

TRUNK

WORDS AND PHOTOS HUW KINGSTON

TRAILS

An enterprising operator in Botswana's Okavango Delta is offering mountain bike safaris. Not only do these involve close encounters with the Big Five, but cyclists will be riding in the footsteps of elephants, who have stomped out great singletrack.

WE COULD JUST pick his eyes and nose out from the camouflage of the bush. An old male lion staring at us as we, astride our bikes, stared at him. He trying to decide whether we were tasty, we trying to decide whether he was hungry. We'd not long passed a freshly killed carcass, so hoped he might have eaten. But what about dessert?



CALL OF A WILD RIDE

Less than two weeks earlier I'd met Theo, a work friend, in a cafe in the heart of Sydney.

"How do you fancy riding singletrack built by elephants?" he asked.

I looked up from stirring the first coffee and smiled.

"And what are you like riding with a gun on your back?"

By the time the second caffeine hit was in, I'd forgotten what we were originally meeting about as Theo enticed me with Okavanga Delta photos and painted pictures in my head of elephants looking nonchalantly on as I rode past.

Less than two weeks later I was in Johannesburg. A day later in the dusty desert town of Maun in the north-west corner of Botswana. Botswana is a landlocked country about the size of France and has a population of two million. A country that has melded a renowned education system, reasonable economic security (gained from a couple of large mining projects) and a population not riven by tribalism to become one of the more successful and stable countries in Africa since independence 45 years ago.

The country is dominated by the expanses of the Kalahari Desert shared with Namibia and South Africa. From March each year, flowing down from the Angola highlands in the north, rivers cross the Caprivi Strip in Namibia and thence into Botswana, where the waters fan out into the Okavango Delta. These waters never mix it with the sea; the Okavango is the world's largest inland river delta. Such natural irrigation causes vegetation to flourish, attracting a huge quantity and variety of animals and birds.

CRASH-TEST DUMMIES

Whilst Nic, Theo's brother, and I had flown into Maun, the others drove across the country from South Africa. While we strolled the 50m from Botswana Customs to the main street, they took 17 hours to join us. Maun is a hotch-potch of street stalls, safari offices and craft shops; a staging post for trans-Africa safari trucks and for people heading into the Okavango.

Our little group consisted of Theo and his wife, Aryna; ex of South Africa now in Sydney; Nic



Spot the lion?

from Cape Town; their dad, also Nic (and a dead ringer for Geoffrey Rush); Andre from Jo'burg; Sarah and Rob from Sydney. We were headed to the Okavango as – depending on how you looked at it – advisers or crash-test dummies for the first mountain-bike safari in the Delta.

Gear was loaded into a charter plane, a few rows of seats removed to fit the bikes. Soon we were above the Okavango; above narrow channels of water snaking between lagoons, savannah country dotted with trees. And everywhere animal trails – elephant trails? Heading across the flat country, ploughing straight into channels. The Okavango Mountain Bike Park was waiting!

Bumping down onto a sandy airstrip, we were met by Roni, Alistair and Mark. After all the travel we were keen to ride, so built the bikes up on the airstrip, loaded the rest of our luggage into a four-wheel-drive and rode off. We'd hardly gone 100m when Mark stopped us. A couple of giraffe – mother and baby – were ambling down the trail. Soon we were riding quietly past a herd of elephants, then two dozen zebras kicked up dust as they galloped away. This was Africa – already! It was raw; we weren't kept behind metal panels on a safari vehicle, we couldn't get away anywhere fast. As if to remind us of the dangers,

Alistair told how a local had been attacked and killed by an elephant the previous week.

ISLAND IN THE DELTA

Home for the week was on Samoyana Island, one of thousands of low-lying islands in the delta. We left our bikes on the bank of a lagoon and for the first of many boat trips, ran the gauntlet of the hippos, across the lagoon and into the 2m-wide, papyrus-choked channel that weaved up to the island.

Brothers Roni and Alistair Macfarlane and Ian, their 85-year-old father, lived on Samoyana. The family had spent a lifetime in the African bush – as farmers, as big-game hunters, as safari guides. Ian had a brilliant memory of his life long before independence and possessed the largest gun collection in Botswana. Both brothers had fought off lions. They knew the Okavango as their backyard. And indeed it was. They had a concession lease from the government over 100,000 hectares of the delta. They were engaged in building a couple of safari camps, but an earlier visit by Theo had piqued their interest in the idea of bike safaris as a means of getting up close and personal with game while covering reasonable distances. Cycle Okavango was born that week.



