



Keeping an eye on a curious neighbour



Tourists observe a prowling lion at Jao Camp



# Beauty and the beasts

I'm not certain, but it sounds like someone's phone is ringing. In the middle of the wilderness. In the middle of the African night. In the middle of nowhere. Next up a bleeping alarm chimes in, followed by a manic set of wind chimes. It seems like I am sleeping in the midst of a percussion section tuning up, until I listen closely and realise the sounds are all natural. No phones, no alarms, no instruments. The startling concerto outside my door is the sound of my nocturnal neighbours filling the air with their dazzling harmonies. A chorus of hippos, frogs, cicadas, birds and bats beat out their techno rhythms while a lone firefly pulses in luminous harmony.

This is camping, but not as we know it. I may be in a tent with canvas walls and mesh screens, but to all intents and purposes it is a five-star suite. It's my first night in Botswana and Jao Camp is home. A luxury Wilderness Safaris' camp in the heart of the Okavango Delta, it is one of the most remote places I've ever visited. Hidden on an island between ebony and leadwood trees, nine suites are linked by a walkway with commanding views over the lush marshes.

Designed to maximise views while allowing the animals move freely through it, the raised camp is fence-free, bar an electric elephant wire. This is Africa, raw and remote – as a rambunctious baboon languishing on my deck cheekily reminds me – and an opportunity like no other to get up close and personal with the wildlife.

Safari in Botswana is all you could wish for: a post-colonial dream of Cessnas and khakis, ▶▶

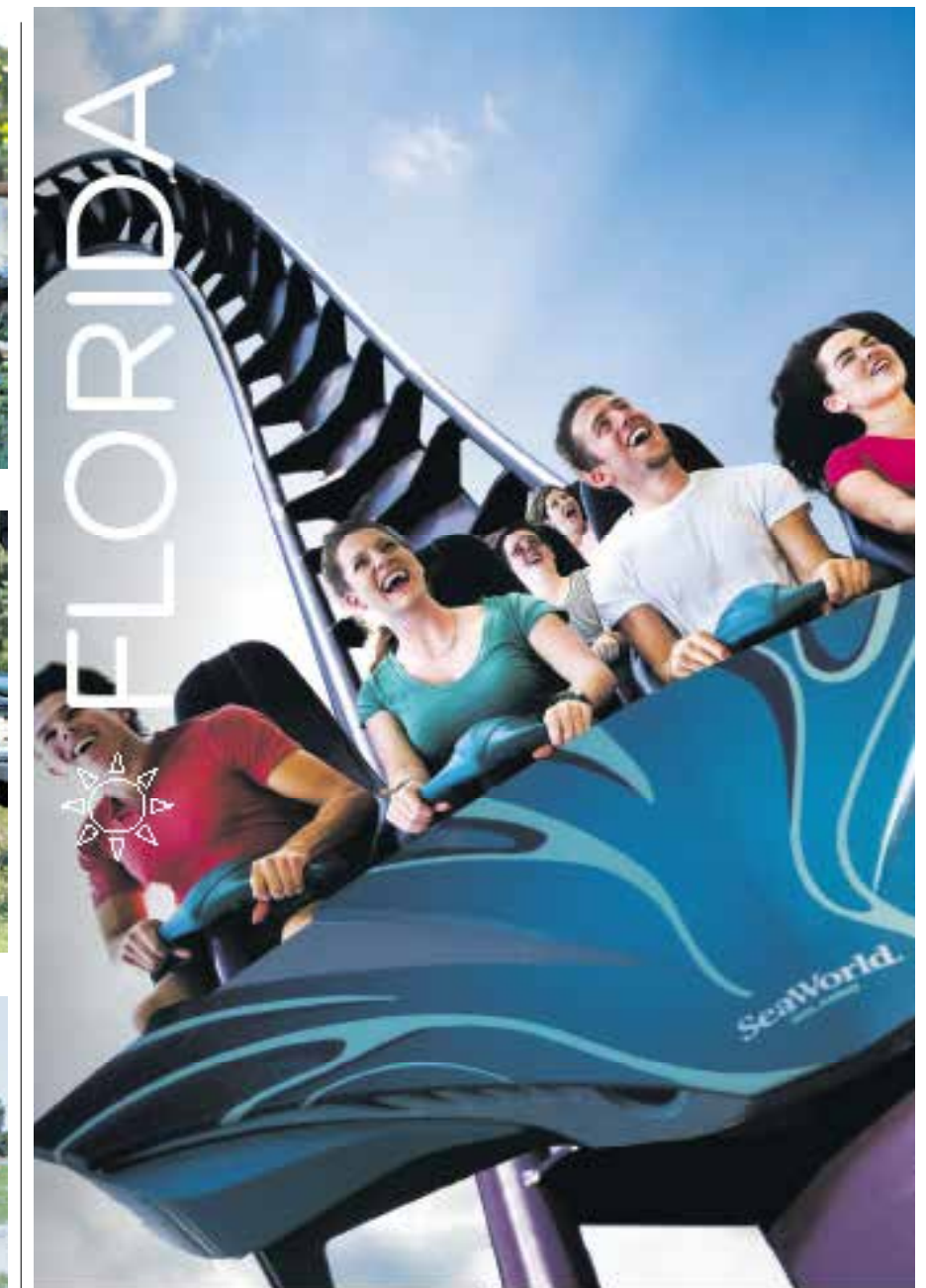
'A crash of rhino, a dazzle of zebra, a journey of giraffes and a raft of hippos' are just some of the evocative creatures and names you'll see and hear if you visit Botswana, says **Jillian Bolger**



Above left: red lechwe in the Okavango Delta; above: dining on the delta; left: Jao Camp, hidden in the trees

ALL PICTURES: DANA ALLEN

“This is Africa, raw and remote – and a chance like no other to get up close and personal with the wildlife



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A giraffe cooling down at Kings Pool Camp

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sundowners and G&Ts, dusty airstrips and 4x4s, bush breakfasts and endless wildlife. Unlike the game reserves of South Africa, the animals here move about freely, unrestricted by fences. Seeing over 100 elephants in a single day is quite simply breathtaking, and hammers home the fact that a quarter of the world's elephant population lives here.

