

There is no set formula for designing a lodge. Some owners employ an architect, a team of interior designers, engineers, a project manager, building contractor, the lot – necessitating a collaborative approach; some projects just have one designer; others grow organically, with no set plan.

“With Asilia Highlands, there wasn’t an architect,” says Caline Williams-Wynn, owner of Artichoke, a design company based in Cape Town. “The guys took me to the site and put me in

a dome tent, and just told me to bring something warm to wear.”

The lodge, as its name suggests, is in the highlands – around Ngorongoro, Tanzania – where the air is a little cooler than that of the savannahs.

“It was freezing,” says Williams-Wynn. “There I was in a little dome tent, cold, on a site I’d never been to before, trying to get inspiration.”

Inspiration, though – as you will see – wasn’t far away.

Architect Nick Plewman, of Nicholas Plewman Architects + Associates, who

collaborated with Williams-Wynn on Bisate Lodge in Rwanda and designed lodges for andBeyond (such as the Phinda Homestead), among others, employs a ‘biophilic-design’ concept – defined as “an approach that seeks to connect building occupants more closely to nature” – in his lodge builds.

“The project must be sustainable,” says Plewman. “The buildings need to be light, well ventilated, touch the Earth gently and be as energy efficient as possible. There is a relationship between the landscape and the scale, fabric and

texture of the building. There should also be a relationship between the building and its regional context, preferably in both geophysical and cultural terms. The latter is especially tricky because it walks along a potential crevasse of cultural appropriation, kitsch and cliché.”

The look of the interior is just as important. “I try to use as much local influence and culture as I can in my design,” says Williams-Wynn. “I try to get a feeling of everything, from the floor finishes to the sanitary wear, to the type of lighting and the finish on the walls.”

Environmental responsibility is also a key factor. “We try to do a very light footing,” she says. “With the Highlands, for example, we can take it down and the land will rehabilitate quickly, because it’s all built on gum poles and is a very lightweight structure.”

A lodge typically takes 12-16 months to complete, from concept to opening its doors. Its location can create many challenges along the way, though – a lack of roads to a site in the middle of nowhere causes logistical nightmares in transporting materials; heavy rains and

altitude also cause issues. For example, at Bisate, which sits on the side of a volcano, trucks brought materials to a central point, from where they had to be carried up the slope by hand – rock by rock, bag by bag – so as not to damage the environment with cranes and lorries. On an average day, there were over 250 workers on site to facilitate this titanic effort.

In Africa, where there’s a will, there is always a way.

Below: Based on the shape of Maasai *bomas* found nearby, Asilia Highlands blends into its natural landscape



GRAND DESIGNS

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BUILD A LODGE IN A REMOTE LANDSCAPE? TO FIND OUT, *MSAFIRI* MEETS THE CREATIVE GENIUSES BEHIND SOME OF AFRICA’S ICONIC PROPERTIES AND DISCOVERS HOW THE ENVIRONMENT PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN DESIGN

ASILIA HIGHLANDS TANZANIA | SEGERA RETREAT KENYA | BISATE LODGE RWANDA | WATAMU TREEHOUSE KENYA | CHISA BUSANGA ZAMBIA | KISAWA SANCTUARY MOZAMBIQUE



01

ASILIA HIGHLANDS

NGORONGORO HIGHLANDS, TANZANIA | WWW.ASILIAAFRICA.COM

Inspired by the round shape of Maasai *bomas* that dot the Ngorongoro landscape, Asilia Highlands comprises a series of hemispherical thin-shell structures – the first such geodesic domes to be used in Africa.

The geodesic dome, according to the American Institute of Architecture, is the “strongest, lightest, most efficient means of enclosing space known to man”. The design is such that it can bear immense loads without the need for internal supports, enabling a completely open interior.

The domes also come with a minimal ecological footprint – the bulk of the structure is made from recyclable materials and the spherical nature allows it to be heated and cooled efficiently. All the wood is teak, harvested from sustainably managed plantations.

