

the WILD ONE

With some of the largest areas of protected wilderness in Africa, Botswana offers a very special safari experience. Staying in a series of luxurious lodges, Lucia van der Post explores the austere beautiful landscape of the Okavango Delta, both on the ground and from the air

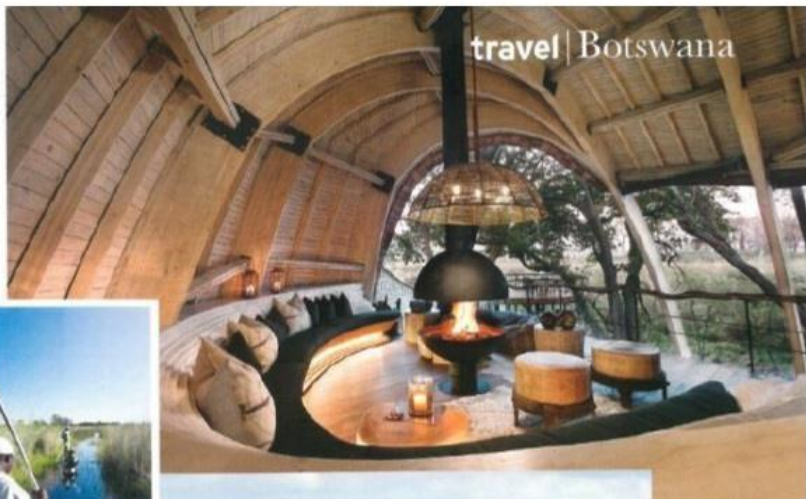
THIS PAGE An aerial view of the Okavango Delta.
OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP RIGHT Sandibe Okavango Safari Lodge's arched reception is made of 350 pieces of timber. Hippos in a lagoon. Poling mekoro canoes down a waterway

Botswana isn't like the rest of Africa. It seems lonelier, vaster, wider and, for tourists, sadly a lot more expensive. But when you're at AndBeyond's spectacular Sandibe Okavango Safari Lodge, you begin to understand why. Here, right on the edge of Botswana's Okavango Delta and next door to Moremi Game Reserve, nature plays the leading role. Wild pairs and old fig trees press right up against the bedroom windows. They tower over the soaring timber arches of the main lodge and, when the sun goes down, the sea of miscanthus grass that grows in the cool, clear waters of the Okavango river seems to be lit by flames of fire. Behind, cut on the golden, grass-covered flood plains and palm-fringed islands, the lion roars and the elephants trumpet. And yet, all this natural glory, with its attendant comforts - the cottages on their stilts with viewing platforms and private pools, the 4x4s, the guides, the cooks, the masseuse, the cleaners - are there to give just 16 people the holiday of a lifetime.

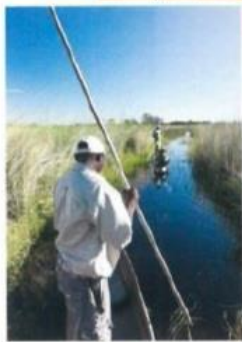
The other wonderful thing about Botswana is that the Okavango Delta and the austere beautiful desert have scarcely changed in all the years I've been going there. The lodges are more sophisticated, the food fancier, the hospitality slicker, but the things that matter, the things you've really come to see - the lily-laden lagoons, the hippo-filled canals, the wide skies, the rich and varied fauna - seem blessedly untouched, left to the ebb and flow of nature's seasons.

The government of Botswana has always believed in low-impact, high-value tourism and it shows. Most of the lodges are small: some, such as Great Plains Conservation's Zarafa, take a mere eight people, none in the Delta takes more than 20 and, these days, they all have to be eco-friendly and constructed from natural materials, hence the splendid new lodge at Sandibe. The first camp on this site was designed by a cousin of mine, the South African architect Nick Plewman. Now an old hand at bush design, he loved his first project in the wild but always felt that the original building had been compromised by budget constraints and outside dikats.

This time round he worked with the British architect Alex Michaelis of Michaelis Boyd, and they were able to work more freely. They agreed that the new Sandibe should be 'drawn directly from nature and be very organic'. Made entirely of timber, it has vast curving arches, wooden floors, a sinuous bar that, like a puzzle, is made from 350 separate pieces of wood. In keeping with the desire to be as eco-friendly as



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possible, 70 per cent of the energy the lodge uses comes from alternative sources.

While Sandibe is the latest and certainly the most spectacular of AndBeyond's lodges, its safari experiences are primarily land based - think foot safaris and night-time game drives. There are other lodges for different experiences - for example, a short flight in a small plane brings you to Xaranna and Xudum, both Delta paradises with views of the lagoons and numerous water-based activities. Xaranna and Xudum are small lodges with just nine villas or tents each, as well as individual plunge pools. At Xaranna, there are capacious wood-frame tents, while at Xudum, huge thatched rooms are built up on stilts with rooftop lookouts.

One spectacular afternoon at Xaranna, my 10-year-old grandson, under the expert eyes of the head ranger Max Tlimalo, reeled in numerous tilapia from the watery depths and, on another,

Pro Ihamaqa - a guide whose ancestors were river bushmen - taught him how to pole a mekoro canoe. Together we floated through the waterways, stopping to swim where the water was low and safe, picnicking on islands or sandbanks surrounded by miles of pristine wilderness. Botswana days don't come much better than this.

At all AndBeyond lodges, you can now book helicopter trips. It is possible, for instance, to fly to the magical and mysterious Tsodilo Hills to view the Bushmen paintings, or take a scenic trip flying low above the ground, spotting animals and birds as you go, and getting a feel for the geography of this extraordinarily beautiful and varied land. And, for those who consider a rhinoceros sighting the high point of a safari, there can be a rare treat at both Xudum and Xaranna. As part of AndBeyond's conservation efforts, numerous rhinoceroses have been translocated from Phinda game reserve in South Africa to give them a safer home in Botswana. The rhino are guarded at all times for obvious reasons, but tracking one on foot is a thrill that is available in few other places. Catch it while you can □

WAYS AND MEANS

Lucia van der Post travelled as a guest of The Ultimate Travel Company (020 3582 9558; www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk). A week in the Okavango Delta, including two nights at Xaranna, two at Xudum and three at Sandibe, costs from £4,750, full board, including flights and transfers. For more information, visit www.andbeyond.com.