



QUICK GUIDE TO

# Self-Driving in Botswana



Botswana is made for road (and road-less) trips — it is a big-sky country, a land of flood plains, deserts and eternal horizons. Self-drive and you'll undoubtedly have one of the continent's most intimate safari experiences.

## Getting started

Self-drive safaris in Botswana typically start with a flight into Gaborone, Kasane or Maun, or to Johannesburg in neighbouring South Africa, however, this itinerary will start in Windhoek, since that will probably be the case for most of you. Upon arrival you'll pick up your 4WD camper and head out into the wilds. The GPS is king — Tracks4Africa ([www.tracks4africa.co.za](http://www.tracks4africa.co.za)) is a reliable choice for maps. Booking ahead for campsites, too, is essential, particularly in peak periods: any South African school holiday periods, and July to September when driving conditions are optimal.

## The rewards

Once you enter fully into the wild lands covered below, the advantages of your decision to self-drive will immediately become clear: freedom to roam, time to gander at whatever you want and nobody for the animals to look at but you. And come the evening at your remote campsite, after you've enjoyed a hearty meal from your gas stove, sit down with a cold beverage and soak up the silence before evening gathers and the night sounds of Africa fill the darkness all around. This is, after all, a country to be experienced in blissful isolation, with nothing but canvas separating you from the African night. Sleep safe in the knowledge that where you go tomorrow is entirely up to you.

## Okavango Delta and Chobe

The Okavango Delta, in the country's north, is an African miracle, an extraordinary spectacle, and a byword for the abundance of wild Africa. Every year, January rains that fall in the highlands of Angola head not for the sea but relentlessly down into the delta, arriving several months later. They water the plains and river channels before eventually soaking into the northern Kalahari. At the water's peak, much of the delta is inaccessible to vehicles, but that changes from July through to September or tinder-dry October. It is then that the great drama of the Okavango takes hold, as predator and prey tussle not for supremacy but for survival. It is about big cats (lion, leopard and cheetah) and big creatures (elephant, buffalo, hippo), about local specialties (the splay-hoofed sitatunga and the delta-adapted lechwe) and an astonishing richness of birdlife. The delta is so large — up to 18,000 square kilometres at its greatest extent — that making the most of your time here requires careful planning.

The Okavango Panhandle, that narrow river valley through which the annual deluge flows, is ideal for birdwatching, for fishing and for getting out onto the water in a mokoro (dugout canoe). It's less ideal for viewing large mammals. Further east, the Moremi Game Reserve is the delta's heartland, fed by well-worn trails and serviced by iconic campsites such as Third Bridge where lions roam, or Xakanaxa where hippos blart by the lagoon deep into the night.

East again and the outer reaches of the delta spill over into the Savuti Marsh of Chobe National Park, an area famed for lion and elephant clashes. The nearby Linyanti Marsh is known for its roaming packs of African wild dogs, while the Chobe Riverfront area is home to some of Africa's biggest elephants roaming in their tens of thousands.

## Kalahari

*not included in the itinerary below but always something worth seeing if you have the time to do so.*

Where the delta ends, the Kalahari takes over, and the challenge of driving here is all about sand and salt rather than water, although even such stark realities come with a caveat: the Kalahari may be the largest sand desert on earth, but sand dunes are unusual and deep-sand driving is rarely an issue. Then again, if driving here late in the dry season (late September and October), wind-blown grass seeds can play havoc with your radiator.

From north to south, a string of protected areas guide your path through the Kalahari. In the north, the largest network of salt pans on the planet – Sowa (Sua), Nxai and Ntwetwe Pans together make up the Makgadikgadi Pans – covers an area as large as the delta. The Boteti River in the west draws wildlife in the dry season, with vast numbers of zebra migrating east during the rains (islands of baobabs shelter campsites of rare beauty in this area).

Further south, across the Nata-Maun highway, is the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. One of the largest in Africa, it is a soulful, deep-desert reserve where low sand hills and fossilised river valleys shelter black-maned lions, as well as leopard and cheetah, gemsbok and honey badger. It is a remote and lightly trammelled world where the nearest member of your own species may be tens of kilometres away across arid country that belongs to lions.

