

Traveller MAGAZINE Essence

ISSUE 30 | JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2025

**OKAVANGO DELTA
CHRONICLES AT
DUKE'S EAST CAMP**

**EPICUREAN LUXURY AT
LA CLÉ FRANSCHHOEK**

**ESWATINI: A SOLO
TRAVELLER'S PARADISE**

**TOUCHING THE WILD
FROM ASILIA AFRICA'S
REKERO CAMP**

JOHANN DU PLESSIS

**BUILDING THE LABOTESSA LUXURY
BOUTIQUE HOTEL DREAM**



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EXCLUSIVE SOUTH AFRICA SAFARIS 2025

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Yvonne C. Mtengwa



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Editor's Note



Last year has been quite the adventure! So much of an adventure that we find ourselves looking back at our achievements as a publication and can only be grateful for how far we've come. Beyond turning 4 years old, we launched our all-new online content hub, which was well received and certainly signifies our growth and the depth of content we have produced over the years. We took our time with this one as we marvelled at the fact that this would be our 30th Issue! 30 whole Issues Friends!

2024 was certainly a year we are proud of, launching Travel Essence Getaways; the curated travel arm of our business which came inspired by our team's journeys when sourcing content. We inked two great partnerships with luxury safari companies that will bolster our trip offerings, we explored a few new destinations and embarked on a filming project that we are particularly excited about. We are still in mid-production, so more to come on this. With the year already looking quite promising after my return from my first 7-day trip across 2 of Africa's most iconic safari destinations – Tanzania's Serengeti and Kenya's Maasai Mara – a big

one for us this year, beyond publishing stellar content, our goal is to take more clients from the Middle East with us on exciting trips to Africa.

Looking ahead at 2025...


I hope our first Issue of 2025 offers you our readers, a special look at the dynamic and evolving landscape of African travel this year. You've probably seen the reports. You are certainly inundated with copious amounts of content on the digital spaces and across social media. Each article, video, reel or carousel truly highlights why the continent is not just a destination; it's a vibrant tapestry of experiences, leading the way in conscious and trans-

There is a charm about the African wilds that grips the heart and will not let go. It is a charm that knows no season, that is potent alike under the fierce glare of the noonday sun and under the soft, mysterious light of the moon.

— FREDERICK COURTNEY SELOUS


formative travel for those who are intentional about meaningful travel experiences.

We trust your year has been off to a good start and are truly grateful that you are here, flicking through the pages of our 30th Issue and sifting through our channels for more content on what we've loved on Africa.

Join us. Our journey keeps getting better. 

Yours truly,

Gywnne C. Mtengwa



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Johan Du Plessis:

Building the Labotessa Luxury Boutique Hotel Dream



1. HOW DID THE LABOTESSA JOURNEY BEGIN FOR YOU, JOHAN?

I would say it began at the moment of conceptualisation—before our doors even opened or the name was officially registered. I am a hotelier by passion and profession, having studied hospitality and spent my entire career in the industry.

Operating my own hotel was always the dream. I believe that life presents us with different paths, and when the road veers left or right, it's important to embrace the journey with curiosity and openness. Sometimes, a detour is an opportunity in disguise. That philosophy shaped the beginning of my Labotessa journey.

2. WE UNDERSTAND YOU STARTED THE BUSINESS SOMEWHAT AS A PARTNERSHIP. TELL US A LITTLE MORE ABOUT THAT.

The idea took shape with a close childhood friend who is now my business partner.

As custodians of Labotessa, we both have our responsibilities however, I am responsible for the hotel operation. He is based in North America where he practices as a medical doctor, while I pursued my career in hospitality, studying in Switzerland.

Despite the physical distance, our friendship and partnership remain strong.

We learnt about this particular property and identified the opportunity for a future hotel. I knew it had the potential to become something truly special. That was back in 2010—the seed was planted then and there.

At the time, I continued working with a prestigious American hotel group with a vast global footprint. I was fortunate to always be assigned to properties in pivotal



phases—whether launching a new hotel, assembling a team, or building a brand. My career was constantly evolving, and I believe my ability to create and develop was recognised, which led to my frequent relocations within the industry.

3. AT WHAT POINT DID YOU ACQUIRE THE PROPERTY, AND WHAT WAS THE PROCESS LIKE?

As time passed, and while the logistical aspects of acquiring the property were underway, little significant progress was made on-site. The building is classified as a heritage site, which meant extensive red tape

and a long process of securing permits before any renovations could commence. It took years, but we persevered and ultimately secured the necessary approvals.

Then, in 2017, after successfully opening another hotel for my employer, I had a pivotal moment. My employer recognised the success of our launch and approached me to oversee the opening of a second property. It made me pause and think—if I was being trusted with such a significant project, why couldn't I do it for myself? That realisation became the catalyst for taking the leap with Labotessa.

4. AND HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE NAME “LABOTESSA”?

The name was born from a wonderful evening of good conversation over excellent wine. There is something about discussing ideas and dreams out loud that makes them feel tangible. My business partner and I were reflecting on the potential of the property, and the more we spoke, the more we envisioned something extraordinary taking shape.

Soon after, we had begun the search for a name, and soon enough, Labotessa was registered.

5. WE IMAGINE BRINGING THE DREAM TO LIFE MUST HAVE BEEN AN ADVENTURE. WHAT WAS THAT PROCESS LIKE?

We approached the project single-handedly—without architects, interior designers, or external hotel management companies. We wanted Labotessa to be a pure reflection of our vision, though I also recognised that this would be an immense challenge.

Looking back, I underestimated myself at every stage. I followed what industry profes-



sionals refer to as the “pre-opening bible”—a meticulous guide for launching a hotel, covering everything from guest experiences to operational contingencies. Yet, no amount of planning could fully prepare me for the complexities of the process.

After two years of renovations and meticulous preparations, we finally opened in 2019. The moment was truly magical—seeing our vision come to life was an unparalleled experience. But just three months later, COVID-19 forced us to shut our doors.

