

Water lilies display their blooms on the Okavango River

Text and photos by Toni White

Carrying all we would need for the next five days, our expedition team travelled some 65 kilometres through shallow, meandering channels in small power boats. We eventually reached Jugu Juga, the small island which was to be our home for the next two days. As we unloaded our equipment and started to pitch camp, a bull elephant with tell tale 'tears' staining his face repeatedly charged us, only veering off when our guide beat two metal plates together. The strong smelling discharge, rich in testosterone, running down his cheeks announced that he was in 'musth'. This was my introduction to the "Really Wild"—the Okavango Delta in Botswana.

The Okavango Delta in Northern Botswana is described as the "Jewel of the Kalahari Desert". Covering some 15,000 square kilometers, it is a labyrinth of lagoons, lakes and hidden channels. It is the biggest inland fresh water delta in the world. It acts like a magnet to the wildlife of Botswana and beyond, with its crystalline waters attracting huge herds of elephant, hippo and Nile crocodiles. With 400 different species of bird, it has by far the greatest concentration and diversity of wildlife in the whole of Africa.

Spurred by huge subtropical storms in central Angola, some 12 billion cubic metres of water travel down



Diving the Delta

Botswana's Okavango River





The expedition team in action; Hippo yawns; Stealthy croc in the reeds; Team member Pete works his underwater rig

the Cubango River, through Namibia as the Kuvango River, and finally enter Botswana as the Okavango River. The water diverts through a maze of lagoons, channels and islands before draining away in the southern wastes of the Kalahari Desert.

I had been talking for some years about going on an expedition to the Okavango Delta to photograph the wild-

life and assess the possibilities of diving it. However, I really didn't know what we were letting ourselves in for.

I had done many big animal expeditions before with world renowned expert Mark Addison of Blue Wilderness Diving (www.bluwilderness.co.za), mainly in South Africa. And so it was that in the dry season of October 2007, Mark and I gathered with six intrepid underwater

photographers, in Maun, the gateway to the Moremi Game Reserve, Botswana.

The expedition

As we loaded up our two flat-bottomed boats with everything from tents to compressors, we all wondered what the next five days would bring. We were soon speeding along the Boro River, leaving the low rise buildings of Maun. The river

banks were alive with birds of every description, and we soon found ourselves gazing at the rafts of reeds that are the life blood of the delta. The further we travelled, the narrower and shallower the delta channels became.

After 30 to 40 kilometres, we started to see our first signs of big game. Elephants and crocodiles became more frequent sightings, and in the distance, we saw herds of impala and buffalo. After a couple of heart-stopping moments

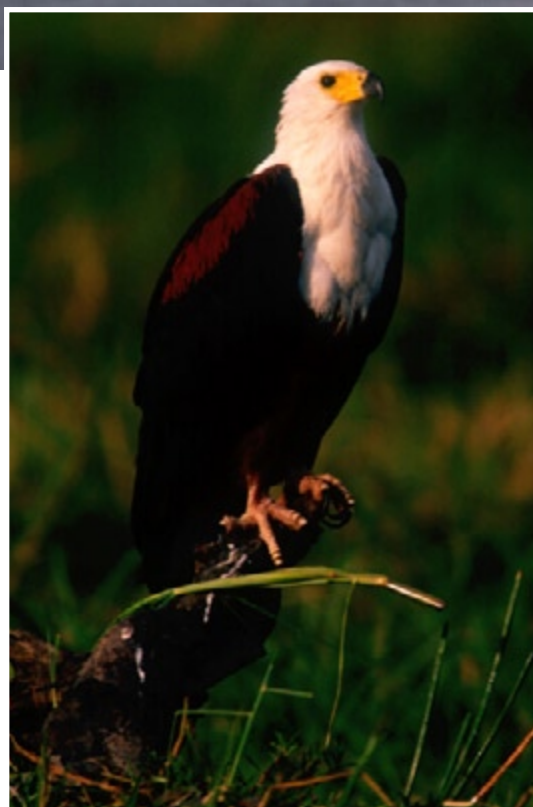
when the boats became tangled up in the reeds in the shallow waters, we arrived at our first camp on Jugu Juga Island.

