

On the run:  
a herd of giraffes gallop  
gracefully across the  
vast, flooded plains of  
the Okavango Delta



# Wet & Wild

Dancing electric storms, animals up close – and thousands off the price.  
Botswana's at its best in the rainy season, finds **Josephine Stockman**

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aco sniffs the air.  
 ‘Rain coming,’ he says, handing us plastic ponchos as a damp breeze starts to ruffle our hair...

Anvil-shaped clouds, the colour of bruises, hover forebodingly above the savannah; suddenly, a streak of lightning hits the red earth with a shotgun crack. As our Jeep races the storm across the open plains, Taco turns to us with a grin that is borderline-wicked: ‘Don’t worry, so long as there are lots of giraffes close by, we are safe – they get hit first!’ Cackling, he zooms us towards the distant lodge as the drumming rain nips at our tyres and drenches the thick vegetation.

It’s spring, and this lush, landlocked African country is getting its annual dollop of the damp stuff. ‘Green season’ might sound suspiciously like a euphemism for ‘rainy and miserable’, but it’s during Botswana’s December-to-March wet period that savvy safari-goers book their trips. Prices are lower (*thousands* lower), lodges emptier, landscapes more colourful, and as well as ticking off the big-hitting wildlife (lions, cheetahs, elephants and hippos), it’s the best time to spot the country’s dazzling birds, too. What’s more, while you do risk getting a little soaked, the rain here isn’t a constant, spirit-sapping drizzle like in Britain, but a series of occasional, dramatic, photogenic thunderbursts – punctuated by sizzling sunshine and blue skies.

There was certainly no sign of storm-clouds as my husband Tom and I stepped onto the baking tarmac at Maun airport a few days earlier. This town is the gateway for most visitors, who arrive in jets from Johannesburg, then transfer to gnat-sized planes to reach their camps. Tanned bush pilots mill around outside the terminal, swapping tales and waiting for new arrivals to emerge, blinking in the brilliant sunshine. ‘I’m in the wrong job,’ says Tom,

comparing his pasty limbs to the bronzed Crocodile Dundee look-alike who is coming to greet us. Steve is here to take us on the first leg of a join-the-dots safari through Botswana’s pristine wilderness and I soon see why planes are the only way to reach our chosen remote camps. As we wobble our way upwards and leave Maun’s glinting corrugated-metal roofs behind, dirt tracks peter out into an endless expanse of green, mottled with the shadows of clouds scudding far above. In just minutes, the roads, houses – and all signs of human existence – have vanished, leaving us with just the occasional hooded vulture for company, cruising past at eye level, before soaring on gracefully.

Botswana may be most famous for its Okavango Delta, a watery wonderland in the country’s northern reaches, but first we’re headed due south to the Central Kalahari – a vast untouched landscape of whispering grasslands and thorny acacias – the largest game reserve in the world. In wet season, its dry lake-beds bloom with fresh, green shoots, drawing herds of hungry springboks, wildebeest and oryx. And of course, where you get munching herbivores, predators soon follow.

A clutch of thatched huts, Tau Pan is almost invisible from the air, marked only by an Elastoplast-sized airstrip. As we land, an olive-green Jeep appears, sending a plume of dust into the air. Balepi, our guide, and KG, our tracker, are both Kalahari bushmen, with a truly encyclopaedic knowledge of the surrounding wildlife. ‘Important things first,’ says Balepi. ‘What would you like for your sundowners later – wine, beer, G&Ts?’ We may be in the back of beyond but we won’t exactly be roughing it. Tau >



Bush tales: clockwise from top left, sun-dappled water-lilies glowing under an Okavango Delta sunset; a beaming San bushman; bee-eaters huddling together; a herd of watchful springboks; a hungry hippo staring out from the Khwai river; the stunningly-situated swimming pool at Nxai Pan; a stalking leopard peering through the dense undergrowth; enthralled safari-goers observing a family of elephants



I notice a pair of saucer-sized lion-paw marks, right beside our deck. I have rejoined the food chain

Pan is one of a handful of camps run by Kwando Safaris. Each one has a different feel but all excel in that brand of back-to-nature, rustic chic that combines power-showers and camp-fires.

