Module # 1 – Component # 1

Discover the Ecology - Botswana

Introduction

Botswana is Africa’s shining light. True democracy, peaceful people, honest politicians positive GDP growth and money in the bank are part of the reason why they are a successful nation.

With an area of 581,730 square kilometres, Botswana is virtually the same size as France, Kenya or Texas. Situated in the centre of Southern Africa, it is a landlocked country, with Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe as its immediate neighbours. Botswana lies at an average of 950 metres [3117 ft] above sea level and is more than 600 kilometres [373 miles] from the nearest coast. The Tropic of Capricorn bisects Botswana. With the exception of the eastern part of Botswana where the great majority of Batswana live and where the summer rainfall is slightly higher, three quarters of Botswana is technically a desert. This is what makes the Okavango Delta even more remarkable. It is a wonderful wetland within a desert, getting its water from rain falling in central Angola over a 1000 km [621 miles] away.

Botswana is one of Africa’s success stories. Prior to independence in 1966, it was one of the world’s poorest countries. When we started to work in Botswana in the 1970s, very few people who lived outside Botswana had even heard of the Okavango. In those early days East Africa was “king” of the safari circuit. Botswana was undiscovered and was only visited by a few hardy adventurers. But things were to change. East Africa lost its gloss in the eyes of the discerning traveller as it overcrowded its parks. South Africa became a “normal” country with Nelson Mandela’s release, and the whole Southern African subcontinent became a desirable region to explore! Within Botswana, there were big changes, too. Diamonds were discovered in the Kalahari shortly after independence and this kick-started the economy.
Sir Seretse Khama was the country’s first post-independence president. He was a wonderful leader and one of the most pragmatic and far-thinking presidents any country could ever hope for. Sir Seretse laid the foundations that Botswana needed to propel itself forward. Democracy has never been compromised and the economy has boomed. On the wildlife front, Sir Seretse’s son, Lieutenant General Ian Khama, is one of the country’s unsung conservation heroes. When he became head of the military, he positioned his troops to secure Botswana’s borders from poachers. The game concentrations within the country multiplied overnight. Many people owe their jobs and careers to his actions. Today he is the vice president of the country.

The country’s leaders took the view that high quality / low volume tourism was the best way to create a sustainable industry that would employ a large percentage of its people, while still preserving the environment. Today wildlife and tourism employs about 45% of all the people who live in northern Botswana. The country has remained focused on delivering the finest possible, authentic wildlife experience. This is accomplished through one of Africa’s most sensible land plans ever devised. Much of the country’s most productive wildlife land lies outside the parks.

This land has been surveyed over the past 10 years and has been divided into private reserves (locally called concessions) that are leased out to safari companies. Nearly 40% of the country has been set aside for wildlife. The safari companies have to manage their concessions within strict guidelines to prevent overcrowding. These companies have to train and employ local people and they are obliged to pay large amounts to the communities or the Government for the privilege of being there. Communities are now being brought into the mainstream of the wildlife industry. While most of the country’s best wildlife experiences are in these private reserves, the country still has National parks for the general public to visit.

The safari camps that Wilderness Safaris recommends within this Course are all in private areas.
The Climate of Botswana

Introduction

Botswana is a country of contrasts. In the South it is desert, in its centre it is swamp land (delta) and in the North rolling grassland. These contrasts are the direct result of the country’s climate and geography. A general theme however is that it is hot and dry for most of the year. Fortunately it also has a reasonably predictable rainy season, which runs through the summer months [October to March].

Seasons & Temperatures

The summer season is renowned for exceptionally high temperatures, specifically for those used to European or North American climates. The temperature extremes in summer may reach upwards of 45°C [113°F]. Fortunately the frequency of thundershowers can often be relied upon to temper things down.

Winter is the dry season, and travellers are almost assured of clear skies. The days are mild but the nights can be surprisingly cold, especially in the desert and semi desert areas with temperatures going from 25°C [77°F] during the day to 0°C [32°F] at night.
Rainfall & Humidity

Rainfall when it occurs, tends to be erratic, unpredictable and highly localised. It is not uncommon for one area to receive a significant storm, replete with drenching rain, thunder and lightning, while 10 or 15 kilometres [6 to 9 miles] away the sun shines brightly. In this land of extremes and contrasts, the amount of rainfall is no exception. In the North East of the country, rainfall may exceed 650mm [40 in], but dwindle down to 250mm [15 in] in the South Western desert regions.

'Pula', is the Setswana word for rain. Not so coincidently, it is also the name of this country’s currency. The irony should not be lost that one is so reliant on the other.

