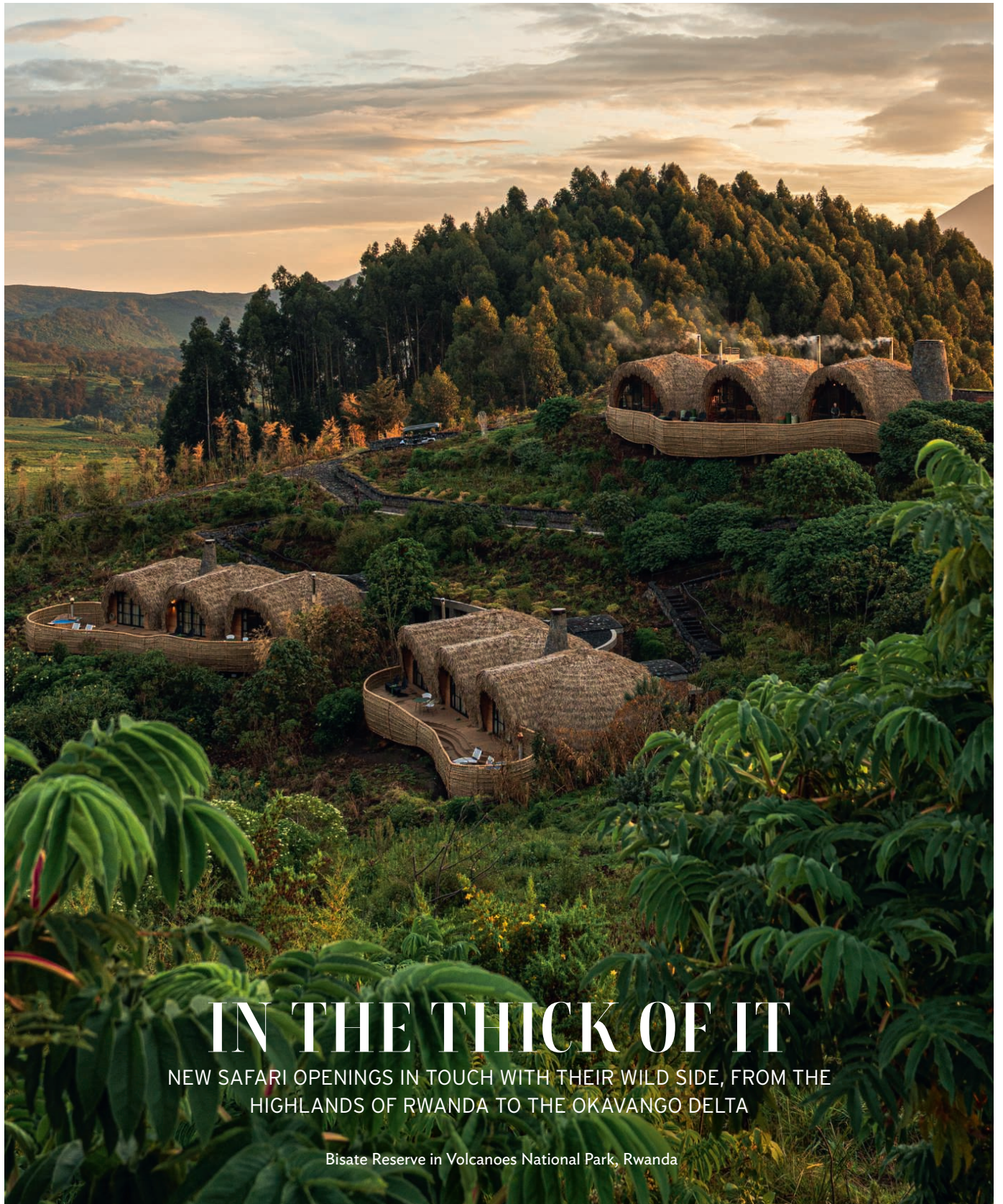


# WHERE TO STAY

INSIDER REPORTS ON THE BEST SPOTS TO BED DOWN. EDITED BY LYDIA BELL



## IN THE THICK OF IT

NEW SAFARI OPENINGS IN TOUCH WITH THEIR WILD SIDE, FROM THE HIGHLANDS OF RWANDA TO THE OKAVANGO DELTA

Bisate Reserve in Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda

PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS SCHALXX

WHERE TO STAY *Safari*



## VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK, RWANDA

### BISATE RESERVE

Ever since Dian Fossey highlighted the plight of the endangered mountain gorilla, demand to see this precious primate has soared among the sort of bucket listers who need ultra-salubrious digs for the trip. Enter stage left Bisate Reserve by safari specialist Wilderness, whose four new villas are now Rwanda's grandest wildlife lodge. Set on 104 acres at the peak of a crater, with views of Volcanoes National Park, this überlodge opened last autumn as a much-needed extension to Wilderness's impossible-to-get-into Bisate camp. Acclaimed architect Nick Plewman designed the villas, which are constructed from volcanic rock, handmade bricks and local wood, and are surrounded by 100,000 indigenous trees. From the outside they resemble elongated "nests" with plastic faux-thatch roofing. Each villa is a whopping 2,282 square feet and, inside, the spaces are more like architectural bush houses than suites, with contemporary African interiors: parquet floors, wood and reed-and-bamboo-woven ceilings and an undulating living room with spectacular views of the Virunga Massif's several volcanoes spanning Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. The dinner menu changes daily and might feature smoky beef or Lake Kivu fish with steamed beans, cassava gnocchi and local vegetables. Guests – from families to honeymooners and retirees – don't just come for the wildlife, but also the good life: gorilla viewings in the morning, massages in the afternoon, soaking in a tub with a glass of fine wine, and curling up by the fire with a book. The 12 habituated gorilla families may be the main draw, but Bisate Reserve is undoubtedly a destination in its own right. LISA GRAINGER *From about £2,475 per person, full board with on-site activities; wildernessdestinations.com*

