

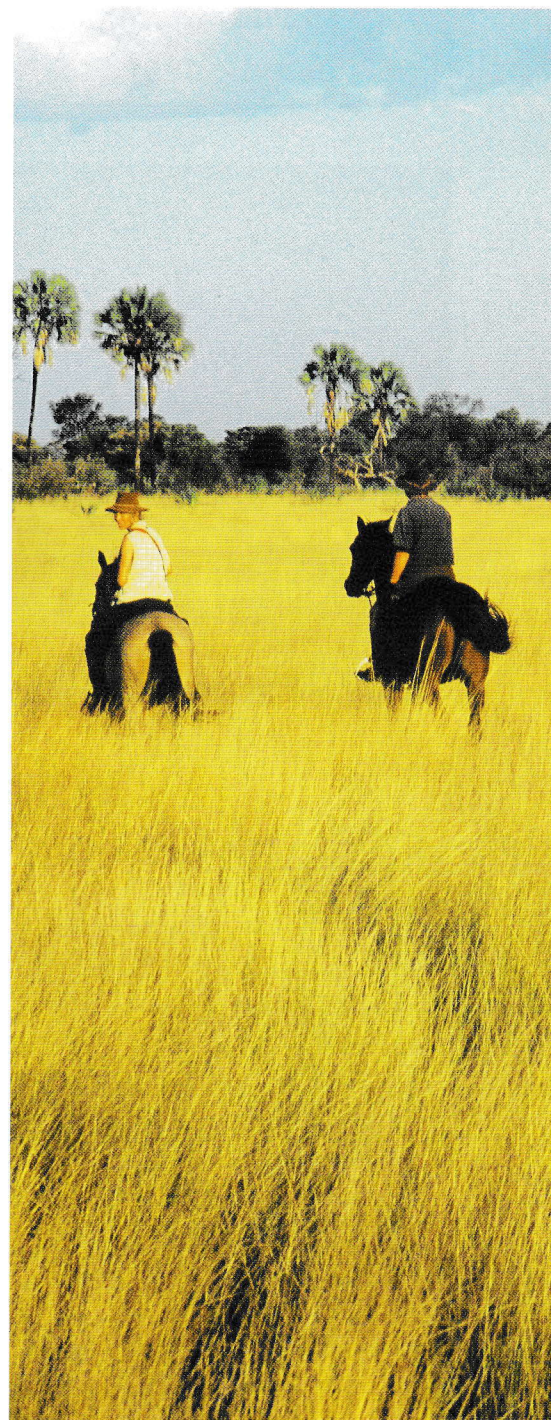


# OKAVANGO horse





The Okavango Delta is surely one of the best all-round safari experiences in Africa, and horse riding through this terrain is a high action holiday. **Carrie Hampton** describes this physical undertaking for those with a sense of adventure and a love of the wild.



*Heading out on horseback into the wilderness. LEFT: Horses are lined up for a quick photo shoot in the long golden grass of the Okavango Delta.*

# ride



A 'hot bottom' in riding-speak usually refers to someone who incites horses into naughty behaviour, but here it took on a new meaning



*The sky darkened to a deep midnight blue, foretelling a warm Okavango rainstorm.*



novice riders should think twice about venturing into the saddle of the raring-to-go horses that are part of the deal at African Horseback Safaris in the Okavango Delta. A good level of competence is a prerequisite for this adventure, not only because you have to cope with long rides and fast gallops, but you sometimes find yourself doing so alongside big game like giraffe, zebra and buffalo. Oh, and there's always the possibility of bumping into leopard, lion, elephant or wild dog.

Luckily the potential dangers of the African bush are far less fearsome from atop a horse, and the animal's eyes and ears are always alert for danger. They take mole holes and anthills in their stride and simply jump over anything else in the way.

