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Into Canoeing? Try It on an African River Safari

Why tour Botswana in a 4x4 when paddling a canoe or kayak on one of its rivers can get you nose to nose with nature?



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BUG'S EYE VIEW | Sunrise on Botswana's Okavango Delta *SOPHY ROBERTS*

By **SOPHY ROBERTS**

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FIRST CAME THE BITE of the African dawn in winter nipping at my fingers. Then came the wet of the morning dew as we slipped through a narrow alley in the reed beds that cover much of the floodplains in Botswana's Okavango Delta. As orange light spilled into the riverscape, the air hummed with insects, their million tiny wings backlit by the rising sun. They looked like flakes of snow.

These details I can recall, although my priority at that moment was the search for hippopotamus backs glinting pewter in the sun. Every day on this five-night journey in June—paddling in a flotilla of two-person canoes on an 83-mile river safari—we saw hippos wallowing in the oxbows of water formed by the Okavango's annual flood. We listened for their honks and burps, and watched nervously for the wave of water that indicated a hippo had submerged and was possibly moving toward us.

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We learned these skills from our guide, Josh Iremonger. He also taught us paddle-slapping, which sounds like a gunshot, to scare hippos away. Considered among Africa's most dangerous animals, they can tip boats and kill people who get too close.

Mr. Iremonger, 30, was born in England but for the last 13 years has lived in Gabon and Guinea, in West Africa, and Zambia and Botswana, in Southern Africa. He specializes in guiding travelers along the continent's waterways by kayak and canoe.

I heard about Mr. Iremonger through Michael Lorentz, a veteran African guide who founded Passage to Africa, a South Africa-based company. Mr. Lorentz and his 14 fellow guides, including Mr. Iremonger, design and lead safaris that focus on certain animals, such as mountain gorillas or elephants, or a territory, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Namibia's Skeleton Coast.

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On paper, Mr. Iremonger looked like he knew his game. His résumé included two African Great Lake kayak trips: a 38-day circumnavigation of Lake Malawi and a 22-day trek covering the length of Lake Tanganyika. The trip I joined was part of a 67-day, 1,058-mile "first," paddling the Cuito tributary of the Okavango river, which rises in the Angolan Highlands before tipping through Namibia into the alluvial fan in Botswana. Mr. Iremonger canoed most of this route with just one other man, Daniel Dugmore, 24.

Mr. Iremonger opened up a week of his expedition, during the Botswana portion, to paying clients. I traveled from my home in the United Kingdom and was joined by three South Africans. If the five-night package is repeated, it will cost \$3,550 per person, excluding airfares into and out of the international airport in Maun, the dusty frontier town from which one accesses the delta, and the bush-plane or helicopter charter to the starting point upriver. Because this was



Safari guide Josh Iremonger PHOTO: SOPHY ROBERTS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

the
first
time
Mr.

Iremonger had opened an expedition to guests, and it was sold last minute, we paid \$1,200 each. We joined him on day 38 of his journey to canoe the central delta's floodplain, traveling from Chao, within the Moremi Game Reserve, to Maun.

Mr. Iremonger spruced up the amenities for us, bringing in a camp cook, five staff and simple tents raised on the riverbank ahead of our arrival each afternoon. We also spent a night at an eco-lodge called Oddballs, which I loved. The solar-heated bucket showers—a pail of water hauled above, then poured onto, one's head using pulleys—ran longer than those of our traveling accommodations, where water was heated in kettles over campfires.

Had our group sought luxury, we could have paddled between lodges offering fine wines and massages and costing upward of \$1,500 per person per night. But I have traveled comfortably in Africa many times, and I yearned to experience the wilderness as I first had, walking with elephants in Tanzania, in 2008. I wanted to feel the rush of my own vulnerability again, that raw response.

Slipping unnoticed between an ecosystem's wild creatures proved even more exciting by canoe than by foot. If a hippo didn't want to let us pass, we had to wait it out or use paddles as poles and punt through channels to circumvent them. We had to be quiet. We also had to be wary of Nile crocodiles.

Bit by bit, my trepidation faded under Mr. Iremonger's leadership. He told us that during winter months, from May to August, crocodiles tend to keep to themselves, soaking up heat on the waterways' sandy beaches. Their metabolism slows down. They feed less. In June, when night temperatures can drop below freezing, snapping at our canoes was a low priority.

“Good guiding is about giving these animals space,” he said. While he wasn't claiming to remove all risk, it became clear this trip was not about courting danger. It was necessary to be relatively fit not only because we propelled ourselves but so we could get out of harm's way if necessary. We also benefited from a motorboat looking for hippo in

advance of our flotilla.



