

# WELCOME TO LAKE NGAMI AND THE OKAVANGO

## PANHANDLE



Seen from space, the Okavango Delta is the shape of a frying pan, with the long handle running to the NW. And this is how the Okavango Panhandle area comes to have its name. The photo is from the NASA Earth Observatory.



The A70 highway travels up the western fringe of the Delta and then the Okavango River itself all the way to the Namibian border at Moheambo. The road is tarred all the way to the border post. It runs parallel to the river rather than alongside it, and views of the river and the delta are few and far between unless you turn off the highway.

The population is sparse, the villages are a long way apart, and most tourist traffic has been left behind in Maun. There are camps and lodges on the way up the Panhandle, but they are very different to the fly in/fly out luxury camps of the Okavango Delta. The Panhandle camps are mostly targeting either sports fishermen or self-contained self-drive travelers with large 4x4 vehicles. But for an independent traveler, even with a 2WD car, a visit to the Panhandle area can be a very rewarding experience.

### While you are on the western side of the river...

- Visit Lake Ngami to see the locals fishing for the huge **sharptooth catfish**, the second biggest freshwater fish in southern Africa, which can reach up to 60 kg in weight. Lake Ngami is also an **outstanding birding site**, though the quality of the birdwatching fluctuates along with the water levels.



- You can cruise the upper Okavango River in a houseboat.



*Herrero women in traditional dress, and a Bayei cultural group in Maun*

- You can stop in villages dominated by different ethnic groups. The Panhandle is a particularly diverse area. There are villages dominated by the **Herrero** tribe, whose women wear enormous headdresses supposed to resemble the horns of their cattle; villages settled by refugees from the Angolan Civil War; villages of **Hambukushu** and **Bayei**, river people who make their living from fishing in the river and growing crops alongside it rather than from herding cattle; and villages of **San** still pursuing lives based on hunting and gathering wild foods.
- Check out the **baskets** of the Angolan refugees of the numbered Etsha villages. The refugees arrived in Botswana with nothing except their traditional skills, and they make what are undoubtedly the finest baskets in southern Africa – real works of art. You can find them at work in the Etsha villages, and also find large collections of the baskets on sale in Gumare.





- You can sign up for **lessons in traditional pottery and basketry** in Shakawe.
- In season, you can **go fishing** in the pristine waters of the Okavango River. You don't need to bring your own gear: boats and guides are readily available and they are fully equipped. Fish species in the Panhandle popular with anglers are tigerfish, nembwe, threespot tilapia, brown spot tilapia, African pike, sharptooth catfish, blunt-tooth catfish and butter barbel.



- Marvel at the **outstanding ancient rock art of the Tsodilo Hills**, another UNESCO world heritage site. The Tsodilo Hills are an important archaeological site, and there is an outstation of the National Museum of Botswana here dedicated to the prehistory of Ngamiland, possibly the birthplace of our species. The Tsodilo Hills also offer some interesting **hiking trails**, and a full circuit of the hills on foot will take about 6 hours.
- Take a motorboat trip to see the **armoured boat**, a lost relic of the Angolan Civil War which drifted down the Okavango River and found a resting place near Samochima, or to look for the usual denizens of the deep swamps of the Panhandle – **sitatunga** and **red lechwe** antelope; hippos, crocodiles, herons, fish eagles and fishing owls.
- During the winter floods you can **dive with the crocodiles**. As a tourist activity this must be booked well in advance and only experienced scuba divers are accepted. If you have your own gear you can, of course, go diving by yourself. But it is possible only when the cool clear water coming from the Angolan highlands have produced good visibility and temperatures low enough to make the crocodiles torpid.



- Take a **mokoro (dugout canoe) excursion** into the anastomosing channels of the lower panhandle with the polers operating from Etsha 13. This is usually an overnight trip with a stay at a camp on an island in the river, owned by the villagers.
- Explore **the fossil dunes** of the Panhandle, the long linear striations showing in the top left of the satellite photo above. These dunes are home to an interesting assemblage of plant and animal life.
- And when you are done, you can transit across the historic **Caprivi Strip** of Namibia. The most practical route from Shakawe to Ngoma.