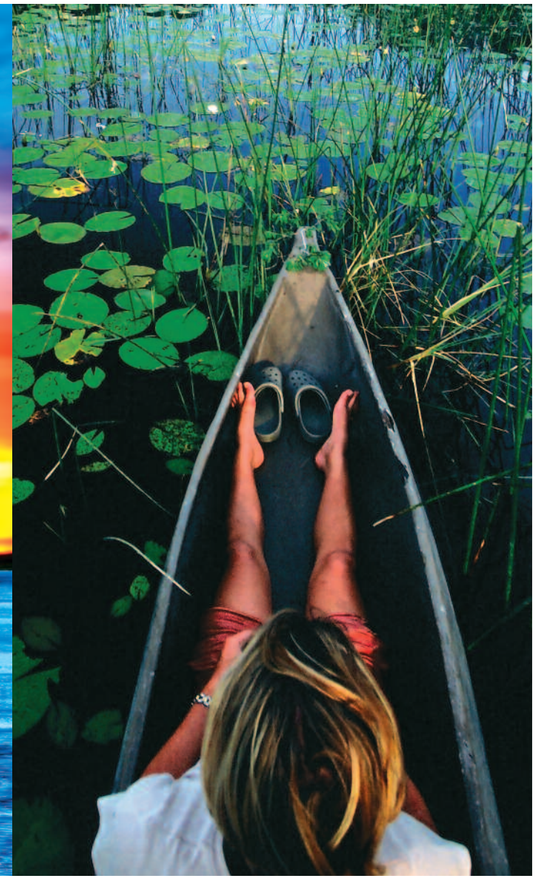
Riding high in the OKAVANGO

WORDS & PICTURES: KATE JOHNS



I wake to a grumbling, whirring, electronic noise within breathing distance of my head. A flimsy tent sheet lies between me and this 'thing' which sounds like a contented cat purring only much, much louder. It is pitch-black outside and tree branches snap in quick succession resembling a firework display.

I've been in Africa for six months now, but this noise is not one I am familiar with. I roll over noisily in bed, hoping to disturb my travel partner who's Kenyan born-and-bred. Maybe Rawana can shed some light on this bizarre sound.

I conclude, in my weary state, that it's an elephant which has swallowed a harmonica and is playing tunes out of its belly button. But do elephants *have* belly buttons?

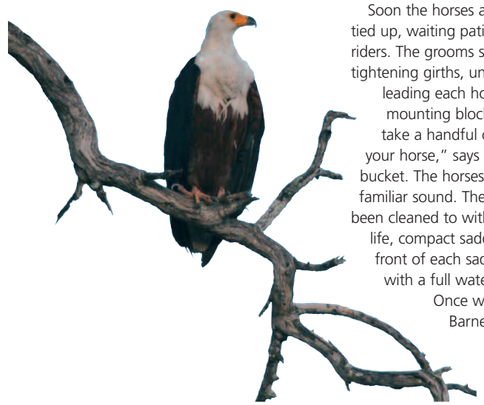
It is day one of our riding safari and we're perched on a tropical island fringed by fast-flowing waters, buried deep within the Okavango Delta. Were we to pull out a map of Botswana, we'd be in an unidentifiable green speck south-west of the Moremi Game Reserve, in the middle of the largest stretch of continuous sand in the world, the Kalahari Basin.

We'll be riding in the Delta for five days: the Holy Grail of horse riding safaris around the world. It is said in the hunting circles of England, amongst the racehorse fraternity of Ireland, polo players of Australia and endurance riders of America that riding in the Delta is the bee's knees. It offers the perfect blend of well-oiled steeds, "Garden of Eden" wildlife and a turn of speed that is guaranteed to turn your knuckles white. Our guides are PJ and Barney Bestelink, husband and wife team of Okavango Horse Safaris who have been leading riders through the veins of the Delta for 23 seasons.

On the second day of our safari, our morning wake-up call arrives with tea at 5 a.m. The gentle light of dawn creeps above the horizon, the temperature is cool. We've been told that dawn is the best time to ride as midday temperatures can reach a scorching 40 degrees centigrade, and riding in the early morning or late afternoon is kinder on the horses. It also offers optimum game encounters.

Around the smouldering campfire, our fellow safari companions nurse cups of coffee: two Irish couples in their late 20s and a South African lass who is a second-time guest of PJ and Barney. Sarah Humble, one of our guides, appears immaculately dressed in her riding attire with a pair of gloves tucked into her belt. A five-foot-three-inch blonde dynamo, Sarah is an English nurse who became addicted to the Delta in 1999. She now assists full-time with the guiding and logistics of running this remote camp. She has a vibrancy that's infectious.

