



A game viewing vehicle makes its way in the Delta.

The waterlogged savannah of the Okavango Delta.

PICTURES: WINNIE GRAHAM AND COURTESY OF XAKANAXA



Inside the luxury tent at the Xakanaxa Camp.

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# AWASH IN ANIMALS UP AT THE DELTA

**T**HE SIGHT of the Okavango from the air is breath-catching. There is water everywhere, the various streams of the delta reaching the outskirts of Maun, the town that exists to serve the needs of tourists in search of an unbelievable wildlife experience.

Not in 50 years, locals say, has there been so much water. Unlike other rivers that empty into the ocean, the Okavango flows through 1 300km of Kalahari desert before fanning into a delta and disappearing into the sand. But along the way it enriches savannah grasslands and giant forests that, in turn, support a huge variety of animals, reptiles and birds.

So spectacular is the view from the small plane taking us to Xakanaxa Camp that I find my pulse racing. It's a huge patchwork (18 000km<sup>2</sup> in extent) of green and blue, edged by the red of the Kalahari sands.

We are headed for a rustic game camp, one of the first to be built on a dry strip in the delta. Xakanaxa started out as a hunting lodge in the 1960s and has emerged as one of the region's top eco-friendly camps. The accommodation, I know, is on the water's edge where hippo snort by day and come ashore at night to graze.

We splash along a water-logged road in a huge game viewing vehicle and arrive at a thatched entrance. Lettie Letsile, the manager, is there to welcome us with the characteristic warmth of the Tswana – and a spread of tasty eats and drinks. But first we disappear to our luxury tents, and are charmed by the huge beds, the plush shower arrangements and the patios overlooking the delta.

Xakanaxa rustic? Hardly – other than the paraffin lamps and candles, it is as comfortable as the most luxurious hotel room. The shower water is heated, the toilet flushes and the bed is piled with blankets and a warm duvet. What more could anyone want?

By 3.30pm, fed and refreshed, we are on our way with our guide, Baams Motsama, who tells us about his people. Part River Bushman, part BaYei, he has lived in the area all his life.

"We like wild meat," he says, "buffalo, eland, lechwe (a type of antelope), lion, monitor lizard, but not crocodile or baboon."

Botswana's prime game viewing destination is awash as the heavy rains that fell on the Angolan plateau during summer reach the Okavango Delta, transforming the area into a Garden of Eden. *Winnie Graham reports*

The conversation stops abruptly when a radio message tells Baams that a pack of wild dogs has been spotted. We swing around and go in search – but the dogs are on the move and we lose them.

"Maybe tomorrow," says Baams. We splash through the savannah where impala graze and watch a herd of lechwe virtually walk on water. Waterbuck and wildebeest move out of range, but the zebra, giraffe and wildebeest are more obliging, posing for pictures. A turn in the road brings us face to face with an elephant stripping a branch off a tree. Again, we take pictures, but the big fellow gets restless with our prolonged presence.

"We are in his space," Baams says. "Time to move on."

It is winter and many of the migrant birds have moved north, yet there is still a surprising variety around. We see kestrels and bateleurs, black eagles and an African harrier-hawk. A fish eagle's call lets us know he's in the area.

At sunset Baams pulls up at a particularly pretty spot. We spot crocodile on the opposite bank and watch an antelope come tentatively to drink. But it's cocktail time in the bush and our attention is diverted as we tuck into the snacks.

When we return to camp, we learn that a rare bird – Pel's fishing owl – has moved in. We cannot wait to see it among the branches of a tall tree and stand in serried ranks with our binoculars focused on the spectacular bird. Several other guests have arrived, all American soccer fans who are fitting in a visit to the delta between games. The conversation centres on the World Cup.

There is no television in the camp but the men want the soccer scores. The staff have radios in their quarters and willingly keep guests informed while we relax round the dinner table.



A rare sight... Pel's fishing owl.

The meals at Xakanaxa are simple but excellent: a rich vegetable soup with fillet steaks one night, a fish entree and a tasty chicken dish the next. The desserts are decadent, the homemade breads a treat, the salads piled high. The buffet is laid out on long tables with waitresses on standby to serve the food. Wine flows freely. The conversation buzzes but, as the evening lengthens, guests are reminded that they have to be up by 6.15am for the early morning game drive. It's part of the ritual that no one wants to forgo.

We are escorted to our sleeping quarters by guides. No one is allowed to walk unattended after dark. Hippo come ashore to graze, lions roam free. Danger lurks.

In the night a guest wakes to the sound of a scuffle next to her tent. She hears a screech, then a pitiful bleat.

Silence. A leopard has taken a bush-buck within metres of her bed. In the daylight all that remains is a patch of flattened grass.

Lettie, the enterprising manager, has organised a picnic lunch today. We will leave by vehicle and see all we can of the delta, before returning by boat in the afternoon.

As we clamber into the vehicle, Baams says: "I'm taking orders. What do you want to see today?"

"Lions," say the Americans. "Wild dogs," cries a South African. "Buffalo," says another. The mood is set. Baams will be allocated points if he comes up to scratch. There is much laughter and light-hearted bantering. We are having fun.

Initially we don't have much success. We spot the occasional herd of impala and kudu. Baams is losing non-existent points. He points to a flock of guinea fowl.

"They don't count. You're 10 down," a guest mocks.

