

An Unrivalled River Retreat

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 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.

The Chobe River flows at the very eastern end of the Caprivi Strip, forming the border between Botswana and Namibia. On the banks of Botswana, the famous Chobe National Park stretches an incredible 154,000 hectares – the third largest in the country – 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 – and all of them come down to the river’s edge to drink, graze and hunt. It is also a bird-watchers’ paradise so twitchers, take note. Over 450 species of birds are 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 a joy to spot in this vast wilderness.

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

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, much of which involve crossing the border, so make sure you have plenty space in your passport for game drives, boat safaris and nature walks, as most of this takes place in Botswana.

I have only ever been to few places in the world that stir the soul quite like Chobe Water Villas, an exclusive boutique lodge located in Namibia’s Kasika Conservancy. Access to the villas is via the Kasane Immigration Office in Botswana where you will receive your first stamp (of many!), and be transferred by boat across the river to the villas. Though only a short 15-minute boat ride away, the journey is enough to get your blood pumping, with sightings of crocodiles, hippos and more en route to the lodge. As the boat cruises around the edge of Sedudu Island, one catches the first glimpse of Chobe Water Villas. The beautiful bungalows are erected on stilts, protruding over the river’s edge and thereby 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 thatched lodge, situated in the shade of 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 give the impression that what you're about to walk into is a rather typical African lodge, in browns and ochres in typical safari style. It is anything but typical. Maintaining a very real sense of safari chic, architect and interior designer Jan Lewis from Design Union in Cape Town uses natural materials in flowing spaces with dashes of décor genius, all of which are references to the natural elements in Namibia – the desert, the rain, tribal patterns and the animals. Everything is symbolic and holds a meaning.

The main lodge is where most of the gatherings happen – the infinity pool and deck offer magnificent views across the river, G&T in hand. Viewing pits on either side of the pool are equipped with fires and are perfect for evenings spent exchanging stories of the day. The lounge, with its nicely stocked library, is a great place to relax and unwind and enjoy the afternoon high tea. The cocktail bar is ready and waiting to supply pre- or post-dinner drinks, and 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

lodge's commitment to providing guests with a five-star luxury experience smack-bang in the middle of the African bush.

A walk through nature along the raised, wooden boardwalks gets you to your villa, and if you thought you were impressed with the main lodge, just wait until you open the door to your very own slice of paradise. As mentioned, the villas are on stilts over the river's edge and each one offers unobstructed 180-degree views of the river. Go to sleep to the grunts of hippos mingling in the dark just under your balcony and awaken to the calls of African fish eagles hunting at the break of day.

The spacious open-plan bedroom and lounge afford magnificent river views through the floor-to-ceiling glass doors, and offer an array of amenities that reflect true world-class hospitality. A complimentary mini-bar with snacks as well as a coffee and tea station ensure that you don't even have to leave the comfort of your 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 guests' utmost comfort as well as safety.

The lodge and villas are truly unique and epitomise world-class luxury, with a safari-chic twist. However, the real draw-card in this region is the abundance of 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 the biggest zebra migration after the Maasai 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, 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.

As I boarded the plane from Kasana back to Cape Town, two full pages of passport stamps later, I couldn't help but think of a quote by Italian author, Francesca Marciano: "When you leave Africa, as the plane lifts, you feel that more than leaving a continent, you're 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.

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