

24 HOURS IN MAUN

MOST TRAVELLERS TO THE WILDS OF THE OKAVANGO DELTA WILL PASS THROUGH MAUN, WITH VERY FEW STAYING OVER. **BUT THE OBLIGATORY 24-HOUR STOPOVER FOR A COVID PCR TEST HAS THRUST MAUN INTO THE SPOTLIGHT** AS A DESTINATION IN ITS OWN RIGHT, AND THE TOWN HAS SOME SURPRISES THAT MAY MAKE YOU WANT TO LINGER

Words **Carrie Hampton** Photos **Mikael Rosen**



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Donkeys are the main form of transport for Maun villagers.



A short history of Maun

YESTERDAY

From raw beginnings, becoming the Batawana tribal capital in 1915, Maun has lived up to its reputation as a hard-living, cattle-ranching, frontier town. With big game roaming the Okavango Delta on its doorstep, Maun's "Wild West" reputation was fuelled by hunters telling tall stories around the bar.

TODAY

The president has lifted the ban on big game hunting but hunters keep a low profile in Maun, as most people in the safari industry are dead against it. Safari tourism is still Maun's biggest business and accommodation is often priced in US dollars. If faced with this, ask for SADC rates. Botswana's pula is strong against the rand, so expect everything to cost one-third more than in South Africa. The exception is shared sedan taxis, which only charge six pula for downtown journeys of up to about 5km.

TOMORROW

I heard one lodge operator say: 'Botswana's conservation is at its lowest point for many years.' But they are pragmatic and bide their time, expecting things to change. There are still plenty of protected areas, so spend 24 hours exploring Maun before heading into the Okavango.

Bright new tourism businesses, accommodation, cafes and authentic cultural experiences are popping up to satisfy the new stayover market in Maun.

But the dusty old town you might remember is still here. Maun's handsome pilots and khaki-clad guides are ubiquitous; so are the randomly roaming donkeys, goats and cows, albeit contending with much more traffic.

This is cattle-ranching country and you'll see fine long-horned Brahmin and Tswana, with Simmental introduced to provide the perfect combination of meat and milk. Pre-order vacuum-packed Botswana beef from Delta Meat Deli or Beef Boys Meat Market, both of which have branched out into groceries, cakes, breads, and on-trend items such as gluten-free products.

The rise in overnighting tourists has resulted in culture-focused excursions around Maun and a new one-stop-info-shop beside the airport - Explore Maun - for activities and accommodation bookings. Silvester Mafosi, of Third Kind Travel & Tours, is also a font of much local knowledge. He links social enterprise with tourism, in collaboration with Safari Destinations and Travel For Impact, which distributes \$1 per bed night pledges from camps, lodges, hotels and tour operators. They've created a three-hour immersive local experience, which averts the focus from sympathy-inducing school visits, to authentic and often hilarious rural experiences, such as visiting a cattle station and being asked to milk a cow.



ABOVE Expect cattle to wander across the roads in Maun at any moment.



RIGHT 4x4 safari vehicles buzz around Maun like flies.

My comical moment came when attempting basket weaving. Master weaver Mma Thitaku Kushonya gathers up tourists like a mother hen and teaches her age-old skill to clumsy hands. 'To make a perfectly symmetrical basket is the biggest problem at first,' she laughs, eyeing my effort. 'And once you introduce a pattern, you can't make a single mistake!' Mma Kushonya points out intricate patterns and explains how price reflects quality and that each basket bears the name of the maker. They're all made by women, providing some form of income for about 110 craftspeople. For the first time, I appreciated how a fine weave with a complicated design isn't just beautiful, it's at least a week's work.



Women of substance



EDNAH ROSEN

Ednah Rosen owns Akacia Cafe in the Nhaba Museum cultural hub and returned to Botswana after 30 years in Sweden. Suffering big city burnout in Stockholm, she dreamed of a warmer climate and of writing a Setswana cookbook. She fulfilled her dreams and won an award for her book, *Taste of Botswana*. Find Ednah at Akacia Cafe and stop by on a Friday from 4pm to 6pm for musical storytelling and soulful vibes. **+267 740 640 91, akaciacafe.com**



THITAKU KUSHONYA

Mma Thitaku Kushonya not only won first prize as Botswana's best basket weaver, but came fourth out of 52 countries in an international arts competition in the USA. She has travelled the world representing Botswana and mentors hundreds of women in how to earn their own living from traditional crafts. She weaves her creations and runs classes at her studio close to town. **+267 722 714 22, facebook.com/Botswana-Quality-Baskets-115807201824669**