“We wanted to create a camp that was completely different – one that involved the village environment,” says designer Caline Williams-Wynn. “Although you’ve got lions walking through the area, you’ve also got cattle, shepherds and Maasai. And, because of the cold, “we designed it like you were living in the snow, so we used lots of sheepskins”.

The interior also reflects its surroundings. In the main area, the

sunken, circular seating around the fireplace is designed to bring the traditional campfire experience inside. Rich tartan Maasai throws, *bamileki* stools and goat-skin patchworks enhance the traditional aspect of the camp, while pendant lights that drop pods of illumination onto the seating below add a touch of the contemporary.

Images of the local village and the Maasai in traditional dress, taken by renowned photographer Graham Springer, bring the lodge’s walls to life. “Everything in the Highlands is to do with the village,” says Williams-Wynn.



Above: The sunken lounge brings the traditional campfire experience inside
Left: The dome structure provides an open interior; note the attention to detail, with paintings of local Maasai on the wall and sheepskin rugs by the bed

“THE GEODESIC DOME IS THE STRONGEST, LIGHTEST, MOST EFFICIENT MEANS OF ENCLOSING SPACE KNOWN TO MAN”

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTURE



02

SEGERA RETREAT

LAIKIPIA, KENYA | WWW.SEGERA.COM

Nestled on 50,000 acres of preserved land between Mt Kenya and the Great Rift Valley, Segera is the brainchild of conservationist Jochen Zeitz. Its location was chosen to help protect the ancient migratory wildlife corridors, while the retreat also supports local community and conservation initiatives.

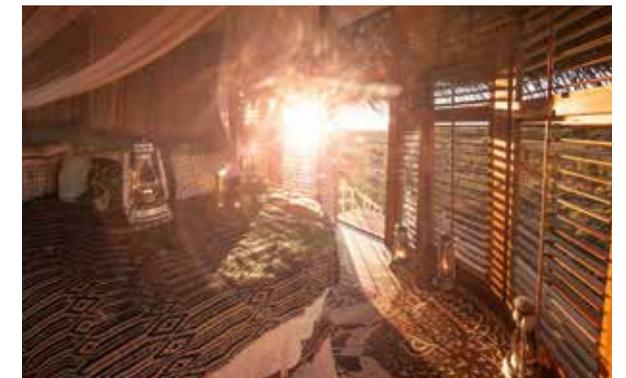
Charged with creating a “spirit of understated elegance and quiet authenticity”, South African-based architects LIFE set about weaving an inviting mix of the old and new. They transformed the original ranch homestead, for instance, into a contemporary family farmhouse, complete with a new cellar tower, while they created the courtyard from classic rectilinear buildings, bonded together by natural elements and curved structures.

The retreat’s six garden villas sit among botanical gardens around a large saltwater pool, while its three ‘homes’ each come with a private pool. Weathered wood exteriors combine with smoothed stone; fringes of twisted thatch roofs help to soften the solid rock walls; and light shines from locally made recycled glass chandeliers.

This “eclectic ambience”, as Segera calls it, was also the remit for the interiors, which incorporate the very African concept of ‘collectivity’ – disparate, yet aesthetically united objects.

Segera’s pièce de résistance, however, is its elevated Bird Nest – a collaboration between Zeitz, Carolin Dekeyser of Nay Palad and architect Daniel Pouzet. Inspired by the concept of nesting and sleeping like a bird, they built the structure entirely from raw materials, including tree branches, which local craftspeople wove into a nest. Positioned next to a wildlife-abundant river, it provides 360-degree views over the plains by day and of the stars – best seen from the nest’s rooftop bed – by night.

Above: Sleep like a bird in the distinctive Bird Nest
Right: The elevated room provides in-the-round views over the plains





This pic:
The 'hill-like' rooms of Rwanda's Bisate Lodge sit on the slope of an eroded volcano cone

03

BISATE LODGE

VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK, RWANDA
WILDERNESS-SAFARIS.COM

The spherical, thatched structures of Bisate Lodge “echo the thousands of hills that dot the Rwandan landscape”, says owners Wilderness Safaris. With a nod to the volcanoes in the distance, stone from the volcanic mountainous terrain of Virunga has been used in Bisate’s fireplaces and surrounds.

