

# Incomparable Okavango Delta Affordable

## A Report by Philip de Bruin ©

This report was born several years ago when American friends wanted to experience the Okavango Delta together with their teenager children. I couldn't believe how expensive the Delta became. Although our friends could afford the visit, it was expensive even in American or European terms. Since that time I have been collecting information. I have been a member of the South African Four Wheel Drive Club for more than twenty years, and I filed and collated many relevant reports and information.

In September 2002 our Dutch friends indicated that they would like to visit the Okavango Delta together with their three children aged between 18 and 21 years. Again, on investigation, it was quite clear that a fly-in, staying-in-lodges safari would be unaffordable. We then looked at a self-drive safari camping in the Botswana Parks, but the entrance and camping fees – for crowded camps with no facilities whatsoever – are exorbitant. Furthermore, we wanted to take some of our children and grandchildren along and entrance and camping fees became a factor.

I then started to wade through many reports and contacted friends and associates to pick up all possible information. It proved to be a more daunting task than anticipated. My target was the north western part of the delta - still undiscovered. I also wanted to put together an experience of the real Africa in its purest form. My first visit to the Delta was in 1985. Villages like Nata and Maun became modern cities in the mean time. The tracks we negotiated in 1985 became tarred roads. All these things are good for Botswana, and I am glad that they obviously deserve their status as number one in Africa regarding stability, security, a booming economy, and a corruption free society. But I wanted to try and relive, and share with my family and friends, the authenticity that is fast vanishing in Africa.

When I re-read my article, written in 1985 and published in Caravan and Outdoor Life of February 1986, I had to smile. Many things changed. Also how I experienced the people and the service. It is clear that the major change was probably in my attitude! I include a copy of the 1985 report for your perusal as a bonus to this report. It is attached to the end of this report, and I apologise for the rather poor quality of the copy.

In 1987 we stayed for a magical week in the hart of the Okavango Delta at a hunting camp operated by one of the largest hunting operations in Botswana. Outside of the hunting season, in those days, the operators offered affordable packages for "Photographic Safaris". This hunter told us about one of his hunting camps much further west in the Delta where the savannah was teeming with game. The only problem was that it was too remote to operate for Photographic Safaris as their cost of operation would blow the price out of proportion.

By February 2003 a plan was in place for a 15 day safari with a budget of \$420 per vehicle for fuel, and camping fees of \$200 per person! It sounded incredible because one night in an inexpensive lodge in the Delta costs at least \$200 per person!

The estimate proved to be too generous for entrance and camping fees. It actually came to about \$120 per person. The total distance, excluding the Vic Falls excursion, came just short of 4,000 km – which was our budget estimate.

This report tries to put down all the relevant information to enable your family and friends in the South African Diaspora to experience the real, but vanishing, Africa in an inexpensive way. We remarked several times on the trip: "That is exactly how Laurens van der Post describes it in his book *The Lost World of the Kalahari!*" He made his expedition in 1957.

Please use this report as a guide of tips. It contains my experiences and my opinions. At this point, my International Lawyer demands that I make the following disclaimer:

**"I am not giving legal, medical, or travel advice. I am interpreting my experience and research of information the way I see it. Neither I, nor Diaspora Solutions Ltd, is responsible for any action or damages that you may incur directly or indirectly from the information given in this report."**

With that formality out of the way, let's consider your preparation for the trip. Please read through the entire report. In the daily itinerary I included some specific tips that require your attention at planning stage. Print the itinerary and have your navigator **read it out to you as you progress**.

This report is **Copyright** protected. You have my permission to print it for your own use and to make printed copies for each vehicle in your safari convoy. You need to be connected to the Internet for the eBook Pro software to allow printing.

**Please ensure that everyone in your party read the report and understand the procedures and protocols described.**

But first let's look at your destination.

## **Destination**

Your destination is an island in the Delta called Old Vumbura. Not to be confused with the camp now called Vumbura further east in the Delta. Until hunting was outlawed in the Delta in 1996, Old Vumbura was a hunting camp. It has got a stunning setting. It is very remote. You can plot the GPS co-ordinates (S 18° 57.302' E022° 40.404') onto the map of Botswana to see that it is well within the "buffalo fence". This means no hunting and no farming activities. You can fish in the Delta with a hook.

The actual island can only be reached by mokoro or inflatable boat, but the "island" directly to the west is reachable over dry land and has plenty of nice camping spots. The most western spot has a good view over the swamp and the savannah.

Very few people visited Old Vumbura since 1996. The tracks to get there is a 4x4 challenge – deep sand with a high middelmannelletjie – with at least one crossing of a flooded channel. You'll need to pick up one or two guides in Gudigwa to be allowed through the buffalo fence and to find Old Vumbura.

The River Bushmen community of Gudigwa would very much like to partner with somebody to establish a tourist camp there. They desperately need the jobs that it would create. We are investigating the viability of a fly-in camp at more reasonable prices than the other camps. Even if we do go ahead with the venture we will promote it also for 4x4 visits. There are no 4x4 destinations at reasonable rates left in the Delta, and this area has got plenty camping space on the western island.

Readers of this report will be informed if we go ahead with the establishment of a camp.

