

Highlights from the Okavango Delta

From Frankfurt to Windhoek on a night flight, and after a brief stop at the small but international airport, we head on to Maun. Seven of the estimated 20 passengers disembark and follow an official into the international terminal. A short wait, as there is no visa officer on duty yet. The official turns up after five minutes with her entry stamp: get stamped and collect your luggage, which is still being carried in piece by piece here (and that's meant quite literally). I head outside and am warmly welcomed, then directed to Paul, the pilot of the tiny Cessna, to be taken to the camp. I'm given an official flight ticket, then it's a relaxed walk through security and onto the plane. On board with me are the farrier and a co-pilot. The luggage is stowed in the back and the flight in the small plane is pleasant: a stunning panorama over the Okavango Delta. It's the rainy season, and after the dry spell, this is eagerly awaited. There's hardly any water to be seen, but many currently 'dry' watercourses are clearly visible from above. There are just a few minor bumps, but this 30-minute flight is over in no time and we land on a sandy airstrip in the middle of the bush. A jeep is there to meet us, whilst a member of staff climbs into the plane. Here at the camp, the routine is three months' work followed by one month's holiday. We are welcomed and driven to the camp along the only passable sandy track – a journey of about 15 minutes. The journey itself is an experience, and giraffes greet us along the way. The manager, Kathie, is waiting for me at the camp and gives me a brief briefing before lunch: outside, in a perfect setting with a view of the bush. Simon, our waiter, serves us lasagne, salad, bread, cheese and fresh fruit. Accompanied by a glass of wine and water – a perfect start. I have a little time to look around and settle into my 'tent': spacious, with beds, a wardrobe, a desk, luggage racks and, at the back, a fully equipped bathroom: toilet, washbasin and a shower that even has hot water – what a luxury in the middle of the bush!



At the front is a terrace with sun loungers and an unobstructed view of the bush – better than any TV programme! A small family of baboons, comprising two adults and a baby, is currently walking past. The animals respect the tents but roam freely through ‘their home’, where I’m allowed to be a guest. After tea time with fresh cake and coffee or tea, we finally set off on our first ride, where we also encounter lots of animals: elephants, giraffes, impalas, kudus and so on. I’m riding Foster, an easy-to-ride and experienced ‘photo horse’.

Afterwards, there’s a sundowner and a beautiful sunset before I try out the bush shower – marvellous! Later, dinner is served al fresco, naturally a multi-course meal at a beautifully laid table. Afterwards, you’re taken back to your tent, where, after a night on the plane, I sleep soundly amidst the sounds of the bush.

A typical day at the camp looks like this: 5.30 am: woken up with coffee or tea served at the bedside.

6.00 am: Breakfast by the campfire with yoghurt, fresh fruit, toast, cereals, etc.

6.30 am: Set off on horseback. In the morning, you ride the same horse as the previous evening. The ride lasts about 4 hours with a short snack break (apples and muesli bars are served as a second breakfast), and everyone carries their own water bottle. It’s also great fun to gallop briskly through the bush.

11.30 am Lunch at the camp or, occasionally, outdoors at a set table in a shady spot, with a glass of champagne as an aperitif.

Followed by a siesta. Free time to read, sleep, take a dip in the refreshing pool or relax on the terrace and watch the bush.

4.30 pm Tea time with fresh cake – the carrot cake is definitely my favourite! 5.00–

5.30 pm Set off for the evening ride, lasting around 1½–2 hours. We ride at a walk and a trot so that you can get used to your new horse.

Afterwards, we enjoy appetisers and drinks.

8.00 pm: A multi-course dinner is served at an outdoor table. Impressions from 10

days in the bush:

- The smell of coffee wakes me; I open my eyes and my first glance falls on the bush. I blink again and realise I’ve seen it right: a giraffe emerges from behind a bush and strolls leisurely towards the next tree. It’s followed closely by two young ones, striding along on their long legs. What a beautiful sight – I quickly grab my camera; you never know if a moment like this will happen again.

