



Elephants are a dream for safari lovers – but a nightmare for local farmers

A microbrewery in Botswana is creating a recipe to relieve tensions between people and pachyderms

By Sue Watt, TRAVEL WRITER

6 March 2023 • 4:05pm



As horizontal lightning darted across the sky on a cloud-covered evening in the Okavango Delta, we could just make out the lumpy shapes of elephants loitering on the track ahead. Our guide stopped the Land Cruiser as they came nearer and we sat motionless, transfixed.

There were around 30 of them, some tentatively sniffing the night air with their periscope-like trunks, others protectively shuffling small shadows – their tiny calves – between their legs. Like gracious ghosts, they moved silently before they disappeared into the bush.

Botswana has the highest population of elephants on Earth: around 130,000 migrate along ancient trails around the world's largest inland delta, which spans some 6,000 square miles in full flood.



Botswana has the highest population of elephants on Earth – some 130,000 migrate along its ancient trails | CREDIT: Getty

There is something truly special about being in the presence of these pachyderms simply going about their daily lives – but not everyone would agree. What might be a dream sighting for safari lovers is the stuff of nightmares for local farmers living on the edge of poverty and trying to grow food for their families despite the onslaught of hungry elephants in harvest season.

But it seems the Okavango Craft Brewery (OCB) in Maun, the sleepy gateway town to the Delta, has found a recipe for relieving tensions between people and pachyderms. Their beers come with a distinctly feel-good flavour, simultaneously saving elephants and transforming farmers' lives.



The bar of the Taproom real ale pub at Okavango Craft Brewery | CREDIT: Will Whitford

On a hot, clammy afternoon a few days after that eerie elephant encounter, I downed a glass of chilled Delta Lager the colour of liquid gold in the bougainvillea-filled garden of the Taproom, OCB's pub beside the brewery. My husband, Will, had chosen a refreshing Panhandle Pale Ale, named after the remotest part of the Delta, and Graham McCulloch, the microbrewery's director, was enjoying a pint of Old Bull Stout. "I grew up on Guinness," he said, with a distinct Dublin lilt, "so I insisted we do an Irish stout!"

We could have chosen a Session IPA called Kingfisher, or The Matriarch, a powerful 6 per cent American Amber Ale. Or Mowana cider, the local name for the baobab tree. All the drinks have names linked to the area or its inhabitants: my favourite was the Mock Charge, a non-alcoholic beer created during Botswana's Covid ban on alcohol.



Okavango Craft Brewery Co-founder Graham McCulloch (left) and Manager Jonathan Pierce (right) | CREDIT: Will Whitford

Another common factor in OCB's beers is that they are all made with millet. Yes, millet. It's an unusual ingredient in the brewing world, but the popular staple crop grows well in this semi-arid environment. Unfortunately, elephants like it too, especially when planted on their migratory paths where many farming plots are located. Therein lies the problem: when they share the same space and sustenance, the lives of both people and pachyderms are at risk.

“People get charged and sometimes killed, but you have to protect your field if you live in a landscape with elephants,” Graham said. “Yet there are solutions that can reduce conflict and reduce the killing of elephants but also generate a value in elephants. People will actually say: ‘We want these elephants; don't shoot them because they have a value to us.’”

As well as co-founding OCB, Graham and his wife, conservation biologist Dr Anna Songhurst, established the NGO Ecoexist to foster coexistence between elephants and people. They spent 10 years undertaking research while living in the Eastern Panhandle region.



McCulloch and his wife founded OCB as a means for local farmers to earn a premium for their surplus millet | CREDIT: Will Whitford

Ecoexist persuaded the authorities to move farming plots away from the migratory paths to safer field clusters of up to 800 hectares, often containing hundreds of plots. They taught 70 “elephant aware” farmers about sustainable practices that produce greater yields of millet from smaller areas, and about protecting their crops using solar electric and chilli fences (elephants hate chillies).

Five initiatives that are helping to save wildlife

Gorongosa Coffee, Mozambique

Hike the slopes of Mount Gorongosa in Gorongosa National Park, where 850 farmers culti...

[Expand to read more +](#)

All this involved more work for the farmers and, as an incentive, Graham wanted to create a new market that would pay a premium for their surplus millet. Northern Botswana’s first microbrewery was born.

It had a rocky start, opening in 2019 just before the Covid lockdown. Strong local support kept it going and the Taproom pub opened in August 2021. We sipped our beers to a soundtrack of soothing reggae and the buzz of customers young and old, all enjoying the relaxed vibe.



Millet, barley and hops, along with water from the Okavango Delta, all help to create OCB's distinctive real ales | CREDIT: Will Whitford

Its manager Jonathan Pierce, once a barman at a Wetherspoon pub in Leeds, gave us a tour of the brewery. Among all the shiny steel fermentation tanks, kegs and pipes stood a huge old wooden barrel full of rare 100 per cent millet beer.

This is its premium Marula Sour Ale, sold in wax-dipped champagne bottles. “It’s selling well,” Graham said, “and it tastes amazing!”

OCB’s success is testament to the team’s tenacity and commitment. Last year, they won two medals in the African Beer Cup, the largest beer competition on the continent. And their beers are now sold in hotels in Maun and Botswana’s capital, Gaborone, in Kasane near Chobe National Park, and at safari camps across the Okavango.



Last year, OCB won two medals in the African Beer Cup – the largest beer competition on the continent | CREDIT: Will Whitford

Perhaps OCB's most important success, however, is that Ecoexist has trained another 200 farmers in elephant-aware practices, with more waiting eagerly in the wings. Although there are no safari camps or lodges in the farmers' remote localities, visitors can fly to their villages for new community tours set up with Ecoexist and Maun-based Helicopter Horizons.

“The easiest way is to helicopter guests in,” Graham explained. “This means we can connect more communities to tourism and bring more benefits into the villages as a direct reward for coexisting with elephants.”

Back in the Taproom after our brewery tour, Will and I felt it only right that we should celebrate this situation with another drink. Just by buying a beer, we were buying into conservation. We raised our glasses to the farmers reaping their rewards for saving the elephants of the Okavango.

Essentials

The [Okavango Craft Brewery](#) offers tours, including a tasting of four beers, for \$25 (£21).

[Helicopter Horizon Tours](#) offers a scenic and beer-tasting flight from \$295pp and a Conservation & Co-existence Cultural Experience tour that includes a guided visit to a village supported by Ecoexist for \$1,070pp.

OCB's craft beers can be enjoyed at Xigera Camp, Wilderness's DumaTau, Vumbura and Mombo, and camps in Khwai Private Reserve. Many hotels and lodges in Maun serve their beers, including Desert & Delta's [Sedia Hotel](#) from \$78pp B&B

Dispatches Newsletter

Our foreign correspondents bring you the stories that matter - from Ukraine and around the world.



Sign up

Related Topics

Botswana, Africa, Beer, Elephants, Wildlife



The Telegraph values your comments but kindly requests all posts are on topic, constructive and respectful. Please review our [commenting policy](#).

Show comments

More stories



Russia's next civil war has already begun



BBC Sport staff hit out at 'multi-millionaire presenters drawing picket lines'



Budget 2023 latest: Tax burden on track to hit post-war record, warns OBR



'Fitting a heat pump has been an expensive waste of time'



Winners and losers from the Budget 2023 - and what it means for your money



Budget pension shake-up to leave richest retirees £3,600-a-month better off