Botswana is an orderly country run to a very large degree by the people. Traditional leaders and communities are organised and reasonable. The people are proud, well informed, and friendly. Even in remote villages would you find several people that speak good and understandable English. In Gudigwa a guy walked past us who spoke fluent Afrikaans. The remote villages are well organised and clean. The most authentic African villages that you can encounter. When they have an electricity supply, virtually every hut has a DSTV dish! We never encountered squatters, beggars, or an attitude. Our Dutch friends commented that you immediately detected these negatives when you cross the border out of Botswana.

### **Greeting protocol**

In Africa it is never polite to merely say "good day". The greeting is a very important element in establishing goodwill. The more remote you go, the more important it becomes.

The minimum greeting is a very friendly "Good morning sir. How are you?" while you look each other in the eyes. "I'm very well thank you, and how are you?"

In the more remote areas it would be prudent to enquire about his family: "Is you family well too?" The same questions will come your way.

When you meet your guide, or your poler, or somebody that you want to discuss something with, the three-phase handshake is required. A normal handshake followed by a handshake with your hand round his thumb, and then again a normal handshake. Please remember that a firm handshake is not polite – it spells aggression while a soft hand tells the man that you come in peace and mean no harm.

When you say goodbye to your guide or poler, the three-phase handshake is the polite way to do it.

### **Risks**

I'm sure you heard the expression: Africa is not for sissies!

Having said that, let me point out that 2 families – that is 2 vehicles out of 5 vehicles – in our party, have never been on a 4x4 trip before. In fact, the one family have never even been out camping in Africa!

Africa can get very **hot**. The sun is dangerous – you must have protection against sunstroke and sun-burn. You must have dark glasses. You must remain aware that the African sun is fierce.

The nights can get very **cold**. You must have a heavy duty sleeping bag that can handle sub-zero temperatures. You must have warm clothes. July is the coldest month, but also the month with the least probability of mosquitoes.

From December to April, inclusive, is the raining season. It is also very hot. It would probably be more difficult to reach the island described in this report.

You can encounter mosquitoes. You must take all precautions against **malaria**. A good and free information service can be had from: Travel Clinic, Kingsley Centre, Dr Reinhard Gruner ([reinhard.g@protectorgroup.co.za](mailto:reinhard.g@protectorgroup.co.za)) Tel: +27 12 421-2809 Fax: +27 12 421-2088 Mobile: +27 84 51 51 500. They do hire out a fully equipped medical kit, but you must book well in advance.

In this pristine African Delta area, wild animals roam free as they have done for thousands of years. You must be aware and respect that. There are snakes and scorpions. You must **never leave your tent open**, and you must watch **where you put your foot down**. Moving outside of your camp at night must be done with **a very good torch**, aware that predators can see you before you can see them.

However, all things considered, it is probably safer than walking around in Johannesburg!

In contrast with the highly frequented camps in the Botswana Parks where predators and baboons lost their natural fear of man, we found that the wild animals were inquisitive, but avoided our camp. Except for an elephant bull that feasted on the ripe jackal berries in a tree 10 metres from our camp on our last night! His presence was so unobtrusive that most of the guys already asleep never even heard him!

There is no instant way to communicate from the remote areas. You'll clearly take out **medical insurance** with evacuation benefits if required, but it could take days before you can alert the medical rescue teams. On previous trips we took along a satellite phone, but we found it to be expensive and impractical.

**Please do not attempt this safari with fewer than 3 vehicles.** Carry enough food and water to last you an extra 4 to 5 days if you have to send 2 vehicles to fetch help in Seronga. In the more remote part, it is unlikely that another vehicle will use the same route for months.

## Challenges

Inexperience in driving under off-road conditions is a challenge. Do get some off-road instruction before you leave. In South Africa there are several clubs or companies giving such instruction. The best reference for information would be the Four Wheel Drive Club of SA at [www.fwdcsa.co.za](http://www.fwdcsa.co.za) and go to Driver Training.

Fuel between Etsha6 and Divundu (Bagani) in Namibia, or back to Etsha6, is a challenge. You should make it with 130 litres of **diesel** per vehicle, but take two extra 20 litre Jerry cans as well to be on the safe side.

The water in the Delta is cleaner than in most cities in Africa and safe to drink. However, plan to carry 20 litres of **drinking water** per person to be on the safe side.

Some vehicles in your party will get stuck in sand or mud. Good **rescue and recovery kit** including high-lift jack, large spade, long snatch ropes, some spares, tyre repair kits, and if possible a good winch should be carried.

Some vicious thorns cause punctures that can easily be fixed with a **puncture repair kit** available at 4x4 outlets. Read the instructions beforehand so that you can quickly fix a puncture before it is necessary to pump the tyre or remove it.

You must leave buffer time, **measured in days**, to allow for mishaps. Never travel after dark. **Camp before the sun sets**. This makes booking ahead very difficult. The only challenge for accommodation in formal camps is along the southern side of the pan-handle of the Delta during school holidays in South Africa.

Radio contact between vehicles is very useful. Distances between vehicles can be long because of dust and vehicles taking the wrong tracks can delay your convoy by hours. If you are without radios, **always wait** for the vehicle following you at every fork or junction. If one person in your party is a member of the Four Wheel Drive Club of SA, you can hire radios from them. If not, I would recommend joining the club well in advance of your trip to make use of their information, services, and facilities. Or buy some walky-talkies. With today's technology it is affordable.