- Dinner. We’re sitting in a cosy circle, and a few legendary bush stories and bush adventures involving Ritten are doing the rounds. Despite the heat, the farrier has shod and filed the hooves of nearly 30 horses. And suddenly we hear branches and trees cracking; something rather large must be on the move. It’s pitch black, but our guide Bongwe and Mod can identify the animals by the sounds they make. It looks like there are elephants on the move again... We can’t see them, but they’re very close by and making their way along the path. It’s best not to get too close to them, though. They make their way at a leisurely pace, and sure enough, it’s a whole herd. Kathie therefore decides to take a jeep back to her tent later – you really shouldn’t find yourself face to face with these grey giants on foot! The great thing here in the middle of the bush is that you get to see so much and never know what’s coming next:

That's nature and life out here in the wilderness. Only one thing is certain: there's plenty to see and it never gets boring!

- This morning's ride on Star is fantastic: a few wonderful gallops right through the bush, occasionally startling a bushbuck or an impala. But then an unexpected highlight: a herd of wildebeest and a herd of zebras are galloping alongside us! I've truly arrived in the African bush! Later, we come to one of the few, slightly larger waterholes, and the scene is truly unique: the occasional nostril peeks out of the water, and a whole herd of hippos is watching us curiously.

They don't see horses very often... Over 20 of them, including calves, are enjoying the vital, cool water and eyeing us curiously. A few crocodiles can also be spotted through the nostrils peeking out. There's quite a lot going on in this pool, and you definitely shouldn't go swimming here!

We ride on and, just before the end of the ride, we come across a herd of giraffes. Wow! With their long legs, they gallop through the open bushland as if in slow motion. We manage to snap a few good photos before they cheerfully gallop off again. We round a bend to find the table already laid out for us. As always, the horses are well looked after by the grooms, who ride them back to the stables and then tend to them. The guests are served champagne before another delicious meal is brought out. Afterwards, we make the short journey back to camp by jeep.

- The camp is lit by torches and gas lamps, because once darkness falls at night, you can't see a thing. The table is laid out in front of the main tent: the appetiser is served with a drink straight after the ride, followed by three further courses in the evening. All accompanied by a glass of wine. The ultimate holiday! Simon announces the menu and we share stories of the day's events. Added to this are the many different sounds, and we're surprised to discover which sounds come from which animals: I'd imagined zebra and buffalo calls to be quite different. This evening, however, it's quiet at times, with only the occasional 'alarm call' to be heard.

The predators are on the move. Here, they could be lions, cheetahs or leopards. Baboons warn one another, as do impalas, and move themselves and their young to safety.

The journey by jeep to his tent is a bit longer for the farrier today: he has to wait a while until the numerous water buffalo clear the path to his tent.

- Zorba is my horse for the morning today – and what a horse he is. A day for buffalo.

We set off on horseback and, after just a few metres, we find ourselves face to face with a few giraffes. A first photo stop, then we ride through the endless expanse without spotting any animals. Only now and then does a bushbuck, tsessebe or impala leap out of the bush. And suddenly, a haze: like a black wall, hundreds of water buffalo appear and gather together before galloping off as a mass. Like mist, the grey haze rises and envelops the herd. We gallop alongside them for a while until we come to a halt just ahead of them. The herd takes up position and approaches the horses curiously... ever closer... until suddenly the horses are deemed 'dangerous' and the entire herd turns on its heel and bolts.

We ride on, enjoying a few stretches of gallop with the occasional leap over small tree trunks, before we spot a huge herd of elephants, including many calves, frolicking around a waterhole. Their ears help them cool down, and we manage to take some great photos before the herd notices us. The wind has given away our scent: they gather together and set off at a leisurely but determined pace. Over 50 animals – an impressive sight!



On the way back to the stables, we come across a few buffalo again before heading back to the stables.

- Captain Hook

We're sitting relaxed at the table after lunch, watching the 'bush cinema'. A hornbill cheekily approaches the laid table and pecks up the crumbs. He's an old acquaintance at the camp: Captain Hook. The name comes from the fact that his left leg was broken and therefore looks crooked. But he's learnt to cope with it, skilfully using his tail as a stabiliser, and still manages to snatch the toast away from his bird rivals. That's how it is here in the bush: everyone tries to survive in their own way.

- A small bat hangs upside down in the main tent. Disturbed by a few flies, it interrupts its nap, shaking its head – along with its enormous ears – to shoo away the pesky creatures. A quick stretch, wings folded back, and eyes closed. It continues to sleep upside down.

