



# Delta Delights

Discover every side of the Okavango Delta at the new Dinare lodges.

**Words and Images: Melanie van Zyl**

**S**o much of what is known about Botswana is tied to tourism. The Okavango, especially, is revered for its exceptional beauty and virtue as an unsullied wilderness. It sure is a perfect destination, but there's more to Botswana than her breathtaking landscapes, as I discovered on a visit to the Dinare Camps, just Southeast of Moremi Game Reserve.

This was not my first trip to the Okavango Delta, but it was my first time experiencing the privilege of staying at a concession lodge in this famous UNESCO World Heritage Site. Hailing from South Africa, I'm used to a different side of this watery wonderland, usually navigating the sandy tracks that cut through my usual stomping grounds of Moremi myself and roughing it on the roof of a 4x4.

The first thing that struck me was how different the Delta is when viewed from the sky. Instead of the splashy, muddy mess, I knew back on land, from inside the Cessna piloted by Moremi Air, serpentine channels and globule after globule of lagoon studded

the land in watercolour swathes of emerald, olive, pea, beer bottle and every other imaginable hue of green. It was a striking contradiction to the dominant brown and beige that I had witnessed from my window seat flight from Johannesburg.

A short 15-minute flight from Maun and we landed smoothly on a dusty runway. The pilot opened his door for a woosh of welcome fresh air that swept inside the hot cabin. Then the propellers finished their twisting sky recital, halting the aircraft so that a sudden silence announced our arrival at the Santawani Airstrip. Waiting on the edge in a Land Cruiser were my Delta decoders, field guide Chris Tebalo and expert tracker Phinix Nchungu. Our destination, the new Mma Dinare lodge, was a 45-minute drive away.

Opened in May 2018, Mma Dinare means 'Mother Buffalo' in Setswana and is the newest addition to the Under One Botswana Sky portfolio. Proudly Motswana-owned and managed (fairly unusual for the Okavango's high-end stays) the collection also includes the



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iconic Delta destinations of Moremi Crossing, Pom Pom Camp, Gunn's Camp, as well as Chobe Safari Lodge and Chobe Bush Lodge in northern Botswana and Nata Lodge beside the Makgadikgadi Pans. Neighbouring Mma Dinare and opened in 2017, Rra Dinare is another and shares the same concession.

A relaxed camp constructed in the traditional safari-style of canvas and thatch, Mma Dinare offers an exclusive stay with just nine tents spread along the Gomoti River and its surrounding floodplains. Welcomed into camp with Sestwana songs and a swig of sparkling wine, the manager Lenkamile Rams ('you can call me Rams') showed me to my spacious suite. Inside, the towels had been creatively folded into the shape of the buffalo head complete with curled horns (take that elephant-shaped towels on hotel beds around the world, I thought to myself). From the private deck, shaded by the thick boughs of an indigenous riverine forest, I then spied four big elephant bulls wading through water and prying long lengths of water lilies from the depths.

'We get buffalo here at least once a week', said Rams when I enquired about the lodge's name. 'This is a big buffalo area'. Eager to discover who else the area was home to, I set out with Chris and Phinix on an afternoon game drive. Chris steered us first through Mopane woodland, where a breeding herd of elephant dined on the protein-rich leaves, then followed the course of the Gomoti River (which is named after the Water Fig tree) to its largest floodplains, where

Rra Dinare lodge sits overlooking a productive panorama. Red lechwe grazed in the safety of the streams alongside a host of other swampy inhabitants who were equally happy to wear water. Hippopotamus pods harrumphed around the deeper pools, while waterbuck trudged the shallows and old buffalo bulls sat about in mud baths on the outskirts. 'Can you see the mess up in that tree?', Chris asked while we stopped to watch a flock of White-faced Whistling ducks sing across these wonderful wetlands. 'That is a Hamerkop nest. It looks like bad thatching, but it can weigh up to 50 kilograms. Leopards like to hide their cubs there when they are still very young'.

Soon after, Phinix spotted a young male lion lying in the shade beside a towering termite mound escaping the last heat of the day. 'Sometimes he even lies right below the dining deck.', Chris informed as we got closer. A lone male, this lion's extensive territory has to be regularly patrolled to maintain such prime hunting grounds. The residents of Rra Dinare lodge are lucky to have such an exciting neighbour. Beyond the feline's floodplains, I was suddenly surprised by the transformation of scenery. Despite the canvas of green I had seen from the sky above, dry plains existed too, and it's where we discovered three cheetahs prowling the sandy grasslands. After allowing a handful of photographs, the mother and her two nearly-grown cubs swished their tails and disappeared into low acacia scrub as the Botswana sun smeared our sky with a copper-coloured coat of paint.





Later that evening and after a firelit dinner in the round open-air deck, I could make out the squelches of a buffalo herd as they descended on the marsh outside the tent's canvas folds. Lying so close to the water, I went to bed thinking how easy it was to forget that I was still technically in the Kalahari Desert and that it just so happened to host a guest named water now and again.

Last year, Time magazine reported that 'about 55 000 tourists visit Venice every day'. With the world's most popular destinations implementing ways to combat over-tourism this unpretentious, homely camp has to be the antidote to overcrowding. Combined, the two lodges here comprise just 17 rooms (plus two extra for guides) and share some spacious 67 000 acres of wilderness. One of the best things about an expedition to the Okavango is this sheer isolation, but ironically, it also brought me closer to people.

The following day, instead of an alarm clock, the amiable waitress Keokopile Ditshupelo, hailing from the



nearby village of Sankuyo, spoil me with a gentle wake up call, 'Koko', and a tray of coffee minutes before the sun rose. For over a hundred years, the Sankuyo community have lived on this eastern edge of the Okavango Delta. The current Sankuyo village chief is Kgosi Timex Malousi, but before assuming his title, he had extensive experience in tourism as operations manager, overseeing major camps in the Delta. Such hands-on management has come in use. 'If my people prosper, then I prosper. If they fail, then I fail,' said Kgosi Malousi when interviewed recently. 'I should not take on all responsibilities myself. I need to teach my people how to take responsibility and move forward so that our village will develop and prosper together.'

As well as offering accommodation in the Okavango, the Dinare lodge-owners are also working on the provision of energy to Sankuyo village through solar panel technology, plus household water connections in the hopes of minimising human contact with dangerous animals during water collection. Previously

a hunting area, the community now relies solely on tourism, on me and others visiting Dinare.

During this stay, I experienced the Delta from all angles. First, I saw the spectacle of the Okavango as a sprawling hydrous mass from the sky, then there was the magic of watery floodplains as a vista from the lodge before I was presented with the reality of Kalahari sand, which was home to a trio of cheetah. There was also the chance to enjoy a mokoro getting close to the tiny Painted Reed frogs of the Gomoti River and a night drive introduced to the Delta's nocturnal dwellers too, a porcupine, genets and the odd-looking Springhare. Last but not least, I was lucky enough to meet the resilient residents of this desert oasis. Together with the citizens of Sankuyo, Rra Dinare and Mma Dinare lodges provide a sanctuary for visitors wanting an authentic experience of Africa's most distinguished wilderness.