

# BIGGEST GAME IN TOWN

THE YEAR'S MOST EXCITING SAFARI LODGES REFLECT PREVAILING TRENDS FOR INTIMACY, LIGHT FOOTPRINTS AND DEEP IMMERSION. EDITED BY LYDIA BELL

## SOUTH AFRICA

### LOAPI TENTED CAMP

Loapi is the newest and smartest addition to Tswalu, South Africa's largest privately owned reserve, in the arid Kalahari. The reserve has been a 25-year passion project for the South African Oppenheimer family, involving three high-end properties, as well as land restoration and conservation initiatives focusing on animals such as rhinos, pangolins and meerkats. Loapi is the most ambitious arrival yet: a collection of six sustainable standalone homes with private house managers, chefs, guides and trackers. Gapp Architects' striking glass, steel and canvas houses, spaced at least 165 feet apart, are self-sufficient and can be dismantled and moved, leaving the land untouched. Inside, interiors by Cape Town's Gregory Mellor are flecked with mohair tapestries, clay sculptures, carved wooden panels and textured umber and cream sofas. But it's all just backdrop for the

main view of golden grassy plains and rust earth that bleeds into distant mountains and a cloudless, electric-blue sky. Tswalu is not for the first-time safarigoer who wants to see the Big Five all in one day.

But those searching for rare pangolins or aardvarks, black and white rhinos, wild dogs and cheetahs, may be rewarded. At night, guests eat alfresco – a private chef prepares bright butternut salads, droëwors and biltong, tapas treats or cauliflower soup next to a roaring fireplace – so as to stay in nature. It's big and bold, and, without another soul to be seen, invites introspection. MARY HOLLAND

Red Savannah offers six nights in South Africa from £7,962 per person all-inclusive, with four nights at Loapi Tented Camp, including international flights and transfers; [redsavannah.com](https://www.redsavannah.com)



PHOTOGRAPH: ANDREW MORGAN

WHERE TO STAY *Safari*



## WHERE TO STAY *Safari*



### BOTSWANA

## KHWAI LEDIBA

Striking the balance between creature comforts and adventure isn't always easy. But African Bush Camps (ABC), helmed by Zimbabwean former guide Beks Ndlovu, has mastered the art of delivering smart, Champagne-popping safaris without compromising on the thrill of waking up in the wild. Its latest project, Khwai Lediba, in the Okavango Delta, is a prime example, bridging a gap between the company's portfolio of high-end and expedition-style camps. Hidden in a quieter corner of Botswana's community-owned Khwai concession – now booming with camps – it neighbours slightly more upmarket sister property Khwai Leadwood, opened by ABC in 2020. Both are a decent distance from the mobile campsites used by self-drivers and Khwai's main airstrip, though a helicopter can provide faster transfers for an additional fee. Much closer is the Khwai River crossing into the Moremi Game Reserve, where most game drives happen, clocking up sightings of lions, leopards and wild dogs. When four-wheel fatigue sets in, walking safaris and breezy late-afternoon mokoro rides unfold in the concession. Elephants frequently pass quietly through, leaving telltale footprints on sandy paths leading to seven wooden-framed canvas tents, including one honeymoon suite and a family room, both with bathtubs. In the main sitting room, bright murals and thatch-woven lampshades foreground local artists. And shared dinners are the place for the local staff's storytelling skills to shine. SARAH MARSHALL

Abercrombie & Kent offers three nights at Khwai Lediba from £4,250 per person all-inclusive, with international flights and transfers; [abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)