## Vehicles and equipment

After some research we decided on **Britz 4x4 Rentals in Kempton Park** for renting a safari vehicle and equipment. They were also highly recommended by friends who rented a vehicle for European friends before. You can find details at [www.britz.co.za](http://www.britz.co.za). The vehicle we rented for our Dutch friends was the Land Rover Defender 110 Nomad, sleeping 4 people in rooftop tents. They supplied everything for an extra person in the vehicle except for a tent which we had to borrow. A small tent can be bought inexpensively at Makro, if you do have access, or at Cape Union Mart.

Do rent also Britz's recovery kit for the Nomad. Go also for their comprehensive insurance.

At delivery time the Nomad really appeared fully equipped. However, with hind sight, we would recommend the following:

- When the delivery demonstration has been completed, go through the procedure of setting up camp to test everything.
- In our case, two sleeping bags were without zips. We had to go back to get it replaced.
- There were some problems to close the covers over the tents properly.
- The side canopy gave a lot of trouble when opened on the trip. It merely needed some maintenance, but it would be easier if it's done at collection time by Britz.
- Make sure the sliding ladders run freely. On our trip it needed maintenance at the first camp, but again it would be easier if done by Britz.
- The gas bottle and fuel tank need to be filled. But test the gas burner. We found at a remote camp that the burner was blocked. Fortunately, one person in our party had a spare jet.
- Sit on each chair. One of the chairs ripped at the first camp and was

- useless for the duration.
- Open the table and make sure it is stable.
- Fill the "shower" bag, which is really only for heating water in the sun, to make sure it is not leaking.
- Test the cigarette lighter socket if you want to fit a radio or reload camera batteries.
- Check all outside lights that they are working and feel if their fittings are secure.
- Make sure you can engage Low Range and Diff Lock easily.
- Make sure you have an instruction book in the vehicle. It is important to know how to get it going again after you have run out of diesel. Understand how to bleed or prime the diesel system of your vehicle.

Things you should consider adding to the standard equipment:

- Most important is an extra ground tent for your guides.
- Hand torches.
- If your trip is during winter, inexpensive travel rugs from Cape Union Mart.
- Two 20 litre jerry cans for diesel and two 20 litre jerry cans for drinking water – depending on the number of people in your party. The built-in water tank of the Nomad is supposed to take 40 litres, but we were sure that it proved to be less. Buy also a heavy duty strap with ratchet-binding to secure the jerry cans on the roof carrier. The jerry cans must have a safety pin for the lid to prevent branches ripping it open. These things can be bought from Makro, or any 4x4 outlet. The best prices for specialised 4x4 equipment is from Echo Accessories at [www.echo4x4.co.za](http://www.echo4x4.co.za). The owner, Willie Grobler, personally test equipment in the bush before he stocks it in his shop.
- Maps of Botswana and possibly Namibia. Can be bought at Britz or 4x4 outlets.
- At least the leader of your convoy should have a GPS. I will try to give precise directions, but a GPS confirms all the time that you are on track!
- The Nomad has a built in seed screen in front of the radiator. For all other vehicles, take along seed screens or rig it before you leave.
- A plastic bucket for drawing water out of the Delta is very useful although it is an uncomfortable thing to pack.

All equipment, luggage, containers, etc. must be **securely fastened** to the chassis or body of the vehicle – inside and outside. Stuff that can break must be protected in bubble plastic and packed to avoid it from moving around.

In a radical situation stuff flying around or hitting the driver can cause an accident. All drivers and passengers must **wear their seat belts at all times** – also when in off road conditions. The vehicle can roll or tilt sharply and fling a passenger on the driver or even out of the window.

It is very important that you **plan to have space** in a vehicle or in vehicles **for your guides**. They cannot travel on a roof rack! Plan extra food and drinks and share with them what you eat.

### **Bush toilet protocol**

Forgive me for talking specifically about bush toilet protocol. If only all people would stick to the protocol, the camp area behind the bushes would be spared toilet paper and other pollution.

Politely it is called the cat-method. You need a **spade and your toilet paper**. At Echo Accessories you can also buy a light-weight folding chair with a hole in the seat.

Behind the bushes you dig a shallow hole and position your chair and yourself over the hole. When finished you cover everything thoroughly, including the toilet paper, with soil or sand and stamp it down. You then put a stick upright into it so that the next person knows the spot has been used.

## Food

Meat is your biggest problem in Botswana because of their control measures to prevent foot-and-mouth disease for their cattle. Before our trip we ordered fillet steaks at some strategic points in Botswana. Two days before we left I received a report from an associate which indicated that you can **get a permit** for carrying up to 25kg of meat bought in South Africa! To test the system we bought some meat although our planning was to go light on meat and rely on tins of fish etc.

The permits worked brilliantly. At the control stop I merely acknowledged that I was carrying fresh meat, but that I had a permit. The person on duty would take the permit and copy numerous items from the permit onto their forms – a lengthy procedure – and wave us on in a friendly way.

