

FROM PAGE H1

Botswana's amazing Okavango Delta

Yet the sun's warmth and the scent of wild sage remind us this is happening now, right before our eyes.

When a guinea fowl screeches, followed by the alarming call of a red-billed spurfowl, the lechwe stop grazing and stand at attention, their spiral horns clearly visible above the long reeds. "They've picked it up," says Emang of the bird sounds.

Lechwe are suited to this wet landscape with elongated hoofs that don't get stuck in the mud. But lions have also adapted. And now, with the lechwe alert to danger, they make their move. They walk to the edge of the channel, and without hesitating, swim across.

"There can be crocodiles here," says Emang as we watch, entranced. "That's their main concern."

The lions safely reach the other side, but the lechwe have run off. Should we be relieved or disappointed?

Emang breaks our collective silence with another wisecrack. "The mokoro was amazing, eh?" he says with a laugh.

Actually, everything about this watery wilderness is amazing. The Okavango Delta is a huge inland delta in the middle of a desert, the Kalahari. After the rainy season ends in April, the annual floods begin. Water flows down from Angola, 1,000 kilometres to the north. So even in the dry season — from May through November — there's enough water to support a huge diversity of flora and fauna.

The Big Five — buffalo, lion, leopard, elephant and rhino — are here, as well as large herds of zebra, wildebeest and giraffe. Water-loving hippos, crocodiles and sitatunga favour the lagoons and channels while spotted hyena, wild dog and cheetah stick to islands and ridges.

Bird life is equally rich, with more than 400 species, including my favourite, the African jacana, also known as the Jesus bird because it appears to walk on water.

Landlocked Botswana's approach to tourism in the Okavango Delta has been careful and deliberate. Instead of encouraging budget tourism for the masses, the government has focused on low-volume, high-value tourists to get the biggest bang for the least environmental cost.

It does this by leasing big chunks of land to private safari



PHOTOS: SUZANNE MORPHET

A pair of female lions watch a group of red lechwe in Botswana's Okavango Delta.



A herd of red lechwe blends into the reeds in the Okavango Delta, on the other side of a narrow channel from three hungry lions, who swam across it in pursuit of their prey. Lions have adapted to the marine environment, but are wary of crocodiles that could lurk in the water.



companies, then closely regulating their activities. "We are very strict," said Lops Rampeba, the camp manager at Vumbura Plains South, over dinner on my first evening. This camp and 16 others in the delta are owned and/or operated by Wilderness Safaris, an acclaimed ecotourism company that works in eight African countries.

"Wilderness Safaris is first and foremost a conservation

company," Lops explains, with a passion for protecting the wilderness and increasing biodiversity.

Last year, for example, it participated in 87 research and conservation projects, such as reintroducing the black rhino to its former range.

Camps are a lot more luxurious than you might expect for a company with such a strong conservation ethic. At Vumbura Plains,

the camp perches on the edge of a huge floodplain in the shade of large, leafy trees. Six rooms made with timber, canvas and thatch are connected by a winding boardwalk and offer sweeping views over a sea of reeds. Private plunge pools and indoor/outdoor showers are included.

The morning we watched the lions prey on the lechwe, my small group had the action all to ourselves.

Since this is a private reserve and guides work for the same company, they give each other lots of elbow room.

Travelling to my next camp — Abu Camp — by bush plane I can see how vast and green the delta is. Abu Camp is all about elephants. Half the elephants in Africa live in Botswana, camp manager Aaron Gjellstad explains. But the highlight for most guests is not the wild elephants; rather it's the herd of trained elephants that call Abu home. Most were orphaned, but several of the original herd came from North America where they spent decades in captivity. One of those — the matriarch Cathy — is still alive.

One morning I join the elephants on a walking safari through open woodland. Another day I climb onto Cathy's back for a safari with the best views yet, high above the mopane trees she likes to nibble on.

It's at Abu that I also experience the mokoro. Lenk, my guide, stands in the back of the boat and pushes us silently through the reeds with a long pole. He points out creatures I wouldn't have noticed, like a tiny iridescent reed frog. "They're the ones that make the click-click sound you hear at night," he says.

As the big red sun begins to set, the silhouette of a lone elephant appears on the horizon — the picture-perfect ending to another amazing day in the Okavango Delta.

JOURNEYS & SAFARIS TO AFRICA

BOTSWANA
EGYPT
ETHIOPIA
KENYA
LESOTHO
MADAGASCAR
MOROCCO
NAMIBIA
RWANDA
SOUTH AFRICA
SWAZILAND
TANZANIA
UGANDA
ZAMBIA
ZIMBABWE
INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS

BESTWAY
TOURS & SAFARIS
JOURNEYS SINCE 1978
www.bestway.com
604-264-7378

BC Reg #592

READER POSTCARDS

Have you been on a great vacation or explored a little known destination? Tell us about it. Send a photo and a small write up (no more than 600 words) to travel@sunprovince.com and we'll consider it for publication.

FLY TO THE UK ...THIS FALL

CELEBRATING **20 YEARS** canadian affair

Roundtrip Flights from Vancouver to the UK

LONDON \$899 Dep Oct 7, 9, 14, 16 includes all taxes & fees	GLASGOW \$899 Dep Oct 6, 13 includes all taxes & fees	MANCHESTER \$949 Dep Oct 3, 10, 17 includes all taxes & fees
---	---	--

Start your search at... CANADIANAFFAIR.CA
or call us on 1-877-8-FLY2UK

Vancouver departures. Prices are per person based on roundtrip in economy, and valid on new individual bookings only and are subject to change without notice. Lowest fare shown, subject to availability at time of booking. Limited seats available at the prices indicated. Terms & Conditions apply. Flights are operated by Air Transat and sold by Travel Tours Canada Inc. doing business as Canadian Affair and is registered as a travel wholesaler in British Columbia (Reg #2454) with offices at 1090 West Pender Street, Suite 1110, Vancouver, BC, V6E 2N7.

THE HILLS HEALTH RANCH

An award winning fitness & spa vacation resort specializing in weight loss, fitness and hiking.

Massage & Spa Treatments, Hiking, Horseback Riding, Canoeing, Biking, Yoga, Pilates, Aerobics, Aqua Fitness Instructors, Personal Training, Nutritionist, Body Therapists, Comprehensive Lifestyle Counseling

3 NIGHT FAMILY CHALET SPECIAL for only **\$599.00 + taxes**

PACKAGE INCLUDES:

- Three nights Chalet Accommodations
- One full body massage
- Two 1-hr Horseback rides

Under New Management

THEHILLS@SPBC.COM OR CALL (250)791-5225

The writer was hosted by Wilderness Safaris, South African Airways and the Royal Livingstone Hotel. None of the host companies read or approved of this article before publication.

If you go ...

South African Airways offers direct flights from New York to Johannesburg. Continue with South African Airlink to Maun, Botswana, gateway to the Okavango Delta. flysaa.com/za/en

Stay: Wilderness Safaris offers a range of camps from luxury to more affordable. The company's aviation division, Wilderness Air, flies visitors between camps, and to and from Maun and other nearby airports, including Victoria Falls. wilderness-safaris.com

Be sure to take advantage of your proximity to Victoria Falls.

Stay: the Royal Livingstone is a five-star hotel just a 10-minute walk from the falls. suninternational.com/royal-livingstone