Despite the hardships of the pandemic, my proudest achievement during that time was safeguarding the livelihoods of our 20 staff members and their families. We were closed for nine months, reopening in November 2020. Since then, we have been incredibly fortunate to receive accolades, including being recognised as the Best Design Hotel in Africa and the Best Designed Boutique Hotel in South Africa.

6. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ARE THE KEY INGREDIENTS OF LABOTESSA'S SUCCESS?

Passion. My team and I are deeply passionate about what we do. We understand that a truly remarkable boutique experience is not solely about elegant design or personalised service—it's about the seamless harmony



between the two.

I often compare it to a well-balanced recipe. The essence of the experience lies in understanding the nuances of what guests truly seek. Our guests have refined tastes, and from the grand high ceilings to carefully curated textures and bold, non-traditional colour choices, every detail is intentional. The charm of a boutique hotel lies in its ability to adapt and fine-tune elements to suit the guest's preferences.

7. DID ANY PARTICULAR CITY OR PROPERTY INSPIRE THE AESTHETIC DESIGN OF LABOTESSA?

I've always been drawn to European aesthetics, particularly the way historic architecture is preserved. When I first saw the building, I recognised its rich heritage and felt compelled to enhance its existing character rather than change it.

For me, true luxury is about space, openness, and flow. This philosophy is reflected in our barrier-free design, which fosters a sense of connection between guests and the hotel environment.

Our interiors are intentionally understated, ensuring that each element complements the others rather than competing for attention. Darker wall tones, for example, are reminiscent of classic European interiors—found in places like London or Paris—where such colours evoke depth and warmth rather than darkness. My personal appreciation for colour and detail has been greatly influenced by my travels and my background in hospitality.

8. AND THE DIPTYQUE BOUTIQUE? TALK TO US ABOUT HOW THAT CAME ABOUT? WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS BRAND TO ANCHOR YOUR



DOWNSTAIRS AREA AND WHAT IS THE SYMBOLISM OF THIS PARTNERSHIP WITH LABOTESSA?

Labotessa and Diptyque share a deep commitment to attention to detail, quality, and creating memorable guest experiences. Our Diptyque Boutique is designed to reflect those values, taking you on a journey through scent and personal experience.

9. WHAT IS THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF WELCOMING GUESTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD?

For me, it's when guests truly recognise the passion behind what we do. We don't just offer hospitality; we welcome guests with authenticity and gratitude.

Rather than calling Labotessa a 'home away from home'—a phrase often overused in the industry—I prefer to think of it as a place where guests feel genuinely valued and immersed in something special. Every guest who walks through our doors contributes to the

livelihoods of our team and their families, and that is something we never take for granted.

10. WHO IS THE TYPICAL GUEST AT LABOTESSA LUXURY BOUTIQUE HOTEL?

As a boutique hotel, we are intimate in size, which makes us particularly well-suited to couples, honeymooners, and guests who appreciate a curated lifestyle experience. Many of our guests share an appreciation for similar things, which allows us to create a highly personalised and seamless experience.

Situated in the heart of Cape Town's historic Parliament District, Labotessa appeals to those who want to be at the pulse of the city's culture while enjoying a sense of refined exclusivity.

11. WHAT MAKES BOUTIQUE HOTELS SO SOUGHT-AFTER BY DISCERNING TRAVELLERS?

Boutique hotels offer something that larger properties simply cannot: a deeply personalised, detail-driven experience. Guests who prefer boutique accommodations often seek a specific aesthetic, a unique atmosphere, and an unparalleled level of service.

Much like choosing a dream home, they consider factors such as location, architecture, and curated design elements. Every aspect—from the art on the walls to the dining experience—is intentionally crafted, whereas in larger hotels, this level of individualisation is not always possible.


12. WHEN YOU'RE NOT AT LABOTESSA, HOW DO YOU LIKE TO SPEND YOUR TIME?

Exploring—always. I have an insatiable curiosity, which fuels my creativity. Sometimes, I explore just to observe rather than to partake—I might notice a new café, admire its aesthetic, but not necessarily step inside.

I also have a deep love for the outdoors. Having grown up on a farm in South Africa, I have a profound

appreciation for nature and open spaces. Gardening is a passion of mine, and guests will notice the potted plants on Labotessa's front patio. There's something truly rewarding about nurturing life through nature.

13. WHO HAS PLAYED THE MOST PIVOTAL ROLE IN SHAPING THE PERSON YOU ARE TODAY?

Without question, my parents. They provided me with a stable upbringing, strong values, and discipline. Integrity and education were always paramount in our home. Their teachings continue to guide me each day. 

➤ To immerse yourself in the charm of Labotessa Luxury Boutique Hotel and learn more, visit <https://labotessa.com/>







EDITOR'S PICK



BEHOLD THE MAGIC OF LA MAISON D'ÉTÉ: Where Time Slows Down in Mauritius

By Yvonne C Mtengwa

MAURITIUS, A RENOWNED JEWEL IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, AND ONE WELL ACCLAIMED FOR ITS ABUNDANCE IN LEISURE, LIFESTYLE AND ADVENTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL, DELIVERS ON EVERY POSTCARD PROMISE. I HAD SEEN THE HERALDING CALL TO VISIT AND SO UPON ARRIVAL, I WELL APPRECIATED HAVING ANSWERED.



For my first ever opportunity to explore an island nation revered for its pristine beaches, turquoise waters, and lush landscapes, I looked forward to a series of activities geared for the spirited adventurer and solid epicurean during a week-long visit to this iconic destination. And because the most important piece of any travel related puzzle for me lies with my choice of accommodations, it turned out to be an absolute gift to be transferred from the airport to a quaint yet opulent beachside haven, nestled on the Island's east coast in the tranquil village of Poste Lafayette.

