Botswana: Africa’s best-kept secret

Botswana has made a name for itself with nature conservation and sustainable governance

by Sabine Neumann and Horst Schwartz

Botswana, a country in southwest Africa and the partner country of this year’s ITB Berlin, has been described by Messe Berlin as ‘Africa’s best-kept secret’. Indeed, the extent to which Botswana has adopted a pioneering role in nature conservation is not widely known. It is due to the sustainable management practised by the government and conservationists that wildlife abounds in this country. It is Botswana’s perfect investment in a future in which tourism plays an important part.

Naturally, Botswana is where the ‘Big Five’ are – elephants, white and black rhinos, buffaloes, lions and leopards. Incidentally, the term comes not from their size but from the risk they pose to human hunters. 120,000 elephants alone live in Chobe National Park, as well as hippos and crocodiles. Botswana is home to one-third of Africa’s savanna elephants, namely 200,000 animals. In the Okavango Delta, with a bit of luck, safari tourists can spot the rare white rhino. Conditions are excellent for these animals here and the government has made a concerted effort to fight poaching. As a result, rhinos from other southern African countries are resettled in Botswana. The cost of relocating a single animal is 70,000 to 100,000 US dollars.

The Botswana Tourism Organization (BTO) is an active member of numerous local wildlife conservation projects. Thus the BTO is currently endeavouring to fund a rhino task force, the Central Rhino Operations Unit, along with an aerial navigation event, the Race for Rhinos. A presentation will take place at the Destination Day on 9 March at the ITB Berlin Convention. For the people in Botswana saving the rhino is an undertaking of key importance, one that involves saving a vulnerable and endangered species for posterity. 2014 witnessed the founding of Rhino Conservation Botswana (RCB). Tshekedi Khama has followed in the footsteps of the country’s president, Lieutenant General Seretse Khama Ian Khama, as patron of this international organisation. The Minister of the Environment, Natural Resources, Conservation and Tourism is also a member of the board of the Tlhokomela Trust. The trust, a public-private partnership now in its second year, protects endangered wildlife and is a partner of the Giants Club. Along with Kenya, Gabon and Uganda, Botswana is the fourth country making efforts to conserve its elephant population and protect it against the illegal ivory trade. The country is also proud to have organised the first-ever elephant population count.

Prizes for good work

Zebras and giraffes, mainly in the southwest of the Okavango Delta, hippos and flamingos in the shallow waters during the rainy season – they too are...
among the stars that visitors can watch close-up on safaris. For Michael Merbeck, an expert on Africa and managing director of the tour operator Abenteuersonne Afrika, safaris in Botswana offer something exclusive: “The country is sparsely populated. This is not where you find the occupants of ten jeeps watching elephants bathe at a watering hole.” Botswana is not only the refuge for a number of endangered mammals, including African wild dogs and brown hyenas, but for rare bird species such as Cape vultures and wattled cranes as well.

National Geographic Traveller has praised the country’s efforts and in 2015/2016 it declared Botswana its partner country. Impressive documentaries such as Savage Kingdom portrays wildlife in Botswana’s various habitats, and can be viewed online on NatGeo Wild [http://channel-nationalgeographic.com/wild/savage-kingdom/videos/saba-the-phantom-assassin/]. Last year at ITB Berlin 2016 Botswana received a World Legacy Award for its conservation work and was voted Lonely Planet’s Destination of the Year. UNWTO has included three nature reserves, the Okavango Delta, Chobe National Park and the Makgadikgadi Game Reserve, on the list of its top 100 Green Destinations. In 2017 Botswana was nominated for the WTTC Tourism for Tomorrow Award.

Nature reserves cover 40 per cent of the country’s land surface

The Republic of Botswana is a landlocked country without beaches. To the southeast it borders on South Africa, to the west and north on Namibia, and to the northeast on Zambia and Zimbabwe. Its surface area is 1.5 times that of Germany, whereas its population is just under two million. Over ten per cent of the country’s inhabitants live in the capital Gaborone. Botswana is a tableland, and largely without hills. Most regions lie at an altitude of more than 1,000 metres. Savanna, bush and swamp areas make up a diverse landscape. Botswana’s nature parks and game reserves are the country’s national treasures, as laid down in the National Development Plan (NDP11). At 52,000 square kilometres, they cover almost 40 per cent of the land surface. President Lieutenant General Seretse Khama Ian Khama has experience of the bush and was instrumental in these developments.

