

Camping in Botswana

“Hey mate, need a drink?” asked the young Australian bartender working the bar at the Okavango River Lodge.

“I’ll have a beer, a Castle.” After grabbing the beer for me I asked, “So, how’s an Aussie wind up living in Maun, Botswana.”

“I reckon it was safer than the Outback.” the bartender said in the typical self-effacing Aussie way.

“So, I have my own tent, how much to lay it down here?”

“Four dollars.”

“Four dollars? OK, where is the campground.”

The Aussie spread his arms apart, smiled and said, “Anywhere, just stay twenty meters from the river.”

“Why’s that?”

He made a chomping motion with his right hand.

“Crocs?!”

“Yeah, there is a fair bit of them around here. Bit of a nuisance at times.”

Noticing my angst he asked, “Want another beer?”

“Yes, I think I do.”

Despite the animals, bringing your own tent and camping is a good idea if visiting Botswana. First, the country has just 1.6 million people located in a land area of over 350,000 square miles, allowing for ample space to camp. The scarce population also means there is limited accommodation in certain areas of the country and camping may be the only possibility. Accommodations can also be expensive, while camping is cheap. Finally, camping allows you to be right in the middle of the wildlife – or at least twenty meters from it.

The Okavango Delta is one of the prime areas to witness the animals. Maun is the main city in the area and is largely dedicated to organized trips into the delta and stocking up on food and sleep as there is little else to do in the city. Most of the camping is located just outside of Maun but there are frequent minibuses traveling back and forth to the city center.

There are four main delta areas that can be visited in the Okavango, but the Eastern Delta is the easiest and cheapest to visit as it involves only a couple hours in truck on a dirt/mud road until reaching the actual delta. Then, there is a switch to a mokoro, which is a hallowed out, shallow canoe. The mokoro can hold three people and their luggage and is propelled by the “captain” who has a long pole that he dips into the water. The captain then navigates the canoe through the labyrinth of waterways as passengers get clipped by nearby



vegetation. Once reaching camp, the captain will locate some branches, start a fire, cook, as well as dig the toilet. Visitors are expected to put up their own tent, pick up after themselves and not stray from the campground. Further, when visitors need to use the toilet, they are expected to place a stick on the pathway to the toilet indicating the toilet is occupied.

Trips into the Okavango are often walking trips, which leads to an increase in adrenaline as animals are within charging distance. There is an abundance of animals; they are attracted to the water from the surrounding semi-arid habitat area. Animals that can be seen are baboons, impalas, kudus, several types of birds, insects and some rather big termite hills that are sturdy enough to climb on. Most exhilarating are the elephants, although it is advisable to stay at least 100 meters away as they are deceptively fast.

The animals can indirectly be viewed via their footprints, in the dusty ground away from the waterways. Some of the footprints are near the campsites. Indeed, waking in the middle night I stuck my head out of my tent and saw a couple eyes staring back at me from a fairly close distance. The next day, our tour guide noticed lion tracks as well as several other antelope tracks near the tents.

Chobe National Park, just across the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe, has a wide variety of animals to see. The city of Kasane serves as the base for trips inside Chobe and is more upscale than Maun. The campsites are also more sophisticated as visitors are assigned certain areas to set up their tent and must register with security. There are more organized tours and just more tourists in general here, so security is important. I had a

group of mongooses by my tent which was added security.

Most organized tours are either in the form of game drives via trucks or Chobe River tours via boat. The river trip includes a view of a surprisingly large number of animals. A couple scenes are especially interesting. One is seeing numerous hippos climb out of waterholes. Another interesting site is seeing the elephants cross the river in a long line, one elephant's trunk following the others tail.



South of Chobe is the Kalahari Desert. A visit to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve isn't necessary to get the idea of what a desert is like. There is one main road between Maun and the Namibian border at Mamuno, as well as the Trans-Kalahari Highway, which heads from the border south towards the capital of Gaborone.

Hanging out at the remote Botswana border is a real treat. The only place to stay at the border town of Buitepos, which is technically in Namibia, is the East Gate Service Station and Rest Camp. There is a good chance that independent travelers will have the camp to themselves as organized tours usually just pass through the border. To the north of the camp are a couple of small houses and a small fenced-off farm with antelopes, most notably kudus. To the east is a sign for the next sheep auction, a gas station and the only other commercial building at the border, a small grocery store. To the south and west is nothing except desert, which is surprisingly interesting. The desert at the border is not strictly sand but does contain some shrubs; technically it is an arid savanna. The highlight is watching the sun set and the variety of colors uninterrupted by manmade lights.



Many people come to Botswana via organized tourist trips due to fear of the perils of Africa. Other slightly more adventurous travelers go via overland trips in big trucks, which are trips with roughly 20 other people who then rotate such duties as cooking, cleaning and fire-building. However, there is really no good reason not to go Botswana independently. Yes, OK, there are a few crocodiles but the country is generally safe and the people are kind. In areas there are limited accommodations and infrastructure, but eventually someone will come along. While hanging out with others at Chobe or the Okavango Delta can be rewarding, so can staring at the sunset in the middle of the Kalahari all by yourself.