

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Changing ROOMS

Safari lodge accommodation is ever-evolving, and recent years has seen a shift in quality, design and sophistication. What does this mean for travellers? **Pippa de Bruyn** engages in some pillow talk

When I started researching safari accommodation in 1998, hopping from lodge to lodge for the first of many guidebooks, tourism to Africa was nascent — numbers of facilities have tripled in the new millennium — and the truly stand-out ‘luxury’ options could still be counted on one hand.

That said, they were in a league of their own. At Londolozi I wondered around my deck in a dressing gown and dark glasses, feeling like a guest in the Kennedy Compound, while Singita Boulders felt like a safari lair designed for a James Bond villain. With the 2001 opening of Lebombo on their marvellous 33,000-acre Greater Kruger concession, and Sabora Tented Camp in 2006 in the 350,000-acre Grumeti estate, it was Singita that continued to raise the bar. And the world noticed: by 2008 Singita’s lodges had been voted number one hotel in the world no less than 15 times across a variety of publications.

Having established that people would willingly pay for a transcendent level of luxury in remote wilderness settings, others followed, flush with suites the size of a small apartment, Afro-contemporary design and private pools.

Wilderness Safaris (now Wilderness) launched in 1985 with lightweight tented camps in exceptional locations in the Okavango Delta — places where wildlife documentary-makers thrived and punters enthusiastically followed. Mombo, enjoying arguably the best location on Chief’s Island, was rebuilt in 1999, establishing Botswana as a luxury safari destination.

At this time, a low-volume high-value tourism model lead the way in sub-Saharan Africa, most openly in Botswana.

Whether due to a moratorium on numbers or an understanding of the innate value of

exclusivity, the only way for operators to grow revenue and meet increasing costs was to upgrade facilities.

There was also a deliberate desire to reach a certain kind of person. Emmy-award winning documentary-maker Dereck Joubert, co-founder of Great Plains Conservation — an organisation now protecting over one million acres of fragile habitats — puts it this way: “We realised we needed to speak to people in a different way, to tell our story within a place, around a campfire, to the world’s decision makers. To offer them an experience that would turn them into ambassadors for conservation.

“We are very clear about the kind of market we wanted to attract: a value-sensitive guest, not a price-sensitive one. It’s not just about the quality of the hospitality — there’s no excuse for bad wine, food or linen — but about exclusivity. If a private concession like Zarafa has running costs of over US\$10 million a year to lease and protect, and we decide on a maximum capacity of 12 people a night, then inevitably the per-night cost to the guest is going to be high.

“It may sound elitist, but it’s also really difficult to experience a spiritual moment with other vehicles jostling for space around a sighting. Such an experience is essentially private, and potentially life changing. This is what we call Conservation Tourism.”

Slowly but very surely, lodges and camps have become ever more luxurious: outdoor shower and plunge pools are *de rigueur*, as is a dedicated work space, Wi-Fi good enough for conference calls, indoor and outdoor showers, a bathtub with a view, original art and design. And while rates have climbed, it’s made no discernible dent in demand, buoyed predominantly by the American market.



Suite dreams: One of the tented suites at Zarafa Camp in the Selinda Reserve, Botswana. Zarafa is a Great Plains Réserve-Collection luxury camp



Decor: Internal spaces are more intimately considered to connect with the outdoors, as shown by the large window panels and earthy tones and textures of the decor at Ker & Downey Zambia's new Musesenji River Camp in Lower Zambezi NP



Healthy options: The gym at Lewa Wilderness, Kenya, invites a workout. It is increasingly common for camps of all sizes to have some semblance of gym, spa or yoga area



Family homes: Most lodges and camps now offer family units, and many have separate exclusive-use options. At Waterberry Lodge in Livingstone, The River Farmhouse creates a private home-away-from-home environment



Maximise location: Newmark's Bupenyu Lodge takes full advantage of its dramatic site at the top of the Batoka Gorge, by Victoria Falls



Fit for place: Natural Selection's Shipwreck Lodge was designed to mimic the ghostly timber hulls and wreckage of ships stranded along Namibia's Skeleton Coast

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GREAT PLAINS CONSERVATION; KER & DOWNEY ZAMBIA; WATERBERRY LODGE; NATURAL SELECTION; NEWMARK HOTELS; LEWA WILDERNESS

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A marked trend since the turn of the millennium has also been the growth in family travel, with lodges that once had strict age limits building family suites, creating junior ranger programmes or establishing play areas manned by professional childminders.

