

AROUND THE OKAVANGO – PART 1

The quick way around

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Photography: The Earnshaws

Most of us don't have a lot of time to spend on overland expeditions. So how do you get the most out of that once-a-year vacation? Geoff Earnshaw and his family spent their July holiday circumnavigating the Okavango Delta



We try to do something special every July. Elise and I both celebrate our birthdays around this time and it is also our wedding anniversary, so there's a lot to celebrate. Our annual July vacations have become a large celebration of all these events rolled into one. And as an added bonus, we were being joined on this particular trip by my son Geoffrey and his wife Cathy.

Elise and I were driving our trusty Toyota Prado, while Geoffrey and Cathy were in a Fortuner. Both vehicles were pretty standard. The only real overland additions were roof-top tents, BFG all-terrain tyres and dual battery systems to power our fridges and freezers. The Fortuner also had an auxiliary tank, but I felt confident that the Prado wouldn't need one, since it had two 90-litre tanks as standard.

The aim of this trip was to travel along an interesting 4x4 route, find spots that would allow us to take some nice photographs and just spend some time together enjoying the great outdoors.

We eventually settled on circumnavigating the Okavango Delta, since I had travelled in that region years earlier and wanted to return to it, and because it is undoubtedly one of southern Africa's greatest overland destinations.

It has to be said, however, that this trip

would not appeal to everyone – especially not as a two-week holiday. The round trip to Johannesburg was 4384km, so it was quite a drive. But considering everything we saw, one would struggle to find a more rewarding two-week holiday.

Day one – Johannesburg to Francistown (705km)

We left Johannesburg early and crossed the border at Martinsdrift. Officials on both sides of the border were friendly, courteous and efficient. It took us only 20 minutes to pass through. The cost of a Botswana multiple-entry permit was P160 (R169) per couple.

We spent the night at a lodge on the edge of Francistown called Woodlands Stopover. The place was extremely well managed and very tasteful. It also boasted good security, a pool and wireless internet.

Day two – Francistown to Maun (495km)

The temperature hovered around zero degrees when we hit the road early the following morning. About 170km north of Francistown, we took a brief detour to visit Nata Bird Sanctuary.

It cost us P50 (R52) per person and P25 (R26) per vehicle to get in, but it was definitely

worth it. The sanctuary was full of pelicans and flamingoes, and we managed to snap some excellent shots from a shoreline hide.

After visiting Nata, we travelled to Maun, where we refuelled and purchased some supplies. Our credit cards were accepted without hassles and prices were similar to Johannesburg's, so we were pretty impressed.

