



Buffalo and yellow-billed oxpecker enjoying their lunch

PRIVATE OKAVANGO RESERVES

CHIEF'S ISLAND

Despite what you might imagine, many areas within the Okavango Delta are largely dry; Chief's Island is such a place. Once the royal hunting reserve of the local chief, it was gifted by him in the 1970s to augment Moremi Game Reserve. Then, almost a decade ago, black and white rhino were reintroduced to this area – having been poached many years previously. Since then, calves have been born, their numbers have steadily increased and individuals have spread out across Botswana. It's a real success story for conservation and the island is now one of the region's top safari areas.

Chief's Island is home to just three camps, guaranteeing an exclusive, undisturbed safari. All are accessed by air and all have to abide by the park's rules: i.e. they don't offer walks or night drives.

On the north side of Chief's Island, **Mombo Camp** is Botswana's flagship safari camp. Opulent and stylish, it has nine luxurious tented rooms, all raised high off the ground and connected by aerial, wooden walkways. All have great views, en-suite toilets and showers (indoor and out), fans,

and a relaxing outdoor 'sala' or day bed. Expect to be impressed by its game densities, if depressed by its high cost and the need to book early to get space here at all; it's often full more than a year in advance. Mombo is also connected by a raised walkway to its smaller sibling, **Little Mombo**, which has just three of the same luxurious rooms.

Both camps have their own plunge pools and concentrate their activities on 4WD game drives during the day. Given their game and fame, both Mombo camps

command a large supplement over and above most of Botswana's other camps – typically around £557-670 extra per person sharing per night.

To the west of the island, **Chief's Camp** has 12 luxurious tented rooms on slightly elevated decking. These have walls of quilted canvas for insulation, wooden doors, solid furniture and indoor and outdoor showers. Chief's concentrates on 4WD safaris during the day, although also offers mokoro trips when water levels are high. The main lounge and dining area have a large deck, with a pool, and the food is amongst the best in the Delta.



Taking a break with a morning coffee

JAO RESERVE

On the western side of the Delta, the Jao Reserve extends over a large, seasonally flooded area dotted with islands. It's an area of permanent wetlands, veined by deep-water channels. Hippos, crocodiles and sitatunga are abundant here, as are red lechwe. From around September to February, when it's usually at its driest, you'll find increased numbers of buffalo, elephant and the occasional cheetah. It's an excellent reserve for birds, with plenty of giant kingfishers, Goliath herons, pelicans, slaty egrets, swamp boubous and countless storks.

The palatial **Jao Camp** is a luxurious island retreat surrounded by channels and papyrus reed-beds. Jao's nine large, canvas-walled chalets are widely spaced and lavishly furnished. Each has a huge veranda with a separate 'sala' (outdoor day bed) and a claw-foot bath as well as an outdoor shower. One room is designed for families. The central lounge and dining area is similarly opulent, emerging from the lush vegetation like a lost palace in the jungle. Jao commands a supplement over the cost of most of the Okavango's camps of around £270-406 per person per night, depending on the season.

Northwest of Jao, **Kwetsani Camp** is a

small but smart camp with just five lovely, canvas-walled chalets – all on raised wooden decking linked by walkways. Each is very comfortable and airy, with an indoor and an outdoor shower, as well as en-suite toilet and twin washbasins. On a small palm island, **Jacana Camp** takes just 12 guests in simpler en-suite Meru-style tents, linked by natural pathways around the island. It's a lovely camp with a relaxed, tropical air.

In a contrasting area, on a large, dry island on the west side of the Jao Reserve, **Tubu Tree Camp** is another very comfortable camp, and a favourite with most who stay here. The game sightings from Tubu are generally the best in this reserve.

Safari activities at all these camps vary with the water levels, depending on the time of year. 4WD safaris (day and night), mokoro trips and motorboat trips are all usually possible. In general, the emphasis at Tubu Tree tends to be on dry-land activities, like game drives, whereas the other camps in this reserve concentrate more on water-based activities.

Note that if you're staying in the Jao Reserve for more than a few days, then you can opt to make a booking that includes a night or two 'sleeping out' in a simple campsite in the bush (such sleep-outs are obviously weather dependent).