### ZIMBABWE

## FOTHERGILL ISLAND

Lake Kariba is like an inland sea in Zimbabwe: a 1.38-million-acre man-made lake bordering Zambia, fed by the Zambezi river and surrounded by spectacular conservation areas. Two wildlife lovers took over Fothergill Island, within the remote Matusadona National Park, in 2019, and transformed it into the lake's smartest camp, reopening it in 2021. The five one-bedroom canvas-walled suites, two two-bedroom suites and one three-bedroom private retreat are more like mini villas than rooms, most with an outdoor sala, plunge pool, ponds and pretty gardens protected by electrified elephant-proof fences. A practised team of staff serve modern multicultural cuisine, serious international wines and sundowners around a starlit boma and in upscale safari-style living and dining tents, with views over the pool and lake. The real treats, though, are the activities on land and water: game drives with sunny, well-read guides to track lions, elephants and buffaloes; bush breakfasts on sandy river beds over which gem-coloured sunbirds flit; sunset trips into river gorges teeming with hippos and giant crocodiles; and catch-and-release fishing excursions to try to snag the lake's famously ferocious tigerfish. For the restless there's a gym, yoga deck and running track; for children, archery, swimming and wildlife excursions with guides who ooze enthusiasm for this special wild spot. Fothergill has a landing strip for charters, and smart speedboats for whizzing to Kariba airport. LISA GRAINGER

*From about £590 per person; fothergill.travel*





MOZAMBIQUE

MUZIMU LODGE

For years, Gorongosa National Park offered basic rondavels and tents with the bare necessities, and a campground for the more intrepid. Those who visited the park – which has undergone a two-decade restoration – weren’t seeking private plunge pools; rather, the extraordinary nature and wildlife. Set at the southern tip of the Rift Valley, Gorongosa has a rich and varied landscape, its dense jungles and infinite savannah roamed by lions and wild dogs. But 2023 ushered in a new era of smarter hospitality with the opening of Muzimu, an intimate tented lodge connected via wooden walkways on the banks of a river bed. The property’s six canvas tents are simple and restrained, with locally made wooden headboards and desks, as well as pendant lights and lounge chairs in colourful printed fabrics. Their wooden decks overlook a thick tangle of palms and acacia trees. In the main spaces, extraordinary salads and home-baked breads created by local chef Vália Dimitri (who did a stint at The Pot Luck Club in Cape Town) are served at dining tables scattered across the deck. There’s also a giant fire pit for late-night stargazing and a tempting pool fringed with sunbeds for a post-drive dip. The traditional daily game drives seem almost mundane compared with the other excursions on offer: you’ll be up mountains; visiting local research labs and coffee plantations; on epic bike rides; and exploring deep limestone gorges and waterfalls. MH  
*From about £770 per person; gorongosa.org*

KENYA

ANGAMA AMBOSELI

In a land where everything is big, the only option is to be bold. Africa’s tallest mountain and some of the continent’s last big tuskers set the scale for Angama’s new camp, close to Amboseli, one of Kenya’s prime national parks. Here, 10 canvas-roofed suites arc around the base of Kilimanjaro, with bedside views of the semi-dormant volcano rising from a magical fever tree forest. Taking up exclusive residence in the community-owned Kimana Sanctuary, the camp is set on an ancient elephant migratory route, protecting an area increasingly under threat from agriculture. Built in partnership with NGO Big Life Foundation, which leases the land from Maasai communities, Angama’s first project outside the Mara has its biggest conservation focus to date, and the best place to get a grip on the story is the mushroom-shaped observation tower. Sink into a rocking chair with a sundowner and watch elephant herds parade across swamps while lights twinkle below Kili – a reminder of the challenges cohabiting humans and wildlife face. Every design detail of the camp pays homage to the elephants who regularly pass through: exterior walls are made from dung and concrete, curved surfaces resemble their physical form and textured table mats mimic their coarse skin. A proposed new road will make Amboseli National Park accessible within 30 minutes, although there’s enough wilderness and wonder inside the sanctuary. Along with game drives and elephant tracking on foot, this is a place to rest and relax; a safe haven for four- and two-legged guests. SM

Africa Travel can arrange a three-night stay at Angama Amboseli from £5,490 per person all-inclusive, with international flights and transfers; [africatravel.com](http://africatravel.com)

PHOTOGRAPHS: AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS; NUNO CARDOSO; OLIVIER GRUNEWALD; SCOTT RAMSAY; BRIAN SIAMBI; MELANIE VAN ZYL



