

Set adrift in Africa's water world



The Okavango Delta is one of nature's wonders – a vast expanse of water in the heart of the desert. The best way to explore it is by canoe, just

Don't worry. It's very safe," says my guide, as he leads me towards the mokoro, a small traditional canoe waiting for me at the shore. I'd be more inclined to believe him if he weren't loading a rifle as he spoke, snapping into the magazine a fistful of bullets, each one the size of an index finger.

His name, curiously, is Justice, which only adds to the feeling that I am entering some kind of morality play in which an ethical judgment is about to be made on my life, played out as a gun battle between Justice and the crocodiles and hippos of the Okavango Delta.

Botswana is flat, dry and hot. Flat like you've never seen before. It makes Holland look like Nepal. Flying over it, the country has the appearance of an endless well-ironed bolt of once-green cloth, washed so many times that it has almost entirely lost its colour. Only a few knots of trees and straggling threads of water break up the green-beige nothingness of the landscape. Semi-arid desert is the geographical term for it, but the more colloquial version – scrub – does a more evocative job.

The only exception is the delta. Here,

the waters of the Okavango river, into which drains a vast area of Angola to the north, flow into this nothingness, spread out, and seep away. Nothing like it happens anywhere else on Earth.

The area is a twitcher's paradise and a cartographer's nightmare. No one seems able to decide if it should be green or blue on a map. The waters rise and fall in tune with Angolan, not local, rainfall,

creating a bewildering maze of islands, waterways and lagoons, much of which disappears under water during floods, only to reappear in a quite different arrangement when the waters recede. The land is so flat that the waterways are often shifted by tectonic movement, with patterns of floodwater changing over years and decades in ways that no one can predict.

The flatness means that the water remains barely a metre deep for huge distances. As a result, the mokoro is steered by a pole pushed into the riverbed, rather than by oars. It seems faintly ludicrous to make any kind of connection between a crocodile-infested swamp in the middle of a vast uninhabitable desert and the Cam in Cambridge, but you can't really ignore the fact that a mokoro is,

in effect, a punt. The main difference is that here the baying monsters swarming around you are best kept at bay with a rifle. On second thoughts, maybe that's two similarities.

I step gingerly into the mokoro, and take a seat. Justice steps in and pushes us off from dry land, into a universe of water and reeds. We pole off down a narrow waterway, which is precisely the width of a hippo's body, for the simple reason that it has been formed by the daily migration of hippos from the water, where they bask throughout the daylight, to the shore, where they graze all night.

All very endearing, until you remember that hippos kill more humans than any other animal in Africa. These big cuddly vegetarians are, in fact, extremely aggressive and highly territorial. Despite weighing up to three tons, they can run faster than any human. If you come between a hippo and his escape route to water, or between a mother hippo and her offspring, your life expectancy is probably seconds.

So here I am, in a cardboard-thin boat, my nose barely a foot above water-level, taking a punt down a hippo path, with

BACK TO NATURE: ADVENTURES WITHOUT WHEELS

■ HORSEBACK SAFARI IN SOUTH AFRICA

You will see white rhinos, hippos, buffalo, zebra, leopard, giraffe, pelt at speed down sandy paths and gallop alongside herds of game through wide open spaces on The Dinaka Luxury Riding Safari in the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve, with Horizon Horseback Adventures (00 271 4755 4003; www.ridinginafrica.com). The eight-day trip costs from £1,280pp, excluding flights.

■ CANOE SAFARI IN BRAZIL

A jungle safari expedition at the Amazon Lodge in Brazil is a real adventure: guests learn survival skills and details of the Amazon eco-system while canoeing through flooded forests and spotting birds and monkeys. From £707pp for six days with Journey Latin America (020 8622 8491; www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk), including full board, transfers to and from Manaus and excursions, but not flights.



■ SAFARI BY ELEPHANT IN INDIA

On this group adventure you'll go birdwatching on foot beside the Yamuna River in Delhi and in the Keoladeo reserve in Rajasthan, before driving to Corbett National Park for the highlight of the trip: a three-day safari by elephant to search for leopards, tigers, elephants and crocodiles. After that, there's time to walk in the Himalayan foothills. The 17 day trip costs £2,095pp, including flights, with Naturetrek (01962 733051; www.naturetrek.co.uk); the next departure is 18 January, when the birding is at its peak.



ESSENTIALS

William Sutcliffe travelled with Journeys by Design (01273 623790; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk). A nine-day trip including the Okavango Delta, Mokoro boat trail and the Kalahari Game Reserve costs from £3,490pp (excluding flights). The season for trips runs from March to October. Lufthansa flights (0870 837 7747; www.lufthansa.com) from London City to Gaborone, via Frankfurt and Johannesburg cost from around £600 return including taxes.



