

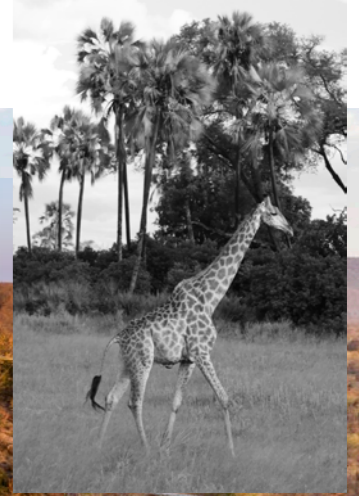
MY FAMILY & OTHER ANIMALS

On a thrilling tour across South Africa and Botswana, Helena de Bertodano and her clan experience unforgettable moments at every turn



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TRAVEL



Lying outside on the sky bed at night, perched high above the meandering Palala River, my teenage son Ben saw so many shooting stars in the limpid night sky that he ran out of wishes. 'I've started making them for my friends instead,' he informed me when I joined him on the glass floor of our villa's balcony. It felt as if we were suspended in space, the ravine below, the moon above.

We were staying at Noka Camp, a fabulous new lodge three hours' drive north of Johannesburg in the Lapalala Game Reserve, South Africa, one of the last remaining true wilderness areas in the world – hence the shimmering clarity of the night sky. It was the beginning of a two-week trip that was subsequently to take us to three different Wilderness lodges in Botswana's Okavango Delta: the new Qorokwe Camp, and the recently renovated Jao and King's Pool.

All four sites have strong ecological credentials, but Noka trumps them all in terms of its undiluted commitment to the environment. Part of the family-owned Lepogo Lodges, it is the first luxury camp in Africa to offset the carbon footprint of every guest, from the moment they leave home until their return. In my case, this meant donating a stove to a local village to neutralise the journey I made from London with my mother – who has never visited Africa – to join my son, currently on his gap year here. The lodges are not for profit, so 100 per cent of any financial gain is reinvested into the reserve for the benefit of wildlife, conservation and the local community. All energy is self-generated by a 250-metre solar walkway that links the five villas. 'The entire lodge is built on stilts,' says Dan Hughes, Noka's head ecologist. 'I like to think of it as a place in time: you could come back to this spot in the future

and it will be as if the lodge never existed.' Certainly, the surrounding animals did not seem to notice its presence: we saw baboons swinging through the trees around our balcony, elephants meandering beside the walkway and klipspringers (small antelopes) bounding away as we approached the entrance of the villa.

When we ventured out into the



Left, below and top centre: Lepogo Lodges' Noka Camp, Lapalala



50,000-hectare reserve, the sightings were even better. Within a couple of hours of arrival, our guide Josia had taken us to see a lioness leading her cubs to a recent zebra kill, while their father lay beside a nearby lake, lifting his head nonchalantly to yawn amid the clouds of yellow butterflies. Josia's dedication to giving us a unique experience went as far as licking a heap of animal dung to check whether it came from an elephant and squeezing the liquid out of another to show how fresh it was. ('Do you want to try?' he asked, waving me towards a fragrant pile. 'I'll take your word for it,' I responded, backing away politely.) Afterwards, perched close to the edge of a cliff, we sipped sundowners – pink gin cocktails to complement the spectacular sunset views – alongside delicious snacks prepared by Noka's in-house chef Thapelo Letsogo (a protégé of Heston Blumenthal). His creative dishes, which included ostrich steaks with roasted butternut squash and asparagus, and seared Limpopo trout with homemade 'caviar', were among many highlights of our stay.

The juxtaposition of raw nature and state-of-the-art technology is a delicate balancing act, but the camp manages it perfectly. Everything in the villa is controlled from a bedside iPad: at the touch of a button, the blinds slowly lift and the doors slide open to reveal the sun coming up, rising over the river as white-throated bee-eaters swoop low. An outdoor gym, with two running machines and a yoga deck, is nestled among the trees, offering views over the villa rooftops and the natural beauty beyond. There's a helipad for guests wishing to fly in from Johannesburg, while the ground transport consists of a Land Cruiser with heated seats and all mod cons (you can even charge your phone while you watch an elephant ambling towards you).

At the Wilderness camps in Botswana, where we travelled next, we were once again impressed by the eco-friendly emphasis. Jao, which reopened last year, sits on an island and has roofs that look like thatch but are actually made of recycled plastic. The pool area, shaded by a domed structure crafted out of blue gum-tree branches, appears otherworldly, like an upside-down bird's nest during the day or a spaceship when lit up at night. But there are constant reminders of the bush – not only in the decor, which reflects the terrain, but also in the wildlife: vervet monkeys scampered through the dining area and we encountered mongooses chattering at our door.

