

An Unrivalled River Retreat

Text: Julie Graham
Images © Chobe Water Villas, iStockphoto.com

“ I went to sleep to the grunts of hippos mingling in the dark just under my balcony and awoke to the calls of African fish eagles hunting at the break of day.

CHOBÉ WATER VILLAS

There are few places in the world that epitomise the phrase “untamed Africa” quite like the Caprivi Strip. A typical panhandle, the narrow strip of the Caprivi separates Angola and Botswana and runs roughly 450 km from West to East, from Namibia to the Zambezi River. The region is renowned for its utter wildness, with most of the safari camps and lodges unfenced, allowing

animals to roam free - as they should. The indescribable sensation one feels when immersed in this region can only really be communicated by walking on the land and breathing in the air. It is Africa at its most untamed. And it is spectacular.

At the very eastern end of the Caprivi Strip, the Chobe River flows, forming the border between Botswana and Namibia.

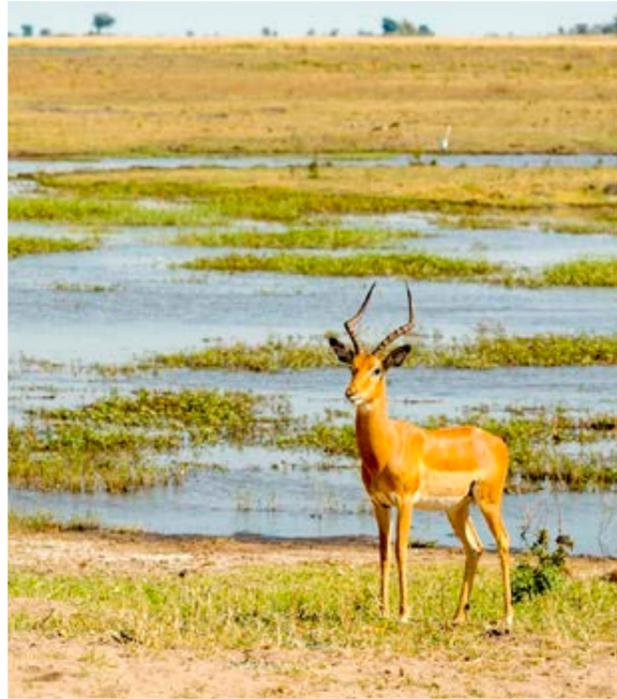
On the banks of Botswana, the famous Chobe National Park stretches an incredible 154,000 hectares, making it the third largest national park in Botswana - with an elephant population exceeding 120,000! Like in the park, wildlife along the Chobe River is abundant. Made up of channels, islands, floodplains, and riverine forests, the river is home to massive herds of elephant, buffalo,

and hippo, as well as other concentrations of wildlife such as crocodile, giraffe, wild dog, the rare puku antelope, sable, and other buck, lions, leopards, and more - all of whom come down to the edge of the river to drink, graze, and, of course, hunt. It is also a birders paradise, so twitchers, take note: There are over 450 species of birds found in the region, including cormorants, pelicans,

herons, egrets, bustards, cranes, plovers, lapwings, storks, giant kingfishers, bee eaters, and the iconic African fish eagle. The birds are in abundance and a joy to spot in this vast wilderness.

The Namibian side of the Chobe River is a more tranquil retreat into the watery wilderness with fewer lodges and safari camps and no real roads of which to speak.

Basing yourself on this side of the river means a greater sense of solitude and connectedness with the untamed Africa around you. It also means most activities are by boat, many of which involve crossing the border, so make sure you have plenty of space in your passport for game drives, boat safaris, and nature walks - most of which take place in Botswana.