Most animals are sensibly snoozing in the midday heat, so we're deposited in our room for a siesta. It's a breezy, wooden-floored boudoir, with a four-poster and knockout views, hidden at the end of a winding path that leads back to the lodge. I notice a pair of saucer-sized paw-marks imprinted in the dirt right beside our deck. 'Are they...?' I inquire gingerly as Balepi hauls our bags up the steps. 'Oh yes – tracks from last night,' he says, squatting down to examine them. 'Lion – probably hunting,' he adds. Kwando's camps may have all the human comforts but it appears the creatures, too, are comfortable roaming at will – there are no fences to keep out nocturnal visitors. I suddenly feel as if I have rejoined the food chain.

Late afternoon, we venture out in an open-topped Jeep, ducking to avoid the dung-beetles that fly past clumsily. Balepi parks at the edge of the pan and starts to bleat – a spine-chillingly convincing imitation of a wounded animal in distress. KG grins conspiratorially; we watch and wait. Suddenly, some nearby springboks are on high alert, tails raised like little white surrender flags and it becomes clear why: a muscular male lion is walking right towards us, at first a distant pinprick, then closer, until he's only metres away from a still-bleating Balepi. The springboks bolt en masse, leaping high into the air as they run in a spectacular display of 'pronking' (in Afrikaans, to 'pronk' means to show off). It's a way of demonstrating to predators that they're in tip-top shape and far too fast to catch, a 'don't-bother-chasing-me' signal that looks mildly ridiculous but seems to work a treat; the lion ignores them and scrutinises us instead. Soon, casting a dirty glance at our guide, he continues onwards with the look of someone who realises he's been duped, leaving us all wide-eyed with excitement.

This area is famous for Kalahari black-maned lions like this, and we spot two more magnificent felines, several skittish ostriches, a family of bristly warthogs and a pair of comical-looking, bat-eared foxes. The light turns treacle-hued and dusk casts a rosy glow over the grasslands as we pause for our sunset tippie; while we clink G&Ts, hundreds of white-bellied storks stream overhead on their way to roost. It's a mesmerising spectacle and there's an added frisson of excitement as predators begin to stir in the fast-fading light. A distant rumble of thunder is our signal to return to camp, and that night, we lie watching electrical storms dance across the horizon, as lions grunt softly nearby.

Days have a clearly defined structure on safari: early starts (consider 5am a lie-in here in the bush), porridge over the smouldering camp fire, game drives in search of wildlife and suppers swapping stories with other guests. The thrill, however, is ever-present because you never know what you're going to find – hence the number of return visitors. 'Every day brings surprises – you have no idea what you might see when you wake up,' enthuses an athletic Swede with a paparazzi-worthy camera. She's right – at every camp, just as you become used to the sight of lions walking nonchalantly past the Jeep, your eagle-eyed tracker spots a pair of cubs play-fighting, or a baby giraffe taking its first uncertain steps, and you're awe-struck all over again. Then there's the green-season weather, which adds an extra layer of drama: perhaps purple afternoon thunderclouds clear to reveal an epic rainbow, or zebras shelter beneath acacia trees as tropical rain leaves the savannah steaming. We spend our evenings playing capture-the-lightning-bolt from the lodge's decked bar, cameras poised to snap the white-hot streaks.

If lions are the scene-stealers at Tau Pan, at sister camp Nxai Pan (which takes its name from the national park that lies to the northeast), elephants are the stars. Taco and his diminutive tracker, Shoes, take us to a watering hole one afternoon. Here, the baggy-bottomed beasts enjoy their daily mud-baths, dousing themselves in slippery, grey goo, which dries to a pale talcum-like coat, giving them the appearance of lumbering ghosts in the prickly undergrowth. Later, when one sidles up and tries to join me in the outdoor shower of our room, I'm torn between making a naked dash for my camera and hiding under the bed. Shoes explains: 'They can smell the water, you see – that's why we have an electric fence around the plunge pool.'