In Botswana, unlike other African countries, there is no risk of encountering poachers in the wild. “There is no poaching”, says Michael Merbeck, who has covered more than 150,000 kilometres on safaris in southern and eastern Africa. Nor do people hunt for food.” It is much more likely that tourists will encounter a helicopter landing next to them on their travels across the country. The crews of the Botswana Defence Force are tasked with checking wildlife populations and illegal trade with game trophies.

A selection of national parks and game reserves

The Northern Tuli game reserve lies to the country’s east. It abounds with wild animals, including white rhinos, elephants, giraffes, oryx and eland antelopes, lions, leopards and hyenas, as well as over 400 bird species. The previously mentioned Okavango Delta in the country’s north is a natural wonder approximately the size of Schleswig-Holstein, a federal state in Germany. The source of the Okavango is in Angola. Africa’s third-longest river is 1,600 kilometres long and peters out in the swamps of Botswana’s 15,000 square-kilometre inland delta. Every year, when seasonal flooding covers the area, the delta’s water basin more than double in size. “This huge amount of water doesn’t come in the rainy season, but precisely at the driest time of year”, says Michael Merbeck, “which is when Botswana’s grasslands turn to green and the colours of a hundred different flowers are dotted about
the landscape." The Okavango Delta boasts an excellent tourism infrastructure with solitary bush camps and exclusive lodges. Till Brunecker’s personal favourite this year is the Sanctuary Chief’s Camp in the northwest of Chief’s Island, in the middle of the private Mombo camp in the Moremi Game Reserve. “It features four exclusive safari tents and is one of the most beautiful and exclusive camps in the Okavango Delta”, says the proprietor of Edeltrotter Luxusreisen. “It has just been completely refurbished using ultra-modern and eco-friendly equipment.”

Chobe National Park with its enormous elephant population is also in the country’s north. The Moremi Game Reserve, which features various parks, is famous for its lion prides and wealth of bird species, more than 350, which are best watched on the Khwai River. It occupies the eastern part of the Okavango Delta and is open all year round. Michael Merbeck recommends July to October as the best months to go wildlife spotting.

In the heart of the country lies the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, the second largest in the world. It boasts everything from open plains, bush and sand dunes to dried out riverbeds. A dry, virgin landscape that is wild and romantic, it is very challenging both for wildlife and visitors. “The at times very basic bush camps conjure a distinct atmosphere”, says Michael Merbeck. “It feels like going back to the age of famous explorers, an unforgettable experience for camping fans.” “A fantastic experience” is how he describes the enormous Makgadikgadi Pan, the dried out remains of a former lake, which is inhabited by many species on their migration routes. In the rainy season shallow waters appear which are visited by hordes of flamingos, among other species. Merbeck: “Under clear skies and a full moon the world becomes a perfect place.”

The enormous antelope herds and the lions that populate the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in western Botswana are able to cross into South Africa unhindered. The park was created by combining the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park in South Africa and the Gemsbok National Park in Botswana into a single nature reserve in the Kalahari without borders. Situated in southern Botswana are the Gaborone Game Reserve, a small park where city dwellers can observe animals, and the Mannyelanong Game Reserve which, unlike all the other reserves in the country, is fenced in. The Cape vultures which the reserve specifically protects can only be watched from afar.

**From the diamond trade to tourism**

Botswana is one of Africa’s economically more stable countries, has a low population density, and is regarded as one of the least corrupt. In 2016, the fiftieth year of its independence, it describes itself as a “vibrant democracy with a mid-range income.” Experts worry about the country’s economic dependence on diamonds, the main mineral resource, which account for 70 per cent of exports. Over the next couple of decades diamond finds will be all but exhausted, and that would have a devastating effect on GDP and unemployment, which is already at just under 18 per cent. The president wants to continue the diamond trade’s success story by carefully promoting tourism which, as a key industry, it is hoped will drive the economy and create jobs. “The substantial efforts that have been made are paying off”, says Merbeck. In his opinion Botswana “should stay upmarket in order to remain authentic and exclusive.”

