

Botswana's new sleek and sumptuous safari retreats

A raft of new lodges and camps is reframing the country's pristine wilderness. Charlotte Sinclair reports

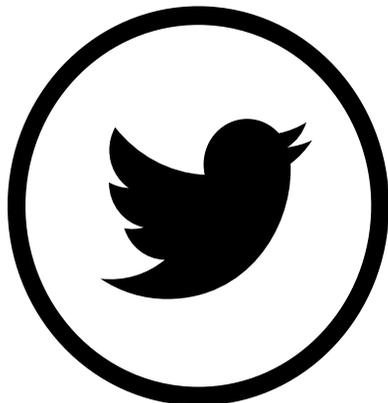


Sanctuary Chief's Camp is located in an area known as "Predator Capital" | Image: Sanctuary Retreats

October 27 2017 / [Charlotte Sinclair](#)



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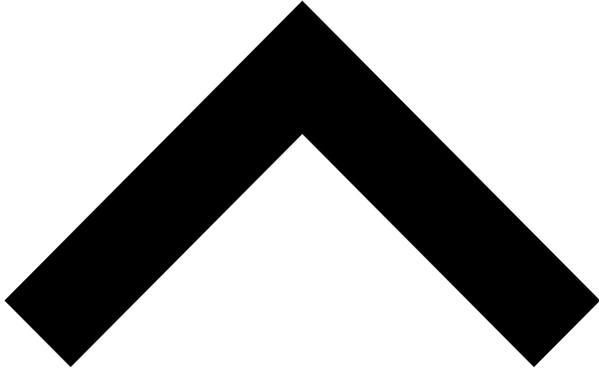


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Charlotte Sinclair travelled as a guest of Journeys by Design (01273-623 790; journeysbydesign.com), which offers an eight-night Botswana itinerary with two nights each at &Beyond Nxabega Okavango Tented Camp, Duba Plains Camp, Sable Alley and Sanctuary Chief's Camp, from £10,675 per person, including return economy flights with British Airways from London Heathrow to Johannesburg, return Airlink flights from Johannesburg to Maun, VIP airport services, airstrip transfers and safari activities. &Beyond Nxabega Okavango Tented Camp, +2711-809 4300; andbeyond.com; from \$755 per person, including meals, some drinks, safari activities, transfers and park fees. Duba Plains Camp, 01547-560 850; greatplainsconservation.com; from \$1,650 per person. Sable Alley, +2721-001 1574; naturalselection.travel; from \$570 per person, including meals, some drinks and daily activities. Sanctuary Chief's Camp, 01242-546 609; sanctuaryretreats.com; from £842 per person, including meals and drinks, safari activities, transfers and park fees.

Is there a better safari destination than Botswana? Certainly there are few that evoke such good feelings, formed not only by the unparalleled game viewings in a geography that encompasses both the [deserts of the Kalahari](#) and the waters of the Okavango Delta (with all the variety of flora and fauna that such dramatic shifts in environment comprise), but also by Botswana's attitudes – enshrined in law, enforced by government – towards ecology, social responsibility, species protection and high-experience/low-impact tourism.



The pool looks out over the floodplain | Image: Sanctuary Retreats

Here is a country where around 40 per cent of the total land mass is protected, commercial hunting was banned in 2014 and many concessions or private reserves are leased from the community, with profits funnelling directly back into the locality. This year, Botswana's singular allure has been re-emphasised with a few top-to-toe refurbished classic camps and a couple of new and future classics. Each offers a fresh take on the safari experience, whether by indulgent improvements or bringing it back to basics – or a happy alignment of both.

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Sanctuary Chief's Camp, on Chief's Island in the Moremi Game Reserve, has long offered a gold-standard Botswana safari with an established reputation for expert guides, comfortable digs and a location, within Mombo Concession, that earns its nickname "Predator Capital". Guests come here for the reassurance of Sanctuary Retreats' brand values and the consummate experience that implies, not to mention the likelihood of ticking the big-five boxes.



