

Dancing in the Delta

Forget about heading out on safari. One fledgling music festival in Botswana is showcasing Africa's top talent and making the Okavango Delta a better place.

Words and photography **Melanie van Zyl**

The Mackay.z band from Zimbabwe performs at the community stage set up for residents of Tsutsubega village.



Puppeteers join the dancefloor.



Riding the donkey cart to Festival Island.

From the broken bridge to the pink clinic is 2.89 kilometres, reads the directions. Keep driving past a Mopane tree forest and dried up rainwater pans. Watch out for elephants crossing the sand road. Getting to the Okavango Delta Music Festival feels more like a scavenger hunt than a straightforward foray, which is wholly appropriate given this is no mediocre event.

Botswana is famed as a wildlife destination, but we're here to explore sounds and song rather than set out on safari. Packed tightly into a 4WD, crowded by a cluster of camping equipment, I'm taking two friends – sound engineer Carmen and music-loving Lauren – on an alternative Okavango adventure.

Our destination is as unusual as the directions. A small village roughly 45 minutes from the town of Maun, Tsutsubega has a San name meaning Place of the Emerald Spotted Dove. This gentle little bird frequents many a tree branch in these parts and is known in twitching circles as King of the Blues thanks to its mournful call. My grandmother, an avid birder, taught me how to remember its unmistakable song using this solemn rhyme: “My father’s dead, my mother’s dead, oh oh oh...” Although Tsutsubega village is named for the sombre ballad, it certainly contradicts its namesake on this particular weekend. Or maybe the doves sing a different rhyme – “Dancing ahead, dancing ahead, oh oh oh” – when, once a year, revellers are welcomed to this precious corner of the Okavango Delta.

Just beyond Tsutsubega village lies the forested oasis of Festival Island. It’s the end of August, when the Okavango Delta is flooded, so the island usually sits encircled by lily-laden waters. Drought, however, is visiting Botswana. Water levels at the UNESCO World Heritage Site are dependent on the annual rainfall received at the source, thousands of kilometres away in the central highlands of Angola.

Just like the would-be water, we’ve travelled a fair distance to be here – roughly 1,300 kilometres from our home city of Johannesburg in neighbouring South Africa. After checking in at the ticket office, which has been decked out with colourful skulls and handmade fabric bunting and is home to several sleeping pups, we cross one last stretch of sand to set up camp at the edge of Festival Island. It overlooks a dusty, rather than damp, floodplain, but the dry conditions haven’t put anybody off.

Established in 2018, the Okavango Delta Music Festival is a three-day affair of live music and vibey DJ sets operating as sustainably as possible in this delicate wilderness area. In its first year, the festival entertained 500 guests, but in 2019 the ticket sales nearly doubled, hitting 900. With tents erected, we set our sights on the festival grounds to meet Jay Roode, one of the devoted organisers. “Last year was all about mokoro,” he says. “We had members of the community pole people across the floodplain to the island in a traditional dugout canoe, but this time we offer a different kind of local transport.” In this part of the country donkey carts provide daily mobility for many locals. Now freshly painted and embellished with flowers, the stylish carriages make for a memorable entrance. It’s just one of the ways this event was arranged to benefit its hosts.



South African musician Bongeziwe Mabandla.



Bring a camp chair or sway to the music.

After cooing over the doleful donkeys, I follow Jay to the dance floor. It's a modest square covered with natural fibre rugs laid down in a bid to quell any dust being kicked up during dancing. The open-air stage is impressive and sits beneath towering leadwood, jackalberry and sausage trees. Bringing the speakers and sound equipment through all that sand from Maun was a logistical nightmare, Jay tells me, but it's quickly forgotten as golden-hour light ushers in the first act.

“We prefer our stars in the sky,” Jay says. “We wanted to stand by a strong African focus.”

The music selection for the festival is purposefully diverse. “We prefer our stars in the sky,” Jay says, smiling. This is not to say the artist line-up isn't excellent. Quite the contrary; the performers are just not the regular headline acts. “We wanted to provide a platform to different artists, and stand by a strong African focus.” I recognise only one name from the line-up, South African Afro-folk favourite Bongeziwe Mabandla, but he's not due to have his time in the spotlight until tomorrow. For now, I throw my arms up and find my feet a-flutter joining the audience in jamming to the playful beats and sanguine sounds of Zimbabwean musician So Kindly. (I also make a mental note to add their spice to my Spotify playlist once back home.)