Hello from La Maison d'Été

Post a vibrant welcome, my eyes were drawn in by spaces that embody the island's charm and tranquility. Think pastel colours of pinks and turquoise shades, furniture and fittings made up of earthy textures of wood, stone, woven pieces on walls and inspired artwork, which all collide to immediately invoke a sense of relaxation at check in. La Maison d'Été, a part of the Newmark Hotels & Re-

serves portfolio, became an enchanting retreat, with the team readied up to offer an experience that transcends a typical vacation, and weaving its magic into my heart and that of other guests the hearts.

From the moment you step into La Maison d'Été, you're enveloped in an atmosphere of serenity. The hotel's design, inspired by traditional Mauritian architecture with a contemporary twist, seamlessly blends natural materials with clean lines and vibrant accents. This creates a haven of understated elegance, reflecting the island's laid-back yet sophisticated vibe. The open-air layout with full view of the ocean stretching out into the horizon, is a hallmark of tropical architecture, allowing the gentle sea breeze to permeate every corner while carrying with it the soothing sounds of the ocean.

Spaces of beauty

La Maison d'Été offers an intimate escape with just 24 thoughtfully designed rooms and suites, ensuring personalized attention and a sense of exclusivity. Guests can choose from a range of accommodations, each offering a unique perspective on the





surrounding beauty. The room categories cater to various needs and preferences. Deluxe Rooms provide comfortable and stylish spaces with private balconies or terraces overlooking the lush gardens, soft sandy beaches and the seemingly endless sea. With two plunge pools on site, one is spoilt for choice or where to take their refreshing dip on an afternoon replete with sunshine.

A personal touch

The heart of La Maison d'Été lies in its personalized service. The staff, warm and attentive, anticipates your needs before you even articulate them and for me, genuine smiles and willingness to go the extra mile always creates a sense of belonging, making me feel like a cherished guest rather than just a visitor. Whether it was guiding us on what experiences we could enjoy while on the island or simply sharing a friendly chat, the team's dedication to creating memorable experiences was evident in every interaction.

Fine food choices

The culinary journey at La Maison d'Été was a feast for the senses, with the chef offering us a diverse range of delectable dishes, all of which showcased the island's rich culinary heritage. The pork ribs and herb encrusted lamb chops were a thing of culinary decadence, perfect on the palate and accompanied beautifully by tropical flavoured cocktails.

A beachfront restaurant provides a romantic setting for candlelit dinners, with the gentle sound of waves as your background music. Nestled amidst the tropical gardens lies the quaint main restaurant under thatch,



which offers a more relaxed ambiance is to us, was perfect for leisurely lunches or casual dinners.

All in all

Beyond the luxurious accommodations and exquisite dining, La Maison d'Été offers a plethora of activities and experiences to enrich your stay. The hotel's pristine beach is perfect for sunbathing, swimming, or simply strolling along the soft sands. For those seeking adventure, a variety of water sports are available, including snorkeling and kayaking. The hotel also organizes excursions beyond its walls, allowing you to explore hidden coves, encounter vibrant land and marine life or learn more about the island's rich history and culture.

But perhaps your preference is to enjoy the luxury to time standing still while resting on site, for a more tranquil experience, La Maison d'Été's spa, La Parenthèse, is a haven of relaxation and rejuvenation. The spa offers a range of treatments inspired by ancient Mauritian traditions, using natural ingredients to soothe the body and mind. From massages to facials to body wraps, each treatment is designed to restore balance and harmony.

La Maison d'Été's commitment to sustainability further enhances its appeal. The hotel has implemented various eco-friendly practices, such as reducing water and energy consumption, minimizing waste, and supporting local communities. By choosing to stay at La Maison d'Été, you're not only indulging in a luxurious vacation but also contributing to the preservation of Mauritius' natural beauty.

The magic of La Maison d'Été lies not only in its luxurious offerings but also in its ability to create an emotional connection with its guests. It's a place where time slows down, allowing you to reconnect with yourself, your loved ones, and the beauty of the natural world. The memories created at La Maison d'Été linger long after you've left, a gentle reminder of the tranquility, warmth, and magic of Mauritius.





➤ To learn more about La Maison d'Été, visit <https://newmarkhotels.com/accommodation/la-maison-dete>

La Maison d'Été is more than just a hotel; it's an experience that touches the soul. It's a place where you can escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life and immerse yourself in a world of serenity and beauty. Whether you're seeking a romantic getaway, a family vacation, or a solo retreat, La Maison d'Été promises an unforgettable experience, weaving its magic into your heart and leaving you with memories to cherish for a lifetime.

As the sun set over the crystal-clear waters, casting a golden glow over La Maison d'Été, I understood why this enchanting retreat holds a special place in the hearts of its guests. It's a place where time stands still, where worries fade away, and where the magic of Mauritius truly came alive for me. 🌿

