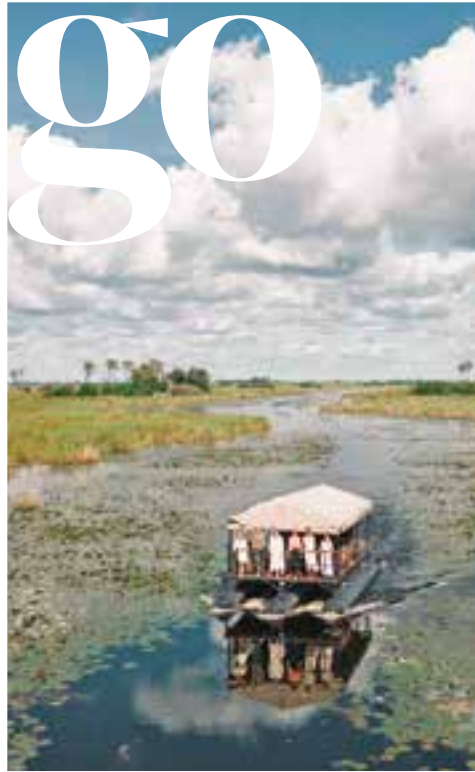


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Walk on the Wild Side

BY KIM-MARIE GALLOWAY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALLEN ZEPEDA

WE TAKE A **MAJESTIC JOURNEY** TO THE
OLDEST INHABITED CONTINENT ON EARTH





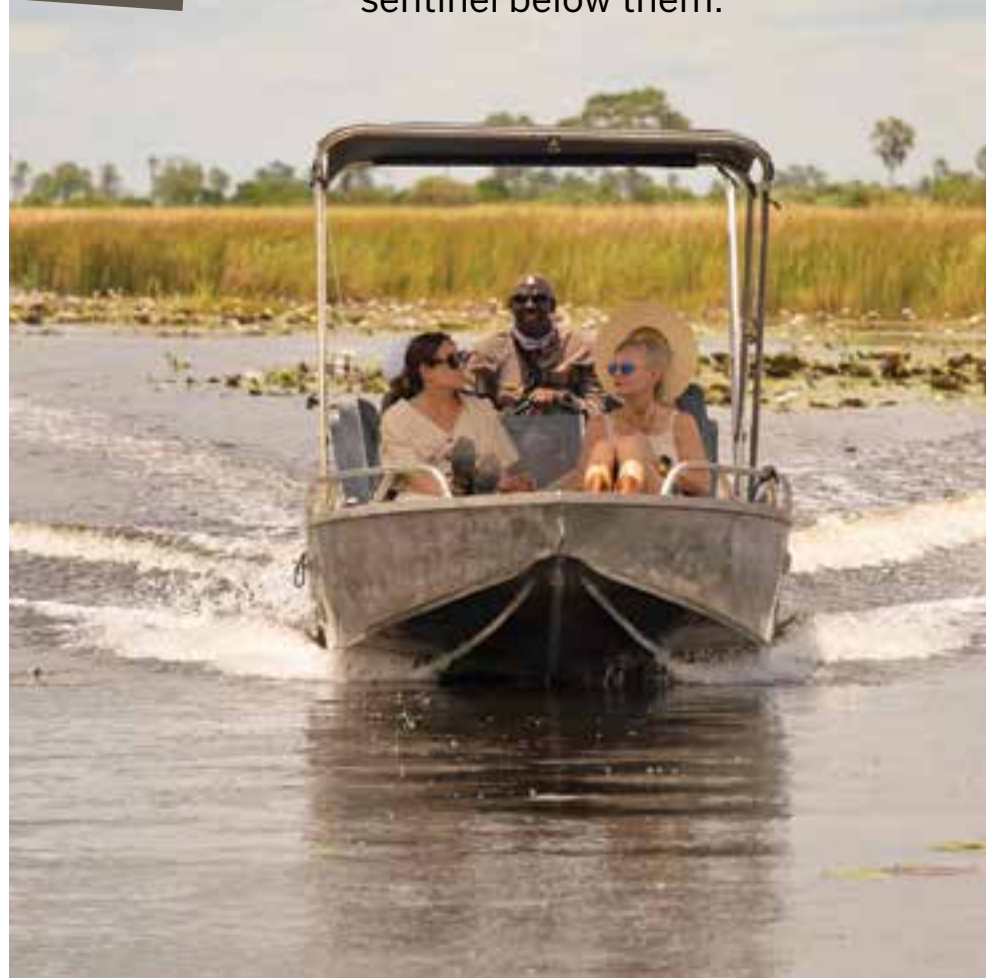
“I watched a family of baboons start their morning with **THE BABY DOING SOME BACKBEND STRETCHES IN MOM’S ARMS ON A TREE BRANCH**, while dad squatted sentinel below them.”

You feel the approach of a male lion before you see it. The birds chirp out warning calls, lesser animals scatter, and the air around you feels charged. Sitting in the safari jeep, sans door, I froze as the male we nicknamed Scar paced directly toward me. The guides assured us we’d be safe if we didn’t stand up and reveal that we were humans. Seated, we were supposedly indistinguishable from a car part. My encounter with Scar was on the last drive of my thirteen-day safari. I covered two countries and five camps, traveling on twelve planes, four helicopters, two boats and more jeeps than I can recall.

The guides knew Scar wasn’t looking for a meal. His lioness brought home a warthog for dinner the night before. Scar had a full belly and no desire to eat blonde lady travel writers. He was on the hunt for his family. It seems Scar ate the entire kill, leaving nothing but scraps for his family. When he awoke that morning, he couldn’t find them. He was agitated and marching toward me as if I might have an answer for him. He came close enough that I could feel his breath as he turned, brushed the jeep with his side and continued his search. Later that morning, we found his pride sleeping peacefully under a bush. It turned out the lioness was intentionally ignoring his plaintive roars after he hoarded the meal for himself. I’ve never felt closer to nature.

