



I WAKE WHEN IT'S STILL DARK. ELEPHANTS ARE trumpeting from the island and I can hear hippos grunting beneath the lodge. Somewhere, hyenas are whooping. Africa is waiting for me, out there in the darkness. It's still chilly from the night; at this hour, my game drive feels almost furtive, an early-morning raid to catch nature unawares. A white-headed fish eagle flies away into the grey pre-dawn followed by a host of long-tailed starlings. A startled impala vanishes like a ghost. Giraffes glide among mopane trees, and a family of warthogs retreat, trotting away in military formation, their tails in the air like salutes. Around a bend, a herd of elephants is shambling across the track, dusty behemoths glancing at us over their shoulders. Carefully tucked into the centre of the group, their little legs working double time, are two baby elephants hardly bigger than Labradors. At the first light, here is a vision of earth long before the arrival of man.

Botswana is arguably the greatest wildlife destination on the planet. The Kalahari, Chobe National Park, the Moremi Game Reserve, Linyanti, the Okavango Delta are all legendary habitats. But Botswana is also home to the luxury safari, with some of the continent's finest lodges, and I have come to see two of the most highly esteemed – Wilderness Safari's King's Pool Camp and Jao Camp, both established in the 1990s – which have recently undergone major sustainable rebuilds. Founded in 1983 by Colin Bell and Chris McIntyre, Wilderness has always been a pioneer among safari operators. Long before it became fashionable, they saw their camps and lodges as playing an important role in conservation and community development. The work of their two formidable non-profit organisations – Children

recur in light fittings, wall divides and tableware; weathered artefacts such as bowls, shields and gourds are links to the cultures of southern Africa. On the main reception terrace, which is open to the lagoon, the different elements – library, bar, seating areas, dining tables, fire-pits and fireplaces – manage to be both connected and independent, allowing for privacy or engagement with other guests over supper of local venison carpaccio and a wonderful South African Shiraz. The property is also completely solar-powered and has one of the lightest eco-footprints in Africa.

But for all its smart details, King's Pool is still a classic safari camp. A short flight to the west, in the middle of the Delta, Jao Camp is something else entirely. Privately owned by the Kays family but marketed as part of the Wilderness Safari group, Jao originally opened in 1999 as one of the first luxury properties in the Okavango. Since then, others have been playing catch-up. With this overhaul, Jao has raised the bar again. The camp sits on an island of leadwood trees and termite mounds, in the midst of shallow lagoons in the wet season and savannah woodlands in the dry. Elevated on high terraces and boardwalks to keep above the annual floods and enhance game viewing, Jao feels like the world's most spectacular tree house. It is contemporary, innovative and dramatic. Like Singita Boulders Lodge in the Sabi Sands or Chinzombo Camp in Zambia's South Luangwa, it has escaped safari traditions for bold design concepts inspired by its environment.

The architectural design studio of Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens has created award-winning lodges throughout Africa and I would put my money on Jao Camp adding a statuette to their mantelpiece.

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in the Wilderness and Wilderness Wildlife Trust – is what attracts shareholders such as Bono and Richard Branson to the company.

King's Pool, an isolated camp set on an oxbow lagoon by the Linyanti River, was named after King Carl XVI Gustaf who came to Botswana on honeymoon with his wife Silvia in 1976. It's the archetypal Wilderness property – luxurious, sophisticated and small-scale. Location is everything here. Bordering Chobe, it shares the national park's concentration of game, particularly predators, but benefits from the flexibility of a private concession, offering a range of activities from walking safaris to scenic helicopter flights that are not possible inside the reserve. It is also close to the Delta, and days end with a sunset cruise on the Linyanti, a world of hippos, crocs and aquatic wildlife, where you can watch elephants crossing the river into Namibia. The rebuild is a delight. Nine tents look out over the water with hippos wallowing and crocodiles snoozing open-mouthed, arranged discreetly beneath colossal lakeside trees so there are great views of the animals but not of the neighbours.

I say 'tents', but it is like calling Longleat a country manor – they are really stylish villas of canvas and thatch. Carved African doors open into spacious bedrooms with colonial desks, handsome travelling chests, wardrobes and a pair of double-width armchairs – the kind you might have curled up in as child with your mother to read *The Wind in the Willows* – where you can drink morning coffee while watching jacana birds tiptoeing across the water lilies. In atmosphere, King's Pool is the close cousin of Zarafa Camp, one of Botswana's grandest, where a lagoon is also the compelling focus.

In the bathrooms, pale travertine stone surfaces frame double showers; motifs of burnished brass, bleached wood and woven rope

There's a thrilling mix of materials: steel tendons and hardwood beams support soaring thatched roofs; leather and linen sofas gather round a fireplace flue of oxidised steel; woven room dividers overlook bathroom sinks of matt metal. Botanical themes run through the place like creepers, in tables printed with leaf motifs, lamp shades mimicking palm leaves and a cascade of white ceramic flowers tumbling down towards the bar, while the pool, gym and spa canopies are large, open-weave 'nests' of bleached sticks. As for the trees in which the whole structure stands, they become just another exciting material integrated into the fabric of the building.

There are only seven villas – larger, lighter and more open than Jao's former incarnation. From the plunge pools and fire-pits on the private terraces you can watch leopards shadowing impala. Game drives are unrivalled. We track a lioness with two cubs strolling past with the indifference of a boulevard flâneur. Back at camp, my favourite place is the rosewood-lined museum filled with books, maps and artwork, and a giraffe skeleton that reaches the ceiling. In the gallery on the first floor is a fascinating account of the Kays family, who still run Jao and now count six generations in Botswana. That they were able to acquire this concession against stiff competition, and make it one of the most gorgeous lodges in Africa, is a tribute to their professionalism and energy. 📍

Africa Travel can arrange a trip to Botswana from £6,950 per person, including three nights each at King's Pool Camp and Jao Camp, full board, British Airways flights via Johannesburg, transfers and safari activities. +44 20 7843 3591; africatravel.co.uk

Opposite, clockwise from top left: open fireplace in Jao's main lodge; pelicans flying over the Okavango Delta; the tree-edged living space at Jao; walking safari with a river Bushman; Jao's lodge at night; a young leopard; thatching made of recycled plastic; elephants at sunrise; a giraffe skeleton in Jao's library