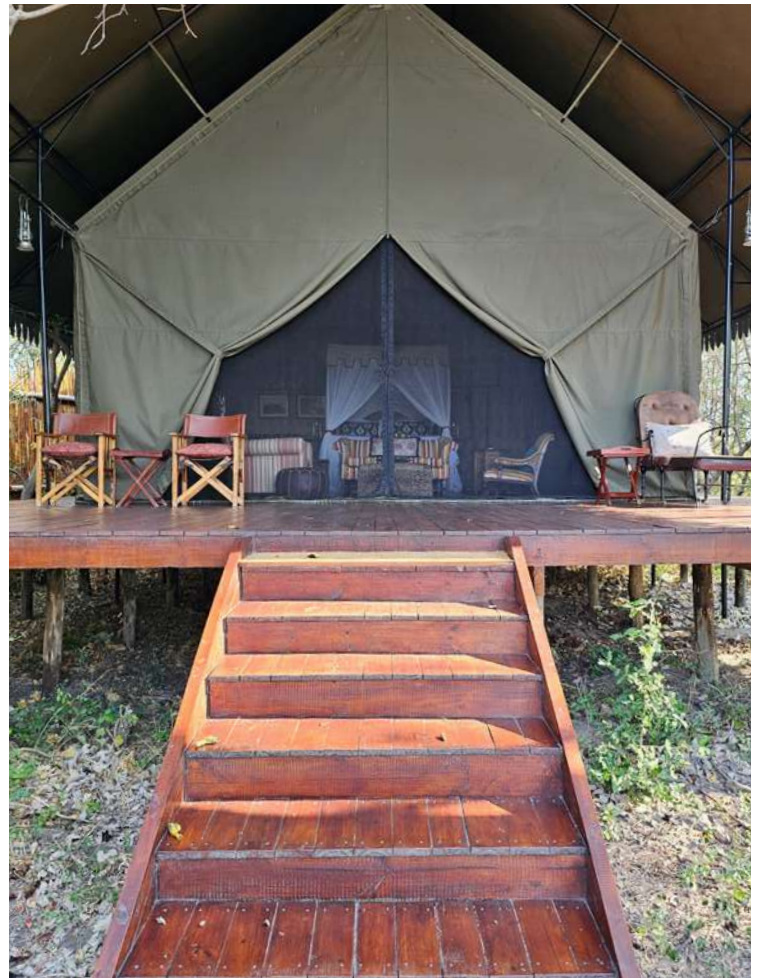




Okavango Delta Chronicles: Discovering Duke's East Camp, Botswana

By Yvonne C Mtengwa

Botswana. The very name conjures images of shimmering salt pans, verdant floodplains teeming with life, and skies ablaze with a million stars by night. It's a land I've discovered over the years to be of untamed beauty, a place where the rhythm of nature dictates the pace of life, whisking you away into the throngs of Southern Africa's wilderness.



And nestled within this breathtaking landscape, under the esteemed Natural Selection portfolio, lies a sanctuary of understated elegance and authentic African charm:

Duke's East Camp. Not too sure what to expect as my charter took off from Maun International Airport, I was certain that my experience would likely go over as brilliantly as the one undertaken a few months before. After all, any camp that seamlessly blends a luxurious offering with a respect for the natural surroundings of which it was built, is one I will happily pack a bag for.

Natural Selection has long been synonymous with crafting exceptional travel experiences, boasting a collection of lodges and camps that celebrate the unique character of their surroundings. This was my first time expe-

riencing part of their portfolio, in what was slated to be an exciting 7-day discovery of some of its camps in the Okavango Delta and Moremi Game Reserve. Duke's East was my first stop and opportunity to test out the brand's hallmarks, checking into a distinctive camp that doubled as a haven where discerning travellers can immerse themselves in the magic of Botswana, while enjoying unparalleled comfort and personalized service.

INSIDE DUKE'S EAST - AND YOUR TENT

And what a remarkable welcome it was! A sister camp and smaller to its predecessor Duke's Camp, Duke's East delivers on its promise of an intimate camp, comprising just four exquisitely designed tents and offering a privileged glimpse into the heart of the Okavango Delta from the comfort of your tent. Perched on raised wooden decks, with winding pathways of hedge-like foliage of leadwood and ebony trees leading to each tent, each one is a masterpiece of sustainable design, with inspiration borrowed from the vintage style that embellishes the original Duke's Camp.

Imagine flowing drapery stitched up of plush, vibrantly patterned fabrics, throws of Persian Rugs across your wooden floors, and hand-carved four-poster beds for that extra



touch of regal flair. African memorabilia and elements collected from the outdoors formed decorative pieces that complimented my tent's furnishings beautifully, delivering an aesthetic that seemed to invoke the spirit of a bygone era.

I particularly revelled in the sight of my spacious en-suite bathroom, characterised by the contrasts between abundant brass fittings, ceramic sinks, bespoke amenities, and a wooden walkway leading to an outdoor shower.

The front of my tent was a welcoming viewing deck, furnished by two chairs, and perfect a setting to enjoy my cup of piping hot coffee by morning, and a refreshing glass of wine or G&T when in my tent in the afternoon. Behind the canvas and inside the tent was a cozy seating area, a space I grew comfortable using for quiet reflection on my time in the wilderness. It also became a space I'd relish the opportunity for spontaneous game sightings, with sounds of nearby lions roaring or the crunch of hippos feeding by night, offering somewhat of a serenade into the night's silence.

All in all, the curved canvas and natural materials from which the individual tents are made, create a



sense of organic harmony with the surrounding bush, while luxurious touches ensure an unforgettable stay. If I were to summarise the sensory experience one can look forward to during their stay, think handcrafted yet luxurious furnishings, private verandas overlooking the floodplains, and the soothing sounds of the African night serenading you to sleep.

ADVENTURE BEYOND THE CANVAS.

Herds of elephant and red lechwe are common here, and moments spent in quiet observation rarely go unrewarded. One activity I had long wanted to experience and finally got the chance to, was a sunset ride onboard a traditional Mokoro - the dugout canoes made from the trunks of jackalberry trees that gracefully glide

through the Delta's waterways.

What truly sets Duke's East apart is its commitment to providing an immersive and enriching experience. It's not merely a place to stay; it's a gateway to understanding the soul of Botswana. The camp's prime location within a private concession allows for unparalleled game viewing opportunities. Days are spent exploring the Delta's intricate network of channels and lagoons, either by mokoro, gliding silently past hippos and vibrant waterbirds, or on thrilling game drives in open 4x4 vehicles, tracking lions, leopards, and the elusive wild dog.


But the magic of Duke's East equally extends beyond the thrill of wildlife encounters. It's in the quiet moments, too, that the camp's true essence reveals itself. Perhaps it's the shared stories



around a crackling campfire under a canopy of stars with other guests, the taste of freshly prepared cuisine infused with local flavours, or the gentle rhythm of chatter among guests and the staff drifting through the air. The camp fosters a sense of connection – to the land, to the wildlife, and to the rich cultural heritage of Botswana.

