

The Subtle Art of Safari

Unveiled this September, the newly refurbished Kwara Camp now offers a more stylish stay in the matchless wilds of the Okavango Delta, but this is no mere lodge renovation – it's a return to straightforward safari.

By Melanie van Zyl.

Emerging from the dark charcoal cover of night, three elephant bulls amble towards the fire pit. Sitting together with Charles Sebaga beside Kwara Camp's crackling flames, I dare not exhale as the pachyderms plod ever forward. Having been based in the concession since 2001, Charles is an area expert here. Like many Batswana working for Kwando Safaris (a 100 percent citizen-owned outfit) he started his career as a guide, then worked his way up to manager. Today he stands at the helm of Kwando's finest renewal to ensure everything runs smoothly. This is just another day at the office.

Charles motions for us – a group of gawping guests – to sit tight. The enormous mammals keep to the protective shadows just beyond the campfire's realm of light, but I can easily make out their bulk. Elephants use infrasound to communicate and the low

notes can travel up to 15 kilometres. Not only can I feel their deep-down rumblings, but they reverberate through my very core. The closest bull seems to scrutinise the newly built camp and uses his twisting trunk to inspect the grounds. Then, as suddenly as he appeared, he turns away with a nod of his heavy head. Was he lured by ample foliage or was he giving us a nod of approval?

Like these gigantic gardeners of the Okavango, I'm visiting Kwara Camp to feed. Not just for the lodge's five-course dinners (although the pineapple sorbet, double chocolate cheesecake and scrumptious cheeseboards provide reason enough). Leaving all semblance of city life behind, going on a safari is my way of acquiring sustenance for the soul.

Plains Zebra, the national animal of Botswana, in their natural habitat

The Okavango Delta is a hotspot for seeing Wild Dogs (also known as Painted Wolves).



But what is it that defines the quintessential safari? Kwara Camp exhibits every hallmark of the classic model. There's the exciting access by bush plane, indoor-outdoor showers (plus a bath to boot), wide sundowner decks, marvellous views, mosquito net canopies above magnificent beds and, of course, animals. It shouldn't be, but often nature is the last requirement in a long list of safari must-haves.

Kwara Camp and the nearby Splash Camp (which opened in July 2018) sit in a sprawling concession, which is one of Botswana's largest at around 440 000 acres and one of the most diverse. The area comprises grassland plains that rise up from labyrinthine wetlands and forms a whopping wilderness double the size of Singapore. Only, it's frequented by roughly 150 people at any given time. Along its southern border, this expanse of land shares nearly 30 kilometres with Moremi Game Reserve and the trademark lagoons that cut snakelike shapes into the UNESCO World Heritage Site. Out here, you are no ordinary lodger, you are a guest of the wilderness.

Just like the open-air, elephant-friendly fire pit, the raised lounge decks and nine sophisticated rooms at Kwara Camp let the outside in (the good bits at least). There are no glass doors or windows in my bedroom. A fine mesh keeps the creepy crawlies at bay but permits a wash of fresh air through the room, ventilating it via stylish Venetian blinds. The walls are a cream canvas, and although the chambers are technically a tent, it's an understated label for such spacious digs. Towering ceilings echo the broad Botswana sky outside, and the front door opens onto an elegant lounge where a small treasury of bird books and field guides await. A thoughtful touch.

On any given game drive, I'm exposed to a combination of damp and dusty landscapes, plus the chorus of creatures that inhabits them. Deep water channels and permanent swamps

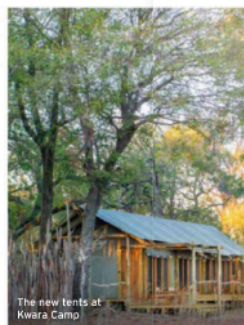
Safari essentials

» A diverse range of habitats allows for different activities at Kwara Camp. Day and night drives, walking safaris, boat trips that visit the Godikwe Lagoon in the waters of Moremi Game Reserve (known for abundant birdlife) and mokoro safaris are all possible here, as well as fishing in season. Kwara Camp is not in a national park, thus off-road driving is also permitted in search of special sightings. The minimum age for Kwara guests is 18 and there are no family rooms. (These are available at Splash) and the camp must be booked for a stay of a minimum of three nights.

