



SWIMMING TRUNKS: Elephants, elephants everywhere.

Suspended timelessly in a bubble of peace

Kate Turkington returns to one of her favourite places on earth, the unspoilt watery wilderness of the Okavango Delta in Botswana

IT'S VERY late. The Milky Way cuts a brilliant swathe through a dark sky ablaze with stars. Hippos are on the move, chortling, swishing, splashing around the camp. A Pel's Fishing Owl – one of the world's most sought-after birds – screeches from a low branch, its call like that of a soul in torment.

A lion roars softly in the distance, as closer, a hyena whoops. Painted reed frogs supply a backing chorus of piping chirps. The great grey shape of a bull elephant materialises beyond the fire, and vanishes as silently as it came. It's just another night in Botswana's legendary Okavango Delta.

There aren't many places left on earth that can be called true wilderness. This is one of them. Deep in the heart of Botswana, it's the only inland delta of its kind in the world. Formed by the Okavango River, which floods down from the Angolan highlands once a year, it fans out into north-western Botswana in a meandering, complex network of papyrus-lined channels, deep still pools, secret waterways where reeds and grasses almost meet over your head, palm-fringed islands and natural lagoons. The lily-covered crystal-clear water is so pure you can drink it.

This year the rains and the flood have been exceptional and the water has almost reached Maun. Even the legendary "Stolen Channel" – the Savuti river – which has been dry for decades, is flowing freely. Thousands of zebra are roaming the area accompanied by the predators which have followed in their wake from Moremi Wildlife Reserve.

Lettie Letsile, manager of Xakanaxa Camp, says she has never seen so much water. As a small girl growing up in Makalamabedi village, north-east of Maun, she remembers going to fetch water from the river for Beauty, her grandmother. "One evening I saw an owl with two faces and ran all the way home. I was so frightened." Although now an accomplished birder, Lettie didn't know then that the fierce tiny pearl-spotted owl, which fits inside a beer mug, has "mock" eyes on the back of its head to deter predators.



TRANQUILLITY: Xakanaxa Camp

"And we were always very careful at full moon because Beauty told us that the moon was a giant eye watching us, and we were very scared of giants. And of witches too. We could always recognise a witch because she had long, long nails." Beauty would no doubt be amazed today to see her granddaughter managing one of the delta's oldest and loveliest camps.



"He is an expert poler, skillfully guiding our mokoro through a maze of hippo channels."

Two young American brothers, Ryan and Matt Fleming from Seattle, have momentarily fled South Africa's soccer frenzy to come to the Okavango. We have driven far south, have watched a pride of 12 lions dozing in the midday sun, a baby waterbuck running after its mother, several stately giraffe, and some Okavango "specials" – red lechwe, and the highly endangered wattled cranes and saddle-billed storks.

