

Botswana

July 24



From Victoria Falls we went onto Botswana - staying at 3 different Orient Express safari camps - Savute Elephant Camp, Khwai River Camp and Eagle Island Camp for 2 nights in each - flying in between in a Cesna and landing on dirt strips.

BOTSWANA

24/07/06

We left Zambia via Mack Air - all a bit dodgy - no ticket or voucher, we had to hang around the departure lounge looking for our pilot. We finally found him and we set out on a 6-seater single engine plane with 12,000 hours on the clock. After all our concerns about the weight (strict max of 20KG pp including hand luggage) there was no weigh-in.

We set off at 1:00 PM for a short 20 minute flight for Kissane to pass customs & immigration then on to the Savute Elephant Camp (SEC) - a 40 minute flight. We landed on a gravel runway - no terminal building - and were met by K.B. our guide from the Camp for a 20-minute drive to the Camp. On the way we had a mini-game drive - seeing elephants, Kudus, impalas, and many birds.

SAVUTE ELEPHANT CAMP

The SEC is one of 3 Orient Express game camps in Botswana. This one has 12-tented cabins - we were in #12 "The Kudu". The tent is great - large balcony overlooking an elephant trail leading to a watering hole right in front of the main complex. The interior has a giant kind bed, nice furnishings, an indoor and outdoor shower, mini-bar, etc.

We arrived just in time for afternoon tea (3:00PM) - a nice buffet spread of sambos, cakes and fruits which was good since Mack Air did not provide the same level of refreshments as Nationwide.

Safari Action

At 4:00 PM we set off with K.B. who was to be our private guide for both days of our stay.

We saw: elephants, kudus, impalas, wildebeest, warthogs, jackals, and again many birds.

The SEC is within the 8500 Sq km Chobi National Park. It is crisscrossed by roads (sand tracks) and all game drives must keep to these tracks. How people find their way is a mystery to me as there are virtually no 'road' signs. KB says that some independent travellers use GPS or they can buy maps from the rangers. There is a campground close to the camp – I was surprised to see both tour groups and what appeared to be independent travellers. We also saw safari truck from a nearby camp – from the look of their trucks it must also be up-market.

We stopped to watch a wonderful African sunset sipping cold beer and G&Ts (lots of ice) – things have come a long way since Dieter & Tom did their camping safari nearly 40 years ago. Anyway – back to Camp just past 6:30 PM (the Chobi Park curfew)

The following morning we were up and at 'em at 6:00 am – on the road before 7:00 am. The first hour was a bit disappointing – did not see much besides elephants and impalas – then the lions !! Two females walked very slowly past our truck – less than a meter away – we took lots of close-up photos – then about 100m away were 2 more females and 3 cubs lounging in the grass – and about 300m away, one very large male – standing and watching. We moved on trying to spot a wild dog (the only one in the whole park) since another group had seen him – but no luck. Then a reported sighting of a leopard – again we searched for it in vain – maybe this afternoon.

In between we saw a few herds of wildebeest, 3 adult giraffes – one with a young one and a few zebras.

Afternoon drive was again great – saw the largest hornbill (the ground hornbill), and a leopard as well as ostrich, zebra, gnu,

The food and other activities

Meals at the camp are as follows: continental brekkie at 6:30 am just before the first game drive, brunch at 11:00 am on return, afternoon tea at 3:00 pm then dinner at 8:00 pm.

Dinner the first evening was not in the main lodge but in a boma – a walled outdoor area under the stars with a large campfire burning surrounded by tables. Dinner was a pumpkin and coconut soup which was excellent followed by a nice buffet – mains included beef fillet and/or Canadian salmon – lots of nice veggies – even white asparagus. Of course dinner was accompanied by South African wines – some basic plonk. While all drinks are included – premium wines are extra. The food was good to very good – beef was overcooked but veggies and everything else was pretty much what I expected.

Brunch is served after the morning game drive (around 11am) and is always buffet style. Lots of choice – salads, omelettes (or other eggs), breads, cheeses, and hot food – beef Wellington today with rice.

Dinner the second evening was a la carte ordered at the end of the PM drive. Dieter had

kudu stew and I had roasted veggies. The entrée was smoked salmon with goat's cheese – excellent.

After brunch there is free time – until high tea at 3. We generally retired to our tent to rest, write diary notes, shower, edit pictures, watch the elephants and birds around the camp, etc.

Onwards and upwards

We departed SEC for Khwai River Camp (KRC) at 11:15 arriving about 12:20PM. Same pilot on MackAir – the runway at KRC was smoother and there was even a terminal building (well a wall-less covered area.)

