

JULY 2018

THE ADVENTURE ISSUE

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*Snorkeling near
Mala Wharf, in Maui.*

DISPLAY UNTIL JULY 27, 2018

\$5.99



The lounge area of Uncharted Mobile Expeditions' camp in Botswana.

FIRST LOOK

A Camp of One's Own

Until recently, mobile safaris—widely seen as the best way to get close to Africa's wildlife—were available only for large, private bookings. Now anyone can get in on the action. *By Jane Broughton*

FIVE MINUTES after we set out from Uncharted Mobile Expeditions' mobile camp in the Okavango Delta, Botswana, someone in our vehicle yelled "Lion!" Everybody spun in their seats to see a lioness in pursuit of a baby warthog hurtling toward us. Zigzagging frantically, the piglet was soon pinned to the ground by a giant paw. There was a collective gasp as we steeled ourselves for the inevitable. But seconds later, 150 pounds of protective mother bush pig hit the lioness at full speed, throwing up a cloud of dust. Released by the impact, the squealing piglet sped across the dirt road and away to freedom.

Such thrilling encounters seem to happen with remarkable frequency on mobile safaris—a wildlife trip on which guests stay at a movable camp. That's because when it comes to the African wilderness, sleeping in a tent (whether it be a basic fly camp or a slightly more complex, comfortable setup with flushable toilets) is the best way to get close to the action. Deeply immersive, a mobile operation puts you in exactly the right place at the right time, which is why it's currently a big trend in safaris. If the animals travel or the weather changes, simple camps can be packed up after breakfast and set up in a new location in time for dinner.

Mobile safaris are typically offered on an exclusive basis, meaning they have usually been the preserve of families or large groups. With the introduction of set-date departures, Uncharted Mobile Expeditions allows guests to book a single tent, rather than the entire camp—opening up the experience to a wider audience and making it considerably more affordable.

I had begun by flying in a Cessna from Maun, northern Botswana's hub, to the farthest-flung airstrip in the Okavango Delta. My destination was NG12, a remote government-owned concession that, until recently, was known only to safari insiders. In the Okavango, as in Africa's other iconic wild places, space is the holy grail—the definition of luxury. There are no permanent lodges in NG12, despite the fact that, at 200,000 acres, it is more than 50,000 acres larger than Vumbura to the south, where Wilderness Safaris operates two luxury camps. In four days of exploring, we saw only one other vehicle. The surrounding landscapes ranged from open plains dotted with elephants, buffalo, zebras, and giraffes to lagoons where hippos jostled for territory and crocodiles cruised silently in between.

This part of the delta can be reached only by a patchy network of dirt tracks and rudimentary →

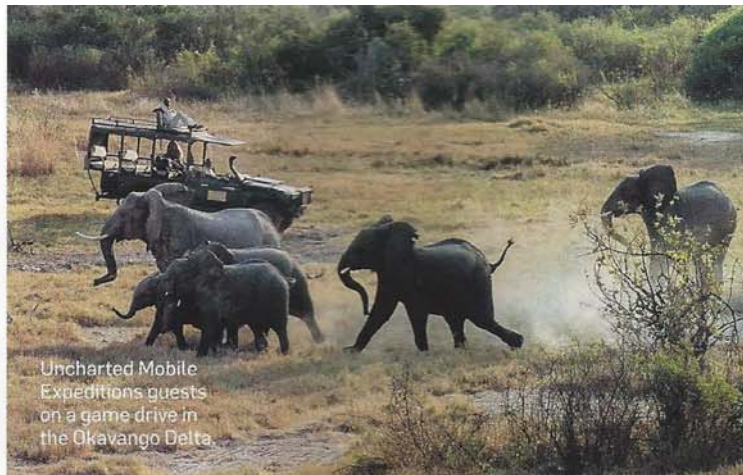
bridges, and this inaccessibility is precisely what appealed to Uncharted's Ralph Bousfield. Bousfield is a fifth-generation Botswanan who, in 1992, opened Jack's Camp—a pioneering lodge on the remote salt pans of Botswana's Makgadikgadi region—with his late father, Jack, a legendary crocodile hunter. During the early 90s, father and son frequently flew over the delta in the family's small plane searching for a suitable place to establish a base. They wanted to offer their guests a circuit that combined the wonders of the desert with the delta's big game. After decades of searching, Bousfield leased the NG12 site at the end of last year. "The distance from Maun, the tricky logistics, and the lack of a road network might have been off-putting to some, but it made this site more attractive to me," he told me with a laugh.