- The evening ride is incredible: never before have so many buffalo been seen gathered in one place! Water buffalo as far as the eye can see! And to top it off, a hippo, antelopes, zebras, tsessebes and lots of elephants, including a tiny baby.

Almost surrounded, we ride on; I'm riding Apache, a grey Arabian – I've found another favourite horse. Giraffes also cross our path, as if every animal in the bush wanted to gather at this waterhole and in the open field. The calm before the storm?



- I wake up. It is still dark; only gradually is dawn breaking. Thunder and wind sweep across the bush, and the long-awaited rain finally arrives: locally, as it usually only rains in one spot. A few birds begin their morning concert, but it was the crackling in the trees that woke me – there seems to be quite a lot going on. Herds of buffalo are galloping as if fleeing from something – or is it zebras? It's not easy to tell. It's getting lighter and I can make out a few things; lo and behold, right next to my tent on the right, an elephant has made itself comfortable and is nibbling on the trees. From the bathroom, I can only see its trunk reaching into the branches. Shortly afterwards, a second gentle giant appears. Impressive to see them so close! I decide to wait until someone comes to collect me, as one of the elephants is standing right by the front steps, blocking the way, whilst the other is blocking the side path round the back. A short while later, Mod arrives, spots the elephants and manages to coax them both forward a little by clapping his hands, clearing the way to the steps leading to breakfast. 'George' is an old acquaintance with a peaceful nature. Nevertheless, they are wild animals living in the wild. I've never been this close to elephants in the wild before – what a fantastic experience! This, too, is Africa.

- After days of heat reaching 41 °C, the rain has arrived, accompanied by thunder, lightning and cooler air. I take my place in Apache's saddle and off we go. It's only drizzling lightly, and we're in for some brilliant gallops, some of them at a good pace. We even clear small tree trunks with ease. Where the rain has fallen, greenery is sprouting; even trees that looked as though they'd died are now budding. The animals, on the other hand, have retreated and are much sparser: two

elephants, the occasional springbok, a few tsessebes, later a hyena, the odd warthog and, to round it off, a family of giraffes: mother, father and calf.

In between lies the vast plain of the currently dry delta. Here and there, shells from the last flood can still be found... and a rainbow accompanies us too. Our guides ride in such a way that we can see the rain and the clouds in the background, but don't get caught in them. Only right at the very end do we have to ride through the rain once to get back to the stables. At a gallop, of course! It's a long stretch and after just a few metres we're soaked. At the stables, we tend to the horses and rush to dry off. Nature is still the most powerful force and puts on a magnificent show.

- Today I'm riding Simba, the little chestnut who'd rather gallop than trot. Today we're exploring a more remote part of the delta, where there are still some flooded sections. Only a few after the dry season, but at least it's the bush-delta atmosphere you'd imagine. Water lilies and water that reaches right up to our feet. That brief gallop through the water gives you exactly the feeling promised by pictures of this region. Smaller, raised islets protect the termite mounds from getting wet; although the ground is water, the grass makes everything look simply green, like a huge, flooded meadow.

We're lucky again today and spot quite a few animals: three warthogs grazing and wallowing in the mud,

a herd of giraffes including calves, storks, kudus with their large ears, impalas with their young, tsessebes, and the impressive, shy red antelopes, which only stay in wet areas and have special hooves that allow them to move effortlessly through the mud. Shy zebras also cross our path, and last but not least, two bull elephants – one of which flees back to his herd, whilst the other poses for photos and calmly carries on eating. None of this bothers the horses; they're used to wild animals and are happy to be allowed to graze. A few longer gallops, including zigzagging through the bush to avoid obstacles, make this ride another highlight in the Delta.

- Once again, I get to mount the 4½-year-old Seretse, a magnificent horse whom I've instantly declared my favourite. Although sometimes a little less experienced than his more seasoned companions, he does a fantastic job!

