



# THE REAL DELTA



*You can fly into one of Botswana's many Okavango Delta lodges any time, pay big bucks, get spoiled and experience the beguiling swampland's sacred beauty. Or you can go on an expedition in the Delta's magical wetlands, carrying all you need in dugout canoes and camping on the islands with no fences between you and the wild things. Don Pinnock and a group of Getaway readers embarked on just such an adventure.*





*'Exploration often has more to do with depth than distance.'*  
Henry David Thoreau

### It's tempting to start with the dramatic.

The deadly black mamba in the toilet enclosure; our group being driven by heat to swim in the heavily crocodile Boro River; the huge hyena scavenging through the camp kitchen.

But these are side issues, distractions from what the Okavango Delta experience was all about. They provide dinner conversation and bragging points. What lasts as nostalgic memory, however, is slipping silently in a *mokoro* (dugout canoe) along lily-sprinkled channels of dark, clear water, hearing the plunge of red lechwe in the reed beds, watching huge fan palms, jackalberry, sausage and rain trees drift by. It's sitting around a fire at night with stars tangled in overhead branches and the roar of lions on the move as we tucked into our tents. It's the birds of Moremi.

We met at Maun International Airport, which was reminiscent of the time back when World War II Dakotas were still doing passenger runs. After shopping, we climbed into an open Land Cruiser and were soon trundling out of town at a steady 60 km/h and into mopane woodland. Sleek cows that moored incessantly for no reason and goats in tight thug gangs eyed our passing.

Destination: buffalo-proof fence. It's to keep cows from buff's or the other way around, this being cattle country and foot-and-mouth disease

**TOP** A lilac-breasted roller. **LEFT:** Apart from the occasional croc or hippo, the greatest danger in a *mokoro* is being overwhelmed by the beauty. **FAR LEFT, BELOW:** Painted reed frogs plop into the water as you glide past. **LEFT:** After drifting in a dugout, the second best way to see the Delta is from the air. **BELOW:** You spend much of your time in a *mokoro* floating through water lilies.





**ABOVE:** The reed-beds and blue channels of the Delta seem so out of place sprawling lazily through the thirsty Kalahari Desert.

**BELOW:** Third Bridge in Moremi is a bumpy affair across sump-sucking marshland.



invokes serious paranoia. It didn't look anything-proof where we met the polers and their *mekoro* (*that's the plural of mokoro - ed*). They piled an inordinate amount of gear into the slender boats and were soon slipping silently through the clear water and white water lilies with buttercup-yellow centres.

It was time to assess the party. Apart from the polers and their chief, Julius Mpontshang, there was Dave and Liz Snodgrass, Athol and Sandy Grieve, Torben and Lisbeth Roug and Di Jones plus Safari and Guide Services guys Peter Comley, Joseph Mosheti, Jeremiah Kavoyo, Frank Chikosi and Shaka Maphaa, the chef.

Being poled means lounging like a colonial dignitary watching beauty drift by. Bumps on the reeds proved to be small, speckled painted reed frogs catching the sun. They were unfazed enough to sit on your finger.