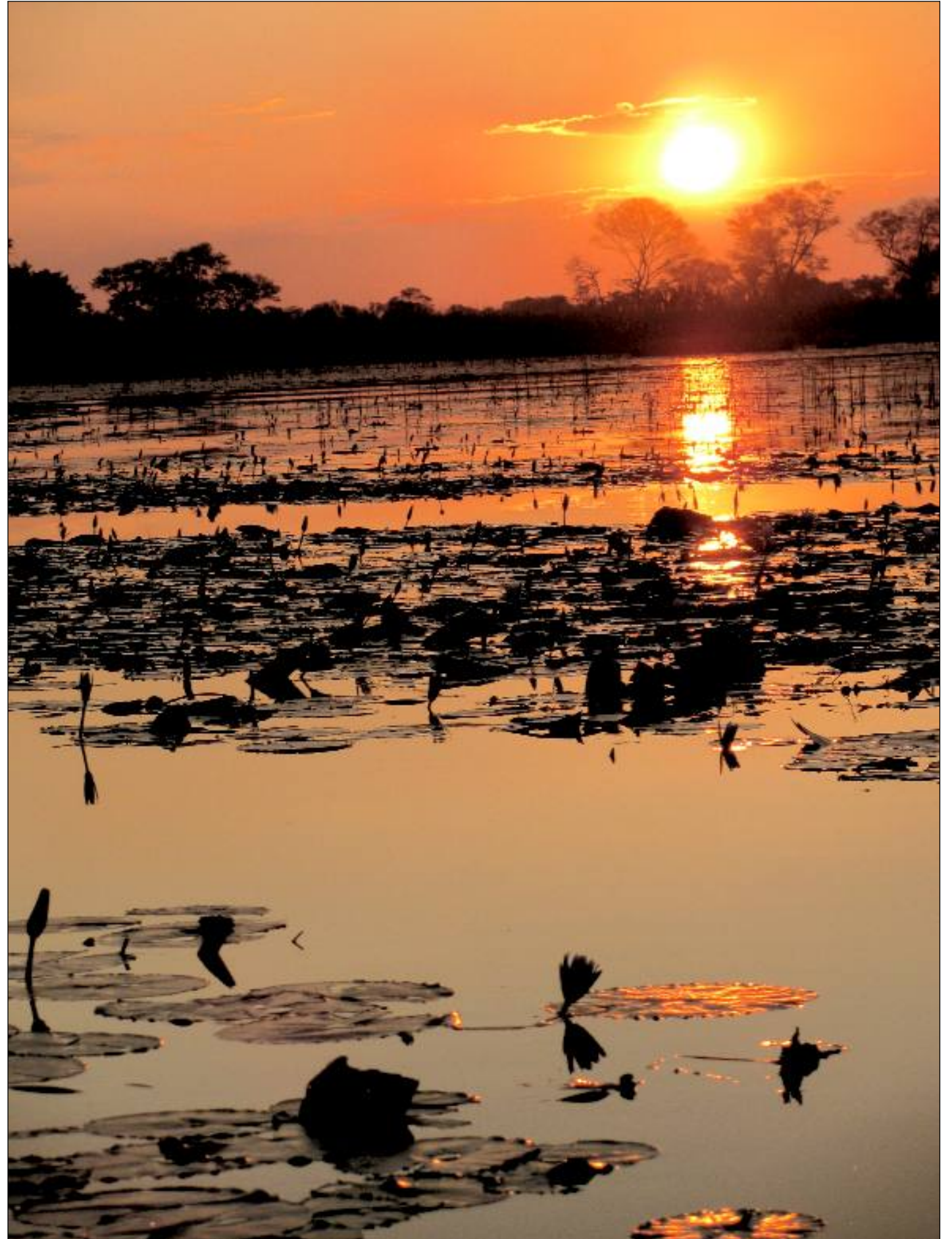
After a picnic beneath a giant sausage tree, where parrots scold us and starlings murmur, we climb into the boat for the long journey back to camp. The sky is a washed out blue, and a chill wind whips around us, because this is winter, when temperatures can drop to freezing after the sun goes down. We chug along through feathery fronds of papyrus, thick reeds, flat bright green lily pads, and carpets of white water lilies whose long red juicy stems float just below the surface.

My world is half sky, half reeds and water. Tops of tall trees show above the head-high vegetation as clumps of waterberry trees arch over us. A tiny bejewelled malachite kingfisher darts across our narrow channel as it opens into a wide sparkling lagoon where hippos eyeball us inquisitively and jacanas lily-trot. The wind picks up, and a crocodile slithers into the water.

But there is another danger in this eden. A Brazilian water weed (*Salvinia molesta*) is encroaching. Back at camp, our ranger, Baams, shows us a weevil-breeding project which combats the weed. The weevils (*Cyrtobagous salviniae*) are bred in large half drums of water, and then released into areas where the weed is proliferating. The project has been going for 25 years and is just keeping the *Salvinia* at bay.

Like many guides in the delta, Baams has his share of hippo stories. Once, after being chased by an angry hippo, he describes how he "was shaking like a small tree in a big wind". And like all the local guides, he is an expert poler, skillfully guiding our mokoro through a maze of hippo channels and narrow waterways. "We learnt to pole as children. Our parents wouldn't let us use their mokoros because they said we would break them, so we cut down palm trees and made mini mokoros out of the trunks."

Another day, at Orient Express's Eagle Island Camp, I go for a bush walk with Fiannula and John from the UK, on their first visit to the delta. Our guide is the experienced Roc, from the Baye tribe. We have zoomed through pods of hippos, along innumerable waterways, drifted along in a mokoro, and are now walking on one of the



WATERWAYS: Another glorious sunset over the Okavango Delta.

PICTURES: KATE TURKINGTON

delta's many islands. Roc explains the "four keystones of the delta – termites, elephants, hippos and mice. These creatures keep the waterways open, and renew the vegetation and soil."

"Mice?" I question. "Oh yes, very important," says Roc. "Mice spend a lot of time gathering and hiding food supplies of seeds, burying their caches in holes in the ground. Problem is, they often forget where they've hidden them, and that means the seeds sprout and grow and so new trees, plants and shrubs spring up."

Our trip ends with a helicopter ride over the Okavango back to Maun. Stuart Mackay, who runs Mackair, has just dropped off England's Prince William and Prince Harry, frequent visitors to Botswana, in Maun. He points out game as we fly above the seemingly endless water wilderness. A herd of buffalo doesn't pause in its collective chewing as we fly over. Elephants are more skittish and Stuart takes great care not to fly too low and alarm them. Giraffe are ultra cool, while sunbathing hippos take to the water in a splashing, hectic rush.

