Why Right Now Is the Perfect Time to Go to Botswana, According to Science

The Delta is experiencing its highest floodwaters in over a decade, and researchers say the window to see it this way may not last.

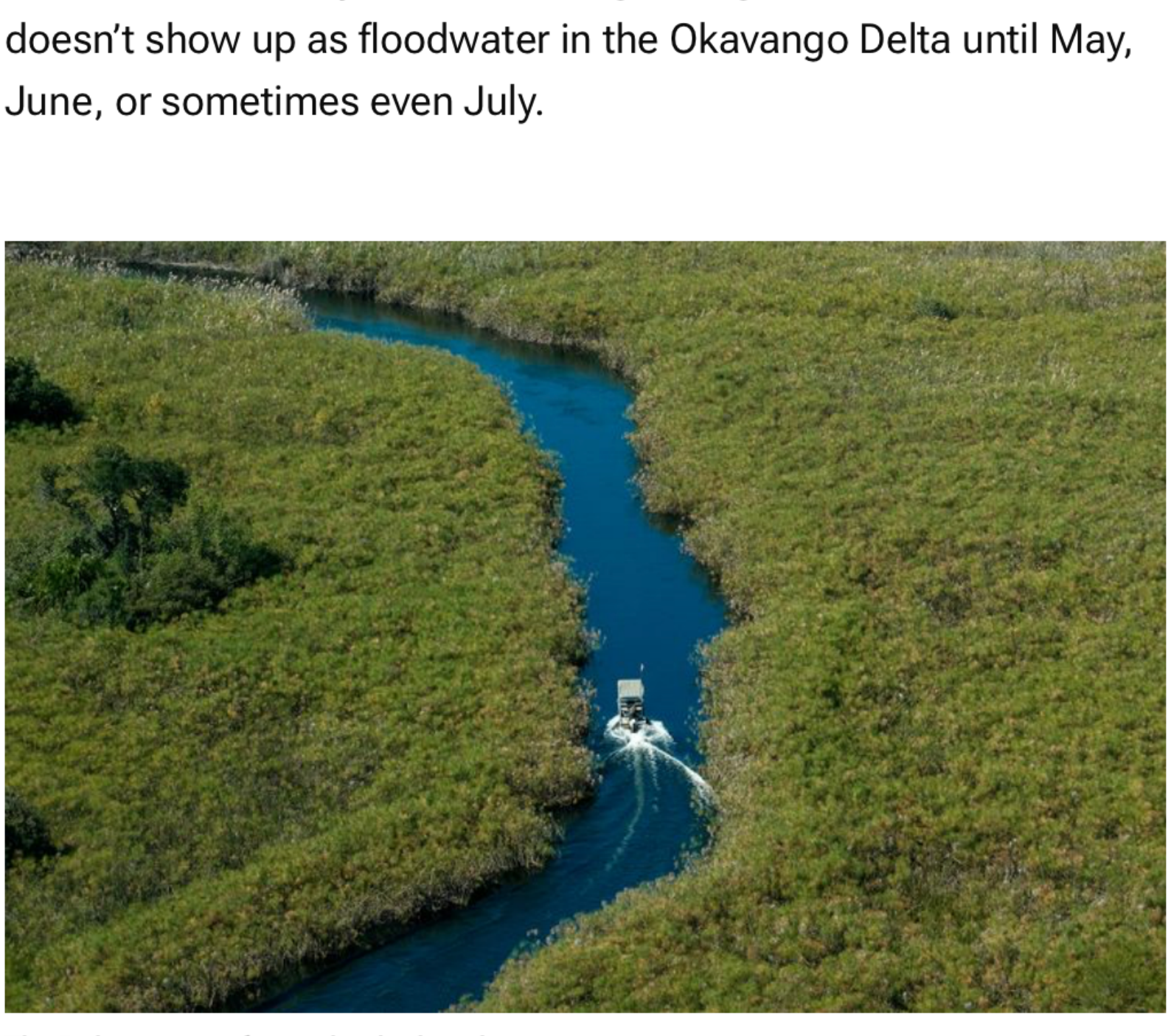
By **Stacey Leasca** | Published on July 15, 2026

Journalist Stacey Leasca rides a mokoro through the Okavango Delta.
Credit: Silas Dunham

"We're going to have to sacrifice the chardonnay," my guide, Shatiso "Shati" Mosojane, said. It was indeed sad, but a sacrifice we had to make, as the lions roared within earshot, and the mid-morning sun began to cast its heat. There was little hope of rescue, as we were smack in the middle of the bush without another soul for miles. It was exactly the kind of thing every safari-goer would hope happens to them in the northern Okavango Delta.