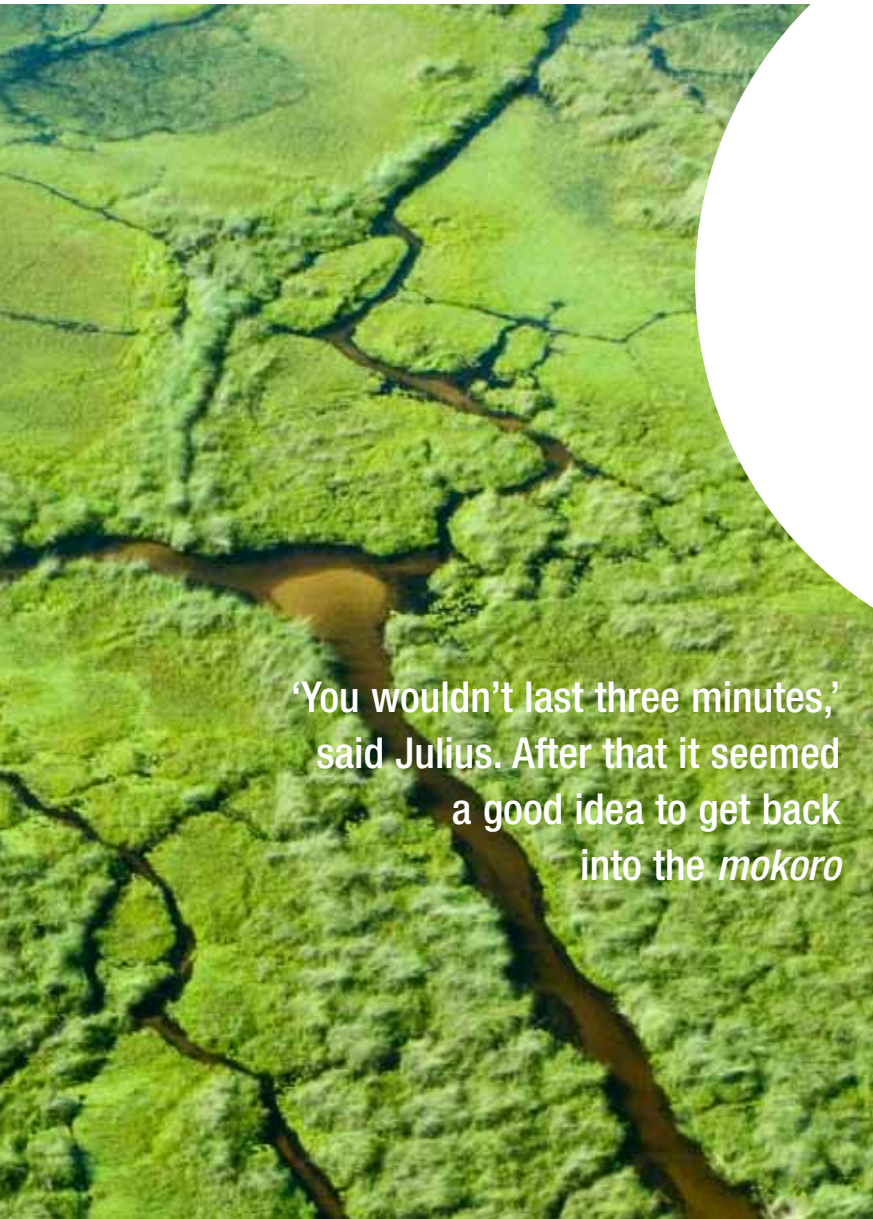
We made camp on one of the Delta's 50000 islands and ate roast potatoes, chicken legs, patty pans and salad plus fried bananas in custard. Oh, and red wine. The hardship of camping....

### The way of the waters

The Okavango Delta is beguiling. In summer, tropical storms rumble and flash across the high Benguela Plateau

in central Angola. Water pours off steep slopes, gathering sand, leeching salts from the sodden earth and picking up speed as it gutters down long, straight valleys. By the time it reaches the northern border of Botswana it has become Southern Africa's third largest river.

Here it channels into the Okavango Panhandle on a wide, meandering journey towards the Gumare Fault, a tectonic extension of the Great Rift Valley of East Africa. It is thought that the Okavango, together with the Chobe and Zambezi, once flowed into a vast lake covering what is now the dry Makgadikgadi Pans.



‘You wouldn’t last three minutes,’  
said Julius. After that it seemed  
a good idea to get back  
into the *mokoro*

Geological faulting gradually tilted and lifted the Earth’s surface, diverting two of the rivers northwards to their present courses and causing a great trough, which absorbed the flow of the Okavango. Over time this filled with silt, windswept sand and organic debris, becoming a delta which today looks like the leg and claws of an eagle – or, as someone suggested while peering at the map, a great green cannabis leaf.

The Kalahari, a huge semi-desert covering most of Botswana, is exceptionally flat: across 250 kilometres of the Delta, the elevation drops a mere 61 metres. Water which falls in the

Angolan highlands in December and which pours into the Panhandle at a staggering 11 cubic kilometres a year, takes six months to fill the Okavango’s furthestmost channels and, on good years, reaches Maun. Once in the Delta, the only place for the waters to go is up: swallowed each year by the atmosphere through evaporation and plant transpiration. That’s 16 000 square kilometres of vanishing water.

