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WETLAND WONDER

In a country dominated by the Kalahari Desert, the very different Okavango Delta has long captivated travellers to Botswana. We discover this watery world via one of its oldest traditions: riding aboard a *mokoro* canoe

WORDS MELANIE VAN ZYL



IN MOST PARTS of Africa, safari is undertaken by jeep. When exploring Botswana's Okavango Delta, however, the vehicle of choice is the *mokoro* – the local Setswana word for a traditional canoe. The area's first human inhabitants traversed the wild waterways of the delta using this kind of vessel and, today, visitors can still do the same.

Tshepang Mikell Mogomotsi – known as “Mike” – is well-versed in this ancient art. Originally from Jao, a village in the heart of the Okavango Delta, he has poled since he was just 10 years old. Mike is my “Delta Decoder” and guide at Pom Pom Camp, an eco-friendly lodge west of the Moremi Game Reserve in the Okavango. As has been done for centuries, Mike and I follow a path through the waterway cleared by herbivore hippos and hungry elephants. I sit at water level, centimetres from the surface, while he stands tall behind me. Legs slightly apart to balance the vessel, he moves us through the water using a long pole, called the *nkashi*.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Okavango Delta encompasses an area of two million hectares, with a further buffer zone of another two million. The beauty of *mekoro* (the plural for *mokoro*) is how they provide access to otherwise unreachable swamplands. Without the disturbance of a noisy boat motor, the wilderness gains a potent edge. Mike sends the *nkashi* deep into the stream with a plop while water laps against the hull in a meditative rhythm. We float past small silent crocodiles and catch the heavy *har-har-har* of hippos

calling. Around one tight river bend, we meet them – two pairs of tiny eyes buttoned to the top of coal-coloured heads. Thankfully, Mike knows to stick to the shallows, away from the deep lagoons they tend to favour.

Soon, we hear the splashing of a red lechwe, and a herd of the aquatic antelope comes into sight, crossing right in front of the boat. “These are the flagship animals of the delta,” Mike says. “They have very short front legs, but they can still jump over two metres high. Before it was used for tourism, the *mokoro* was used for hunting lechwe. The boats are so silent that we could sneak up on them.”

As we continue, the *mokoro* cuts through water like diamond slices of glass. Following the stems of water lilies (the roots of which can be boiled into a delicious stew), I can see right to the river floor where Kalahari sand lies streaked in ochre shades. The Okavango Delta is renowned for its watery identity, but technically we are still in the Kalahari Desert. It is an ecological marvel: this otherwise parched region is turned into a swamp each year when water trickles down from Angola; game numbers begin to increase in July and August, and October is the best season for birdwatching, as the heronries are full of nesting birds.

At my next lodge, Moremi Crossing, which is usually surrounded by water, I meet Amos Disho, who has been poling since age 11. Despite the current drought conditions in Botswana, the Boro River still enables the quintessential *mokoro* cruise – dependent, however, on shifting hippo →

Top right: A pod of hippopotamuses in the Okavango Delta – *mokoro* polers avoid the deeper waters they are found in

Bottom right: Jacob Kesotegile works at eco-friendly safari camp Moremi Crossing as a *mokoro* poler





"IN A **MOKORO**, WITHOUT THE DISTURBANCE OF A NOISY BOAT MOTOR, THE **WILDERNESS OF THE DELTA** GAINS A POTENT EDGE"

habitats as they are especially testy in dry conditions.


"All our forefathers made mokoro," Amos explains. "Sometimes, it takes one month, sometimes three, but you cannot rush it. If you make a mistake, it is very expensive!" Traditionally, mekoro are crafted from jackalberry, ebony, mangosteen or sausage trees. "First, we dig out the tree to expose the long taproot and trim the branches – the root becomes the sharp front point of the boat. Once shaped, the mokoro has to be soaked in water for about a week."

Although both Mike and Amos learnt to pole in a wooden dugout canoe, today their time-honoured skills are put to use in a modern fibre-glass variety. The eco-friendly boats are just as lovely, and once out on the water, the remarkable wilderness fast outweighs vessel authenticity. Pairs of pied kingfishers trill between papyrus perches where Angolan painted reed frogs shelter, and we pass through endless beds of saucer-shaped water lilies on which blue-tinged birds perch. "That is the African jacana," Mike points out on one trip. "Unlike other animals, the male jacana sits on the eggs and takes care of the chicks when they hatch."

Historically, mekoro were used by men for fishing and hunting, and by women to harvest reeds and water-lily

bulbs. At Okavango's camps, guides are predominately male; however, the Okavango Kopano Mokoro Community Trust (OKMCT) has included women in its operations since 1998, and today many more women are qualifying for their guiding licences.

This is confirmed on an overnight camping trip a few days later, facilitated by Delta Rain, when I meet two female mokoro polers, Sophie Kehemetswe and Nora Tsaru, who take me to an island in the Okavango. "More women are poling the rivers now than men," says Nora.

"It can be difficult to get the guiding licence," says Sophie, as she gently steers us between swishing reeds. "I studied for a month, and the process includes a written test and interview. But being qualified means I can lead walks on islands in the delta as well. Seeing zebra is my favourite – that is our national animal. Do you know why? The zebra is black and white, reflecting our history. The first president, Sir Seretse Khama, a black man, married Ruth Williams, a white woman. The zebra says that all people are welcome in Botswana." Just as on board the mokoro. 

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deltarain.com, kwando.co.bw



QATAR AIRWAYS WILL FLY THREE TIMES WEEKLY FROM DOHA TO GABORONE FROM 27 OCTOBER 2019

Top left: A small herd of red lechwe – also known as aquatic antelope – leaping over water in front of a mokoro

Bottom left: Although mokoro guides were traditionally male, it is becoming increasingly popular with women