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The author follows his guide on a quad bike across the Makgadikgadi Basin salt pans. *Source: Natural Selection*

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A New Breed of Safaris in Botswana Aims Higher Than Just Animals

Looking to the stars and primordial portions of the Earth first explored by hominids a million years ago brings a new perspective for the adventurous traveler.

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About halfway into our journey, the caravan of quad bikes ground to an abrupt halt along the cracked and creviced salt pans of Botswana's Makgadikgadi Basin. "This is why you're here," my guide, Super Sande, exclaimed, gesturing at the abject flatness of the Kalahari, a talc-white carpet sprouting not a single weed or thorn. He instructed our small group to each pick a direction and, forming a starburst pattern, count our steps out toward the various horizons.

Twenty steps. Fifty. A hundred. A thousand footprints etched into the sunbaked dust until I finally stopped, alone. In the extreme silence borne only in the heart of the desert, I dropped to my knees. In the colossal quiet, I could hear only my thoughts as I traced my finger over the ropes of dried mud and shards of shattered seashells and wondered if anyone else—in the history of our planet—had ever walked across the exact bit of land on which I had settled.

We were the first to try a product newly created by award-winning safari operator Natural Selection— a four-day trek across Botswana’s vast, uninhabited interior, connecting the islands of granite and thick-trunked trees that disrupt the miles of otherwise flat, lifeless terrain.

Roughly the size of France or Texas but with only 3 million inhabitants, Botswana is one of the least densely populated nations on Earth. It’s probably most famous for the flooding swamps of the Okavango Delta, which attracts hundreds of species of mammals and birds each year. With its government enacting a high-cost, low-volume approach to tourism, the country has positioned itself as a premium destination, and it’s a favorite among safari-goers seeking hordes of animals instead of crowds of tourists.

But Botswana is fast becoming the locus for “a newer, edgier kind of experience,” says Dave van Smeerdijk, co-founder of Natural Selection. This 300-mile ATV adventure (roughly the distance from Boston to Philadelphia) promised not a single sighting of lions or elephants, and yet van Smeerdijk was seeing “a really big surge” in interest. There is particular enthusiasm from moneyed millennials, the new generation of sub-Saharan travelers, who want to swap game drives for a more holistic exploration of the land. This trip—four-wheeling over a primordial lake bed in search of surreal rock formations and sleeping under millions of stars undimmed by urban light pollution—offers exactly that.

A day earlier, my journey had begun at Jack’s Camp, a legendary property founded in the 1990s by Ralph Bousfield. He named it for his late father, who’d long maintained a rugged site in the area for other eager expeditioners. Natural Selection added the camp to its portfolio in 2016 and used the quiet months during the pandemic to completely rebuild it in 2020, elevating its sumptuous explorer-style tents into a thoroughly luxurious oasis complete with a large lap pool, a tea lounge festooned with oriental textiles and a collection of skeletal oddities so eclectic the government named it an official natural history museum.

After a hardy breakfast under the watchful eyes of various taxidermied animals, we prepared our quad bikes, strapping on our belongings and plenty of extra rations with bungee cords and wrapping colorful kikoï cloths (light cotton sarongs) snug around our faces—a futile attempt at protection from the wind- and sunburns that loomed ahead on our daylong transits through the unforgiving environs. Super led the way, and one by one we launched into the unknown, leaving plenty of room between us so as to not be completely choked by the plumes of dust kicked up by our tires.

It was immediately apparent how well our guide fit the name Super—mere minutes after our departure we were swallowed whole by the desert, and yet he knew exactly where we were headed without a compass or single reference point, save the passage of the sun above. It was “the way the ancient Bushmen navigated their environs,” he explained. Stories of Super’s navigational prowess—shared by my fellow travelers (members of the Natural Selection team test-driving the adventure alongside me) and bolstered by our guide himself—grew more hyperbolic each time we stopped to break up the hours of riding on the pan, swelling into legends of rescuing tribesmen in the wilderness who were unable to find their way home. Priding myself on having a reasonable sense

of direction, I felt blind in the Kalahari, able to focus only on my fingers cramping around the handlebars of my quad, until something unusual emerged from the distance in the late afternoon.