The permit lists your vehicle's registration number, the type of meat or products and the quantities. It includes your purchase slips listing your purchases – officially stamped – as well as a copy of a letter from the Botswana Dept of Animal Health and Production and a copy of a statement from the Directorate of Veterinary Services of Gauteng.

**To get the permit** you make an appointment with the Directorate of Veterinary Services in Pretoria at +27 12 328 5140. You take your purchase slips and state what you want to carry like beef, pork, chicken, yoghurt and how much of each. You state your destination as Okavango Delta in Botswana and possibly Caprivi strip in Namibia, pay a fee of R60 for each vehicle/permit, and walk away with your permit.

I'm not even going to give you the contacts for purchasing meat in Botswana because, except for ordering at Drotsky Cabins, the quality was poor. Eileen at Drotsky Cabins is very helpful. If you want to camp there you need to book well in advance if it is during the South African holidays. You don't need to camp to order the meat. The quality of the fillet steaks supplied was outstanding. Contact details: Eileen Drotsky, Tel +267 675035, [drotskys@info.bw](mailto:drotskys@info.bw), Camping fee P55.00 pp per night. Relatively expensive compared to the other camps I'll recommend, but the nicest camp in that area.

Avoid taking bottles on the trip. From the remote camps you need to bring your empties out and bottles are heavy and bulky. Beer cans and other cans can be flattened to take less space. We burned all paper and plastics and brought the rest out to be dumped in a village with garbage disposal. Please **do not bury your rubbish**. You cannot dig as deep as a hyena!

We bought 5 litre and 3 litre boxes of wine at Woolworths in Pretoria. When you remove the bladder out of the box it takes little space in the fridge, and the box can be burned. The empty bladder takes little space. And the wine is

excellent too!

Beer you can buy all over Botswana. However, it would be prudent to stock up in Maun and Shakawe. Our entire party consumed more beer on the trip than we could believe. The heat, dust, and dry air generate a thirst that can only be quenched with an ice cold beer!

## Cash

None of us were able to pick up Botswana Pula at airports in Europe. The best is to order enough Pula at a bank in South Africa at least a week in advance. It takes the bank several days to get Pula. We had a very frustrated encounter in Serowe and Maun with Cash Dispensers. It appears that you can only withdraw money on a Visa credit card at the Barclays Bank Cash Dispensers and with a Mastercard credit card at Standard Bank. You need to have a PIN for your credit card. Cash cards or EC Maestro cards do not work. There is a currency exchange shop at Riley's in Maun, but they will only exchange Pula for Rand, Euro, British Pounds, or US Dollar in cash.

There are a few places where you can pay with a credit card, and I will indicate it in the report, but mostly cash is required. Rand is generally accepted, but at an atrocious exchange rate.

## Route

The distances are long and to drive straight for the Delta can be very boring. You also need your party to become master campers and master off-road drivers before you attempt the tracks to Old Vumbura. The build-up recommended below should sort out any latent problems for vehicles and camping equipment.

### Day 1

- Try to leave Johannesburg or Pretoria by 6 am. Anything later will delay you in traffic. Take the N1 toll road to Nylstroom. Leave the N1 at Nylstroom and drive through the town to Vaalwater. Turn right towards Ellisras. **All these towns have now unpronounceable African names**, but the road signs still use the old names.
- **Avoid** the border at Groblersbrug/Martin's Drift. Heavy Vehicle traffic bound for Central Africa is trying to avoid Zimbabwe. This cause congestion and delays at this border post.
- When you enter Ellisras, **turn left** direction Grootgeluk. There is a filling station on your right before you leave Ellisras.
- Follow the road all the way to Stockpoort border post. Ignore turnoffs to left and right – keep on straight. The dirt road is reasonable.
- The border officials at Stockpoort are friendly. Make sure you have a copy of your **vehicle registration certificate**. If you rented at Britz, you need a letter from then **authorising** you to take the vehicle across the border.
- The Botswana border officials are friendly. You do not need to complete forms for children under 16. You'll have to buy an insurance disc for P10 for each vehicle. **Hold on to this disc** as you will need to show it when you re-enter Botswana later.
- Carry on direction Mahalapye, but turn right on the main road towards Palapye.
- We headed, on recommendation, for Khama Rhino Sanctuary for our first camp. The ablutions are dark – even during the day. Warm water

available in the evening, but not in the morning. About P50 per person. Wood can be bought at the gate. We would avoid Khama Rhino Sanctuary next time.

- Camp **Itumela at Palapye** gets very good reviews. My recommendation would be to fill up in Palapye, if required, and camp at Itumela. The first night's camping is usually a tense and rather disorganised affair. Camp early. Typically vehicles are re-packed. Avoid leaving the repacking for the next morning.