Sanctuary Chief's Camp underwent an extensive refurbishment last year | Image: Sanctuary Retreats

The camp underwent a handsome refurbishment last year, and now features an expansive lounge deck, extended dining room and what must now be among the smartest guest rooms in the bush: part glass, part canvas, with splash pools, bathtubs positioned for views of the floodplain, air con and espresso machines. There's quinoa for dinner and WiFi in the bedrooms. This is safari with the rough edges smoothed. (Nearby Mombo Camp, operated by [Wilderness Safaris](#) and considered by many to be Botswana's signature camp, is currently undergoing its own revamp. [Having previously experienced the winning Wilderness proposition here at DumaTau and Little Tubu](#), I'm confident the renewed Mombo will be unmissable.)



Black rhino have been brought here from South Africa to protect them against poachers |
Image: Getty Images/National Geographic Creative

Formerly the royal hunting territory of the chief of the local Tawana tribe (after whom the game reserve is named), the 45,000-hectare Mombo Concession – the largest expanse of solid ground in the Delta – teems with lion. Several cats had padded straight through a couple of days before my arrival, apparently (the you-just-missed-it downer remains, even here, a safari universal). Here too – if you can find them among the acacia thorns – are a handful of precious [rhino](#), distinguishing Chief's Camp as one of the few lodges in Botswana where unscripted viewings of the rare animals are possible. During my stay, alongside the usual quota of elephant and giraffe, I see three lion cubs sunbathing on a termite mound, and a pack of wild dogs with eight tumbling puppies.



Safari-chic style can now be found throughout the camp | Image: Sanctuary Retreats

In pronounced contrast to Chief's Camp, Sable Alley is a return to tradition: no WiFi, no cappuccino, no air con – but this doesn't convert to a lack of atmosphere and charm. The newly opened camp lies in the south of the 180,000-hectare Khwai Concession, bordering Moremi and Chobe National Park. It is the work of Greg and Kelly Butler, in cooperation with Natural Selection, a new enterprise focusing on owner-operated lodges and the community aspect of wildlife conservation, co-founded by conservation safari specialist Colin Bell. (Others in its stable include the superlative, lantern-lit San Camp, in the Botswanan Kalahari.) Bell's imprimatur has generated considerable interest, not least for its [eco-credentials](#) (the 12 tents run on solar power), its genuine social impact (80 per cent of the staff come from the local village) and the untapped potential of the game viewing on this former hunting concession. (Perhaps its intent is one reason the guests here are younger and more diverse than those at Chief's, with Silicon Valley types and Melbourne foodies among them.)



Dense vegetation surrounds Sable Alley

As we navigate the bumpy tracks of the reserve, my guide Aubrey tells me, “We don’t guarantee anything, but here on a single day you might see elephant, buffalo, leopard and lion.” Impressive, especially given the dense nature of the Khwai vegetation: thick riverine forests of mopane trees and bushwillow, island wooded with sausage, palm and rain trees where fish eagles perch and leopards laze in the high branches, and rivers bending through stands of reeds brooded with tiny frogs. The same trackers who used to work for the hunters now monitor local animal populations.



The tents at the newly opened camp run on solar power

One evening, Kelly Butler describes her aim to offer something more authentic, bemoaning a “rat race of big corporations” that are “bringing too much of the city into the bush”. And it’s true that the mode for increasingly [upmarket lodges](#) in the Delta can at times feel at odds with safari’s roughing-it fundamentals. “That’s why there’s no air con, no WiFi here,” she continues. “If there was WiFi, everyone would stop doing what they’re doing now.” She gestures to the guests sitting around the fire, chatting in low tones as they observe hippos grazing noisily at the lagoon’s edge.



An outdoor bath adds to the charm of the honeymoon tent

In practical terms, her vision translates into vast, elevated A-frame tents, furnished in a contemporary safari vernacular: African textiles, filament bulb lighting and pine wall panelling that is as stylish as it is, presumably, inexpensive. An easy conviviality infuses the decor and proceedings – not least when, on an afternoon drive, wheels crunching through the biscuit-smelling dust, Machoni and I get stuck making a river crossing. “The real safari experience!” he says, cheerfully jacking the truck’s wheels into the air.



Lion, leopard, elephant and buffalo can all be seen there on a single day

In the sunken marshlands and wide grass plains of the Delta proper, [&Beyond](#)'s entirely rebuilt Nxabega Okavango Tented Camp makes a persuasive case that you can have it both ways. There's authenticity (nine canvas tents, no air con) and [exceptional wildlife experiences](#), but also a shaded pool area – all bronze lights and dark wood – and sophisticated menus of tempura cod and mango sorbet worthy of [a sleek Cape Town hotel](#). Nxabega has been here since &Beyond was still Conservation Corporation Africa; the new camp is a well-oiled machine, but minus the impersonality that phrase implies. Indeed, the service (surfeits of smiling, first names only) is superior.