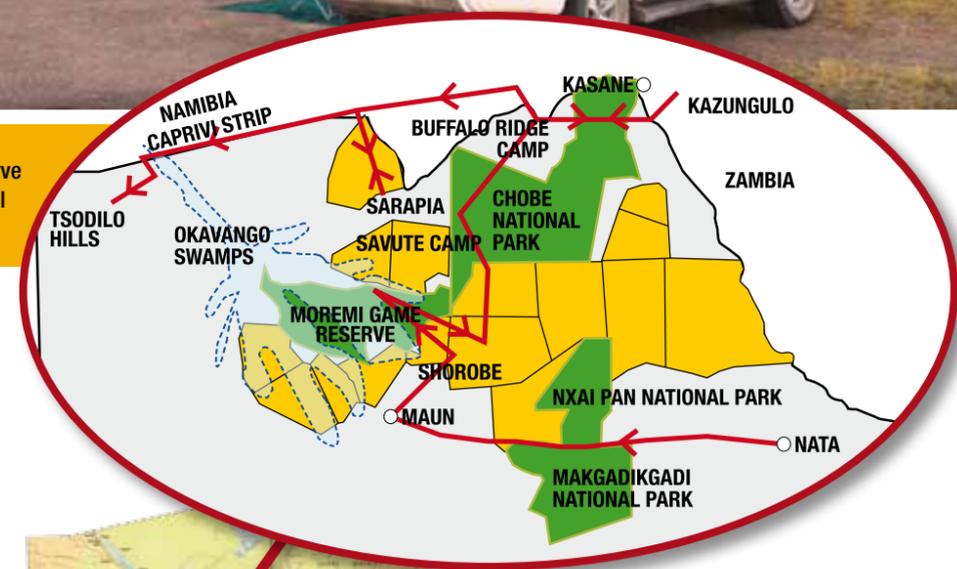
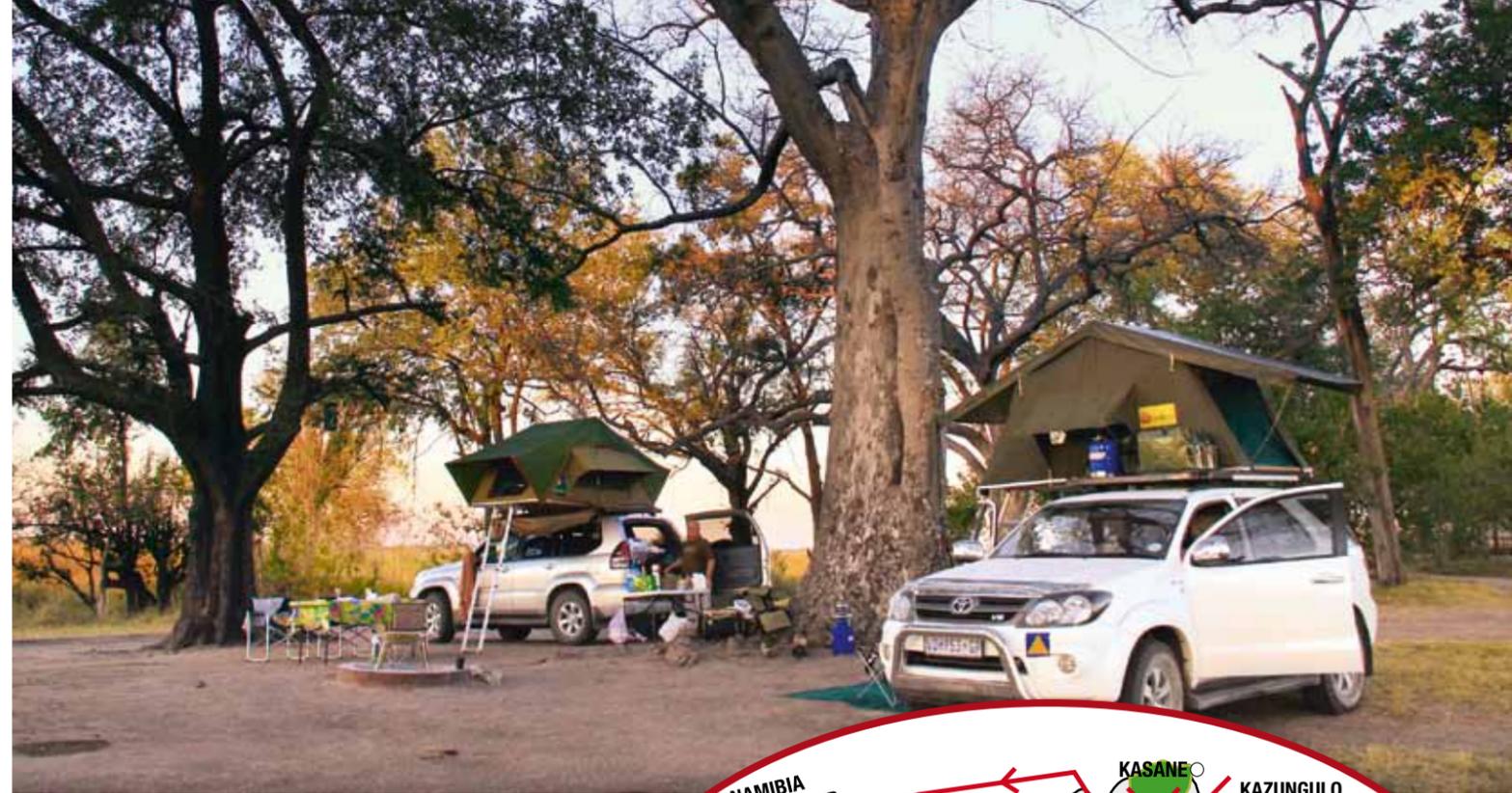
We had campsites booked at Xakanaxa, Savuti and Ihaha, and paid our gate entry fees at the Parks Reservation Office next to the Maun police station. Once again, our credit cards were accepted.

We spent the night at Audi Camp near Maun (P80, or R85, per person) and had a lovely meal at the camp's restaurant. The only things we unpacked were our roof-top tents.

Day three – Maun to Xakanaxa (250km)

We travelled to Moremi's South Gate via Shorobe. The road – around 96km – was a combination of tar and gravel, and didn't pose any problems.