Independent from Britain since 1966, Botswana is almost the same size as France, yet only has a population of two million (France has 66 million.) With a long-standing democratic government, it is one of Africa's most stable countries, and the world's largest diamond producer. The locals, known as Batswana, speak some 26 languages between them. Demonstrably proud of their country, they possess an infectious sense of humour that makes them warm and natural hosts.

As well as classic game drives, Jao Camp offers the thrill of a water safari. Setting off by mokoro, a traditional dug out canoe, in the early morning sun, is one of the dreamiest things imaginable. Drifting through the tranquil wetlands, hundreds of miles from anywhere, we're enveloped by a world of emerald grasses, lush palm groves and galleries of leafy mopane trees.

The canoe is powered by Jackson, a local riverman whose lean, muscular physique belies his 60 years of age. Propelling us along by pole, we glide across the lily-covered lagoon, swishing past reeds and papyrus, birdsong and the lapping waters creating the most perfect soundtrack to this most Zen of experiences.

In a world where deltas are usually a river-meets-sea affair, the Okavango River has no such watery destiny. Multiple rivers branch off its main artery, creating a fanlike network that quenches the thirsty earth of this landlocked country. With no body of water to embrace their arrival, the thundering waters from Angola's highlands simply falter at Botswana's Kalahari sands, marking the end of its 1,100-kilometre journey. Before the river disappears, hundreds of kilometres of wilderness greedily soak it up, creating an oasis within a desert. This emerald paradise of lush waterways and lagoons, floodplains and islands is a dream refuge for birds and other animals.

It's not easy to get to this Garden of Eden, and Botswana's model of low-impact high-earning tourism has, to date, proved successful in preserving the country's embarrassment of natural riches. Flying from camp to camp on Wilderness Air allows us marvel at the 40 shades of green below, stretching out like a dip-dyed expanse of fabric. Peering from our plane, we spy elephants drinking at waterholes and red lechwe antelopes bounding along. There is no sign of human life, and it is both breathtaking and humbling.

Leaving Camp Jao behind, we fly north to Kings Pool, another luxury camp on the border with Namibia, hugging the banks of the Linyanti River.

“This emerald paradise of lush waterways and lagoons, floodplains and islands is a dream refuge for birds and other animals”

Named for Swedish royalty who once stayed in the area, this nine-suite retreat offers up a daily spectacle of bathing hippos, who prove quite the noisy neighbours. The elephant population here is staggering, and we sit spellbound one afternoon watching a small herd rally the troops before plunging into the river and marching single file upstream towards the Namibian border. The older elephants climb the banks in an orderly fashion, but the younger ones can't resist the urge to hang about splashing in the water. It's a sight to behold, one that's straight out of a David Attenborough documentary.

“A crash. A dazzle. A journey. A raft.” Reuben, our guide, is on fire today. He's not reciting African poetry, however, but giving us a lesson in the collective nouns for the neighbours. “A crash of rhino, a dazzle of zebra, a journey of giraffes and a raft of hippos.” His list includes a flamboyance of flamingos and an implausibility of wildebeests, which have a serious whiff of colonial explorers who can't quite believe their eyes.

As luck would have it, we spot our fair share of crashes, dazzles, journeys and rafts, as well as a whole host of equally mesmerising game. Setting off on early morning game drives and again in late afternoon, we spot everything from elephants to impalas, wild dogs to wildebeests, baboons to buffalos and crocodiles to kudus. There's plenty of time to snack too, with our guides seeking out the most picturesque spots to break for morning coffees or sunset gin and tonics.

Back at camp, we indulge in excellent food, cooling off in our plunge pool and awaiting the spectacle of afternoon tea and our next thrilling game drive. Botswana's purity has been a revelation, and the escapism and tranquility a balm for the soul. Tomorrow we leave for Zambia, Victoria Falls and the mighty Zambezi, but not before this sub-Saharan Shangri-La offers up one final surprise. We may not have spotted the elusive leopard here, but we do encounter something far rarer at our last sunset: US television personality Martha Stewart, staying in the tent beside us. For the record, we shared canapés. Canapés with Martha Stewart. Now, there's a sentence I didn't think I'd ever write. ■

## GETTING THERE

Mahlatini Luxury Travel (01-9061883; mahlatini.com) offers a six-night luxury holiday at Wilderness Safaris' Jao Camp and Kings Camp in Botswana and Toka Leya Camp in Zambia (two nights at each camp) from €7,300 per person sharing on an all-inclusive basis. Includes international flights from Dublin, light aircraft and road transfers and scheduled safari activities.



Sunset at Kings Pool



The locals, known as Batswana, are excellent hosts



Wild dogs stretch their legs at Linyanti Wildlife Reserve