No need to guard against thirsty elephants in our next camp: Kwara lies in the heart of the Okavango Delta and is surrounded by lagoons and rivers – absolute paradise for wallowing >



After the flood: above, bird's-eye view of a safari-plane soaring over the Okavango Delta in green season; left, a lion stares ahead with a water buffalo behind; right, a rainbow illuminates the stormy sky above prickly acacia trees near Tau Pan Camp, Central Kalahari



Hairy moment: 'You're hitting the spot there Dad' – Chagma baboons glow in the sunset

'Every day brings surprises – you have no idea what you might see when you wake up'





Safari chic: one of the stylish 'tents' at Lebala with its polished wooden floors and wobbly front deck, overlooking the verdant grasslands of the Okavango Delta

pachyderms. From the air, the setting is remarkable: silver tentacles of water, coiling and unfurling across a shimmering landscape of slender reeds and tangled forests. It's hard to see where we can possibly land, and when we do spot the narrow airstrip, it's a hairy touchdown as we swerve to avoid a zebra crossing.

While the previous camps overlooked open grasslands, at Kwara, the jungle encroaches: decks are wrapped around giant ebony and leadwood trees; furniture has been fashioned from twisted branches; stylish tents (with proper loos and plump beds) are hidden on leafy forest paths. Here, the air is steamy, sweet and – after the peace of the Kalahari – unexpectedly noisy. Angry honks, snorts and deep bellows reverberate. It turns out that the grey boulders, protruding from the lake in front of our tent, are actually hippos. Their thin skin makes them prone to sunburn, so they submerge themselves by day, coming out to graze at night. 'I hope you brought earplugs,' says our guide, General. Later that night, I understand why: it sounds like a herd of famished cows are chewing the cud just metres from my pillow. Leaping out of bed, Tom and I try unsuccessfully to spy one through the tent's mosquito netting. The next morning, General explains that spotting them on land is a rare treat, only making me more eager to find one.

Tantalising traces are everywhere. The delta is riddled with narrow paths of trampled reeds – 'hippo highways,' explains General. 'They're very important for keeping the water flowing through the delta.' No sign of the portly mammals but our game drives are far from fruitless. We track three cheetahs on the hunt, their delicate feline faces trained on a herd of watchful zebras; we get goose-bumps at the sight of crocodiles lazing on the river banks; we laugh at a troupe of baboons trying to keep their playful babies under control; we even tick off four of 'the ugly five' – wildebeest, hyenas, marabou storks and warthogs. But that noisy, night-time beast – the hippo – eludes us still.

Our last chance lies at Lebala, just further north – and our final stop. Hidden among rippling reeds, it's the swishest camp of all, with claw-foot tubs in vast 'tents' with polished hardwood floors. There are so many hippos here that you feel you could use them as stepping-stones to cross rivers, Indiana Jones-style. I'm determined to see one on dry land, so we head out with eyes peeled. A low-slung ceiling of mauve-grey clouds has set in, casting an eerie light as we drive, silently scanning the undergrowth. Jewel-bright carmine bee-eaters and lilac-breasted rollers flit alongside our Jeep, picking off grasshoppers that are disturbed by the rumbling vehicle. Suddenly, behind a giant

## An elephant joins me in the shower. I'm torn: naked dash for my camera, or hide under the bed?

anthill, we come face-to-face with an enormous hippo with a tuft of grass sticking out of his mouth at a jaunty angle.