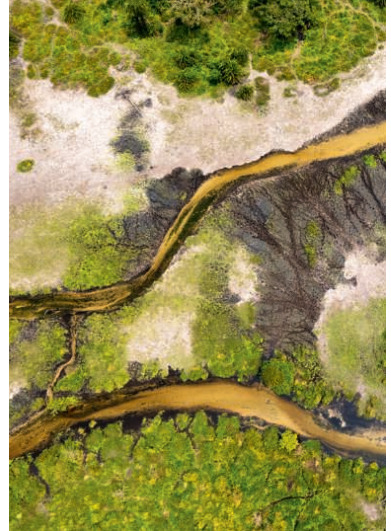




## ODZALA-KOKOUA NATIONAL PARK, REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

### CAMP IMBALANGA

For years mountain gorillas have stolen the limelight, but now their lower altitude cousins are stepping out of the shadows. Historically awkward and expensive to reach, Odzala-Kokoua National Park – named a Unesco World Heritage site in 2023 – is one of the best places to see lowland gorillas, and access is now much easier following the opening of a new camp by NGO African Parks. Wrapped by the dense emerald vegetation of Africa’s largest rainforest, four net-and-canvas tents decorated with kitenge fabrics sit on elevated platforms. Rooms are simple but it’s what’s on the immediate doorstep that counts. Waking up in the Congo Basin – a place so wild it generates its own weather system – is otherworldly; whooping screeches from wild chimpanzees flood the canopy and every rustle of leaves could be a passing forest elephant. A nearby hide overlooks a fertile bai (open swampland) where sitatunga graze and lowland gorillas come to “root mine”. Other activities include forest walks searching for rare bongo antelopes, or riverboat rides encountering bathing buffaloes or goliath herons swooping overhead. The tiny details, such as listening to the hammering of headbutting termites, are just as impressive. Eco-guides and housekeeping staff have been recruited from the local community, part of a plan to improve livelihoods for future custodians of the park. Next year a troop of habituated lowland gorillas should be ready for tracking, making this one of the most exciting wilderness escapes too few travellers know about. SARAH MARSHALL *From about £318 per person, full board; ukuri.travel*



