

BOTSWANA

THE LAST SANCTUARY

Celebrating its 50th anniversary, this nation models how to save Africa's wildlife.



by COSTAS CHRIST photographs by AARON HUEY

The tawny sands of the Kalahari Desert envelop our 4x4 in a dusty cloud as we race along a rutted track to the Tsodilo Hills, in northern Botswana. Three rocky monoliths emerge into

view across the otherwise flat landscape that defines most of this African nation.

“This place has been occupied by humans for more than 100,000 years,” says my guide. “The indigenous San people believe it brings positive energy to all who come here.” Tsodilo’s stony mounds, since 2001 a World Heritage site, also contain one of the highest concentrations of ancient rock art on Earth, with more than 4,500 paintings discovered to date. The three main

hills are known as Male, Female, and Child, and are revered as the spot where creation began—a San Garden of Eden. Indeed, geological evidence indicates that water covered much of the area thousands of years ago, and fish were abundant.

Xuntae Xhao leads me along one of more than a dozen trails that traverse Tsodilo to the precise place where his San ancestors believe their creator lowered all creatures from the sky. Indentations that resemble the cloven hooves of a kudu antelope

and the outline of a human body mark the spot in the rockscape.

“People came first, followed by the animals to help them survive. It was a time when humans and animals were all equal,” he says. Today, this venerated place is looked after by the Tsodilo Community Trust, an innovative partnership between San villagers and the Botswana government.

“The San are Tsodilo’s rightful guardians and beneficiaries,” says Charles Motshubi, a community development organizer and the Tsodilo project manager. Xhao nods. “It is we who know the ancient stories of this land.”

That night the wind comes up, howling along the prehistoric cliffs adorned with depictions painted in red of rhinos, eland, and elephants.

INTO THE WILD

THE OKAVANGO DELTA

“Hippos and crocs patrol the deep water, so let’s keep to the shallows and give them their privacy,” Goitseone Monnaphutego says as we pole our way by *mokoro*, or canoe, into the Okavango Delta. What he doesn’t add is that elephants like their water both ways—shallow and deep. Now we watch two bulls emerge from the reeds ahead of us. As the bigger one turns our way and flaps his ears in warning, Monnaphutego brings the mokoro to a stop and whispers, “Whoever said the lion is king of the jungle is wrong. That title has always belonged to the elephant.”

This king is in grave danger. Between 2010 and 2012 alone, more than 100,000 African elephants were slaughtered across the African continent, fueled by Asia’s illegal ivory syndicates. In the mayhem, Botswana is fast becoming their last sanctuary. This landlocked nation boasts the largest herds of free-roaming elephants in Africa and is home to one third of the continent’s threatened elephant population.

“If this trend [poaching] continues unabated, it is likely that elephants will go extinct in most of their range in our lifetimes,” Botswana’s conservation-minded President Seretse Khama Ian Khama said last July. Khama’s plan: Promote community-based ecotourism, enforce strict antipoaching regulations, and slap a ban on big-game hunting.

Monnaphutego exemplifies this conservation approach. “My father was a poacher; I was destined to follow his path until

I learned wildlife is something to be conserved, not feared, to improve our lives.” He and veteran local guide Kgaga Kgaga run Okavango Museum Explorations, an outfitter specializing in discovering the delta by mokoro. They represent a new generation of Africans turned ecotourism entrepreneurs. Over several days, we pole along remote waterways that “my people have used for centuries,” encountering hippos, fish eagles, goliath herons, and wattled cranes. One evening we see the flash of a sitatunga as it disappears along the water’s edge. The aquatic antelope is so rare that locals refer to it as Botswana’s unicorn.

“I have seen a sitatunga only three times,” Monnaphutego murmurs to me. “As quick as they appear, they vanish.”



AFRICA’S ARK

MOREMI GAME RESERVE

“Wild dogs ahead!” exclaims the tracker, riding in a seat welded to the front frame of our Toyota Land Cruiser. Since dawn we’ve been hot on the trail of one of the most elusive and endangered mammals in the world—the African wild dog. We’re following not one but a pack of 21.

A dizzying array of tracks discloses that this pack hunted an impala the previous evening. Bellies full, the family is now lounging in the shade of an acacia—pups frolicking and adults

A guide poles a *mokoro*, or traditional canoe, through wetlands of the Okavango Delta (left), a World Heritage site that is home to endangered species such as the African wild dog and black rhino. Ancient rock art (above) draws visitors to Botswana’s other World Heritage site, the Tsodilo Hills, dubbed the “Louvre of the Desert.” Opening pages: Elephants big and small refuel at a watering hole in Botswana’s eastern Tuli Block area.



Horseback riders pass a group of zebras (above) in late afternoon on the Makgadikgadi salt pans, the remains of an ancient lake. Nearby, at tented San Camp, a staff member sets the table for dinner (opposite).

slumbering—belying the fact that their entire population has dwindled to some 5,000, which lands them on the doorstep of extinction. The good news: The Moremi Game Reserve’s ecosystem of overlapping marshes, grasslands, and woodlands of mopani and acacia trees has become a wild dog stronghold. The first such sanctuary created by local communities in southern Africa, it was established in the 1960s.