Khwai River Camp

KRC has 15 tents – exactly the same design as SEC only somewhat newer furnishing – no outdoor shower. Right on the river – lots of bird life and many many hippos – at 2PM we had already seen hippos out of the water as well as 2 elephants in the middle of river – up to their tummies.

Safari Action

Off on our “private” drive – we finally figured out why some trucks have up to 6 people in them and we were on our own – on checking our Orient Express tour inclusions we noted that “private game drives were included”. Also, while the camp is right across the river from the Moremi Game reserve the game drives stay outside the park and therefore can drive off-track making it easier to get really close to the animals – particularly lions which tend to stay put.

We saw lichees, waterbuck, crocodiles, hippos (still submerged), and elephants. All the guides were tracking some lions – we finally found them – 2 females (sisters) each with 3 cubs still suckling – only 3 months old. We stopped up close and spent an hour watching the 6 cubs (3 females and 3 males) horsing around. Our guide (Johnson) told us that the 2 females shared the care of the cubs even interchanging which one suckled with which mother. In the end the 2 females left to go hunting leaving the 6 cubs all alone to fend for themselves. They can leave their cubs for a whole day. Somehow they find each other. When the lions make a kill – one mother will stay with the kill while the other rounds up the cubs. Back to lodge by 7:00 pm in time for a quick shower before dinner. On the way to dinner we saw a hippo right at the edge of the camp – it was too dark to see too much. Later in the evening there 2 large red lychees right in front of the bar area. The next morning we were up again at 6:00am, a quick continental brekkie then off with Johnson. More lion tracking – found another trio – 2 females and one big male – we got up really close for some great shots. We also saw zebra, 4 spotted hyena (Dieter spotted them) which are hard to see, and our first sighting of cape buffalo – a very large herd with many very young calves, a kudu family, 2

gnus, 2 wildebeest (up close), water buck.

Birds spotted: Malibu storks, spoonbill stork, yellow billed storks, tawny eagle, batisar eagle, pied kingfisher, Egyptian ducks, spear wing geese, vultures,

That afternoon we were out again, not much new but stopped for sundowners beside a hippo pond with a large (3.5 meter) crocodile sunning himself on the bank. Stayed out after dark and had to drive through the herd of cape buffalo (100's of them) – they had spread out all over the road. Johnson had to turn off his spot light and head lights and drive very slowly, revving his engine to get them to move away – it was very scary. At one stage an impala also had to jump out of our way and literally leap over the jeep hood in a single bound. Back at the camp about 7:15 pm.

On the final morning drive – we (and every other jeep in the area – about 7) found 2 lionesses stalking a breakaway herd of buffalo. We watched and watched but the lions did not strike – then the buffalo got spooked and re-joined the main herd. So we continued on our way and did see a pack of 4 wild dogs – very lean and mean looking. The alpha female had a radio collar on – for tracking by the wildlife organisation. Back again for brunch – with departure at 12:30 PM.

Meals and People

The first evening pre-dinner drinks went until about 8:30pm – we met some of the other guests – Americans, British, South African, one Brit with an eastern European wife had recently moved from Singapore to HK.

Dinner was buffet style – BBQ meats, veggies and salads. The meat would have been OK but was almost cold – I would rate the meal as a 6 out of 10. The second night we had dinner in the eagle's nest lookout – we both had a local bream filet – very good.

Onto Eagle Island Camp

Mack Air again for the 20-minute flight to Eagle Island Camp (EIC) – arrived in plenty of time to unpack, explore, shower, and afternoon tea at 3:00 PM. As we flew in we could see the landscape changing as the area became covered by more and more water from the Delta – there are even palm trees. Every camp has its own landing strip. EIC is the same setup (the tents are the same) – we were allocated tent 5 – Kingfisher. EIC is situated in the heart in of the Okavango Delta – the water is very high at present – the highest it has been in years. We are surrounded by water with all sorts of long grasses growing in it – crisscrossed with hippo channels. The atmosphere is so peaceful. The managers (Werner and Chantelle) are very nice – we brought a birthday present for Chantelle from the Louise the manager for KRC.

