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Dreams of Africa are alive in the Okavango Delta

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On an early morning game drive we spot a group of zebra in northern Botswana. (Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld/MCT)

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GALLERY: Dreams of Africa are alive in the Okavango Delta

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MAUN, Botswana — If you've paid for an African safari but you're still not clear about the details, bad on you. Making the same mistake, I didn't dig into the heart of the adventure before I headed to Southern Africa for my first wildlife safari, because I was always too busy. Bad on me!

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By the time we reached the Okavango Delta, in northern Botswana, we'd been on the go for 24 hours, rocketing through nine time zones, three airplanes and four airports. Jet lagged and yawning, I ached for a hot shower and a good bed.

But when Botswana's big animals call, every moment counts. I'd barely unzipped my bag and put my toothbrush on the sink when they announced the afternoon game drive, starting at 4:30 p.m. No problem, I thought. I'll sleep late tomorrow. Until they explained that the next morning's game drive would start — as usual — at 6 a.m. sharp.

So why was I so clueless? Like most travelers who dream of Africa, we'd seen countless wildlife documentaries, thrilled to the scenery and yearned to experience those distant sights and sounds in person. Beyond that we didn't really know what to expect.

What's the Okavango Delta? The Okavango River, flowing southeast into northern Botswana from Angola and Namibia, has no outlet, either to other rivers or to the ocean. When annual spring floods reach the Delta, they slow down and spread out, refilling lagoons and marshes and turning woodland mounds into islets and this watery paradise into a self-contained sanctuary.

To protect this remarkable natural area, the Botswana government limits tourism by awarding guest concessions to qualified tour outfitters. Each company leases a specific numbered area and builds (or takes over existing structures) one or more lodges and guest tents. There are a few permanent lodges, built back in the day. But newer lodges and guest tents are required to be semi-permanent structures bolted onto raised (and sometimes terraced) wood decks that can be moved every few years.

A typical day: Your wake-up call arrives at 5:45 a.m. when a kitchen staffer knocks on your door, bearing a tray with tea or coffee and toast. Bolting it down, you hurry to the main lodge, grabbing a piece of fruit or a sweet roll to go. By 6 a.m., you, your guide and four to six other visitors are sitting in an open-topped ORV, heading away from camp in search of elephants, giraffe, antelope, rhinos, hippos, big cats, African buffalo, snakes and warthogs. Why so early? Simple. This is when the animals are awake and active.

At 9 a.m., or so, you'll stop for a trailside breakfast. By 10 or 11 a.m., as the day heats up and the animals head to the shade to sleep, the vehicles return to the lodge for lunch. Afterward, until 4:30 p.m., when the day

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begins to cool and the second game drive leaves. You'll have time to meet your fellow guests, take a guided walk, read, browse in the gift shop, send Internet messages, swim in the pool or nap.

By 4:30 p.m., you've donned a lightweight shell, sprayed on the mosquito goo, and are out on the prowl again. As the sun drops in the west, male lions stretch and wake up, lionesses hunt, leopards steal through the underbrush and hyenas make the rounds to recent kills, hoping for leftovers. Antelope and zebras, waterbuck and bushbuck, kudus and impalas step out of the shade to graze. As the sun sets, you stop on the trail for a sundowner — wine, spirits, beer, cheese and conversation. As dusk falls, lucky visitors will hear male lions roar and hyenas cackle, a raucous chorus of yips, howls and barks.

By 8 p.m. — or later, if you've followed a leopard drag an impala up into a tree — you'll be dragging back into camp, tired but happy and ready for dinner. These leisurely and often lavish four-to-five course meals, served with wine, are entirely social, a chance to compare wildlife sightings, share personal histories and exchange email addresses. As the evening wears on, the elephants grow larger.

After digesting the lodge manager's command that you are never to walk alone at night, from your tent or to the lodge, a camp guide walks you back to your bed, leaving you with strict instructions to stay inside until the next morning. As the night turns dark and you fall asleep, you may hear huffing or rustling as animals prowl among the cabins. As there are no fences, they are free to check the swimming pool, rub up against the trees and walk past your tent. Soon you realize that they've turned the tables and you're the one in the zoo.

