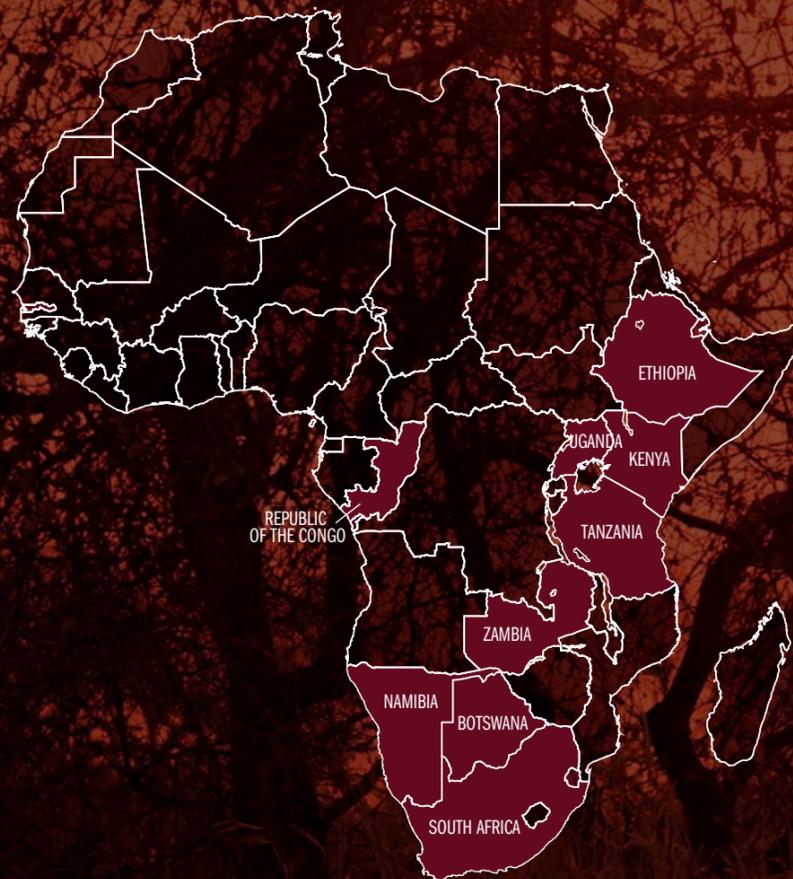


10 AFRICAN SAFARIS

YOU WON'T BELIEVE

From paddling the Zambezi to galloping across South African savanna, we've come up with the adventures you can't miss. They'll transport you through wilderness, introduce you to stunning landscapes and deliver some mighty animals along the way.



WALKING WITH GIANTS

FOR A MORE SERENE TAKE ON THE TRADITIONAL SAFARI, HANNA JONES LACES UP HER HIKING BOOTS FOR CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE WILD KIND IN KENYA.

Promises have been made: hike to the top of a huge rock called Nyasura in the distance and be rewarded with spectacular views over the plains. After about 15 minutes or so, it isn't the vista that proves to be the most magical element of the climb: we can hear men singing. Since we're in the middle of nowhere, Kenya, this comes as a bit of a surprise, but it does provide the impetus to get moving a little faster towards the summit.

Suddenly, we happen upon three Samburu warriors by a small rock pool. Each of them is washing his clothes in the water. It's hard to say who is more startled to see the other, but pleasantries are exchanged and we eventually continue on our way to the vantage point overlooking the Ewaso River and Laikipia landscapes.

There's no denying the appeal of taking an Ewaso River Walking Safari. This gentler, quieter approach to exploring the African wilderness offers the seasoned visitor to the continent another avenue to exploration.

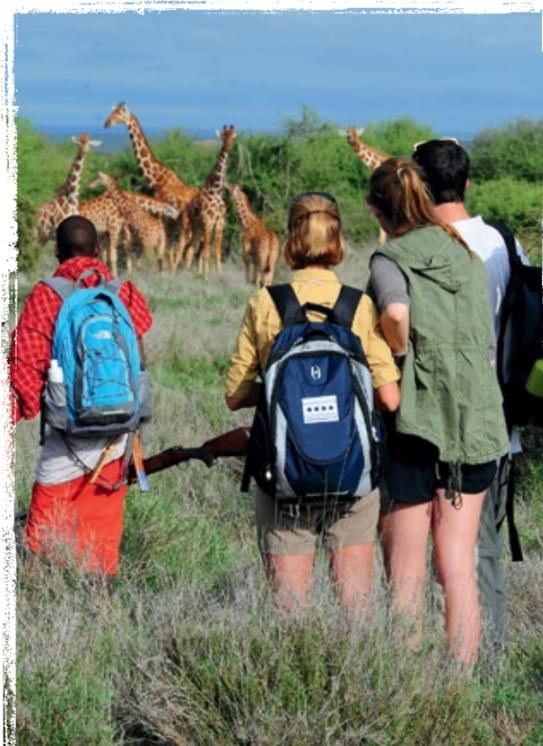
Words can't describe the feeling of walking through empty Laikipia landscapes. On a well-worn elephant trail we bump into an old man who has nothing but a spear in his hand. He speaks briefly to the guides and trackers and is on his way once more. At other times I'm acutely aware of the levels of life in this landscape. Without a vehicle to separate me from the environment, I can appreciate even the smallest of insects and flowers. But, this being November and the beginning of rainy season, there is plenty of other animal action. The acacia bush country is home to giraffe, zebra and impala, as well as monkeys and birds. Elephants, who like to bathe in the muddy stretches of the Ewaso Ng'iro River, can also be spotted.

