



**BELMOND**  
**EAGLE ISLAND LODGE**  
OKAVANGO DELTA



**PRESS KIT**

Belmond Eagle Island Lodge introduced by Amanda Woods

OVERVIEW

The 1000th UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the seven natural wonders of the world, the Okavango Delta in northwest Botswana is an oasis in the Kalahari desert. The largest inland delta on the planet, this rare ecosystem is home to some of the world's most endangered animals—and one of the world's most luxurious lodges.

On a private island surrounded by some of the deepest stretches of water in the Delta, Belmond Eagle Island Lodge is considered the ultimate water-based lodge experience in Africa. Here guests can silently glide past hippos in canoe-like mekoros, take in the vastness of the Delta and see elephants, giraffes and zebras from above in a helicopter, go on a horse riding or motorboat safari, visit local villagers, or simply relax in the beauty of the lodge.

Belmond's flagship safari lodge reopened in November 2015 after a ten month rebuild that took both the lodge's design and environmental credentials to a new level.

Each of the 12 new spacious and light-filled deluxe tented rooms has its own plunge pool and deck, positioned in such a way that when guests retire to their rooms they are afforded total privacy and can see no signs of human life—only Botswana's unique animals and birds.

Housed on raised wooden platforms and shaded by traditional African thatched roofs, with discreet air conditioning for when the temperatures rise, the centrepiece of the 82 square metre rooms is an oversized bed that looks out over the Delta. The unusual grey mosquito netting makes for easier viewing of animals at night. Botswana's mining tradition inspired the copper finish of the bed heads; each one perforated with tiny holes in a water lily pattern that allows light to filter through and flicker on the bed.

A black free-standing bathtub adds drama to the bathroom where guests can also choose between an indoor and outdoor shower, the latter with views over the Delta, and with both wet areas featuring a rippling water effect in the concrete floor.

The rooms may have Wi-Fi and subtle USB chargers for modern devices, but elegant echoes of colonial camp days are felt throughout, including hand-stitched leather pockets for binoculars on custom-designed tables and a mini bar that looks like an explorer's toolbox and reveals drawers and hidden cupboards full of complimentary drinks and guest amenities.

After arriving by private charter plane on an airstrip that has been temporarily cleared of wildlife, guests are welcomed at a boma, or traditional hut, before exploring the lodge. Here structures are inspired by the massive ant nests that are found in the area, their organic shapes rising from the ground and bending around the camp's ancient trees.

In the lounge guests can relax by a large fireplace and artisanal style bar made from locally sourced timber, while in the dining pavilion they can gather around the open-style kitchen and pizza oven at meal times. Both areas have stunning Delta views, and are linked by an external deck.

Guests can mingle in the Fish Eagle Bar where the white, brown and bright yellow colour scheme is inspired by the bird the lodge is named after—and can listen out for its evocative high-pitched whistle. The nearby open camp fire and barbecue area provides more places for guests to connect as they swap tales from their safaris under a blanket of stars.

Inge Moore, Principal & Creative Director of the design firm The Gallery HBA says she brought the natural world and spirit of adventure into every area of the lodge. “By using local artisans and materials, reinventing traditional safari camp paraphernalia and translating the natural world into the interiors, the design is crafted to fill the hearts and minds of both safari camp connoisseurs and newcomers alike.”

Stays at Belmond Eagle Island Lodge include full board with breakfast, lunch and dinner along with drinks including alcohol, with some premium brands and imported champagnes at additional cost. Dining options range from light and healthy to indulgent, and special dietary requests can be catered for. Meanwhile same day complimentary laundry keeps safari clothing options in the walk-in wardrobes fresh.

Stays here also come with a sense of being transported to a different world. A world of calm where you’re at one with nature. “The Delta is all about slowing down and taking time out to sit on your deck and enjoy Eagle Island’s tranquillity and peace,” Christelle Horne, General Manager of Belmond Safaris, explains.

“There are no outside influences. No cars, no people apart from the small group of fellow travellers in the lodge. You can lie in your pool or sit on your deck and watch an elephant walk past, or watch antelope in the river or hippos in the dam. Here nature comes to you.”

For the full Botswana nature experience, Belmond Eagle Island Lodge can be combined with stays at Belmond’s other luxury Botswana lodges: Belmond Savute Elephant Lodge in the Chobe National Park and Belmond Khwai River Lodge in the Moremi Wildlife Reserve.

## HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Xaxaba Island, the home of Belmond Eagle Island Lodge, was one of the first photographic camps in the Okavango Delta in the early 1900s.