It was late afternoon by the time we started preparing the camp while our cook started to dig holes to prepare our evening meal. This was the point when we all decided that the Okavango was very definitely a different kind of wild

from the average game reserve.

We were just carrying our sleeping bags up from the boats when the bull elephant repeatedly charged us. It was more than a little disconcerting, especially when we wondered whether we were pitching camp in his territory. Mark managed to discourage him, and he pulled back to a safer distance, but continued to show his annoyance with us by stamping and trumpeting for the rest of the night.

We investigated our chosen patch further and found a small lagoon at the rear of the camp with a resident hippo in it. The next morning we found that five rather large crocodiles had spent the night on the sand of the river, no more than 20 feet from our tents. It was definitely getting wilder! To add to all of this, during that first night we had one of the most dramatic storms that I have ever seen. The cracks of thunder would have shattered glass if there been any around and the night sky was illuminated by huge displays of lightning.



The Okavango River

The next morning, we were quickly on the river with our dive gear and cameras in tow. Travelling deeper into the delta, we came across a huge disturbance in the river. It soon became obvious that we had come across a hitherto unknown migration of barbell. The banks were covered in every bird imaginable; fish eagles, storks, pelicans and the beautiful malachite Kingfisher. Crocodiles were lined up in the sand. Every size from half a metre to a couple of four metre monsters were waiting for their turn to feed on the barbell.

Andy donned his wetsuit, fins and mask and immediately jumped over the side, camera in hand, to try and get a half and half picture of a small croc sitting on the bank. The croc was up and gone before you could say snap! So instead he turned his attention to the more static lilies that were growing profusely from the river beds.

Following Andy's lead we all jumped into the water, ignoring the fact that bigger crocs were within a few metres of us. The

barbell (some as long as a metre) were swimming past us in such numbers that they were crashing into our submerged legs. Before long we were all jumping up and down in the water, and the air was blue with expletives! It didn't take long for us to decide that this was just a bit too hairy, and we exited the water rather faster than we had entered.

We thought that that was quite enough excitement for one day but on the way back to camp, we were confronted by a herd of elephants crossing the channel in front of us. Two huge females were guarding the progress of the young elephants. They decided that they would walk up the channel towards us, sparring as they came. Luckily for us they must have seen the agitation on our boats as they got nearer and decided that we had taken their severe warning.

Apart from the troop of baboons that walked through the camp at 1am, the pride of lions calling to each other all night and our friend the elephant throwing

things around in disgust because we hadn't moved on, the night passed relatively quietly.

Hippo haven

The dawn brought a new challenge; we knew that there was a lagoon nearby with a resident herd of hippos. On arrival, we saw five heads in the water all staring at our boat. Apparently, boats take first place on the hippo hate list, closely followed by humans!

We had already decided that going into the water with the single biggest killer of humans on this continent was not an option. We had built a couple of small ROV's with Mark that we planned to attach our cameras to and drive them into the herd to try to capture the images we wanted. Let's just say we got close.

We had a bit of a hiatus while deciding which of us would volunteer their camera first (due to the significant risk that it might not come back!!!) Once decided, the ROV's set off but instead of the attack we expected, the male hippo moved behind the females, and the whole herd started to back off into shallower water, completely intimidated by the small black box travelling towards them. After three frustrating hours trying to get nearer, we decided that we had enough information to plan a different approach for our next trip in July 2008.

Proud eagle perches on a limb; family of elephants commune by the waters; Portrait of a large bull elephant



We spent the rest of the afternoon gently travelling the river banks enjoying the profusion of wildlife. We were on our way back to base camp when we saw a group of hippos on the bank. It was the group that we had been trying to photograph that morning. In an instant, we could see a look in their eyes that said, "So, it was you harassing us in the lagoon this morning". At that point, they all charged down the bank towards us. Our driver slammed the engines forward and sped past them as they all jumped into the channel obviously intent on upsetting our evening.