This adventurous detour began for me a few months prior, back in my apartment in Lisbon, Portugal. I was on the phone with Meagan Yash, a travel specialist with Timbuktu, a bespoke tour operator often named to the very top of *Travel + Leisure's* World's Best Awards, including taking the No. 1 spot for best tour operators in 2024. Yash has spent nearly 20 years in the travel industry, the last decade of it focused on Africa, making her the perfect person to wax poetic about safaris with. While plotting out my next journey, Yash suggested I go to Botswana—and that I go pretty much immediately, because the flood waters hadn't been this good in well over a decade. So, she quickly got to work building an itinerary to see the best of Botswana's Delta with a visit to two of Natural Selection's most beloved camps.

To understand why all this water in Botswana is a big deal, you have to travel roughly 1,000 miles to the Bié Plateau in the highlands of Angola. It's often called the "water tower" of Africa, as more than 95 percent of the water that eventually fills the Delta starts there as rain and is captured by the source rivers and lakes and protected by miombo woodland. From there, the water spills into two rivers, each with its own distinct personality: the Cubango, a steep and fast system full of rapids, and the Cuito, a gentle waterway, buffered by peatlands that release water gradually and sustain the Delta through the dry season. The two rivers merge at the Angola-Namibia border and creep south into Botswana so slowly that rain falling in Angola in December doesn't show up as floodwater in the Okavango Delta until May, June, or sometimes even July.



The Delta as seen from a bush plane between camps.
Credit: Stacey Leasca/Travel + Leisure

However, that pipeline hasn't always run full. By 2019, the Delta's open water had hit its lowest level in 20 years. The tipping point, researchers found, came in 2018, when the wetland system dropped below the threshold it needed to recover before the drought hit full force the following year. In 2020, 350 elephants died in the Delta after drinking from watering holes where toxic cyanobacteria had bloomed, an event one King's College London-led study later tied to the whiplash between an extremely dry year and the wet one that followed. Long-range climate models aren't offering much reassurance for the future either, with some projecting less rainfall and higher temperatures across the catchment in the decades ahead.

"Some will say in our lifetime it's unprecedented," Dr. Jennifer Lalley, the co-founder and conservation director of Natural Selection, said of this year's water levels. "There are older folks here who say, decades and decades ago, 'water reached this river, this floodplain, this village.' Most people will point to 2010, 2011, and 2012, when there were significant floods. But this year has already outdone that."

The reason for all the water now is higher-than-average rainfall in both Angola and Botswana, a generous gift from Mother Nature that pushed the Delta into an early flood season, bringing with it plenty of life. "When the water arrives in volume, the entire system changes character," Ross Exler, an Africa Geographic Okavango Delta safari expert, said. "You feel it everywhere—in the movement of animals, the opening of channels, the soundscape, even the pace at which you travel through the landscape."

But the water only gets here because Angola and Namibia let it through.

"The other reason people need to come and see it now is that we don't know what's going to happen upstream," Lalley said. "Everyone's got their eyes on Angola and Namibia, because that water passes through both countries. Water extraction in Namibia, more and more dams are being built in Angola. The Delta's a special place, and it's actually under threat."

But, for now, there's water. And lots of it, which is why I had to forgo my afternoon sip of chardonnay.

On our early morning game drive out of Natural Selection's Duke's Camp, an eight-tent camp on a 220,000-acre concession known for some of the Delta's highest lion densities, we set out through the head-high grasslands in search of big game. But before we got too far, we found the left back tire of our Land Cruiser pulled into the earth, spinning fruitlessly in the mud. The water, Mosojane explained, hadn't been there the day before. So, he got out, jacked up the car, and grabbed some nearby fallen branches to act as traction under the wheel. Luckily, a maintenance team happened to be nearby, and they came to help pull us out, too. Then, when Mosojane went to take the jack down, it wouldn't budge. Hence, the chardonnay, which he poured over the jack to get it moving. Don't worry, oenophiles. It was all a ruse by Mosojane, who'd secretly filled the bottle with lubricant all along.

Inside Duke's Camp with Natural Selection.
Credit: Silas Dunham

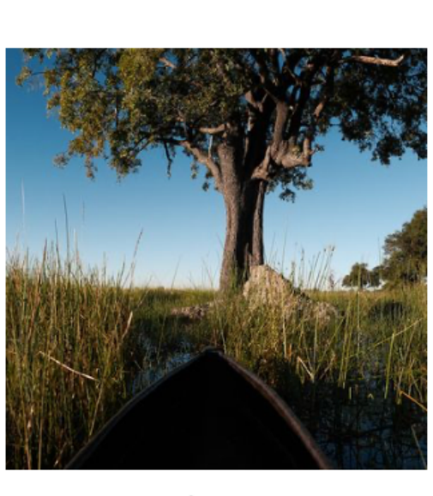
Once freed, we were off—or so we thought. Mere moments later, we found ourselves stuck again after attempting to forge a small waterway that only the day prior had been nothing but a shallow puddle. Fortunately, the maintenance crew was right behind us for the assist. "I'm never driving this way again," Mosojane joked as we hooted and hollered with joy once we really were on our way.

