Botswana is the most expensive safari country because of the government's focus on high-quality, high-cost lodges. It is not without reason as it offers fantastic game viewing and the privilege of being part of—and even sleeping within—an elephant herd.

By Cheryl Tiu

Photos courtesy of Asia to Africa Safaris and Wilderness Safaris

Botswana has the largest elephant population in Africa. During the dry season, they sojourn on the Linyati River.
IT IS A TINY, SIX-SEATER CESSNA 210 THAT TAKES PASSENGERS TO KASANE, A NORTHEASTERN TOWN IN BOTSWANA THAT SERVES AS REGIONAL IMMIGRATION FOR THE SAFARIS FROM THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES OF ZAMBIA, ZIMBABWE AND NAMIBIA. Apart from being the point in Africa where the four countries almost meet, it also made headlines in 1975 when Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton remarried there. While bush planes are the norm in any safari country, the ones in Botswana are extra small serving low-volume tourists for exclusivity.

Large tracts of land in the country had been passionately conserved for wildlife. Prior to its independence in 1966, Botswana was relatively unexplored. When diamonds were discovered, the country developed a high-quality, low-volume tourism in order to employ a majority of the population while still preserving the environment. Nearly 40 percent of the country has been set aside for wildlife, which today has made it a top safari destination.

Two big rivers, the Chavango Delta and the Chobe River, keep the animals in the country all year round, most especially The Big Five (lions, elephants, buffalos, rhinoceros and leopards). It is the most expensive safari country in the continent because of the government’s policy which focuses on high-quality, high-cost lodges in order to attract a small numbers of high-paying guests. Despite the prices, camps can be fully booked up to a year in advance, because of the once in a lifetime experiences on offer.

THE LINYATI
Customized itineraries from Asia to Africa Safaris, the first bespoke safari specialists in Asia founded by Filipinos, former investment bankers Jose “Lito” Cortes and Victor “Binky” Dizon, will often have journeys through camps in the Linyati Reserve and Chavango Delta for a more extended wildlife viewing. The Linyati, one of Botswana’s high end private reserves owned by luxury operator Wilderness Safari, is located just the west of the Savute marsh area of the Chobe National Park. Predators, from large prides of lions to the critically endangered wild dogs (there are only 3000 of them left), as well as leopard-spotted hyenas, cheetahs, zebras, antelopes, elephants and buffalos, are commonly seen during game drives. The fact that the reserve is private and open only to guests staying at Wilderness Safaris’ camps allows for unlimited activities like day and night game drives, walking safaris, boating on the Queen Sylvia on the Linyati River, and fishing.

THE MAIN LOUNGE AT KING’S POOL looks out to a picturesque oxbow lagoon, often with views of elephants jumping into the water.

FIT FOR A KING
Arriving at the airstrip at King’s Pool, another 45-minute bush plane ride from Kasane, the friendly staff awaits with personalized Wilderness Safaris water thermoses, the most important refreshment during game drives under the afternoon sun. King’s Pool is a premier camp, the highest level in the portfolio. Named for Scandinavian royalty, the lounge area looks out to a picturesque oxbow lagoon, where over a cup of coffee or high tea, elephants can be seen grazing before jumping into the water.

Each of the nine well-appointed rooms made of canvas and thatch, each lead to their own veranda complete with a plunge pool, sun-lounger and a sala.

Bird life is excellent year round and the Linyati raptor is one of the well-represented species.

THE WILD DOGS are one of the most endangered carnivores in Botswana, with only 2000 of them left.

Leopard of the Linyati wilderness are some of the most beautiful moments during a safari.
A hippo yawning
to polenta) will be served.
and (thick, cornmeal porridge similar
to stewed beef),
morogo
then disappearing behind the horizon.
and peaceful activity is a ride on the
elephant boat. Underneath
just the safety of a mosquito net,
stargazing up to the
peaceful African evening sky.
it is not difficult to drift off
to peaceful slumber with the
low rumblings of the elephants,
whispering goodnight to one
another down there.
They say that elephants
ever forget. But in this case,
the memories made with them
will never be forgotten.

The newest and most stylish camp is
Duma Tau, a classic camp with 10 tents
that can be accessed through cleverly
sculpted walkways. Set on a lagoon on the Linyanti River, the architecture is both eco-friendly
and creative, such as using reeds to hang
the toilet paper in each en-suite bathroom
to antique-looking chests as tabletops. The
main lodge area has a long communal
dining table, an assortment of beautiful
antique-looking armchairs and sofas looking
out to sweeping river views, and a walkway
to the communal fire pit which sits on
the water, which has the best views of the
African sunrise and sunset.

PAUL ALLEN’S ABU
The Okavango Delta is about a
40-minute flight from Linyanti. It is a
wondrous wetland that receives its
water from rain falling over a thousand
kilometers away sustaining a huge
diversity of fauna and flora. Abu Camp, set
on a 500,000-acre private concession, is
a favorite. Owned by Microsoft co-
founder Paul Allen (and managed by
Wilderness Safaris), it is the only camp
in Botswana with Wi-Fi—of course,
with Mr. Allen’s intervention. Here, the
elephants are king, as Botswana is known
to have the highest number of elephants
in Africa, and the Okavango Delta is
home to about 30,000, six of which are
named and taken care of at Abu.
The camp has one of the most number
of activities—seven, including the game
and night drives, and walking safaris—and
of course, the elephant activities. It is
known all over Africa as the place to ride
African elephants. They are offered on
two of the older ones, Kathy and Sherini,
for up to an hour and a half. There are a
few interesting (and sad) trivia about the
earth’s largest land mammals: most of them
lose their teeth when they are about
30 to 55 years old, and this is important to
them because elephants’ digestive systems
are poor and can only digest 40 percent of
what they eat. This is also the reason why
they stop and eat all day. For faster boat rides into the
more daring waters where the hippos tread, a speed boat
alternative is on hand.

SLEEPING WITH THE ELEPHANTS
The six spacious rooms are a combination of canvas-
and-beam structures that are part-tent, part-cabin, with
king sized beds, wingback armchairs and steamer trunks
as decors. Views look out to a tranquil lagoon, shaded by
hardwood trees. Apart from
the spacious indoor bathroom,
a glass door opens to a deck
as decors.

Walking with the elephants is
another activity—and a way to get
exercise. Closed shoes and pants
are recommended as some of the swamp
grasses are high and the delta can be
a bit muddy. Perhaps the most relaxing
and peaceful activity is a ride on the
makoro, a canoe that glides along the
shallow water of the delta with the use of a
cane. The guide will pick
up a daylily and turn it into a
necklace as a souvenir.
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