EAGLE ISLAND RESERVE

Perhaps the longest channel within the Okavango Delta is the Boro River, which runs south along the western side of Chief's Island, often defining the boundary of Moremi Game Reserve. Some of the Delta's first photographic camps were started here and one of our team visited a camp very close to here, called Xaxaba Camp, in the early 1990s. Then, as now, there wasn't much dry land about, and so activities centred on boating, mokoro trips and walking on the islands. This has never been a prime game-viewing area, but it does have one of the Delta's great channels, and is a really beautiful area offering a classic experience of the Okavango Delta's floodplains and lagoons.

Xaxaba Camp has long gone, and in its stead is **Eagle Island Camp** – which has been built in the same luxurious style as its sister camps: Khwai River Lodge (page 89) and Savute Elephant Camp (page 101). That means 12 large, opulent rooms built high on wooden decks, polished wooden floors, very comfortable furniture, minibars, 24-hour power and even air conditioning. Guests can even take a helicopter ride to visit the local Xaxaba Village, allowing for a cultural interaction not always on offer at remote Delta camps.



Elephants will often swim through very deep water to cross channels in the Delta



Lions stalking through shallow water in Duba Plains

Community Reserves

Botswana can be expensive to visit, but note that many of the private reserves here are part-owned by local communities. Large elements of the cost go into paying for supplies from the community; wages of the local people who work at the camp; and as direct payments to bodies elected by the communities for local projects like clinics and schools. For example, both Vumbura and Duba Plains reserves are administered by and for the *Okavango Community Trust*, which represents the local people who live on the fringes of the Delta. These people benefit from the camps through work and training, as well as having a direct financial stake in the camps' success. Visiting places like this is one way of ensuring that at least some of the Okavango's exclusive camps help Botswana's poorer citizens.

ABU RESERVE

Abu Camp is one of Botswana's most expensive safari camps. It was completely rebuilt in 2011 and consists of six luxurious tents raised up on decks. The food is excellent, the service attentive and the activities include 4WD safaris, night drives and mokoro safaris – but what attracts the world's glitterati is the opportunity to explore the area with a resident family of elephants. Guests can interact closely with this herd, accompanying them on foot as they move through the bush, touching them and even riding on top in a specially designed saddle. This insight into the daily life of African elephants isn't cheap (see the *Abu Camp Add-on* on page 112), but it is unique.

In the same reserve, **Seba Camp** is a relaxed camp which overlooks a small lagoon, complete with resident hippos. Seba is unusual in that there is no age limit for children, and it is well equipped to cater for families. It has eight luxurious rooms, including a rather unusual double-decker family room, sleeping six, with its own plunge pool, toy box and hideaway sandpit.

Seba offers a variety of water- and land-based activities, depending on the time of year, including guided walking safaris. You may also get the chance to visit Abu's elephants from here, and learn more about the camp's ongoing research programme into elephant behaviour, backed by *Bristol University*.

XIGERA RESERVE

Xigera (pronounced 'keejera') stands on the fringes of Chief's Island, within a private area of Moremi Game Reserve. Water is everywhere here and the luxuriant vegetation makes it seem like one of the Okavango Delta's most tropical corners. There is some good game, including red lechwe and sitatunga, but we feel that it's best to concentrate on the more watery aspects of the Delta from Xigera. The birdlife is spectacular, from endless herons, egrets and cranes to countless smaller water birds.

Linked by raised walkways, Xigera's ten tented chalets are spread around the edge of an island. Each has been designed with



One of the spacious tents at Xigera

space and character, including features such as indoor and outdoor showers. Xigera has an understated, romantic feel. Activities concentrate on motorboat and mokoro excursions, though 4WD game drives during the day are possible all year.

DUBA PLAINS RESERVE

Duba Plains Reserve protects an isolated area of about 350km² on the edge of the Delta, north of Mombo. Being so northerly, Duba receives the Okavango Delta's flood earlier than most camps, typically around April–May. Its environment is characterised by extensive floodplain and savanna areas dotted with small date-palm islands. These vast swathes of grass attract great herds of buffalo, as well as plenty of elephant, and a wide variety of antelope, dominated by lechwe. However, it's the interaction between the buffalo and Duba's resident prides of lions, both of which often hunt during the day, that has cemented Duba's name as a top safari camp.

