

Wondering about a safari in Botswana? Seismic activity is helping to change the landscape

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In Botswana's seasonal wetlands, mokoros, or dugout canoes, glide through the flooded landscape.

DANA ALLAN/SUPPLIED

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The Okavango Delta has always been in a constant state of flux. That's what makes it such a draw for safari-goers who return time and time again; no two seasons – no two days – are ever exactly the same.

Each year, rain from the Angolan highlands arrives in Botswana via rivers that flow into the Delta, turning dry floodplains into a shimmering maze of seasonal wetlands. There, elephants wade through papyrus, lions stalk red lechwe (antelope) and mokoros (dugout canoes) glide across the shallows in silence. Visitors arrive annually to witness this ritual of renewal, drawn by the wild poetry of a place that rewrites and reinvents itself with each flood.

Beneath this dreamlike surface lies the Okavango Rift Zone – the most seismically active region of Botswana – where even subtle tectonic movements along the Delta's fault lines can redirect millions of gallons of water. But recent years have brought more than a dry spell or big flood. The Delta has started to tilt, affecting where channels move, grasses flourish and animals gather.

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According to safari operators, this shift isn't just impacting wildlife behaviour – it's reshaping Botswana's tourism map. Camps that were once considered "dry" with consistent wildlife regularly fill with flood water, while former "water-based" camps now highlight exceptional game viewing rather than mokoro excursions.

"We have seen a progressive increase in the proportion of water flowing down the northeast part of the system and a re-establishment of wetlands in the southwestern end," says Mike Murray-Hudson, an Okavango Research Institute systems ecologist and professor.

If you want to start a debate in Maun – the town that acts as a gateway to the Delta – ask a local why these changes are happening. Many insist they're owing to a 6.5-magnitude earthquake that struck Botswana in 2017. Others blame



As habitats become more friendly to wildlife, African wild dogs are among the species that flourish.

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microearthquakes, sediment buildup, vegetation blockages and even hippos, whose movements can shape the landscape.

The truth is that it's likely a combination of the above, most scientists, including Murray-Hudson and Tarzan Kwadiba, [Botswana Geoscience Institute](#) chief geophysicist, say.

In the southwest Delta, safari camps such as [Ker & Downey Botswana's Kanana](#) used to be underwater nearly year-round, says Kim Nixon, [Chobe Holdings](#) Limited chief operations officer. Now the floodplains have turned into lush grazing grounds where peat-rich soils grow nutrient-dense grasses, drawing herds of antelope, buffalo and, with them, prolific predator sightings. "There's a local saying: A dry Delta is a productive Delta," adds Nixon.



At camps in Gomoti Plains, water has receded from the floodplains and channels have shrunk, enabling animals to come right up to the lodge.

ANDREW HOWARD PHOTO/SUPPLIED

Properties in the southeast have experienced similar effects. At both [Wilderness Chitabe](#) and [Machaba Safaris's Gomoti Plains](#) camps, water has receded from the floodplains and channels have shrunk, enabling animals to come right up to the lodge so guests can enjoy leisurely, intimate "armchair" sightings. The habitat has become more diverse, as populations of African wild dog, leopard and lion thrive.

"We base our camps on where the good wildlife is," says Alistair Rankin, Machaba Safaris co-founder and CEO. "That's what people come on safari to see."

Botswana's top safari brands are benefiting from these changes with a wave of strategic openings in newly wildlife-rich regions. In 2023, [Wilderness](#) opened [Mokete](#) in the Mababe Depression at the eastern edge of the Delta after the Mababe River started flowing again, creating a 6,400-acre wetland that draws in herds of thousands of buffalo and hungry lions like a magnet.

"Ten years ago the same area was totally dry," says Wesley Hartmann, [Wilderness](#) Botswana head of environmental and conservation operations. "Now it has a concentration of game that I don't think you'll see anywhere else in Botswana. Operators will definitely be looking at where the water's going – and, ultimately, where the animals are going – for new camps."



Predators like lions go where herds of prey go, making formerly inhospitable areas into wildlife hotbeds.

DANA ALLAN/SUPPLIED

Ultra luxury safari outfitter [Singita](#), known for investing in Africa's prime wilderness areas and reserves, waited years before choosing to build its first Botswana camp in a 175,000-hectare concession. Opening in December, 2026, [Elela](#) is located in the southwest, an area that's transformed into a seasonal swamp habitat brimming with wildlife.

Meanwhile, many camps in the northeast Delta must cope with the challenges of unexpectedly deep floods. This past season, camps including [Shinde Footsteps](#), [Mombio](#) and [Camp Okavango](#) closed submerged airstrips, helo-ported in guests and transported supplies by barge.

"We were all wading in water to operate our camps," says Nixon, who anticipates that if this level of flooding remains in the area for the next few years, traveller demand may waver and some camps in the region will be forced to rebrand as water-based camps, offering boat cruises, canoe rides and

spas instead of more traditional game drives.

For travellers, this makes careful planning – and hiring a travel adviser with reliable up-to-the-minute information – more important than ever.

“Nothing is static in Botswana,” says Teresa Sullivan, co-founder of [Mango African Safaris](#). She recommends a combination of land- and water-based activities to see the full scope of what the Delta offers. If you’re short on time, choose a camp that offers both; longer itineraries can include properties with access to permanent water.



Landscape changes in the Delta have been dramatic, but tourist camps have managed to adapt.

DANA ALLAN/SUPPLIED

Sullivan also suggests being honest with your travel agent about what you want to do. “If your priority is gliding through channels in a *mokoro* or seeing big pods of hippos, that’s a very different itinerary than someone who only wants to track cats.”

The changes may seem dramatic, but Rankin notes that nothing happens fast in the Delta. “As dynamic as the Delta is, it’s also very stable,” he says. “It still has great animals. You still have camps that produce phenomenal safaris.”

When planning a safari, travellers may simply need to think a little more like the Delta itself – fluid and open to change. Because here, water decides what happens next.

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