

CHRIS BERTISH: PIONEERING THE...



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Okavango Delta Expedition

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Why not today?



On 15 March 2015, armed with a mixture of nervousness and excitement, a small group of intrepid adventurers and paddlers set off from Cape Town in high spirits. Their destination? A little-known former hunting concession area deep inside Botswana's Okavango Delta. And their mission? To be the first people to explore the far regions of the famous Delta by stand-up paddleboard (SUP).

WORDS BY EUGENE YIGA

“There were eight of us on the plane,” recalls Chris Bertish. “A few had done a small amount of paddling in the past, but were still game to come on this pioneering expedition. They weren't exactly put at ease by the inflight magazine story by a journalist who narrowly avoided being attacked by an angry hippopotamus in the region!”

Head guide Andrew Harkness collected the group after they arrived in Maun. Having guided in the Delta for 11 years, he shared some tips and inside knowledge during the three-hour 4X4 journey to their basecamp. But even though they spotted almost all the big five before they even reached the drop off point, little did they know that the adventure would start before the expedition was officially underway.

“We thought we would be driven right to the camp,” Bertish says. “Wrong. The vehicle stopped just short of the Delta river basin,

where we unloaded our gear and inflatable boards. Andrew introduced us to 'Wako' Ngwananoka, a local Botswana makoro [traditional wooden river canoe] guide. Wako went ahead by makoro to drop off gear and equipment at the camp, while we stayed at the vehicle to unload gear for the second load.”

While unloading their personal items, a large male elephant appeared from the undergrowth directly across the river. It seemed they were blocking his favourite route across the water! They all jumped back into the safety of the 4X4, waiting with baited breath as the animal paced along the water's edge, deciding whether to cross over towards them.

“Luckily the return of the mokoros spooked the bull, and he retreated into the undergrowth,” Bertish says. “We all breathed a sigh of relief. It was a tense moment and our real trip hadn't even begun!”

They arrived at the basecamp at sunset,

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to the warm welcome of five local makoro guides and eight dome tents on the river's edge. They were rustic (“simple but comfortable”) and just what they needed before setting off into the wild the following morning.

“It didn't take long to realise we were in the wilderness and exposed, as we paddled along the side of the river banks and peered into the heavily reeded undergrowth of the Delta tributaries,” Bertish says. “We passed more hippos, a water snake, some elephants, a pair of fish eagles, a herd of waterbuck, and numerous giraffe, before stopping in a shallow pool for a lunch break.”

It was just after midday and they needed to get out of the sweltering sun. Because the temperature was 39°C (in the shade!), they waited until 3pm before heading off again.

“The meandering tributaries went from 40m wide waterways to tunnel-like streams less than a metre wide,” Bertish says. “The Delta changed around us with every turn, and there was a new surprise around every bend. The beauty was unfathomable; the tranquillity only matched by the fiery colours that greeted us in the evening sky as we pulled in to a new place to set up camp.”

Having paddled over 12km, they were keen to set up base before the sun went

down. They were also happy to light a big fire to braai their dinner while sharing drinks and stories around the campfire until the exhaustion of the day's paddling got the better of them. One by one, they headed off to sleep to the sounds of the wild outdoors.

“The warmth of the morning sun woke us for our second and last day on the water,” Bertish says. “After a quick breakfast and coffee from the fire, we broke down our camp, packed up, and headed out to see what the deeper Delta had in store for us.”

With the water levels in the Delta the lowest they had been the entire year, some areas became tight and difficult to paddle through. Indeed, some channels were so narrow that the team could barely fit through on SUP or makoro.

“We couldn't always see what was around us, but the high reeds and thickets created secluded pools for safe rest stops,” Bertish says. “Too shallow for hippos and crocs to enter, the pools were perfect places to unwind, rehydrate, and snack before continuing.”

They stopped under some vultures circling over a dead buffalo, and had to be re-routed when their main tributary was blocked by six unhappy hippos. Although they may be cute to look at from afar,

people forget that the hippo is considered one of the most dangerous animals in the African wilds. And so, for safety reasons, the group decided not to even attempt skirting them. Instead, they found an alternative route back to their next basecamp.

“We unloaded all our gear and stored our stuff in the tents before setting off on foot into the deep undergrowth in search of early evening game,” recalls Bertish. “We were treated to close encounters with giraffe, buffalo, zebra, warthogs, monkeys, and various antelope, before heading back to the safety of the fire and basecamp.”

As the sun set over the Delta and another magical day, they were surrounded by the most amazing evening sky, and serenaded by all the birds, beetles, and beasts bustling around in the twilight. That evening, they also brought out the campfire stories, alive with passion and excitement as everyone recounted the day's highlights, and shared epic adventure stories from previous expeditions and adventures.

“We were treated to an amazing bushfire and a dinner of local dishes from the bush oven, with plenty of beer and wine,” says Bertish. “A group of waterbuck came roaming through the camp, and a Pel's

fishing owl - one of the rarest of all owls - perched above us in the tree, watching us all get slower and sleepier. It had been another incredible day, but eventually we all had to turn in for the night.”

The following morning, they packed up their gear and had a hearty breakfast before heading back over to the mainland. They

MEET CHRIS:

Chris Bertish is giving a talk on 20 October as part of One&Only Cape Town's Guest Speaker Series. To book, email Restaurant.Reservations@oneandonlycapetown.com or call 021 431 4511/5888.

READ CHRIS:

“Stoked!” is an inspiring story about courage, determination and the power of dreams. The story highlights his upbringing, travels, surfing experiences, various trips & journals and his build up, training, hardships and struggles on the journey to achieving the Mavericks win.

EXPERIENCE CHRIS:

To book the SUP trip, go to www.toescapeto.com/escapeexplore.

had another amazing game drive back out of the Delta, and got to Maun with time to jump into the pool at the lodge, clean up, catch up on emails, and have a well-deserved cold beer and good night's sleep before flying out in the morning.

“We all agreed it was a job well done,” says Bertish. “We were all still alive - all legs and arms still attached! - and had explored an area of the Delta that had never been paddled by SUP before... We all learned a great deal, we experienced a

whole new world, and got to be completely out in the wild: alone, in a remote part of nature, propelled by our own efforts and without polluting the Delta with engine noise or petrol fumes.”

Indeed, they experienced something that most people will never have the good fortune of seeing. Bertish says that connecting with nature, in its most raw and primal state, is a humbling experience. And to do it with a group of “normal” working folk - not expert sports people or paddlers - proved that an experience like this can change your world, your thoughts, your expectations, and your “possible”.

“If they can push their comfort zones and take on the challenge, escape, explore, and have an amazing new adventure, doesn't it make you think you could too?” Bertish asks. “Remove the words ‘can't’ and ‘impossible’ from your world and it's amazing what you'll be able to do. Think of the things you'll see, the people you'll meet, the places you'll go. It all starts with a choice, then a challenge to yourself to say ‘can’ instead of ‘can't!’” 🌟

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