[&Beyond](#)'s Nxabega Okavango Tented Camp has been entirely rebuilt | Image: [&Beyond](#)

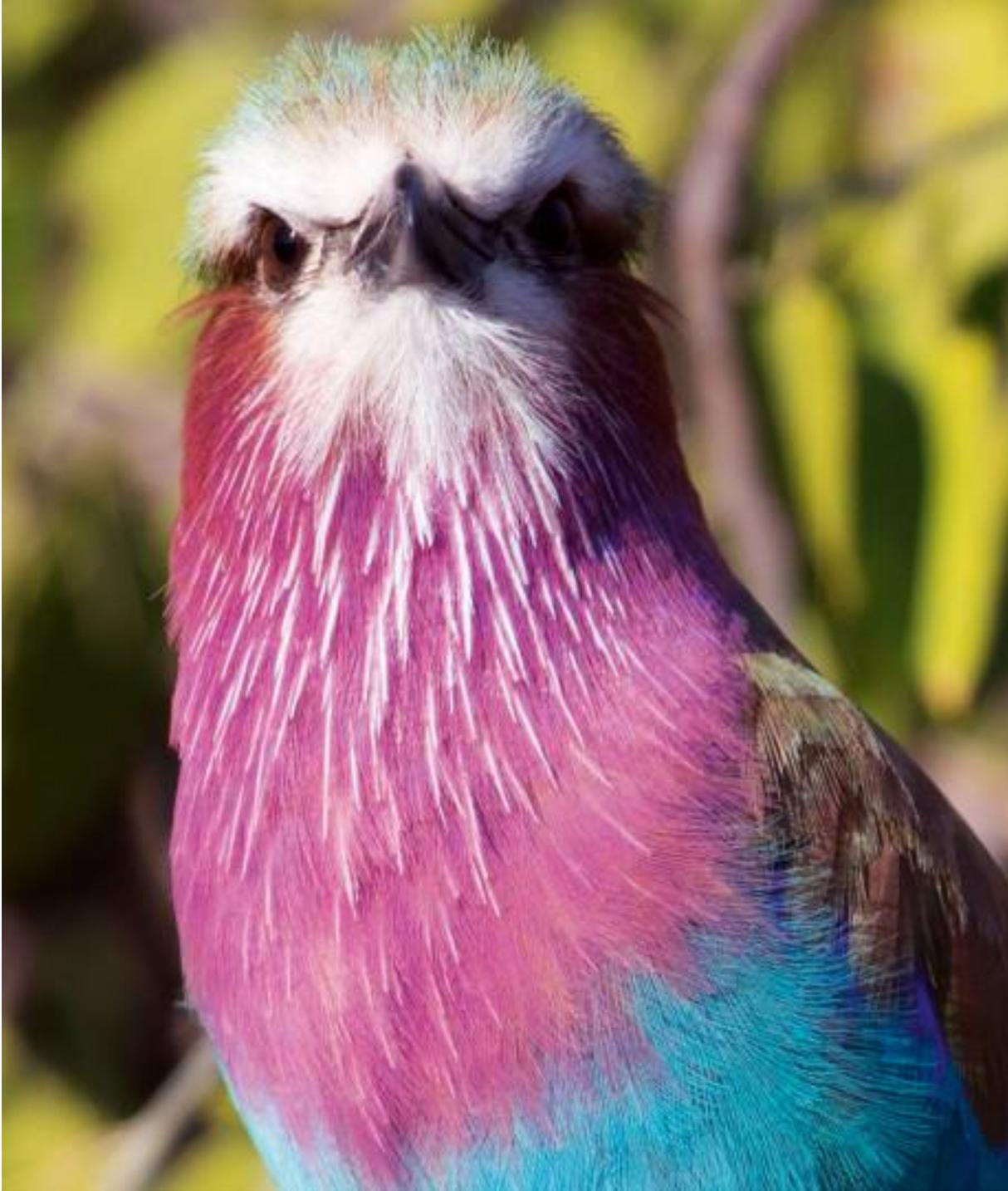
But the wildlife is the thing, and [&Beyond](#) has a well-earned reputation for the depth of its animal engagement; the guiding here, in my case by Kelatlheletswe Ngande, a Delta native of lively wit and acute intelligence, is first class. In the Okavango, water makes vast land tracts inaccessible to vehicles, but the landscape at Nxabega is more open, less forested. We see a hyena slink across the path of a herd of affronted zebra, elephants shaking palm trees, and scores of buffalo, belligerent beneath the grey horns they bear like too-tight judges' wigs. It is also very beautiful; the savanna is drenched in gold at dawn and silver at dusk, the red-tipped reeds wave in the marshes like licking flames. But sightings here aren't only the usual (three elephants pass my tent wall at dawn, the sound of their footfall through the undergrowth so exactly like a grass broom brushing across a wooden floor that I sit bolt upright in bed,