After chatting to one of the rangers at South Gate, we decided to take the direct central route to Xakanaxa. This route can be very wet and muddy during the rainy season, but since we were travelling in the



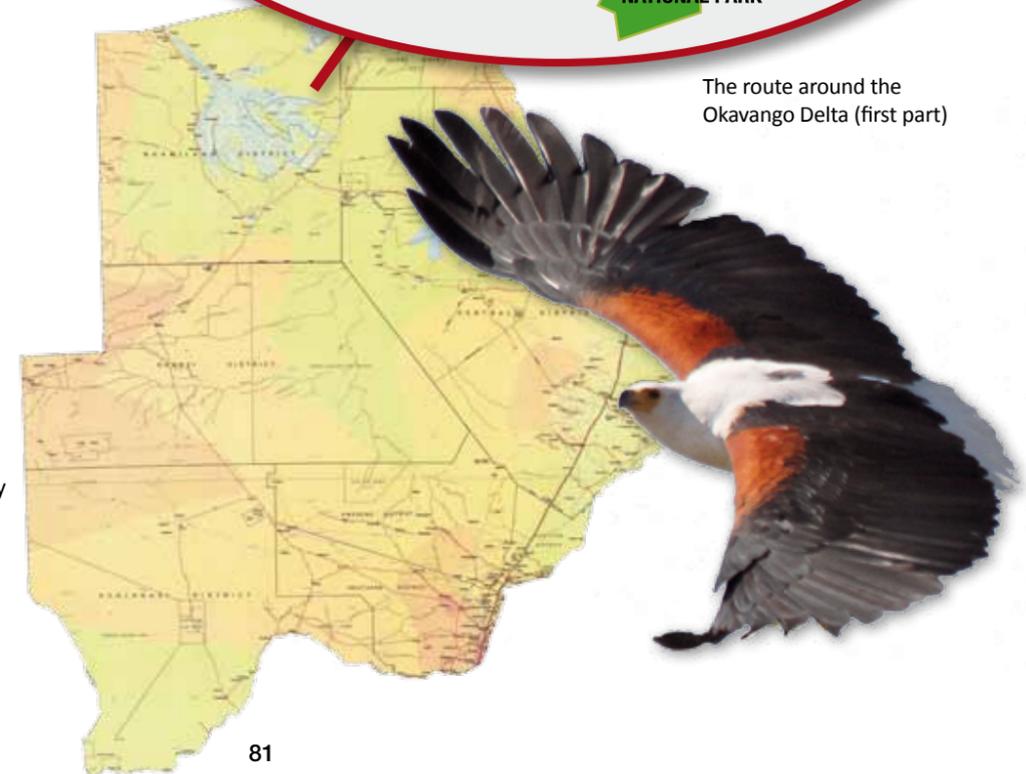
Above: The Xakanaxa campsite in Moremi Game Reserve was a pleasant surprise. Not only was it clean and well maintained, there was also plenty of wildlife around it.

dry period, there was little danger of getting stuck. Travelling the 42km to Xakanaxa's campsite took roughly 90 minutes. We could have completed it in less time, but we had some excellent wildlife photo opportunities along the way.

The campsite itself was a pleasant surprise. It was clean and offered all the necessary facilities. This was only our first night in the bush, yet a variety of animals passed through our site, including elephants. As I said, Botswana is a very special place!

Day four – Xakanaxa to Savuti (195km)

We met some travellers early on our fourth day. They informed us that the water level between Dombo Pools and North Gate was surprisingly high. Apparently one overseas visitor had already been forced to abandon his holiday after getting his vehicle stuck. Despite my desire to show my family the route north, we decided not to risk it. Instead, we returned to South Gate and travelled 34km farther south to join the route from Shorobe to Zankuyo and Mababe. About 10km after the Mababe game scout camp, we took the Sand Ridge



The route around the Okavango Delta (first part)



Previous page: Exploring the Okavango in a traditional makoro is one of the greatest pleasures that the region has to offer. The area is filled with wildlife such as bee eaters, kudus, pukus and elephants. Above: The Earnshaws camped at the Ihaha riverside campsite. The site offered stunning views.

Route, and after 40km of enjoyable driving, arrived at Savuti Camp.

Savuti was at its absolute best. Not only were the facilities in excellent condition, but we saw elephants, lions and hyenas right around the campsite

Unfortunately, though, we were spending only one night at Savuti. We would leave the following morning for Ihaha.

Day five – Savuti to Chobe (165km)

After an early start, we travelled through the Gcoha Hills. We encountered some construction near Ngoma Bridge, but made it to Kasane without any real delay. At Kasane, we filled up with fuel and purchased more supplies. We then drove along the Chobe River Route, which was exceptionally rewarding.

