

Botswana Okavango Delta: Adventure horseback safari in the Garden of Eden

The engine hums, the propeller whirs, and we're already taking to the skies – what an exhilarating feeling! We're flying in a charter plane from Maun to Macatoo Camp in the heart of the Okavango Delta, and I'm looking forward to one of the greatest adventures I've ever experienced. Even from the plane, I can spot a herd of buffalo and a herd of elephants – what a fantastic view!

Half an hour later, we land at the camp's airstrip, where Bongwe is already waiting for me, beaming with joy and holding out a cool drink. We hop into the jeep and set off along the bumpy track towards the camp – what I didn't know was that after a while we'd have to switch to a boat, as the camp can no longer be reached any other way due to the flood. The flood is stronger than ever this year, John, the camp's owner, tells me later. But first, I enjoy a brisk ride through tall grasses that rise high out of the sparkling water and am quite amazed at how quickly Bongwe races through the 'overgrown' water, knowing exactly where to go. On the way, we come across a solitary giraffe that is in the process of crossing the wide water ford. Just as we spot her, she spots us, stops and eyes us curiously – presumably to assess what to make of us. After she has inspected us sufficiently, she turns away from us again and strides off towards the mainland in long strides. I can't help but grin – it looks rather odd how this otherwise graceful animal stretches its legs sideways out of the water with every step. An unforgettable welcome to the Okavango Delta, to be sure! The warm welcome at the camp is no less touching: a reception committee awaits me at the jetty with a refreshing towel and welcomes me with a lovingly sung song – a moment you won't forget in a hurry.



John then keeps me company over a late lunch in the camp's cosy 'living room tent' and tells me interesting facts about the Delta before guiding me through the camp and finally to my tent. There I have some time to rest before fresh coffee and tea are served. The comfortable tent with its attached front terrace, featuring two loungers, wins me over in an instant: There's even a wardrobe, a desk, plenty of storage space, rugs and a spacious bathroom. The beds are incredibly comfortable – all in all, in no way comparable to a conventional camping tent; it's far too luxuriously equipped for that, and you can stand upright anywhere in it. I'm delighted that I can watch what's happening around the tent through the mosquito-netted windows. Over the course of the next week, I'll often see the odd bushbuck grazing right next to my bed or a troop of monkeys scurrying past. The sandy ground in and around the camp also wins me over: it's so wonderfully fine and it's simply a pleasure to walk around barefoot!

In addition to the tents, the idyllic camp consists of the aforementioned 'living room tent' with a bar, where there is a cosy seating area. Right by the jetty, a circle of chairs has been set up with a fire pit in the middle, where the group likes to gather after dinner. In the mornings, coffee is kept warm and bread toasted over the fire here, which lends breakfast a special atmosphere. It's lovely when, during dinner – which always takes place under the open sky – hot coals from the fire are placed under your chair. The large sun deck with a pool, hammock and seating and lounging areas is also fantastic, offering sweeping views across the water. If you spend the afternoon here, it's not uncommon to see a small herd of antelopes or other wildlife passing by.

From the very first ride, I'm absolutely thrilled by the horses! Over the course of the week, I'll be riding three of the roughly 40 horses: Simba, Mufasa and Loxley. Simba is exactly the right companion for the first ride, as he keeps his cool in every situation, yet still shows energy and determination. Mufasa is simply irresistible! Alert, reliable and energetic, he responds to even the slightest cue incredibly quickly and skilfully. Loxley is a handsome Arabian with plenty of character, and I loved him from the very first minute! On one occasion, during a long and deep water crossing, he rears up when I'm asked to steer him briefly away from the group, which adds an extra adrenaline rush to the whole experience, especially as we were already knee-deep in water anyway. The occasional jumping and frequent galloping through the water also brings great joy to the horses and me – even if you're soaking wet afterwards. All the horses prove to be reliable and, for the most part, remain calm even in more extreme situations. At one point, we venture a little too close to a herd of elephants, which the matriarch doesn't like at all, so after threatening to flap her ears, she begins to trumpet and slowly moves towards us. Although Loxley's nervousness is evident at this moment, he still responds to my cues as I ride him behind the backup guide's horse to gallop away from the elephants, whilst they are distracted by our guide. On another occasion, we are galloping through the water when Bongwe and his horse, along with Mufasa and me, fall into a hole, causing Bongwe to land in the water. A minor scare that quickly turned into laughter. A slightly bigger