Like everything else in travel and life, not all safaris are created equal. I stayed in a five-star resort in South Africa and a range of four- and five-star camps in Botswana. While I had experienced the wonder of the untouched wilderness and was left awestruck, I overheard passengers at the small airport leaving Botswana who did not. Their guide didn’t speak English, so they were left to guess what was happening around them. And don’t get them started about the horrid man who never washed his hands and was always grubbing around in the sundowner snacks.

My first game drive was in South Africa with Cheetah



Plains, an ultra-luxe safari resort on a private reserve in the northeast corner of the Sabi Sands Game reserve. While the wildlife viewing was extraordinary, the occasional sight of power lines and vehicles from other camps broke the spell of being in the vast untouched wild.

Cheetah Plains is the safari experience you would expect Mark Cuban to book. The lodge is straight out of *Architectural Digest*. A swimming pool overlooked a pond full of hippos, and a little elephant visited me on my back patio while I was enjoying my

(from top left)
Boarding a flight to camp hop • On a drive in the Duba Concession with one of the few female safari guides, Nthabi • A water safari spotting some hippos and elephants

GO SMALL OR GO HOME

The major differences in
the safari experience

Private Concession

- AN UNFENCED PORTION OF A NATIONAL PARK THAT IS PRIVATELY MANAGED
- ACCESS RESTRICTED TO GUESTS STAYING AT THE PRIVATE LODGE OR CAMP WITHIN THE CONCESSION
- LIMITATIONS ON VEHICLES, NIGHT DRIVES AND OFF-ROADING ALLOWED
- EXPERIENCED, VETTED GUIDES

National Park

- NATIONAL LAND SET ASIDE FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION—WITH KRUGER NATIONAL PARK AND SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK FALLING INTO THIS CATEGORY
- OPEN TO PROFESSIONAL TOUR OPERATOR AND THE SELF-DRIVING PUBLIC
- DOZENS TO HUNDREDS OF VEHICLES CAN CONVERGE ON A SINGLE SIGHTING
- DRIVERS MUST STAY ON THE PAVED ROAD, LIMITED GAME DRIVE HOURS
- QUALITY OF GUIDES CAN VARY WILDLY

Cruising the Selinda Spillway, also known as the "Thrillway"

morning coffee. I saw the Big Five (lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos and African buffalo) within the first twenty-four hours of my arrival. This is the perfect safari for someone who prefers solid walls and lockable doors to a tent and is not willing to get on a small plane to safari genuinely off the grid. But, at roughly \$10,000 a night, it doesn't come cheap. All gourmet food, including your private fully stocked wine cellar and private sommelier, are included.

While most safaris no longer have a hunting aspect, many are still causing more harm than good. In 2006 two nature documentarians set out to change that. Dereck and Beverly Joubert had been working with National Geographic and believed there was a better way to safari, that tourism could be sustainable. They created Great Plains Conservation, a foundation offering world-class safari experiences where all the profits go to conservation efforts. Great Plains has camps in Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe. I traveled with the team from Great Plains for a week, visiting different camps in Botswana, including Duba Plains, Selinda Camp and Zarafa. We reached some by small plane, some by helicopter and one by boat.

While many companies green-wash their efforts, the Jouberts are serious about preserving the land and the animals for future generations. I was surprised to learn

that lions, like Scar, are considered vulnerable and could be extinct in our lifetime. Dereck and Beverly have been appointed "Explorers in Residence" by National Geographic and, among piles of other awards, were awarded the 2021 Explorers Medal, described by filmmaker James Cameron as the Academy Award for exploration. They join the ranks of previous honorees such as Neil Armstrong and Sir Edmund Hillary.

Each Great Plains camp sits on a private concession, the safari term for land, rates being about \$7,000 per night based on double occupancy. The most critical part of a safari is the game drive. The game drive experience on a private concession is almost always superior. In Botswana, I never saw another human who wasn't on safari with me—no vehicles with iPhone-wielding tourists jockeying for position when we watched a baby elephant practicing his charge or a pair of lions mating. (Did you know lions mate every five to fifteen minutes for three days straight? I do, and I have a disturbing amount of video to prove it.)

A typical day on a luxury safari starts with the team waking you around 5:30 a.m. with a gentle knock at your tent and a tray of coffee. At one camp, it couldn't be left outside "because the baboons might take it." Early morning game drives have the most action; the late-night predators are headed to bed and everyone else is waking. I watched a family of baboons start their morning with the baby doing some backbend stretches in mom's arms on a tree branch, while dad squatted sentinel below them. Most game drives last at least four hours. Breakfast is usually served in the wild. Depending on the camp, you might be eating off the jeep's hood, or there will be a full dining table complete with cloth napkins and silver.

One of the Great Plains camps, Zarafa, located on the 320,000 acre Selinda Reserve has a barge-style boat with a fringe top, aboard which they serve lunch as you float down a river and greet the elephants as you pass by. Days at camp are a mix of naps and spa appointments. You won't find many gyms in the tented camps. One camp bought a rowing machine. The baboons continually disassembled it until finally, the baboons won. No rowing machine.

Evening game drives finish with the famous sundowner. As the sun drops, your guide will find a spot directly facing the sunset, set up the ultimate speakeasy and pour the cocktail of your choice, as you watch the sun dip under the horizon and realize you haven't checked Instagram or sent an e-mail in hours. You hope you never have to again.

cheetahplains.com; greatplainsconservation.com