PHOTOGRAPHS: IRENE GALERA/AFRICAN PARKS; GERHARD HÜDEPOHL/ATACAMAPHOTO.COM; CHRIS SCHALXX



## OKAVANGO DELTA, BOTSWANA

### TAWANA

For centuries the chiefs of the Batawana tribe have jealously guarded this corner of the Moremi Game Reserve in Botswana's Okavango Delta, one of the world's last undefiled wildernesses. But in 2024 Chief Tawana Moremi opened the door just a crack to let safari specialist Natural Selection build one of the smartest new lodges in the region. Lucky guests have access to 130 acres of unfenced land that teems with such a high concentrations of year-round wildlife (cheetahs and leopards included) that my binoculars remained untouched. For an added fee there are scenic helicopter flights over the delta's silver-ribbon rivers. The lodge's main area comprises an open, elevated dining terrace and living space that commands sweeping vistas of the grassy Gomoti River floodplain, a 180-degree stage for grazing warthogs, antelopes and elephants. Hippos wander thrillingly close to the terrace, while the humans enjoy a stellar selection of wines from the walk-in cellar. The camp can accommodate up to 22 people in eight huge thatch-roofed suites, each with a private pool. The contemporary interiors feature floors made from recycled cork and floor-to-ceiling patio windows that allow guests to watch the elephants and warthogs from the comfort of their bed. From the mainly Italian and French menu (including risotto with chard and sweetcorn, and excellent thin-crust pizzas from a wood-fired oven) to the 16-metre outdoor lap pool and in-room spa treatments, this is safari at its most spoiling, uniting style and life-affirming wilderness. *NOO SARO-WIWA* From about £1,555 per person; [naturalselection.travel](http://naturalselection.travel)



## MASAI MARA, KENYA

### MARA TOTO TREE CAMP

The 15th camp from Great Plains, Mara Toto is an adult treehouse fantasy for conservation-conscious travellers wanting to explore the Kenyan wilderness. Even though it's in the ever-popular Masai Mara, it sits on private land in a secluded corner, camouflaged by ebony, wild fig and mahogany trees in a patch of forest along the Ntiakitiak River. Toto, which means "baby" in Swahili, has just four suites and a maximum of eight guests. A walkway ascends from ground level into the foliage, linking rooms to a communal space with sumptuous brown leather sofas, a library and a wooden deck where dining tables and a firepit overlook the river and the plains. The walls in my enormous suite are made from cotton canvas for a sense of immersion – I fall asleep to the sound of hippos splashing in the river beneath me, and wake to the patter of monkey feet running across the roof. Breakfast includes gluten-free pancakes and build-your-own smoothies, with locally grown fruit and nuts, and superfood powders. The dinner menu leans towards plant-based dishes, though there are plenty of steaks and grilled meats too. After the evening game drives, in which my excellent guide, Nancy (one of a small but growing number of female guides in Kenya), shares her knowledge of Masai culture, a hot bubble bath or an in-room massage awaits. Best of all there's a professional Canon DSLR camera provided to every guest for the duration of the stay. *SELINA DENMAN* From about £1,675 per person sharing, all-inclusive; [greatplainsconservation.com](http://greatplainsconservation.com)