One of this walk's unique aspects is its guides. Hailing from the Samburu tribe, who live mainly in north central Kenya (they're related to, but distinct from, the Maasai people), they lead the safaris dressed in traditional attire. This includes shoes made from old tyres – and if you doubt the effectiveness of such footwear, I'm here to tell you those old Bridgestones seemed to offer better footing than my hiking boots. They lead camels – a strange sight on the African plains – which carry food, water, cameras, camping gear and, whenever needed, weary walkers.

The guides are kind and knowledgeable. Walking alongside them or sitting around the campfire in the evening allows for easy conversation. I learn about their culture and customs, traditions and lifestyle, and in just a few short days they go from being the people who show me animals to fast friends.

Each day is a little bit different on the safari. I've opted for the luxury option and the tent has a bed with a proper mattress and linen, robes, lanterns and chairs out the front. Every morning begins with an early wake-up, as one of the guides pours warm water into a bowl so that I can wash my face while looking out over the landscape lit with the soft sunshine. Considering the camp is packed up and moved each day, the standards are remarkably high.

Each afternoon we explore the area around the camp, only to find one of the staff members hiding behind a tree with snacks and sundowners ready to go. Even the tonic water for the G&Ts is icy cold. Dinner is cooked over a fire on the ground, then, after the talking is done, there's nothing to do but head for bed where the sounds of the bush surround my canvas home and act as a wild lullaby.



GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Fly to Kenya by connecting over Bangkok, Guangzhou and Hong Kong with Thai Airways, China Southern and Cathay Pacific. Fares start at about AU\$2500 return. kenya-airways.com



TOUR THERE

The three-day Ewaso River Walking Safari costs from AU\$3455 a person, including meals and transfers from Nairobi. benchinternational.com.au



IN PURSUIT OF PRIMATES

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

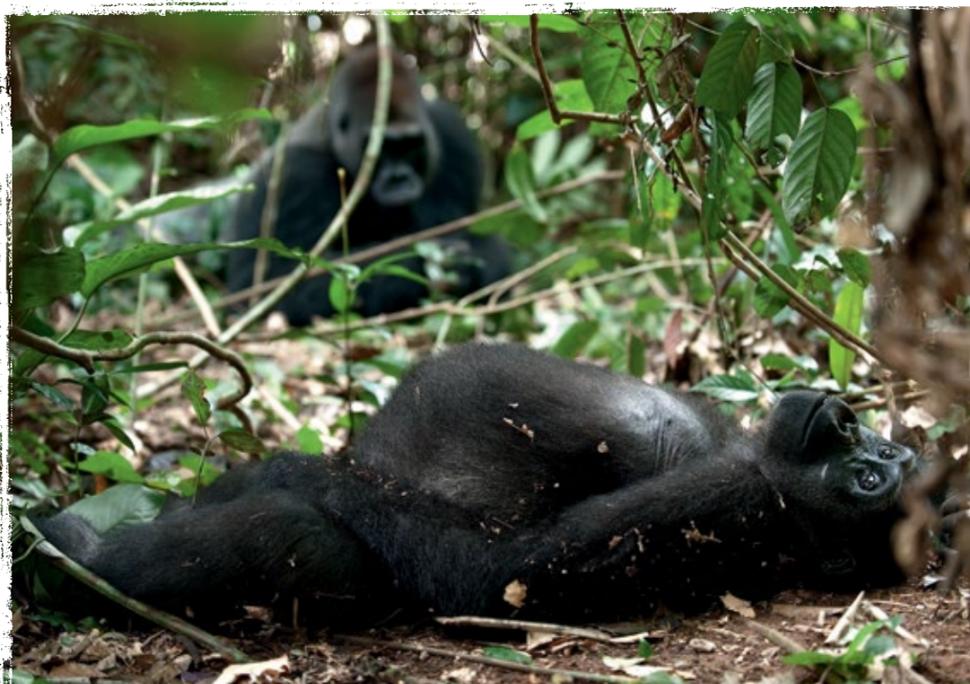
Not for your novice hiker, this safari leads you through remote rainforests of the Odzala-Kokoua National Park to track the endangered western lowland gorillas. No two forays into the forest are ever the same, and you'll follow expert trackers who monitor the gorillas' habits closely, leading you to where they slept the previous night as the sun's rays begin filtering through the canopy.

Covering distances of between five and eight kilometres, you'll trail the gorillas, who can move at remarkably high speeds, through the undergrowth, until they stop to eat, shimmy up trees and stare at their human cousins who've followed them into the bush. Along the way watch out for all variety of monkeys, exotic birds and magnificent butterflies, as well as, if you're lucky, forest elephants.

