



A SUITE AT &BEYOND'S
NXABEGA OKAVANGO CAMP



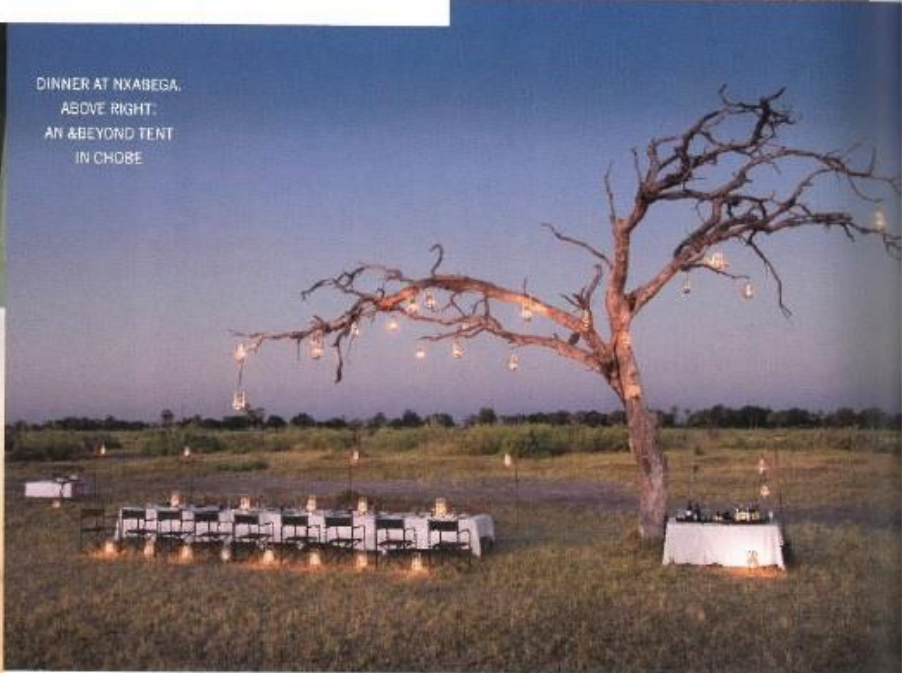
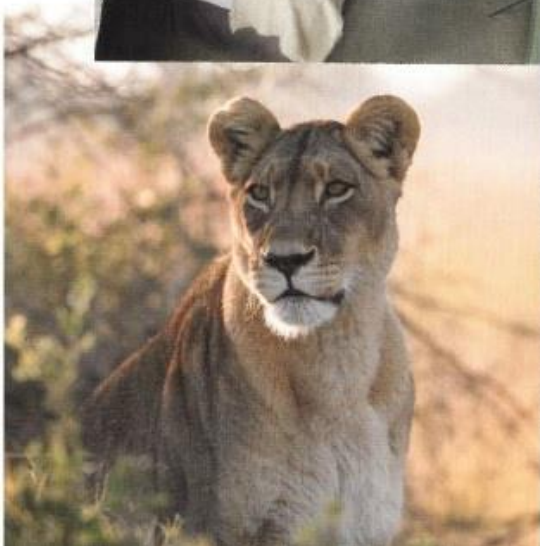
INTO THE WILD

On Botswana's floodplains and savannahs, the animal kingdom is thrillingly close at hand.

By Helena Lee



DINNER AT NXABEGA.
ABOVE RIGHT:
AN &BEYOND TENT
IN CHOBE



TRAVEL

We are face to face with a lioness, deep in the grasslands of Southern Africa. Her stealthy yellow-garnet eyes are keen, her fur tawny and smooth.

Then, a perceptible shift: her eyes narrow, her ears twitch. My husband and I realise there is an impala behind us, and all of a sudden we feel vulnerable. Despite sitting in the safety of a Land Cruiser, we are still between a predator and its prey. But, leaden in her movements, the lioness peels off into the shade of the fever-berry-tree. She's decided it's too hot to hunt.

