

BOTSWANA

# A First Look at Jao, Botswana's Game-Changing Safari Lodge

by STANLEY STEWART

A redesigned camp in one of the world's best wildlife destinations.

I wake when it is still dark. Elephants are trumpeting from the island, hippos grunting in the pool beneath the lodge. Somewhere, hyenas are whooping.

[Botswana](#), with its legendary habitats, from desert to delta, is arguably the greatest wildlife destination on earth. It is also home to some of Africa's finest safari lodges, and I have come to see two of them, King's Pool Camp and Jao. The camps are run by [Wilderness Safaris](#), the pioneering operator founded in 1983 by Colin Bell and Chris McIntyre that was among the first to understand the positive role luxury ecotourism might have in conservation. Today it helps protect more than 6 million acres of African wilderness across six biomes in six countries, attracting Bono and [Richard Branson](#) to its shareholder the Rise Fund.

First built in the 1990s, both camps—bookable through specialists [Africa Travel](#)—signaled a new dawn in design and attitude. But it was Jao that changed the game. From that point on, others had to play catch up. With a spectacular rebuild, Jao has raised the bar again. Sophisticated, small-scale, reusing existing and salvaged materials, it's surrounded by the watery Okavango, sitting on an island of leadwood trees and riverine forest. It feels like the world's most spectacular [tree house](#).

With Jao's 11-year track record of contributing to rising wildlife population, the game drives in this area of Botswana are unrivaled, and on one night, from the firepit, I watched a leopard shadowing impala. The minimization of guest footprints here is part of the immersive design by Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens (also behind the Seychelles' exceptional [North Island](#)). And Jao's bold, contemporary, environmentally inspired concept is further dazzling proof that African luxury and sustainability are not mutually exclusive.