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# Cities of Botswana

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## Introduction

Botswana, a landlocked nation in Southern Africa, is renowned for its diamond-rich economy, vibrant wildlife, and commitment to democratic governance. Yet, beyond its wide-open wilderness and the sweeping sands of the Kalahari Desert, Botswana's cities and towns serve as vital engines of national progress. These urban centers—ranging from bustling capitals to storied traditional villages—are more than mere settlements; they are living chronicles of the country's history, culture, aspirations, and transformation.

The cities of Botswana play a pivotal role in shaping the fabric of modern Botswana. Gaborone, a planned capital born from the nation's independence, stands as a testament to visionary leadership and ambition. Francistown, rooted in the Gold Rush era, bridges the past and present, while Maun has become synonymous with adventure and safari tourism as the gateway to the Okavango Delta. Each city tells its own story, marked by unique challenges, achievements, and opportunities.

The diversity among Botswana's cities is striking. Some, like Serowe and Molepolole, are steeped in history as traditional capitals of major tribes, preserving ancient customs in the midst of change. Others, such as Selebi-Phikwe, Orapa, and Jwaneng, were shaped by mineral discoveries and driven by the promises of modern industry. Regional hubs like Kasane and Palapye illustrate Botswana's dynamic adaptation to regional and international economic ties, evolving transportation networks, and demographic shifts.

Increasing urbanization in recent decades has transformed Botswana's landscape, drawing people into cities in search of educational and economic opportunities, better infrastructure, and healthcare. This shift has presented both remarkable opportunities for growth and significant challenges in urban planning, sustainability, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Botswana's government and its people continue to grapple with balancing modernization with the need to maintain the distinct identities that define each community.

This book, "Cities of Botswana," is both a historical account and a practical guide. Each chapter delves into one of Botswana's principal cities or towns, exploring its origins, growth, demographics, economic significance, infrastructure, and distinctive characteristics. Stories of resilience, enterprise, and community spirit abound, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of how these urban centers have shaped Botswana's national narrative.

Whether you are a visitor seeking to explore Botswana's urban landscapes, or a reader

interested in the country's social and economic development, this book offers a gateway into the heart of its cities. Through these pages, you will discover how Botswana's towns and cities serve as both crossroads of history and beacons of the nation's future.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Gaborone: The Heart of Botswana

Gaborone, Botswana's vibrant capital, stands as a striking testament to intentionality and foresight. Unlike many African cities that grew organically from colonial trading posts or ancient settlements, Gaborone was born out of a deliberate decision to craft a new administrative center for a newly independent nation. Its very existence embodies Botswana's aspirations for self-determination and modernity, replacing the historical administrative center of Mafikeng (now Mahikeng) which, rather inconveniently, was located outside its borders in neighboring South Africa. The journey from a relatively obscure colonial outpost to a bustling metropolis of over 200,000 people is a narrative deeply intertwined with the story of Botswana itself.

The mid-1960s were a pivotal time for Bechuanaland Protectorate. As the winds of change swept across Africa, bringing with them the promise of independence, the need for a capital city firmly rooted within its own territory became paramount. Serowe, the traditional capital of the Bamangwato people, was considered, as was Francistown, with its established infrastructure from the gold rush era. However, the chosen location, a relatively undeveloped area in the southeastern part of the country, offered a blank slate, free from the entanglements of existing tribal claims or established colonial architecture. This afforded the new government an unprecedented opportunity to plan a city from the ground up, designed to meet the specific needs and embody the spirit of the nascent Republic of Botswana.

Construction of Gaborone commenced in 1964, a mere two years before Botswana gained its independence. The scale of the undertaking was ambitious, involving the rapid development of essential infrastructure, government buildings, housing, and commercial spaces. The city was meticulously laid out around a central mall, which quickly became, and remains, a focal point for commerce and social activity. This deliberate planning approach set Gaborone apart, creating a modern, organized urban landscape that reflected the nation's commitment to progress and stability. The name "Gaborone" itself is a nod to the area's history, honoring Chief Kgosi Gaborone of the Tlokwa tribe, who had originally inhabited the land.

From its inception, Gaborone was envisioned as more than just an administrative center. It was designed to be the economic engine and cultural melting pot of the new nation. The initial influx of civil servants, professionals, and entrepreneurs laid the groundwork for a diverse and rapidly growing population. The promise of economic opportunities, coupled with access to better services and educational facilities, acted as a powerful magnet, drawing people from rural areas across Botswana. This steady migration has fueled Gaborone's continuous expansion, transforming it into the country's most populous city and a microcosm of Botswana's diverse ethnic tapestry.

