

Safari 101: How to plan, what to expect

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

MAUN, Botswana – I wish I'd done my homework before we boarded the plane bound for Botswana's Okavango Delta on our first African safari.

By the time we reached Chiefs' Camp in the Moremi Game Reserve we'd been in the air more than 24 hours. A shower and nap looked like meat to a starving man.

Just four hours later, as the moon rose over the horizon, we found ourselves on a game drive tracking a pride of lions. By 6 a.m. the next morning, still groggy, we headed out again.

What happened? We'd admired the photos and yearned for the scenery but skimmed over the details. Now it was catch-up time. ABOUT THE DELTA:

The Okavango River, flowing southeast into northern Botswana, has no outlet. It floods each spring, flowing between wooded islands and into lagoons, marshes and streams, some permanent and some seasonal.

PLANNING YOUR TRIP:

* Most North Americans prefer to book their safari with an experienced full-service tour operator – somebody who knows the country. A typical itinerary takes you to three or four lodges and includes flights from one to the next, plus the round-trip flight from South Africa to Botswana. Also included are guided game drives and walks, accommodations, meals, beverages and laundry service.

* Look for a tour company, such as Downers Grove-based Abercrombie & Kent, whose employees have seen the lodges firsthand.

* Ask these questions: Will the company's local representatives meet you at the airport upon arrival? Do they take you to your hotel and escort you to your flight to Botswana? Is your stay at each lodge confirmed? If your plane is delayed, is there a local agent to contact?

* Pay for your trip in U.S. dollars at home. And book your own flight from the United States to Johannesburg, South Africa, where most flights to Botswana originate.

* Travel and medical insurance are recommended, including a provision for emergency evacuation to South Africa.

* Small airplanes have space and weight restrictions, so limit your luggage to a 36-inch-by-18-inch duffel bag plus a small carry-on for your camera, money, passport and toiletries. Two changes of clothing are enough, since the lodges provide laundry service.

A TYPICAL DAY:

Your wake-up call comes at 5:30 a.m. when a staffer delivers tea or coffee. Rushing to the main lodge, you grab a piece of fruit or a sweet roll. At 6 a.m. you meet your guide and a few other travelers for the morning game drive in an open-topped 4x4. Around 9 a.m., the guide serves a trailside breakfast.

As the day heats up around 10 a.m., the animals rest and the 4x4s return to the lodge. Until the next game drive leaves at about 4 p.m., you'll have time for a guided walk, lunch, a dip in the plunge pool and a nap. When the animals return to the hunt, the game drives head out again. Sundowners – spirits, beer and cheese – are served in the bush as the sun sets. A leisurely dinner is served at 8 p.m., and the last guest typically turns in around 11 p.m.

On the day you move to a new lodge, you join the morning game drive as usual. Afterward, your guide will drive you to the air strip, which usually is in a nearby field. The plane – a high-wing six-seater – lands, and arriving guests get out. You climb in. Twenty minutes later you're eating lunch at a new lodge.

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* On game drives, talk softly, sit still and don't stand, especially when lions and elephants are close. The animals pay little attention to tents or vehicles and don't seem to realize that the contents – and that would be you – are edible.

* Never leave camp on your own to walk along a river or pond; crocodiles are silent killers. Never walk alone after dark through the camp or from your tent. Your guide will escort you.

MALARIA:

The mosquitoes that carry this sometimes fatal disease are rarely a threat in the dry months. Local residents protect themselves at twilight with light-colored, long-sleeved shirts, long pants and insect repellent. Before you start a course of prophylactic drugs with potentially serious side effects, you might want to investigate alternative options. Consult your physician or a travel medicine clinic.

WHEN TO GO:

June through August (winter) are dry months, with cool nights and mild days. September and October are warm and dry; less foliage means better game viewing. January, February and December are low season. March-May and October and November are mid-season, and June-September are high season.

GETTING THERE:

South African Airways flies a 15-hour non-stop flight to Johannesburg from New York and, starting in May, Washington, D.C. The return flights, against headwinds and two hours longer, refuel in Dakar, Senegal. Round-trip economy tickets have been costing about \$1,589. But SAA is now offering discounted and two-for-one fares. Call (888) 722-4872 for updates.

ESSENTIAL READING:

* The Bradt Guide To Botswana (Globe Pequot Press, \$24.95) by Chris McIntyre is the best source available. Buy it now and read it before you go; bradt guides.com.

* The Shell Tourist Guide (and map) to Botswana by Veronica Roodt is hard to find but sometimes available in South Africa. If you see it, get it.

SOME TOUR OPERATORS:

* Wilderness Safaris (see main story) is a 25-year-old company that operates camps and safaris in Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the Seychelles. Daily prices at the Kwetsani and Duba Plains camps in the Okavango Delta range from \$600 to \$770 a person December through May and go up to \$900 to \$1,030 June through November; wilderness-safaris.com.

Chicago-based Eyes on Africa is one of a select group of tour operators that Wilderness works with to customize its trips; eyesonafrika.net, (773) 549-0169.

* Abercrombie & Kent's custom-planned safaris send Okavango Delta-bound guests to their Sanctuary-branded luxury lodges. Twelve-day safaris start at \$7,695 a person; abercrombiekent.com, (800) 554-7016.

* Ker & Downey is another top outfitter, with nine-day safaris starting at \$4,070 a person in low season; kerdowney.com, (800) 423-4236.

* Phakawe Safaris and Ecotours is a moderately priced option for active travelers. This outfitter books lodges, leads mobile camping groups and arranges fishing and mokoro (dugout canoe) trips. An eight-night lodge safari runs from \$3,198 in low season to \$5,165 in high season. E-mail requests to enquiries@phakawe.com.

* Delta Rain, a budget outfit run by long-time bush travelers, has 10-day guided camping trips to the Moremi Game Reserve, Savuti, Kasane and the Makgadikgadi Pan that include tents, meals and all camping gear (but you bring the sleeping bag). Prices start at \$1,524 a person; deltarain.com.

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