### The spider run

Dawn slowly silhouetted the island’s imposing trees and a clamorous spur-fowl took over from a fiery-necked nightjar enquiring, in a querulous



Moremi is simply alive with creatures great and small, all attracted by the abundance of water and grazing – and, for predators, fresh meat.





After breakfast we went for a walk and Peter, our guide, maintained a worried look because he could smell buffalo

### Dave's top 10 bird sightings



1. Wattled crane
2. Saddle-billed stork
3. Glossy ibis
4. Arnot's chat
5. Yellow-billed oxpecker
6. Meyer's parrot
7. Woodland kingfisher
8. Fiery-necked nightjar
9. Comb duck
10. Rufus-billed heron

**ABOVE:** Early morning hikes provide the best chance of seeing animals and the abundant birdlife – and of being eaten.

voice, 'Did sleep deliver us?' After breakfast we went for a walk and Peter, our guide, maintained a worried look because he could smell buffalo.

I then made a discovery: those in the party were mostly birders. So it became five steps, scope, discussion, ID, five more steps, scope. Discussion. I like birds, but... With plenty of time on my hands, I took to imagining what the birds were saying. I decided the mourning dove was really a dove of peace, calling pleadingly 'No more war'. A black-crowned tsagra was the mournful one, saying 'I'm not cheerful. I'm not cheerful.'

Eventually, after much scoping and discussion, we packed up and set

off through reeds – miscanthus and phragmites – which rained spiders. 'Why go through the reeds when there's the Boro River nearby?' I asked Julius, who was doing the guiding. 'The channels belong to the hippos,' he replied. So it was spiders or hippos.

The following day, after a hot walk, we all eyed the cool waters with much longing. 'Can we swim here?' we asked Julius. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'as long as it's on white sand. Crocs don't cross white sand in daylight.' Could he find some white sand? 'Sure, in the Boro River.'

After much humming and hawing we all got in the *mekoro* and poled



over to see. Sure enough, there was a clear patch between dark walls of croc-concealing aquatic plants. Who would be first bait? Torben leaped overboard with a splash and we were soon all in, keeping a watch for logs with eyes. An hour later we were still there, all uneaten.

Could we have a night swim, I asked. 'You wouldn't last three minutes,' said Julius. After that it seemed a good idea to get back into the *mekoro*.

We set off again early next morning into a delicious dawn. This was how it was supposed to be. We poled slowly up the Boro River as the sun rose behind us, bathing the reeds, trees and us in golden light. Fish

eagles threw back their heads and greeted the dawn, a honeyguide offered to show us a hive, jacanas padded over lily leaves and herons pondered the shallows for unsuspecting frogs. It was an eerily isolated beauty in no urgent need of beholders – an invitation to commit poetry or philosophy or any number of higher or contemplative crimes.

We beached – actually we drove up flattened reeds – and then we strolled through high-tree parkland and then mopane woodland. There were soggy places where warthogs had been nose-shovelling and hundreds of aardvark holes, some clearly colonised by warthogs. The grass

was nipple-high and of mammals we saw nothing.

'I came to see animals,' Torben grumbled to the guides.

'The grass is too high,' said Peter, 'wait for Moremi.'

That evening, as we watched a poler hauling tilapia out of the water with a handline, a huge, anvil-shaped cloud swallowed the sun. That night the hammer descended. As we sat eating chicken with veg and water-lily stew, the south began to flicker. 'Far away, that storm,' Peter pronounced. An hour later we all trooped to the edge of the reedbed to watch bolts of searing lightning hammering unfortunate trees not too far off.

**ABOVE LEFT:** As the sun reaches its zenith, it's good to collapse in the shade of a giant jackalberry. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Grass heads at dawn glow like jewels.



## The case of the disappearing salt

In the Delta, water gets involved in some really complex chemistry. Unlike most rivers, the Okavango carries very little mud, salts and nutrients. Most of the sediment is sand.