It's difficult to revive that sense of wonder we once had as young children, when we cherished first-time experiences. But on safari, the stories of nature continually reveal themselves and so the wonder is limitless. We had been tracking the Simwanza pride for two days on a journey that began with a canopied boat ride down the Chobe River, a fast-moving tributary where Botswana meets Zambia and Namibia. Led by our exceptional guide KD, we were a small group of six, bound together by the curiosity of what we might see on a week-long trip across the national parks of Botswana (my husband Tom and I were also there to celebrate his 40th birthday, to savour some rare time away from our toddler). New life seemed to herald our arrival in the country, turning our first venture on the boat into a veritable game of I Spy. Here, a cavorting warthog and her three piglets by the mangosteen-trees, there nesting kingfishers on the embankment, digging holes for their eggs. We saw baby elephants all in a line, holding on to each other's tails with their trunks as they crossed the river, before spraying sand over themselves to cool down. A fallen tree trunk had proven a perfect playground for a city of chacma baboons, their long fingers pulling at the grass or grooming each other with care. The babies clung to their mothers' bellies, while the elders sat philosophically looking out at the river.

That night we raced against sunset, the colour of fire illuminating all in its path, to reach our camp that seemed buried in the wilderness. The travel specialists &Beyond had arranged three mobile camping sites that would be home for the next week. But this was glamping, of course, so we were greeted with traditional song and fresh lemonade on arrival, and enjoyed ensuite tents, kingsize beds and warm footbaths with citronella salts after a hard-day's safari. Butlers filled our basins every morning and evening with warm water scented by the hot coals they were heated over, and we showered alfresco under a sky framed by the leaves and boughs of the Kalahari apple-leaf-trees. There were no boundaries, no fences, and a liberation in the knowledge that we were at the mercy of the nature that surrounded us. As the sun went down, an ice-cold gin and tonic served by the fire and sipped beneath a curtain of

constellations revived us; we looked up and took in the Milky Way, twisting in an arc of galactic glory next to Orion's Belt and the Star of Magellan. From a tiny kitchen, the staff conjured three-course dinners: corn fritters with a pineapple and chilli relish, deeply spiced amber butternut squash soup, juicy pork chops caramelised by the flames of the open fire and orange marble cake with creamy yoghurt. It was easy to be seduced by the effortless luxury of it all, but the echo of the lion's call as we prepared for bed reminded us how close to peril we really were.

Two days later, after seeing the lions, we headed for the savannahs of Savute. Though still in the Chobe National Park, we drove into a different landscape of open plains, scrubland and grass, where the elephants had left their mark – countless skeletons of acacia-trees stripped by hungry pachyderms punctuated the horizon, like inverted lightning rods erupting from the ground. Herds of wildebeest, prehistoric-looking creatures with their dark, mask-like faces and black Mohicans on their spines, frolicked gaily by the edges. We saw two nuzzling lions on their third day of mating, but the leopard we were looking for eluded us over the two days, preferring the comfort of solitude up on an ancient rock high above ground. That night, a shooting star left a trail of red embers in the sky, marking Tom's birthday with a serendipitous flourish.

In Nxabega, we finally tracked down a leopard, having taken two flights in tiny six-seater planes to reach the lush floodplains of the Okavango Delta. Here, we were much closer to the action, and could venture off-road without the limit of an evening curfew as we were in &Beyond's private concession. We found the leopard on the slope of a bough,

perfectly placed to survey the world with her chartreuse eyes. She was small, elegant and still panting after a kill. Her two-month-old cub feasted enthusiastically on the leg of the unfortunate antelope, blood dripping from the fur round its mouth.

On our final day, we stayed in one of &Beyond's lodges, swapping tents for suites, and open fires for swimming in a pool by the plain. We forwent the 5.30 wake-up call to see the warm glow of sunrise from



our bed, the silhouettes of palm-trees turning from shadows to shades of green, and the citrus colours giving way to a white-blue sky. My iPhone had been in airplane mode for seven days – the most glorious seven days elongated by early call times and lingering evenings. Our disconnection from signal, email and news meant experiencing a stronger connection with the land, and the world as it should be: the animals, who are governed by their own laws and behaviour, the stars that appear at night, the twinkling planets that burn low and bright against the early-morning sky... □
Six-night trips to Botswana start from about £2,675 a person with &Beyond (www.andbeyond.com).