There's just one camp here, **Duba Plains**, which has just six large tents – each with a fan above the bed, an en-suite toilet and both inside and outside showers. In late 2010, Duba was bought by the team that owns Selinda and Zarafa camps (page 102) who plan some upgrades 'in keeping with their strong conservation and sustainability ethos'. The camp already has new vehicles for their 4WD safaris (day and night), and new boats now also allow for water activities. Duba has always been a superb little safari camp and we expect that, with these changes, it'll get even better. However, as a result we may see its cost rise in future years.

VUMBURA RESERVE

North of Moremi, the environment in the Vumbura Reserve is, in many ways, a more watery version of that found around Mombo (see page 90): extensive floodplains dotted with small palm islands and large forested areas. The game here is exceptionally varied. Lion are relatively common and the open areas also suit wild dog, which have denned here in recent years. Cheetah, leopard and spotted hyena are also seen frequently. There are plenty of elephants and buffalo, and a diverse range of other herbivores including zebra, blue wildebeest, red lechwe, impala, tsessebe, kudu and sable. The bird species range from pink pelicans to mopane specialists such as red hornbills.

Little Vumbura is an old favourite here, hidden amidst riverine vines and waterberry trees, on its own island beside a permanent channel – and so usually reached by boat. It takes only 12 guests, which helps to create an intimate atmosphere, but also means that it is often full, so book early if you want to find space at this gem!

The main camps in this reserve are two adjacent but semi-independent camps:

Vumbura Plains North and **Vumbura Plains South**. Each has seven vast, luxurious raised suites connected by walkways. The suites boast bleached timber interiors, a sunken lounge, open-plan shower, outdoor 'sala' (an open-air day bed) and a private plunge pool. Imagine a hotel of contemporary, minimalist design, deep in the Delta, and you've pictured Vumbura Plains. As you'd expect, these über-chic 'Plains' camps command a supplement over most other Okavango safari camps: £270-406 extra per person sharing per night, depending on the season.

All three Vumbura camps offer a varied programme of activities, which focus on mokoro trips and 4WD safaris (day and night). There's a channel of deep water nearby where, depending on water levels, motorboats can be used.



Striped kingfisher



MAPULA RESERVE

Mapula Reserve is north of Vumbura and Duba Plains, in an environment that is similar to that of Vumbura. The wildlife here is varied: buffalo and elephant are permanent residents, with red lechwe, impala, kudu, zebra, wildebeest and giraffe all common. The main predators are lion and leopard, although wild dog are probably the biggest attraction; they have denned here in the last few years. Unusually, the Okavango's old buffalo fence runs through the reserve – although plenty of holes and flattened sections ensure that it is largely ignored by the game.

Mapula Lodge has nine very spacious, thatched chalets raised on private decks beside the edge of a beautiful permanent lagoon. These are simpler than the rooms of more modern Okavango camps; they use rustic wooden features and basic cane furniture. All the chalets have an en-suite bathroom, with flush toilet, indoor tin bath and outside shower. The lodge's main area includes an open-sided dining room, lounge, a small plunge pool and a thatched bar.

The emphasis at Mapula is firmly on its activities, which include mokoro trips, guided walks (with an armed guide) on request, and 4WD safaris both day and night. Game drives are usually accompanied by both a guide and a tracker. Mapula is a one-off, independent and not owned by a group. It's recently changed hands with more than a few teething problems during this transition. We're hopeful these issues will resolve themselves but please call us for the latest update.

KWARA RESERVE

North of Moremi, Kwara Reserve covers about 1,750km² of lovely and particularly varied environments. Look at the satellite photograph on our website: southwest of the camps here you'll find lagoons, channels lined by papyrus and shallow floodplains, whilst northeast you'll see mopane woodlands and dry, open bush.

Kwara Camp is the sister camp of Lagoon and Lebala (see page 103). It has eight large, comfortable en-suite tents with big shaded verandas and outdoor showers (the honeymoon tent also has a claw-footed bath); all are raised on individual wooden platforms. Its restful lounge overlooks a lagoon which fluctuates with the seasons. Nearby, **Little Kwara** is lovely. It has only five tents, all raised on platforms with en-suite bathrooms including a toilet and bath, and a separate outdoor shower.