Beyond game drives and mokoro excursions, Duke's East offers a range of carefully curated activities designed to deepen your appreciation for this extraordinary ecosystem. Guided nature walks provide an opportunity to learn about the intricate details of the flora and fauna, while birdwatching excursions reveal the Delta's vibrant avian tapestry. For those seeking a more immersive cultural experience, visits to local villages can be arranged, offering a glimpse into the traditions and daily life of the Batswana people.

MORE THAN JUST A LUXURIOUS ESCAPE

Duke's East Camp is an invitation to connect with the very heart of Botswana. It's a place where adventure and serenity intertwine, where the raw beauty of the wilderness meets the refined elegance of a world-class camp. It's an experience that will stay with you long after you've left, a reminder of the magic that awaits in Botswana's wilderness. 





➤ And through the lens of Natural Selections, this extraordinary corner of the world is waiting to be discovered. To learn more about **Duke's East**, visit <https://naturalselection.travel/camps/dukes-east/>

A SYMPHONY OF OLD AND NEW

at The Victoria & Alfred Hotel by Newmark

By Yvonne C Mtengwa



And in the iconic V&A Waterfront District lies the Victoria & Alfred Hotel by Newmark, a boutique hotel that awards discerning guests an opportunity to immerse themselves in a living tapestry of Cape Town's history and contemporary luxury. This iconic establishment, enveloped within the heart of the Mother City's most iconic lifestyle destinations, is more than just a hotel; it's a portal to the city's soul.

Originally a 1904 North Quay warehouse, the building's industrial heritage is a stark contrast to its current incarnation as a sophisticated haven. Newmark Hotels & Resorts, a boutique hospitality brand with a keen eye for preserving history while infusing modern elegance, transformed this space into a living testament to Cape Town's evolution. The hotel's design is a masterful blend of raw industrial elements - exposed brick, high ceilings, and large windows - juxtaposed with sleek furnishings and contemporary art. It's a space where most would agree that the past and present coexist in perfect harmony.

Chic Accommodations within the Waterfront's Pulse

The Victoria & Alfred Hotel is more than just a place to sleep; it's a vantage point to the vibrant pulse

of Cape Town. Take for instance the hotel's location within the V&A Waterfront, which puts guests at the epicenter of the city's energy. A check-in will award you accommodations that are contemporary, as much as they are cosy, boasting only the finest crisp linens laid across plush beds, pillows to hug you as you sleep and amenities that speak the language of convenience and luxury. Big bay windows in the harbour-facing rooms and suites, and equally stand out windows in others facing the retail and entertainment district, deliver natural light by day and a call to relish in the district's vibrancy by night.

The Waterfront itself is a marvel of urban regeneration, transforming a once-bustling harbour into a world-class shopping, dining, and lifestyle destination that welcomes the visitation of millions from across Africa





and the world each year. From the moment you step outside the hotel, you're immersed in a kaleidoscope of sights, sounds, and smells, heralding the fact that your window to the continent's southernmost cityscape have just now opened, with a call to explore further.

Plated at Ginja

The hotel's Ginja Restaurant celebrates a culinary journey in itself. With its contemporary twist on classic dishes and a wine list that displays South Africa's rich viticulture, it's the perfect place to indulge your senses while enjoying a view whose image could sit on





➤ To book your stay at the Victoria & Alfred Hotel by Newmark visit <https://newmarkhotels.com/accommodation/the-victoria-alfred-hotel/>

any postcard or photo album. As you savour your meal of the day's fresh catch, or perhaps something else, piping hot from the grill and accompanied by a salad or side dish made from locally sourced ingredients, be rest assured that the panoramic views of the adjacent harbour and Table Mountain, one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, fuse together to create a backdrop that is both inspiring and relaxing. Ginja is a welcoming home for both in-house guests and diners passing by and looking for a great place to enjoy an array of plated offerings.

Beyond the Victoria & Alfred Hotel by Newmark's Walls

A mere few steps outside the hotel's walls, a world of exploration awaits. Take a leisurely stroll along the Waterfront promenade, browsing the designer boutiques and artisanal shops that showcase a host of fashion item infused by South African culture, jewellery and pottery made from local elements and decorative art pieces that could find their home on any wall or table. For history into the evolution of African art, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art (Zeitz Mocaa), routinely hosts exhibitions and events that are open to the public. Not to mention the imposing architectural splendor that is this art domain, an epic display of a mashup between space and concrete.


Nature and history buffs can take a drive up to the nearby Castle of Good Hope, a must-visit, adventure seekers can embark on a boat trip to Robben Island, a poignant reminder of South Africa's



EDITOR'S PICK • THE VICTORIA & ALFRED HOTEL

past and wine lovers can carve a day out for a little wine tasting expedition through the winelands. And for those seeking natural beauty, Table Mountain is a short yet scenic drive away, offering breathtaking panoramic views of the city, whether you decide to take a hike or take a cable car up.

Staying at the Victoria & Alfred Hotel is more than just a vacation; it's an experi-

ence that encapsulates the essence of Cape Town. In a city that's replete with things to do for one with a penchant for the finer experiences in life, checking into this property is not only a chance to step back in time, but also one to embrace the city's vibrant present. It's a place where history and luxury intertwine to create an unforgettable stay. 



Yvonne C Mtengwa is the Founder/Editor-in-Chief of the award-winning Travel Essence Magazine, a Communications Strategist by profession, with an avid passion for discovering Africa and the Middle East's iconic landscapes through her travels. Connect with and follow her travel, tourism, and lifestyle experiences on

 @Quintessentially_yvonne







TASTE-MAKERS

Marula Hill Travel's 2025 Take On Safari: Luxury, Sustainability, and Meaningful Connection





DISCOVER HOW THE AFRICAN SAFARI EXPERIENCE IS EVOLVING INTO A JOURNEY LIKE NO OTHER.

Have you ever dreamed of a safari that goes beyond wildlife sightings and becomes genuinely transformative? In 2025, safaris will be redefined as deeply personal journeys that blend exclusivity, sustainability, and cultural connection.

