



Leopard cub play-fighting with its mum - practising valuable skills for later in life

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, just over a decade ago, black and white rhino were reintroduced to this area – having been poached out many years previously. Since then, calves have been born, their numbers have steadily increased and individuals have spread out across the Delta. 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.

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

On the north side of Chief's Island, **Mombo Camp** is Botswana's flagship safari camp.

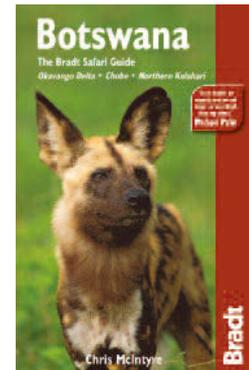
Opulent and stylish, it has nine luxurious tented rooms raised high off the ground and connected by aerial wooden walkways. All have great views, indoor and outdoor showers, fans, and a relaxing outdoor 'sala' or day bed. Expect to be impressed by its game densities, if depressed by its high cost and 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.

From around mid-January 2016 to April 2017, both Mombo and Little Mombo will

be rebuilt, resulting in a calibre of camps that will continue to live up to their reputations. With the rebuild being done in stages, room configurations for both camps will vary. Please contact a member of the Expert Africa team for an update. During this time, there will be a separate luxury tented 'fly camp' (i.e. no permanent structures) called **Mombo Trails**, with up to seven tented rooms; not quite in the same league as the main camps, but still with all the standard Mombo comforts and a fantastic wildlife offering. The added bonus of Mombo Trails? A seriously reduced rate on the standard prices. So for anyone who has ever wanted to stay at Mombo but found the price tag too high, perhaps now is the time to consider it!



Buffalo bulls have a thick boss between the horns; females on the other hand have none



Safari Guide to Botswana

Expert Africa's MD, Chris McIntyre, was co-author of the very first English guidebook to Namibia and Botswana, published over 25 years ago. Chris has since then written extensively on Botswana – including his comprehensive guide to northern Botswana.

Botswana: The Bradt Safari Guide.

Researching these guidebooks has helped Chris and the Expert Africa team to understand the various reserves and camps, so ask for their advice when you're planning your trip. The fourth edition was published in 2014, if you would like a copy please visit our website

www.expertafrika.com/books-and-maps

Chitabe Camp excellent experience

“ We saw a wide range of animals, the highlight being the wild dogs hunting which we saw twice. Plenty of leopards and some lions but no cheetah or hyena. Our guide Gordon was excellent and knowledgeable. The small number of game vehicles in the concession and the ability to go off road to follow animals made the experience much more personal. ”

Dr D, Sydney, April 2015

Cheetah sometimes relax on termite mounds using their height to survey the area for potential prey



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 resident herds 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 slaty egrets, black coucals, black egrets and brown firefinches.

Sandibe Okavango Safari Lodge

reopened in September 2014 after a complete rebuild. The old concrete buildings have been replaced by wooden structures, which draw inspiration for their design from the pangolin's scales and the nests of weaver birds. Inside the cavernous main area is very contemporary, featuring a large dining area and luxurious lounge with a particularly funky bar.

Sandy pathways lead to 12 spacious suites on elevated decks dotted along the Santantadibe River – a deep, wide channel leading to several beautiful lagoons. Each suite has a cosy indoor lounge area with a fireplace, double or twin beds and en-suite bathroom including a shower beneath a skylight. Sliding doors lead out to a private plunge pool and sitting/dining area on a large sunken deck.

Sandibe's rebuild has given it a step-change in style, luxury and cost, but you can still expect excellent 4WD safaris (day and night) and short walks for activities.



Room at Chitabe Camp

CHITABE RESERVE

Towards the south of the Okavango Delta, Chitabe Reserve is one of the Delta's drier areas. Almost surrounded by Moremi Game Reserve, 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 normally 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 high walkways. The tents are very comfortably furnished, with ceiling fans, and en-suite bathrooms including indoor and outdoor showers. Chitabe has a pleasant lounge and dining area and a plunge pool.