“Upside-down trees,” Super called them; their spindly branches looked like roots proliferating toward the heavens. We had reached the Lost Island of the Baobabs, he said, our home for the evening.

Unbeknown to us, an advance team from Jack’s Camp had stealthily arrived at the site earlier in the day and assembled a cozy outpost without a lick of electricity. A bar cart and lounge chairs sat beneath the vast, gnarled crown of a baobab tree, and nearby was a long dining table with a starched white tablecloth over which a parade of exquisite tajines, lamb kebabs and stewed lentils was marched, all of it cooked over an open fire, including fluffy loaves of bread, proofed and leavened in cast-iron crates.

After a long dinner, Super stared out toward the pans into the black night. “There,” he said, pointing, “that’s where you’ll be sleeping.” Away from our rocky outcrop, back along the flatness of the desert floor was a scattering of bedrolls unfurled under the banner of the Milky Way. “This isn’t five-star—it’s five zillion-star accommodation,” Super added with a smirk.

Snug in my bedroll—a canvas sleeping pouch stuffed with blankets and a generous amount of foam padding underneath—I pulled the duvet up to my chin as the desert air plummeted to near freezing temperatures. Only an errant satellite interrupted my wide-eyed wonderment of the sky, with more points of light than I had ever seen. Then I thought of my father, and how, as a child, I’d stand with him in our backyard and list all the stars we could see.

Over the years our lists changed from heavenly bodies to the animals I spotted on various work trips. My father, an amateur photographer, enjoyed snapping photos of his backyard visitors; in return, I’d email him from my job as a travel journalist, detailing the different creatures I’d encountered. I knew it was his furtive way of checking in on me and making sure I was still alive, but I always obliged: lemurs in Madagascar, tarsiers in Borneo, gorillas in Rwanda.

It was hard to imagine that the salt pans beneath me were once teaming with wildlife as well. Tens of thousands of years ago, they lay beneath one of the world’s largest lakes. The surrounding fertile lands were a sanctuary for birds, animals and nomadic tribes, who prayed to long-forgotten deities at Kubu, a lonely huddle of boulders that was once an island. We would trundle through a hundred more miles of desolation the next day, the high sun and parched air drying a thousand flecks of mud spatter onto my sunglasses, to reach this prehistoric place of worship.

There’s an even greater proliferation of towering baobabs at Kubu, perched atop a large rocky mound resembling a sleeping leviathan. Super led us up its spine, hiking past a smattering of primeval cairns that guided the way to a small altar inside a shallow cave. Safe from the howling wind, he recounted the secrets of these ancient stones, describing the prehistoric remains of early hominids found beneath, along with the chiseled tools left by wayward devotees; the ancestors of the Bushmen. “Perhaps,” he whispered, “this was the very first travel destination on Earth. ...”

The following morning we began our circuit back to Jack’s Camp, 50 more miles as the crow flies, if the birds could tolerate such harsh conditions across the extreme blankness of the landscape. Our path, however, was more circuitous, the journey extending well into the afternoon as Super avoided the muddy rifts that splashed across the pan. Finally we spotted the huddle of flapping tents like a distant mirage and watched it grow larger on the infinite horizon, the sun setting just behind.

Our return to camp was timed perfectly for afternoon tea in the Persian pavilion, an elaborate buffet of crumpets, hors d'oeuvres and fresh, Technicolor juices served on an array of silver platters. We flopped our weary bodies down on the thickly woven rugs and pillows—a cloud of geometric stitching—and inhaled our snacks with gusto.