It is not surprising to hear that the former President of Botswana Ian Khama recently chose Jao for a family holiday, as did Katy Perry, who apparently partied until four in

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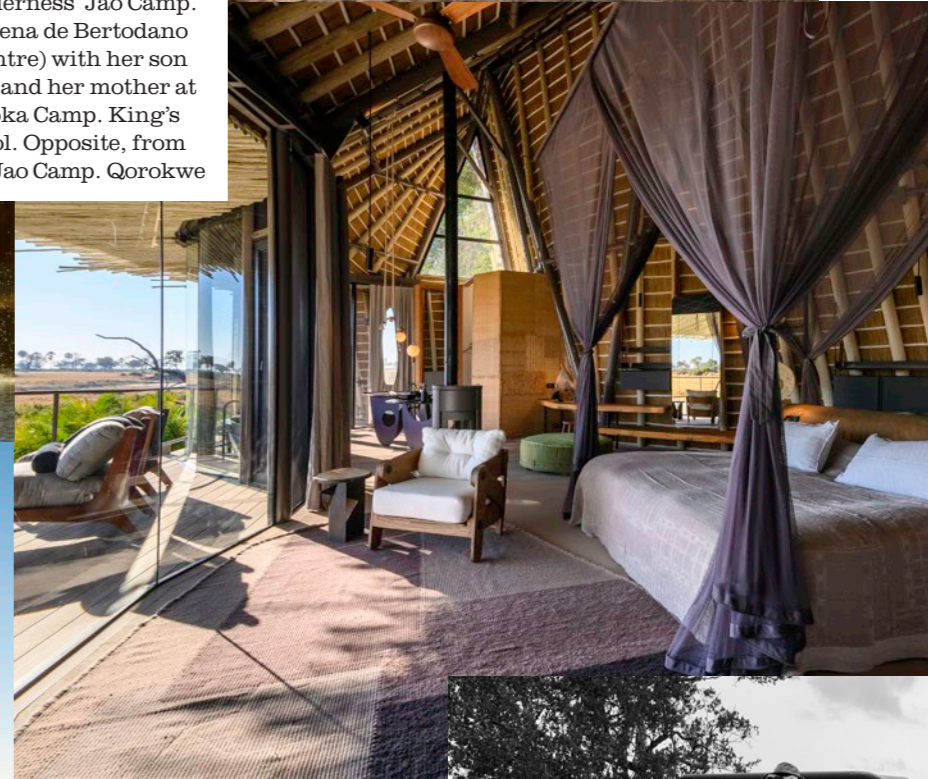
the morning and skipped the dawn game drives – although her mother embraced them. When you check in to any of the Wilderness camps, you are told that wake-up time is at five 'unless you want a late start at six'. I admit that I grumbled about the early starts (unlike my own mother, who, like Perry's, was bursting with energy each day, pronouncing enthusiastically that 'you only live once'), but the sunrise drives were well worth it. Our guides were exceptional, especially Jonah from Qorokwe, who, on spotting an agitated giraffe on the horizon, steered the safari vehicle over thorny bushland, skirting around the termite mounds until we found the reason for her distress: her week-old baby was being eaten by a lioness. Whenever the mother giraffe approached, the lioness would pounce; the giraffe bounded away but soon clopped back to gaze at her fast-vanishing offspring with big, sorrowful eyes. As we watched, vultures waited in the surrounding trees and black-backed jackals padded about at a safe distance. My son, gripped, lingered to take hundreds of photographs; my mother, I could sense, felt it was time to move on.

Our last stop was King's Pool, where we stayed in a villa looking out over a reed-encircled lagoon. Here, our quest was to find a leopard, the only member of the Big Five we had not yet glimpsed; we spent hours following fresh tracks, scouring the ground and treetops alike for their maker's presence. For the first 24 hours, our search proved fruitless, but towards the end of the second day, our guide BK glimpsed something as we drove past a bush and started reversing slowly backwards. 'There,' he exclaimed excitedly. But instead of a large, lithe creature leaping out, a tiny head emerged curiously and BK laughed: it was merely a leopard tortoise, so named because the pattern of its shell resembles a leopard's coat. Only when night fell and we were almost back at camp did we see the ghostly shape of the elusive big cat slinking across the path in front of us. For the first time on this trip, my son did not have his camera at the ready, but was so spellbound he didn't care. 'All my wishes have come true,' he said, awe-struck. I could only agree. □

Noka Camp (www.lepogolodges.com), from £780 a person a night; Wilderness Safaris' Qorokwe, from about £1,320 a person a night; Jao Camp, from about £1,560 a person; and King's Pool, from about £1,670 a person (www.wilderness-safaris.com). All prices are based on two people sharing a room and include all meals. Virgin Atlantic flies from Heathrow direct to Johannesburg with return fares from £469 a person. Airlink flies from Johannesburg to Maun (to meet Wilderness light aircraft), from £340 return.



Clockwise from right: Wilderness' Jao Camp. Helena de Bertodano (centre) with her son Ben and her mother at Noka Camp. King's Pool. Opposite, from left: Jao Camp. Qorokwe



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