Because the concession is not within an officially designated wildlife reserve, where certain rules have to be followed, Bousfield is able to blur the boundaries between what usually happens in camp and what takes place in the wild. "It's fun to set up a table in shallow water for a surprise lunch, or to linger after sunset drinks to take a boat trip through the reeds—that's when the delta really comes alive," he said.

Positioned under a canopy of fig and jackalberry trees, the little camp of three guest tents and an open-sided mess tent was everything I'd dreamed of in a mobile site. Taking its cue from Jack's Camp, it channels the glamorous East African safari style of the 1940s: vintage furniture and a front porch decked out with a canvas wash basin, a copper water jug, and a mirror added serious *Out of Africa* appeal. Each kilim-carpeted tent has an en suite bathroom with a hot-water bucket shower and a flushable toilet. It was hard to believe that when our group checked out, the entire camp would be packed up and driven across the delta—a journey of almost two days—to the Central Kalahari Desert.

Uncharted Mobile may have nailed the nostalgic aesthetic, but, more importantly, it also employs some of the best guides in the business—such as the legendary Super Sande, who used to work at Jack's Camp and now heads up the team in NG12. I shared the camp with an American family that ranged in age from a preschooler to retirees, and the six-foot-seven Sande was as skilled at imparting bush lore to a four-year-old as he was at explaining the subtle differences between a coppery-tailed coucal and a Burchell's coucal to me.

On returning to camp after a game drive, we found a table laid under the stars. Kerosene



Uncharted Mobile Expeditions guests on a game drive in the Okavango Delta.

lanterns provided light, along with fireflies dancing in the grass. For dinner, spiced butternut soup was served with rolls still warm from the oven. Next came steak, mashed potatoes, and cumin-roasted carrots, followed by a rich chocolate tart. The meal seemed even more impressive after I visited the chef in his camp kitchen the following day and saw his oven: an old metal trunk filled with hot coals.

Sitting outside my tent on my last afternoon, perusing a bird book from the camp library, I looked up and realized my tent was under an enormous sausage tree. What were the chances of one of its hefty fruits—some weighing as much as 15 pounds—falling on my head? Sipping iced coffee and listening to the rumble of distant thunder, I decided that it would be a fine way to go. *naturalselection.travel*; from \$2,780 per person for four nights, all-inclusive. Mobile safaris can be packaged with a stay at Jack's Camp, as well as other experiences in the region. ✘

Jane Broughton is a freelance writer based in Cape Town.

MOBILE CAMPS: THE BEST OF THE REST

1 ZIMBABWE

In untrammeled **Gonarezhou National Park** in southeastern Zimbabwe, respected guide Ant Kaschula offers a wilderness experience that combines wildlife viewing with guided walks. Small, exclusive-use camps are run mainly during the dry season (April to November) for a maximum of 10 guests. The solar-lit Meru-style tents each have a bucket shower and a composting toilet. *gonarezhou-bushcamps.com*; from \$690 per person, all-inclusive.

2 TANZANIA

Legendary Expeditions sets up mobile camps in the path of vast herds of wildebeests migrating through the Serengeti Plain. The tents, each of which has an en suite bathroom, are moved around the park

according to breeding and weather patterns. Individual tents are available to book; groups of six or more are allocated the camp on an exclusive-use basis. *legendaryexpeditions.com*; from \$1,025 per person, all-inclusive.

3 KENYA

Kenya is said to be where modern-day mobile camps started, and **Royal African Safaris** continues the tradition with expert guides and elegantly appointed tents set up around the Masai Mara National Reserve. Locations vary from week to week according to the movements of the animals. Safaris fill up via word of mouth, and as many as 65 percent of bookings come from repeat guests. *royalafrican.com*; from \$1,500 per person, all inclusive.