

Out of Africa

By **JUDY KOUTSKY** | August 27, 2007

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THE SOUTHERN PART OF AFRICA HAS LONG BEEN A DESTINATION FOR THOSE WHO SEEK THE EXCLUSIVITY of deluxe accommodations, but without sacrificing the adventure and exhilaration of safari. A destination package that takes travelers to Botswana and Namibia — two locales enjoying increased tourism among the jet-set — can be had through Wilderness Safaris (wilderness-safaris.com). I began my safari in Namibia, where I stayed for five nights, before continuing on to Botswana, where I stayed on for another five as a guest of the safari company.

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Dana Allen

On a luxury safari, Judy Houtsky travels to Botswana and Namibia. Above, gemsbok on the move at the Little Kulala camp in Namibia.

A vast and sparsely populated country with fewer than 2 million inhabitants, Namibia boasts the world's oldest desert, the Namib, and its tallest sand dunes. One of the most memorable stops during the trip was to the Sossusvlei region, where giant red dunes — so tall they seem to kiss the sky — meet the Atlantic Ocean. A hot-air balloon ride over the Namib Desert, including a Champagne breakfast in the middle of the bush upon landing, was a breathtaking way to take in the views.

The Little Kulala Lodge (littlekulala.com), located in the only reserve with direct access to Sossusvlei, offers myriad recreational activities, including game drives that allow travelers an up close view of oryx, ostriches, and other desert animals. Once there, a trek up along the dunes promises picturesque 360-degree views of the surrounding desert — a quick trot back down at top speed will have you feeling like a child as your feet sink deep into the sand. In the evenings, dinner under a bright African sky bursting with stars is made better by the resort's impressive wine cellar, which includes varieties from among the world's most well-known reserves.

During my visit, I traveled north to Etosha National Park, the crown jewel of wildlife in Namibia. For those seeking close encounters with a rhinoceros, a stay at the Little Ongava game lodge (littleongava.com), located in a private reserve near Etosha, almost ensures coming into contact with the region's white and black rhinoceros. At Ongava, preservation and the environment rule; accommodations are restricted to a limited number of guests.

After Namibia, Botswana offered an entirely different safari experience. In Botswana, the Okavango Delta (the largest inland delta in the world) sits smack in the middle of the Kalahari Desert. This

unique water system gives the land its lush, green quality, while the remaining 80% of the country is desert. The delta region is widely considered to be one of the premier wilderness sanctuaries in Africa. It is home to a variety of animals, including the "big five" (so called because they are the most difficult animals to shoot) — Cape buffalo, lions, leopards, elephants, and rhinoceroses. Additionally, vast herds of zebras, giraffes, wildebeests, warthogs, hipopotamuses, kudus, and other animals most people perhaps never knew existed make their homes here.

The country long ago made the decision to model their tourism on photo safaris with low-density/low-volume visitor controls. In retaining this air of exclusivity, Botswana continues to attract the high end of the tourist market. A safari trip to Botswana ranks as the most expensive on the continent. Visitors who stay in one of the country's luxury camps will usually be one of between 10 and 16 guests. Those guests enjoy sole use of between 600 and 1,000 square miles of land, eliminating the possibility of dozens of safari vehicles lined up in the parks and reserves. Indeed, with nearly 40% of the country's land set aside for wildlife conservation, visitors are far more likely to brush up against animals than tourists.

One of the best ways to see Botswana is to visit a number of safari camps. A favorite was Savuti Camp (savuticamp.com), situated in the Linyanti Reserve in northern Botswana. Here, one of the largest populations of elephants on the continent can be found and it's not uncommon to spot as many as 50 at once. Savuti is a classic wilderness camp, which means visitors interact closely with nature in top-notch accommodations. The camp consists of seven separate tented rooms and sits in front of a large watering hole that attracts hundreds of animals, including elephants, impala, and warthogs. Travelers are served their meals as animals feed, bathe, and drink just a short distance away.

The rooms include spacious beds, double sinks, rainforest showers, flush toilets, and a large veranda from which to watch the animals. At night, elephants and other wildlife can be seen walking alongside the tents grazing on tree leaves. Although you can hear them, it is no cause for alarm—the animals leave these man-made structures alone. Each morning and afternoon is spent on game drives taken in four-by-four vehicles. Our group tracked lions on the hunt for impala and warthogs, their dinner of choice. Two camps located in the heart of the Okavango Delta are Jao (jaocamp.com) and Little Vumbura (littlevumbura.com). Jao is a premier luxury camp that is popular among honeymooners and offers some of the largest rooms I have seen in the country, complete with an oversize bathtub and day bed on the deck. Because of its proximity to the delta, recreation at Jao focuses primarily on water activities including fishing, boat rides, and excursions on the traditional mokoros, dug-out canoes. A variety of water-dwelling animals are on view here. Little Vumbura is located in a private reserve in the northern reaches of the delta. There, I heard the most active nightlife. It was not uncommon to fall asleep to the sound of hippos grazing or elephants chomping on nearby trees well past sundown. Cape buffalo could be seen in the hundreds here and leopard and cheetah are often spotted.

After all of the game drives and exotic animals, a "sundowner" turned out to be one of the unforeseen highlights of this African safari. On one such evening, cocktails and gin and tonics — the safari beverages of choice — were passed around with canapés as we watched the sun set over giraffes, acacia trees, and the surrounding bush.

Reservations can be made through Travel Beyond (800-823-6063; travelbeyond.com).