Buy more local art at Maun Made, a showroom inside The Duck Cafe & Bar opposite the airport. It's a platform for artists, entrepreneurs, and communities to market their creations. A planned product range made from local recycled waste helps to promote trash as a valuable resource. It also stocks new fashion brand NA.SH bags, born when the canvas business run by brothers Nathan and Ashton lacked orders. Inspiration came from Ride Botswana, which commissioned an overnight bag made using colourful shweshwe and vegan-leather instead of canvas. It was a huge hit.

All this local innovation is found inside The Duck, a fresh new cafe-bar replacing the old "Wild West saloon" Duck Inn pub. It was here that 'hunters and safari operators shook off the loneliness of the bush with parties and drinking', Karen Ross wrote in her book, *Okavango: Jewel of the Kalahari*. This inglorious drunken rite of passage, before re-entering society after weeks in the bush, continues unabated at sympathetic venues.

Evidence of old Maun exists everywhere. The Riley name is emblazoned across hotel signage, a garage forecourt and etched into gravestones in the walled family cemetery. It bears witness to some early 20th century Maun characters. Harry's bar, inside the old Riley's Hotel, was a hunters hangout, full of characters out of a Hemingway novel. Their ghosts have fled the corporate-style Cresta Riley's Hotel for lack of excitement. Riley's Garage is still the best place to fill up, fix your vehicle, and buy spares and camping gear.



TOP Fabric artist sporting his hand-painted face mask.

ABOVE LEFT Locally made NA.SH bags is a successful lockdown start up.

LEFT Old Mall street market is the place to find bargains.



LEFT Canter through the shallows and among tame game in Royal Tree Lodge reserve.

ABOVE Fly over the Okavango with Maun Helicopters.

The words excitement and Maun may be unfamiliar companions, but I proved it possible to pair the two without stretching the truth. Seeing the Okavango in wrap-around vision inside Maun Helicopters' Airbus H130, was thrilling. Maun Helicopters is new in town, rivals to the well-established Helicopter Horizons. Both offer sensational flips and trips for a taste of the Okavango Delta. My next thrill was galloping on horseback closely observed by zebra, giraffe and antelope, their eyes questioning: 'What's the hurry?' Because there are no predators in the Royal Tree Lodge game reserve, the animals are pretty relaxed. Ride Botswana's well-schooled horses suit any level of rider, including speed-freaks like me.

Maun proved that it can supply every kind of experience to make a fulfilling trip. A 24-hour stint in Maun isn't really enough, but it will give you a chance to encounter some of the local products and people, who are making such an effort to accommodate and entertain visitors. **G**

PHOTOGRAPHY SHUTTERSTOCK, UNSPLASH

Trip Planner

Stay Here

THE TSHILLI FARM

It's worth driving 25km on a 4x4 track to stay in forest chalets or a basic campsite, to tap into the owners' regional knowledge. It has a great bistro and bar favoured by local and ex-pat homesteaders, who need no excuse for a party. Transfers and tours available. Special *Getaway* price: Double chalet R1 200 pn, family chalet R1 500, camping R80 per site. **+267 747 779 61, tshillifarm.com**

CROCODILE CAMP AND SPA

Ten grassy sites with capacity for 100 campers, each has ablutions, kitchenette and Wi-Fi. Includes use of hotel pool, spa facilities and bar and deck beside the Thamalakane River. Drinks aren't cheap. Camping R290 per person, children 6-11 years R145. **+267 684 0830, sklcamps.com/crocodile-camp**

SEDIA HOTEL

This well-known hotel is being refurbished to a three-star level. The atmospherically lit pool and restaurant deck is good for romantic dinners. Campers get the best view of the river. R1 650 per double room, camping R140 pp pn. **+267 686 0177, sedia-hotel.com**

THE MAUN STUDIOS

The bonus for road trippers staying here, is tapping into owner Rocky Palmer's font of knowledge about routes, roads and vehicle repairs. There are only two gorgeous self-catering suites on this family riverside property. Meals offered. From R1 800 per room pn, inc full breakfast. **+267 741 892 66, themaunstudios.com**

ROYAL TREE LODGE

Jog, walk or horse ride among habituated animals in the game reserve surrounding Royal Tree Lodge. It's 10km out of town, with high-quality tented rooms and chalets, a bar and restaurant. **+267 680 0757, royaltreelodge.com**

Eat Here

There's been a food revolution in Maun, with numerous really good eateries, only a few of which are open in the evenings.