## DAMARALAND, NAMIBIA

### DESERT RHINO CAMP

People come to this remote expanse of rugged semi-desert in northern Namibia for one reason: to see some of the last desert-adapted black rhinos on the planet – and to help them survive. True, springboks and southern giraffes also make appearances, along with mountain zebras and the occasional cheetah or leopard, but it's really all about the rhinos. Setting out on a morning tracking expedition, over the Martian-like landscape scattered with red rocks, we are able to get within about 500 feet of one, our guides assessing the bull's mood (calm and friendly) by his stance. Standing there unperturbed, he moves slowly from side to side until his magnificent horn glows orange in the sunset. Desert Rhino Camp started life 20 years ago as a no-frills rhino research field station in Namibia's Palmwag Concession. Now, safari specialist Wilderness has scooped it up – its third camp in the region – and it has been entirely reimagined, reopening last summer as a design-forward oasis while continuing its crucial work. Six stone-walled suites hunker down into the landscape, their timber-clad and leather-accented interiors inspired by the terrain; with undulating canvas roofs it's as if they've sailed here on the wind. Between the morning and afternoon game drives is lunch served under the shade of a solitary tree, from a menu that includes bread and lamb potjie cooked over coals and marula nut crumpets. At night we relax on our outdoor bed gazing up at the stars – it's utterly dark, profoundly quiet. The camp is powered by its pioneering partnership with Save the Rhino Trust Namibia and three community conservancies, and guests are encouraged to help, learning to identify rhinos by their horns and ears, and recording each sighting. On our last drive we follow mother and calf Tuta and Casper. There may not be the sheer number of animals here that other African safari camps offer, but this is a wholly rewarding experience in an otherworldly setting. **KARIN MUELLER**  
*From about £442 per person, all-inclusive; wildernessdestinations.com*



## WHERE TO STAY *Safari*



### OKAVANGO DELTA, BOTSWANA

## ATZARÓ OKAVANGO

Perched above a floodplain near a year-round stretch of the Santandadibe River in the southern Delta, this eight-suite and two-villa contemporary thatch-and-canvas camp is Botswana's smartest new safari destination. One of just seven camps on the community-owned NG32 area, Atzaró is as wild as the Moremi Game Reserve adjoining it. The nearest village is a 50-minute drive away, and the closest airstrip even further, which is why all guests arrive by helicopter. With few other lodgings around, wildlife sightings are joyfully peaceful and prolific, with elephants and wild dogs to two resident lion prides to observe. Night drives are permitted for spotting rarer nocturnal-hunting creatures such as aardwolves, porcupines, civets, genets, honeybadgers and leopards. Guided mokoro canoe excursions are possible all year, although far better once the floods have arrived. This is not so much a camp as a lavishly accessorised Africa-meets-Bali-styled bush hotel at which to hang out by the 20-metre lap pool, work out in the outdoor gym, have great massages or just hunker down in the wine cellar. The suites and enormous two-bedroom family villas are set beside raised wooden walkways and each has a plunge pool with bush views. They are a bargain given that they start at half the price of some of the most exclusive bush hideaways in Botswana, and include just about everything barring spa treatments, high-end wines and transfers. *LG From about £550 per person, all-inclusive; atzaró-okavango.com*



### RUAHA NATIONAL PARK, TANZANIA

## KOKOKO CAMP

Sleeping beneath the stars is a simple pleasure easily delivered at Asilia's new exclusive-use camp. Inspired by the curved eyelids of a Verreaux's eagle-owl (known in Swahili as a Kokoko), three tents have retractable roofs that fold back on a cantilever to reveal the night sky, which is reliably bright in Tanzania's Ruaha National Park. Returning to the roots of safari, design features are straightforward but effective; rustic bucket showers are heated by a solar-powered donkey boiler, meals can be eaten cosied around a campfire and there's a homely open-sided main living area for reading, chatting and napping. Set along a river bed, beneath the shade of fig, rain and sausage trees, the camp replaces Kwihala, Asilia's first foray into one of East Africa's most underrated parks. Guests might find elephants digging wells between spindly date palms and wild dogs resting below baobabs in an area larger than Serengeti National Park but with a fraction of the visitors. Alongside crowd-free game drives, the camp offers adventurous wilderness hikes far wilder than run-of-the-mill strolls searching for insects and spores. The intrepid can scale a stack of granite boulders to find the pawprints of leopards hunting for catfish in rocky pools, and wander into off-road areas where few humans have ever stepped. Although no-nonsense, the camp still delivers comfort, service and a level of privacy far greater than most high-end equivalents. By stripping away superfluous distractions, the sights and sounds of nature feel much closer. A true eye-opener for safaris to come. *SM From about £1,315, based on up to two guests, full board with private guide; asiliaafrica.com*



PHOTOGRAPHS: ASILIA AFRICA KOKOKO CAMP; ATZARÓ GROUP; MATT DUTILE