People often describe a gorilla encounter as one of the most emotional and humbling experiences of their lives. It's easy to see what attracted Dr Magda Bermejo here to study them. She lives at Ngaga Camp and about 17 years ago began habituating two groups of the gorillas to her presence. More recently, they've also had to get used to the travellers who stay at the eco-friendly, rustic lodge in groups of four at any one time.

After two days of tracking gorillas, the adventure moves to Lango Camp, about four hours away. Travel along the local rivers in motorised *pirogues* (canoes) looking for buffalo, red river hogs, primates and bongos, a type of striped antelope, before arriving at jungle hides where you'll watch the life of the forest unfold. *Nine-night trips to Ngaga and Lango Camps start at about AU\$10,275, including meals, permits and transfers from Brazzaville.*

naturalworldsafaris.com



THE SKELETON'S SOLITUDE

NAMIBIA

It may be one of the most uninhabitable places on the planet. Following the publication of John Henry Marsh's 1944 book on the shipwreck of the *Dunedin Star*, it's been called the Skeleton Coast, but the Bushmen of Namibia refer to this part of the world as the land God made in anger. Moody, isolated and strangely beautiful, the 500-kilometre-long Skeleton Coast National Park stretches along the Atlantic Coast from Kunene River in the north to the Ugab River in the south, showcasing plains, mountains and shifting dunes.

Departing Windhoek, this nine-day 4WD excursion includes walks to hidden waterfalls, wild camping on beaches, visiting wrecks and old mines, and keeping eyes peeled for desert elephants, herds of oryx and springboks, brown hyenas, black rhinos, fur seals and rare desert lions.

The nine-day Skeleton Coast Adventure is conducted on a private basis only. The cost for four people starts at AU\$3400, all inclusive, from Windhoek.

karibunamibia.com



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Go to www.southafrica.net



FROM EVERY ANGLE

SOUTH AFRICA AND BOTSWANA

If you can't decide whether you'd prefer to take to the African plains by foot, clamber into a saddle or quaff sundowners after witnessing a lion gorge on an antelope from the back of a 4WD, combine them all for the ultimate safari adventure. Start in South Africa, where you'll hike Cape Town's Table Mountain and meet a local who will share tales of his time imprisoned on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela, then glimpse rare zebras, ostrich and baboons as you cycle to Chapman's Peak on the rugged Cape Peninsula.

You'll go hiking and canoeing and get a taste of ancient history at the luxurious Bushmans Kloof Wilderness Reserve and Retreat, where more than 130 rock art sites date back 10,000 years. In the afternoon take a break from adventure for a spa treatment in the Riverside Gazebo and watch the sun set with a glass of one of the local vintages.

From South Africa a private charter flight

takes you to Mashatu in Botswana where more than 50 types of mammals and reptiles and 350 species of birds roam the plains. Three of the big five – lions, leopards and the largest herd of elephants on private land in Africa – as well as cheetahs, jackals, wildcats, ostrich and giraffe, make for excellent photo opportunities. You'll learn to track animals as you cycle between baobabs and giant sacrosanct Mashatu berry trees, for which the reserve is named. A blazing fire and canopy of stars accompanies your camp at night.

Before returning to South Africa for bush excursions by foot and 4WD you'll go for game drives and hike the Great Escarpment. After all that adventuring we bet you still won't be able to pick your favourite style of safari.

The 11-day South Africa & Botswana Multisport Adventure with Backroads starts at AU\$10,706, excluding internal flights.

backroads.com



WATER WORLD

WITH ELEPHANTS AND HIPPOS WATCHING ON, DANIKA PORTER EXPLORES THE SWAMPY WETLANDS OF BOTSWANA'S OKAVANGO DELTA.

Photography by **Danika Porter**

Camp rules dictate you cannot walk around unaccompanied after nightfall. Just the night before, a leopard had crept into camp and killed a bushbuck – the carcass is still there and everyone is certain the leopard will return for its prey. My guide, Onks, escorts me to my tent, then I am on my own. Lying in bed, with only an emergency air horn, I pray the canvas is a successful deterrent. The night, as it turns out, is far from peaceful – elephants trumpet, hippos grunt, baboons scream and there are plenty of other sounds I can't recognise.

This is my first stop of three on the Okavango Delta. Each of the camps is isolated within the immense waterway and accessed by bush airline. Only from this aerial perspective can you appreciate the scale of this lush paradise in the otherwise arid Kalahari Desert.

That afternoon, I clamber into a *mokoro* (dugout canoe), the traditional method of transportation in the delta. Chris is the poler, expertly navigating channels hippos have trampled through the papyrus. Onks travels ahead to ensure we don't hit a hippo speed bump.

Xigera Camp is a series of thatched huts and tents, all interconnected by raised boardwalks. But the 10 canvas castles are far from your average two-man dome. My accommodation is the size of an apartment, with separate bedroom, dressing room and bathroom, and an outdoor shower.

The dawn is freezing, but suitably rugged up, Onks and I head out on a game drive. We pass skittish impala, each face seemingly decorated with heavy-handed make-up. Onks teaches me how to gauge a giraffe's age by the darkness of its markings. Zebras parade stiff mohawks and tattooed stripes, the pattern of each as unique as a fingerprint. We encounter a macabre scene of squabbling vultures devouring a baby elephant carcass. All that remains is the deflated skin with leg stumps attached.



