



AFRICA SPECIAL

FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

Rebecca Cox visits Botswana's Okavango Delta, where two impressive women are leaders – but Mother Nature is the boss

BOTSWANA

FROM TOP: Once the preserve of men, now female rangers, such as Bae Siethuka, are forging a path; the endangered wild dog is often at the top of a guest's wish list



I want to showcase the capability of women,' says Bae Siethuka, the first female guide at the African Bush Camps Foundation, 'guiding has always been male dominated.' Until now. Bae enrolled on the Foundation's two-year trainee guide programme in 2021, completed it in a year, and is now the first in the field. Botswana itself is her driving force: 'I have always wanted to interact with people across the world, by sharing the beauty that is my country.'

And beauty is something Botswana has abundance, particularly viewed from Atzaró Okavango in the Delta. The camp, which runs on 100 percent solar power, is headed up by a woman, too, general manager Kele Modiagane-Muzhuzha, who takes the protection of all this beauty seriously. 'The camp is built in an area that is away from game movement routes,' she says. 'The lodge is also carefully designed so that it is not a permanent structure, so the environment remains in the same condition it was in before it was built.'

Tented suites are elevated on stilts, blending canvas with natural wood and handcrafted basketry – the latter made by artisans from Ditshiping, the village five kilometres away that supplies almost half of the camp's staff. The village's residents also lead the traditional mokoro rides along the Delta's waterways, gliding silently through papyrus channels so you can immerse yourself in the landscape completely, while supporting the local community. A patrol team from Ditshiping works to deter poaching in the area, a tutoring centre in Maun supports the village's children attending school in the city.

Atzaró Okavango's presence funds the community while the community shapes the camp – here, we could insert a clip of a cartoon baboon holding up a baby lion to the soundtrack of *The Circle of Life*. The lions, though, are not the main attraction here, nor the leopards. The endangered African wild dogs are at the heart of the conservation efforts in Botswana, the last stronghold of the predator on the continent, and a sighting of a pack of wild dogs tearing across sun-dappled water on a hunt is top of most visitors' wish lists. Our most reliable animal encounter came at 2am each night – a grunting

hippo stomping across the camp attempting to dismantle the walkways. But as Modiagane-Muzhuzha flagged, the camp is built non-permanently for exactly this reason: the animals were here first. And though Modiagane-Muzhuzha and Siethuka are among the guardians of all this for now, hopefully the animals will be here long after the humans leave. ■

BOOK IT: Atzaró Okavango works as a standalone trip, or paired with Atzaró Cape Town. The nine-day 'African Ultimate Experience' combining both properties starts at £8,100 per couple. atzaro-okavango.com

Rebecca's return flights from London Heathrow to Botswana had a carbon footprint of 17,677kg of CO₂e (ecollectivecarbon.com)