Kwara Private Reserve, Western Okavango Delta, Botswana.
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The elephant-friendly fire pit.



The new tents at Kwara Camp



Almost 45% of land in Botswana is protected - crucial for vulnerable species like the lion



Kwara's central lodge and welcome area

provide robust hippo haunts, sensational birding and allow Red Tachwe to gather around Kwara Camp. Contrastingly, vast plains cater for cheetah hunts, journeys of giraffes, herds of Blue Gnus, buffalo, Tsessebe and Botswana's national animal, the zebra. Wild Dog, elephants, lions and more straddle the spaces in between.

The new vehicle policy at Kwara means that each game drive accommodates a maximum of four guests at a time, making for a more exclusive experience. The 4x4s have also been modernised with USB ports and camera mounts for the avid photographer. A Kwando Safari always includes a guide and tracker combination, so that two pairs of eyes decode the Delta's data. Perched in front, the tracker focuses on detecting otherwise inconspicuous signs of the wild - droppings, footprints, scrapes, bones and diggings - while the guide interprets them.

My guide for the three-day stay is George Tembo from Etsha, a village on the eastern edges of the Okavango River. He tells me that Kwara means minnow or small fish in the local Yeyi language. I can't help but admire that Kwara is named for one of the Okavango's less appreciated creatures and this celebration of the small is echoed in the art that adorns camp. Photographs of blister beetles, mantises and colourful moths captured by celebrated wildlife filmmakers, Tim and June Liversedge, compose a working art gallery. The couple has called the Delta home for decades, and although their documentaries often feature larger animals, Tim is actually an entomologist. "He has observed and studied insects all his life and has particularly monitored them over the past few years to get an indication of the well-being of habitats", says his wife, June. "It's imperative to make visitors aware of the importance of all species".

Perhaps a great safari boils down to the essentials of sharing. Sure, there's been a move towards exclusivity at Kwara with just four guests to a vehicle and two private pool pavilions, but dinners remain a bubbly communal affair. I mingle with engaging guests (a veterinarian, landscaper and start-up entrepreneur to mention a few) and we chat about our respective lives back at home.

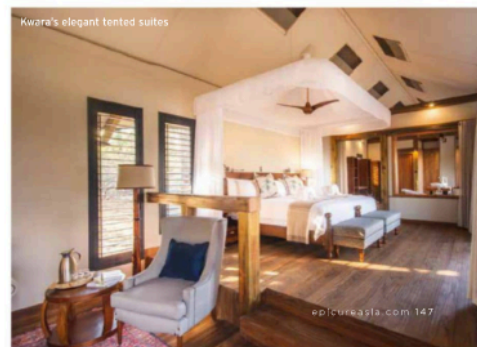
However, there's also an unmistakable indulgence in having the bush to yourself. The new lodge design provides plenty of

private nooks for escape, too. One afternoon I retreat to the Leadwood library, where, sitting quietly, I can appreciate the sounds of safari. There are Tarzan-like whoops of a Green Pigeon and squeaks of Meyer's Parrots picking the Fig tree clean. A snuffle of warthog weeds sprouts off the termite mound and a quiet smooch of dry leaves alerts me to several impala feeding below the Sausage trees nearby. All of this is amplified by the distinct lack of digital disturbance. According to safari specialists, African Travel Resource, "Since 2015 over 90% of the approximately 2,850 quality safari camps in Africa have started to provide WiFi for their guests". This is one camp that will thankfully not give in to the hype.

Kwara Camp joined the Kwando Safaris portfolio back in 1999 and although this reborn lodge ramps up the luxury, the overhaul is clean, elegant and honours the ecosystem it inhabits. By way of biodegradable amenities, impressive solar energy generation, recycled timber structures, anti-plastic strategies and closely-monitored waste disposal (all on the checklist for today's mindful traveller) the camp exists in harmony with its natural setting. Even after 20 years, above all else and in every detail, Kwara Camp prioritises an unrivalled one-on-one encounter with the wild. After all, that's what safaris are really about. ☺



At night, kerosene lanterns give Kwara a romantic glow.



Kwara's elegant tented suites