The bar and fire pit at Savuti Camp.



Petunia making himself at home at Xigera Camp.



Onks paddling ahead.



The elephant herd at Savuti Camp.

We stop just metres from a solitary bull elephant and my heart starts racing. He flares his ears, curls his trunk and rocks his head in a warning to back off. I'm nervous, but Onks judges his behaviour and calmly waits. The elephant eventually walks over to a palm tree and repeatedly head-butts the trunk. Palm nuts rain down and he deftly uses his trunk to shovel the tiny rewards into his mouth.

Back in camp, I help myself to the open bar while Petunia squelches up beside the pool. He's the resident hippo and is clearly not at all disturbed by over-excited tourists, ignoring me while hovering up swamp grass, his huge jaws chomping nonstop like a Hungry Hippo playing piece.

Before my next flight, we have to clear the dirt runway of hazards. This sophisticated process consists of Onks scaring off animals by running with his arms waving comically. Today's ride is a 12-seater Cessna Caravan and it's a mere five-minute skip to Kwetsani Camp. Straight from the runway I'm off with Kwetsani manager Dan, along passages in the grass just wide enough for our tinny to pass through.

As if on cue, a herd of elephants is gathering at the water's edge. The family of five could easily be missed, with only the tallest adults showing above the reeds. Dan cuts the engine and we float quietly as the footsteps approach. The matriarch wades across first and emerges with a distinct waterline dividing her body like Top Deck chocolate. A tiny baby slips right under, all but its periscope-like trunk disappearing into the water.

Where Xigera has a rustic Robinson Crusoe vibe, Kwetsani is styled like a fancy African hotel. An elegant restaurant and lounge adjoins a massive deck overlooking a vast dry plain. My tent is a dream treehouse with an interior equal to any luxury suite. Bi-fold doors open to uninterrupted views, so I can spy wildlife without leaving bed.

Meshack is my guide and we are on a leopard-spotting mission. A short boat ride takes us to Hunda Island, a haven for animals during flood season. Within 10 minutes Meshack locates a leopard and cub. The bub is a frisky kitten desperate to play, attacking its mum's legs to little effect. It's mesmerising to observe the mother's beauty and intimidating presence from just a few metres away. We hit the jackpot with another female leopard lounging nearby on a rock. She dozes like a passenger on a plane, her head slowly sinking forward, then snapping back up.

My final stop is Savuti Camp, located north of the delta in the Linyanti region. From the air the scenery changes dramatically as floodplains seep into barren landscape. It's a contrasting dusty transfer to reach Savuti's open huts and decks layered above the Savuti Channel. The waterway is an animal magnet and the 'bush television' plays a constant wildlife documentary. Twelve elephants appear seeking a drink, then two hippos emerge from the reeds and sink into the river. A pair of giraffes meanders past to complete the scene.



Inside the Savuti Camp tents.



Sunset drinks at the end of a game drive.

Goodman, the guide here, has organised sundowners at the hippo bar. He sets up drinks on the bonnet of the jeep beside a pool teeming with the wallowing creatures. Just beady eyes, flared nostrils and teddy-bear ears breach the surface. The animals disappear then resurface, flushing nostrils like a snorkel, in a different spot. The big boys tussle for dominance, yawning their jaws wide to reveal weapon-sized tusks. Catapulting their bodies out of the water they knock their mouths together – it's like an awkward first attempt at pashing.

I'm not long in bed that night when chaos breaks out. Trees snap like toothpicks and something is brushing my tent. There's a massive silhouette at my door and two white tusks gleaming in the moonlight. My nonchalant guest lets off a sloppy fart that wafts through my tent. I lie back very, very slowly and consider futile escape plans. Instead I lie awake for hours as the elephant herd happily feeds. In the morning Goodman laughs at my tale and says a thirsty elephant once skewered its tusks through a tent while the guest was showering.

As I reluctantly farewell my hippo neighbours and close the tent, I nearly collide with a feisty male elephant blocking my boardwalk. His splayed ears and rearing trunk bar my passage, so I lower my bag and wait. Ten minutes pass and the stand-off continues. This is surely a sign I'm not meant to leave this surreal Eden. Isn't it?

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

South African Airlines flies daily to Johannesburg from Perth with connections to Maun in Botswana. Return fares start at about AU\$2350 flysaa.com



TOUR THERE

Encompass Africa offers six-night all-inclusive packages from Maun, staying at three camps, starting from AU\$5099 a person. encompassafrica.com.au



STAY THERE

For overnight stays, Johannesburg's luxury Michelangelo Hotel is centrally located on Nelson Mandela Square. Rates start from AU\$450, including breakfast. encompassafrica.com.au