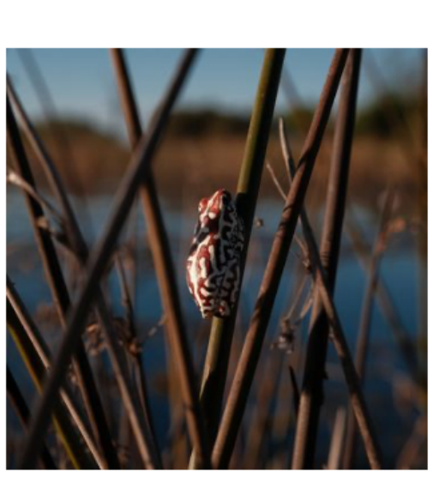
Crossing the waterways in a car, spotting elephants on the banks, fluffy-coated hyena pups poking out from their den, and two male lions moving in stealth mode through the grass were certainly worthy of the trip. But it's the other waterway activities you can take part in here that make Botswana's swelling rivers all the more enticing.

Credit: Stacey Leasca/Travel + Leisure

In the evening, we dipped over to the delta's banks to hop in a mokoro, a traditional dugout canoe used for transportation by locals, to paddle our way through its blooming lilies, spotting "water leopards," AKA the painted reed frog, no bigger than the tip of your pinky, resting on the top of their namesake plant. The water was crystal clear and refreshingly chill, though you wouldn't want to hop in out of fear that a hippo could be lurking nearby. Luckily, the guides knew to warn them that we were coming with a gentle tap on the hull, sending a small hum through the water.

"It was a mode of transport long ago, and it still is now," Parks Tshiamo Maphakela, my guide while staying at Natural Selection's upscale neighboring camp, North Island, told me. "Someone selected a tree that would float; that alone was a skill. Either a mango, kiaat, or sausage tree. Skilled men would chop it down and carve it into a mokoro, and that's how the Okavango Delta was discovered. Every island, every channel, someone came, camped, fished, hunted, and left a story behind."





L: The view from the mokoro in the Okaganvo Delta.
Credit: Stacey Leasca/Travel + Leisure

C: A frog rests on the reeds in the Delta.
Credit: Stacey Leasca/Travel + Leisure

