

EVERY DOG HAS ITS DAY

IT MAY BE ELEPHANT, LION AND RHINO THAT DRAW PEOPLE TO THE OKAVANGO DELTA, BUT IT'S THE 'PAINTED' DOGS THAT DRIVE **SUE WATT** WILD AS SHE GOES BEYOND THE BIG FIVE IN BOTSWANA

PHOTOGRAPHER: *Will Whitford*



As dusk falls over the Delta, I'm transfixed by an enormous elephant heading straight towards me. He comes so close I can see the dense lashes shielding his reddish-brown eyes, the wiry hairs on his trunk and myriad scratches on his tusks. I swear I could reach out and touch him without taking a single step forward – yet he has no idea that I'm here.

Neither do the other 20 bull elephant slurping and splashing around the muddy waterhole. That's because I'm safely tucked away in a hide, a semi-submerged container with windows just above ground-level, and I'm watching all this unseen. Mesmerised, we stay here for an hour.

It's one of many magical Big Five encounters I get to experience in Botswana's famous Okavango Delta. Traditionally, the term referred to the five most dangerous animals to hunt – elephant, rhino, Cape buffalo, leopard and lion – but today, it denotes the most popular wildlife species to tick off (by spotting not shooting) while on safari, the ones that pull in the crowds. Here in the Delta, though, there are no crowds.

Our first stop is Sable Alley in Khwai Private Reserve, a 25-minute bush flight from Maun, the gateway town to the Okavango. With an emphasis on affordable luxury, it's part of Natural Selection's portfolio of small, owner-run camps, brimming with character.

BOTSWANA



The 12 stylish tented rooms and the main lounge and dining area all overlook a pan frequented by elephant and hippo, which often wander through the unfenced camp. Its soothing, natural ambience is complemented by high thatch roofs over the main open building, plenty of comfy sofas and chairs, carvings and crafts, and wooden decking leading to the swimming pool.

Bordering Moremi Game Reserve and Chobe National Park in northern Botswana, Khwai Private Reserve is a former hunting concession. Wildlife here was understandably skittish but after a couple of years of habituation, the animals now realise that guests here shoot with cameras, not guns. There are few camps in the reserve, which spans 2,000 square kilometres of woodlands, rivers and open floodplains, and it feels as if you have it all to yourself.

On our first game drive, we meet Nicholas, a beautiful 11-month-old leopard. He's lying by a termite mound in shady mopane woodland, waiting patiently for mum Nicky to return from hunting. Nicky is apparently one cool, laid-back cat and has passed this on to her son. Totally chilled, he raises his head to see us then flops down again and continues snoozing.

Later, we find two tiny lion cubs with their mum lying in the shade in the afternoon sun. Balls of tawny fluff with furry white bellies, they're just two months old and are utterly adorable. Full of naughty curiosity, one cub strays too far in our direction so mum picks him up in her mouth and carries him back to safety.

On game drives along the Sable Alley channel, we come across hippo wallowing in the water. Giraffe, zebra, impala, kudu, waterbuck and reedbuck amble along the plains. Famously the most aggressive and unpredictable of the Big Five, grumpy Cape buffalo caked in dried mud glare at us as we pass.

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The Delta's cold, clear nights are ideal for stargazing and a night at Natural Selection's Skybeds is the perfect way to do this. An intimate, rustic camp deep in the bush, it has just three 'rooms' – five-metre-high wooden towers like treehouses, open to the elements with the starlit sky for a ceiling.

Our two-hour drive from Sable Alley includes that mesmerising encounter at the elephant hide, and we arrive at Skybeds in time for sundowners. Sipping G&Ts in the bar treehouse, we realise that elephant have joined us, drinking their own sundowner at a waterhole just beyond camp. Dinner is cooked over the campfire, then we head to bed on the top floor of our tower, snuggling up under thick duvets and that fabulous twinkling sky. But sleep doesn't come easy – I'm too busy taking in the cosmos and counting shooting stars.

Our next Delta destination is Chief's Island in Moremi Game Reserve, a half-hour flight away. Renowned for its high density of wildlife, the largest island in the Delta was once the royal hunting ground of local ruler Chief Moremi, who gave it to the reserve in the 1970s.

Our home on this beautiful and bountiful island is Sanctuary Chief's Camp overlooking the Pajio floodplains in the private Mombo concession. Chief's exudes relaxed luxury: it's all cream and wood décor with sumptuous leather sofas and chairs in the lounge under a high thatch roof and sunbeds shaded by calico umbrellas surrounding the pool. Chief's 12 spacious suites have private plunge pools and all the mod-cons you need, from Nespresso coffee machines and aircon to well-stocked mini-bars and wifi.

The island certainly lives up to its reputation as a predator paradise. On game drives, we see hardly any other vehicles but plenty of lion, either alone or in prides of up to ten, prowling the plains or sleeping in the afternoon sun. We come across a huge dark-maned male lying by the track. As he gets up, he roars then stalks towards a herd of impala. The tension in the air is palpable but the antelope defiantly stand their ground, rooted to the spot as their predator walks past.

On one drive, we spot a black rhino waddling gracefully across the plain. She's huge and prehistoric-looking, and

she's very special. Mary was brought from South Africa in an extensive relocation programme with Botswana Rhino Conservation. Secrecy surrounds the exact number translocated to Botswana, where rhino were once extinct. Our guide tells us that she's "heavily pregnant and, unusually for a black rhino, always calm". I'm very thankful we saw her.

But it's not all about the big beasts. On a *mokoro*, a traditional dug-out canoe, we glide blissfully along a lily-strewn channel spotting tiny frogs clinging on to grasses and dragonflies fluttering all around us. It's a classic Okavango scene as the floodwaters arrive from Angola. We head back as the sun sets, reflected perfectly in the mirror-like waters.

And for all the thrill of the Big Five, the animal I really love to watch is the wild dog. The following morning, we leave at a chilly 6am, aiming to reach their den before they go hunting. We find these super-efficient killing machines snuggled up together against the cold, with sated bellies and blood-stained faces. There are 10 in the pack, their huge saucer-shaped ears popping up now and then amid their palette of unique brown, white, gold and black patterned hides – no wonder these canines are known as 'painted' dogs.

These fascinating, family-focused beasts may not be in the exclusive clique of the Big Five, but they've long intrigued me and my time in their company was truly special.

Once again, effortlessly, the Delta delivers... ☺

PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM LEFT: A wild dog; leopard on the prowl; Sanctuary Chief's Camp

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Wild dog; a lioness with her cub; a rhino in the bush; giraffe; sunset over the Delta; cruising up to Chief's Camp

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A&K's 11-night Classic Botswana itinerary starts at £5,695 per person (based on two sharing, includes flights, private transfers, accommodation and selected excursions). For more information, call our Africa travel specialists on 01242 547 702.