Why not make
'one day' today?
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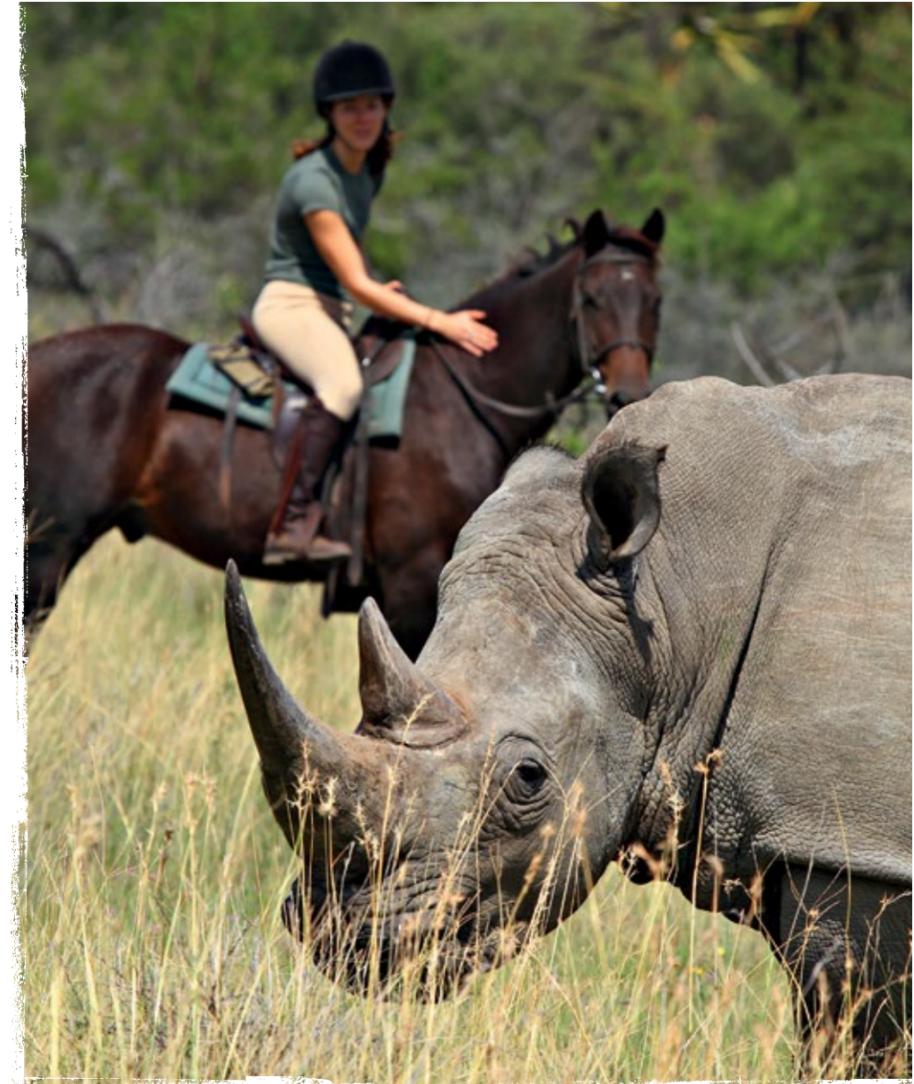


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PONY UP

SOUTH AFRICA

There's definitely an advantage to appearing as though you're an animal while trying to get up close to another. At the Ant Collection, the horses used for riding safaris graze and wander the bush with the game you're hoping to see – rhinos, giraffes and zebras are just some of the 40 species found on the 5000-hectare property – so none of them feels threatened by the presence of ponies.

Ant's has about 90 horses (most of them thoroughbreds or Arab-Boerperd crosses), so there's one to suit any level of rider, including those who've never been in the saddle before. Two guides accompany each safari through the private game reserve: one to canter along ridges and sandy tracks with those who are experienced equestrians, the other to hang back with the novices.

When you've had enough time atop your mount, head back to Ant's Hill lodge, built on the edge of a cliff, with a pool and deck overlooking Waterberg. Meals, including high tea before the afternoon ride, are a highlight, and each of the rooms and cottages is decked out with African fabrics, daybeds and touches of luxury. After dark there are wine tastings, night drives and sky safaris to teach you about the stars.

Four nights at the Ant Collection starts from about AU\$2595 a person, twin share, and includes meals, riding, walking and 4WD safaris, mountain biking, and transfers from Johannesburg Airport.

benchinternational.com.au



Sipi Falls.

NORTH TO ADVENTURE

UGANDA

It was once marred by the dark days of civil war, but Uganda is reclaiming its title as the pearl of Africa, and this 12-day safari through the country's little-explored north will take adventurers off the beaten tourist trail and deep into its wild heartland.

National parks sweep across the landscape, home to an astonishing abundance of flourishing wildlife, from some of the world's last remaining mountain gorillas to the big five. Each day you'll embark on game drives in a 4WD, explore the grasslands on walks and cruise along rivers by boat, weaving through lush savannas and rugged jungle.

Hike to Sipi Falls and cool off under the misty spray of its three tumbling waterfalls and visit remote Kidepo Valley National Park, where bird lovers will delight in attempting to spot the 475 different species that reside here. At Murchison Falls National Park you'll cruise by boat along the Nile towards thundering waterfalls, keeping your eyes peeled for grazing giraffes, bathing elephants, buffalos and lions among the borassus palms. Learn to track chimps in the Budongo Reserve and get up close to the elusive rhino at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary.