> riding in the Delta is the bee's knees. It offers the perfect blend of well-oiled steeds, 'Garden of Eden' wildlife and a turn of speed that is guaranteed to turn your knuckles white



"Did you hear Washing Machine last night?" she asks. "He's our resident bull elephant who appeared in camp three days ago and doesn't want to leave. He makes this strange noise in his gut; sounds like a washing machine."

Soon the horses are saddled and tied up, waiting patiently for their riders. The grooms scurry around tightening girths, untying ropes and leading each horse to the mounting block. "Don't forget to take a handful of pony nuts for your horse," says Barney, rattling a bucket. The horses whinny at the familiar sound. The leather tack has been cleaned to within an inch of its life, compact saddle-bags sit on the front of each saddle, every one with a full water bottle.

Once we are all mounted, Barney, followed by her beloved English Bull Terrier, Pumbi, tells us a little about our steeds. "He's quite a strong horse, okay? But he's lovely all the same," she says of my horse, Donotsi. The wellbeing of the horses is Barney's number-one priority. It can't be easy to manage a herd of 58, with the added challenges of limited vet assistance, unknown riders and a precarious ground-surface which is covered in thorns, Moklowane palm-seeds and holes that can easily render a horse lame.

Barney leads the charge, pushing her horse into a strong canter close on the coat-tails of a 200-strong herd of buffalo. At this point I'm seventh in line, behind Nevel, the Irish plasterer whose bottom bounces in and out of the saddle. My horse and I are itching to get out of line. Then we hit an ankle deep *malapo* – seasonal flood plain – at speed: there's a deafening noise as 12 horses hit the water. I can't help but squeal in delight, and the buffalo begin to pick up speed.

The following day we canter across the open floodplains towards our next camp, Moklowane which stands on an island dotted with African Mangosteen trees, their crowns resembling a Bob Marley hairdo. A variety of game including lechwe antelope, zebra and kudu graze on the sweet grasses. Today I'm riding Duba, a powerful warmblood with a wicked personality.

"Lion!" yells someone from the rear. We grind to a halt. I squint to see what's happening. It's not a lion but a spotted hyena that appears out of the knee-high grass. His cover blown, he runs with a peculiar loping gait towards the dense woodland. "Good eyes!" remarks Barney.

As evening falls, we ride into camp and I'm transfixed by the burning amber of the sunset. The colours remind me of an Australian bushfire. A date palm stands alone on the edge of the Matsebe River where our spare horse wades belly-deep into the ➤

© OKAVANGO HORSE SAFARIS

water to graze on the reeds. We toss our stirrups over our saddles, lift our legs up jockey-style, and guide the horses across the deep moat that surrounds the camp: a cluster of open-air tree houses, each with a private bathroom.

Once in camp we head straight for the campfire, positioned on an abandoned termite mound overlooking the water, and surrounded by deckchairs. Percy, a burly Batswanan with cheeky sense of humour, hands out drinks and the odd joke before dinner. We're treated to a wholesome three-course dinner every night: the logistics required to ensure that there is a lasting supply of ice, cold water and fresh gourmet food is mind-boggling. Later, as I lie under my mosquito net, our tree house is illuminated by a full moon, the night-noises of Africa resonate – a hippo blows and a storm grumbles away in the distance.

The following afternoon, the gentle *swish*, *swish*, *swish* of our dugout canoe as it glides effortlessly through the water, lulls us into a hypnotic state. The reeds and papyrus brush against my skin as we follow the 'hippo highway', the principal motorway of the Delta. As Tirelo, our guide, expertly manoeuvres the canoe through the reeds, he names the birds, frogs and antelope that catch our eye. After the morning's ride, I love this gentle experience and the opportunity to spot the smaller wildlife which is normally hidden in the lower reaches of the undergrowth when you're on horseback. A painted reed-frog clings tentatively to

> a date palm stands alone on the edge of the Matsebe River where our spare horse wades belly-deep into the water to graze on the reeds

the tip of a reed; red-winged dragonflies land and then take flight. Rawana, who is a keen "twitcher", has her binoculars glued to her eyes, and reels off a list of impressive birds.

On day five of our riding safari, Barney receives a radio message: a pride of lion are close by. Since we've reached our lunch spot, we make the unanimous decision to dismount and look for the lions in the Land Rover before they move on. Percy drives, explaining the lion protocol as we go. "Make sure no one speaks, moves or stands-up when we see them," he says. Some minutes later, we spot the resting pride, cutting the engine some 50 metres away. There are four cubs, three lionesses and two males sprawled beneath the canopy of a tree. They're drifting in and out of sleep, stomachs bloated and mouths ajar as they pant in the heat. The larger of the two males lies with his back to us, his handsome mane hangs heavy around his neck like a two-toned Elizabethan neck-ruff.