"Just wait," Baams responds.

The mood changes when we hear a pride of lions in the area. We need to find them. Silence descends as we splash over the savannah.

"There they are!"

Seven lions, lionesses and cubs have found a place in the sun. The males were asleep but lift their heads at our approach. The cubs are wrestling on the grass.

Baams switches off the engine. The point system is forgotten, our adrenaline is pumping, our cameras working overtime. Could we really be this close to carnivores?

Game viewing is no longer a game, but serious business as we encounter different species, large and small, on land and water. Even the sight of a warthog, his tail erect, is a thrill.

We return by boat through the waterways where Jacana fly up at our approach; otter dive beneath the surface and waterlilies abound.

We are told that the water from the Okavango is perfect for drinking. The sheer volume and constant flow ensures it purity.

But not all is perfect in this earthly paradise.

Baams points to prolific little water plants, *Salvinia Molesta*, that float on the surface of the delta and threaten to choke river life of oxygen. Rather like water hyacinth that has clogged many South African dams, the salvinia, or Kariba weed as it is also known, has become a curse which Baams is helping to eradicate. He is involved in breeding an eco-friendly "weevil" that eats the plants without destroying other vegetation.

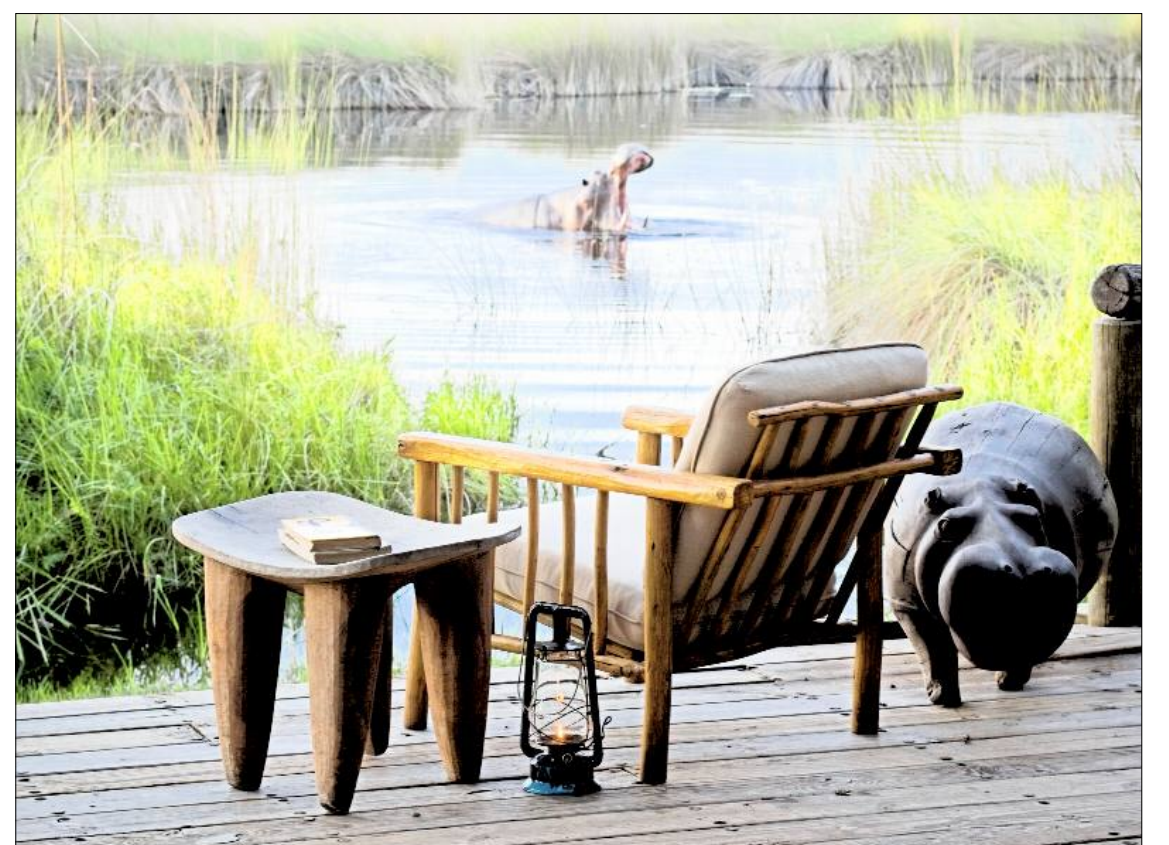
So successful has the project been that Prince Haakom of Norway recently visited Baams to see his work, which is being funded by the United Nations Development Programme, in conjunction with the country's department of water and Botswana University's Harry Oppenheimer/Okavango Research Centre.

"The project has been running since 1982," Baams adds. "We don't expect to eradicate the weed completely, but at least we can control it."

Back at Xakanaxa, the resident crocodile is sunning himself below the open dining room.

"He's been here several years," Lettie tells us. "His name is Popcorn. He knows his place and we know ours. That's the way it has always been in the delta."

For reservations, call 011 463 3999. Xakanaxa Camp: 00 267 683 0221/3 Website: [www.xakanaxa-camp.com](http://www.xakanaxa-camp.com), [www.moremi-safaris.com](http://www.moremi-safaris.com)



A view from the deck of the Xakanaxa Camp.



The pool at the Xakanaxa camp at dusk.

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