In the evenings, kick back in eco-friendly lodges, and relax weary muscles while recounting the day's adventures across this African utopia. *The 12-day Secrets of the North safari starts at around AU\$6090, including airport transfers, accommodation, meals, 4WD safari vehicle and national park entrance fees and permits. Each tour supports local communities and conservation projects.*

safari-uganda.com



Rafting the Nile.



FLOATING WITH ELLIES

ZAMBIA

Close encounters of the thick-skinned kind are frequent on this 163-kilometre paddle down the mighty Zambezi. It's not uncommon to manoeuvre around partially submerged hippos, glide past elephants bathing in the shallows or observe crocodiles sunning themselves on the banks during this six-day aquatic adventure with River Horse Safaris.

There's no other tour that takes visitors into this part of Zambia, traversing the entire floodplains of the Lower Zambezi and journeying through isolated Mupata Gorge before ending where the Zambezi meets the Luangwa River. Each day, the camp is packed up before dawn, everyone climbs into twin canoes and the journey begins before the heat kicks in. Wildlife abounds here, where humans are few and the landscape is vivid and unexpected. Vast walls of volcanic rock rise from the water in the Great Rift Valley and estuaries running off the main river feel as though they're completely unexplored.

At night, tents are set up on the sandy banks of the river and everyone helps out by preparing dinner or cleaning up. There's also the chance to go on game drives and walks, watching for animals that make their home further away from the river's edge. With a maximum of 12 guests on any given departure, this is an intimate way to observe the vast African wilderness.

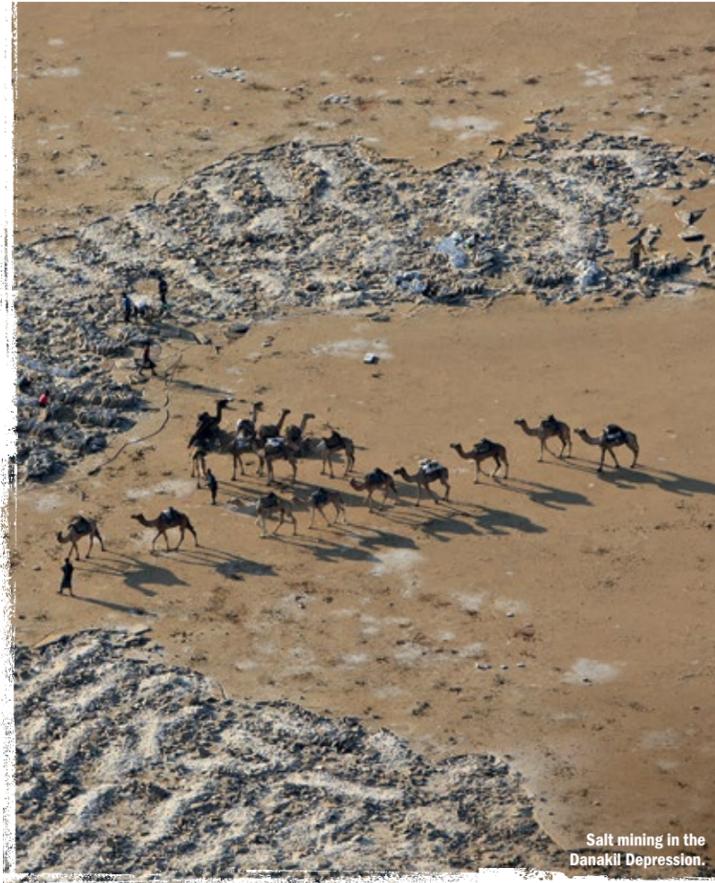
The five-night Great Zambezi Canoe Safari starts at about AU\$1350 a person, including canoeing and camping equipment, meals and soft drinks, and an overland transfer back to Lusaka at the end of the tour.

riverhorsesafaris.com





A resident of Tigray.



Salt mining in the Danakil Depression.



THE HIGH ROAD

ETHIOPIA

Skim the clouds in a chopper then swoop into some of the most remote landscapes on earth in the north of Ethiopia. Each day you'll witness panoramic views from the cabin of your private helicopter as it takes you to places only a handful of people have ever stood. Touch down in the Simien Mountains as first light illuminates its pinnacles and plateaus. Here, bearded vultures plunge from cliffs, scavenging for carcasses in the deep valleys below, bleeding-heart baboons, found only in Ethiopia, journey in harems of 800, and rare Ethiopian wolves and walia ibex roam the World Heritage-listed national park.

This is a land steeped in history and one of the world's oldest Christian nations. You'll visit churches hidden in caves and hewn from rock almost 1000 years ago.