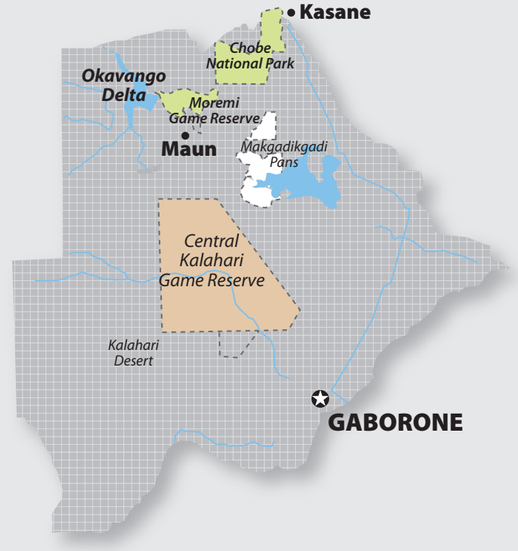
That same evening, as we ride into camp, everywhere I look there are elephant - big ones, small ones, muddy ones. Some 500 metres away, our path is blocked by a huge breeding herd. "I've never seen so many elephant," says Barney. "But we don't want to end up in the middle of them." A young bull suddenly appears just a few metres away, stopping dead in his tracks. He stares at us. "Baboons riding zebras: how strange!" he must be thinking. I hold my breath. Lucky it's not his mother. He shakes his head and, disgruntled, scoots off to find his mates. We make it safely into camp, our final day over.

The end of the safari has come.

I try to make time stand still: Pumbi, our beloved safari companion, nudges up to me. I give him a hearty pat before I am directed to the Land Rover so that we can make our journey back to Maun.

For me, riding in the Okavango Delta is the icing on the cake of a long list of riding safaris in Australia, Argentina, Chile and Kenya. How can I explain the last five days to friends back home? How will they appreciate the haunting sounds of Washing Machine, the elephant, swimming bareback beside pods of hippo, cantering alongside herds of buffalo, the most dangerous animal in Africa? They simply wouldn't believe me.

THE DELTA



> dawn is the best time to ride in the Delta as midday temperatures can reach a scorching 40 degrees centigrade, and riding in the early morning or late afternoon is kinder on the horses. It also offers optimum game encounters

The Okavango Delta in northern Botswana is made up of a labyrinth of lagoons, lakes and hidden channels covering an area of over 17,000-square-kilometres. The largest inland delta in the world, trapped in the parched Kalahari sands, it is a magnet for the wildlife which depends on it.

The area was once part of Lake Makgadikgadi, an ancient lake that dried up some 10,000 years ago. Today, the Okavango River has no outlet to the sea. Instead, it empties onto the sands of the Kalahari Desert, irrigating 15,000-square-kilometres of the desert. Each year some 11 cubic kilometres of water reach the Delta.

The water entering the Delta is unusually pure, due to the lack of agriculture and industry along the Okavango River. It passes through the sand aquifers of the numerous Delta islands and evaporates, leaving enormous quantities of salt behind. These precipitation processes are so strong that the vegetation disappears in the centre of the islands and thick salt crusts are formed.

The waters of the Okavango Delta are subject to seasonal flooding, which begins about mid-summer in the north and six months later in the south (May-June). The water from the Delta evaporates relatively rapidly given the high temperatures, resulting in a cycle of cresting and dropping water in the south. Islands can disappear completely during the peak flood before reappearing at the end of the season.

TRAVEL FILE

Tourism is Botswana's third biggest foreign revenue-earner, after diamonds and beef. However, to prevent over-utilisation of its wilderness resource, Botswana follows a low-volume tourism policy. The Government, recognising the country's tourism potential early on in its development, put aside 17 percent of its total surface area for game reserves and national parks. Wildlife management areas cover a further 22 percent of the area which means that 39 percent of the country is devoted to conservation.

When to go

Botswana's summer months are from September to April. October, November and February are the hottest months (temperatures varying between 12 and 38 degrees centigrade). The rains begin around October with the occasional thundershower. December to February are the wettest months. May to the end of August is Botswana's winter (little or no rain with cold evenings and early mornings.

How to get there

Air Botswana (*www.airbotswana.co.bw*) flies from Johannesburg to Maun, the tourism headquarters for the Delta. Okavango Horse Safaris can not only book international flights but also arrange light aircraft transfers from Maun to the nearest airstrip to the camp of departure.

To book

Visit www.inthesaddle.com or e-mail rides@inthesaddle.com