The fact that Botswana is not a budget destination is borne out by the figures. Arrival statistics from the USA, UK and Germany are low. In 2014 the USA
accounted for 2.4 per cent of arrivals (51,298), the UK for 1.9 per cent (41,865), and 35,247 visitors came from Germany, whose share remained stable at 1.6 per cent. Botswana aims to exploit its partnership with ITB Berlin 2017 to establish itself as a tourism brand, as a sanctuary for wildlife and a place where the country’s inhabitants and visitors can co-exist in harmony and appreciate nature. Speaking at the public press conference, Botswana’s ambassador to Germany H.E. Tswelopele C. Moremi was convinced of the importance of ITB, the global platform for the industry: “One cannot underestimate how important it is to compete for tourists and future opportunities at ITB Berlin 2017. The whole world can get an impression of us here.”

Many different safaris

In Botswana safaris and tourism belong together. Most tours begin in Maun, which is where international flights arrive. In many cases small aircraft are used to reach the lodges. Botswana has lots of aerodromes and airstrips. Mobile safaris with tents for small groups are also very popular. Families are important customers. Many who organise their own tours go on a safari. However, Merbeck warns that loose sand and male elephants pose a risk. “One should at least attend a one-day seminar on how to get a vehicle out of deep sand.” An encounter with a male elephant can easily go wrong: “No matter where one has hidden citrus fruits, a male elephant will go in search and find them.”

In Germany trips to Botswana are organised by large tour operators and minor specialist companies. At present, the market is still small. Tour programmes are wide-ranging and vary. One example: “Our programme includes safaris with tents, camping in comfort, round trips with lodges as well as exclusive safaris by air”, is how Outback Afrika managing director Svenja Penzel describes her products. “We deliberately do not organise safaris for people touring on their own.” For Michael Merbeck, managing director of Abendsonne, they are part of the deal, as are guided mobile safaris, in both private and small groups, traditional safaris by air and special tours such as photo tours, elephant spotting safaris and safaris by canoe. “Individual tours can be put together according to customers' needs, with all the extras and luxury one wants, or for a taste of adventure, if desired.”

Meiers’s Weltreisen mainly markets safaris by air, which flexibly combine several camps and lodges and vary the duration of one’s stay. The programme also features a mobile camping safari and a trip on the Chobe River with the Zambezi Queen as an alternative to staying on land. Ikarus Tours has eleven tours to choose from, some of which are combined tours that visit neighbouring countries including Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The TUI catalogue has three round trips and 13 lodges on offer. Customers with airtours can book a round trip and two lodges. “Our luxury market customers in particular book custom-organised safaris in the Okavango Delta”, says Mathias Tewes, head of TUI Product Management, Africa & Asia. “We have expanded our range of products accordingly and will continue to do so next year.”

Limited capacity

Two factors stand in the way of operators significantly expanding their programmes: high prices and limited capacity. According to Thomas Oopen of B&T Touristik, “the obstacle to increasing tourism is a lack of flights.” Studiosus Area Manager Ulrich Rosenbaum admits that “prices are indeed high, which rather makes Botswana a destination for the elite. In some cases
the quality of local services does not justify the high prices.”

Svenja Penzel of Outback would like to see more accommodation: “When booking we often notice limited availability, despite this contradicting the country’s policy to limit the number of visitors to sensitive game reserve areas.” Operators unanimously recommend that customers book trips to Botswana as early as possible. Their views on Botswana as a destination are also the same. “In our opinion Botswana is well prepared to accept tourists and deserves high praise for the way it manages tourism”, says Michael Merbeck. “Conservation efforts in particular are particularly worthy of praise.” Svenja Penzel adds: “General conditions in Botswana are good for tourism.”

Indeed, German holidaymakers can travel without a visa to a country that is politically stable and where a democratic multi-party system is in place. President Lieutenant General Seretse Khama Ian Khama, son of the country’s first president following independence in 1966, is Botswana’s president and premier in one person. From 1885 to 1966 Bechuanaland was a British protectorate. Before becoming a colony several small Batswana kingdoms existed which sought help from the British to protect them from raiding Boers.