Like Savuti, Chobe's Ihaha campsite was fantastic, but we were also spending only one night here.

Day six – Chobe Reserve (110km)

Day six had been set aside for photography. And what a great day it turned out to be! We photographed a wide variety of game. We captured elephants, hippos and even a herd of buffaloes swimming across the Chobe River.

Once our photographic excursion was at an end, we drove to Toro Lodge in Kasane. Toro was fairly pricey, but considering what it offered, we thought it was good value for money. Accommodation in a prime riverside chalet and breakfast for two cost P794 (R840).

We decided to spend the night in the

lodge because we were craving warm, private showers and also wanted to get an early start the following morning.

Being able to hit the road without having to break camp would really help.

The lodge had a "special" on local traditional meals that evening, and for a brief moment, we were tempted. But since the safest thing on offer was Mopani worms, we opted for pizzas and cold beer.

Day seven – Kasane, Katima Mulilo and Caprivi (262km)

We travelled from Kasane to Ngoma Bridge via Chobe Game Reserve. Crossing the border between Botswana and Namibia was easy, though we did spot a rather interesting anomaly. The total cost of crossing the border is 220 – regardless of the currency you use. You can pay in rands, Namibian dollars or pula, but the amount stays the same!

After crossing the beautiful bridge at the border, we actually missed Katima Mulilo and had to retrace our steps, but we did manage to find it.

There was a good information bureau at Katima Mulilo where an official advised us to take the tar road to Kongola, and then travel south to Mudumu and Mamilli. One could get to Caprivi via Linyandi, but apparently large sections of road were under water.

We turned south off the tar road when we reached Kongola and continued on a good gravel track. Our destination was Camp Kwando, a beautiful camp on the banks of the Kwando River. While there, we took a boat trip on the river. It was lovely, and we bagged a few decent shots, but it didn't quite compare with the beauty and activity of Chobe Game Reserve.

Day eight – Mudumu, Popa Falls and Ngepi Camp (300km)

After striking camp we headed off for Mudumu National Park. Travelling south on a good gravel road running parallel with the river, we took one of the several unmarked entrances into the park. The sand was fairly deep, but fine to drive on.

We found the game scout camp and paid our dues (P50 each). The ranger advised us that the 25% of the reserve that was between the road and the river contained nearly all the animals. Despite this advice, though, we didn't spot much. Moremi and Chobe had been far superior.

We retraced our steps and set our sights on the tar road that led to Popa Falls. After taking a few snaps of the falls and refuelling, we travelled to Ngepi Camp. This is a pleasant campsite situated on an island. It boasted good facilities and cost P100 (R106) per person.

While at the camp, we took a guided bird walk, which was great. We did not spot anything we hadn't seen before, but we did see plenty of amazing birds.

We also hired two makoros, which turned out to be one of the highlights of the trip.

Our guides were knowledgeable and we got up close and personal with elephants, hippos and crocs. It was a wonderful experience, especially for a bunch of avid photographers!

Day nine – Ngepi, Mohebo and Tsodillo Hills (150km)

We left Ngepi Camp and travelled to Mohango Game Park. It seemed like a nice park, but large sections of road were being upgraded, which had caused the animals to

retreat. Future visitors will probably see more game than we did and will also traverse better roads, so it is probably worth visiting.

From the park, we drove back to the Namibia/Botswana border. Fifteen minutes after arriving at the border post, we were back in Botswana and heading for Tsodillo Hills.

I had been to Tsodillo Hills on two previous occasions and thought it was spectacular, so I was eager to find out if the place lived up to my memories of it.

Geoff's Okavango odyssey will be continued in next month's issue.

SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES... AND WIN!

Send us an account of your off-road adventure and a handful of photographs, and you could win a fabulous prize. If you haven't been blessed with the writing ability of William Shakespeare, don't worry. We will rewrite your story if necessary. You are also welcome to write the article in the language of your choice – we will translate it.

This month our prize goes to Geoff and Elise Earnshaw for their account of a whirlwind tour through the Okavango.

The Earnshaws win a GoPro adventure camera valued at R2500 from GRS Trading. It records directly to an SD card and can be read by a PC, so there's no need to download images to video tapes.

The camera is capable of shooting video in high definition and producing 5-megapixel stills.

For more information, tel. 021 913-1262; or e-mail info@grstrading.co.za.



Left: The Ngepi campsite in the Caprivi boasts a safety pool that has been built right in the Okavango River. Above: The road to Chobe's Mababe Gate. Right: The sun sets over Chobe.