Today, safari lodges such as &Beyond’s Sandibe Okavango lodge offer a base camp for forays into Moremi.

“Conservation is at the heart of all we do,” &Beyond’s CEO, Joss Kent, tells me. His company, in partnership with another, Great Plains Conservation, and the Botswana government, has embarked on its most ambitious project, Rhinos Without Borders, to save another iconic animal now tottering on the edge of extinction; a rhino horn can fetch more than \$200,000 on the black market. (Its supposed medicinal power has been debunked by science.) Other safari outfitters, including Wilderness Safaris and Abercrombie & Kent, also are riding to the rescue in a huge effort to relocate rhinos from adjacent countries where poaching has skyrocketed in recent years. Botswana has become the continent’s safest haven, a modern-day ark for Africa’s threatened species. Sandibe Okavango Safari Lodge even resembles an ark, albeit of an eco-luxury kind. Elephants feed on palm trees beside guest rooms, baboons scamper across the lodge veranda, and nearby lions call to each other in deep throaty rumbles.

KALAHARI SALT FLATS THE MAKGADIKGADI

Among the most dramatic sights visible on satellite images of Africa is a cluster of huge irregular oblongs in the continent’s southern reaches. Zoom in closer and the Makgadikgadi Pans, one of the world’s largest complexes of salt flats, come into focus. Think barren, endless, empty—yet anything but lifeless. In this



NG MAPS: PARKS DATA FROM THE WORLD DATABASE ON PROTECTED AREAS (WDPA)



panscape of sometimes searing heat by day and cool, breezy nights, the footprints of zebras, giraffes, ostriches, and other desert-adapted creatures crisscross the otherworldly terrain, reminding me of astronauts’ footsteps left on the moon. While the tracks appear to wander aimlessly, in fact they weave a story: It is here that one of Africa’s epic migrations unfolds each year, as huge herds of zebras search for the mineral-rich grasses that flourish in the surrounding area. The zebras are dwarfed in number only by the hundreds of thousands of greater and lesser flamingos that come to nest in the remote pans. Pause long enough to look and listen, and a bounty of life materializes.



“We want to bring simplicity back to going on safari, and for us that means being in wide-open spaces on horseback,” explains David Foot, who set up Ride Botswana with his wife, Robyn. Their mission is to offer travelers a chance to experience an African safari from the old days, before the advent of bush planes and 4x4s.

PLANNING A TRIP

Ready to plan a trip to Botswana? Log on to our website, natgeotravel.com, to explore our online Botswana Guide, full of travel information, country facts, stories, tips, and photographs. To visit the official Botswana Tourism website: botswana-tourism.co.bw

From San Camp, a collection of six walk-in tents adorned with antiques and artifacts, we set out on horses, walking and then galloping toward a faraway tree line. In the 4,600 square miles of the Makgadikgadi that surround us, I do not see one building, cell tower, or paved road in any direction.

As sunset approaches, we stop for gin-and-tonic sundowners as herds of

wildebeests stare at us curiously. With no engine running and no exhaust fumes spewing, we merge with the animal kingdom.

“I’ve heard there are seven-star hotels somewhere in the world,” says Robyn. Sweeping her arm toward the vast sky above us, she declares, “This is a million-star hotel.”

Later that evening, I meet Super, San Camp’s senior guide, who has spent 26 years exploring the pans. We head out for a night drive and soon spot the rarest of the four hyena species, the brown hyena, as well as another rare night wanderer, the reclusive aardwolf. When a huge southern African porcupine wanders by, I know my night is complete.

**BUSH BIKING IN MASHATU
TULI BLOCK**

Tuli Block, a ribbon of land in the country’s far eastern region, is a place where people and wilderness intermingle to the benefit of both. It’s home to the Mashatu Game Reserve, one of the largest private protected areas in Africa’s south, and is serviced by locally owned tour operators and lodges, from rustic to luxury. Tuli also is the sole place in Botswana where you can go on a mountain biking safari in a designated game reserve. The master of bush cycling is Johan Rakumako, who helped map the Tour de Tuli, a five-day off-the-grid tour using elephant migration routes. Who knew that pachyderms create well-groomed mountain bike trails?

“To see a wild elephant from a mountain bike is an experience,” Rakumako enthuses as we set out for a day of riding through the remote Limpopo River Valley, where the

borders of Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa intersect. This part of the country stands in stark contrast to the rest of Botswana—craggy escarpments and sandstone ridges replace the flat plains, while waterfalls tumble and massive nyala berry trees create vistas of resplendent greenery.

The euphoria of a memorable journey washes over me. I know Rakumako, Monnaphutego, Kgaga, Xhao, and others I’ve met are creating a future for themselves and for some of the most endangered wildlife on Earth. As we ride along elephant highways, through dry riverbeds and across open fields, flocks of helmeted guinea fowl squawk, and browsing eland, herds of impala, and noble-looking giraffes watch us go by.

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Botswana three ways: Leopard-spotting often means looking for the big cats in trees (opposite); a cottage at Sandibe Okavango Safari Lodge (above); bikers in the Mashatu Game Reserve (below) cross paths with wildlife.