As my fellow travelers swapped videos captured on their GoPros, I snuck back to my tent to shower off the days of Kalahari sand that had encrusted my fingernails and found its way into every wrinkle on my face. The room was exactly as I had left it—heavy red drapes like theater curtains, dark wooden furnishings with golden clasps—but there was something on the writer's desk I hadn't noticed before: a packet of branded stationery.

“Dear Dad,” I picked up a pen and wrote on the blank letterhead. Instead of my ritual email, I embraced my analog surrounds and started my list. “Hi from Botswana. I saw absolutely nothing. It was the perfect adventure.”

The Return of the Small-Business Safari

After buying shares in several small tourism enterprises in Botswana, including Jack's Camp, Natural Selection officially launched in 2016 as a portfolio of distinguished properties. The company's *modus operandi* is the partnership model; it buys a minority stake in locally owned lodges to help develop them to an international standard. The goal is to funnel tourism dollars directly into area conservation projects and the coffers of neighboring communities.

Before starting Natural Selection, Dave van Smeerdijk worked for Wilderness Safaris. To mark its 40th anniversary in 2023, that sustainable travel collective has dropped “Safari” from its moniker, pointing to a shift in the way travelers want to explore Africa. “The conversation around the lodge dinner table has changed,” says Keith Vincent, Wilderness's chief executive officer. “Instead of animal sightings, guests are eager to learn more about what's happening in the villages nearby.”

“Authenticity” is the byword for millennial experience, and a desire for deeper access—for transparency—is informing the way new luxury travelers make their holiday spending choices. “Guests want to know exactly where their money is going,” says Vincent, who's spearheading Wilderness's own ambitious partnership model. The aim is to reframe the relationship the company has with its top guides—to cooperate with them as proprietors of their own safari businesses rather than as corporate employees—to improve visitors' connection with local communities and put profits more directly into deserving hands.

How to Plan This Trip

Luxury travel planner Extraordinary Journeys, which specializes in booking unique experiences and atypical safaris in sub-Saharan Africa, is particularly adept at crafting an international itinerary that seamlessly lands you in the wilds of Botswana from your continental point of entry at Johannesburg or Cape Town. Co-founder Elizabeth Gordon sees many of her clients wanting to pair Botswana with another southern African nation, but she encourages travelers to go deeper here, marrying the salt pans with a handful of days exploring the Okavango Delta to appreciate the diverse but interconnected ecosystems.

Four nights are required to execute this overland journey, which includes an evening at Jack's Camp on either side of the adventure. The trip to Kubu can also begin and/or end at San Camp, a nearby sister property, which also fosters a retro-naturalist (think: Darwin chic) atmosphere with lacquered

antiques and plush, white linen tents. Tack on an extra day or two at either property to further explore the area by foot or horseback, visit with the resident colony of meerkats or set out to find wild hyenas, aardwolves and an elusive pride of black-maned Kalahari lions.

The entire Kubu expedition, including an additional evening at Jack's Camp and light aircraft flights to and from the tourist hub of Maun, starts at \$14,390 per person, all-inclusive except for gratuities and travel insurance. Departures are weather-dependent during the dry season—June to September. Mobile phone and internet service are unavailable for the entirety of the experience.

Three Codas for Your Kalahari Adventure

Explore Botswana's other biomes by basing yourself at one of the following lodges.

Tawana Camp

The newest addition to Natural Selection's coterie of premium camps will open in August in partnership with the eponymous chiefdom's landowners, who have a storied reputation for wildlife conservation. In addition to spotting large mammals, the lodge will acquaint guests with the local culture and customs.

Vumbura Plains

Perched on slatted decking above the swelling flood plains, Wilderness's newly rebuilt Vumbura marks the third generation of the camp's existence in a decades-long project to re-wild the marshland of the Okavango.

DumaTau

A riverine resort more than a safari lodge, this Wilderness property's star attractions are the bathing elephants, who are easily spotted from its eight oversize tentalows (tent-bungalows). Spa treatments and seasonal vegetables could serve as a perfect end-of-trip reward after roughing it in the desert.