

WILD AND FREE

Three newly-opened luxury lodges take Private Edition from the roaring waters of the mighty Zambezi River to the gentle shade of the jackalberry tree in the Okavango Delta.

IT IS SAID THAT ONCE you've lived in Africa you're forever changed. Whether it's the vastness of the landscape, the blueness of the skies, or simply the lifestyle or people, those who leave often pine for the unique feeling Africa evokes. Some are never happier than when they're in the bush, where the animals roam free. It is here that we are put back in our rightful places, in awe of nature.

DUKE'S CAMP (OKAVANGO DELTA, BOTSWANA)

Ascending the wide wooden stairs to a large tent in the serene afternoon shade of a jackalberry tree, Duke's Camp is instantly, almost eerily, familiar to anyone who's been to the Bousfield school of Botswana safari.

Over several decades now, the Bousfield family has crafted a unique way to experience the African bush. Their offerings, under the Uncharted Africa banner, fall somewhere between comfortable and adventurous, often in rapid succession. Game drives, for example, are on custom Toyota Land Cruisers with the option of rooftop seats. Drivers' doors have wooden armrests weathered from years of use, and there aren't luxuries like bucket seats or USB charging ports. Guides won't necessarily warn you of upcoming branches and may throw the vehicle around the odd corner in pursuit of wildlife, but then, moments later, they'll pour you the coffee of your life to savour with freshly baked granola served in a white bowl with a silver spoon.

Until now, these experiences were only an option available on the desolate Makgadikgadi Pans, or an intrepid mobile safari often led by Ralph Bousfield himself. But the realisation of a longstanding dream has seen him strike a deal with Duke Serefo, whose family has lived on the land for generations, to open a sister to Jack's Camp in the Okavango Delta.

Already known by the moniker 'Duke's', the familiarity and cross-references to Jack's are no coincidence. When Bousfield and his Uncharted Africa team rebuilt Jack's during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, they chose to upcycle much of the iconic camp for use at the new Duke's. Touches like the copper pitcher on arrival, the flapping vintage tents, and antique furniture are familiar across the portfolio.



Duke's Camp offers a genuine safari experience that combines the thrill of a game drive with the simplicity of unwinding on the deck of your tent soaking up unobstructed views of the Delta.



'Jack's camp has always been a real safari camp, and Duke's is now the same,' says Bousfield. 'We have always loved the elegant simplicity of a stylish, beautiful yet real safari camp. We saw that there was a niche for this and so built Duke's as a traditional, proper safari camp that is simple yet elegant and beautiful.'

Wandering around the main tent, past display cabinets filled with relics, faded family photographs, and an antique wooden trunk repurposed to hide an upright drinks fridge, a large vintage dining table laid with antique silverware and crystal glasses invites you to take a seat. Across the verdant Delta in the middle distance an elephant grazes in a knee-deep channel, pulling clumps of long grass from the shallows before effortlessly swishing them into its mouth.

Where Duke's starts and the wilderness ends is deliberately impossible to tell, for guests and elephants. Mokoros ready for poling lie metres from the main tent, there's no visible fence to speak of, and pathways have been hollowed out through dense bush that's no match for a meandering elephant or a skulking leopard.

'We have built Duke's camp as the last word in real and traditional authentic safari camps,' Bousfield says. 'The tents are proper tents. You walk on the sand. You engage with the environment around you. And you don't feel removed from the surroundings and the experience. You are part of it all.'

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the guest tents, which poke through the riverside vegetation and hover above the water for uninterrupted views of the Delta. When night falls, and you're tucked into your waist-high four-poster bed surrounded by nothing but the highest quality bedding, a mosquito net, and a few millimetres of canvas, the whooping hyenas and chomping hippopotamuses remind you this is about as wild as luxurious Africa gets.