Out on the elephant singletrack.



I know there's a trail here somewhere.

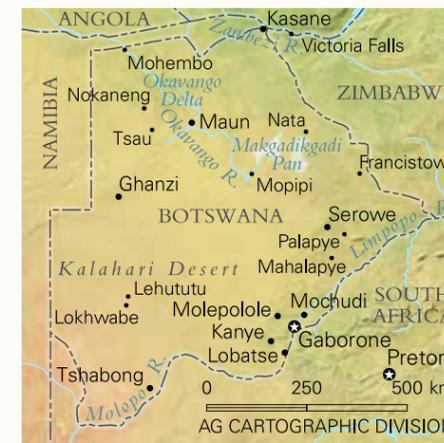
As we rode through the Okavango it became apparent that elephants do build excellent MTB singletrack.

A month before we arrived, Roni had bought a bike and had spent time checking out possible routes linking the elephant tracks. He was like a kid with a new toy, loving the bike and looking quite the part in his pith helmet, which we christened the Okavango Cycle Helmet, and khakis. Mark Thijs, a MTB guide from South Africa, had arrived some days before us and had also been out checking trails to take us on.

ELEPHANT SINGLETRACK

After a night in the tent listening to branches brought crashing down by elephants and hippos grunting in the channels, we breakfasted on pap, a cereal concoction of maize that tasted like rice-pudding porridge. Then it was back in the tinnies for the run past the hippos to the bikes. As many people would tell us, more people are killed in Africa by hippos than by any other animal. They are truly the most "bulky" of animals with a fearsome set of jaws completely over-engineered for their diet of plants in the channels, but perfect for keeping enemies in check.

As we rode through the Okavango it became apparent that elephants do build excellent MTB singletrack. Their "one foot in front of the other" gait ensures trails are no more than 60cm wide



and their soft feet don't claw the track into sand. The only disadvantage were the boulder-sized elephant turds on the trail. But with elephant dung wheel-flick experts Theo and Andre on the team, the path ahead was soon cleared.

We were joined each day by one or both of Mpho and Gabon, local lads Roni was training as guides. They also helped carry the rifle. The Okavango was the first time I'd ridden somewhere

where a point of discussion was how best to carry a gun on a bike. And it was some gun – "Big Bore for Big Game" proclaimed the engraving on the breech of a 100-year-old .416 Rigby.

Roni had roughly graded some trails across the lease, planning for us to use these. However, these tended to offer much sandier riding than the more enjoyable elephant trails. Mark showed us his "landing craft" riding manoeuvres; how to pedal across a waist-deep channel until only the handlebars on the bike were showing. No way to treat \$10,000 worth of Specialized S-Works mountain bike, but it didn't seem to bother him as he emerged on the far side. Occasionally a hand would go up at the front and signal us to go left or right to try and outflank a large elephant herd. On one occasion, we headed right and pushed bikes through thorn bush that ripped at arms and jerseys, only to find ourselves metres away from a large bull elephant. He stared down at us, giving no doubt as to who was in charge. We retraced our steps and headed left, but the elephants were everywhere. There was nothing for it but to head back the way we had come. Then, as we pedalled out of some long grass, our first pride of lions, three females and five cubs, loped nonchalantly across our path; only 50m away.



Herd of Bikes. Herd of Zebra.



Three generations at Eretsha village.



How not to treat your \$10,000 mountain bike.



Papa and kids at Eretsha village.

AWESOME OKAVANGO

Camp on Samoyana was perfect. A bathroom with a hot shower built into a fallen tree. A fire pit, the focal point of camp, where we'd munch on massive bowls of salted popcorn washed down with cold beers watching clichéd African sunsets. Early one evening we took the boats up a wide channel from the lagoon. Some swam, other fished; pulling out bream after bream. Roni spied a fish eagle high in a tree 500m away. He grabbed a bream, whistled and waved the fish at the eagle. Then he threw the fish into the river. Within a minute, as the fish floated past us on the languid current, the eagle swooped across the setting sun and took the fish. As we headed back to camp in the fading light, hippos were moving up the channels to feed and elephants sloshed through the marshes.

To the untrained eye, the Okavango's topography is limited. Islands were islands only because they rose a metre or less from the surrounding waterways and marshes. But Roni and Alistair had such a feel for their country. "See that chain of islands over there, that's where we're headed." We'd look towards where their arms were pointing and nod in agreement, even though in reality all we could see was a uniform sea of grass and

Camp on Samoyana was perfect. A bathroom with a hot shower built into a fallen tree.



