On safari in Botswana’s Okavango Delta Helen Anderson has the best of both worlds—creature-spotting by day and all the creature comforts by night at a trio of luxury retreats.

PHOTOGRAPHY JULIAN KINGMA

WILD SIDES
Doug Groves with two of his charges near Sanctuary Stanley’s Camp in Botswana’s north. Opposite: Sanctuary Chief’s Camp in the heart of the Okavango Delta.
Four boys go hunting for birds in the Okavango Delta. Their traps full, the 12-year-old cousins are walking home with their dinner when they spy a kettle of vultures circling ahead. For reasons they still can’t explain, instead of steering clear, they walk towards them, curious, forgetting there’s only one thing guaranteed to attract vultures.

The boys interrupt a pride of lions ripping apart a freshly felled buffalo. Almost too late, they recall a lesson their fathers taught them: don’t run, stay still, stay silent. Stare down the lion.

The lions circle. Predators and prey stay this way for hours, the boys never breaking eye-contact – until the big cats scatter as a grass fire sweeps through, lit by a father who comes searching for his boys, who sees the same vultures circling and assumes the worst. “He rescued us and took us home, and to this day we’ve never forgotten what our fathers taught us.”

Kebonye Ramorusi, known to everyone as Ice, tells his story over a fireside dinner at Sanctuary Stanley’s Camp deep in the delta. The dense night presses in around us, full of alarming noises and long shadows. We listen, saucer-eyed, in fear and fascination. Like most of the staff here, our guide grew up in one of the six villages within a 105,000-hectare private concession called NG32 on which the camp is located. On safari in the delta, I want to follow the man who has stared down a lion.

Ice was born the day Botswana gained its independence from Britain. In September last year the little landlocked republic of two million people celebrated 50 years of peaceful democracy. Surrounded by troubled neighbours – Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa and Angola – Botswana has long been regarded by the international community as “the African miracle”. Its rare political stability and spectacular economic growth were fuelled by the discovery of the world’s largest diamond reserves – fortuitously, soon after the British relinquished their protectorate, then named Bechuanaland – and overseen by Seretse Khama, a benign and beneficent president. Ice’s passage from a tribal childhood to highly respected safari guide is emblematic of his nation’s story.

Botswana is miraculous for other reasons, too. In a region notorious for trophy hunting and rampant poaching of elephants and rhino, the nation has an uncompromising shoot-to-kill policy towards poachers, and hunting of any kind is banned on public land. A third of Africa’s elephants have disappeared in the past seven years, according to the findings of the Great Elephant Census released in August last year, and increasingly the remainder is seeking refuge in Botswana: 130,451 of them at last count – the biggest population of elephants in Africa.

We’ve come to see them, and the many other miracles of Botswana, at a trio of lodges and tented camps in the nation’s north run by Sanctuary Retreats, an affiliate of the global Abercrombie & Kent travel group. Though each location and camp style is unique, the welcome at Sanctuary Chobe Chilwero lodge, our first stop, sets the pattern. A choir of staff with lovely, seldom-heard names – Ishmael, Finneas, Florence – gather for our arrival and throw their hearts into a song in melodious Setswana, while a cup of bush tea and just-baked scones wait for us. Past a pair of...
warthogs grazing on the front lawn, along a path scattered with basketball-sized dung heaps and the delicately veined footprints of elephants (as big as serving platters) are 15 cottages. Each has all the comforts of home plus an outdoor shower, a hammock in a courtyard at the back, and a front veranda with views across a floodplain to the mighty Chobe River; broad and brown and teeming, I imagine, with hippos and crocodiles.

Sure enough, there are floats of hippo and plenty of lantern-jawed Nile crocodiles glowering on muddy banks when we take a boat out on the Chobe late each afternoon. We sidle towards a male hippo the size of a minibus as it slides from one stinking puddle to another; our approach elicits a full 180-degree yawn, shocking in its candy-pinkness and unmistakable aggression. We move on.

Birdlife throngs in the dying day: Egyptian geese and helmeted guinea fowl, storks and spurfowl, darters and doves. Fish eagles wheel overhead, crying like babies. We glide past scimitar-horned waterbucks and a 50-strong troop of baboons, momentarily becalmed by their communal delousing exercise.

But this is Africa’s Elephant Central – authorities estimate about 80,000 of the nation’s 130,000 elephants live here in Chobe National Park – and they steal the show. Families shower together on the banks; the ladies – bags and wrinkles deepening in the twilight – hose each other companionably while their youngsters mock-charge and squirt each other, then roll awkwardly in the mud. Across the main channel on marshy Sedudu Island are huddles of mainly male elephants, methodically salad-spinning their dinner.

We edge close to a dozen of them, ankles-deep, trunks grasping and uprooting reeds, rhythmically thrashing in a sapping motion to dislodge mud and insects, then popping the thatches in their mouths. Watching this mealtime routine at close quarters – close enough to cop a misting of mud, close enough to smell an elephant’s herbaceous fart – is both thrilling and meditative.

It’s this mix of exhilaration and intense focus that makes safaris so addictive, and there are twice-daily excursions on river and land at Chobe Chilwero. We head out at sunrise one day on a drive with Chika Kachana, a Chobe guide for 18 years; he shows us the dusty graves of his grandparents in the national park. The early birds are everywhere – flycatchers and francolins, herons and hornbills – and we’re discussing the messy feeding habits of the open-bill stork when Chika stops the truck, peers down at a glossy black deposit by the track and announces, “Lion, close.”