## Day 2

- Try to leave early – not later than 9 am. Usually people are still disorganised, but it will improve as experience is gained.
- Turn left in Palapye at the BP filling station towards Serowe and Orapa.
- At Letlhakane (S 21° 25.202' E025° 35.603') turn into the village and fill up at the Shell filling station. There is a nice "supermarket" to stock up.
- Carry on with the road through the village and turn right at the T-junction towards Mmatshumo. The road is good. You cross the tar road (S 21° 19.433' E025° 33.750') from Francis Town to Orapa.
- In Mmatshumo (S 21° 08.617' E025° 39.150'), on the turn to the right in the main road, tracks leave the road to the left. There is a road-sign saying LEKHUBU, and 100 metres on there is a sign in the form of a Baobab-tree cut out of steel plate with the word "Kubu" on it, pointing to follow the tracks on the right.
- The tracks seem to split sometimes into many tracks. The hard gravel track is the "made" road and most of the time the best option to follow. The other tracks have challenging thick sand. At the cattle kraal and loading ramp (S 21° 06.006' E025° 39.331'), the route goes to the left round the kraal and then further north to Kubu Island.
- At the cattle kraal made out of branches (S 21° 01.601' E025° 37.186') several tracks leave the hard gravel "road". Stay on the gravel and head for the entrance gate (S 20° 58.620' E025° 37.178') manned by a member of the Gaing-O-Community Trust who is managing Kubu Island. He will give you a pamphlet detailing the current charges. You pay at Kubu Island. He will also advise you if the route over the pan is dry enough to negotiate.
- At the fork (S 20° 55.967' E025° 40.000'), where there is a sign to De Kraal Camping, you can take the right hand road directly to Kubu Island (S 20° 53.733' E025° 49.417') if the pan is dry enough to cross. Otherwise go to De Kraal, turn right and right again at the cattle post (S 20° 48.033' E025° 45.617') to approach Kubu Island from the north west.
- The view of Kubu Island, as you approach it from the south west over the pan, is stunning. The camping sites are on the western side. We chose the camp site with the huge baobab tree. The 19 people in our party took hands and we could almost complete the circle round the tree! The huge trunk gives good shade during the day.
- Moments after you stop a very friendly and witty registrar will arrive on a bicycle, closely followed by another person on a bicycle. The registrar will introduce himself as such, and inform you that the other **mobile office** is the receiver of revenue!
- Kubu Island camping ground has several ingenious bush toilets. Do **study the instructions**. If you use it correctly there is no pong that is normally associated with a long-drop. There is even a bush shower north of the campsite with the big baobab! You must provide your own

water.

- There is no rubbish removal service, so please take all your rubbish along. It can be dumped at the village of Gweta.
- Firewood can be bought from the registrar.

### **Day 3**

- If you left Palapye early on Day 2, you can be at Kubu Island by 3 pm. That would leave enough time to explore. However, staying two nights allow for repairs, repacking, and general unwinding.
- The island was romanced by Wilbur Smith in his book *The Sunbird*. The registrar also claimed that it was connected to Great Zimbabwe in some way. The so-called Lost City is not a Citadel similar to the one at Great Zimbabwe. Even the ruined walls, to me, do not resemble the ruined walls found at Great Zimbabwe. But I am not an archaeologist. I think it was merely a cattle kraal built with the abundant stones lying around. We explored the island from south to north, and we could not find anything resembling an ancient mine. However, the views are stunning and we spent a very enjoyable and restful day there.

### **Day 4**

- Try to leave early. Please keep in mind that cold-sand tracks are easier to negotiate than hot-sand tracks. Leave Kubu Island on the north western side and set your GPS to the co-ordinates of the cattle post at S 20° 48.033' E025° 45.617'.
- At the cattle post, take the fork to the right. It's no train smash if you miss it and end up at De Kraal Camping. Pass the camping area and turn north when you get to the main tracks. Head for the veterinary gate at S 20° 45.810' E025° 44.320'. Wait for the official to register all the vehicles and pass through the gate. Immediately after you went through the gate, take the tracks to your left. It follows the fence westward for quite some time before it swings north at another gate in the fence but not in use anymore. You can now set your GPS to the co-ordinates of Gweta (S 20° 11.433' E025° 15.883').
- This "road" is a good training ground. You'll encounter thick sand. Do not fight the ruts by turning your steering wheel – let it merely follow the ruts. If you leave a rut at speed **you can roll your vehicle**. Several reports told of rolled vehicles on this track.
- Maintain momentum, but take it slow. It is unlikely that you would need to use Low Range, but do it if you are inexperienced as a matter of training. You must engage Low Range before you go into thick sand and keep your revs high. Keep in mind that Low Range is heavy on fuel consumption. But rather **do your training and experimenting here** than when you get into the Delta.
- Gweta is a lovely large African village – very much what Maun used to be in the mid-eighties. Follow the tracks winding through the village until you get to the tarred road and turn right. After a kilometre or so you'll get to the T-junction of the Nata - Maun main road. Turn left direction Maun (S 19° 59.377' E023° 25.206').
- You'll go through at least one **inspection stop** on you way to Maun. All your car's lights are checked and the general roadworthiness of it, your driver's license is scrutinised, and any driver or passenger **not wearing a seat belt will receive a fine on the spot**.
- Maun is today a large modern city with the busiest airport in Africa. Stay on the main road until you've crossed the bridge over the

Thamalekane River. For supplies, take the road to the right at the traffic circle and carry on until you find a shopping centre on your right. This Spar is well stocked and you can get virtually anything here. They take credit cards, and the manager is very friendly and helpful. After a frustrating hour trying to get Pula at the cash dispensers and money changers, he gave me cash against my credit card with the standard 5% added on that the bank charges him.