The next day we broke camp to travel back nearer to Maun with the intention

camp on Nxaraga Island and were looking out of our tent at the lagoon with its eight resident hippos. We spent the afternoon fruitlessly trying to photograph this herd and learned valuable lessons for our next visit.

The evening and night brought nothing more exciting than a large spider running around the inside of my tent. Little did I realize that all the trouble was being stored up for our last night.

Diving the river

Bright and early we were back on the water heading for deeper channels with the clear water that we had identified

of getting nearer to a bigger herd of hippo. We wanted some deeper water, so we could attempt a scuba dive to assess the possibilities of future dives with crocs.

By lunch-time we had established

for our dive. Kitting up, we soon became aware that the waters here are never still, and this would be a drift dive.

Entering the water, we dropped two metres to the bottom. The visibility was restricted to about four metres because of the high concentrations of peat in the ground but this was good enough for photography. The sand on the bottom was white—we were definitely in the Kalahari Desert.

We knew from this first dive that photography would be possible, but we got another reminder that this was truly a wild, wild place and one to be respected. As the dive ended, we stood up in shallow water and within seconds, Pete had let out an ear splitting scream as something large swam between his legs knocking him off his feet. Whether it was a croc or a



Large croc waits in the grass; Stork in flight; Trees dot the Delta landscape

Botswana

large monitor lizard has been debated many times since. Whatever it was, it was certainly a warning.

And as for our last night... what a night it was! Just after midnight Mark and Gail woke up to find that they had an elephant's trunk in their tent with them. They had

pitched their tent under a Marula tree—the fruit is an elephant's favourite food.

I opened my tent flap during the night to find three hippos happily munching away at the grass just outside. Nobody left their tents that night, and in the morn-

ing, there was a huge rush for the one portable toilet!

Joking apart, we all agreed that this had been an exceptional expedition for all of us. Experiencing these magnificent animals up close and wild, had been the experience of a lifetime for all of us. From a practical point of view, it has also given us confidence to return armed with what we learned. We are sure that given time, we will capture the underwater images that we now know are possible. We plan to return to the Delta twice a year over the next three years, once during the dry and once during the wet season. We know that we will capture the stunning images that we have been privileged to see. ■

Tony White is a professional underwater photographer. Now based in South Africa, he runs underwater photographic tours to some of the most exciting underwater events and places on our planet. More information can be obtained from his website www.seaofdreams.co.uk



fact file



Botswana



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK

History Botswana, formerly the British protectorate of Bechuanaland, adopted its new name when it attained independence in 1966. Forty years of uninterrupted civilian leadership, progressive social policies, and significant capital investment have boosted the country's economy making it one of the most dynamic in Africa. Although tourism is a growing sector due to the country's conservation practices and extensive nature preserves, mineral extraction, mainly diamond mining, leads economic activity. The country has one of the world's highest known rates of HIV/AIDS infection, however, it also has one of Africa's most progressive and comprehensive programs for dealing with the disease. Government: parliamentary republic. Capital: Gaborone

Geography

Botswana is located in Southern Africa, north of South Africa. Note: No coastline, landlocked; population is concentrated in the east. Terrain is predominantly flat to gently rolling plateaus with the Kalahari Desert in the southwest. Lowest point: junction of the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers 513 m. Highest point: Tsodilo Hills 1,489 m.