Jam SA

There are few places in the world that I have been to that stir the soul quite like Chobe Water Villas – an exclusive boutique lodge located in the Kasika Conservancy of Namibia. Access to the villas is via the Kasane Immigration Office in Botswana where I received my first stamp (of many!) and was transferred by boat across the river to the villas. Though only a short, 15-minute boat ride away, the journey was enough to get my safari blood pumping with sightings of crocodiles, hippos, and more en route to the lodge. As the boat cruised around the edge of Sedudu Island, I caught the first glimpse of Chobe Water Villas. The beautiful big bungalows sit erected on stilts, protruding over the edge of the river, offering unobstructed views of the river, the islands, and Botswana on the other side. Each bungalow offers utmost privacy and absolute luxury that one may not necessarily be accustomed to finding so deep in the African wilderness.

A warm, Namibian welcome of singing and dancing awaited us as we arrived at the main lodge, situated under a mass of beautiful, indigenous acacia trees. Entering the space, I was amazed at the transition from what I had seen from the boat. From the water, the lodge and bungalows, with their thatched roofs and wooden exterior, gave the impression of a typical African lodge – donned with safari-style browns and ochres. It is anything but that. Maintaining a sense of safari chic, architect and interior designer, Jan Lewis from Design Union in Cape Town, used natural materials in flowing spaces with dashes of décor genius, all of which reference the elements in Namibia, such as the desert, the rain, tribal patterns, and the

animals. Everything is a symbol and holds a precious meaning. This is bush luxury that, in my opinion, is unrivalled.

The main lodge is where most of the gatherings happen: The infinity pool and deck offer magnificent views across the river (with G&T in hand, of course) and viewing areas on either side of the pool are equipped with fire pits and are perfect for evenings regaling stories of the happenings of the day around the fire. The lounge, with a well-stocked library, is a great place to relax and unwind (and enjoy the afternoon high tea), while the cocktail bar is ready and waiting to supply pre- or post-dinner drinks. The restaurant is where real culinary magic happens. From the cold- and hot buffet-style breakfasts and lunches to the à la carte fine dining dinners, or even a braai on beautiful evenings, the food at Chobe Water Villas is fresh, thoughtfully and deliciously prepared and presented, and a real reflection of the commitment of the lodge to providing guests with a five-star luxury experience smack bang in the middle of Africa.

I walked through nature along the raised, wooden boardwalks to get to my villa. Each villa offers unobstructed 180 degree views of the river, the islands, and their inhabitants. I went to sleep to the grunts of hippos mingling in the dark just under my balcony and awoke to the calls of African fish eagles hunting at the break of day. The spacious open-plan bedroom and lounge afforded magnificent river views through the floor-to-ceiling glass doors, and offered an array of top-notch amenities. A complimentary mini-bar with snacks as well as a coffee and tea station ensured that I did not even have to leave the comfort of my villa for sustenance.

En suite bathrooms, high-quality linen bathrobes, slippers, air-conditioning, mosquito nets, hair-dryers, complimentary Wi-Fi (throughout the lodge), a writing desk, safe, torches and an intercom phone are all part of the package to ensure utmost comfort and safety.

Chobe Water Villas is truly unique and epitomises world-class luxury, with a safari chic twist. However, the real draw-card in this region is the uninterrupted wildlife right on your doorstep. It is truly a sight and sensory experience that one has to immerse oneself into to really understand. Home to one of the biggest elephant populations in the world, an abundance of wildlife and activities that exists nowhere else, one of the biggest zebra migrations after the Masai Mara or Serengeti, and sunsets that will leave you breathless, Caprivi is unmatched in its wildlife offerings. Chobe Water Villas offers boat cruises, game drives, as well as nature and village walks on top of a host of other activities, all designed to get guests as immersed in the bush and water wilderness as possible.

And after all that, offers the perfect place for respite and reflection.

As I boarded the plane from Kasana back to Cape Town, two full pages of passport stamps later, I could not help but think of a quote by Italian author, Francesca Marciano, in *Rules of the Wild*: "When you leave Africa, as the plane lifts, you feel that more than leaving a continent, you are leaving a state of mind. Whatever awaits you at the other end of your journey will be of a different order of existence."

For more information, please visit www.chobewatervillas.com. ■