: to get there fast. And then I see her, draped in the crook of a jackalberry tree: young Maruthodi, daughter of Pula, one of Mombo's most exalted leopards. She is placid and imperious, her tangerine eyes fixed on the horizon. I have seen a lot, but I have never seen such magnificence. Minutes pass, maybe hours, it's hard to tell, until she slinks down into the tall grass to look for her mother somewhere in the bush. This marvelous show has ended, and soon I too will begin the long journey home. ☺

A boardwalk runs clear along the property, pitched high like a bridge in some sections for elephants to pass under. The crisp skyline of tent peaks (battletested by vervet monkeys, who trampoline on the roof and quickly slide off) rises and falls against miles of grassland. The lounge is a placid sanctum of pale linen fabric and blond-wood furniture, bracketed by a copper hearth and cabinets around the bar. "Nothing metal is allowed to be cleaned," says Dreyer. "We want a beautiful patina."

What is most astonishing is the backyard, within Mombo's 37,000-acre concession, and the constant flow of elephants, Cape buffalo, and zebra, visible at all times from anywhere in camp—even from the private plunge pool of my guest tent. I experience that familiar tug-of-war between a massage in the airy spa and an afternoon drive, but who am I kidding? There are hundreds of giraffes, it's green season in the delta, and babies are hopping around everywhere. Once again, Botswana's storied tourism model means no congestion.

"You never bump into anyone here," says my new guide, Dave Luck. "You have a real sense of how it was 30,000 years ago."

The Best of Botswana

The safari specialists and camps to know.

JOURNEYS BY DESIGN

Since launching this company in 1999, Will Jones has remained one of the continent's most sought-after guides for his knowledge (he's lived in six African countries) and dedication (he'll fly to meet clients in person). He's also known for introducing travelers to impactful conservation efforts through his organization, Wild Philanthropy. *Weeklong trips from \$33,800 per person; journeysbydesign.com.*

BEAGLE EXPEDITIONS

Founder Simon Byron, who was raised in Botswana, is a passionate advocate for the authentic mobile safari experience. *Trips from*

\$3,180 per night for four; beagle-expeditions.com.

DUBA PLAINS CAMP

The camp from Great Plains Conservation has reopened following a ground-up rebuild. Each of the seven tents comes with a private plunge pool. *Tents from \$1,600 per person; greatplainsconservation.com.*

MOMBO CAMP

The iconic camp by Wilderness Safaris recently unveiled a new look. Along with updating its nine tented suites, the camp has added a spa, gym, and lap pool. *Tents from \$1,892 per person; wilderness-safaris.com.*