That's about the only rush you'll experience in the Okavango Delta. You'll experience tranquillity, a cocooning-away from the real world, as you are suspended timelessly in a bubble of perfect peace.

Very importantly – and safety is an issue on many travellers' minds – it's safe. Over 40 years on after independence in 1966, Botswana is not only the world's leading producer of gem quality diamonds and one of Africa's richest countries, but it's also a role model for a peaceful, stable democracy. You might have lions and hyenas outside your lodge or tent, but there certainly won't be predators of the two-footed variety.



HIPPO CHANNELS: Mud, mud, glorious mud.

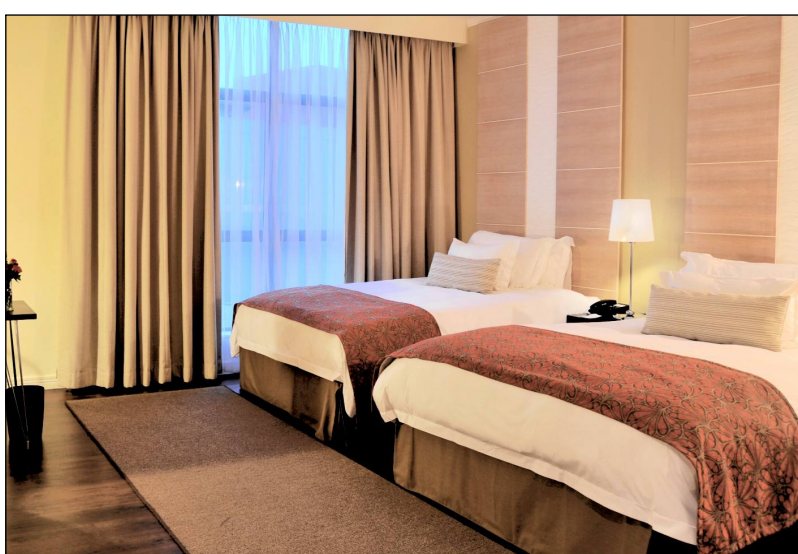
Fact file

CHOOSE one of three Orient Express Camps: Eagle Island Lodge – deep in the Delta. Kwai River Lodge – on the edge of Moremi Wildlife Reserve. Savuti Elephant Camp – south of Chobe. www.orient-express-safaris.com Xakanaxa Camp, www.moremi-safaris.com; Tel: +27 011 463 3999

e-mail: info@moremi-safaris.com; Mackair: www.mackair.co.bw; Tel: +267 686 0675; e-mail: reservations@mackair.co.bw

Going it alone:

You'll need a 4x4 and good driving skills. Spanking new ablution blocks have been built at the public camping sites in Moremi, Savuti and Chobe with hot and cold running water.



ELEGANT COMFORT: A suite at the Garden Court Umhlanga hotel.

Meander through the peaceful place of reeds

ENTER the Sunday Independent/Star Travel Club competition to win a getaway at Southern Sun's Garden Court Umhlanga hotel. This prize includes two nights accommodation for two sharing, with breakfast.

To enter post your details, travel club number and the hotel name to: The Marketing Department, Box 1014, Joburg, 2000 by July 27. To join The Star Travel Club enclose a R100 membership fee payable to The Star Travel Club with your entry as only members can enter this competition. Alternatively, call 011 633 2341 (am) with your credit card. This

includes a three-month subscription to Saturday Star or Pretoria News Weekend. If you join or renew your membership this year you could win a four-night cruise aboard MSC Sinfonia with MSC Cruises and Starlight Cruises. They are also offering monthly cruises.

Southern Sun's new Garden Court Umhlanga hotel opened in May. Whether in the region for business or leisure, guests will be assured of the definitive Garden Court experience where a great stay starts and ends with a great day.

With a fresh, contemporary



design concept incorporating the area's influence, the new hotel is in close proximity to the Umhlanga Gateway complex and nearby beaches.



The source of inspiration for the architectural blueprint and internal visual approach lies in the literal translation of Umhlanga – meaning "place of reeds" in isiZulu. The hotel incorporates the literal aesthetic of a reed, which is charac-

terised by an aubergine sheath and green stem. This has influenced the sophisticated style, colour palette and chosen photographic reed-inspired artworks.

The public spaces, from the double-volume entrance and reception through to the dining area, will mirror the intrinsic theme while imbuing warmth and comfort – all reinforcing the coastal location, as well as instilling a sense of calm and relaxation and redefining a great stay.

For further information visit www.southernsun.com