Because the river has no outlet, salt is accumulating at the rate of about 450 000 tonnes a year. This should have killed the Delta ages ago, but it hasn't. The reason is that swamp trees quarantine it.

Papyrus and hippo grass dominate the channels of the upper swamp, allowing water to escape slowly into back-swamp areas but confining the sandy sediment. These areas – communities of grasses, sedges and other aquatic species – transpire water into the atmosphere and produce peat, while bacteria fix dissolved salts.

On islands lower downstream, trees transpire so rapidly they cause the water table beneath the islands to fall below the level of the surrounding swamp.

As a result, ground water from beneath flooded areas, where most of the salts congregate, flows under the islands, accumulating in the centre.

Eventually the toxic salts destroy all plants on the island. At this point the floodwaters should erode it and release salts into the swamp. But, with perfect timing, papyrus and hippo grass upstream will have encroached into their channels, causing sand levels to rise and blocking their flow. The water is diverted elsewhere and the old islands dry out.

Then, mysteriously, the peat in these dry areas catches fire and summer rains flush saline poisons deep into the ground. Nutrients from the fires combine with sand to form fertile soils, which produce lush grasslands.

Because the area is so flat, the loss of peat causes the level of the land to drop and swamp water gradually reclaims the grasslands. In this way the Delta renews itself.



Around midnight a blast of wind rolled over my igloo tent and I groped around in the dark trying to right it from the inside. It was like being in one of those bubbles kids use to walk on water. The best way to hold it was to lie on my back in the middle with my feet against the windward poles. From that odd position I was soon mopping puddles from imperfectly tied window flaps as rain thundered down. It was a long night.

Eventually, after four days of drifting, hiking, eating and dreaming, we packed the *mekoro* and headed for the buffalo-proof fence. There we beached at the polers' village and transferred to vehicles for the ride to Maun to resupply before heading for Xakanaxa on Moremi Island.

Long before we got there elephants appeared, some bathing in muddy wallows, some destroying mopane trees, others caring for calves. One gave us a long, thoughtful lookover from about 10 metres, another threw branches at us and told us to buzz off. By the time we got to the reserve gate there were herds of them, plus giraffes batting long eyelashes at us, impala, kudu and a fine, spotted hyena near what must have been a nearby kill, given the number of moody vultures.

### Exploring Moremi

By the time we arrived, the camp had been set up under jackalberry trees at the water's edge. As we sat chatting that evening, a large, spotted hyena came to see what was cooking and



stole some chicken scraps. A beautiful beast with bad press. He was prowling among the tents soon after we turned in. I hoped nobody had to do a midnight toilet run.

Next morning we were in the 4x4 nosing along the sandy trails and came across a magnificent bull giraffe doing its treetop munch backed by a forest in glorious light.

‘Oh look at that,’ said Dave, ‘there’s an oxpecker under its tail.’ All the binoculars zoned in on the beast’s speckled bum. Birders have avian tunnel vision. We stopped to see some red lechwe delicately nibbling grass. ‘Beautiful yellow saddle,’ exclaimed Liz.

Yellow saddle on a red lechwe?

‘And just look at that beak!’ I turned to find all the binos on

a distant saddle-billed stork. ‘And see that stick up there in the tree? Well next to that’s a Meyer’s parrot. Oh, it’s gone...’

What was still there was the inevitable red-billed spurfowl. They are small brown balls of indecision. As you approach in a vehicle you can almost see their thought process.

‘There’s a large object approaching, what shall I do? Road or grass? Oh dear, it’s getting closer. Run or fly?’ But by then it’s almost under your wheels and still frantically deciding. ‘Road? Grass? Omigod! Road? No, too exposed. Grass? Yes grass. Now! Run....’ You wait for the thump as your tyre turns it into roadkill, but it erupts out the side into the grass, then stops and looks back to see if that was the right decision.

Later that afternoon, in the slanting rays of the very African sun, we drove through woodlands that were parklike and glorious.

Lechwe and waterbuck grazed, hippos huffed and stickle-backed crocs slid into the pools like giant cheese graters. Massive white thunderheads were building and were soon rumbling and flashing, finally releasing legs of rain – but not on us – providing a deep blue-grey canvas for the setting sun.

