

On the far edges of the delta, beneath the star-spangled sky, a whisper of mosquito netting separates me from the surrounding watery wilderness. A weekend into our safari, night-time sounds of the bush have become more familiar, but, as we move ever deeper into the true heart of the African wilderness, away from the cocoon of the newly launched Jack's Island Lodge, away from the glamor of the canvas Meru tents of the mobile camp, every sound seems amplified. Hippos grunt in the shallows, a bullfrog croaks, and then a bloodcurdling screech and chorus of "Wahoo Wahoo!" as a troop of baboons see off a predator: a leopard whose footprints we discover the next day. There's also the pumping bass note of my own accelerated heartbeat, as the moon rises like a great lantern in the sky from behind the towering date palms, casting long ghostly shadows across my bedroll and lighting up the looming outline of the jackalberry tree and the mopane forest.

The owner and brainchild of the new lodge and safari camp, biologist and super-guide Ralph Bousfield, meets me on the runway of Maun airport, his armful of signature talisman bangles and shamanic bracelets jangling and setting off security alarms at every turn. Bousfield's hypnotic green eyes (like Kaa in *The Jungle Book*) gleam at the prospect of another adventure. But his famous long locks have gone; it's a more serious 55-year-old sitting beside me, piloting the 1970s vintage Playboy-era Cessna, with its red-leather seats and striking graphics.

In seconds, we are airborne, flying over the vast, abstract canvas of the desert landscape in which it is hard to imagine that anything survives let alone supports one of the largest oases in the world that is the Okavango Delta. Its seasonal pulses and weather patterns define the rhythm of the landscape. Rainfall flows off the Angolan highlands and drains into the delta creating one of the greatest concentrations of wildlife on the planet. It's the obvious environment for a safari lodge, and Ralph and his father were prospecting the area looking for the >

Paradise found

For fantastical moments lifted from some ancient time of warring giraffes, lush green landscapes, star-studded skies and AFRICA'S most sacred sites where man was created, Jack's Island Camp in BOTSWANA opens up an untouched area of the OKAVANGO DELTA in the continent's last Eden, offering a safari experience like no other.

Words by Catherine Fairweather

out of this world

perfect location to build a flagship camp 30 years ago, when the plane that Ralph was piloting, came down. Ralph pulled his then girlfriend and father from the burning plane, suffering third-degree burns himself. But Jack Bousfield – the original Tanganyika Jack, Africa's own real-life Crocodile Dundee – did not survive, and Ralph has spent his life and career creating Uncharted Africa with some of the most memorable safari experiences and lodges in Botswana, in his father's name.

It took decades of searching, however, to fulfill the original dream for the ultimate place in the delta itself. Jack's Island, which opened this year, is lovely, shaded by giant ebony trees. It sits in the midst of myriad waterways that thread through the landscape and pool into a shining lagoon into which the sun sinks every day. Here, the water never runs dry.

As one of the only lodges in an area of 220,000 hectares, and with the removal of the old cattle fences encouraging an increasing abundance of wildlife, Ralph sensed he had hit the jackpot.

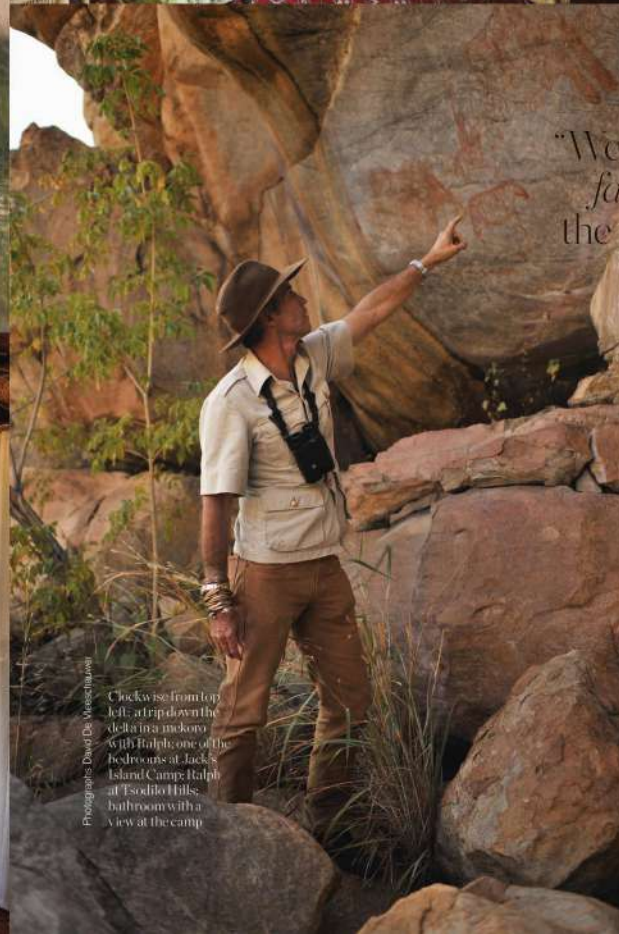
We reach the camp by boat, the lanterns are already glowing on the reed pontoon in the encroaching dusk. Like all the camps in the Uncharted Africa stable, this place exudes effortless old-school elegance, with kilims, brass oil lamps and weathered antiques across its nine rooms. We slip into the wi-fi void, the electricity- and communications-free existence as though easing into old slippers. Facing the edge of the lagoon that never dries on the borders of the floodplains, you don't really have to get out of your director's chair to appreciate the variety of game. There's a pangolin on the runway, a family of hippos just over the lip edge of the pool and floodplain that the camp borders, a couple of warring giraffes wrestling with their necks.

