

Botswana beckons - In Review: Ker & Downey Botswana and Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge

 By [Debbie Hathway](#)

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When you're at breaking point, the African bush provides the salve to soothe open wounds.

The African bush is spellbinding. It's not just the perceived peace and quiet that penetrates every cell of body and brain when you're in the thick of it. Because that would belie the energy of the surrounding ecosystem. The flick of a lizard's tail as it darts into a corner of your veranda looking out into the vast nothingness of scrub that stretches for kilometres before you. A shy bushbuck disappearing around the corner as soon as you lift your camera. The call of waking baboons from the clifftops. The roar of lions. The crackle of branches trampled by elephants. The warning shouts from monkeys when predators are near. Even when no animals are in sight, there is the ever-present soundtrack of birdsong.



Magnificent scenery and whispered stories

Somehow, in properly conserved areas of wilderness, when guests are invited to witness life in a protected habitat – the awe that comes with that privilege invokes respectful silence (from obedient guests) on a game drive in open vehicles so as not to disturb the creatures in their daily tasks. That, coupled with the sheer magnificence of the scenery and the whispered stories shared by experienced guides, creates the magic. And with it a sense of calm induced not only by the environment but also the inactivity encouraged by the local staff eager to please at every turn. It's a welcome feeling any time of year, but when processing the unexpected reality of being an adult orphan, it is indeed a blessing.



I was invited to tour three upmarket game lodges in Botswana in March 2020 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Falcon Africa, tour operators who knew the area inside and out. My father was ill and my hosts were ready to connect me with home at every stop. With Wi-Fi only available in the general areas of one lodge, guests are gently encouraged to disconnect from the intrusions of the outside world. Sometimes that's the whole point of a bush break.

Sadly, my father passed away the day before the departure date. The itinerary included prime game viewing at two reserves in the Kalahari region and one in the Okavango Delta. As the sole journalist invited to this exclusive event, I had no choice but to pack and prepare to travel as planned. That and a strong case of eldest child syndrome, which means I have a strong sense of responsibility and commitment. The show must always go on. So I joined my small group, grateful for the opportunity to be quiet without having to explain myself. Air charters and game drives are not conducive to conversation anyway.



Ker & Downey Botswana

By the time we landed in Botswana at an alarmingly empty (by normal standards) Maun International Airport, much of the conversation was beginning to centre on the outbreak of Covid-19. A short charter flight away, [Ker & Downey Botswana](#) guide Phefo Moheto was waiting to greet us at “Dinaka International”, demarcated by a tiny metal-roofed shelter alongside a short sandy airstrip.



Dinaka Ker & Downey Botswana

Dinaka, meaning ‘horns’, is the latest acquisition by Ker & Downey Botswana, which was founded by safari pioneers at the end of the Second World War. It comprises just seven spacious thatched safari tents, connected by wooden walkways. Here the semi-arid sandy savannah is home to more than 200 bird species, the Kalahari lion, cheetah, leopard, springbok, oryx and brown hyena, among others, as well as smaller mammals such as the honey badger. The camp is unfenced and

animals move through it freely.

By the time we reached the second lodge – Okuti, a Ker & Downey Botswana camp in Moremi Game Reserve, the oldest protected area of the Delta – we discovered that lockdown was imminent but were assured that our return home would be unhindered. The talk about what would happen next was all-consuming. What would happen to the travel industry? How would the lodges survive without tourists? What would the tour operators do? How many staff would be retrenched? How many businesses would close? It's all academic now.



Okuti Ker & Downey Botswana

Our guide, Baams Motsamai, calmly went about distracting us from the imminent crisis with a water safari along the Maunachira channel, which flows in front of the five Masasas (meaning house of reeds) at Okuti. The reserve supports a tremendous amount of wildlife as well as more than 400 bird species. A surprise sundowner on the river bank was well received by slightly frazzled guests after Motsamai was forced to open the throttle to escape a charging hippo in territorial mode. Did you know they can swim at 8km/hr underwater?



Okuti Ker & Downey Botswana

Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge

Our final overnight stop was Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge on a leafy hilltop I never would have dreamed existed in this part of the world. It was the first place that I felt I could truly breathe deeply and get air into my lungs. Perhaps the shock was wearing off, but here the energy was definitely different – calming yet energising. “It’s a pleasure for us to hear that. It means you have to come and stay longer,” said manager Edwin Mmusi.

We were now in the Chobe National Park in the north of Botswana, which has one of the highest concentrations of game and wildlife in Africa. Ghoha Hills accommodates 26 guests in total, in nine standard rooms and two family rooms, which can be reached via a short walk along a sandy path further up the hill from the dining area and pool deck. The busiest time at the lodge is from April onwards, with June being the coldest month. Winter is often preferable for foreigners unused to the heat of the African summer, although the hills attract a nice breeze during the day.



Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge

Mmusi says that before Chobe was established, people lived on top of this hill many, many years ago. Then fences were

erected and the place was deserted for a long time, until the powers that be were convinced to authorise the establishment of a lodge. “I’ve been here five years. Even I have felt relief. When you’re on top of this place it’s very calm, it’s very quiet,” he says. “In terms of game, the special thing about it is that some animals live here all year round. We pump water to keep our dam full so that the animals don’t need to go elsewhere.”

Mmusi recalls stories about the Savuti lions bringing down big elephants. “They have enough food. There are more than 20 in the pride now, in the Savuti. It is growing and guests have seen cubs. Others have seen hyena cubs too. The lions move around but the guides know where to find them. There are not many leopards ... they are very elusive.”



Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge

The point is that the animals are there, but they are not around every corner. This is the beauty of true conservation – having the privilege of seeing a wide variety of wildlife in their natural habitat. By the end of the trip, we were able to tick off the big five in a space that Ker & Downey Botswana calls “a niche carved from eternity”. Botswana is a country well worth a return visit – to recalibrate, to reconnect and to recharge.

How to get there

- Hathway was a guest at Dinaka, Okuti and Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge, courtesy of Falcon Africa. Contact Allan and Tracy Eccles on +27 (0)83 631 0209, or visit falcon-africa.co.za for more information.
- Air Botswana flies direct from OR Tambo International in Johannesburg, South Africa to Maun International Airport in Botswana in just two hours.
- We used Safari Air charters to move between lodges, averaging about 40 minutes per flight. Travel light, using holdalls or similar for easy loading and storage.

ABOUT DEBBIE HATHWAY

Debbie Hathway is an award-winning writer, with a special interest in luxury lifestyle (watches, jewellery, travel, property investment) and the arts.

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