The design process saw a collaboration between Nicholas Plewman Architects, Caline Williams-Wynn of Artichoke and several other designers, including Rwandan fashion entrepreneur and founder of Inzuki Designs Teta Isibo, the National Ethnographic Museum and local textile experts and craftspeople.

Bisate proved a particularly challenging concept. “The exceptionally steep slope of the site and the singular experience of entering the world of our nearest evolutionary cousins, the great apes, right in what feels like the physical and psychological heart of the African continent, defied any idea of architectural conventionality,” says architect Nick Plewman.

“The resulting shaggy thatched rooms seem an appropriate platform from which to depart on a gorilla trek and an ideal nest in which to absorb that life-changing experience.”

Inside, Williams-Wynn drew from a variety of aspects of local life, particularly the colourful textiles and use of texture. “It needed to say Rwanda – from the scatter cushions to the bamboo on the balustrading,” she says. “It’s based on the King’s Palace – the ceiling disc is taken exactly from there.” ↻

MANY OF THE FURNISHINGS WERE DECORATED USING IMIGONGO, AN ART FORM UNIQUE TO RWANDA THAT USES COW DUNG MIXED WITH SOILS OF DIFFERENT COLOURS AND THEN PAINTED IN GEOMETRIC SHAPES



Many of the furnishings were decorated using *imigongo*, an art form unique to Rwanda that uses cow dung mixed with soils of different colours and then painted in geometric shapes.

Isibo helped source local products to bring a vibrant Rwandan flair to the lodge. “We would go into the Kigali markets and she’d find what I needed, from bins to basket weaving,” explains Williams-Wynn.

Isibo adds: “As a designer who focuses on fusing traditional Rwandan craftsmanship with contemporary design, Bisate was super exciting. I [loved helping] to achieve a strong local flavour and to make the lodge look and feel authentically Rwandan.”



This pic: The Treehouse towers poke out of the forest canopy, affording views of the ocean
Below: The aesthetic contours of Watamu Treehouse

04

WATAMU TREEHOUSE

WATAMU, KENYA | WWW.TREEHOUSE.CO.KE

The story behind the design of the unusual Watamu Treehouse is, itself, somewhat unusual.

“Design is not the right word, as there never was a design,” says owner Paul Krystall. “Many people have contributed. People I call ‘angels’, who show up at the right time with the right skills to help with the next step.”

A prime example, Krystall recalls, was when the manager of a Romanian three-phase power plant arrived for his honeymoon. “He spent much of his holiday drawing electrical diagrams.”

Krystall and his father Eric bought the plot in 1992, and Eric’s wife Nani Croze, founder of Kitengela Glass, designed the first building – a single-room home.

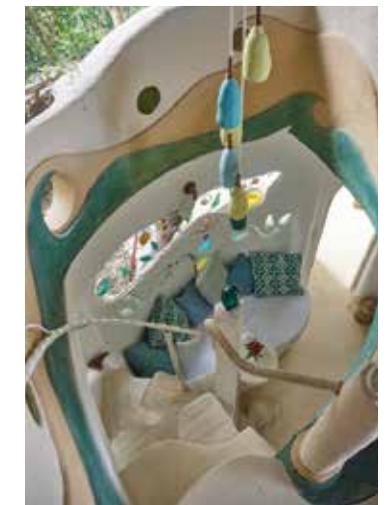
They had inherited three clearings made by the previous owners. “Nani’s concept was to use these for the foundations and go up instead of infringing on the forest,” says Krystall. “The main principles were that the buildings would be shaped organically and fit into the forest, and the structures would be round and full of colourful recycled pieces of translucent glass.” Some 10,000 pieces of recycled glass have been utilised over the years.