The nearby **Chitabe Lediba** has just five similar tents, two of them suitable for families, and broadly the same facilities. It's a smaller camp, where meals are more informal and often eaten outside. Both camps offer a classic safari experience in an area that typically offers some excellent game viewing. They concentrate on 4WD safari drives by day and night, led by teams of enthusiastic, professional guides. These camps are popular, so you'll need to book early.

STANLEY'S AND BAINES' RESERVE

In the southern Delta, **Stanley's Camp** has eight en-suite tents elevated on wooden decking, with solid wooden furnishings and a hammock on the deck. The open-plan central dining/lounge area is a large, airy canvas tent.

Nearby, the five substantial, thatched suites of **Baines' Camp** have innovative, 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' that can be rolled onto your private deck beneath the stars – a real highlight for us on our visits here.

Both camps arrange day and night 4WD safari drives, walking safaris, and mokoro excursions when water levels permit. Baines' also offers seasonal motorboat trips on the Boro River, dependent on water levels.

Despite the variety of activities available, the density of big game here is typically lower than in other Okavango regions – we wouldn't normally recommend it for big game. However, probably its biggest attraction, is the option to spend a morning with three African elephants, an awe-inspiring experience and a highlight for most guests. 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 extra and needs to be booked when you arrange your trip.



Young male baboons use lookout duty to gain status in the troop

THE SOUTHWESTERN DELTA

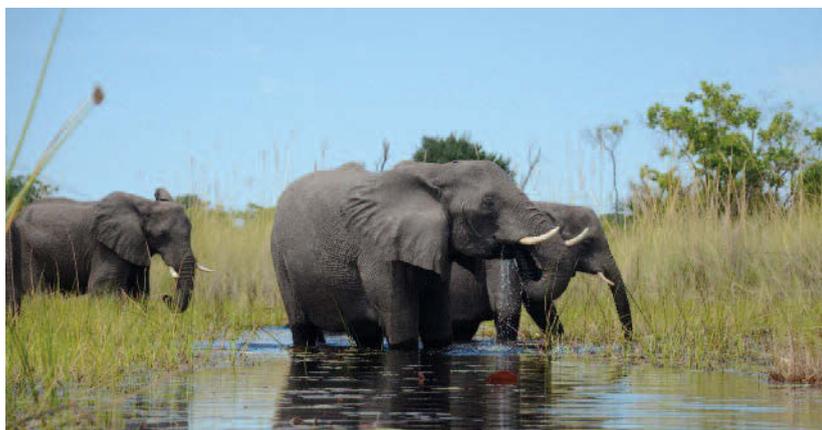
To the south and west of Chief's Island, several reserves are dominated by forests and dry open plains, but include a network of permanent channels and lush flood meadows. It's home to plenty of big game, including buffalo, elephant, hippo, tsessebe, impala, giraffe, zebra and kudu. Sightings of large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

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

Kanana overlooks a pretty lagoon and has a horseshoe-shaped central lounge/dining area. Its eight elevated en-suite tents, including one for a family, have private verandas. Nearby is a huge heronry, which is also the Okavango's only known breeding site for pink-backed pelicans. This remarkable birding spectacle (usually at its best September–December) attracts many predators. From our own experience, we'd be surprised if even those with only a passing interest in birds failed to be impressed by the sheer magnitude and variety of birds at the heronry at its peak.

For the adventurous visitor spending at least three nights at Kanana, it's possible to prearrange a night under the stars on the raised Kanana sleep-out deck a short drive from camp. Ask us for more details.

One of the *Expert Africa* team first visited **Pom Pom Camp** in 1992. The camp has changed many times since, but still overlooks a lovely lagoon in a beautiful area of tiny palm islands and lush floodplains. As



Elephant crossing the waterways of the Delta - a memorable sight from a mokoro



A white rhino that was relocated to the Okavango Delta where poaching is almost non-existent

well as a central lounge, dining and bar area made of thatch and canvas, Pom Pom has nine comfortable safari tents (including a family tent), each with an open-air shower. Pom Pom is a good, reasonably economical option for those seeking to enjoy the Delta's scenic environments and excellent birdwatching. Despite having only nine tents, we don't feel the camp quite achieves the same intimate feel and personal level of service of many other small Delta camps.