scare comes from a terrifying encounter on horseback in the water: Simba and I are swimming through a wide ford when Bongwe urges me to get out of the water. When I ask what's going on, he replies that a crocodile has just been lurking near my leg. After this incident, we feel a bit queasy when we cross water again... My most thrilling experience comes with Mufasa, as we gallop right through the floodwaters alongside four giraffes and two herds of zebras, and in the heat of the moment he approaches the giraffes to within arm's length – this was surely the most unforgettable moment of all.

The other encounters with the wildlife are spectacular, and on every ride we experience something unforgettable: over two days we see large herds of buffalo galloping through the water, and we marvel at close quarters at plenty of elephants – alone or in herds – which often gives us goosebumps and instils a sense of awe. We also encounter several giraffe families, whom we either see galloping past or as they curiously eye us up. Zebras and buffalo, as well as most antelopes, peek out rather shyly from behind bushes before fleeing from us. The tsessebe antelope, however, proves to be very tame: On one occasion, we spot two of them crouching on a small hill with their young – we can even ride around them – it doesn't seem to bother them. We once saw ostriches running at great speed in the distance – a magnificent sight! We also marvel at the many large and small birds, such as mighty eagles or iridescently coloured songbirds.



At the camp, alongside the bushbucks and monkeys, there are also squirrels and hornbills with their red, white and grey curved beaks. They often make us laugh when they squabble over crumbs on the ground or attack the lunch buffet. The squirrels are even tame enough to be handled: if you have something edible in your hand, they confidently scurry up to you to help themselves. However, when I once held out a green pepper to a squirrel, I was bitten on the finger by razor-sharp little teeth – peppers are apparently not among their favourite foods.

The table in the Okavango Delta is always lavishly, sumptuously and imaginatively laid. The lunch menu consists of cold and hot delicacies as well as a cheese or fruit platter, and the three-course dinner is more than excellent – and all this in the middle of the wilderness! The sundowner is often served on the sun deck along with delicious little canapés, but sometimes also in the camp's lounge or somewhere else entirely, for example if dinner is being served on an island, where we then travel by boat.

On one occasion, we come out of the water with the horses just in time for lunch, to find a beautiful table laid out right on the shore, and we are welcomed with a glass of champagne after dismounting. As we are soaking wet from swimming and galloping through the water, the camp staff have thoughtfully laid out a change of clothes from our tent so that we can enjoy our meal in dry comfort. What a lovely surprise!



Every now and then, we swap the afternoon ride for a trip by boat or mokoro (a hollowed-out dugout canoe) and spot a hippopotamus, elephants and giraffes. On a fun fishing trip, as a complete novice, I catch a fish after just my second attempt (it was to remain the only one) – beginner's luck.

We spend one night in the treehouse, which is a few minutes' boat ride from the camp. When we arrive there after dinner, our mattresses, draped in mosquito nets, await us on the deck, brightly lit by paraffin lamps. We look forward to the night in the open air among the treetops like little children and enjoy listening to the sounds of the African night even more intently than usual, feeling as though we are right in the heart of the bush. In the morning, we are gently roused from sleep by the first rays of the rising sun – the moment we open our eyes, we are treated to a breathtaking view of the delta bathed in soft light...

I will never forget the days in the Okavango Delta: there is simply such a sense of peace here – wherever you look, untouched wilderness, and in the midst of it all, an oasis: Macatoo Camp, where the world seems more than just alright. The many hours spent together on horseback, engaged in lively conversation with the guides and John, will also remain in my memory, as will the smiling faces of the entire camp staff, who were consistently attentive and always cheerful.

In the end, our expectations of this safari in the Garden of Eden were not only met, but far exceeded.

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The trip: <http://www.reiterreisen.com/oko008.htm>