- Go back to the traffic circle and take the road to the south, parallel to the river, to fill up at Riley's. Fill up your jerry cans. There is also a bottle store for stocking up on beer. You can pay with a credit card for the fuel and the beer.
- If you use a lot of gas, it would be a good idea to top up at Riley's.
- If you go along this road further south you'll see a sign on the right hand side for **Ron's Fresh Produce**. Reportedly the best place for fresh meat in Maun.
- Reports claim that Audi Camp in Maun is the better camp in Maun, but you've got to contend with the sound of several all-night discos. Rather head 12 km further south to Sitatunga Camp (S 20° 04.485' E023° 21.401'). The turn-off is at a large sign on your left.

### **Day 5**

- Rather a long and boring drive on a tarred road. Follow the signs for Sepupa and Shakawe.
- Fill up with fuel at Etsha6. It is the **last filling station** on the north western road in Botswana. The next would be 180 km further on at Divundu in Namibia.
- The nicest, and most expensive, camp along the southern side of the panhandle is Drotsky Cabins. If it is high season you must book ahead.
- A more practical, albeit less spectacular, camp is at Sepupa (S 18° 44.890' E022° 10.389') called Sepopa Swamp Stop. It is also less expensive. Consider a powerboat trip on the Okavango in the afternoon.

### **Day 6**

- Do a day trip to Tsodilo Hills from your camp at Sepopa Swamp Stop. You can skip this excursion, but the Tsodilo Hills are so unique, a World Heritage Site, that you should consider it.
- You could camp at Tsodilo Hills, but several reports warned against it. Apparently the cattle of the locals love to harass campers and their equipment at night.
- At 25 km from the Swamp Stop turn-off, in the direction of Shakawe, is the turn-off for Tsodilo Hills. The sign is on the left hand side, but not in the same format as a road sign and thus easily missed. The day trip, which used to take 3 hours either way, is now a comfortable 30 minutes drive due to an excellent hard road completed recently. At Tsodilo Hills we met people who took the southern un-upgraded road and it took them 3 hours!
- At the entrance gate take the tracks to the left indicated by a signpost for the museum. The other tracks are a bit of a nightmare.
- The museum is interesting to visit. You can also hire a guide for the trails of Tsodilo Hills. There is no other charge except for the guide.
- A bit further on with the tracks is the start of the Rhino Trail. It takes about 3 hours and is dramatic with some panoramic views. The ancient bushman paintings are numbered. The dancing figure is at

number 8. The Rhinos are at number 10 and the whale at number 11. Apparently every painting tells a story, but I personally think a lot of romancing takes place.

- Retrace your route back to the Swamp Stop. If you do not carry jerry cans with fuel, consider returning to Etsha6 to fill up.

### **Day 7**

- Leave Sepupa direction Shakawe. There are two "supermarkets" in Shakawe where you can stock up. Even fresh bread. The filling station closed the week we were there for renovations. It is expected, by the locals, to be closed for months – even years.
- On the main road, as you enter Shakawe, there is a sign to the left for Shakawe airport. Only further on that road is there a sign saying Ferry. This road leads to Namibia or the Mohembo ferry to cross the Okavango to the northern side.
- The ferry ride is free, but the wait could be long. The earlier you are there the better. The main ferry was not operating, but what looked like a back-up was operational to the right of the official ferry entrance. It takes 4 vehicles at a time.
- The drive to Seronga (S 18° 48.516' E022° 24.562') is a lovely drive. Beautiful African villages with neat reed fences, the Okavango flood plane on your right hand side with Tsodilo Hills in the distance.
- Reportedly, the best camping in Seronga is at Willy's place. We met Willy at his shop. You can't miss it. It is at the turn to the left with a phone shop to the right of it. His shop is in three shipping containers with a roof over it! Willy was a professional hunter in the Delta for 35 years and he directed us to Gudigwa and Old Vumbura. Do stop and say hello to him or to Ann at the shop. They are a valuable source of information for the area.
- Because of building operations and a generator that ran all night, Willy recommended the Okavango Polers Trust Camp (S 18° 49.547' E022° 25.959') just outside Seronga. It is well signposted. It is a bit pricey, but a lovely setting close to the water - wood supplied free of charge. Hot showers. Toilet paper provided. The two sections of the ablution block is linked and not clearly designated for male and female, so it becomes a free-for-all mixed arrangement that didn't worry anybody at all. Just the luxury of hot showers was enough! Camping is P27.50 pp per night plus a "Service Fee" of P33 per person. Children under eight years old are not paying the camping fee or the Service Fee.
- If you don't camp here but only go out on the mekoro, the "Service Fee" will still apply.

### **Day 8**

- Most people in our party have never been on a mokoro into the Delta. We decided to stay another day and booked 8 mekoro. (Mekoro is the plural for mokoro in Tswana.) Prices are a bit of a rip-off. The charge is P187 per mokoro – for two people. On top of this they charge P77 per person to transport you to the launching stage, claiming that it is not safe to leave your vehicle there! The manager, Masasa, is an intelligent and reasonable man and if you adhered to the greeting protocol, these prices are negotiable.
- We didn't want our grandchildren, aged 4 and 2, to go out on the mekoro. If your mokoro do get bumped by a hippo you need to be able to swim to the nearest papyrus island. So my wife and I stayed with the vehicles and entertained the grandchildren, and we all saved

a packet in the process! I think it is safe to leave your vehicle at the launching stage as long as you don't have an easily removable gas cylinder, or something else tempting, on your roof rack.