Today, Gaborone's economy is a dynamic blend of government administration, finance, retail, and a burgeoning service sector. Its role as the national capital naturally positions it as the center of governmental operations, employing a significant portion of its workforce. Beyond public service, Gaborone has become a magnet for both national and international businesses, with many companies choosing to establish their headquarters within its thriving commercial districts. This concentration of economic activity has fostered a robust financial sector, with the Botswana Stock Exchange (BSE) playing a crucial role in the country's economic landscape, all headquartered in Gaborone.

One cannot discuss Gaborone's economic prowess without acknowledging the profound impact of Botswana's diamond industry. While the actual mining operations are located elsewhere, the administrative heart of this lucrative industry beats strongly in Gaborone. The sorting, valuing, and sales of rough diamonds, a significant contributor to Botswana's national wealth, are conducted within the city. This vital link to the diamond industry not only strengthens Gaborone's economic foundation but also underscores its critical role in the broader national economy. The city's well-developed infrastructure and stable political environment have proven to be ideal for supporting such high-value operations.

Gaborone boasts a remarkably well-developed infrastructure for a city of its size and relative youth. A modern road network efficiently connects various parts of the city, easing traffic flow and facilitating commerce. Access to reliable electricity and robust telecommunications infrastructure are hallmarks of its planned development, supporting both residential and commercial needs. Sir Seretse Khama International Airport (SSKIA) serves as Gaborone's aerial gateway, providing crucial links to regional destinations across Southern Africa and further afield, connecting Botswana to the global economy and facilitating international travel for both business and tourism.

For residents and visitors alike, Gaborone offers a comprehensive array of amenities. The city is dotted with numerous shopping malls, ranging from large, modern complexes to smaller, specialized centers, catering to a wide spectrum of retail needs. A diverse culinary scene thrives, with a plethora of restaurants offering everything from traditional Setswana cuisine to international dishes. A range of hotels, from luxury establishments to more budget-friendly options, accommodates both business travelers and tourists. The presence of well-equipped hospitals and a variety of educational institutions, including the prestigious University of Botswana, further enhances Gaborone's appeal as a place to live, work, and study.

Culturally, Gaborone is a vibrant mosaic. While Setswana traditions form the bedrock of its identity, the city's diverse population, including a significant expatriate community, has fostered a fascinating blend of local customs and global influences. This cultural fusion is evident in its burgeoning arts scene, its lively entertainment

options, and its everyday social interactions. Cinemas offer the latest blockbusters, while local theaters showcase talent and storytelling. A vibrant music scene, spanning traditional rhythms to contemporary genres, often spills from venues into the streets, adding to the city's energetic pulse.

Gaborone also holds several sites of historical and cultural significance that offer insights into Botswana's journey. The National Museum and Art Gallery serves as a repository of the nation's natural history, traditional art, and cultural heritage, providing a comprehensive overview of Botswana's rich past. Another iconic landmark is the Three Dikgosi Monument, a striking bronze sculpture commemorating the three paramount chiefs – Khama III of the Bamangwato, Bathoen I of the Bangwaketse, and Sebele I of the Bakwena – who traveled to Great Britain in 1895 to seek protection for their people from Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company. This monument stands as a powerful symbol of Botswana's enduring quest for sovereignty and self-determination.

Life in Gaborone, while offering the conveniences of a modern city, still retains a distinct Southern African charm. The pace, though livelier than in smaller towns, is generally more relaxed than in some of the continent's megacities. Weekends often see families gathering for braais (barbecues), friends socializing at cafes, and residents exploring the surrounding natural beauty. The Gaborone Game Reserve, located remarkably close to the city center, provides an accessible escape into Botswana's renowned wildlife, offering opportunities to spot various antelope, zebras, and a myriad of bird species. This proximity to nature is a constant reminder of Botswana's broader ecological heritage, even within its most urbanized setting.

Looking to the future, Gaborone continues to evolve. The challenges of rapid urbanization, such as managing housing demands, waste management, and ensuring equitable access to services, are actively being addressed by the government through ongoing urban planning initiatives. Efforts to diversify the economy beyond its traditional pillars are also underway, aiming to foster innovation and create new employment opportunities for its growing, youthful population. Gaborone stands as a dynamic, forward-looking city, constantly adapting and reinventing itself while remaining firmly anchored to its foundational principles of stability, progress, and national pride. It is, unequivocally, the beating heart of Botswana.

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