Nxabega Okavango Safari Camp takes up to 18 guests, staying in spacious tents on raised platforms. Nxabega was the height of

'safari chic' when it was built, and we've found it to be a lovely camp offering friendly service, good guiding and imaginative food. But time and the environment have taken their toll: from January to April 2016, the camp will be undergoing a stage-by-stage refurbishment, replacing the tents and decks. 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, candlelit dining table. After the refurbishment, we fully expect this smart camp to once again exude an air of quality.

To the south lie two newer, high-spec camps in one of the southern Delta's prettier areas. Overlooking a lily-covered lagoon, **Xaranna Okavango Delta Camp** has nine sleek, air-conditioned, en-suite tents with individual 'salas'. Its sister camp, **Xudum Delta Lodge**, has nine smart, split-level suites built in a contemporary style, 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 camps offer high standards of food, service and luxury. On our visits we've also loved the guiding which took in everything about the area, from the smaller things to the larger things too. The big game is less abundant here in comparison with other parts of the Delta, but we found the detailed guiding made every activity fascinating nonetheless.

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 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.



The Okavango floodwaters filter through papyrus beds emerging crystal-clear

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, 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 environment offering a classic experience of the Okavango Delta's floodplains and lagoons.

Xaxaba Camp has long gone, and in its stead is **Eagle Island Lodge**, which has been built in the same luxurious style as its sister camps: *Khwai River Lodge* (page 93) and *Savute Elephant Lodge* (page 105). 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 take a helicopter ride to visit the local Xaxaba Village, allowing for a cultural interaction not always on offer at remote Delta camps.

ABU RESERVE

Seba Camp overlooks a small lagoon, complete with resident hippos. Seba is well-equipped to cater for families with children over the age of six. It has eight luxurious rooms, including two rather unusual double-decker family rooms, one sleeping six and the other five. Each family room has its own plunge pool, toybox and hideaway sandpit. Seba offers a variety of water and land-based activities, depending on the time of year, including guided walking safaris and catch-and-release fishing. Whilst this isn't typically a top game camp, it's in a lovely location for water-based activities and great for birding. Note that the elephant activities available at *Abu* (see below) are not possible when staying at Seba.

In the same reserve, **Abu Camp** is one of Botswana's most expensive safari camps. The food is excellent, the service attentive and the six tents raised up on decks are luxurious. 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 but it is unique.

XIGERA RESERVE

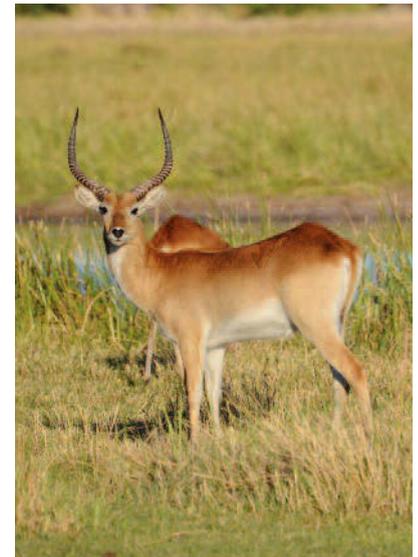
Xigera (pronounced 'keejera') stands on the fringes of Chief's Island, within a private area of Moremi Game Reserve. Water is all around and the luxuriant vegetation makes it seem like one of the Okavango Delta's most tropical corners. There is some good game, including red lechwe and sitatunga, but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

Linked by raised walkways, Xigera's 10 tented chalets are spread around the edge of an island in a particularly pretty part of the Okavango. Each tent has been designed with 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, water levels permitting, 4WD game drives during the day are possible most of the year. Xigera offers visitors the kind of lush, watery experience that many first-time visitors would expect in the Okavango Delta.