Since Covid, the demand from multi-generational families wanting to share the unique bonding experience of being simultaneously awed by Africa's wilderness, has resulted in a proliferation of exclusive-use villas, often manned by a dedicated team, including a chef and guide to accommodate the family's taste and pace.

And it's not just bedrooms that have become ever more luxurious. In an attempt to differentiate and then keep up, lodges keep layering in new facilities to cater for evolving guest interests — not just massage rooms or spa treatments, but 'wellness centres', yoga decks, gyms with views; underground hides with stocked fridges; starbeds; wine cellars filled with limited-release wines; cameras and vehicles specially adapted for photography...

Glossy mags remain a driver of interest, but social media has further entrenched design investment, with architects increasingly briefed to maximise photographic appeal.

Menus have become more elaborate, then healthier; breakfast and lunch are often merged, and all-day snacks take the pressure off

ASILIA AFRICA



But regardless of the size or design of your room, the safari experience remains the constant star of the show. You can still sit with bare toes in a sandy river bed, linger by a campfire, enjoy bucket showers and delicious meals cooked over coals

Top: Asilia's Kokoko Camp's expedition-style tents have retractable canvas roofs to maximise exposure to the night sky

Below left: Like most seasonal camps, Kafunta Safaris' Three Rivers Camp in South Luangwa is rebuilt every year after the rains

Below right: Increasing thought is taken in designing properties to blend in to their environment. Green Safaris took inspiration for their Chisa Busanga Camp (Kafue NP) from weaver bird nests



KAFUNTA SAFARIS



GREEN SAFARIS

eating at set meal times.

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Many of Zambia's bush camps are predominantly seasonal, and having to dismantle and rebuild every year keeps them authentically old-school; in some cases you can walk between them, perhaps spending a night in a flycamp in a riverbed along the way.

In remote areas of East Africa, where operators close during the rains, the tented camp reigns supreme — if you're looking for a real back-to-nature experience check out Asilia's Kokoko Camp in Ruaha, with dome tents set up for two to six guests.

There has never been as wide a range of safari accommodation, nor has it reflected such ingenuity, creativity and a focus on quality.

Spoiled for choice? Quite possibly. **||**

THIS PIC: TARANGIRE SAFARI LODGE, INSET: VANBLERK / SHUTTERSTOCK

SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

As the range of safari accommodation has widened, **Philip Briggs** is grateful for familiar comforts, proving there is something for everyone

browse Instagram or a glossy travel magazine and it would be easy to conclude that African travel revolves around spectacular lodges with innovative architecture, chic décor and infinity pools.

The remarkable rise of high-cost luxury lodges — many bringing much-needed revenue to remote wilderness areas — has been one of Africa's defining tourism success stories of recent decades. But while these eye-catching properties often shape perceptions of the safari experience, visitors can still also choose from a wide selection of comfortable accommodation at more accessible prices.

Many of my favourite places have changed little over the years. Rather than constantly reinventing themselves, they've quietly evolved — becoming a little more comfortable, easier to book and better equipped — while retaining the bush character that made them memorable in the first place.

Southern Africa's national park rest camps, for instance, are still built around unfussy rondavels and chalets that make few concessions to fashion, but grocery shops are now better stocked, canteen-like restaurants have given way to popular franchises, and Wi-Fi and ATMs have

appeared where they would once have seemed like science fiction. As dusk falls, smoke drifts from family braais, meat crackles over glowing coals, and a cold beer or glass of wine accompanies the evening chorus of insects, hyenas, nightjars and owls. It's a time-honoured ritual that feels reassuringly unchanged... and one I'd be reluctant to lose.

East Africa lacks a comparable government rest camp network, but vastly improved roads now make it easy to explore parks such as Ngorongoro Crater, Lake Manyara and Tarangire from affordable lodges and campsites in and around nearby Karatu or Mto wa Mbu.

Meanwhile, inside the parks, unpretentious retreats such as Ndutu Lodge, Tarangire Safari Lodge and Ruaha River Lodge occupy the same enjoyable niche they did when I first visited them in the 1990s. All remain privately owned, occupy magnificent wildlife-viewing locations and put the bush experience ahead of elaborate frills.

They occupy what I think of as my safari sweet spot: regardless of the size of room, pool or how elaborate the service, don't we all just want a comfortable and unforgettable safari that best suits us? **||**



Top: Still run by the family that built it in 1985, Tarangire Safari Lodge retains its familiar character

Below: Satara Rest Camp in Kruger National Park; a restaurant and shop provide self-drivers with options