searching for the mysterious sweeper in my tent) – they are also frequently interactive: one afternoon an impala, escaping a pack of wild dogs, jumps straight into the pool.



The library at Duba Plains Camp has a clubby atmosphere | Image: Great Plains Conservation

A similar transformation has taken place to the northeast, at [Duba Plains Camp](#). Formerly a Wilderness property, it was acquired several years ago by highly regarded ethical safari outfit Great Plains Conservation and Dereck and Beverly Joubert, the esteemed wildlife filmmakers and conservationists – and the camp, which sits on a private reserve spanning 77,000 hectares, is, from the ground up, an entirely new endeavour. “The only thing left here from the old [camp](#) is the location and the view,” says its front-of-house manager Tamryn Perrins. The Jouberts are true wilderness pioneers, whose films and Big Cats Initiative have made them legends of conservation. They came to study lion here several decades ago, and went on to help found Great Plains Conservation with Colin Bell. It is testament to the depth of their relationship with this country that despite being involved in a terrible near-death buffalo attack at the camp earlier this year, the Jouberts are as committed to it, and Botswana, as ever.



Lilac-breasted rollers are among the birdlife found around the camp | Image: Great Plains Conservation

While the rebuild was in progress, guests were billeted at Duba Expedition Camp, a spruce, six-tent outfit of minimal footprint not far from Duba Plains. This will soon move to a permanent location in the far north of the concession, which will ensure the exclusivity of the larger camp's safari experience (fewer vehicles at sightings) and offer a more rustic, affordable adventure and the opportunity to view those species native to the drier terrain of the north, including wild dogs and cheetah.



Alfresco dinners are a Nxabega speciality | Image: &Beyond

Under the aesthetic guidance of Beverly Joubert, Duba Plains Camp is one of the best-looking in Botswana. Guests' tents are low-slung, tree-shaded residences, with brass bathtubs and four-posters, shower stalls fashioned from carved Zanzibar doorframes, large-scale monochrome photographs, Turkish rugs, campaign desks and hardwood floors of polished railway sleepers, plus private pools and (a touch of sheer genius) exercise bikes for spinning off all those high tea and sundowner treats. The views are similarly enticing: an inundated landscape of waving grasslands the colour of a lion's mane, interrupted only by the occasional buffalo or elephant. In the waterways beneath my deck, I watch huge monitor lizards knife through the shallows.

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The desired effect, Perrins says, is for guests to feel at home. "There's no schedule, no guide tapping his watch as you hurry your breakfast; you can do what you want when you want." Of course, such flexibility – not to mention those room proportions, and a sublime duck confit and other such refined temptations at dinner – come at a price. But if, in safari, value for money equates to world-class digs and [exemplary game viewings](#) of a wholly different nature to other locations in the Delta (the concession is known for its high incidence of lion kills, and the adapted, aquatic habits of its apex predators), Duba Plains Camp is a singular experience.

I drive one morning through this unique setting, over freshwater rivers and also through them, the water sluicing onto the floor of the vehicle in glossy sheets. On the open plain, I watch a group of mohawked warthogs, tails up, trot jauntily past. Above, a skein of geese parts the air, while from the tree line, elephants emerge with young babies in their midst, hairy as monkeys. It is an utterly pristine scene of the kind that Botswana delivers at every second. A very good feeling indeed.

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