Safari Action

The first afternoon safari was by private canoe (aka mokoro) with our guide Balogi poling it along like a gondola. Balogi is very nice – he worked for many years for Kontiki Tours as a guide for their mobile safaris – so he has travelled to many of the surrounding countries. His boss was an

Aussie (as were many of his guests) so he has a wish to visit to Australia. We followed the hippo channels and stopped for a short walk on an island. We saw a group of 10 giraffes – it was great. The mokoro just behind us had a French couple in it – only the wife spoke English but we all managed to communicate. Back at the camp for sundowners at 5:30PM. Sundowners are at the Fish Eagle Bar – a little bar area under a large Jackalberry tree on an 'island' right at the jetty. While knocking back the usual beers and G&Ts we met another group of guests – 4 yanks from Denver – Christina Gold (President of Western Union) has an apartment in one of their apartment buildings – however after bragging about this they admitted they did not actually know her. One of them thought that her GSM phone would work here as she thought that meant it was a satellite phone. Like all the camp there is no phone, mobile phone, Blackberry, WiFi, etc service. They do have a satellite phone (at \$US5 per minute) and TV.

Because the water is so high at present all safaris are by boat.

The next morning wake-up was at 6:30AM – this camp is quite slack – an extra half-hour of sleep! After the usual continental brekkie, we set off in one of the speedboats with the French couple and Balogi as captain. We cruised through the hippo channels spotting birds and the odd elephant on nearby islands. We stopped and hid (in the boat) in some long grass watching at least 10 hippos frolicking in a clearing in the water – they were really close – a bit scary but Balogi insisted we were quite safe – nevertheless I plotted an escape path.

We continued on and stopped on land again and walked a few hundred meters to a local village – even though this is a protected area and the government tried to move all the locals out to Maun but some managed to hang on to their tribal lands. The village has a population of 100 and consists of a helter-skelter collection of mud huts – some in 'good' nick but many crumbling. They build the walls of these huts with mud and beer and soft drink cans so they last longer. We did not see many people about – some very ragged children, a few women, and a couple of men – one playing an electronic keyboard – must have been battery operated as this village has no electricity or running water – they collect water in buckets from the delta waters which is exceedingly clean. They don't appear to collect the rubbish however as there was lots lying about – this is the first place we have seen any rubbish of any sort in Botswana. As we left the village the women and children assembled a make shift market – a few sheets of plastic on the ground with a variety of baskets for sale – we did not buy anything so I have no idea what they cost – again I was struck with the feeling that I would prefer to make a donation rather than feel pressured into buying 'some tacky souvenirs'. On the return boat trip we stopped right near the hippo pond at the site of an abandoned local wildlife association camp. We searched for a giant owl (Pel's fishing owl), which is often seen there, but unfortunately he was not around – too bad – this fish-eating owl is very rare.

Socialising at Eagle

The first evening dinner was at 8:00PM (as per normal) preceded by pre-dinner drinks around the campfire. We were joined by the group of 9 yanks we had met at SEC. Dinner was served under the stars rather than the undercover restaurant. The entrée was some sort of pumpkin soup – really hot, great on a cool evening. I had chicken and Dieter had lamb for the main course – both quite good – an 8 out of 10.

During the siesta you can take helicopter flights over the area – which people say is great – however unless you have 4 people it is very expensive – \$US595 for 30 minutes. As of writing this entry – we are waiting for the pilot to see if he can find two other passengers to join us (and share

the cost).

One afternoon, out on the boats – the French couple (Collette and Gerrard?), ourselves and the HK couple (Stewart and Miss Romania) travelled together. We saw a few birds and hippos, very tranquil, we stopped on crocodile island (named by ourselves as this very small island of a couple of square meters had a small croc lying on it) for sundowners. On the way back to the ranch we got an SOS from the other boat which had broken down so we had to rescue the passengers – the Denver 4-some.

That evening we had a surprise in store – DFT at the Fish Eagle Bar – under the stars with a new moon looking down on us. Ox tail stew for mains – 7 out of 10.

Farewell Botswana

On Sunday morning (July 30) we left Eagle Island Camp on an early flight to Maun (8:30 am) which meant we could not do a morning safari. So off to Maun, a 20 minute flight on Mack Air, for a connecting flight to Cape Town on Air Botswana. I tried to update my trip diary en route but Air Botswana does not allow the use of laptops during the flight – must be a first !! We got a good look at Maun on the flight – looked a bit like a large version of the local village we visited the day before. The flight to Cape Town (2.5 hours) on a 'puddle jumper' – surprisingly it was only half full. There was a full free bar service with snacks. Arrived at Cape Town International airport at 1:00 PM – and were met by our arranged hire car. On leaving the airport I was very surprised and shocked to see a large shantytown – a little further on the driver pointed out some new apartments – public housing – they are obviously trying to get rid of the shanty town(s) before the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

[< Previous](#)

[Next >](#)



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