In 2001, Krystall brought his friend Andrew Melesi to Watamu. He combined Melesi’s sense of style and proportion

with his own practicality and understanding of winds to create the property’s first tower.

They built it as a contrast between straight structures and round edges. “What needs to be straight is straight, what needs to be structural is strong, and the rest flows in waves and circles, up or around the trees.”

In 2013, they added a second tower. And still, they haven’t cut down any trees – in fact, trees now grow through the house.



Above: A distinctly Rwandan interior, complete with King’s Palace ceiling disc
Middle left: Where local artisan meets contemporary designer
Left: The buildings complement their surroundings
Below left: Imigongo chairs
Below middle: Bathroom opulence
Below: Locally sourced accessories





Left: Reside 4m up in Chisa's nest of ribs, canvas and twigs
Bottom left: Bird's-eye views over Busanga
Below: Kisawa seeks to integrate into its environment
Below, bottom: Kisawa spa, inspired by the island's houses
Right, top: Stylish, secluded bungalow, Kisawa
Right: The understated, earthy colour palette of Kisawa

05

CHISA BUSANGA

KAFUE NATIONAL PARK, ZAMBIA | GREENSAFARIS.COM

The eureka moment for the design of Chisa Busanga came when Vincent Kouwenhoven, founder of Green Safaris, and architect Bert Meerstadt were wandering around the island where they planned to build a camp in Kafue's Busanga Plains.

At one point, they both looked up and stared at a weaver bird's nest and, without words, they realised what the design concept of their new camp would be – nests.

"Weavers' nests make ingenious homes and we wanted to replicate this, but of course on a larger scale for people," says Kouwenhoven.

"The goal was to offer unique and fascinating accommodation as well as create beautiful spaces. What we were soon to be reminded of, however, is that nature has had millions of years to perfect her designs. Our experience at nest building at this point was zero."

Meerstadt first drafted a stretched version of a nest that was to be built in wood like a clinkered boat, but it proved too difficult to construct in the middle of nowhere. After a few iterations, he came up with a design comprising ribs, canvas and twigs – which, like a real nest, offered a large opening for guests to enjoy the view.

A chance meeting with Riaan Langeveldt led to the South African aluminium 'wizard' building a prototype of Meerstadt's nest design and improving on the use of space within the 6m-diameter sphere.

After meticulous planning, the 'finished' articles arrived. Built four metres off the ground, the four nests have wooden steps leading up to a canvas-lined treehouse. Each offers its occupants a bird's-eye view across the plains from the comfort of their bed, outdoor deck – or even the shower.



06

KISAWA SANCTUARY

BENGUERRA ISLAND, MOZAMBIQUE
 KISAWASANCTUARY.COM

Positioned within a 300-hectare sanctuary of forest, beach and sand dunes on Benguerra Island, 14km off the Mozambican coast, Kisawa Sanctuary's overriding design principle was one of "to blend rather than interrupt".

"My mission," says Nina Flohr, Kisawa's founder and creative director, "is to create a level of hospitality and design that, to my knowledge, does not exist today... We have used design as a tool, not as a style, to ensure Kisawa is integrated culturally and environmentally to Mozambique."

This concept has seen the use of cutting-edge construction practices alongside the traditional methods of local artisans. A 3D printer, commissioned specifically for this project, has been used wherever possible. The printer, using a unique sand-based mortar, created specific construction elements,



including tiles and countertops, along with decorative items such as stools, tables, vases and vessels.

This revolutionary technology was merged with traditional Mozambican weaving and thatching, carpentry and textile skills, involving artisans from Benguerra and its neighbouring islands. The result is an "upbeat, earthy colour palette referencing 1970s Mozambique" that is "complemented with patterns and prints inspired by regional traditions".

The undulating organic shape of the Main Terrace roof echoes the forms of the surrounding sand dunes. Each of the 22 uniquely designed bungalows comes with a private stretch of beach, an infinity pool, shaded day area, outdoor kitchen and massage hut. There's even a fleet of electric buggies available to use. 