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TRAVEL | JULY 2, 2011

Lions, Leopards and Luxury

On safari in southern Africa, where indulgence and an untamed environment happily coexist

By SARA CLEMENCE



&Beyond

PERFECT TENT | A private patio at Xaranna Okavango Delta Camp in Botswana.

The sun was easing toward the horizon, and the drinks table had just been unfolded in a golden-grassed clearing big enough to prevent a territorial animal from approaching—or at least, large to let us see him coming. One of our safari guides had laid out a checkered cloth and lined up the liquor bottles. He was about to start

mixing gin and tonics in cut-glass tumblers when we heard the lion's roar.

We were silent for a moment. Then, seeing the guide's face fall, we all laughed. He took pride in his impeccable bar setup—and now instead of serving up sundowners, he would have to dismantle it all so we could pile back into the open-topped Land Rover and go in search of the big cat.

Photos: Relaxed Luxury, Raw Wilderness

My husband and I and five other guests at Nxabega, a tented camp in Botswana's Okavango Delta, tucked ourselves under lap blankets in the back of the truck. After less than a half hour of racing down rutted dirt tracks, the sun had vanished, and we finally spotted our first lion, lying near the road in shoulder-high grass, with his back toward us.



&Beyond

Tawny and immense, he ignored the truck completely, rising to amble down the road that led back to our camp as we followed, breathless, a dozen yards behind. Padding slowly, the lion stopped occasionally to mark his turf and locate his pride with a series of roars. Gorgeous and chilling, the bellows seemed to roll out across the land like rhythmic thunder and triggered in we humans a twinge of very primal fear.

It was the kind of juxtaposition of relaxed luxury and raw wilderness that my husband and I would experience again and again during our two-week honeymoon in southern Africa this May—and it never failed to surprise or delight.

Knowing that it was our first visit to sub-Saharan Africa, Extraordinary Journeys, a mother-daughter company that specializes in bespoke safari trips, created an itinerary that took us to four different camps that got more rugged—and wildlife rich—as we went along. We began in Matetsi Water Lodge, a collection of thick-walled villas on the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe; took two cars, a bush plane and a boat to Xaranna, a breathtaking modern tent lodge on an island in Botswana's Okavango Delta; proceeded to nearby Nxabega, where monkeys often hung around the dining area; and ended at Chobe Under Canvas, a tented mobile camp in the middle of Chobe National Park.



Andrew Sanocki

A young female leopard sighted on a game drive in the Okavango Delta

At all of the camps, our days began at or before dawn, with a wake-up knock and escort to the camp's dining area. After coffee, tea and fresh baked goods, we would set out on a game drive or boat trip. Returning in late morning, we'd eat a delectable meal (or two), rest, then set out on another activity in late afternoon.

Though the days all had similar structures, each place had its memorable charms. Unpacking at Matetsi, I looked up from the bed to see a monkey leaning against the doorframe, surveying the scene. When we first approached remote Xaranna by water, we saw that a half-dozen staffers were standing on the dock, waving. We soon realized they were waving in unison—and singing a welcome song. The next day, as we explored the water

lily-paved Okavango Delta in narrow canoes, I felt a light tap on my shoulder: Radi, our guide, was offering up a necklace made from a flower he had plucked from the water. In Chobe, we may have been staying in a canvas tent and washing in a tin basin, but it had a flush toilet and a king-sized bed made up with soft, snowy sheets. At night, we woke to the sound of a nearby hyena's howls. The camp staff baked fresh bread over wood fires, slicing and grill-toasting it before serving it warm at breakfast.



&Beyond

A guest tent at Chobe Under Canvas

Which is not to say that our trip was all pampered and hazard-free. When one guide, Max, stopped to show us some foul-smelling giraffe bones that hyenas had been gnawing at night, I begged to keep moving. And safari guides generally don't offer up stories of what can (and does) go wrong when humans wander into the African bush. But if asked—pestered, actually—they'll yield tales guaranteed to scare the bejesus out of the first-time safari-goer.

At Matetsi, a staffer told my husband and me that a night watchman had recently encountered a hippo in early morning, surviving only because his head had ended up inside the furious creature's mouth, preventing his skull from being crushed. A

tourist at a nearby lion sanctuary had been mauled after turning her back on a six-month-old lion, he said. In the Delta, a driver told us about a safari guide who ducked behind some distant brush to relieve himself and never came back to the truck. Eventually his charges realized that he wasn't pulling a prank, and found the path of crushed grass where he had been dragged away.

"But it was an old, weak lion," the driver said, by way of reassurance. "Desperate."

THE LOWDOWN

Planning It: Extraordinary Journeys can advise on, plan and book all lodging, transportation and activities in Africa. Our nine-day safari for two, all in &Beyond lodges and camps, totaled \$8,400, including food and local transfers. ejafrika.com

Getting There: With no direct flights from the U.S. to Botswana, many visitors fly to Johannesburg and connect to Maun or Kasane.

What to PACK: Bring easily layered clothes in dull colors like olive green and khaki, to blend in with the surroundings (brights are fine for dinner); a wide-brimmed hat; sunscreen and a good pair of binoculars. Pack light—the small planes used in the bush have little cargo room. A wad of small bills makes tipping easier.

The lion who had interrupted our cocktail hour was clearly healthy and confident—and at first we were thrilled to be close to him. After five days in the bush, it was our first sighting of a lion, one of the "big five" game that tourists check off their lists. Elephants and buffalo had been easy to find. In Xaranna two days earlier, our guides, following tracks in the dirt and the alarm calls of other animals, had impressively led us to a young female leopard; we saw her testing her hunting skills on a wart-hog that was too big and experienced to land in her grasp. There were no rhino in the parts of Botswana we visited, due to a major poaching problem. That left lion, and we were determined not to leave Africa without catching sight of one—and with luck, more.

Our excitement quickly shifted to worry (and then out-and-out fear) when our guides began leaning out of the Rover, trying to discern which of the tires seemed to be hissing. It soon turned

out that we did not have a flat tire in the darkness, in the bush, several yards from a lion. We had two.

We had to be coaxed out of the truck so it could be jacked up, and urged not to huddle *right* next to it in case there was a mishap. We dug into our bags for little flashlights—as though they would offer any protection against teeth and claws—and peered into the grass to see if the cat had continued down the road or was already circling. We joked nervously about who could run the fastest.

The repair seemed to take hours—but in the end it was probably only 15 minutes. We caught up with the lion, who evidently cared as little for human as George W. Bush does broccoli. Detouring around him, we kept watch for hippos and headed for home, where cold gin and tonics, a hot meal and warm beds awaited.

WHAT TO WEAR THERE: African Safari



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas
What to Wear There: African Safari

HIS

From top: Cotton Linen Sapper Jacket, \$299, barbour.com; Nikon Monarch Dielectric 8x42 All Terrain Binoculars, \$278, llbean.com; Burkman Bros Printed Ikat Shirt, \$155, bloomingdales.com; Ex Officio Bugsaway Paisley Bandana, \$12, paragonsports.com; Fabian Chino - Campus Khaki, \$156, loomstate.org; Tradition Hunters Flask, \$330, dunhill.com; Belstaff Canvas Messenger Bag, \$405, mrporter.com

HERS

From top: Washed Cotton Jacket and Organic Cotton Fair Trade Top, \$258 and \$198, eileenfisher.com; Suno Crinkled Gauze Scarf, \$210, openingceremony.us; Zula Trade Beads, \$395, dannijo.com; Bantu Swim Sekota Print Piping Trim Swimsuit, \$205, shopbird.com; Organic by John Patrick 100% Organic Cotton Short, \$198, barneys.com