

Among the elephants in Botswana

Far from Africa's camera-wielding crowds, three adopted elephants lead the way through the Okavango Delta

TOM PRICE

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MAUN, BOTSWANA -- The thorn bush offered just enough shade from the blistering heat, allowing me to concentrate on the task at hand, namely getting my camera focused on the mud-covered elephant wallowing in a nearby pond. Suddenly, I sensed a looming presence and, turning, I found a four-metre wall of wild bull elephant, covered in bristly black hairs, extending the twin moist tips of his muscled grey trunk toward my head.

Before I could even react, a calm voice said, "Be nice, Jabu," and the beast dropped his trunk and took a step back, absolutely silent on its massive padded feet. The rescuer, of both me and as it turns out the elephant, was Doug Groves, who is also the key to one of the greatest animal encounters you can experience on the African continent.

My partner, Karie, and I were able to spend a day with Mr. Groves and his herd of three adopted elephants, far from Africa's camera-wielding crowds, exploring the open plain -- exactly the kind of authentic encounter we had sought in the Okavango Delta of Botswana.

I had always thought of Africa as either rolling open plains or dense jungle, but here the attraction is water. True, most of this France-sized country is arid scrub. But fed by the Okavango River out of Angola, the delta spreads like a watery palm frond of rivers and lakes over almost 15,500 square kilometres, the world's largest inland waterway. It's not until it reaches the massive Central Kalahari Game Reserve, where the remaining Bushmen tribes made famous by Sir Laurens van der Post continue their ancient hunter-gatherer lifestyles undisturbed, that the rivers of the delta once again turn to sand.



Stanley's Camp, a couple of hours by Land Rover from the town of Maun, the jumping off point for most tours of the delta, sat right in the middle of this watery plain, dotted with countless islands that appear and disappear with the water throughout the year. The camp, on the verge of opening when we arrived and now operated by Abercrombie & Kent, boasted eight double-walled luxury tents, all outfitted in the rough yet regal colonial style.

Fresh linens lined the bed, and Oriental carpets covered the floors. Beyond the zippered door, there was a private deck, complete with comfortable chairs -- just the place to watch the world amble by. Meals were served in the breezy bar and dining area, made entirely of canvas, stout rope and burnished wood built on and around a massive sausage tree. The setup managed to feel safe while still offering sweeping views of the Mopane forest.

The tents of Stanley's Camp were more than just a decorative touch; they were also a reflection of what makes the Okavango such a conservation and tourism success. Throughout the delta's Moremi Game Reserve (the first wildlife preserve to be set up by an African tribe

on its own land), only a very few small, high-end camps are allowed, and only with permission from and payments to the local communities. Contracts are reviewed every couple of years, and can be revoked, hence the transient nature of the tented camps.

The happy result of this restraint is that we had much of the delta virtually to ourselves. Unlike countries where most game is now fenced in, the wide-open delta is home to about 100,000 elephants, the largest herd in Africa, as well as the rest of the "big five" game animals: lions, leopards, rhinoceroses and water buffalo.

How Stanley's Camp came to be home base for Mr. Groves and his elephants, and our bush walk adventure, sounds like a script for a Hollywood movie. In 1988, Mr. Groves, an elephant trainer living in California, travelled to South Africa with three star elephant performers to film a television commercial. One died during the journey, and Mr. Groves struggled to reconcile his passion for elephants with the commercial demands they often faced.

While deciding what to do next, he met and fell in love with Sandi, a South African who had just completed her degrees in biology and zoology and was looking for ways to put them to use. The couple soon learned of two waist-high elephant orphans, Jabu and Thembi, whose parents had been killed. Mr. Groves knew that without a stable environment in which to grow up, the elephants would probably end up as expensive pets or get shot. Meeting the two youngsters, the Groves decided to dedicate their lives to raising them in the wild. Marula, an older elephant in need of a home after her mate killed a trainer and was shot, came to them years later, and soon became another member of their unusual family.

"Relationships, and not luxuries, are important," Sandi said of their simple tent camp deep in the bush with the elephants, who require considerable foraging ground. But first, the Groves needed permission from a concession holder to stay in the delta; Stanley's Camp agreed. In exchange, Stanley's Camp is able to offer its guests the unique chance to spend a day exploring the Africa wilderness with the herd of elephants, going where they go in their endless quest for food, water and amusement.

Although the elephants are semi-wild, their years of living with the Groves have made them accustomed to humans, and they will happily submit to being touched and photographed, and with words of encouragement from the Groves will perform dozens of endearing tricks.

Beyond the elephants, we had a chance to explore the delta's wonders through other means including *mokoro*, long thin canoes polled gondola-style through the seemingly endless rivers, lakes and islands. Such a watery place is a paradise for birds. In my journal, I jotted the names of all the birds our guide called out in a half-hour: red-billed buffalo weaver, black crowned chagra, night heron, cormorant, white rumped duck, long toed plover, African hawk eagle, goliath heron, and red-billed hooper.

But while we enjoyed our *mokoro* tour, nothing compared with walking with the elephants, which wear no restraints. (At night, the elephants are herded into an enclosure to prevent them from wandering away). On our hike, Mr. Groves spotted some of Marula's namesake fruits, a small green plum-like orb that forms the base for a wonderful local cordial of the same name.

"She absolutely loves these," he said, stuffing his pockets with a few treats.

While Mr. Groves explained about how elephant herds are matrilineal, Sandi led the herd. Since she is female, their massive charges saw tiny Sandi as the head of the family, explaining why just a word from her or the occasional poke with a walking stick was all it took to keep them from mischief. The elephants loved to play, and were always poking, pulling and ripping at branches or pulling up roots with their surprisingly strong trunks.

During our hike, Jabu, Themi and Marula ended up near a series of ponds. While enjoying lunch in a shady refuge from the midday African sun, we watched Jabu and the rest of the animals drinking, splashing and generally enjoying themselves. Just beyond them, in a shallow pool, a lone hippo watched the goings-on and occasionally harrumphed his disapproval at having his soak interrupted.

Later that night, lingering over a candlelit glass of fine wine, we heard the throaty "hrruff, hrruff" of lions calling out their hunting ranges to each other. Don't worry, we were assured, lions have never seemed to figure out that tents were merely thin wrappers for people snacks. I wasn't worried. I was still pinching myself from the memories of the day -- had I really wandered in the African bush with three elephants? The magical glow lingered, as I recalled the experience of being about as close as you can get to these animals in the wild.

If you go

GETTING THERE

From Johannesburg, Air Botswana flies you to the town of Maun for your transfer to the camps. Web: <http://www.airbotswana.co.bw>.

WHERE TO STAY

Stanley's Camp: phone: (800) 323-7308; Web: <http://www.akhotelsandresorts.com>. Costs range from \$320 (U.S.) to \$460 a night, depending on the season, and cover all activities, meals and non-alcoholic drinks.

For more information on the Groves and their Living with Elephants Foundation, visit <http://www.livingwithelephants.org>.

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