Hippopotamuses PHOTO: RICHARD COKE/PASSAGE TO AFRICA

Thankfully the hum of that engine was usually too far ahead to interfere with the heightened aural experience a canoe provided. Sitting low

in the water with high reeds on every side, I felt as if I'd entered the set of "Honey, I Shrank the Kids." We often heard creatures but did not see them: the rutting growl of a male impala, and in the evenings, the low rumble of lions. Then the vista would open up, revealing a distant shoreline of silhouetted fan palms reflected on water flat as glass.

Elephants were abundant, feeding beside the river, their populations thriving under Botswana's stable, conservation-focused government. Rhinos, however, haven't fared well in the poaching crisis afflicting the continent. Mr. Iremonger's expedition was raising funds for Rhinos Without Borders, an initiative to relocate to Botswana 100 black rhinos and white rhinos from the poaching fields of South Africa.

It was the bird life, however, that made this journey unique. Our near silence left undisturbed an African jacana, whose long toes enable it to spread its weight over floating lily pads, and a rare pair of wattled cranes—birds that stand almost 6 feet tall. I watched a hamerkop staring at its own reflection and wondered if it, too, thought the crown on its head was derivative of a pterodactyl.

Fishing was also part of this trip, in water that was black-brown, like the peat lakes of Ireland. Catfish as long as my arm slipped beneath the prow of my canoe. To break up the hours of paddling, we walked some of the delta's larger islands. In a glade of ebony trees, we found a Pel's fishing owl, about 2 feet tall, with a slow, glowing stare from black onyx eyes. At our last camp, we walked to within 50 feet of rare African wild dogs, watching the pack rest in a forest-shaded dust bowl.

We worked hard for our rewards. On the longest day on the water, we covered 27 miles, paddling for eight hours, sometimes into a headwind. We got blisters on our hands. Two of us fell in. I canoed in a boat with Mr. Iremonger, who unlike me, never missed a stroke. By the end of each day our appetites were rapacious, and we devoured wood-seared beef fillet, foil-baked chicken and roasted squash.



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Out on the water, there were times we mistook ripples for hippos. A few times, I nearly lost my nerve.

“A little bit of fear can be a healthy thing,” our guide told me one afternoon. “It makes you feel alert.” I wanted him to tell me about the Angola part of his expedition and his plans for a

river trip in Gabon in 2016, but I didn’t ask. Instead we fell to silence. I paddled on, conscious of how alive I felt in that moment in the Okavango Delta in the middle of Africa where for six days, I counted just eight motorboats, 20 other tourists, and not a single 4x4.

THE LOWDOWN // FOUR SLOW-PACED, ALTERNATIVE AFRICAN SAFARIS

Safari by Jeep is the most popular way to see Africa’s wildlife, and the safest option with children. Seasoned safari travelers can step outside that comfort zone and move more slowly by foot, boat or horseback. These safaris reveal smaller fauna, including Africa’s rich insect and coral life. In such wilderness, one’s choice of guide is critical. I highly rate the on-the-ground knowledge of Passage to Africa (passagetoafrica.com), with whom I have traveled in three different African countries.

BY CANOE Botswana is probably the best place to cut one’s teeth on a canoe safari, in the territory Josh Iremonger knows best (*from \$2,880 per person for four nights, a shorter version of the trip I took; passagetoafrica.com*). For the intrepid, Mr. Iremonger is leading a sea-and-river trip for up to six people in Gabon in September 2016, going deep into the West African jungle. *Price to be determined.*

BY DHOW Arabian dhows, traditional wooden sailboats, provide a gentle, wind-powered means to explore Mozambique's empty coast. Ibo Island Lodge operates dhow safaris, camping on sandy beaches in the Quirimbas Archipelago and beginning and ending at the boutique-style, antique-filled lodge. Highlights include swimming with turtles and snorkeling coral reefs (*from \$2,995 per person, four nights on the dhow, three at the lodge, iboisland.com/dhow-safaris*).

BY FOOT In Chad's Zakouma National Park, walking safaris are newly possible. Groups travel with an elegant, tented camp and focus on elephant herds. Regional security issues make it key to use outfitters and guides familiar with the region, listed on african-parks.org. Tours are bespoke and on request.

BY HORSE For competent riders only, these Kenya safaris cover up to 24 miles a day, and groups stay in mobile camps. Highlights include river crossings and gallops across the savanna alongside zebra and giraffe. The most popular trip is a ride beside wildebeest during the Mara-Serengeti migration (*six nights from \$6,925 per person, safarisunlimited.com*).

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