By Andrew Thompson

naturalselection.travel/camps/dukes-camp/

LEJWE LA METSI (LIMPOPO, SOUTH AFRICA)

On arrival at Lejwe La Metsi (the rock of water) in Limpopo, it feels almost unimaginable that such a place exists. Just outside Bela Bela, (a two-hour drive from Johannesburg), the sheer opulence of this establishment belies the imagination. Nothing has been spared in terms of luxury. Roman pillars, travertine floors and marble counter tops provide the six private villas with an air of extravagance, quite atypical of your usual game lodge found in the African bushveld. Although unique pieces such as an oversized leopard print armchair and a kudu horn lamp offer token reminders of your surrounds. Despite their generous size, each villa is discreetly tucked away into the hillside surrounded



by lush, landscaped gardens and trickling waterfalls creating an oasis from the hot dry surrounds of the area.

Malaria-free Lejwe La Metsi's is home to a remarkable diversity of flora and fauna and you can look forward to game drives where you'll spy jackal, hippopotamus, giraffe and zebra. But most unique about this reserve is its conservation efforts of more rare species such as the African buffalo, Zambezi sable, golden wildebeest and black Impala. Sitting on the back of a Landy at sunset with massive buffalo standing so close you can hear them breathe is as mesmerising as watching a herd of pitch-black impala grazing in the open veld, or a golden wildebeest galloping past.

For the more active, the lodge offers a variety of activities including guided quad-bike tours designed to offer a unique perspective of the reserve – great for older children and the adventurous to get up close to a giraffe or a troop of baboons. You can also take a walking safari with an experienced guide and immerse yourself in the sounds, smells and sights of the bushveld close up. You can even enjoy a sky safari – due to the reserve's remote location and virtually no light pollution, the night sky here has a remarkable bounty of stars.

But it's the smallest things that make the experience of staying here special. Breakfast served outside your own private villa

overlooking the lawns, an extravagant picnic laid out next to a trickling stream, and the staff's warmth and attentiveness (from suggesting custom-made cocktails to blowing up floating pool toys for the kids).

While there is nothing subtle about the appearance of Lejwe la Metsi, not the grounds that conjure up being in a tropical jungle, or the extravagance of the private villas, here you'll still find that home-away-from-home feeling that makes for a memorable stay.

By Susan Newham-Blake

lejwelametsi.co.za

MUKWA RIVER LODGE (LIVINGSTONE, ZAMBIA)

Arriving at your destination at night can be disorientating. On the upside, there's the thrill of waking up in a foreign land, drawing back the heavy blackout curtains and gazing at the scene in front of you – in this case the mighty Zambezi river, mud-coloured, rushing past you, a herd of buck on its banks in the gentle morning light, the cry of a fish eagle overhead. You're outside the town of Livingstone in Zambia, home of the mighty Victoria Falls. But it's the river in front of you that makes you pause, the sheer size of it, its untouched beauty. Throughout your stay, you will stare out at it, watch the biggest crocodile you've ever seen slip silently into the water, track the path of a mother and baby hippopotamus bobbing down the river, and marvel at two brave fisherman manoeuvring their precarious wooden canoe through the reeds next to the riverbanks.

It's the power of the river that drew the family who own The Residence in Houghton, Johannesburg, and Camp Ndlovu in the

LEFT All fresco dining with a view at Duke's Camp.
BOTTOM LEFT The Lejwe La Metsi experience is completely immersive: from luxury accommodation in one of six villas to guided tours of the surrounding bushveld.
BOTTOM The villas are secluded and private as seen in this aerial view of the lodge and its rugged surrounds.



PHOTOGRAPHY SUPPLIED



There's no better way to punctuate the day than with a sundowner and the generous view of the ever-present Zambezi from the deck of the main lodge. **BELOW** Mukwa integrates seamlessly into the lush, natural environment of the riverbank.

ALL SUITES HAVE PRIVATE DECKS WITH VIEWS OF THE RIVER OR WATERWAYS.

