



## DELTA BELTER

SANCTUARY LEADS THE LUXURY SAFARI PACK WITH ITS RELAUNCHED CHIEF'S CAMP IN OKAVANGO DELTA. LAURIA HOLT REPORTS FROM BOTSWANA

The first thing I notice about the Okavango Delta is the distinct lack of water. This, in an area known as one of the world's largest inland deltas. Then, slowly but surely, it starts to appear. Soaring overhead in a tiny, single-propeller plane, I watch an aerial view of Botswana's vast natural wonder unfold. A vast landscape perforated by palm eventually gives way to hippo-studded lakes and plains beamed by grazing ostriches and

herds of silently gliding elephants. The seasonal flood has arrived.

If, in heading to a camp regarded as one of the best places in the Delta to spot wild game, I opened my eyes, Chief's Camp stands on an island in the Mmametse Game Reserve once used by the prevailing local chief as his private hunting ground. Every year, from May until September, the land on which the camp stands gets encircled by flood water, effectively separating the

wildlife further inland, making it ever easier to spot them from the camp's deck. This annual phenomenon happens when Angola's mighty Okavango River floods into Botswana's famous Kalahari Desert, leaving a giant basin of water in its wake.

Over the past 2 years, Chief's Camp has earned itself a reputation as one of Botswana's premier safari lodges. But not content to rest on its laurels, it has recently undergone a wholesale renovation

by its owner, Sanctuary Retreats. The safari specialist operates lodges across Africa and further afield in Burma, Egypt and China. Over the past year, it has revitalized Chief's Camp, one of five Sanctuary-owned lodges across Botswana, in time for a June relaunch.

As we close in on the camp's dusty white airstrip, the adventure begins. "Giraffes on the runway!" shouts British pilot Sebastian. "We'll have to go again." Giraffes duly cleared, we touch down and embark on the short drive through the bush toward Chief's Camp.

Loaded up on one of Sanctuary's open-air jeeps, which are perfectly adapted to deal with the Delta's rough terrain, we pass faggot willow bushes, spotting a rare Verreaux's eagle-owl, a group of chacma baboons and a herd of elephants enjoying a muddy bath. As we approach the camp,



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zebras and impalas flee from our path.

As the first British journalist to get a behind-the-scenes tour, I start with the acacia-thatched bar in a bamboo stage from the camp's central lodge. But to call these "rooms" is a misnomer; their original function has been doubled to

serve two, stand-alone gazebos, each with their own outdoor plunge pool, perched on expensive blocks.

Inside, mosquito-draped beds and eggshell walls convey a sense of airy thatched roofs. Each has its own private terrace. For example, a giant terrace named over from the deck - while an additional, all-inclusive, ultra-exclusive super-villa. The Geoffrey Keir Suite, comes with its own chef, butler and guide. This was added to cater for Chief's Camp's celebrity guests, such as Harrison Ford, and those seeking ultimate privacy.

But it's not only experience the camp cares for. An on-site guest experience centre will feature evening talks by wildlife specialists and guides, and a children's education area will examine photos made of lions pose, among other activities, to give families an





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SANCTUARY RETREATS



SLIPPING TOP: Rooms at Chief's Camp have been expanded into high-ceilinged pavilions.

intensive experience of the Delta. Couples will be treated to luxury, from the communal pool and its designer daybeds, to the full-service bar, spa and gym.

But to enjoy all that, guests will have to stay a while, because much of their time will be spent out on morning and afternoon excursions, which come at a cost and part of any Sanctuary stay.

Having spent four nights at two of Sanctuary's other lodges - Stanley's Camp and Baines' Camp - I'd had the chance to experience these activities.

Although each of Sanctuary's Delta camps has its own distinct character, they are united in their approach to activities. From morning and afternoon game drives, to walking safaris and water excursions or traditional mokoro cruises, guests of Sanctuary Retreats are offered

the chance to glimpse Botswana from all angles.

