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BOTSWANA FACTFILE

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Population – 1.6 million

Capital – Gaborone (pop. 138,000)

Language – English is the official language but in remoter areas Tswana (sometimes known as Setswana) is most often used. In the Bushman communities you will still hear the haunting clicking languages of the Bushmen themselves.

International telephone code – +267

Time – GMT +2

Visas – Citizens of most Commonwealth countries, most European countries and the USA do not need a visa for a stay of up to 90 days.

Money – Botswana's currency is the Pula. International lodges and large hotels will take credit cards and accept payment in major currencies but for independent travel the best policy is to withdraw from ATMs in the towns and carry cash in Pula. Botswana has deliberately embraced a high-cost, low-volume tourism policy that has traditionally deterred the numbers of backpackers that are to be found in other countries in the region. Things are changing as tour and lodge operators try to find their own niches and compete to offer cheaper options.

When to go: Wet season runs from November to April, although in many parts of the country it can be virtually non-existent. The ideal time to visit is between May and July/August when game is more likely to be found concentrated around the waterholes. In October and November temperatures can rise to 38°C.

Getting there: Global Village (tel: 0870 442 7770 / www.globalvillage-travel.com) offers flights to Johannesburg for £367, from where you can make regular connections to Botswana (about £133) or – more popular and less expensive – take a coach (6 hours) direct to Gaborone. Because of hefty airport tax on international flights few tourists tend to fly into Botswana from Europe.

Getting around: While roads have improved in recent years, public transport is still erratic and limited – as is to be expected in a country that is home to both the Kalahari Desert and the impenetrable swamps of the Okavango Delta. Many remote areas will be effectively off-limits to anyone without a 4x4 vehicle...and plenty of time. Maun is the main hub for travel to Moremi NP and the Okavango Delta and (as one of Africa's busiest domestic airports) flights and group tours can be arranged relatively inexpensively from here.

Cost of travel: Lacking the competitively priced backpacker infrastructure of Zimbabwe and South Africa, Botswana is one of the most expensive countries in the region for travellers. If you eat in tourist-style cafes prices will be on a par with those in southern Europe (roughly 30p for a bottle of water, 60p for a coffee/tea, £1.20 for a beer). If you eat in local food-halls and stay in downtown hostels you can survive on relatively little (maybe £20 a day)...but you will not end up experiencing the wilderness that is the wonderful thing about this country (for this budget £50 a day upwards). The only way to keep costs low and still see the country is by camping.

Things to see and do: The Okavango Delta is certainly Botswana's premier tourism draw-card. Combine the world's largest inland delta, the Kalahari Desert, the desiccated salt lakes of Sua Pans, the floodplains of legendary Selinda Spillway, Chobe National Park and the rock art of Tsodilo Hills ('The Louvre of the Desert') and you have just a few reasons why Botswana has been called Africa's greatest safari destination.

Accommodation:

- **'BUDGET' - Planet Baobab** (tel: +267 212277) is one of the most unusual and least expensive eco-lodges in Botswana. This quirky, funky lodge, with a choice of rooms or grass Bushman huts, is also well located for trips into the Kalahari.
- **MID-RANGE - Leroo-La-Tau** (www.africansecrets.net / tel: +267 686 0300) is built above a permanent waterhole on the boundary of Makgadikgadi National Park. It is famed for its rich wildlife and the fascinating dawn walks.
- **MID-RANGE - The two Selinda and Zibalianja Camps** (www.linyanti.com / tel: +267 625 0505), on the fabled Selinda Spillway, are perfectly positioned in one of Africa's prime big cat territories. The Selinda lions are famous for attacking crocodiles and even hippos and leopard sightings here are potentially the best in Africa.
- **LUXURY - Deception Valley Lodge** (www.islandsinafrica.com / tel: 0208 566 4520) is a wonderfully luxurious private reserve that specialises in game drives and Bushman treks and is famous for its unbeatable location on the edge of the CKGR. Certainly among the very best safari lodges that Africa has to offer.