These are not just trips; they're adventures designed to immerse you in Africa's breathtaking landscapes, connect you with its people, and allow you to experience its untamed beauty in a luxurious and meaningful way.

ECO-CONSCIOUS SAFARIS: TRAVEL WITH PURPOSE

What if your safari could leave a positive footprint? Today's sustainable safaris do just that, inviting you to play an active role in conservation while enjoying the height of luxury.

Imagine tracking rhinos with dedicated conservationists, knowing your stay directly supports vital anti-poaching initiatives. At the end of the day, enjoy a locally sourced, farm-to-table feast beneath the African stars. These lodges, designed to blend with their environment, prove that indulgence and responsibility can coexist easily.

Every moment of your eco-conscious safari has a purpose—not just for you but for the wildlife and communities that make Africa extraordinary.

EXCLUSIVE SAFARIS: PRIVACY LIKE NEVER BEFORE

For those who crave exclusivity, private safaris redefine luxury. Imagine an entire lodge reserved for you, where every detail is tailored to your preferences.

Picture starting your day with breakfast overlooking the plains, setting out on a game drive with a guide who knows what excites you, and ending the evening with a private dinner under the stars. These escapes are designed to let you slow down, enjoy each moment, and connect deeply with nature and your travel companions.

Here, luxury is not about extravagance—it's about the freedom to experience Africa on your own terms.

CAPTURE THE MAGIC: PHOTOGRAPHIC SAFARIS

Whether you're an aspiring photographer or a seasoned pro, a photographic safari turns every game drive into a gallery-worthy experience.

Guided by expert wildlife photographers, you'll learn to capture nature's raw beauty like never before. Imagine the golden-hour light framing a pride of lions or the silhouette of a giraffe against a beautiful sunset. With prime vantage points, you'll leave with photos and memories frozen in time.

This is more than just photography—it's a chance to see the wild through a new lens.

CULTURAL JOURNEYS: BEYOND WILDLIFE

An African safari is as much about the people as the wildlife. In 2025, cultural engagement will take centre stage, offering opportunities to connect with the communities that call these iconic landscapes home.

Spend time with Maasai elders under the shade of an acacia tree, learn the intricate art of beadwork with Zulu artisans, or join local chefs to create traditional dishes as rich in flavour as they are in history. These experiences go beyond the surface, offering a glimpse into Africa's diverse heritage and the deep ties between its people and the land.

When you return home, you'll carry more than memories—you'll carry understanding and connection.

FAMILY SAFARIS: ADVENTURES FOR ALL GENERATIONS

Imagine a safari where every member of your family, from the youngest explorer to the most seasoned traveller, finds something to treasure. Multi-generational safaris are designed to bring families together through shared adventures and tailored experiences.

Children can track wildlife with expert guides, grandparents can unwind on game drives, and parents can





enjoy a sundowner overlooking the bush. Family-friendly lodges provide spacious suites, flexible schedules, and engaging activities for all ages, ensuring everyone feels at home in the wild.

These safaris are more than vacations—they're the memories that bring families closer for years to come.

WELLNESS SAFARIS: RECONNECT AND REJUVENATE

If your idea of the perfect escape includes balance and rejuvenation, a wellness safari is your dream come true.

Begin your day with sunrise yoga on a deck overlooking the vast plains, feel the soothing touch of a spa treatment inspired by local traditions, and end with quiet moments of meditation under a canopy of stars. Every element of a wellness safari is designed to restore your body, mind, and soul.

It's not just about unwinding—it's about finding a deeper connection with yourself and the natural world around you.

WALKING AND MOBILE SAFARIS: A CLOSER CONNECTION TO NATURE

For a truly engaging experience, walking and mobile safaris offer a unique way to explore Africa's wild heart.

Step away from the vehicle and onto the land, where expert guides lead you through the bush on foot. Discover the finer details—animal tracks, vibrant plants, and the sounds of the wilderness—that you might otherwise miss. Mobile camps enhance the adventure even further, moving you to remote locations where the only neighbours are the wildlife.

Every step of a walking or mobile safari is a reminder of the raw, unfiltered beauty of nature.

LUXURY TRAIN JOURNEYS: TIME- LESS ELEGANCE MEETS THE WILD


If you've ever dreamed of blending old-world charm with the thrill of a safari, luxury train travel is your answer.

Step aboard Rovos Rail or the Blue Train, where fine dining, opulent suites, and sweeping views of Africa's landscapes create a journey as unforgettable as the destinations. Pairing a luxury train journey with a bespoke safari lets you enjoy the best of both worlds—elegance and adventure seamlessly combined.

It's a reminder that the journey can be just as extraordinary as the destination.

2025: A New Era of Safari Travel

Safaris in 2025 are more than vacations—they're personalised, purposeful journeys that inspire connection, awe, and discovery. Whether you're exploring remote destinations, connecting with vibrant cultures, or indulging in wellness retreats, these safaris are redefining what it means to travel.

Let your next adventure go beyond the ordinary. The beauty of Africa is calling—are you ready to answer? 

➤ To view one of our perfectly curated safari experiences by Travel Essence Getaways and Marula Hill Travel, head over to <https://travelessencemag.com/te-getaways/>



Sheri Fazleabas

on Crafting Memorable Journeys

For **Sheri Fazleabas**, travel isn't just about seeing the world—it's about experiencing it in deeply personal, transformative ways. **“Every trip tells a story,”** Sheri says, **“and it's my job to make sure it's the story of a lifetime.”**

Born in Sri Lanka, Sheri's love for travel was woven into her life from an early age. Her family was a cornerstone of the local business community, with ventures spanning tea plantations, roofing tiles, and sawmills. “My grandfather was a business magnate,” Sheri shares proudly. “He had twelve sons and two daughters, all from one mother, and his businesses stretched across industries. Tea was a big part of our lives, and one of our estates, Labookellie, was even visited by the Queen of England.”