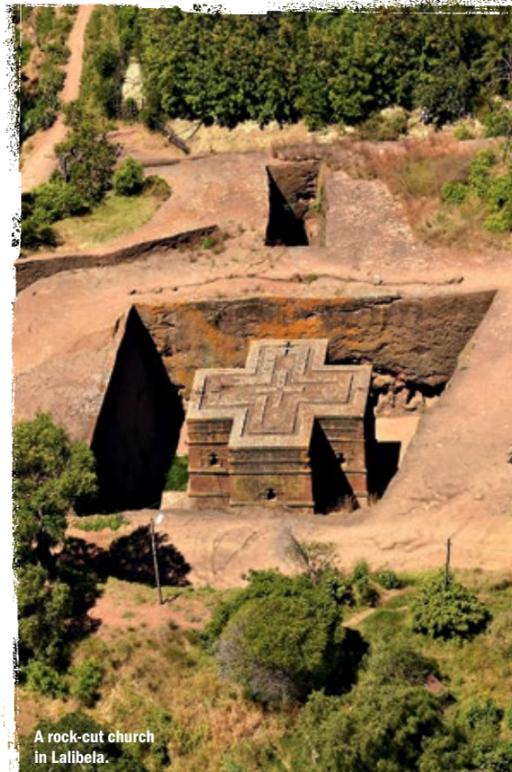
And if hell were a tangible place it would

be the otherworldly landscape of the Danakil Depression, where temperatures throttle the thermometer, making it the hottest place on the planet. Magma from the Erta Ale volcano spits and hisses from the ground and acid lakes sit in lurid ponds.

In the afternoon, you'll soak out the heat in freshwater pools and return at night to lodges that nod to the traditions of the region with the addition of modern amenities and luxurious trimmings. It's an experience unlike any other – after all, more people have visited the moon than set foot in some of the locations you'll explore.

The 10-day Journeys by Design helicopter safari through the highlands of Ethiopia costs AU\$56,000 a person, based on four people sharing the helicopter.

journaysbydesign.com



A rock-cut church in Lalibela.



The view from the Simien Mountains.

MONKEY BUSINESS

IN THE FORESTS OF TANZANIA, SARAH GILBERT CRASHES THROUGH THE UNDERGROWTH IN SEARCH OF A FAMILY OF CHIMPANZEES.

There is something about his broad shoulders and commanding presence that makes me notice him, and when his deep-set brown eyes hold my gaze for an instant it is electrifying.

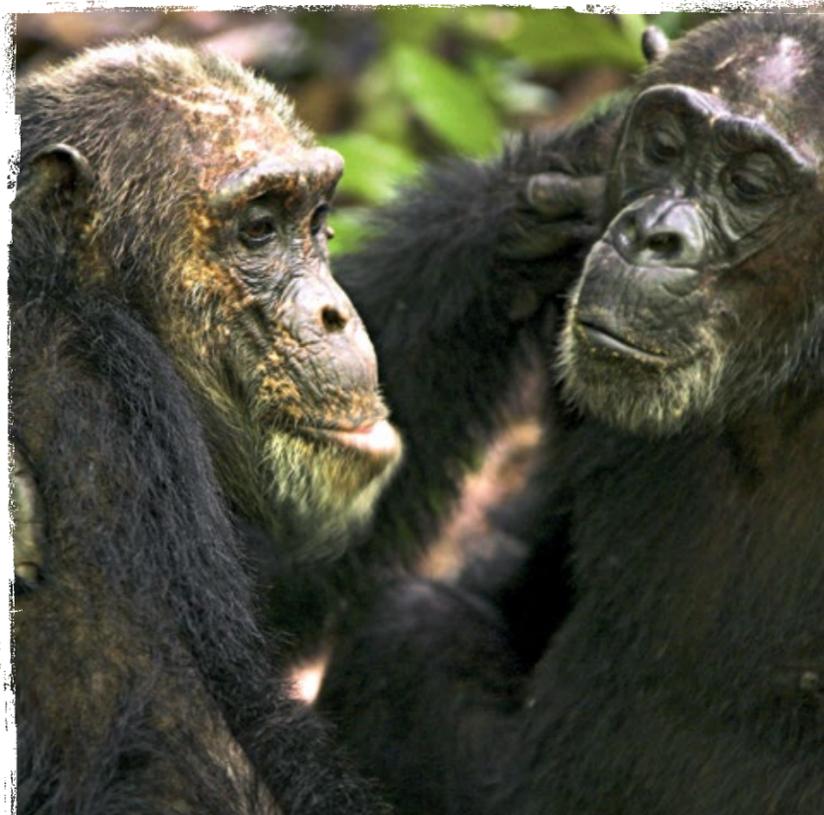
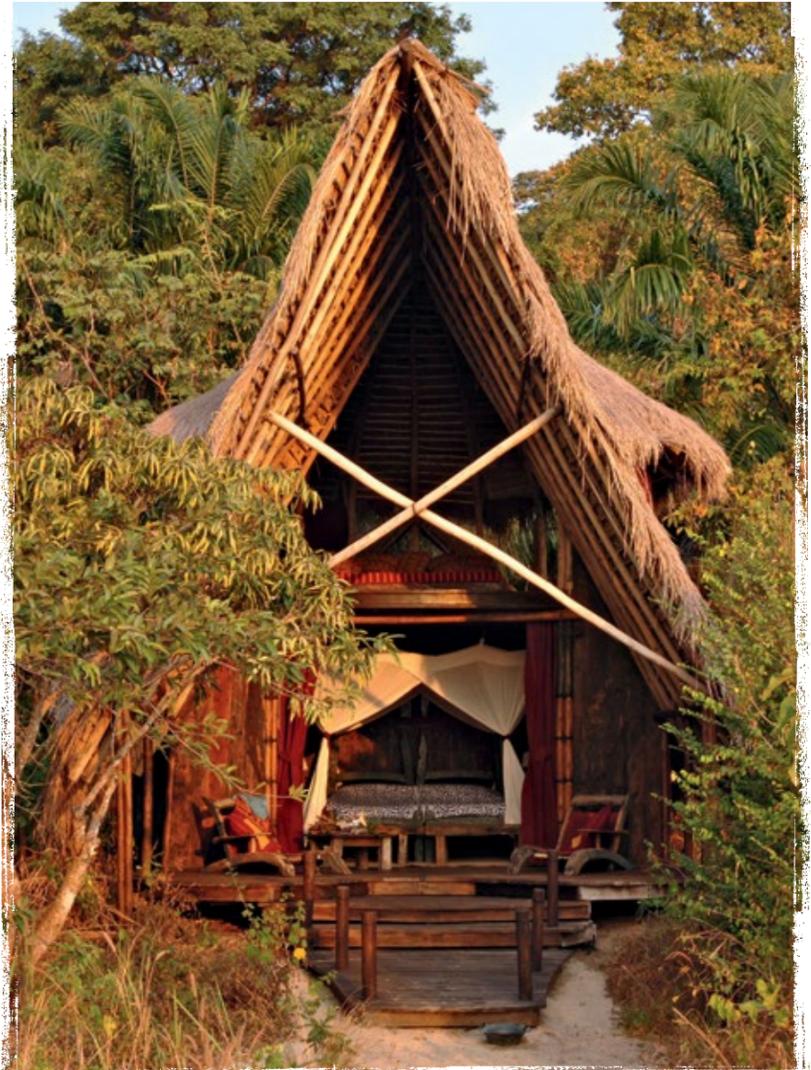
Primus is a chimpanzee, the undisputed alpha male, and our first sighting of him draws excited gasps. His mannerisms seem so familiar as he lies sprawled on the ground while two doting females comb his fur for ticks. Nearby, an adorable youngster gleefully practises somersaults, enjoying the original jungle gym, before being scooped up by his mother. They all seem completely unfazed by the arrival of the paparazzi.

