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## BREAKFAST WITH THE HIPPOS: AT BAINES CAMP, BOTSWANA

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services,  
[World's Fare](#)

OKAVANGO DELTA, Botswana -- Botswana's best comes in small packages. As far as I know, Baines Camp, a safari lodge in the southern Okavango Delta, has never been ranked among the Delta's top luxury lodges. That could be because it's one of Abercrombie & Kent's newest camps, opened in 2004. It's also one of the smallest, with five cabins and space for 10 guests -- 14 if you count the occasional child or children sharing with parents.

If you're one of those travelers with sensitive tastes, fewer guests can be a dicey situation. But for us, the group of 11 travelers meant an intimate, more personal experience. The camp's managers, Semma Killops, from Ireland, and her husband Charl Killops, experienced Africa "hands," had the time and energy to talk to everyone, discover our interests and make suggestions and recommendations. Festive evenings under the stars, where we dined together at one long table, were memorable.

But its size isn't all that distinguishes Baines. The main lodge and the bungalows, the latest in environmental construction, are built on stilts over the reeds at the edge of one of the Okavango's permanent lagoons. What's the advantage? As you'll see from the air, when you fly to your first safari lodge, where there's water, there's wildlife. Elephants, giraffe, herds of antelope and lions are daily visitors, so much so that the Killops know many of them by sight.

In fairness, you'll find that wildlife viewing in the Okavango Delta is spectacular no matter where you stay. Tracking and finding leopards and lions is what early-morning and late-afternoon game drives -- the main event at every safari lodge -- are all about. The quality of the guides -- and A&K hires only the best -- is what makes the difference.

But at Baines, the elephants bathe in the water while you're drinking your morning coffee and as twilight falls, a chorus of frogs begins to sing. Resident hippos, grazing in the reeds not far from your private

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deck, snort and snuffle while you're falling asleep.

With so much water, one would suspect mosquitoes would be close behind. That was my first question, in fact. But according to Semma, they're few and far between.

"We almost never see them," she said. "The current keeps the water fresh. And when the water's low during the dry season, we turn on the wind machines below the decks. Mosquitoes don't like windy places."

The main lodge, a doughnut shaped deck, is anchored to solid ground on one side and built over reeds on the other. On the land side, the entry hall, reception area, office, lounge and buffet tables are roofed and partially enclosed. On the water side, the deck is open to the sky, with game viewing niches furnished with wicker and leather furniture, and tables and chairs for meals. Natural shrubbery reaches for the sun through the doughnut hole.

The bungalows, furnished with luxury fabrics, African crafts and modern bathrooms, are connected to the lodge and to each other by a spider web of curved boardwalks, designed for privacy and aesthetic appeal.

"The designers didn't want any more straight lines than were absolutely necessary," said Charl, whose khaki shorts and shirts suggest the wildlife guide he once was. "Take a look at the thatched roofs, all scalloped and the rounded corners. There are no straight lines in nature. And there's 500,000 empty aluminum soda cans in those walls, all collected in Botswana's towns, where they would have wound up in a landfill somewhere."

The walls, stuccoed inside and out, hide the cans, each stacked side by side between wood and wire frames. Excellent insulators, they keep the bungalows cool in summer and warm in winter. All have bathrooms and private decks, handy for sleeping out under the stars. Ask the housekeeping staff to roll your bed onto the deck and arrange the mosquito netting.

Game drives start on the land side of the lodge, where the land cruisers park and where everyone meets before heading out. When you're seeing Botswana with Abercrombie & Kent as your outfitter, the drives are planned so that you'll have the same safari guide every day -- a real bonus -- and ride with the same companions, usually guests who've arrived when you did. The idea is to cover new ground every day, so that every guest experiences everything. Happily, you can take a few hours off just for yourself, to sit on the deck and marvel at nature. If you don't see it on your game drive, you'll see it there.

#### INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE:

#### PRE-TRIP PLANNING:

The best-informed and most detailed guidebook to Botswana is "Botswana: The Bradt Travel Guide," by Chris McIntyre. Look for it at [www.bradt-travelguides.com](http://www.bradt-travelguides.com), or order it from [www.alibris.com](http://www.alibris.com). A British publication, it's not sold widely in the United States.

For more on A&K's safari camps, climate and temperatures, suggested clothing and in-camp activities, visit Abercrombie & Kent, at [www.abercrombiekent.com](http://www.abercrombiekent.com).

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Abercrombie & Kent is a full-service outfitter with luxury safari lodges in Botswana's Okavango Delta. A&K's itineraries typically include the flights to and from Botswana, visits to three or four lodges and the small-plane flights from one to the next. Prices include flights, lodge stays, game drives, all meals and other activities.

A&K also welcomes independent travelers, and will reserve lodges and flights as requested.

(Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty explore the world from Venice, Calif.)

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