But safaris with Ralph, or any of the inspirational guides he has mentored, is never about standardized game drives or ticking off of the big five. It's never just about style and luxury either; though the gorgeous linen, the hearty bush suppers, the steaming open-air showers under the stars, the hot-water bottles in your bed and the warm coals beneath your chair at dinner, are memorable touches.

It's more that, as a biologist, his knowledge of the land is unrivaled; he can communicate with Bushmen in their own language and on their level. He also knows how to intersperse moments of high-adrenaline thrills with moments of meditative calm.

And so it was that he surprised us with a helicopter trip the next morning, which had us hovering over the ancient linear sand dunes of the Kalahari. These seem to disappear into infinity until we meet a sprawling group of quartzite rock formations rising unexpectedly out the dry flat expanse of desert: the four mounds of the Tsodilo Hills – the Ayers Rock of Africa – that have for millennia been a place of worship and home for ancestral spirits of the southern tribes of the continent.

Despite the grandiose tags and the Unesco-approved status, the place was empty, though we spent the better part of a day there, roaming from cave to cave. But then Ralph can land and get the permit to roam and



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reach the parts where others can't. Here, he is in his element: the emotional interface between the landscape, its wildlife, history and its people.

He tells us the Bushmen and other tribes of Africa believe that this also the place where man and woman were created: "It's the place where sex began," Ralph enthuses, pointing out the smooth hollows in the rock where it happened. "God said, 'I'm too busy to reproduce you', so man and woman, put down their water containers and lay here together, before the rock hardened around the shape of their buttocks."

And so, we wandered around with Ralph in the place where the world began, in the birthplace of all life, totally on our own, with him pointing out 100,000-years-old signs of human existence.

There are thousands of paintings everywhere. This is the "Louvre of the desert" as Laurens van der Post called it, and has the biggest concentration of rock art in Africa. Here are representations of totemic creatures – lions, elephant, rhino – but also unlikely drawings of crabs and

penguins, and crazy spirals and wheels, shamanistic aids to entering an altered state of being that is an integral part of Bushman culture.

And then we lay in silence on our backs in one of the high large caves we had to scramble to. Time stands still here, the white- and ochre-tinted drawings of a white rhino or giraffe painted all those millennia ago still so resonant and luminous above our faces. And we sat for minutes, an hour, letting the mind-chatter fade and allowing the magic and mystery of the place to seep into our bones.

To pause, to sit still, take stock and just be – whether it's breathing in the cool air of a silent cave, watching the fading embers of the fire or the moon tracking its journey across the sky, sharing Ralph's undiminished sense of awe and wonder at the remote and wild places of Africa he uncovers – this is the real luxury and privilege of a safari with Uncharted Africa. To quote the late, great scientist Stephen Hawking: "Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder what makes the universe exist. Be curious." The same idea of personal discovery and individual engagement is at the core of a true authentic safari. It is also, as Hawking suggests, at the heart of what it means to be alive.

NEED TO KNOW Natural Selection can organize a trip from \$8,218 per person (based on two people travelling), including five nights accommodation, all meals and activities, one night fly camping on the island and return flights to Maun; naturalselection.travel

Photographs: David De Vries/istock.com

Clockwise from top left: a trip down the delta in a mokoro with Ralph; one of the bedrooms at Jack's Island Camp; Ralph at Tsodilo Hills; bathroom with a view at the camp