It is frequently said that it’s not the temperature that makes the difference, it’s the humidity that’s the killer. A typical summers day for Botswana may see the humidity range between 30 and 80 %, with afternoons generally being milder than the mornings. The winters are on average, milder.

Please Note: The only health precaution advised for travellers to Botswana is to take Malarial prophylaxis. The incidence of tourists contracting malaria when taking precautions is very small.
The Geography of Botswana

**Introduction**

Botswana is a land-locked country dominated in geographical terms by the Kalahari Desert - a sand-filled basin averaging 1,100 metres [3600 ft] above sea level. The country lies between longitudes 20 and 30 degrees east of Greenwich and between the latitudes 18 and 27 degrees approximately south of the Equator.

Botswana is bordered by Zambia and Zimbabwe to the north-east, Namibia to the north and west, and South Africa to the south and south-east. In the north-west of the country, four countries - Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Namibia - meet at a single point mid-stream in the Zambezi River.

The country is situated in the southern African region and about two-thirds of Botswana lies within the Tropics; it is bisected by the Tropic of Capricorn.

The distance between the extreme north and the extreme south of Botswana is about 1,110 kilometres [683 miles]. It is 960 kilometres [596 miles] across at its widest. The area of Botswana is approximately 581,730 square kilometres [224607 Square miles].
Rivers, Wetlands, Salt Pans & Deserts

The Kalahari Desert in the South West covers 84% of the country. This Kalahari extends far beyond Botswana’s western borders, covering substantial parts of South Africa, Namibia and Angola.

'Desert', however, is a misnomer: Most of the Kalahari (or Kgalagadi, which is its Setswana name) is covered with vegetation including stunted thorn and scrub bush, trees and grasslands. The largely unchanging flat terrain is occasionally interrupted by gently descending valleys, sand dunes, large numbers of pans and, in the extreme North-West, isolated hills.

Many of the pans have dune systems on the South-West side, which vary in size and complexity. The pans fill with water during the rainy season and their hard surface layer ensures that the water remains in the pans and is not immediately absorbed. These pans are of great importance to wildlife, which obtain valuable nutrients from the salts and the grasses of the pans.

The Chobe River runs along part of its Northern boundary; the Nossob River at its South-Western boundary; the Molopo River at its southern boundary; and the Marico, Limpopo and Shashe Rivers at its eastern boundaries. With the exceptions of the Okavango and Chobe areas in the north, the country has little permanent surface water.

In the North-West, the Okavango River flows in from the highlands of Angola and soaks into the sands, forming the 15,000 sq. km [5790 square miles] network of water channels, lagoons, swamps and islands. The Okavango is the largest inland delta system in the world a bit smaller than Israel or half of Switzerland. The North Eastern region of the Kalahari Basin contains the Makgadikgadi Pans - an extensive network of salt pans and ephemeral lakes.

Although Botswana has no mountain ranges to speak of, the almost uniformly flat landscape is punctuated occasionally by low hills, especially along the South Eastern boundary and in the far North West. Botswana’s highest point is Mt Otse, 1,491m [4891 ft] high.
The Okavango Delta

Botswana’s Okavango delta has to be Africa’s most unique wildlife and wilderness sanctuary. What makes the Okavango most remarkable is that it is a wetland paradise located right in the arid Kalahari sands.

It rests between shallow fault lines at the end of the Great African Rift Valley. Deserts are low on rainfall and the Okavango is no exception. However, each year flood-water flows into the Okavango from its source in the moist central African highlands over 1000 Km [622 miles] away. These flood-waters flow from their catchment southwards and into the Kalahari Desert to create a unique wetland that supports and sustains a large diversity of wildlife.

Apart from the dynamic beauty of the wetland habitat, game viewing is excellent right through the year. The heart of the Okavango is the Moremi Game Reserve. All the major habitats and ecotones of the Okavango are preserved here. Around the Moremi Game Reserve are large Private Reserves, that are leased out to private safari companies under strict guide lines and carrying capacities. These private reserves offer the very best safari experiences with massive tracts of pristine parkland and privacy encountered in very few other places in Africa these days. One can go out all day in some areas and not see another soul besides the animals on the savanna.

Wilderness operates several private concessions where their guests are able to have exclusive experiences in the Okavango. To make the experience even more rewarding, many varied activities are available. Safaris by boat and dugout canoe (mokoro) are the best way to see the water areas while game drives and night drives by vehicle are best for tracking the animals.

Walks give the best feel for being in touch with nature, and game hides offer a great way to enjoy game viewing and birding especially during those midday siesta hours.