The horses were strong and it was all I could do to remain behind the guide, who for safety reasons prefers to remain in the lead. We galloped with a zebra stampede and tried to keep up with surprisingly fast giraffe,

who seemed to speed away in slow motion. Soaked with the spray from horses kicking up the warm water in front of me, I grinned at the sheer exhilaration of riding through the seasonal floodplains.

The Okavango Delta is a life-giving source in an otherwise parched country. It sends fingers of water through papyrus-lined channels across the Kalahari sands, which then open out to into peaceful lagoons floating with water lilies. Shady forest glades and Ilala palm islets become surrounded by vast floodplains and rich savannah grasslands, together providing an extraordinary range of habitats.

Macatoo Tented Camp is positioned to take advantage of all these types of terrain. This is African Horseback Safari's base camp, although it is no normal camping experience. The large walk-in safari tents are equipped with instant hot water in en suite bathrooms, and they even tuck hot water bottles into

the beds on winter nights. Rooms are unpretentiously decorated with African batik fabrics, and each has its own little veranda looking into the Delta.

This holiday attracted an international crowd from many parts of the world, and although languages are not always common, the love of horses is, and that removes any barriers. So does a glass of wine or two around the fire or on the large viewing deck. Sunk into the wood is a refreshingly chilly swimming pool, which the resident baboons seem to think was built just for them. They treat the platform as a private playground, where youngsters play tag and chase each other for hours.

Macatoo Camp food was a culinary surprise of the best kind, with food that was both refined and wholesome, while providing enough energy to sustain us for 5 or 6 hours in the saddle each day. One morning we found ourselves in a 'breakfast ambush', and literally





*Galloping through the Okavango flood plains, getting soaked by the warm water, is one of the most delightful aspects of an African Horseback Safari.*

trotted into a table laden with fruit and pastries as we rounded a corner. We were convinced that we were far from camp, but when the grooms appeared from behind some bushes we realised it was just around the corner! No persuasion was needed to celebrate this surprise brunch with champagne and orange juice, and we were saved from becoming drunk in charge of a horse as the grooms had whisked them away.

Evening meals were a gastronomic treat too, with everyone sitting at one long table under a starry sky. Sounds romantic? Well, yes it was. But after being on a horse for so many hours, most of us were a little saddle-sore. The strange burning feeling we all felt in our buttocks turned out not to be from overuse, but from hot coals that had been shovelled under each chair to warm us up exactly where we needed it. A 'hot bottom' in riding-speak usually refers to someone who incites horses into naughty behaviour, but

here it took on a new meaning.

My impressions of the Okavango were governed by my senses – the sounds, smells and colours of Africa. There were palominos the same golden hue as the thigh-high grass, chestnuts and bays matching the shades of well-worn leather and autumn leaves. There were hundreds of grunting buffalo giving off a bovine whiff, made more pleasant by their stampeding hooves releasing the pleasing scent of wild sage.

A more indefinable scent was that of impending rain, and we all got soaked a few times. This was either from the occasional downpour (which was as warm as the shallow lagoons), or from water kicked up by galloping horses. Neither mattered, and the gigantic white clouds gave relief from a too-blue sky. I was exhausted, but the mixture of this challenging physical activity and all the best aspects of big game safari combined to leave me feeling utterly fulfilled. @

### HOW THE OKAVANGO GETS ITS WATER

Although called a 'swamp', the Okavango is actually a gently moving entity with a strong current. Rain in the lush highlands of Angola fills the Okavango River which flows inexorably towards the Delta. When the water reaches Botswana it leaks from a wide channel into unnoticeable pathways, and creeps through reeds into an ever-expanding network of smaller passages. These link to a succession of water-lily lagoons, palm-tree islands and grassy knolls, with open grassland, forest glades and flooded plains forming a mosaic of land and water. The Delta fluctuates in size according to a complex relationship between the annual flood from Angola and local rainfall. In a country that is 80% arid, this emerald swirl of life can even be seen from space, appearing like a limb that reaches into the heart of the Kalahari.