Planning your trip

The *Expert Africa* brochure you're reading describes the range of choices available for your Africa trip, but the best way to start planning is to call us. As we discuss your ideas and answer your questions, you'll find a copy of **The Directory** an invaluable aid. **The Directory** is our manual of itinerary suggestions, or 'trip ideas'; including guideline prices, flight routings and all the tools you need to arrange a trip with us.

Order a printed copy, or download it from expertafrica.com/order-directory



Red lechwe have shorter front legs than hindlegs - an adaptation which helps them run in marshy areas



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 red lechwe are abundant here, and sitatunga are occasionally spotted. From around September to February, when it's usually at its driest, you'll find increased numbers of buffalo, elephant and the occasional cheetah. Whilst levels of game are not as good as elsewhere in the Delta, this is an excellent reserve for birds, with plenty of giant kingfishers, Goliath herons, pelicans, slaty egrets, swamp boubous and countless storks.

Opened in July 2013, the simple, tented **Pelo Camp** is located on a small island surrounded by permanent water. It has five en-suite tents, each with a flushing toilet, as well as indoor and alfresco bucket showers. Pelo's appeal lies in its varied birdlife and picturesque scenery, with the focus being very much on mokoro trips and walks, although motorboat trips and seasonal

fishing are possible when water levels are high enough.

Southwest of Pelo, the small but smart **Kwetsani Camp** has just five canvas-walled chalets on raised wooden decking linked by walkways. Completely rebuilt in 2015, each chalet is very comfortable and airy, with indoor and outdoor showers. It's a hit with most guests who stay here. On a small palm island to the southeast, **Jacana Camp** takes just 12 guests in comfortable en-suite Meru-style tents, linked by natural pathways around the island. It's a lovely camp with a relaxed, tropical air that is a firm favourite for a classic water-based Delta experience.

In contrast, **Tubu Tree Camp** lies on a large, dry island on the west side of the Jao Reserve. Rebuilt in 2013, it has eight smart tents on raised platforms and is a favourite with most who stay here. **Little Tubu** is more intimate, with just three equally comfortable tents. Opened in mid-2013, it's linked to its sister camp by raised walkways. The game sightings from Tubu and Little Tubu are generally the best in this reserve.

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. It's a camp that can be enjoyed and experienced for itself, as much as for its beautiful surroundings.

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 when water levels permit.

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

Young stallions have to prove their strength to win fillies



Tawny eagle



Spotted hyenas are sociable, living in clans or groups led by females who are larger and stronger than males

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 savannah areas dotted with small date-palm islands. These vast swathes of grass attract a wide variety of antelope, dominated by lechwe, as well as plenty of elephant and, less frequently these days, impressive herds of buffalo. Historically, interactions between these buffalo and the large resident prides of lions have been Duba's main attraction. However, in 2014 the deaths of the dominant 'Skimmer' male, and a lioness called Silver Eye, a particularly ambitious hunter, resulted in the Duba prides splintering. Now led by younger, less experienced lions, they've found hunting buffalo more difficult. There are still plenty of lion around, but their famed interactions with buffalo are less frequent.

Currently, there's just one excellent little safari camp here, **Duba Plains**, run by the team that owns Selinda and Zarafa (page 108). It has six large tents, each with a fan

above the bed, and both inside and outside showers. They focus on 4WD safaris (day and night), and water activities when water levels permit. There are changes afoot, though: in March 2016 the new **Duba Expedition Camp** will open 1km from **Duba Plains Camp**. It will have six tents under light cotton canvas with en-suite facilities and large bedrooms. When this opens, Duba Plains itself will be replaced by a new premium camp of the same name – similar in levels of luxury to Zarafa – on the same site, with four spacious tents and



The central area at Vumbura Plains North

a two-bedroom family unit. It's expected to open in late 2016 – contact our team for the latest news. We've always really liked Duba Plains with its friendly team, excellent guides and great hosting. We look forward to seeing how Duba develops over the coming year or two.