NAMIBIA

ONDULI RIDGE

If the Flintstones were transported to Namibia, this is where they'd live: among the giant boulders of Damaraland in one of the least populated areas of the second-least populated country on earth. The landscape – part dry desert grasslands, part Mars-like miles of stone – is spectacular: scattered with rocks of all morphologies and colours, from black basalt to shards of glittering granite, and dotted with huge boulders and stunted, hardy trees. Ultimate Safaris' Onduli Ridge sits on a neck between two inselbergs, with views from the rooms at dawn and dusk over wide, flat plains and, in the distance, the purply peaks of the Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain range. Every room is spacious and set high up on a deck among the rocks. In some, the showerhead juts from a hunk of granite; in all, bathrooms are partly open to the hills and sky, and the bed can be wheeled onto the deck for stargazing. Ultimate Safaris is renowned for upskilling local workforces, and the cooks, trained from the community, turn out inventive and fresh food, from tapas lunches served on multilayered wooden platters to wood-fired pizzas cooked by the pool under the stars. Local attractions include the Unesco-protected Twyfelfontein rock-art sites, the Doros Crater, created by a meteorite, a petrified forest and strange geological formations such as the Organ Pipes and Burnt Mountain. Plus, if you're very lucky, desert-adapted elephants and wild-roaming rhinos. LG  
*Doubles from about £825 all-inclusive; ultimatesafaris.na*



PHOTOGRAPHS: ANKE SCHAFFELHUBER; ULTIMATE SAFARIS; WILDERNESS



**BOTSWANA**

**NORTH ISLAND OKAVANGO**

If the name sounds familiar, that’s intentional. Similar to its Seychellois namesake, this retreat occupies its own island, is surrounded by wildlife and has all the starry qualities set to make it a dazzling success. Some of the team who worked on the lauded Indian Ocean launch more than two decades ago have since founded Natural Selection, the management company overseeing this, Botswana’s sexiest new lodge. Set in a community-owned concession on the edge of the Okavango Delta’s panhandle shared with only one other camp, North Island enjoys a degree of exclusivity – although game drives often meander into the neighbouring concession, where Natural Selection also manages Duke’s and Duke’s East. Wild dogs are among the top animal draws here, with several known active dens attracting the likes of BBC Studios’ Natural History Unit, which filmed a sequence for *Planet Earth III* in the delta area. Spearheading a new trend for micro-camps, the lodge has three suites (with a fourth to follow in March) that horseshoe around a lagoon, fanning from an open-front dining area and marble-topped help-yourself bar – an ideal gathering spot for multigenerational buyouts. Especially glorious at dusk, a decking area snakes into the lagoon, negating the need to head anywhere else for a sundowner, and there’s a well-equipped outdoor gym and hot tub. Shaded by ebony and jackalberry trees, the villas sit on elevated wooden platforms tickled by reeds, with plunge pools, outdoor showers and wraparound verandas perfect for watching elephants munch on fallen fruit. SM

True Travel offers three nights at North Island Okavango from £7,700 per person all-inclusive, with regional flights and transfers; [true.travel](http://true.travel)

**TANZANIA**

**WILDERNESS USAWA SERENGETI**

Given its presence across Africa, safari brand Wilderness has taken its time to arrive in the Serengeti, but last summer it made its move, partnering with local walking-safari pioneer and TV regular Jean Du Plessis. Solar-powered mobile camp Usawa is designed to leave no trace. It was joined late last year by a second camp and, in July, will become part of a trio, all three easy to disassemble and use at any of the nine walking zones scattered across 5,700 square miles of park. The concept? Seamless private on-foot access to the Great Migration, Africa’s 1,200-mile odyssey of life, death and rebirth. Days at Usawa are a timeless tapestry of wild species amid endless vistas – from lions, giraffes, elephants and hippos to the mega-herds of wildebeests, zebras and elands; and the crocodiles and hyenas who lie in wait. Du Plessis’s knowledge of the terrain curates a Serengeti seemingly devoid of other humans. The six tents were designed by glamping pioneer Luxury Frontiers (Camp Sarika by Amangiri, Nayara Tented Camp) and cater for 12 around a central tent where campfire dining unfurls below sprawling, star-strewn skies. From the tents to the acacia-thorn light fittings, handblown glassware and ebony furniture, everything has been commissioned locally. While the animal kingdom runs through the barks and shrieks of its nightly playlist, guests enjoy a prime selection of mainly South African wines paired with international and regional treats, including the moreish Zanzibari urojo, a coconut- and dhal-rich spiced stew. ANDREW HARRIS

*From about £750 per person; [wildernessdestinations.com](http://wildernessdestinations.com)*