In the course of the next couple of hours, he tracks a pride back and forth across the park, finding signs of their erratic passage where we can see only sand and scrub. Instead, we’re entranced by the persistence of a handsome cappuccino-coloured male impala who chases a wily female repeatedly around a rocky circuit – I’m not sure who to cheer when she evades him on the fifth pass. We feel the pathos in the lowing of a buffalo to her lame, exhausted calf – its limp grows worse as we watch, the distance growing between them. The ride is so packed with distractions we’re no longer focused on the big cats when we finally find them: four silent assassins downwind from a waterhole full of elephants and sable antelopes.

The plains become freckled by glittering ponds, then dark ribbons of water appear, winding around clots of land crowned by palms and termite hills.
The 90-minute flight south-west from Chobe Chilvers to one of its sister retreats, Sanctuary Stanley’s Camp – which takes place in a noisy single-prop plane not much bigger than an elephant – is one of the most thrilling of my life, for it’s only from this vantage that the complexity of the improbable wonder of this vast delta surrounded by desert can be grasped.

From Chobe, we rise over dry stubbled plains pocketed by grey saaks and bisected by a few dead-straight roads that stretch forever. Gradually, the plains become flecked by glinting ponds, then dark ribbons of water appear, winding insistently around dots of land crowned by palms and termite hills. The ponds become lagoons and the inlets multiply and become thousands of islands, and that’s when we really know we’re in the Okavango Delta.

For a month every summer, the Okavango River surges with rain from the Angola highlands and then spreads dramatically for the next four months across the delta, some 15,000 square kilometres of country in flux. The flood peaks between June and August, by which time the delta has swollen to triple its typical size and attracted one of the biggest and most diverse concentrations of wildlife on the planet. From this vantage, it’s only from this vantage that the appearance of wild sage bushes triggers the dramatic transfer to Sanctuary Stanley’s Camp, a great expanse of palm and termite hills, a firepit at Sanctuary Chief’s Camp; hippo skull.

Mindfully, on a bushwalk next morning, we encounter no buffalo (they’re virtually guaranteed to charge) and the only sign of a hippo (also murderous when surprised) is a bleached skull, gnawed around the eyes by hyenas, the two killer bottom teeth as long as an outstretched hand. A walk in the wild is not for the faint-hearted, and fox holy a gun over his shoulder and drizzle us all carefully on emergency procedure: 1: the site close behind him, revealing his story about the boys and the lions, and soon they’re sporting a perception, quills here, hyena tracks there, and his stories of the in the bush and crazy-critter encounters flow like the delta in flood.

The appearance of wild sage bushes triggers another of his incredible childhood stories – about the night he was forced to shelter from a storm in a small, earth-boring hole, and a buffalo leaves on his body to mask his scent from predators, a common practice among traditional hunters. (The story gets better: the sage bushes, the boy enthusiasts for protection appealed to a passing lion, spent the night sleeping above him on the bushy shrubbery. The boy was scared to death, but survived to tell the tale.)

Not all encounters with wildlife are random. In its portfolio of philanthropic projects focused on environmental and community sustainability, Sanctuary Retreats works with the Living with Elephants Foundation, which offers guests at Stanley’s Sanctuary Retreats works with the Living with Elephants Foundation, which offers guests at Stanley’s Sanctuary Retreats works with the Living with Elephants Foundation.

A few days later, we spot the results of another of Sanctuary’s conservation projects in the delta. We’ve flown from Stanley’s Camp to Chief’s Island, the biggest in the Okavango: 70 kilometres long and 15 kilometres wide, a refuge for huge numbers of elephants during the floods and regarded as one of the best wildlife-viewing locations in Africa. On our first game drive from Sanctuary Chief’s Camp, we sported those white rhinos – easily and healthily (and coloured grey rather than white, by the way). Their existence is another of the nation’s miracles. By 1992, fewer than 19 white rhinos survived in the wild in Botswana and the black rhino was declared “locally extinct”, prompting the government to take the drastic measure of relocating all surviving rhinos to fenced reserves.

In 2001, in a complex project involving government authorities, the defence force and private bodies, four white rhinos were released in Moremi Game Reserve within the delta, chosen for its lush pastures and...
relative inaccessibility to poachers, black rhinos were released two years later. Sanctuary Retreats joined the project in 2015, enabling the introduction of another handful of black rhinos. The results of 15 years of painstaking management and vigilance grace in front of us now, part of a healthy breeding population of white rhinos and a viable number of black rhinos in the delta.

Chief’s Camp hugs the shore of a pristine lagoon filled with reeds and lilies, an oasis within this vast region of white rhinos and a viable number of black rhinos in the delta. In 90 minutes one morning we see, in the following order: a pair of buffaloes, a cowbird of ginsha, a battle-scarred lion fast asleep beside the track, and a pack of rare painted dogs mingling. When Martin, our guide, parks the track and sets out for morning tea or coffee at Chief’s Camp; the place is fairly bursting with life. It starts before dawn, with a shower of jackalberry followed by the alarming racket of baboons mating on my roof. After breakfast, we’re usually in wide open country where a single, slow head-should typically reveals grazing impala and kudu, zig-zag clusters of zebras, a family of elephants, a lagoon full of hippos and cranes, and a herd of buffalo on the move.

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 organ of an elephant named Boy, a frequent visitor, wanders onto the scene and goes to step into the mokoro we’ve just vacated. Will he destroy the canoe? At the last moment, his foot clears the obstacle and he continues towards the pool. When Martin, our guide, parks the track and sets out for morning tea or coffee at Chief’s Camp; the place is fairly bursting with life. It starts before dawn, with a shower of jackalberry followed by the alarming racket of baboons mating on my roof. After breakfast, we’re usually in wide open country where a single, slow head-should typically reveals grazing impala and kudu, zig-zag clusters of zebras, a family of elephants, a lagoon full of hippos and cranes, and a herd of buffalo on the move.

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