

Endless

Nowhere captures the rugged beauty of sub-Saharan Africa quite like Botswana, as these four safari experiences prove. *by Alexandra Kirkman*

Adventure

Gazing out into the golden plain from an observation deck at Tuludi, in Botswana's Khwai Private Reserve

HOME TO MORE ELEPHANTS than any other country on Earth – at least 130,000 at last count – as well as the incomparable Okavango Delta, Africa's largest and most dazzling oasis, Botswana has long been a safari lover's Valhalla. The original trailblazer of low-impact, luxury safari tourism, the country is one of the continent's greatest and most stable success

stories and has rebounded from the pandemic with the help of some show-stopping new openings and refurbishments, priming it for a banner year in 2022. The following four experiences, offered by some of Botswana's most singular and sought-after destinations, showcase its world-class hospitality and wondrous natural bounty to indelible effect.



A herd of elephants make their way across the vast Okavango Delta, as seen from a Khwai Leadwood heli-safari

Desert Night at Jack's Camp

Spanning 30,000 square kilometres in Botswana's northeast, the Makgadikgadi Pans, remnants of a vast ancient lake that dried up many millennia ago, are the largest salt pans in the world – and the spectacular setting for one of its most extraordinary adventures, thanks to the logistical wizardry of the team at Jack's Camp, the Kalahari icon completely rebuilt and reopened this year.

Setting off on an invigorating late-afternoon quad-bike ride, the landscape shifts suddenly from sparse grassland to downright otherworldly, with the pans' crusted, lunar-like surface seemingly extending to the Earth's edge like a grey-white sea aglow below dusk's fiercely violet canopy. As darkness falls, you'll unsuspectingly arrive at a torch-lit, pop-up desert dinner, where stiff drinks and hot coals shovelled beneath guests' seats stave off the evening chill. Following fireside

digestifs, a short stroll reveals the even grander finale: a generously spaced line of toasty-warm beds, and an invitation to sleep under Africa's impossibly starry night sky.

Waking to the blazing sun and an endless horizon, long shadows stretching into the deafening silence, you'll briefly wonder if you've landed in a faraway galaxy. After coffee and rusks, it's back to Jack's, where a slew of revamped creature comforts that maintain the camp's signature campaign-style charm await – including nine gorgeously appointed, 270sq m guest tents (complete with plunge pools) and a new bar-cum-museum crammed with local curiosities. naturalselection.travel

Birdwatching Cruise at Xigera

A herd of red lechwe – the Okavango's most recognisable aquatic antelope – watch, still as statues, from the golden grass along the channel as our boat motors away from Xigera, nestled on a wooded island in the far western reaches of the storied Moremi Game Reserve, whose much-anticipated debut last January set a stunning



The alfresco Sky Suite at Tuludi

new standard for luxe safaris. As the labyrinthine waterways narrow, the towering papyrus lining them seems to thicken, almost eclipsing the waning daylight until we emerge into the Boro River, flowing southeast all the way to Maun.

A gigantic bull elephant, his trunk resting on one of his massive tusks, lumbers toward the water's edge, while an especially ornery hippo bellows as we pass. But it's the profusion of birdlife – Botswana's species number some 600 – that truly astounds. A sedge of endangered wattled cranes hobnobs beside a gaggle of spur-winged geese in a nearby clearing as we marvel from the upper deck, expertly mixed Negronis and freshly fried chips in hand. Across the river,

Left: a riverside picnic at Xigera; below, from left: the ornate interior in a tented suite at Jack's; a starry night on Kubu Island, accessible with Jack's Camp

African darters and sacred ibis crowd an evergreen waterberry tree as a Goliath heron flies low and laboured in the gloaming.

Later at the lodge, a human-sized, handwoven nest by renowned South African artist Porky Hefer – part of Xigera's meticulously designed "living gallery" of bespoke works by some of the continent's most provocative talents – makes an apropos perch for a pre-dinner cocktail. xigera.com

Sky-High Sleeping at Tuludi

Artfully built around the boughs of an august leadwood tree, the Tuludi Sky Suite – the new sleep-out for two from Tuludi, located in the 200,000ha Khwai Private Reserve – offers an enchanting overnight escape that epitomises the seven-room camp's elevated-treehouse design ethos.

Arriving at twilight after exploring the pristine reserve in a private vehicle, you'll bid adieu to your guide (who camps nearby, just a walkie-talkie call away) and climb to the sky deck to sip sundowners next to the crackling firepit, the constellations starting to twinkle overhead as dusk's fuchsia-streaked sky cedes the stage to darkness. Once you polish off a romantic dinner basket of gourmet goodies accompanied by a South African vintage or two, hurricane

lamps chart the path up a few stairs to the king-sized bed, and beyond it, an outdoor en-suite bathroom equipped with a hot shower and all the amenities.

As you pull back the mosquito netting and crawl under the crisp duvet, your head sinking into the pillow as you gaze up at the inky blanket of a billion stars, the steady buzzing of the bush – punctuated by the occasional roar of distant lions and elephants' trumpets – fills the cool night air, nature's inimitable lullaby. naturalselection.travel

Heli-Safari at Khwai Leadwood

We're revelling in the spectacular view from the deck at Khwai Leadwood, the seven-tent latest addition to the celebrated African Bush Camps portfolio, tucked under the trees on an especially scenic bank of the eponymous river, when we're summoned. The chopper, doors removed for optimal views, awaits in the clearing outside the camp's entrance.

We ascend into the cloudless sky over the community-run Khwai Concession, the wildly varied landscape of the Okavango Delta rolling out before us like a boundless, lushly textured tapestry. Green-tinged waterways bisect the swamps and grassy floodplains like veins in all directions, creating a dizzying mosaic of brown, gold and ochre studded with mossy clumps of acacia and mopane trees, while mineral deposits gleam alabaster in the unrelenting sun. Spotting the body of a dead hippo in a lagoon, we descend for a closer look as the pilot spies a male lion who's already staked a claim lolling in the shade some 40 metres away – which explains why the crocodiles are keeping their distance.

A dazzle of zebra scatters in our wake as we alight back at camp. Then it's time for tea overlooking the property's monumental termite mound, the sculptural focal point of this stylish newcomer to the delta. africanbushcamps.com