Family vacations often took Sheri and her siblings to Sri Lanka's hill country, with its cool climates, lush landscapes, and cascading waterfalls. “We were always travelling,” she recalls. “Weekends and school holidays were spent exploring every corner of Sri Lanka. That's where my love for discovering new places really began.”

FROM SRI LANKA TO THE WORLD

Sheri's adventurous spirit led her to boarding school in England at the age of 15. After five years abroad, she returned to Sri Lanka and joined Thomas Cook in Colombo, beginning a career in travel planning that would span decades. “Those



years were transformative,” she says. “I travelled constantly—not just within Sri Lanka but across Asia, India, and the Maldives. I planned holidays, incentive trips, and everything in between. I loved helping people see the beauty of these places.”

Her expertise soon expanded to include the cruise industry, where she represented Royal Caribbean and Celebrity Cruise Lines, as well as Globus Tours. But even as her career flourished, Sheri’s connection to her roots remained strong. “Sri Lanka is home. Even now, I go back every year and make it a point to explore the country all over again. There’s always something new to discover.”

Building a New Life in the USA

At 40, Sheri took a leap of faith and moved to the United States. There, she met her husband, a fellow Sri Lankan who had lived in the U.S. since childhood, and who she calls the love of her life. “It was a new chapter in every sense,” she reflects. “I came with a job offer, but after 9/11, everything changed. No one was hiring, so I decided to start my own company.”

Armed with little more than a laptop and her passion for travel, Sheri launched her business from home. “I didn’t know where it would lead,” she admits, “but I believed in what I was doing.” Her dedication paid off when she was featured in National Geographic Traveler as a travel agent who could be reached 24/7 in emergencies. “That recognition was a turning point,” she says. “It validated all the hard work and the personal touch I put into every trip.”

THE ANS JOURNEYS EXPERIENCE

Today, Sheri’s company, ANS Journeys, is known for crafting bespoke travel experiences that blend luxury with authenticity. “It’s not just about booking flights and hotels,” she explains. “We dive deep into understanding what our clients truly want. Are they foodies? History buffs? Adventure seekers? Every itinerary is tailored to their interests and budget.”





Sheri's specialities span the globe, with a focus on Africa, the Middle East, the Maldives, and of course, Sri Lanka. "Africa is magical," she says. "There's nothing like witnessing the Great Migration or spending a quiet evening in a safari lodge. It's humbling to be so close to nature."

The Middle East holds a special place in her heart as well. "The history and culture are just incredible," she says. "Whether it's exploring the ancient city of Petra in Jordan or experiencing the modern marvels of Dubai, there's something for everyone."

And then there's the Maldives, a destination she describes as "pure paradise." "It's perfect for romantic getaways, but also great for families and solo travellers. Whether it's diving with manta rays or relaxing in an overwater villa, it's unforgettable."

A PERSONAL TOUCH

What sets Sheri apart is her hands-on approach. "I've been to every destination I recommend," she says. "I know the best places to stay, the must-see attractions, and the hidden gems that most travellers miss." Her connections with local guides and businesses ensure that her clients have access to the most exclusive of experiences.

Sheri also takes pride in offering 24/7 support. "Emergencies happen, and travel plans can change," she says. "Our clients know they can reach us anytime, whether it's through our app or by phone. That peace of mind makes a world of difference." Her commitment to being accessible to her clients has even earned her recognition in National Geographic Traveler, as a trusted travel agent who can be reached


during emergencies, no matter the hour.

Her team shares the same commitment to excellence. “We’re like a family,” Sheri says. “Everyone here is passionate about travel and dedicated to making our clients’ journeys as seamless as possible.”