Health & Safety: There are no statutory vaccinations required but malaria is prevalent in wetter areas and it is advisable to take the prophylactics and do everything possible not to get bitten. It is also worth bearing in mind that Botswana is the AIDS capital of Africa – in a recent survey of prostitutes in Gaborone 100% were HIV positive!

Botswana by 4x4:

Africa Unlimited Safaris (Tel: +27 11 976 3486 / www.africansafaris.co.za) offer a range of guided self-drive safaris around Southern Africa. You can customise your own 8-day 'Best of the Kalahari' mobile camping safari for £1157 pp or join a self-driven 13-day convoy from Jo'burg through many of Botswana's main safari venues to Vic Falls, for £2760 pp.

“But is off-roading for me?”

A trip into the heart of the Kalahari constitutes one of Africa’s greatest safari experiences but the remoteness, the extreme terrain and the inherent risks of such an expedition mean that it will not appeal to everyone. It is necessary to enjoy the driving in itself and to look on eight and nine hour stints behind the wheel, often on rough dirt tracks or deep sand, as part of the experience. The driving is not highly technical and the Land Rover Defenders are powerful enough so that even a novice bush-driver soon realises that there are few obstacles that they will not power through.

Anyone with any experience of camping is likely to be surprised at just how comfortable a mobile safari can be. The guide will prepare a variety of hearty meals over an open-fire, with as much (or as little) help as the clients care to give. Meals are eaten at an aluminium dining table and coffee and drinks are enjoyed around the fire (the ‘bush telly’).

You shower in the open-air behind the vehicles with an electric pump-shower, or in ‘ablution blocks’ on larger campsites. On longer trips into the Kalahari water will be limited and you might go a day or two without showering if reserves need to be guarded.

The chances of getting seriously hurt by dangerous animals are extremely slim but anybody who does not actively enjoy the feeling of being in the heart of what is essentially an unpredictable wilderness might not appreciate the long, frequently noisy, nights in predator territory. The Kalahari lions are often in attendance and in most other parts of Botswana you are almost certain to be visited by (far more dangerous) elephants. Barring serious insect phobia or extreme predator paranoia, however, few travellers will find that they are unable to adapt to the ‘rigours’ of life on a well-prepared 4x4 safari.

Other 4x4 guided self-drive safaris:

Namibia - Britz 4x4 rentals (tel: +264 61 244443 / www.britz.co.za) offer a 13-day ‘Kaokoveld off-road experience’ from £1600 pp.

South Africa & Mozambique - Maui (tel: +27 11 396 1445 / www.maui.co.za) offer ‘Wildlife and Beach’ trips from Jo’burg including game-viewing and diving, from £2160 pp.

Zambia - Hakuna Matata Travels (segopa@info.bw) run adventurous ‘East Zambia 4x4 expeditions,’ including Lower Zambezi and Luangwa NP, from £2185 pp.

Kenya – Hire a self-drive 4WD from Budget (tel: 0870 1 539 170 / www.budget.co.uk), at Nairobi airport, from £63 per day, and mount your own mobile safari into the great Kenyan parks.

Further reading:

Botswana - Chris McIntyre (Bradt Travel Guides, 2002)

Botswana - Paul Greenway (Lonely Planet, 2002)

Botswana: The Insider's Guide - Ian Michler (Struik Publishers, 2005)

African Adventurer's Guide to Botswana – Mike Main (Struik Publishers, 2001)

Lost World of the Kalahari & Heart of the Hunter – Laurens van der Post (Vintage, 2002)

Cry of the Kalahari – Mark & Delia Owens (Houghton Mifflin, 1992)

Botswana: Highly Detailed GPS Road Map - International Motoring Productions, 2004

Zimbabwe, Botswana & Namibia - Lonely Planet

Okavango: Africa's Wetland Wilderness – Adrian Bailey

Signs of the Wild - Clive Walker

Further information:

www.botswana-tourism.gov.bw - the official tourism website from Botswana

www.botswanaturism.org.uk - best source for travel info on the country

www.survival-international.org - for updates on the plight of the San Bushmen

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