As explorers and crocodile hunters alike were drawn to the Delta, the Wilmot family established Xaxaba, which means “island of tall trees”, as the first permanent safari camp in the area. When the family decided to change the lodge to another island a short way upstream in 1975 they took the Xaxaba name with them.

After changing hands to the Zimbabwean couple Paul and Penny Rawson, Xaxaba became part of the Belmond portfolio in 1993, before changing its name to Eagle Island Camp in 2000, and finally becoming Belmond Eagle Island Lodge in April 2014.

These days the lodge is an unforgettable authentic private safari experience in Botswana, a country that prides itself on sustainability, where animals are free to roam and where there is zero tolerance for poachers. After a ten-month closure and almost total rebuild, since reopening in November 2015 it is also one of the most visually stunning and environmentally friendly lodges in the country, breathing new life into the luxury tented safari experience.

## PEOPLE

### **Christelle Horne, General Manager**

Christelle Horne became General Manager of Belmond Safaris, including Belmond Eagle Island Lodge, Belmond Savute Elephant Lodge and Belmond Khwai River Lodge, in November 2015. Her new role followed four years as Belmond’s Regional Human Resources Manager for Africa, which gave her the chance to not only gain an intimate knowledge of the lodges, but

also of the people who work there and the visitors who travel across the world in search of a unique safari experience.

After starting her working life as a teacher, Christelle moved into Human Resources and accumulated more than 25 years' management experience, including roles in the fire security and diamond mining industries, before moving into hospitality in 2003. Her passion for people and their development has seen her introduce internal coaching and mentoring for managers and staff, and establish projects to raise awareness about social issues including HIV/AIDS.

After growing up in South Africa and visiting Botswana regularly, Christelle says that moving to Botswana has changed her life for the better, beyond offering her the chance to do a job she's passionate about.

"Botswana's lifestyle makes you realise that keeping up with the Joneses has no future and adds no value to the planet or to your life. Now I have extra hours in my day that used to be spent sitting in traffic. When you have a busy life those are magic hours that I can now spend relaxing and out in nature with the animals."

### **Bashin Diteko, Guide**

One of the most memorable experiences for guests at Belmond Eagle Island Lodge is a visit to the nearby Xaxaba Island village, where local people live a rural life without electricity or modern conveniences.

Bashin Diteko grew up in the village. Today he is one of Belmond Eagle Island Lodge's treasured guides.

Bashin teaches guests about both human and animal life in the Delta, taking people back to his village to meet his relatives one day and teaching them how to be safe around Africa's most deadly animal, the hippopotamus, the next.

Growing up next to the lodge, Bashin says he always thought about working there when he left school. "I thought it was the best place in the world and loved the way it looked."

After working as a guide at another company Bashin heard news that Belmond was looking for new guides when Eagle Island reopened following renovations, and after applying he received the news that he was in. He now lives on site, working seven days a week through the busy season.

While Belmond offers its own extra training, to join the team Bashin needed to be a qualified guide, something he achieved through years of both practical training and self-study before sitting exams and doing assessments through the Department of Wildlife in the nearest main town, Maun.

Today his role includes hosting and entertaining guests, being at the ready with first aid, and educating people about our planet. "I explain the interaction between living and non-living things in nature and encourage guests to spread the word wherever they may go." But Bashin stresses that safety is the main concern of every guide. Not only must he read an animal's behaviour—he needs to teach guests to do the same.

And his favourite animal in the Delta? "Zebras, because they look like they are wearing pyjamas," he says with a smile.

As for returning to his village as part of the job, that's a special moment for both the guests and Bashin. As he says: "I feel very proud and full of energy when I go back to my village and introduce guests to my family and friends."

## EXPERIENCES

The Okavango Delta is like nowhere else on earth; an oasis in the desert, where life flows at a different pace and where people can witness wildlife in action.

At Belmond Eagle Island Lodge guests won't find traditional safari vehicles. Instead they will get to know the Delta in other ways, including:

### **Mekoro Excursions**

Once the only form of transport around the channels, mekoros are the Okavango Delta's traditional canoe-like vessels. Guides with years of experience use poles to slowly move the narrow, low craft forward. There's a feeling of serenity as guests silently glide through the water, watching—and hearing—the elephants, giraffes, zebras, antelopes, hippopotami and more that live in the Delta all around. This is a photographer's dream come true.

Tours range from a gentle safari to a combined experience, with guests able to pair a mekoro excursion with a champagne breakfast on an island surrounded by wildlife.

#### **Helicopter and Horseback Safaris**

Out on the water guests can feel the way that the Delta flows. In the air they can see just how vast the system is, how the channels fit together, and how the animals are spread out over islands and in the water itself.