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 95): extensive floodplains dotted with small palm islands and large forested areas. It's an exceptionally pretty area with a good variety of game. 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 elephant 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 Southern red-billed 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, creating an intimate atmosphere, but also meaning that it is often full, so book early if you want to find space at this gem!

Vumbura Plains South and **Vumbura Plains North** are adjacent but semi-independent camps, with six and eight suites respectively, including two suitable for families. The luxurious raised suites are connected by walkways and each boasts bleached-timber interiors, a sunken lounge, open-plan shower, outdoor 'sala' and a private plunge pool. Not your typical bush lodges, these camps have a contemporary, minimalist design and are unlikely to appeal to someone who enjoys a more traditional safari camp. However, they typically offer a very good game experience with exceptionally high standards of service, attention to individual needs and luxurious surroundings.

All three Vumbura camps offer a varied programme of activities, focusing 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.

“ We saved up for a few years to go on this trip and with all the hype on the internet I was concerned the real thing could be a bit of an anticlimax. Suffice to say it was anything but. It was truly outstanding in all aspects from the arrangements to Victoria Falls hotel and on to the lodges in Botswana.

A holiday that will live with us forever. ”

**Mr S, Lincolnshire,
November 2015**



African sacred ibis breed in colonies which can sometimes be seen on boat trips in the Delta

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: south-west of the camps here you'll find lagoons, channels lined by papyrus, and shallow floodplains, whilst to the north-east you'll see mopane woodlands and dry, open bush.

Kwara Camp is the sister camp of Lagoon and Lebala (see page 109). It has eight fairly traditional en-suite tents, which

prioritise the necessities rather than the trimmings. Each has a shaded veranda with an outdoor shower (the honeymoon tent also has a bath) and all are raised on wooden platforms. Its lounge overlooks a lagoon, which fluctuates seasonally. Nearby, **Little Kwara** is lovely, and smarter than its sibling. It has only five large tents, all raised on platforms with en-suite bathrooms that include a bath, and a separate outdoor shower.

These camps may be less 'refined' than some of their contemporaries in the Delta, but we love their enthusiasm for their safaris. The diversity of the environments is reflected in both the wide range of activities 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, when water levels allow, 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.

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.

Footsteps, aka 'Footsteps Across the Delta', is the base for walking trails. It takes a maximum of six visitors, who stay in simple tents, each with twin camp beds, a private bucket shower and a flush toilet. Footsteps has a full bar and laundry service, and a dedicated chef. Walks and game drives are led by particularly well-informed guides, and short mokoro trips are available when water levels are high. Small groups can hire Footsteps exclusively (see page 21), and families can enjoy activities tailored for children as young as seven – from making bows and arrows, to cooking over a fire.

Beside deep-water channels, **Shinde**, Footsteps' sibling, is a well-established safari camp with eight newly refurbished and enlarged classic safari tents on decks, all with en-suite bathrooms and shaded verandas. A cluster of three tents (the 'enclave') can be self-contained, with its own dining area and lounge. At one end of Shinde, a split-level 'tree house' incorporates a lounge and dining room. Flexible activities include day and night 4WD safaris, motorboat trips, mokoro trips, guided walks and fishing; there's also a small swimming pool.

Little Kwara review

“ This was my favourite of all the camps we visited – despite the others being wonderful.

The main reason why was our guides – T-bone (nickname) and Wagu – who were two of the best trackers I have ever seen. We saw a lion every time we went on a drive. We also saw an African wild cat and a Serval on a night drive. But one of the more memorable experiences was seeing a cheetah and her three cubs. We were so close you could hear them purring!

Our guides were also funny and warm, which made every day there even more pleasurable. I will forever remember my time spent at Little Kwara. ”

Mrs B, Texas, July 2015

A group of giraffe is called a tower when standing still and a journey when moving