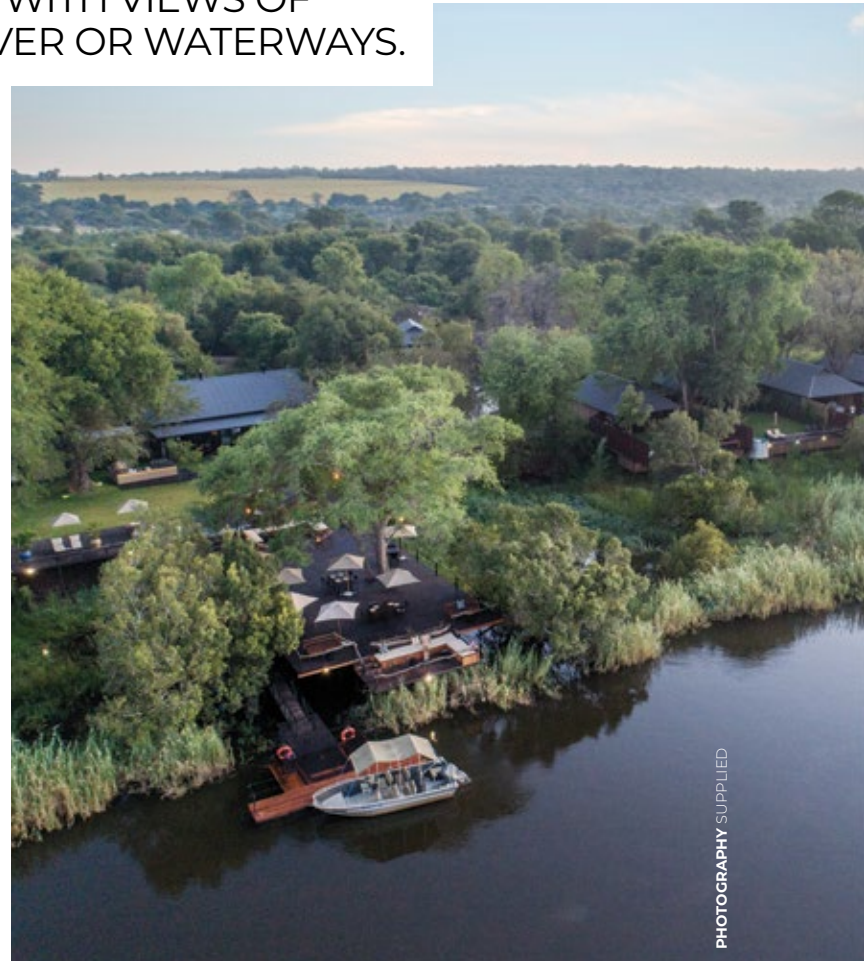
in the Welgevonden Game Reserve in the Waterberg in Limpopo, to purchase this unspoiled stretch of land on the Zambezi and open this sister property, Mukwa River lodge, 28 minutes from Livingstone Airport and 10km from Victoria Falls.

The newly launched lodge is exclusive and intimate, accommodating only 14 guests in six spacious, free-standing suites, including one two-bedroomed family suite. All have private decks with double outdoor showers and a bath, a plunge pool and pool loungers and a dining area, all with spectacular river or island waterway views.

The lodge is seamlessly integrated into the lush, natural environment on the river and you'll find yourself wandering over waterways on your boardwalk to get to the main lodge to dine. Meals are a culinary encounter to remember, with Mukwa serving locally sourced and produced dishes, complemented by an excellent wine list. Chickens, named and loved by the owners, are kept on a dedicated site within the property to provide fresh eggs daily. The kitchen garden produces herbs, fruit and vegetables, and other fresh produce is sourced from local farms and the surrounding community.

But back to the river. Sunset on the Zambezi takes the form of sipping an ice-cold gin and tonic inside a boat while floating past hippos, crocs and a world of birdlife, while an orange African sky takes your breath away. Or sitting back on your private deck with its sweeping views of the river and the Zambezi National Park, to watch animals come down to drink at the river. No wonder then that Mukwa River Lodge was voted the Best Relaxation Retreat in Africa in the 2022 Haute Grandeur Global Hotel Awards.

By Susan Newham-Blake
mukwariverlodge.com



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