- Our party enjoyed the mekoro excursion thoroughly. As my Dutch friend pointed out, the experience is how this part of Africa operated for centuries. The mokoro was, and is, the transport medium of the River Bushman with cattle and donkeys sharing the abundance of the flood planes with elephant and hippos. Neat villages along the shore.
- After some friendly haggling, Masasa charged us a more reasonable P130 per mokoro "because we took 8 mekoro for only 15 people".

### **Day 9**

- Try to roll as early as possible. Your target is Gudigwa (S 18° 35.861' E022° 54.754'). In the village of Beetsha there is a bakery, Kutlwano Bakery, with divine fresh bread.
- In Gudigwa stop at the shop – two shipping containers, but without a roof over it this time! Ask for Patrick. Patrick is a trustee of the Community Trust of Gudigwa that has the concession for the part of the delta you are heading for. He is a dignified gentleman that knows the area very well. He can spot lion tracks while the vehicle is rolling and can tell you when they were made, how many, their sex, and whether they were hunting or not!
- If your party is as large as ours was, he would want to take another guide along. In our case, it happened to be his young nephew Pontsho. Patrick's English is not so good, but he understands it well – even Afrikaans. Pontsho spoke good and understandable English and translated for us. The two spoke to each other in their River Bushman dialect with the authentic bushman click.
- The fee for each guide is P50 per day – so if you camp 4 nights you pay for 5 days. We tipped each guide an extra P50. That came to a net of P600 for the two guides. It is not a per person charge. You need to provide them also with food at every meal and a beer or soft drink at sundown.
- Please understand that these guides are professionals in their own right, they are not servants. They will take you on walks and if you do have an inflatable, they will be able to pole you on the channels. If they begin to feel part of your group they might come up with some exciting suggestions, stories, or even bushman music. Do not expect them to help with rigging your camp except for their own tent. Do not expect them to fetch water or do any household chores. If you want a camp servant, hire one specifically for that purpose in Gudigwa.
- If Patrick can't be your guide, he will nominate somebody else from the village. It would be a pity. Patrick operated as a tracker in the days when Old Vumbura was a hunting camp.
- Deflate all tyres to 1.5 bars for easier negotiation of the sand. Rig screens for catching seeds in front of the radiators. When you encounter a lot of dry seeds, stop every 100 metres or so and remove the seeds and grass collecting on top of your exhaust to prevent that a fire is started. The seeds are only a problem when you get close to Old Vumbura.
- The route takes you through a fairly deep channel in the Delta. Push on to the channel before you break for lunch. It is better to choose your crossing spot and then break for lunch to allow the engines and differentials to cool off before you cross.
- As a rule, it is safer to cross on the tracks already there. Wade through the channel. If the seat of your pants gets wet, it is too deep.

Search for a shallower crossing with good vegetation-cover under the water.

- String all recovery ropes and cables together and attach it to the leading vehicle. If it gets stuck you pull it out backwards. If it goes through it can pull out vehicles that get stuck on the muddy exit side.
- Select Low Range and put on your diff locks. Let the vehicle idle through the crossing slowly so that a bow wave does not form. When you get to the other side, apply a little bit of power and move the steering wheel from side to side if it finds the exit slippery. It is better for each vehicle crossing to make its own tracks. If the vehicle does not move forward, stop and go back 2 metres. Try exiting at another place. Do not allow the wheels to dig down into the mud. It is **very difficult to extract** a vehicle that lies with its chassis on the mud.
- If it's after 3 pm when all vehicles are through, rather make camp right there near the water. Your guide will probably advise you to carry on, but the sand will be hot and the going will be tough. It would be unlikely that you would reach Old Vumbura before dark.
- Your guides are not 4x4 experts. Ask their opinion, but make your decisions based on the rules described above and your own 4x4 experience.

### **Day 10**

- If you had to camp on the way to Old Vumbura, try to get under way early while the sand is still cold. Where the buffalo fence swings south west you'll enter through the gate into the concession area. All vehicles need to register.
- Faint tracks lead along the buffalo fence until you get to an old disused gate. On this track you'll encounter lion, elephant, buffalo, zebra, wildebeest, giraffe, and many more species.
- After the old gate, follow the tracks swinging south east to Old Vumbura (S 18° 57.302' E022° 40.404'). The going is not easy as the track is overgrown. Some vicious thorns grow on the way and you should avoid going over them with your tyres.
- When you get to Old Vumbura, check all tyres for punctures and repair them.
- You've reached your destination! Make your camp as comfortable as you want. Avoid camping in the obvious hippo or elephant trails. Plenty of fire wood available.

### **Day 11 and 12**

- Laze around in this pristine African paradise. You can get the guides to take you on walks in the early morning and/or late afternoon. You can go on drives. Or you can wait for the game to pass in the savannah on the flood plane.
- If you feel brave enough for a swim, choose a pool that the hippos cleared. Make sure you can see the sand bottom. Crocodiles are unlikely to lurk there.
- This is also the time for those sumptuous bush brunches and dinners. Incomparable sun sets and sundowners. A warm fire. All the glory of African night sounds.
- If there's a lot of lion activity close by, you might feel more comfortable to organise a relay of watches through the night. Let at least two people with good flash lights keep watch at the same time.
- Please take care of your camp fire and cover it with sand when you leave. A runaway bush fire is disastrous in the Delta.