After being safely strapped into a helicopter with no doors, guests can feel the wind on their face, have uninterrupted views of the landscape and animals below them, and take photographs without reflections in windows.

The pilots ask guests to choose their style of experience and tailor the tours accordingly, either staying high and moving slowly, or flying lower over the water for a more adrenalin-packed flight.

Helicopter tours can be mixed with champagne lunches on islands, with fishing trips during the fishing season, and with a new experience for guests with the appropriate skills—a horseback riding safari. These half- or full-day excursions start with a game-viewing flight over channels and islands, before reaching the stables at the border of the Moremi Game Reserve.

Guests can choose to ride full- or part-thoroughbreds, pure Arabs, Anglo-Arabs, Friesian Crosses and Botswana Warmbloods, and will then be led by professional guides across clear streams and through grassy floodplains, palm-lined islands, and mopane forests. These great adventures offer the chance to see leopards, lions, kudus, warthogs, wildebeest, wild dogs, elephants, giraffes, ostriches and more.

#### **Xaxaba Island Village Tour**

When most people go on safari they focus on the wildlife. But at Belmond Eagle Island Lodge it is as much about the people who you meet. As well as getting to know staff from Botswana in the lodge there is the chance to visit a local village.

Guests may be welcomed into a home and see how people make their own bread and porridge, use mekoros on the river to catch fish and weave baskets in the traditional way. The chance to meet and interact with the villagers is an experience that deeply impresses many guests.

### **CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT**

When Belmond Eagle Island Lodge was rebuilt it was more than an opportunity to introduce new design and comfort features, it was also a chance to create a lodge with the highest environmental practices in a World Heritage Site. The new lodge was designed with the lightest footprint and best sustainability practices in mind, and in keeping with the Okavango Management Plan it has no permanent structures.

During renovations concrete buildings from the old lodge were demolished and 1350 tons of concrete rubble removed from the area, using trucks that were bringing in new materials to reduce the environmental impact of transportation.

Decking, including 900m<sup>2</sup> of Zimbabwe teak, and gum poles, were saved from the original buildings and reused in the new lodge, while all new timbers were Forestry Stewardship Council certified, as recommended by the World Wildlife Fund.

Roof coverings were constructed using local thatching grass purchased from communities in Northern Botswana and 98% of the building crew were employed from the area, with a local Botswana Construction Company contracted to carry out the work.

Guests' tented rooms were built with special insulation to help keep them cool in the heat, and warm when temperatures drop. This includes a stud-framed wall made from recycled scrap metal with an outer layer of fibre mesh with wool and canvas cladding.

All new buildings have been constructed on timber-based platforms, and the fuel tank is the only one to be supported on cement. Should Belmond Eagle Island Lodge relocate at any time all structures could be picked up and moved, and there would soon be no sign of previous human habitation.

As Belmond Eagle Island Lodge is off the grid, all power, water and sewerage treatment happens on site. While the old lodge relied on diesel powered generators, the new lodge has around 850 solar panels in a 210kWp Photo Voltaic (PV) system, saving an estimated 144,000 litres of diesel a year.

“The lodge is now 95% eco-friendly,” Christelle Horne, General Manager of Belmond Safaris explains. “The other 5% is back-up generators for the solar system when there are extended periods of clouds. But for the most part it is absolutely self-sufficient. It's very rare that we need the generator.”

Around 30,000 litres of water a day are used at the lodge but thanks to the Delta, Belmond is able to avoid transporting supplies onto the site. Water is pumped in from the Kavango River during high water periods and from a borehole in times of low water. This goes through a treatment plant involving a series of settling tanks, multi sand filters, carbon filters and ozone.

A reverse osmosis system then processes the treated water for drinking and cooking, and guests are given reusable bottles to refill. The Lodge also provides drinking water to the local villagers from its borehole. Belmond also collects and removes the village waste which is then sent with its rubbish to Maun for processing.

The lodge supports the village's orphans and two disabled people with clothes, blankets and food, and whenever Belmond Safaris' full time nurse visits the lodge they also provide free health assistance to villagers.

The lodge team put on special treats for the village children, as Christelle Horne explains: “At Christmas we bring children into the lodge to have a big lunch, when Santa arrives by helicopter. And at Easter we hide hundreds of Easter eggs around the village for a hunt.”

As well as caring for the local village, Belmond Eagle Island lodge also supports the Bana Ba Letsatsi and Motse Wa Tsholofelo charities that provide shelter, counselling, and support for orphans and vulnerable children in Maun.