In the south, the park segues into the Khutse Game Reserve, another fine park where big cats outnumber humans. Further away still to the south, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, which Botswana shares with South Africa, is classic Kalahari country with red-sand dunes and wildlife in abundance.

East and west of the Kalahari respectively, the Tsodilo Hills and the Tuli Block make terrific, bouldered add-ons to the Kalahari experience. Tsodilo is a haunting landscape of millennia-old rock art, and the Tuli Block is one of southern Africa's most underrated wildlife-watching destinations.

## Here's a short list of the Dos and Don'ts to consider

### DOs:

**Be open minded and flexible:** driving in Botswana is not as easy as you may think. Road conditions can be challenging in many areas and include soft sand, slippery clay, deep water and broken bridges. Getting stuck or breaking an essential part of your vehicle happens easily and often.

**Be prepared:** plan your route carefully and don't underestimate the time it may take to cover those distances. Make sure you have rented the correct type of vehicle and your car has all the necessary equipment from highlift jack to a spade and most importantly a GPS (Download the tracks4africa App which works OFFLINE!) and ideally a satellite phone. You will be in remote areas with no cell phone signal and the next car coming might be days away.

**Carry more spares and extras** than you'll ever think you'll need – i.e. fuel, water and tyres without overloading your car.

**Have a nicely stocked medical kit** with you – the smallest cut can turn into something nasty quickly in the right conditions.

**Treat officials and bureaucrats with respect.** Losing your temper never gets you anywhere. Remember the 3 Ps: politeness, patience and perseverance.

**Be aware of rules and regulations:** Botswana has so-called vet fences which prevent the spread of highly contagious diseases such as Foot and Mouth. These fences restrict the movement of any cloven hooved products so you might end up handing in your recently purchased BBQ meats and road snacks to the local officials and you will not win any argument with them.

Preferably **travel in convoy.**

*Embrace the spirit of  
African adventure in all  
its glory!*

### **DON'Ts:**

**Do NOT drive off-road!** This is prohibited in all National Parks to keep the wilderness pristine and undamaged. Respect those rules also outside the parks.

**Do not drive in the dark.**

**Do not feed the animals,** this will only encourage them to lose their fear of humans which can end disastrously.

**Do not leave your vehicle under any circumstances.** You do not know the bush nor the animals. You have a better chance at staying alive with access to the safety of your car and the copious supplies of food and water than risking a walk through the bush and an encounter with a wild animal.

**Do not lose your sense of humour** – Africa will inevitably throw challenges at you and keeping an open mind about it will prevent you from losing your sense of humour and/or patience.

**Do NOT travel unprepared.** Study the maps, directions and distances while planning your trip.

**Prebook all accommodation,** Botswana has a very low population density, distances between villages can be huge. If planning a camping trip, campsites have to be booked about 11 months before travel to avoid disappointment.

**Most importantly:** Botswana is by far the most challenging destination and can in no way be compared to Namibia, South Africa and even Zimbabwe and Zambia due to the unique circumstances of season, habitats, environmental conditions and lack of infrastructure!

## Explore The North

*(Recommended time: 2 weeks)*

Click [here](#) to view the interactive map

Despite the long distances, it is possible to get a taste of Botswana and Namibia's best wildlife areas in a busy two-week itinerary. To make this work, you'll need your own 4WD.

Begin in Windhoek and soak up its urban charms before you head out into the wilds. Spend at least three days in Etosha National Park, home to some of the best wildlife viewing in Southern Africa, then drive via Grootfontein to sleep on the banks of the Okavango River at steamy Rundu; that's Angola across the water. Track east into the Caprivi Strip for a couple of nights in Bwabwata National Park and the Nkasa Rupara National Park, before crossing into Botswana and staying along the Chobe Riverfront for a couple of days among big herds of big elephants. Leaving the paved road behind, make for the lion-and-leopard country of Savuti (two nights), then spend three days in Moremi Game Reserve. From there, make for Maun to continue your onward journey, leaving enough time for a scenic helicopter flight over the Okavango Delta.

### Namibia + Botswana Self-Drive Route

Directions from Windhoek to Maun, Botswana

- A** Windhoek
- B** Halali
- C** Grootfontein
- D** Rundu
- E** Bwabwata National Park
- F** Chobe River
- G** Savuti, Botswana
- H** Maun, Botswana

