

Botswana

The chorus of the African bush is a palette of distinctive earmarks: saw-throated leopard barks, elephant hoots, fish eagle screams and the crazy whoop of a running hyena. It's a soundtrack sourced from ruggedness, and as such, we often miss out on gentle music, like a *mokoro* (dugout canoe) slipping over papyrus, or the wind breezing through the thornveld.

And we often expect the African wilderness to be dry and harsh, all hills and bush and soul-spanning sky; so we can be surprised by the subtle, less-dramatic – but equally arresting – beauty of silent reed beds, and the casual incongruity of tufts of palm growing out of a carpet of marsh and slow streams.

Contrasts of image and sound – rock outcroppings uplifted from the moon, red deserts blown out of a surrealist's fantasy and the wet prairie of the largest inland river delta in the world – are commonplace in Botswana, one of the great wild wonderlands of southern Africa. Extending 1100km from north to south and 960km from east to west, 'Bots' is about the same size as Kenya, or France. By and large it is a land of wild border spaces: small towns and cattle posts separated by stretches of yellow grass and bleached thornbush, and some of the best safari camps in the continent.

You know what's *not* here? No 1 Lady Detectives. Seriously – get that cliché out of your head. Instead, embrace the genial pride and laid-back friendliness of the Batswana people, gas up your 4WD and get ready to ride into sunsets that set the thornbush on fire – just watch out for all the cattle on the road when you do.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 582,000 sq km
- **ATMs** Found in large towns
- **Borders** South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe
- **Budget** US\$50 to US\$150 a day
- **Capital** Gaborone
- **Languages** English, Setswana
- **Money** Pula (P); US\$1 = P6.85, €1 = P9.76
- **Population** 1.8 million
- **Seasons** Wet (November to March), dry (May to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 267; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +2
- **Visa** None required for citizens of Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, the UK, Ireland, Canada or the USA



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Okavango Delta** (p875) Glide through watery expanses in a *mokoro*, a traditional dugout canoe.
- **Chobe National Park** (p883) Spot the Big Five (elephant, lion, rhino, leopard and buffalo) at Botswana's premier wildlife park.
- **Makgadikgadi & Nxai Pans National Park** (p884) Follow herds of migrating zebra and wildebeest in this baobab-dotted salt-pan complex.
- **Tsodilo Hills** (p881) Wander through the 'Wilderness Louvre' of ancient San rock paintings.
- **Savuti** (p884) Test the limits of your survival instincts on an intrepid 4WD camping expedition.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Although it straddles the Tropic of Capricorn, Botswana experiences extremes in both temperature and weather. In the winter (late May through August), days are normally clear, warm and sunny, and nights are cool to cold. Wildlife never wanders far from water sources, so sightings are more predictable than in the wetter summer season. This is also the time of European, North American and – most importantly – South African school holidays, so some areas can be busy, especially between mid-July and mid-September.

In summer (October to April), wildlife is harder to spot and rains can render sandy

roads impassable. This is also the time of the highest humidity and the most stifling heat; daytime temperatures of over 40°C are common.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Botswana's tourist highlight is the Okavango Delta (p875), and if you have only a few days, this is where you'll want to focus. Choose Maun (p879) or the Okavango Panhandle (p878) as your base and organise a *mokoro* trip through the wetlands, followed by a wildlife-viewing trip at Moremi Wildlife Reserve (p878).
- **One Week** Combine your visit to the delta with a safari through Chobe National Park (p883), one of the world's top safari experiences. Either go overland through the rugged interior or cruise along the wildlife-rich waterfront.
- **One Month** With a full month (and lots of money), you can hire a 4WD or use a reputable safari company and see the best of the country: do a *mokoro* trip through the Okavango Delta (p875), safari in Moremi Wildlife Reserve (p878) and Chobe National Park (p883), camp and hike in the Tsodilo Hills (p881), cruise along the Okavango Panhandle (p878) and explore the very furthest reaches of the Savuti (p884).

HISTORY

Pre-Colonial History

Archaeological evidence and rock art found in the Tsodilo Hills (see p881) suggests the San took shelter in caves throughout the region from around 17,000 BC. The tempera paintings representing the natural world in which they lived attest to increasing levels of mental and spiritual sophistication. On the physical side, clumsy stone tools gave way to bone, wood and, eventually, iron implements. Better tools meant more efficient hunting, which allowed time for further innovation, personal adornment and artistic pursuits such as the emerging craft of pottery.

Such progress prompted many of these hunter-gatherers to adopt a pastoral lifestyle – sowing crops and grazing livestock on the exposed pastures of the Okavango and the Makgadikgadi lakes. Some migrated west into central Namibia, and by 70 BC some had reached the Cape of Good Hope. Around AD 200–500, Bantu-speaking farmers started

HOW MUCH?

- **Internet connection** US\$3 per hour
- **National park entry fee** US\$22
- **Decent binoculars from a shop in Maun** US\$45
- **Nice meal in a tourist restaurant** US\$20
- **4WD rental** US\$75 to US\$120 per day

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.25
- **Bottle of Castle beer** US\$1.25
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$15
- **Sugar cane** US\$0.10