At Stanley's, a quintessential canvas camp made up of eight tents, I had breakfast with experienced guide TT, who has worked for Sanctuary for 12 years. We spotted warbugs snuffling beside sandy meadows and African fish eagles perching in the area's strange sausage trees, whose dangling fruit dominates the Delta skyline.

Visited at the start of the flood, travelling mainly by road. When the water really arrives, TT said, they do many of their excursions by boat. In other, dry passages have to be ready to wade their feet up to avoid getting soaked, as water regularly rushes in over the sides. That's the beauty of this ever-shifting landscape - whether you travel during

### BEST OF BOTSWANA

Each of Sanctuary Retreats' lodges has distinct virtues and to get an overview of the Delta, it's worth moving around different camps. For example, at Chief's Camp, guests can take mokoro canoe trips from the lodge's deck, between morning and afternoon game drives, so they won't miss a thing.

Because Baines' and Stanley's camps are located in the NG32 private concession, they can offer activities that are restricted in the national parks, such as night drives and walking safaris. Guests at these camps also get exclusive access to Sanctuary Retreats' Walking With Elephants experience (pictured), a partnership with the Living With Elephants Foundation, founded by Doug and Sandi Groves. The Groves are custodians of three orphaned elephants saved from culling in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Sanctuary guests can walk among them, in an effort to educate people about the plight of the African elephant.

Baines' also offers experiences such as the chance to sleep outdoors on the camp's raised decks, making it a good bet for couples. Sanctuary's fourth Delta camp, Chobe Dikweng, is a river lodge, ensuring that you're surrounded by water, whatever the season - ideal for those travelling when the flood hasn't arrived.





## THE BIG 5

In partnership with African Conservation Awareness, Sanctuary Retreats is working to reintroduce the endangered black and white rhinoceros to Botswana. Formerly abundant, the rhino was hunted to extinction in Botswana in the 1960s. The Botswana Rhino Reintroduction Project is working to bring them back into their native environment, with the help of local military, police, customs and immigration. This means that guests at Sanctuary Retreats in Botswana have the opportunity to see all of the Big 5.

### FACTBOX

Prices at Sanctuary's Chief's Camp start from \$575 per person per night, based on two people sharing for a three-night stay, with meals and drinks included, game activities, transfers and park fees.

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**PLUNGE INTO JOY!** Each room at the recently renovated Chief's Camp has its own outdoor pool

the flood or when the plains are dry, you're destined for a one-off adventure.

On the first evening, we had a rare sighting of a pack of hyenas, complete with tiny cubs. To watch them frolicking around a termite mound as the sun slipped below the skyline revealed a tender creature seemingly unaware of its grisly reputation.

But TT did not stay there. Expertly tracing animal tracks across the plains, he led us to a pride of female lions with nine-month-old cubs. Looking at these big cats I knew I was in the presence of something truly wild: yet between one another, they appeared playful as kittens.

Next on TT's agenda was to spot a leopard and, sure enough, he delivered – tracking a lone female to a remote corner of the Mmamagwe Game Reserve. In the excitement, it was near impossible to spot the beautiful creature camouflaged in the long grass. But TT saw her from miles away and pointed her out as she slipped into the river.

Not to be outdone, when I moved to

Baines' Camp – Sanctuary's wild lodge of five rooms, a short drive away – my second guide lensed, led me to a yet another pride of lions. This time, three females were on a hunt and we also encountered a leopard cub lying in a tree, with her wide-eyed mother standing watchfully by.

The experience of these guides is the byproduct of a local, community-led conservation project; TT and I was given my in the Delta and were employed to use their local knowledge as guides. Baines' and Stanley's camps are part of a six, one-acre private concession, known as NCjs, which the Botswana government assigned to six local villages in an effort to turn them away from hunting and reward tourism. The six villages lease the land to Sanctuary Retreats, requiring them to hire a percentage of their staff from the local community in return.

Chief's Camp has its own dedicated team of staff, but the expert local knowledge is sure to be the same, allowing the Chief of the Okavango Delta to rule once again. ■



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