Like icebergs, they're far bigger below the surface than you could possibly imagine. In water, you'll see a dark sliver of back, flared nostrils and a pair of beady eyes but this one is the size of a minibus. Moreover, he's living up to his notorious irritability, warning us threateningly to retreat with a yawn that reveals a cavernous, pink mouth and incisors as long as my arm. Reversing slowly, our guide, Dutch, is equally excited: 'Very rare – you're lucky! We only see them on land on very wet days.' As a soft drizzle enfolds us and we leave our hungry hippo munching contentedly, I realise I've never been happier to see rain on holiday. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY; MAP: SCOTT JESSOP

## Get me there

The easiest way to book a safari is through a specialist tour operator – doing it yourself is difficult, especially when it comes to arranging light-aircraft transfers or contacting remote lodges (many of which don't have phones or Internet).

### GO PACKAGED

**Audley** (01993 838500, [www.audleytravel.com/botswana](http://www.audleytravel.com/botswana)) runs a range of excellent safaris in Botswana and throughout Africa. During the green season, a 10-day trip combining two Kwando camps – one in the desert and one in the Delta – costs from £3,825pp. This includes economy return flights from Heathrow, all internal transfers, meals and drinks (except some fine wines), laundry services and all safari activities. Travelling in the green season saves you up to £1,300pp compared with the peak season (July to October). Alternatively, try **Rainbow Tours** (020 7226

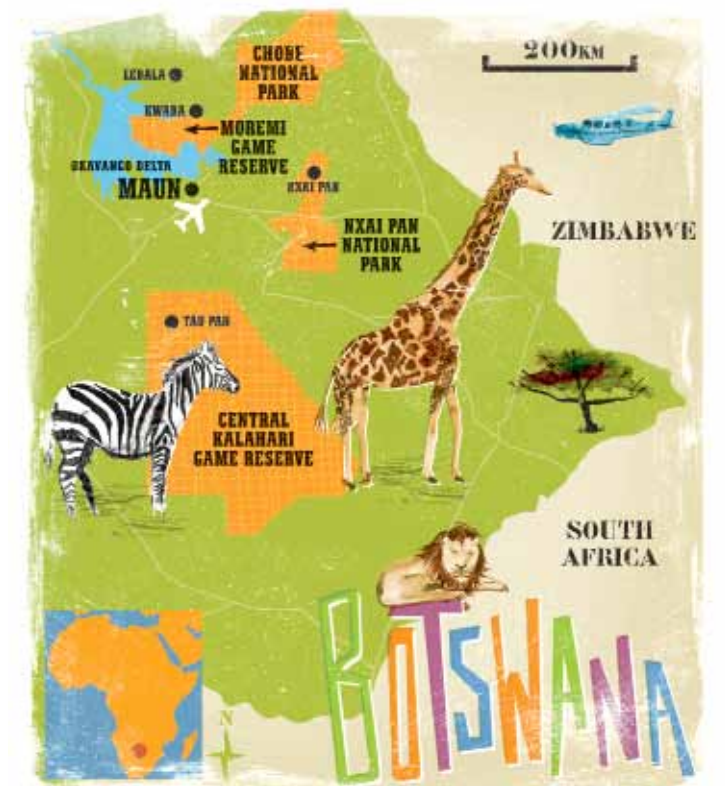
1004, [www.rainbowtours.co.uk](http://www.rainbowtours.co.uk)) or **Expert Africa** (020 8232 9777, [www.expertafrica.com](http://www.expertafrica.com)).

### WHEN TO GO

Green season in Botswana runs from December to March. During this period, temperatures average 26°C during the day but drop to 19°C at night. Mornings can be surprisingly chilly before the sun comes up, so make sure you pack a fleece (see below for more packing tips).

### WHAT TO PACK

Lightweight, fast-drying layers are perfect for a green-season safari. Avoid bright colours (including white), which may disturb wildlife; shades of khaki, beige and green will help you blend in and get close to animals without startling them. A hat is essential as the Jeeps are often open-topped, so you'll be exposed to the elements; moreover, high-factor sun-cream is a must. Buy the best pair of



binoculars you can afford – there's no point in splashing out on a once-in-a-lifetime safari only to arrive with a poor pair of binoculars. A bright torch is also

essential for early-morning starts and late-evening return journeys to your room or tent.

### FURTHER INFORMATION