

Creature Comforts

In the early 1900s President Teddy Roosevelt sent a card to friends to show off his tent in East Africa where he had gone on the safari of the century. "My boma where I was camped alone," Roosevelt proudly wrote under a rather grainy picture of a tent adorned with the American flag.



Roosevelt

What Roosevelt paid for this "comfort" amounted to \$75,000 in 1909 (today's equivalent of well over a million). Today for about the rate that one would pay at a first-class hotel in a major city safarists can stay at luxury tents that offer teak floors, chandeliers, soft beds, great decor, jacuzzi baths and the like. (By the way, the American president had it all wrong when he described his tent as a "boma." This word actually denotes an open air enclosure where people meet and eat).

Teddy Roosevelt was, of course, not the first foreigner to follow the animals into the African interior and pitch a tent under the star-studded skies. David Livingstone, Cornwallis Harris, Samuel Baker and a slew of other explorers and hunters preceded the president.

Then Hollywood came along to romanticize the rustic with their own impression of what safari and other temporary camps should look like. Today many safarists still prefer to tented camps as "the Hemingway experience"—named after the famous author who popularized Africa with his tales about hunting and safaris.

Teddy's tent



In 1926 Eastman-Kodak founder, George “Pop” Eastman, pitched his tent next to Martin and Osa Johnson to get a taste of the safari experience. The Johnsons were sponsored by Eastman to film the first full-fledged wildlife documentaries in East Africa. Ever the inventor, Eastman set out to design a new safari shower. While seated in a zinc bathtub he regulated with a clothes peg the flow of warm water from a suspended canvas bucket. (Today a somewhat modified similar bucket shower is widely used at upscale tented camps).

Park Accommodation

With the establishment of national parks and eventually private game reserves, there was a need for permanent structures. In East Africa the park authorities built *bandas* (square thatched roof huts) and in Southern Africa they constructed *rondawels* (round-shaped thatched roof huts). Both were styled after the local tribal huts.

They started out simple and somewhat spartan but comfortable sleeping quarters with separate communal showers and toilets. Soon the beds became softer, bathrooms ensuite and overall design less austere. Good dining was provided in centrally



Eastman teaching Osa Johnson to empty ostrich eggs

located lodges for those who did not prepare their own meals with food supplies purchased at the camp store. Campsites were made available as well. Most safarists were locals and peak times were during school vacations.



Rondawels at Letaba Camp, Kruger National Park

The now familiar round and square huts became progressively more comfortable as game parks started focusing on more demanding foreign clientele. Today not only the locals but cost-conscious travelers from abroad opt for reasonable and comfortable accommodations.

In both Kenya's Maasai Mara and Tanzania's Serengeti the sanctioning of major hotels within these parks have been met with considerable opposition. While facilitating opportunities for larger numbers of visitors and increased revenues for the authorities they also add to the increasing traffic in sections of these parks.

Private lodges

In the seventies private entrepreneurs stepped in and the competition intensified. The animals remained the same so the battle for business centered around accommodations and service. Bush chic was born. These private lodges don't only look like they could compete with the best hotels in the world—they do.

Criticized by old-time purists for making the experience too sumptuous, bush chic pioneer Mike Rattray responded: "To view the animals you don't have to live like them."



Sabora tent interior, Grumeti Singita Reserve

Styles vary from luxury Hemingway-type tents—replete with soft beds, campaign furniture, bucket showers and rop toilets—to chalets with plush interiors designed by renowned decorators.

It all started in South Africa's Sabi Sand private game reserve and spread like a bush fire to other safari regions including national parks where entrepreneurs were granted leases by the authorities. Every national park sets its own rules. Most, but not



Dining at Serengeti-under-Canvas, AndBeyond

Bush chic



Ivory Lodge, Lion Sands, South Africa



JAO Camp, Okavango Delta



Ntwala, Caprivi, Namibia



Ebony Lodge, Singita, South Africa



Lake Manyara Tree Lodge, Tanzania,

The Ultimate Safari Guide

all, unfortunately, limit the private lodges to a small number of guests. Maasai Mara and Serengeti have allowed major hotels to slip through the fence. After allowing a few major hotels on the riverbanks in Chobe, Botswana today restricts lodges to one guest per thousands of acres and does not allow permanent structures in the Okavango Delta and other parks. Luxury tents on wooden platforms that can easily be removed to return nature to its pristine condition are the norm. In Kruger National Park private entrepreneurs who obtained leases are equally restricted in size but allowed to build permanent structures

However, in both private game reserves and national parks the emphasis remains on environmentally-friendly designs that blend in with the surrounding area. Service is outstanding and guests are pampered with *haute cuisine* varying from African-style

dishes and traditional food to continental food. Not surprisingly Africa's top private lodges regularly rake in awards from *Condé Nast*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Tattler* and a string of other notable critics. There are private plunge pools, and even fitness rooms, saunas and massages for those who might be concerned that all the rich living in the bush might transform them into human hippos.