Botswana is one of the least crowded countries in the world, with just 3.5 people per square kilometre, and it's echoed here. There's plenty of room on Festival Island. I look across the crowd. No matter race or age, everyone has breathing space. So much so that when the artists



The Achikids marimba band from Johannesburg.

leave the stage, they join the party. Tomeletso Sereetsi, who hails from Botswana and performs as Sereetsi & the Natives, is one such merry-maker. “It's awesome how the festival unites people from all over Southern Africa and beyond, both black and white,” he says. “That's the often understated power of music and festivals.” He's right. There's an intimacy to this event, and it's further proved when I cross paths with another popular Botswana act on the dancefloor. Mpho Sebina describes her genre as ethereal soul, citing Sade, Bob Marley and Brenda Fassie as primary influences. She asks me to come watch her sing the next morning – “It's an early slot, so I'm gathering a company” – although she really needn't have worried. “I've already told my friends about this festival,” she continues.






The festival includes DJs, too. Late-night partying is delivered as a silent disco.

“There are so many music acts from different parts of the continent, yoga, delicious drinks, and there is a spirit of oneness at the festival. Plus, the most scenic surroundings.”

Bands of children skip between us as we dance, invariably marching to their own drumbeat. Their beaming faces are coated with cheetah markings, painted by members of Cheetah Conservation Botswana. I laugh out loud when Mpho tells me her weirdest festival moment so far: “This guy was carrying his daughter – she must have been just five months – and she was stark naked, and it was beautiful how free she was. Then she pooped on her dad.” According to Freedom House, an NGO that researches and advocates political freedoms, there are just eight African countries that can be described

as free. Botswana is one of them, and it feels especially present at the festival. Sophie Dandridge and her husband Adrian are the festival directors, but their involvement is deeply rooted. They live nearby, within the Tsutsubega area. “Adrian and I have been involved with this community since he first moved here about 10 years ago,” Sophie tells me. The village is home to roughly 500 people, and almost half of the local community is trained then employed by the annual festival. Even though it’s only for a weekend, through their ‘party-cipation’ all festival attendees help provide employment and encouragement to this remote outpost. After the first event in 2018, proceeds funded a reliable borehole and solar pump for Tsutsubega, providing drinking water for people and their livestock.

With a large section of the delta enduring drought and floodwaters sitting scarily short of the normal range, it’s a crucial contribution. It’s just the first day, but many of the new friends I make agree the Okavango Delta Music Festival is the antithesis of most commercial festivals. Sure, this event is about music (my feet sure feel the beat), but it’s also so much more. The festival and its intrepid organisers provide a much-needed alternative to Botswana’s mainstream safari sightseeing and bring tourism to marginal areas. I can’t help but think about the driving directions again, only this time they ring a lot more like life advice. When faced with a fork in the road, keep left. 

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Qatar Airways has recently launched a route from Doha to the Botswana capital Gaborone. The airline flies from major Australian cities to Doha. Air Botswana flies from Gaborone to Maun, the gateway to the Okavango Delta, several times a day. qatarairways.com airbotswana.co.bw



STAY THERE

During the festival, there are various accommodation options available on the island. You can bring your own tent and set up camping (free with your ticket) or book a more luxurious glamping experience, which includes your own private toilet and hot bucket shower. Tshilli Farm is in the same area as the festival. Check into one of five chalets and enjoy a piece of rustic luxury. Most festival-goers stay in Maun before or after the festival. Sitatunga Camp has new tented suites set out below shady trees, close to the pool and restaurant area. okmusicfestival.com thetshillifarm.com deltarain.com



GET INFORMED

Another festival is planned for 2020 and it always takes place on the last weekend of August. Check for current updates on the Facebook page. The event is child-friendly and serious about sustainability. Only 1,000 tickets are sold and numbers are limited to ensure facilities can cope and areas do not become too crowded. Do not attempt to drive to the festival in any vehicle that is not 4WD; the road to the festival is 20 kilometres of soft sand. Shuttles are available. facebook.com/okavangodeltafestival



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