Clockwise from left: learning survival skills on a 'bushman walk'; a watchful hippo; punting through the beautiful Okavango Delta in a traditional mokoro canoe. Corbis

of perfect time. You cannot imagine yourself to be anywhere better – you feel as if you have found something you didn't even know you were looking for. Then it occurs to you that the roof of a metal boat in the midst of 15,000 sq km of swampland is perhaps not the most intelligent place to hang out during a thunderstorm.

Justice fires up the engine and we zoom back to dry land, while I sit on the prow of the boat with my gin, wondering if it is undignified for a man of my age to feel like James Bond.

The Okavango Delta will be the highlight of any trip to Botswana, but the less-visited Kalahari game reserve should also not be missed. Unlike the delta, the Kalahari desert is by no means beautiful. It is flat, harsh, cruelly hot, bitterly dry, and supports only scrubby, thin vegetation. But, unlike other safari destinations, where every lion is surrounded by more photographers than Kate Moss, here you have hundreds of hectares all to yourself. And when you do see an animal, you will feel like you really have seen a creature in the wild, not in a glorified zoo.

The real purpose of visiting this region, however, is to do a 'bushman walk', where you are taken on foot by a local guide through the bush, and shown traditional survival skills. My guide, Xhuta (the 'Xh' is pronounced as a click of the tongue against the palate), built a trap powerful enough to throttle an ostrich in front of my eyes. He showed me how to cook an ostrich egg without water or cooking utensils, how to make an arrow, and where to find the poison with which to tip it. (You find a particular tree at a particular time of year; you dig out the roots; in among them you will find the larvae of a particular kind of beetle that is attracted to the flowers of this bush; a few of these larvae will have been parasitised by a ground beetle; where this happens, a chemical reaction will have taken place that creates a lethal neurotoxin inside the pupa which, when squeezed on to an arrowhead, is powerful enough to kill a giraffe). How anyone found this out, he didn't explain. He also dramatised for me how to get a warthog out of its sleeping hole and beat it to death, and started a fire using a couple of sticks and a bunch of dry grass.

A few hours in the bush with one of these guys and you feel like an ignorant, feeble baby. But in a good way. It is a humbling experience and one that I felt put me in touch with something more ancient than anything I have ever come across. His is a way of life that pre-dates the earliest ruin you will find anywhere on the planet; yet here, instead of gazing at the rubble of a lost civilisation, you can talk to a survivor, see how he hunted, watch him walk through his environment and listen to him tell stories.

Botswana is not the obvious destination for a classic African safari, but anyone interested in the unique, the strange, and the starkly beautiful, rather than in ticking off a photographer's checklist of big game, could hardly ask for anywhere more rewarding or stimulating.



watch out for the hippos, says William Sutcliffe

only Justice to protect me. Lucky it's him, I suppose. A couple of days earlier, I had a guide called Polite, who drove admirably, but would not have been who you wanted handling a rifle in your mokoro.

I can't pretend I was entirely relaxed, though the stunning beauty of the place did gradually win me over. The water is utterly clear, with hundreds of tiny fish darting around the boat. The hippo-made waterway snakes and curves through the tall reeds, which seem to glow in the low, bright African sun, occasionally opening out into wide lagoons, each of which is only the most minuscule fraction of this endless landscape of not-quite-land, not-exactly-water. The only sound is the swish of Justice's pole in the water and the croak of frogs, happily proclaiming that they have found themselves in frog heaven.

Justice tells me that on his days off, he heads back to his village and often takes his children out in a mokoro. His son, who is eight, likes to swim in the water.

'What about crocodiles?' I ask.

'Oh, they won't go where there's a sandy bottom because they are too easily seen. I only let him swim where there's sand.'

land meander south). What it may lack in tradition, the speedboat adds in comfort, not least for the (perhaps spurious) sense of security it provides for hippo rage. As is the custom on an African safari, we stop at dusk for a sundowner, and I am handed a gin and tonic fresh from the coolbox. I climb on to the roof

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of the speedboat with my drink and watch the sun redden as it slides towards a distant horizon of shimmering reeds. On the other horizon, a spectacular thunderstorm begins to approach, forks and spiders of lightning flashing through the darkening sky.

We travel for these perfect moments, where mood and landscape (and, ideally, an iced drink) coalesce into an instant

EXPERT TRAVELLER



WHERE TO FIND... THE WORLD'S BEST CHOCOLATE

Temptation is everywhere for chocoholics – festivals devoted to the sweet stuff have been springing up across Europe over the past couple of years. Italy has Eurochocolate in Perugia, while France has the Salon du Chocolat in Paris.

Both are in October, but if you can't wait that long, the good news is that Switzerland's offering, the Geneva Chocolate festival, takes place this Saturday. At least

15 Swiss chocolate producers will be displaying their wares alongside a chocolate fountain and 'chococinema'. It takes place in the small town of Versoix, just outside Geneva, home to venerable chocolate maker Favarger, which will open its doors for Wonka-style factory tours on the day.

But don't panic if you miss it – Belgium's Chocolate Festival kicks off in Bruges on 6 April.