On the day you move to the next lodge on your itinerary, you'll join the morning game drive as usual then head for the grassy air strip nearby. The plane, a high-wing eight-seater, lands just before lunch, drops off new guests and picks you up. In 30 minutes or less you're at your next lodge in time for lunch.

Zoo etiquette: Talk softly, sit still and don't stand while you're on a game drive, especially when lions and elephants are close to the vehicle. Swap seats with your drive mates or quietly lean out of the way to let them take photos.

Surprising as it seems, the animals pay little attention to tents or vehicles and don't seem to realize that the contents — you and yours — are edible.

Never leave the camp area on your own to walk along a river or pond; Nile crocodiles, Africa's deadliest killers, lie in wait there for prey. Never walk alone after dark through the camp or from your tent. Your guide will walk you home after dinner.

Trip tips: You can plan and book your own trip sight unseen, relying on Internet sources. But most North Americans choose instead to book a trip to Botswana — or to any destination in Africa — with a tour operator, somebody with representatives in the U.S. and employees at the destination. A typical Botswana itinerary includes several different lodges and the flights between them, plus the round-trip flight from Johannesburg, in South Africa. Once you're there, nearly everything is included, from game drives and guided walks to lodging, meals, beverages and laundry service.

Most tour companies naturally prefer to book guests into their own lodges. But they can book you into any lodge you might request; it is, in fact, a common practice. If you are interested in staying at a specific lodge, insist that it be included in your itinerary.

Packing light: Since small planes enforce space and weight restrictions, bring no more than you can fit into a medium-size duffel (approximately 36-by-18 inches), plus a small carry-on for your camera, money, passport and toiletries. Safari lodges provide frequent laundry service so two changes of clothes is enough. Basics include two pairs of long pants, two pairs of shorts, short and long-sleeve shirts, underwear, light jacket, tennis shoes, a bathing suit, big-brimmed foldable hat and binoculars. Safari guides swear that beige clothing (not white) makes you least visible to wildlife, and helps to repel mosquitoes.

The best tour companies — Cox & Kings, Ker & Downey, & Beyond (formerly CCAfrica), Sanctuary, Abercrombie & Kent and Wilderness Travel, for example — employ reservationists who are familiar with the lodges. Ask these questions: Will the company's local representatives meet you at the airport? Do they provide a hotel and transportation, if necessary? Do they book your connecting flight to Botswana? Are your lodge stays confirmed? If your plane is delayed, who's the contact person?

Pay for your trip before leaving home, in U.S. dollars. Book your own flight — or use miles — from the U.S. to Johannesburg, South Africa. And buy trip insurance, including emergency evacuation from Botswana to a hospital in South Africa.

IF YOU GO:

BEST DATES: June through October are dry months, with less foliage for the animals to hide in. June through August are cool to cold with mild, sunny days; September and October are warmer and dry. Jan. and Feb. are considered low season. March, April, May, October and November are mid-season. Some lodges close for a month in December, for maintenance.

MALARIA: The mosquitoes that carry this sometimes fatal disease are rarely a threat during dry months, from June to mid-October. Local residents protect themselves at twilight with light-colored long-sleeve shirts, long pants and lots of insect repellent. Before you start a course of prophylactic drugs with potentially serious side effects, investigate alternative options. Consult your physician or a travel medicine clinic before leaving home.

ESSENTIAL READING:

—"The Bradt Guide To Botswana" (Globe Pequot Press) by Chris McIntyre, a long-time Africa traveler, is thoughtful, readable and detailed, the very best source available. Buy it before you go and read it while you're there.

—"The Shell Tourist Guide (and map) to Botswana" by Veronica Roodt, is sold in South Africa, at the Johannesburg Airport and at some safari lodges. We found it an exceptional reference. Don't pass it up.

GETTING THERE: South African Airways flies non-stop from selected U.S. cities (including New York and Washington, D.C.) to Johannesburg, South Africa. The return flight, against headwinds and thus two hours longer, refuels in Dakar, Senegal. Flight times and dates can change; see FLY-SAA.com for current information. (800)722-9675. Your tour outfitter will reserve the flight on to Botswana.

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