These camps are enthusiastic about their safaris. The diversity of the environments is reflected in both the wide range of activities possible, and the big game found here. A tracker and an experienced guide run every 4WD safari, and they will venture off road and stay out into the night for interesting encounters. On the water there are mokoro excursions, and fishing and birdwatching trips aboard Kwara's unusual double-decker boat, which offers unique views over the papyrus and affords photographers a great range of angles. Kwara is less than an hour by boat from Gcodikwe Lagoon, where the herony is a major spectacle from September to December.

Relaxing on a mokoro trip



Walking with elephants in Stanley's Reserve

SHINDE RESERVE

Shinde Reserve comprises large, lush floodplains, tall palm islands and thick stands of papyrus in the waterways. It's a good safari area, especially in the drier months, and the game includes rare sable antelope, large herds of lechwe and high lion densities.

Beside deep-water channels, **Shinde** is a well-established safari camp with eight classic safari tents on decks. All have en-suite bathrooms and shaded verandas; a cluster of three (the 'enclave') can be self-contained, with their own dining area. At one end of Shinde is a split-level 'tree house', with bar and dining room. Activities include day and night 4WD safaris, motorboat trips (excursions to Gcodikwe Lagoon are best from September to December), mokoro trips, guided walks and fishing; there's also a small swimming pool.

Shinde's sister camp, **Footsteps** (aka 'Footsteps Across the Delta'), is the base for walking trails. It takes a maximum of six

visitors, who stay in simple tents with twin camp beds, a private bucket shower and a long-drop toilet. Footsteps has a full bar and laundry service, and a dedicated chef. Activities here major on walking, plus the occasional short mokoro trip.

Small groups can hire Footsteps exclusively (see page 20), and families can enjoy activities tailored for children as young as seven – from making bows and arrows, to cooking on a fire! Footsteps Across the Delta can be combined with Footsteps Across the Linyanti, for a varied walking safari (see page 104).

STANLEY'S AND BAINES' RESERVE

In a relatively dry area in the southern Delta, **Stanley's Camp** has eight en-suite tents elevated on wooden decking, all with solid, wooden furnishings. The open-plan central dining/lounge area is a large, airy canvas tent (think circus 'big top').

Nearby, the five substantial, thatched suites

of **Baines' Camp** have innovative and environmentally friendly walls made from recycled drinks cans and scent-free elephant-dung. Named after the 19th-century artist-explorer, Thomas Baines, the camp is stylishly decorated, and has four-poster 'star beds' which can be rolled onto your private deck beneath the stars.

Both camps arrange day and night 4WD safari drives and mokoro excursions, and also conduct walking safaris. Higher-than-average water levels over the past few seasons mean that Baines' now also offers motorboat trips year round.

In the same area, opt to spend a morning with three African elephants on an awe-inspiring **elephant experience**. Under the guidance of gentle expert Doug Groves, you can walk through the bush with them, touch them and interact with them. This profound experience costs an extra £153 (1 Jan–31 Mar) / £215 (1 Apr–14 Jun & 1 Nov–31 Dec) / £268 (15 Jun–31 Oct) per person; it needs to be booked when you arrange your trip.



THE SOUTHWESTERN DELTA

To the south and west of Chief's Island, several reserves are dominated by forests and dry open plains, but include a network of permanent channels and lush flood meadows. Visiting this side of the Delta, you will see plenty of big game including buffalo, elephant, hippo, tsessebe, impala, giraffe, zebra, and kudu. Sightings of large predators have historically been less frequent here, than in areas further north and east.

Activities at all these camps include 4WD safaris, night drives and mokoro trips. Motorboat excursions are also sometimes possible, depending on water levels.

Nxabega Safari Camp takes up to 18 guests, staying in luxurious tents on raised platforms. All have en-suite facilities and a private veranda. Sandy paths link the tents to a swimming pool and the grand main area, which has an opulent lounge, well-stocked bar and a long, candle-lit dining table. Nxabega exudes an air of quality.

Rebuilt in 2009, **Kanana** overlooks a pretty lagoon and has eight elevated en-suite tents, each with a private veranda, and a horseshoe-shaped central lounge/dining

area. Nearby is a huge heronry, which is also the Okavango's only known breeding site for pink-backed pelicans. This is not only a remarkable birding spectacle (at its best September–December), but also attracts many predators.