That night the hyena came visiting again. Seeing unblinking yellow eyes staring at you out of the moonless blackness can be seriously unnerving. But also delightfully real. We were awakened by the usual sounds: the *kwerri-kwetchi* of a crested francolin, the roar of a lion,



**TOP LEFT:** A lion on the lookout in Moremi. Lions have stealth and night vision for hunting. **TOP RIGHT:** With little effort, you can haul out supper on a handline.





**LEFT:** *Mekoro* were first used in the Delta by the Bayei people, who migrated from further north in the 18th century, followed by the Mbukushu who also took to the water. **ABOVE:** When a storm flashes over the Okavango you stare in wonder and hope it misses you.

the chuckle of a kettle on the fire and the whoop of a hyena. 'In three days time,' I thought mournfully, 'we're going to be sitting in an aircraft aching to be back here.'

Next morning, while weaving our way to Dead Tree Island (which we couldn't get to because the bridge was down), we came across a film crew who said they'd seen lions near the airstrip. We found the lions lazing in the shade after, probably, a busy night of slaughter. Initially there were three healthy lionesses and a playful cub, which they tolerated and hugged until it irritated them. Then they growled and cuffed it into submission. It retreated under a bush to sulk.

Lions don't do much, so after about half an hour of us watching them watch us we went back to camp for brunch. After a snooze, poleaxed by the still, midday heat, we returned to see how the lions were doing. They were still doing nothing, apart from the cub who was still hassling for a game. That night it would undoubtedly be a different story with some bone crunching.

We did a bit of our own crunching: the meal that evening was goat and maize *sadza*. Some people claimed that they couldn't eat goat, but it had been stewing in a pot over

a fire all day and was delicious. We finished the lot.

That night the hyena brought a friend and they proceeded to snarl viciously at each other over some scraps. The tent fabric felt awfully thin. They also stole our rusks and ate my muesli.

On the final day we boarded a Cessna Caravan and zigzagged over the Delta towards Maun. The vast waterworld below glittered in the early morning sun. Families of elephants – looking like dark almonds from above – moved along paths of their own making, herds of buffalo dotted grassy areas and in deep blue pools hippos wallowed like oversized plums.

Star-patterned waterways radiated through impossibly green reedbeds and circles of palms guarded the perimeters of salt-white islands. It was breathtaking, a river going nowhere and the architect of a wild, outrageous paradise. We landed in Maun with a bump. Was it really over?

Boarding the flight out, I took comfort from a quote from Henry David Thoreau's book, *Walden*: 'I came to see if I could learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I came to live deep and suck all the marrow out of life...' It somehow reminded me of *sadza* and goat. >