Standard equipment for a Botswana bike ride.

trees. As the months progress, the myriad channels first widen and deepen, then, as the water evaporates, they narrow and shallow. Each season is different, depending on the amount of water from Angola. On one of our forays we waded up to chest deep across channels up to 200m wide. After a few of these, we came upon a dark, wide, deep-looking channel where discretion (read: fear of crocs and hippos) caused us to turn and wade back to find another way.

THE PERFECT SAFARI BIKE

While most of our group had brought fully geared, full-suspension MTBs, we decided during the week that the perfect "Okavango Cruiser" would be a single-speed, front-brake-only "fat-bike". The super-wide tyres could easily deal with the sand; the flatness of the terrain negated the need for gears or too much braking capacity.

In the middle of our Okavango week, we took the boats a good distance up some channels to land on the "mainland" at Jumbo Junction camp. From here, we enjoyed a ride in contrast to our elephant trail amblings. We followed a blindingly white sandy road that took us past a few small hamlets of grass-roofed mud huts and on to Eretsha and Beetsha, a couple of larger villages, where Mpho and Gabon were from. Both had worn their best hot-pink cycling jerseys, which, in Gabon's case, set off his gumboots nicely! At Beetsha we found a bakery offering warm rolls (and nothing else) for a lunch taken surrounded by dozens of local school kids.

A NIGHT OUT

One night, sensing we were far too comfy around the fire after dinner and a few glasses of wine, Roni suggested we go for a night game drive. First, we had to cross the lagoon. Insects filled the sky and splattered against our faces as on a car windscreen on the highway. Fish jumped from the channels while birds and bats swooped on them all. The place was alive. Then "BANG!" The tinnie went up a good metre into the air and slid sideways. As we all hung on, an angry hippo emerged, mouth wide enough to swallow the outboard. He'd understandably not taken too kindly to being disturbed by an aluminium runabout getting an unexpected free ride up his back.

The hippo collision had damaged the outboard mounting and we limped slowly across the lagoon to the 4WD parked near our bikes. Once at the Toyota, we discovered a flat tyre. Perhaps we should have given up then but no, we fixed the flat and drove into the night.

We actually didn't see too much — a few comical-looking warthogs, a rare honey badger and some hyena skulking around a carcass stripped bare — before we blew another tyre. It took a while to fix that and we turned for home.

Roni called Malaki on the mobile (yes, they work well in the flat Okavango), asking him to bring the other tinnie to pick us up. By the time we got back to the lagoon at 11pm, a thick mist had descended. We peered out, looking for Malaki. We heard the motor long before we saw him, but eventually a pinprick of light appeared through the fog and soon the boat was with us, Malaki with a torch between his teeth. It was a brave man who had picked his way alone across the lagoon in poor visibility with hippos at their most active.

EASY RIDING

Riding in the Okavango is not about heart-stopping mountain biking. That comes from the big game. The bike is a means of transport, of safari, and anyone with reasonable fitness and a sense of adventure would enjoy it. Add in boat rides, great camping and a wealth of local knowledge and Cycle Okavango will guarantee a memorable experience in one of Africa's most unique landscapes.

On the final night the delta gave us a rousing send off — hippos burped, elephants trumpeted as they smashed trees, lions roared and hyenas laughed at the madness of it all.

THE ESSENTIALS

Cycle Okavango Delta: Roni and the team run group cycle tours. Most go for five days. Full details at www.cycleokavangodelta.com

When to go: The river waters from Angola start filling the northern Okavango in February and filter through the system. At the Cycle Okavango Delta lease, the levels peak about April. The best time to travel by bike is from June to October.

Getting there: The Okavango Delta is in Botswana's north-west. Maun is the jumping off point. From Australia most people fly to Johannesburg and then take an international flight to Maun. Air Botswana (www.airbotswana.co.bw) and South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) fly from Jo'burg to Maun. To get to Cycle Okavango entails chartering a plane from Maun for a 30-minute flight across the delta. We used Major Blue Air (www.majorblueair.com). It is possible to drive a 4WD close to Cycle Okavango, but it would take about eight hours in good conditions.

More info: Botswana Tourism (www.botswanaturism.co.bw) is a good starting point, with general information on the country. Australians are issued a visa on arrival in Botswana.