- Please stick to the toilet protocol and take all your rubbish out of the Delta with you. You can dump it in Seronga. Please leave only your foot and tyre prints when you leave.
- Never leave your camp with food left open. Monkeys and/or baboons will steal it and wreck your camp. Do not even discard fruit peels or pips near your camp. **Do not even think** of attracting these animals by putting out some fruit for them. This was done at most official Botswana Parks with disastrous results. You are in a pristine African paradise. Please leave it like that.

### Day 13

- Leave very early. Take the same route back to Gudigwa. We explored the longer alternate route along the buffalo fence. It has also a channel crossing, is a lot longer, and the thick sand tracks seem endless.
- In Gudigwa, **inspect your tyres for leaks** and repair them if required. Restore also your tyres to the **correct pressure** for your vehicle.
- The Mohembo ferry closes normally at 18:30. The border with Namibia closes at 18:00. We were too late for the border and had to retrace our steps to Drotsky Cabins to camp. Firewood supplied free of charge.
- If you are not going through the Caprivi, you turn back on your tracks at Mohembo. The route from Maun along the Boteti River is by all reports a more rewarding route than the one over Nata. You turn off the Maun – Nata road at Motopi. A nice camp is reportedly at Xhumaga. The route goes over Rakops and Orapa and then turn off direction Serowe. Retrace your route back to Johannesburg or Pretoria.
- If you cross the border to Namibia have the copy of your vehicle's registration certificate handy. Engine and chassis number must be recorded several times.
- Reportedly the camping at Mohango National Park, just over the border into Namibia, is inexpensive with good facilities.
- I never read a report that raved over Popa falls, and as we were running out of time we gave it a miss.
- **Important.** When you get to Divundu, **before you get onto the tar road**, you must buy a Cross Border Charge Permit at the Supermarket on the left hand side of the road for each vehicle. If you haven't got this permit when you get to the border again, you will be sent back to get it!
- When you get onto the tar road, direction Katima Molilo, fill up at the Shell garage. They take a credit card. Please note that you have left Botswana and the service is slow and sullen with beggars pestering you. You'll have to fill up with diesel yourself, or wait a long time for the attendant.
- The road to Katima Molilo is good but boring. In Katima Molilo you can fill up and stock up. Credit cards are taken. The camp at Zambesi Lodge, right on the Zambezi River bank, is inexpensive and adequate.

### Day 14

- If you are heading for the Victoria Falls, you must decide on your options at Katima Molilo.
  - The bridge over the Zambezi into Zambia at Katima Molilo is not yet completed and the ferry is not always operating.

- Reportedly the ferry crossing process is relatively quick here, but the road to Livingstone is bad.
- You can cross into Botswana at Ngoma and then into Zambia at Kazungula Ferry, also with a ferry, but the delay at this ferry could be substantial because of heavy traffic for Central Africa trying to avoid driving through Zimbabwe.
  - You can also cross into Botswana at Ngoma and then into Zimbabwe at Kazungula and at Vic Falls cross over into Zambia, but at the time of writing Mugabe and his henchmen were still in charge and I would not recommend it. South African passport holders only pay the road tax, but European passport holders pay a further €50 each for a visa and British passport holders GBP55 each!
- Reportedly the camping near the falls in Zambia at Maramba is inexpensive and excellent. You can pay in Rand or Pula. The view of the falls from the Zambian side is also better.
  - We visited Kasane to fill up – credit cards welcome at the Shell garage – and headed for Chobe Safari Lodge to experience their famous Botswana Beef Burger! We never eat hamburgers, but I cannot find fault with the quality, quantity, and service of this experience. Chobe Safari Lodge is also a good choice for camping.
  - The road to Nata and Francistown is long and boring. The camping at Nata Lodge is excellent, but we made for the new camp 10 km north of Francistown called Woodlands. It was by far the best camp and value for money of our trip. Firewood can be bought.

### **Day 15**

- Head for Palapye and then Mahalapye. Before you enter Mahalapye, turn left at the sign for Machaneng and then right at the turn off for Parr's Halt.
- After the two border crossings, cross over the tar road and keep straight on for Ellisras. (The sign directs you to take the tarred road to the left, but that is the long way round.) Turn right at the T-junction in Ellisras and you are on the route for Vaalwater, Nylstroom and Pretoria.

If your experience is like ours, it's going to take you several days to adjust back to life in the fast lane. You'll probably be determined to do it again and take your loved ones and friends along this time.

You've experienced what very, very few people in today's world can experience. In fact, you are probably the last generation that will experience authentic Africa in its pristine grandeur and beauty. As a discoverer on expedition. Not as a pampered guest of a tour operator.

Do write your experience down, before you forget or get side tracked. Write your stories down. In 20 years time, your account will be classified as Africana! And your grandchildren will want to hear it over and over again.

Regards.

*Philip de Bruin*