There are few places left where you can still see chimps in the wild, but on the slopes of the Mahale Mountains in the far west of Tanzania, I get up close to these fascinating primates in their natural habitat.

The base for my four-night chimp-tracking safari is Greystoke Mahale. Set on a remote beach on the shores of gin-clear Lake Tanganyika and backed by thickly forested slopes, it's the epitome of barefoot luxury.

My room is one of six *bandas*, open-fronted thatched huts that are built to blend into the landscape, with a four-poster bed sitting under a netting cocoon and furniture handcrafted from the remains of wooden boats. There is no electricity, but solar power provides light; no air-conditioning but the walls allow the breeze





to filter through. There is no TV or wi-fi either, just the sound of the waves and birdsong for a wake-up call.

Every evening, guests gather for sundowners and relaxed chat at the rustic Beach Bar, perched on top of a rocky outcrop. It is here that we first meet our irreplaceable guides, Mutati and Mwiga, and learn about the do's and don'ts of chimping: only six people per group for no more than an hour and keep 10 metres away (the chimps don't always follow this rule).

At first light, trackers head into the forest in search of M group, who could be congregating a short boat ride and an easy 30-minute walk away, or high in the mountains, a tough three- or four-hour hike. There are around 700 chimps in the forest, but this 60-strong troop has been habituated to short spells of human contact from 50 years of study by Japanese researchers. And, like characters in a long-running soap opera, their lives are well documented and equally engrossing.

If the first day's sighting had been a relaxed spa session, our next encounter finds the chimps in a very different mood. They've caught a red colobus monkey and Primus is holding court at the top of a tree, handing out morsels

to his favourite females and grovelling males.

Suddenly a high-pitched hoot rings through the bush. It is a call to hunt and one of the most spine-tingling sounds I've ever heard. Just one call at first, then another, then the whole troop joins in, getting louder and more frenzied as, one by one, the chimps swing down from the trees and dissolve into the undergrowth.

In between chimp spotting, I go out on a boat, swim in the refreshingly chilly water, try my hand at fishing accompanied by the resident people-loving pelican, and spy on harrumphing hippos. Sometimes I just relax before a convivial dinner around the communal table, and drinks around the bonfire under a canopy of stars.

On my third morning, the chimps are foraging for fruit and on the move. And so we move with them, following behind our machete-wielding tracker. Like their larger, less agile cousin, I crash through the tangle of trees, clamber over snarls of roots and duck under wayward branches in hot pursuit. And it is hot, like a workout in a sauna, but worth it to be in the company of the chimps for just a few minutes more.

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Qatar Airways flies to Arusha via Doha and Dar Es Salaam. Returns fares from Melbourne start at about AU\$2400.

qatarairways.com



TOUR THERE

Trips to Greystoke Mahale cost from around AU\$920 a person per night, twin share, including meals, drinks, park fees and some transfers.

nomad-tanzania.com

