A Journey to the Other End of the Earth

My travels during the past two weeks took me to Botswana in southern Africa. A landlocked country about the size of France, it is a fascinating place to visit. Traveling with Dr. Chuck Kelley and our families, we had a chance to see and photograph the country’s spectacular wildlife, including elephants, giraffes, hippos, lions, leopards, and cheetahs. It also gave us an opportunity to study another model of Travel & Tourism and appreciate the challenges that region’s visitor industry faces.

Botswana should be of particular interest to people in Hawaii because the two areas are geographic antipodes. It’s exactly on the other side of the world. If you start digging a hole in Waikiki, go straight through the center of the earth and come out on the other side of the planet, you will find yourself in northern Botswana. Hawaii is the only state in the U.S. that has an antipode on dry land. Dig long enough in any of the other 49 states and you will end up in an ocean on the other side of the globe.

The late Honolulu Star-Bulletin staffers A. A. “Bud” Smyser and Cornelius “Corny” Downes noted this fact about 42 years ago, according to former Star-Bulletin columnist Russ Lynch. So, when Botswana achieved independence from British colonial rule in September 1966, Hawaii Governor Jack Burns traveled there to attend the independence celebrations and establish a sister relationship between Hawaii and the new nation. At the time, Botswana was a relatively small, lightly-populated country, with few natural resources and known mostly for its Kalahari Desert.

After independence, diamonds were discovered in Botswana, and the income from mining has helped to transform the country from one of the world’s poorest to a middle-income nation with a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of $16,450 in 2007. Debswana, the country’s largest mining company, is 50 percent government-owned and generates about half the government’s revenues. The recent discovery of uranium will enhance those revenues in years to come. Nonetheless, Botswana is not a wealthy country. There are widespread areas of poverty, and nearly half (47 percent) the population lives on less than the equivalent of one U.S. dollar a day, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). There is a great need for development of basic infrastructure, such as housing, transportation, power, and sanitation.

Today, Botswana is set apart from its neighboring countries, such as Zimbabwe, because of its relative economic and political stability. Much of this success can be attributed to the foresight of its early leaders, who after independence, brought in some of the very best independent economic advisors from around the world. The policies they designed and implemented have served the country extremely well, and its economic prosperity has continued to grow over the last 40 years, while its neighbors have, regrettably, spiraled downward.

Botswana is facing two big issues today. The first is an AIDS epidemic, which has reached breathtaking proportions. Approximately one in six residents has HIV, giving Botswana the second-highest HIV infection rate in the world, after nearby Swaziland. The country’s average life expectancy has plummeted from 64 years (1960) to 35 years (2004)! Thousands of children have been orphaned. Turning this situation around is a major, ongoing challenge, not only in Botswana, but throughout southern Africa.

The second issue is the breakdown of government and the economy in neighboring Zimbabwe, which has led hundreds of thousands to flee that country into Botswana. The refugees are putting a strain on Botswana’s resources and making it difficult to maintain law and order in certain areas.

Travel & Tourism in Botswana is based on a model that is quite different from Hawaii’s. It hosts about 2.5 million international visitors a year, a little over a third the number we host in Hawaii. (See www.wttc.org/bin/pdf/original_pdf_file/finwttc_botswana.pdf for more details on Botswana’s Travel & Tourism economy.)

A significant number of those 2.5 million visitors stay, as we did, in small game camps in remote areas. Each camp is capable of holding between 10 and 20 visitors in upscale tents set on elevated wooden platforms. There are three or more staff members per guest, and all staff members live in housing provided within the camp compound. Elephants, hyenas, baboons, and assorted other wildlife wander the camp grounds at will, and after dark, for their safety, guests must be escorted to their tents by a staff member.

The camps are particularly isolated during the May to September period, when water that had fallen as rain in neighboring Angola months earlier arrives in Botswana via the Okavango River and floods the plains in the northern part of the country. Roads are cut off. Small charter aircraft that land on dirt strips are the primary means of bringing in visitors, supplies, and personnel.

The annual flooding of the Okavango Delta also brings nourishment to the area’s plant life, creating a wonderful habitat for all sorts of animals and birds rarely seen in such large numbers anywhere else on earth.

The people of Botswana, called Batswana (singular: Motswana), are very friendly and hospitable. This is particularly true
for those working in the game camps. They speak English well and have an amazing ability to quickly learn the names of the guests in camp. Not long after arrival, I might be asked something like, “Richard, are you happy and settled in your room?” or “Richard, what would you and Linda like for dinner tonight?”

In this small country of about 1.7 million people, working in the hospitality business is a choice job that many aspire to obtain. Although a housekeeper may take home the equivalent of only $40 a month, it goes a long way toward supporting the family and relatives back home. And work may truly be a long way from home, due to the lack of transportation infrastructure. The closest villages are usually over a full day’s drive away, over rough, unpaved roads. Workers, even young mothers, are expected to be away from their families for several months at a time before they get two or three weeks’ leave. And to think we complain about the commute to work in Honolulu!

During our visit, we had some wonderful around-the-campfire conversations with the camp staff who described to us the challenges of the changing lifestyle in Botswana. Many of their parents were nomadic, hunter-gatherer Bushmen of the Kalahari, who lived in traditional ways. In one generation’s time, this has evolved to flying in airplanes, driving automobiles, using the Internet, and working for wages providing top-notch guest services in four-star safari lodges. To illustrate the point, one of the camp staff, a young woman named “Tiny,” told us that when she started the job and a guest tried to take her picture, she thought the camera was a gun, so she threw down her cleaning equipment and ran away screaming in fright!

The camp crews were always eager to share their personal experiences and local knowledge with the guests, be it describing how they cooked over an open fire, or interesting facts about the animals lurking around the tents at night. As a tourist, this greatly added to our enjoyment, and it reminded me a lot of our own Na Mea Ho’okipa value here at Outrigger, in which we share our knowledge of the place and the culture, immeasurably enriching the guests’ experience of Hawaii.

As you can see from the photos, it was a fabulous trip, but we are glad to be back in the U.S. of A.!

Where’s My Antipode?

If any reader wants to find the antipode of his or her location, there is a great Web tool available in an article at http://ruk.ca/article/4019

1) Click the first hyperlink in the article and you will be led to another page at www2.comp.polyu.edu.hk/~04329143d/Location.html where a “Latitude and Longitude Converter and Antipodal Calculator” will be displayed.

2) Click on the button “Get Longitude Latitude information from Google Map.”

3) Find your location on the map displayed and click on it.

4) Click on the “Calculate” button.

5) Click on the button “Show antipodes of your location on Google Map” and a map of the antipode of your location will be displayed!