Today we come across plenty of warthogs, redbucks, impalas, elephants, giraffes and buffalo, but today is a special day! Fresh leopard tracks are visible in the sand, and a little later his presence is confirmed by a torn warthog carcass hanging upside down from a tree. These solitary creatures are masters of camouflage, and if they don't want to be seen, you simply won't spot them. We ride on, our eyes constantly scanning the vast expanse of the bush, when I spot something cat-like with a tail darting into a bush. I tell Scorpion, the back guide, that I've seen something cat-like but that it could just as easily be another animal. Leopards are extremely shy. We all look around searchingly and Bongwe sets off at a trot, with us following behind. We reach a small rise by a tree when we hear a hiss. There's no doubt about it – it's a leopard! Bongwe suddenly sets off in pursuit of the predator. Scorpion is already on the other side, and we ride in full gallop after Bongwe across open bushland, keeping a safe distance from the animal, of course. Then we stop and

wait, as the master of camouflage seems to have vanished into thin air. We wait whilst the horses graze and hear another hiss; a little later, the leopard darts across the open plain towards the next hill, only to disappear behind some bushes for good. What a shy and graceful animal, a first-class sprinter – how lucky we are! Goodbye, leopard. We carry on, and a hippopotamus and more antelopes also cross our path before we reach a platform in a tree.

The grooms take charge of the horses, and we're greeted by Zero at a laid table on the platform, with champagne and a magnificent view. Shortly afterwards, Kathie arrives with a fresh lunch. Monkeys and birds in the trees watch us as we enjoy our delicious meal (spinach or meat casserole, salad, bread, fresh fruit). Later, we're able to watch a family of elephants at a waterhole from above. What a morning ride!



- Evening ride on Jao, a huge grey Percheron. I'd always wanted to ride a horse like this and it was brilliant: a comfortable trot and generally very responsive to the leg, yet he has immense power and knows it. He even managed a small jump – a horse with great character.

Of course, as well as the beautiful bush landscape, we also spotted antelopes, buffalo, giraffes and the like. Afterwards, a sundowner and 'bush TV', with today's programme featuring a live sunset broadcast.

- I get to ride Champion again this morning – I'm really looking forward to it, as he's one of my personal favourites. But there are so many other brilliant horses here too, all easy to ride and calm; just riding them is pure pleasure in itself. Add to that the wildlife spotting – it's absolutely fantastic.

We head into the bush and shortly afterwards we come across a huge herd of buffalo. When they set off, they knock down everything in their path – trees and bushes, for example – it's impressive! With buffalo, you never really know how they'll react, so it's best to keep a safe distance. Later on, we see giraffes, hippos, impalas, kudus and tsessebes, but the highlight this morning is definitely the brisk gallop alongside a herd of zebras, followed by tsessebes and impalas. Welcome to Africa!

Bongwe has adjusted something on the saddle and tries to climb over a tree trunk, but it's rotten on the inside and gives way. He tries again further back and suddenly a huge water monitor lizard darts out, startled, and scurries back towards the water. And right in the middle of the sandy track, we also find large eggs. Ostriches have 'left them behind' here, but they're clearly no longer alive. On top of that, there are some really fast gallops, some of them quite long, where the well-trained and energetic horses show what they're made of.

- One last ride on Seretse. Gorgeous light, warm air, birds, giraffes and the like come to bid us farewell. Then we reach the viewing platform, where we're served a sundowner and some appetisers. Later, we head back to camp by jeep (the horses are ridden back by the grooms). A stick under the jeep is making a noise, so we shine a torch to see what it is. On another occasion, a python had made itself comfortable under the car, but this time it was just a stick. After a refreshing shower – what a luxury in the middle of the bush – it's time for dinner. The menu is read out, delicious as ever: vegetable soup, followed by chicken and stuffed aubergines, served with sugar snap peas, carrots and potato wedges, and later a lovely pudding with vanilla sauce. We have a glass of wine with it and, as it's our last evening, things get a bit merry. The two younger women say their goodbyes quickly, whilst we sit together for a long time, guessing animal sounds and swapping bush stories. A hyena runs right past us and then disappears into the night. Later, we're each escorted back to our tents – what a lovely final evening. I'd love to stay here; I've felt right at home.

- It's a 20–30-minute jeep ride to the airstrip in the middle of the bush. This time there are no animals there; only their droppings are visible here and there. The tiny Cessna arrives, we load our luggage, the pilot says a couple of words about safety, we fasten our seatbelts, and off we go.

Once again, we have a fantastic view over the vast delta, and there's just one member of staff and me on board. In the end, after a bit of a bumpy ride, we land safely in Maun. For me, the journey now continues on to Namibia....

You can find all the information about the programme at www.reiterreisen.com/oko008.htm