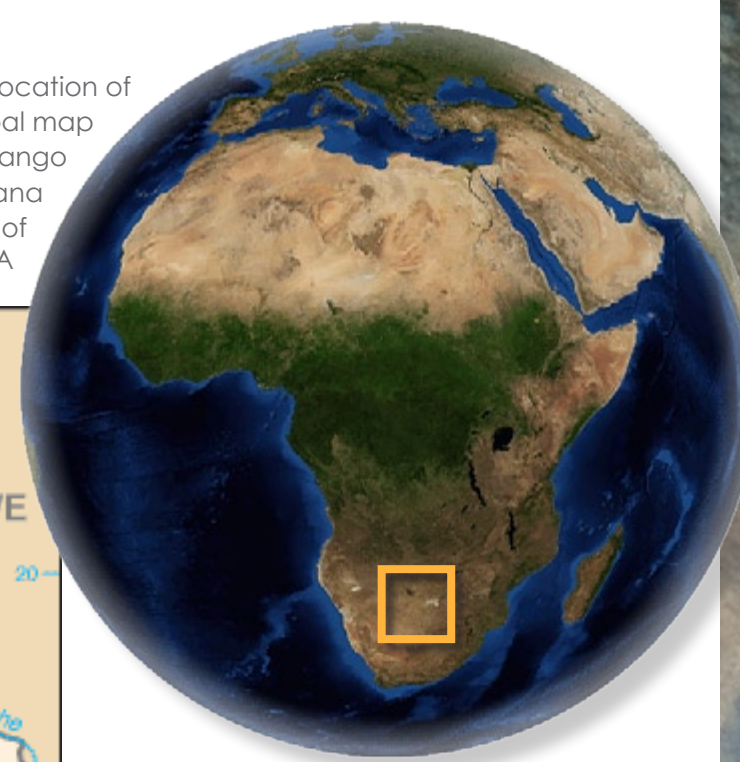
Economy

Since independence in 1966, Botswana has had one of the world's highest economic growth rates, though, in 2007-08, growth fell below 5%. Botswana has transformed itself, through fiscal discipline and sound management, from one of the poorest countries on Earth to a middle-income country with a per capita GDP in 2008 of US\$13,300. Indeed, Botswana is ranked as the best credit risk in Africa by two major investment services. Much of the expansion is fueled by diamond mining, which currently makes up more than one-third of GDP and 70-80% of export earnings. Other key sectors include tourism, financial services, subsistence farming, and cattle raising. However, the government faces challenges such as high rates of

unemployment and poverty. Botswana's considerable economic gains are also threatened by high HIV/AIDS infection rates, the second highest in the world. Long-term prospects are dimmed by an expected leveling off in diamond mining production. Natural resources: diamonds, copper, nickel, salt, soda ash, potash, coal, iron ore, silver. Agriculture: livestock, sorghum, maize, millet, beans, sunflowers, groundnuts. Industry: diamonds, copper, nickel, salt, soda ash, potash; livestock processing; textiles

Climate Botswana's climate is semi-arid with warm winters and hot summers. Natural hazards: periodic droughts; visibility can be obscured with seasonal August winds that blow from the west, carrying sand and dust cross-country.

RIGHT: Location of Botswana on global map
BELOW: Location of Okavango Delta on map of Botswana
FAR RIGHT: View from space of Okavango Delta. NASA



Environmental issues

overgrazing; desertification; limited fresh water resources. Botswana is party to: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Wetlands.

Currency

Botswana Pulas (BWP)
Exchange rates: 1EUR= 9.95BWP;
1USD= 7.00BWP; 1GBP= 11.58BWP;
1AUD= 5.82BWP; 1SGD= 4.84BWP

Population

1,990,876. In poverty: 30.3% (2003) Living with AIDS: 300,000 (2007 est.) Ethnic groups: Tswana (or Setswana) 79%, Kalanga 11%, Basarwa 3%, other, including Kgalagadi and white groups 7%. Religion: Christian 71.6%, Badimo 6%, other religion 1.4%, no religion 20.6% (2001 census). Internet users: 80,000 (2007)

Time

CAT (UTC+2)

Language

Setswana 78.2%, Kalanga 7.9%, Sekgalagadi 2.8%, English 2.1% (official), other language 8.6%, (2001 census)

Health

There is a very high degree of risk for the food and waterborne diseases

bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever; and the vectorborne disease malaria (2009)

Recompression Chamber

PRETORIA, South Africa
Eugene Marais Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy Centre
24hr phone: +27(0)12 334-2567

DURBAN, South Africa
St. Augustine's Hospital
Hyperbaric Medicine Centre
www.sahmc.co.za

Links

Botswana Tourism
www.botswanatourism.co.bw

Split view of lilly pad on Okavango River in Botswana