For adventure, take a two-night **Kanana Mokoro Trail** to explore the Delta's waterways. You'll camp on islands in basic, but comfortable, twin tents – each with an adjacent bucket shower and a 'long-drop' toilet.



The elegant new rooms at Kanana

One of the *Expert Africa* team first visited **Pom Pom** in 1992; its tents were very basic by modern standards, even though they were 'state of the art' at the time! The camp has changed many times since, but still overlooks a lovely lagoon in a beautiful area of tiny palm islands and lush floodplains. Pom Pom has a central lounge, dining and bar area, made of thatch and canvas, and nine comfortable safari tents including a family tent – each with an en-suite bathroom and an open-air shower.

In contrast to Pom Pom's history, to the south lie two newer, high-spec camps in one of the southern Delta's prettier areas. **Xaranna Okavango Delta Camp** was built in 2008 overlooking a lily-covered lagoon. It has nine sleek, air-conditioned, en-suite tents, each with a separate 'sala'. Its sister camp, **Xudum Delta Lodge**, has nine smart, split-level suites built in a contemporary style, each with air conditioning and a second shaded double bed on the roof. An innovative idea encourages guests to cook alongside the chef in the open kitchen. Both of these very smart safari camps offer high standards of food, service and luxury – and private plunge pools!

The southwestern Delta is not known for its big cats, but they are occasionally being seen



An elusive leopard camouflaged in the branches of a tree

CHITABE RESERVE

Towards the south of the Okavango Delta, Chitabe Reserve is one of the Delta's drier areas. Almost surrounded by Moremi, it contrasts with areas further north as it is largely forested: an interesting mosaic of mopane and acacia woodlands, riverine forests and occasional lush channels.

These shady, wooded glades support a varied range of animals and birds, with particularly good numbers of leopard, which thrive on a prolific population of impala. Buffalo, elephant, lion and periodic sightings of wild dog are also highlights here – ably recorded by the camps' owners in their excellent coffee-table book on wild dogs, *Running Wild*.

Chitabe's birdlife is usually excellent, with raptors especially common, although you won't usually see the full range of water birds found elsewhere. (Despite many bird species occurring throughout the Delta, their distribution can often be very localised.) Western-banded snake eagles, Gabar goshawks and martial eagles are sought-after sightings in Chitabe.

The main **Chitabe Camp** has eight luxury tents, built on raised wooden decks linked by walkways. The tents are very comfortably furnished, with ceiling fans, and an en-suite bathroom including indoor and outdoor showers. Chitabe has a pleasant lounge and dining area and a plunge pool.

The nearby, **Chitabe Lediba** (formerly Chitabe Trails Camp), has just five similar tents, and broadly the same facilities. Two of these tents are suitable for families sharing. It's a smaller camp, where meals are more informal and often eaten outside. Both camps offer a classic safari experience, concentrating on 4WD safari drives by day and night.



A wild dog's lifespan is usually 10-12 years

SANDIBE RESERVE

Adjacent to Moremi and Chitabe, Sandibe is striking for its towering stands of palm trees, thick riverine vegetation and several huge old baobabs. It's a lovely mix of forested areas interspersed with floodplains and permanent deep-water channels.

The game here is varied: red lechwe, impala, tsessebe, kudu, zebra, wildebeest and plenty of giraffe, with permanent residents of buffalo and elephant. Lion and leopard are the dominant predators, though cheetah and hyena are not uncommon. Sandibe has rich birdlife: ducks, geese and teal are very common, whilst more unusual specialities include long-winged falcons, slaty egrets, black coucals, black egrets and brown firefinches.

Sandibe Safari Lodge stands beside the Santantadibe River – a deep, wide channel leading to several beautiful lagoons. All of the lodge's eight spacious, en-suite terracotta cottages face the river; each has a private deck and a refreshing open-air shower.

Sandibe's main lounge/dining area is a tall, open structure with a plunge pool nearby. Guests often dine outside and we can arrange one of Africa's most romantic candlelit dinners here – perfect for honeymooners. Activities include 4WD safaris (day and night), mokoro excursions (subject to water levels), short walks and boating trips (sometimes using an unusual, super-quiet electric boat).



Lilac-breasted roller