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Beguiled by Botswana

By ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

What strikes you first is the sky and its emptiness. There is nothing there, just air of a blue that is so attenuated that it is almost white. You stand there, on the tarmac of Seretse Khama Airport, you breathe in the dry air, feel the sun upon your neck and you know that now you have reached the edge. Just a few miles away, over the scrub plain, is the Kalahari and its singing emptiness. You are in Botswana, a country that relatively few people visit but that is in many respects one of the most remarkable countries of Africa.

As a country, it has not been going for all that long. Before independence in 1966, it was the Bechuanaland Protectorate, a buffer state set up by the British against Afrikaner expansionism. When the British left, it was run by a president, Seretse Khama, who was also the paramount chief of the Bangwato, one of the largest tribes in the country. The story of Khama's marriage to his British wife is one of the great love stories of our times -- a marriage that led to exile and ostracism (the colonial authorities, bowing to South African pressure, disapproved of his marriage to a white woman), but that triumphed in the end. Khama died in 1980. When his widow, Ruth, died last year, there was a great storm in the night. Trees were uprooted and people said that this was a sign of how much they had lost. The adopted mother of the nation had gone.

People like this country. It is very different from places like Kenya and Tanzania, and even its neighbor South Africa. These countries have a very obvious natural beauty in the form of dramatic mountains and lush savannah. Botswana is a dry place, a land of wide plains and scrub bush. A lot of it -- the part in the middle -- is semidesert. But there is something beguiling about it -- a quality that affects visitors in a rather peculiar way. It is the very rare visitor to Botswana who is indifferent to the country.

It is probably the emptiness that works the magic. There are few towns of any size, and those that do exist are separated by long miles of thin road. And beyond the towns there is a hinterland that is sparsely populated. There is the occasional settlement, of course, and there are cattle posts, but apart from that the vistas are dominated by endless gray-green canopies of acacia trees, under which are found hardy bushes and shrubs, termite mounds, red earth. The fact that there are not many people has an oddly calming effect. It is quiet. There is bird song. There is the sound of cicadas. But beyond that there is silence.

Gaborone, the capital, has grown in recent years, because the country has been prosperous. Botswana is one of the largest diamond producers in the world, the discovery of diamonds in 1967 having transformed it from a poor country, completely dependent on its cattle industry, to one of the wealthiest countries in Africa. But even if there are now a few tall buildings in Gaborone, there is a friendliness and intimacy about the town that gives it a very characteristic charm. People still seem to have time for one another -- and for the visitor, too -- and if you go to the very center of the town, the square around which the first shops

were built, you find that there are plenty of people standing around and talking. This gives it a relaxed, human feel that one would normally associate with a much smaller place. It is in this square that one finds one of the best basket shops -- Botswana is famed for its magnificent baskets, in which traditional designs are worked by their patient weavers.

To experience the real feel of Botswana, though, one needs to get out of Gaborone and spend some time in one of the villages. This is easily done, since there are several large villages within easy reach that give a clear idea of the traditional life of the country, the life that even people living in Gaborone will usually try to lead on weekends and holidays. Very few Botswana seem to have lost touch with their rural roots.

Mochudi is one of the larger villages, the headquarters of a tribal administration and the birthplace of Mma Ramotswa, the heroine of my novels about the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. It is reached after a 30-minute drive out of Gaborone, along a road that runs up the side of the country to Francistown, the country's second-largest city, and, beyond that, the border into troubled Zimbabwe.

The village sprawls, as Botswana villages tend to do, because there is no shortage of land and few natural boundaries to cut settlements off from the surrounding expanses of bush. As you drive in toward the center, donkey carts share the road with cars, and the ubiquitous cattle meander across your path. Village Botswana is one great big mix: people, cattle, donkeys, small neat houses with well-swept yards of packed mud. And here and there, seemingly dropped down into patches of wasteland, are little businesses -- one-room buildings with wildly improbable names: the Try Again Butchery, the Last Chance Beauty Salon (my favorite), the Honesty First Clothes Shop.

Mochudi is dominated by a hill, known in that part of Africa as a kopje. This hill is made up of great granite boulders, and on top of it sits a local museum, a highly unusual feature of a Botswana village and one of which people here are understandably proud. The museum has items of everyday life in Botswana, including old tin advertising signs, and holds exhibitions of local crafts and painting. Standing in front of this hilltop museum, one sees the land drop away to reveal the village laid out below, with its winding paths and its clusters of houses. Cattle graze on patches of grass between the houses, the sound of their bells floating up in the still air. And if you look to the west, toward the old mission hospital founded by the Dutch Reformed Church, with red tin roofs and comfortable courtyards, you see the kgotla, the tribal meeting place. Inside its thatched stone-walled buildings and its wide enclosure the people meet for great and important occasions.

Chief Linchwe II lives behind the museum, but receives visitors in the cool of the kgotla shelter. I sat there with him a few months ago and talked about his village and his country. I asked him what, in his view, was the secret of Botswana's stability. He thought for just a moment before he replied: "Respect for chieftainship." Of course he believes in the traditional values -- as one would expect of a chief -- and he laments many of the changes he has seen over the last few years, including the loss of respect for elders and an increased selfishness. There are also, of course, the changes wrought by AIDS, which has affected Botswana badly, as it has done elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. At least in Botswana the government can afford to pay for treatment, which is readily available and which is now having a positive impact on the situation. But the old Botswana is still there, he agrees, and indeed the visitor sees it in the courtesy with which the tall, dignified chief himself receives a stranger.

Most visitors, of course, will want to see something more than the villages and the towns, and will embark on a safari. This may take one up to the Okavango Delta, in the north, an area of towering trees and meandering rivers of pure, clear water. This is as close to Eden as anywhere in this part of Africa, and the experience of sitting at a campfire, out in the bush, with a sky of dipping and wheeling constellations above one's head, is romantic past the describing of it.

But you do not have to go that far: Mokolodi, a compact game park just a short distance outside Gaborone, can provide more than a glimpse of the bush and the game that frequents it.

I went with Puso Kirby, the son of the park's founder, to let a bag of snakes loose in the wild. We walked along game paths, with Puso reeling off the names of the indigenous plants and their medicinal properties as we passed them. Then he opened the neck of his bag and casually took out a large cobra and a puff adder, putting them down on the ground and watching them move away into the undergrowth. Puso was born in this country, to white parents who came to Botswana from Zimbabwe. He could never live anywhere else, I suspect, because like just about everyone else I have met who has spent time in this country, he finds it impossible to be indifferent to it. Here was a man who was obviously in love with the place in which he lived.

"It's a special place," somebody said to me later that day. "You feel it in the air. There's something about it. It makes you want to stay. Forever."

There are many countries in Africa that, sadly, people wish to leave. Botswana is rather different. It seems that the people of Botswana are happy to be there, and happy to remain. And what is more, they are generous enough to share all this with the visitor, a gift that should be received, as is traditional in Botswana, with delight and with both hands.

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