Choice

The choice is largely, but not only, dictated by cost. Not even the best and most luxurious accommodation can compensate for a second-rate safari experience. Therefore the first consideration should be the quality of the rangers and the quantity and diversity of the surrounding wildlife. This is why it is important to seek professional advice before you plan your trip and make reservations.



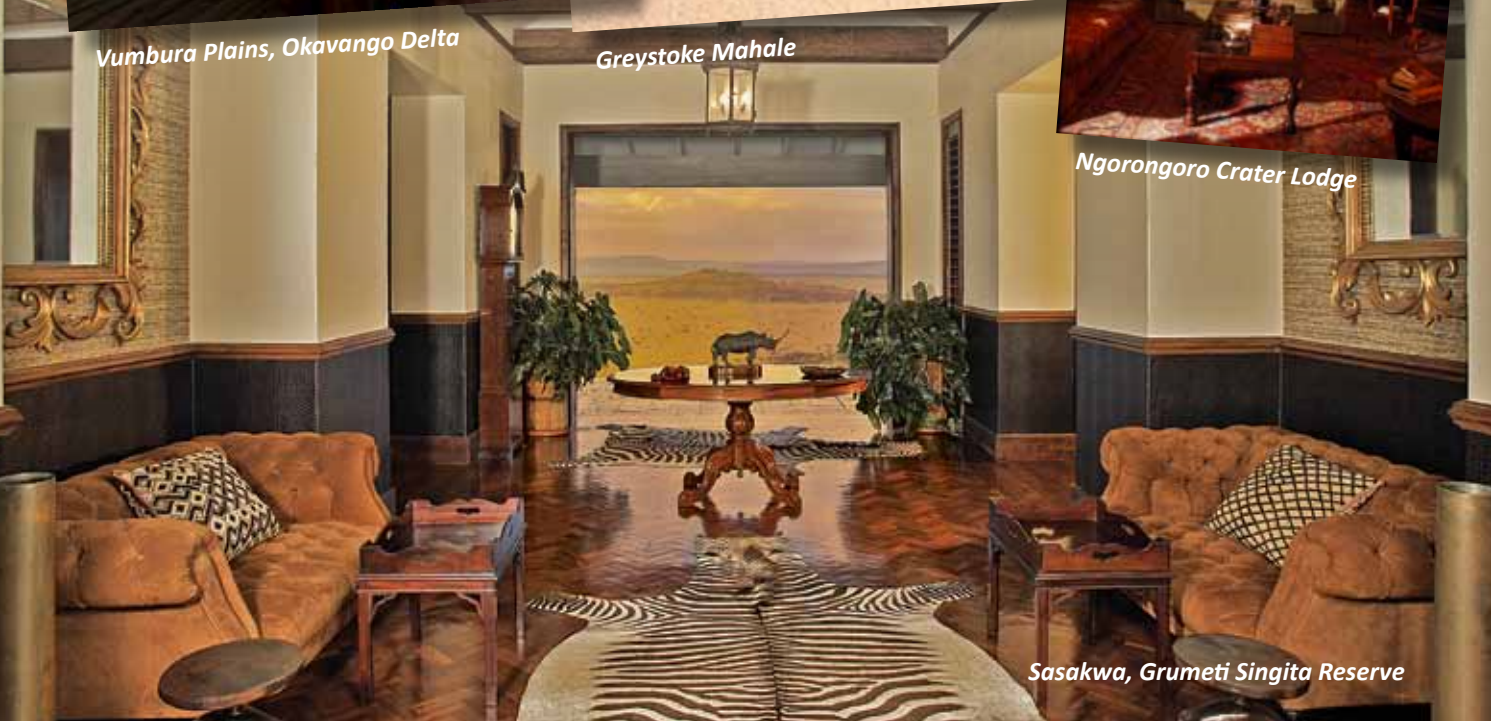
Vumbura Plains, Okavango Delta



Greystoke Mahale



Ngorongoro Crater Lodge



Sasakwa, Grumeti Singita Reserve

Bush chic



Kings Pool, Botswana



Chada Katavi, Tanzania



Serra Cafema, Namibia



Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, Tanzania



Djuma Lodge, South Africa



Sweni Singita, Kruger Park, South Africa



Elephant Plains, South Africa



Mala Mala, South Africa