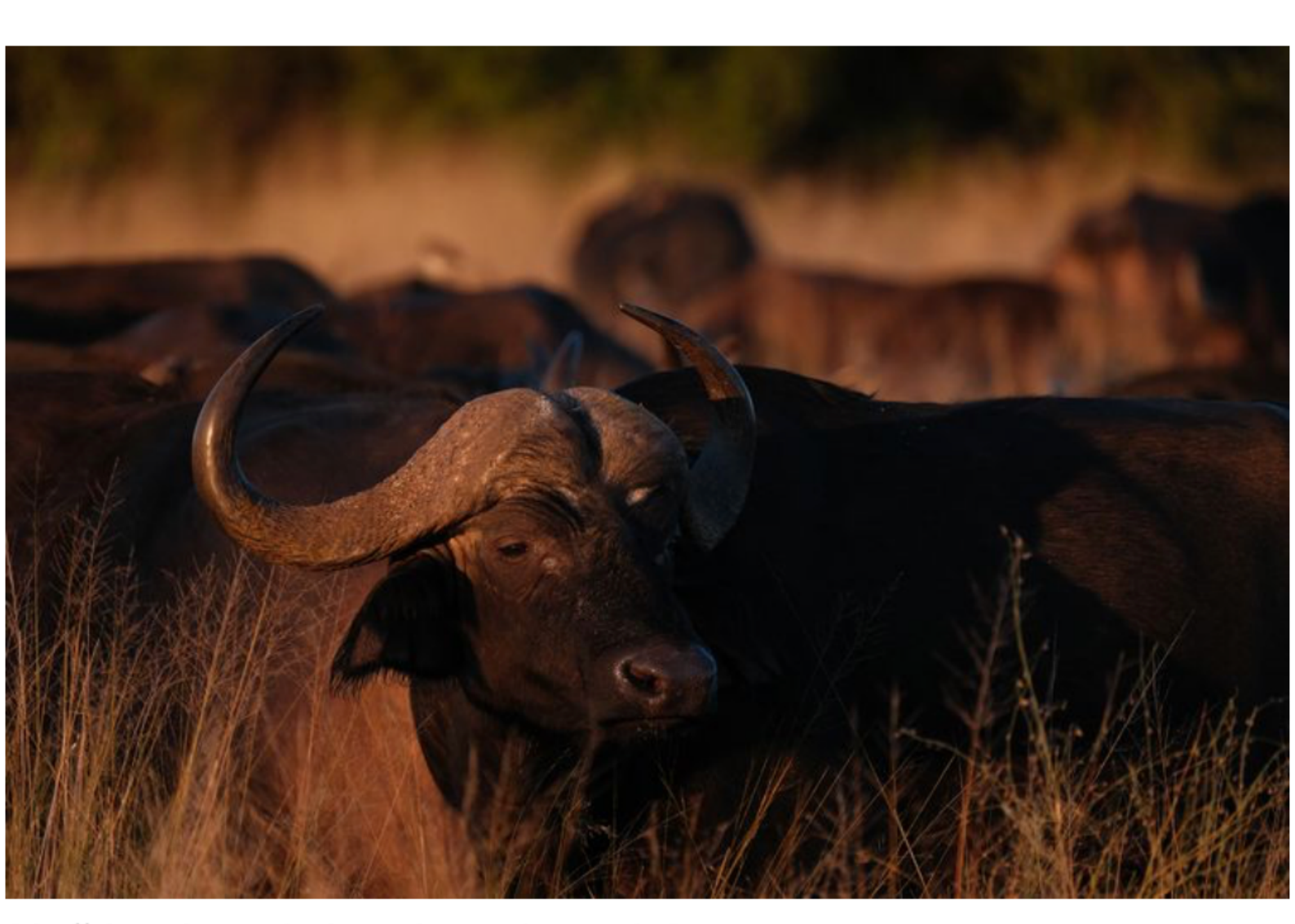
R: The vegetation reaches for the sky in the Okavango Delta.
Credit: Stacey Leasca/Travel + Leisure

There's no growl of an engine on a mokoro. No bumps on the road. It's a smooth-as-silk ride in near total silence, save for the paddle dipping in and out of the water. Even while you're in it, you recognize it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But my hope is that looking back, I'll deem it that simply because of how magical it was, not because climate change has reshaped these waters.

"Tourism is the best tool you can imagine," Maphakela said, explaining how seeing the environment change first-hand helps give visitors a richer understanding of the issue. It's a sentiment Lalley wholeheartedly agreed with, adding: "We started the company to generate funds for positive impact. Tourism, in my mind as a conservation biologist, ticks every box. You can look after the land, employ people, empower local communities, and fund conservation work."

On our last game drive together, Maphakela pulled over for a quick break in a patch of earth that felt like a utopia. Surrounded by zebras grazing on the golden grass under a bright blue sky, he took a deep breath.

"It's the last Eden we have here," he said. "The last untouched wilderness. It's very safe, very friendly, and it'll be worth the wait when you arrive. We have a feeling each time the water comes. This is the time people should come to see exactly what we mean when we say Okavango Delta."



A buffalo wakes up in the early morning sun in Botswana.
Credit: Stacey Leasca/Travel + Leisure

5 Things to Tell Your Travel Advisor Before Booking

Advice from Meagan Yash, a travel specialist at Timbuktu.

Planning a trip to somewhere as remote as the Okavango Delta usually means working with an advisor, not just a booking site. Here's what Yash says she needs to know up front to build the right trip.

Share any milestones.

Anniversaries and honeymoons can unlock major perks. Some camps offer 50 percent off one spouse's stay with proof of a marriage certificate, usually within six months of the wedding. Yash once arranged a surprise anniversary helicopter flight over the Delta, kept secret from the husband until it touched down at their camp. Really, the possibilities are endless.

Make your deal breakers known.

Training for a marathon and need a gym? Make sure to share that with your advisor. Yash always asks guests to share their non-negotiables, which immediately narrows which camps are in play.

Know what you want to avoid.

Not everyone wants to board a light aircraft, which can often be a requirement for remote camps. This can help your advisor find more accessible camps, which usually point toward larger commercial routes through Kruger or Victoria Falls instead.

List any medical needs.

Have a specific medical condition or a necessary dietary restriction? All of it shapes which regions are realistic for your trip. However, Yash can also speak to camps directly before your arrival to ensure your every need is tended to.

Don't hide your budget and interests.

Travelers are often cagey about saying a number. Yash says being transparent gets you a better-matched trip faster, so decide what your max budget is, share a range, and let your advisor take care of the rest. They may even be able to find you a deal you didn't know existed.

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