## Utterances

*An incredible discovery! I had no idea the Delta was so exceptional.*

Athol Grieve



*I just loved the water lilies.*

Di Jones



*We built real relations with the locals we were travelling with.*

Sandy Grieve



*I've wanted to visit the Delta for years. Moremi wildlife is prolific.*

Dave Snodgrass



*The light in the afternoons is so beautiful for photography.*

Torbin Roug



*The peace of travelling in a mokoro was fantastic. And to be able to swim...*

Liz Snodgrass



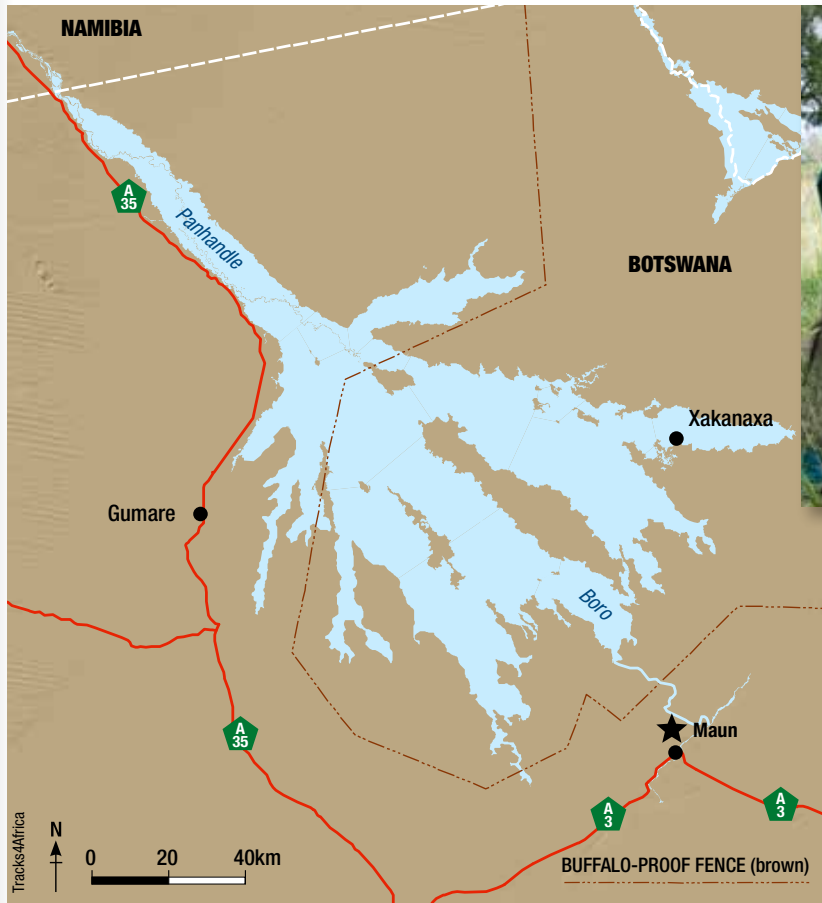
*I loved the bathe in the hot afternoon heat.*

Lisbeth Roug

## Travel planner

This special adventure for *Getaway* readers was organised by Safari and Guide Services (SGS).

Tel +267-625-1754, e-mail [reservations@sgsafrica.com](mailto:reservations@sgsafrica.com) or web [www.sgsafrica.com](http://www.sgsafrica.com).



**RIGHT:** The tents were simple but comfortable and kept out the hyenas.

□ For more places to stay in Botswana, see our Destinations section on page 148. Read Don's blogs about his Okavango trip at [www.getaway.co.za/page/don-pinnock](http://www.getaway.co.za/page/don-pinnock).

### Who to contact

To book, e-mail [getawayadventures@ramsaymedia.co.za](mailto:getawayadventures@ramsaymedia.co.za) with your name and contact details. See [www.getaway.co.za/page/getaway-adventures](http://www.getaway.co.za/page/getaway-adventures) for full itineraries. To book other exciting Getaway Adventures, see opposite page.

### What it costs

It costs R9 900 a person sharing, starting from Maun. This excludes flights and alcoholic drinks, but includes all other transport, meals and accommodation. *NB: Botswana has increased its VAT, so the price may vary. Please enquire when booking.*

### Getting there

Air Botswana flies from Johannesburg to Maun every day (for fares web [www.airbotswana.co.bw](http://www.airbotswana.co.bw)). The fastest way to get around the Delta is by light aircraft and the view from above is spectacular. Mack Air employs first-rate bush pilots flying a range of aircraft. We flew back from Moremi to Maun (which is not part of the package) and it cost around R600 a person at the time. For flights and prices, contact Mack Air on +267-686-0675, e-mail [reservations@mackair.co.bw](mailto:reservations@mackair.co.bw) or web [www.mackair.co.bw](http://www.mackair.co.bw). SGS can arrange the charter for you with your booking.

### What to take

During the expedition accommodation is in dome tents with mattresses and sleeping bags. It can be cold at night and hot during the day. Take a warm tracksuit to sleep in, as well as a beanie, and a lightweight rainproof jacket. Pack using a soft bag and limit weight to under 20kg.

The sun, especially in the afternoons, bounces off the water onto your face, so take high-factor sunscreen. A neutral-coloured umbrella is a clever idea, or at least take a sarong to use as a sunshade.

Boots or comfortable walking shoes are useful for game walks but, at all other times, waterproof sandals are the best footwear.

There will be plenty of opportunities for photographs, but pack your camera in a dry bag or something that is waterproof.

Malaria prophylaxis is recommended. Take mosquito-repellent cream or spray and cover up mornings and evenings. ■