**A safe destination**

Against a backdrop of crises and a perceived lack of travel safety Botswana offers an advantage: it is considered a safe destination. “Street crime in Gaborone and other cities is limited to pickpocketing and credit card theft“, is the warning given by the German Foreign Office. The same could apply to any major city in the world. “Sometimes, break-ins and muggings of pedestrians and motorists occur.” One should avoid journeying overland during darkness because broken down vehicles and dead animals pose an accident risk. The German Foreign Office warns against using public transport such as minibuses and coaches: “These are usually in bad condition technically. In general, no monitoring of a driver’s qualifications or driving times takes place.” Car hire firms are reliable, and flight times to the country’s north to the Okavango Delta and Chobe Park as well as shuttle services to lodges “are generally trouble-free.”

Visitors to Botswana need have no worries. One can get by everywhere speaking English. Credit cards are accepted. Phone calls by landline are trouble-free and phone boxes can be found even in remote areas. Mobile phones work in major cities and on certain sections of overland routes. The health service is better than in many African countries. “If something serious really does happen then a helicopter always arrives quickly”, says Michael Merbeck. “Every lodge and camp offers medical care.” Inoculations are not mandatory for Botswana.

The question of when it is best to travel cannot be conclusively answered. The winter and summer months each have their advantages and disadvantages. Temperatures rarely fall below 20 degrees the whole year round, apart from at night in winter, when they can drop to freezing. In winter vegetation is sparse. The weather is dry and daytime temperatures are tolerable, ranging from 20 to 25 degrees from May to November. The driest and hottest months are September, October and November. Mosquitoes are dormant from June to September, or early October, during which time there is no need to protect oneself against malaria. Summer in Botswana lasts from December to April. The landscape is in bloom, thunderstorms and rain showers are frequent, and daytime temperatures reach 30 to 35 degrees.
#IloveBotswana

The president of Botswana will be attending ITB Berlin 2017 in person and will address the opening ceremony. His brother, who is tourism minister, representatives of the BTO and nature conservationists as well as 40 exhibitors, safari tour operators and destination managers will cultivate relations and hold meetings with the industry on 8 March 2017 at the ITB Berlin Convention and at the Botswana panel discussion in the Adventure Hall for Sustainable Tourism (Hall 4.1). One of their aims will be to establish a broader tourism market and raise greater overall awareness within the travel industry. In addition to safaris, which will continue to play a central role, Botswana aims to attract visitors more generally with its cultural treasures, heritage, and outstanding opportunities for sport and adventure. The BTO aims to engage people in dialogue. How can tour operators offer visitors an experience in other regions of the country and what is needed for them to do that?

A large delegation from Botswana can be found in Hall 20 and Hall 4.1. Before and after ITB Berlin 2017 supporting roadshows will take place in Frankfurt/Main, Stuttgart, Munich, Berlin, Hanover and Düsseldorf in Germany, as well as Basle in Switzerland. Operators marketing round trips, representatives of lodges and African Airways will be there.

Also at the show is a dance ensemble, comprising 11 female and 20 male dancers, who will perform daily and take part in the grand finale of ITB Berlin. In the spirit of the Delphic Games this final event will bring artists representing various countries together for a festive celebration of culture. The ensemble will perform under the name of #IloveBotswana. Assuming the slogan catches on with visitors to ITB, the official partner country in 2017 will have taken a big step forward. Svenja Penzel is convinced the slogan will be a success. Her praise for #IloveBotswana gets to the point: “The people hold their heads high, women do not cover their faces and have a spring in their step. Safari tourists meet friendly, open-minded and well-educated people, both men and women. Conversations spring up quickly, people feel at home and safe. This is a very pleasant place to travel to. Its appeal also has to do with not being in the headlines for negative reasons, unlike many other countries south of the Sahara.”

About ITB Berlin and the ITB Berlin Convention

ITB Berlin 2017 will take place from Wednesday to Sunday, 8 to 12 March. From Wednesday to Friday ITB Berlin is open to trade visitors only. Parallel with the show the ITB Berlin Convention, the largest event of its kind, will be held from Wednesday, 8 to Saturday, 11 March 2017. Admission to the ITB Berlin Convention is free for trade visitors.

More details are available at www.itb-convention.com. Slovenia is the Convention & Culture Partner of ITB Berlin 2017. ITB Berlin is the World’s Leading Travel Trade Show. In 2016 a total of 10,000 companies and organisations from 187 countries exhibited their products and services to around 180,000 visitors, who included 120,000 trade visitors.

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