AKACIA CAFE

Great breakfasts, lunches, cakes and bakes from cookbook author Ednah Rosen. She's reviving the faded Nhaba Museum complex with live music and arts. Open 8am-6pm daily. **+267 740 640 91, akaciacafe.com**

DUSTY DONKEY

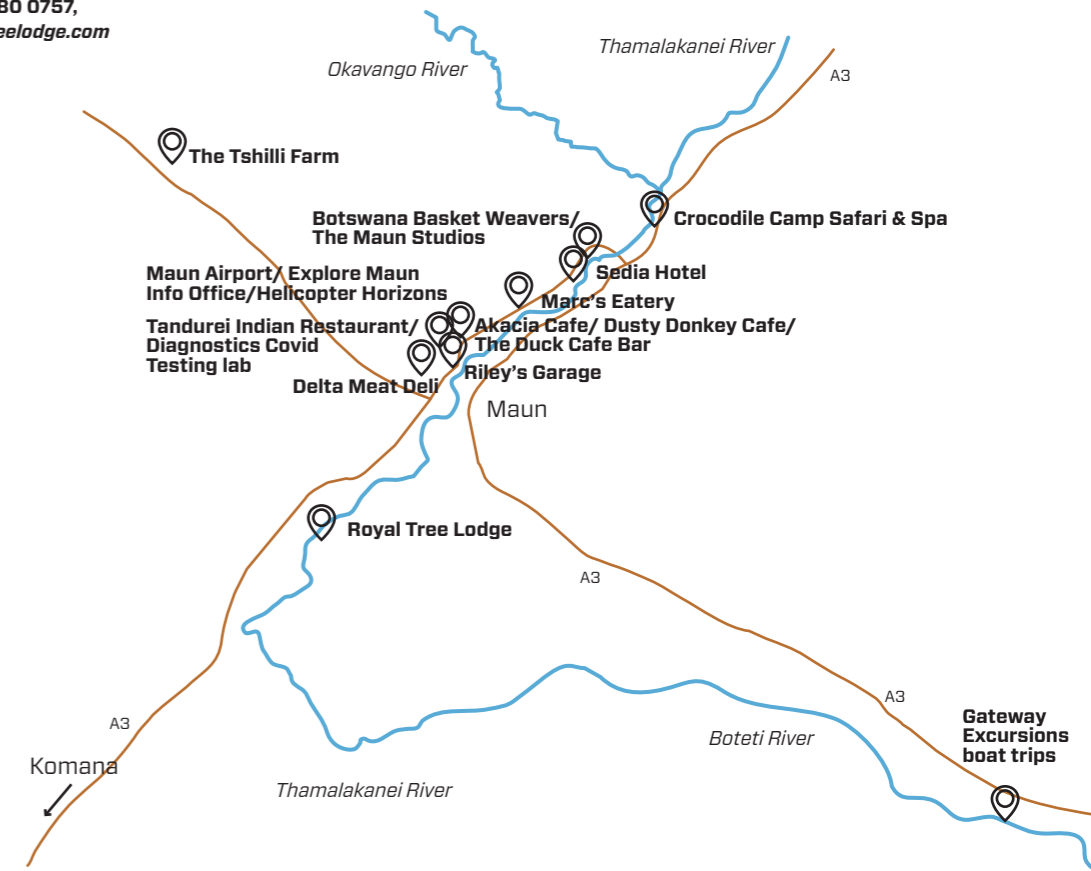
Safari industry folk drift in and out all day for catchup, coffee and delicious food. Located 250m from the airport, close to Woolworths, Spar and a bottle store. Open 8am-4pm. **+267 761 571 05**

MARC'S EATERY

International dishes are served in a lovely courtyard, or opt for the takeaway traveller's lunchbox, including a tsunami sarmie and Moroccan meat pastilla, with vegetarian options. Open 9am-3pm **+267 740 029 55, marcseatery.com**

TANDUREI

This pilots hangout opposite the airport gets a good vibe going in the evenings and serves slap-up Indian cuisine. **+267 680 0227, facebook.com/tandureimaun**



The Tshilli Farm



Royal Tree Lodge