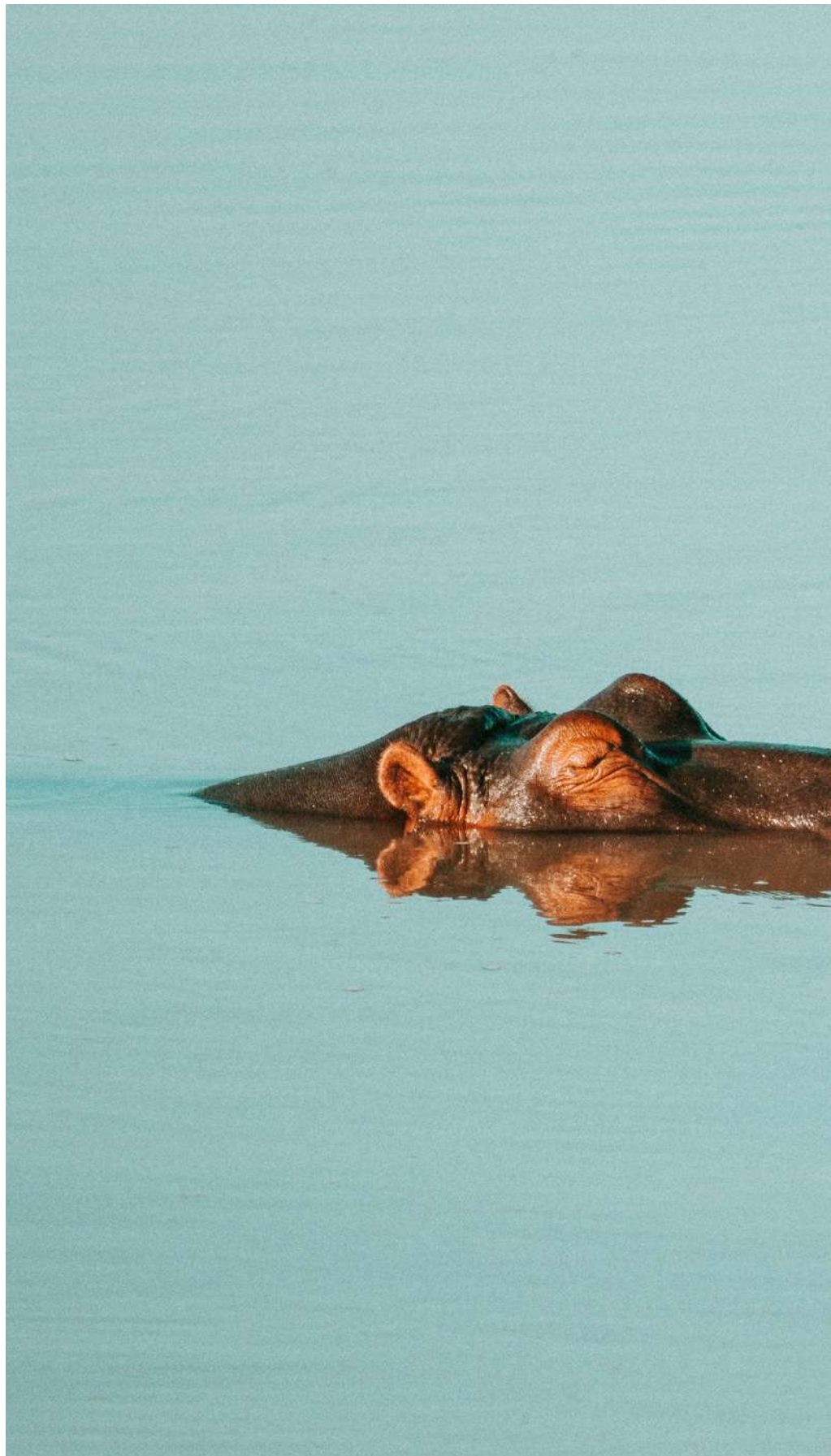
LOOKING AHEAD

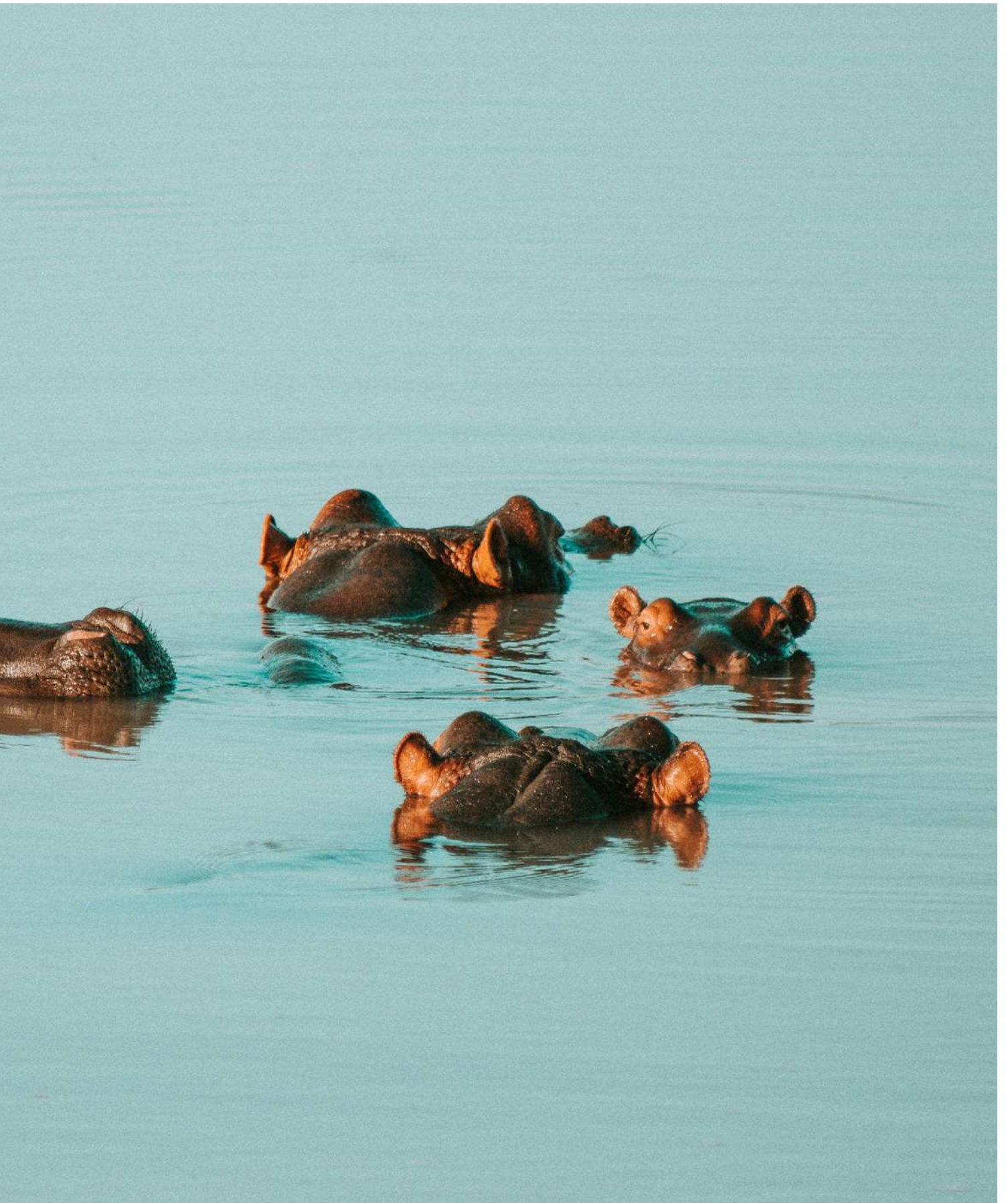
For Sheri, the joy of her job lies in the connections she builds with her clients. “I’ve planned honeymoons, and years later, I’m helping the same couples plan family vacations,” she says. “It’s incredibly rewarding to be part of their lives in this way.”

As for her own travels, Sheri continues to explore new destinations and revisit old favourites. “Travel is my life,” she says simply. “It’s what inspires me, and it’s what I love sharing with others.”

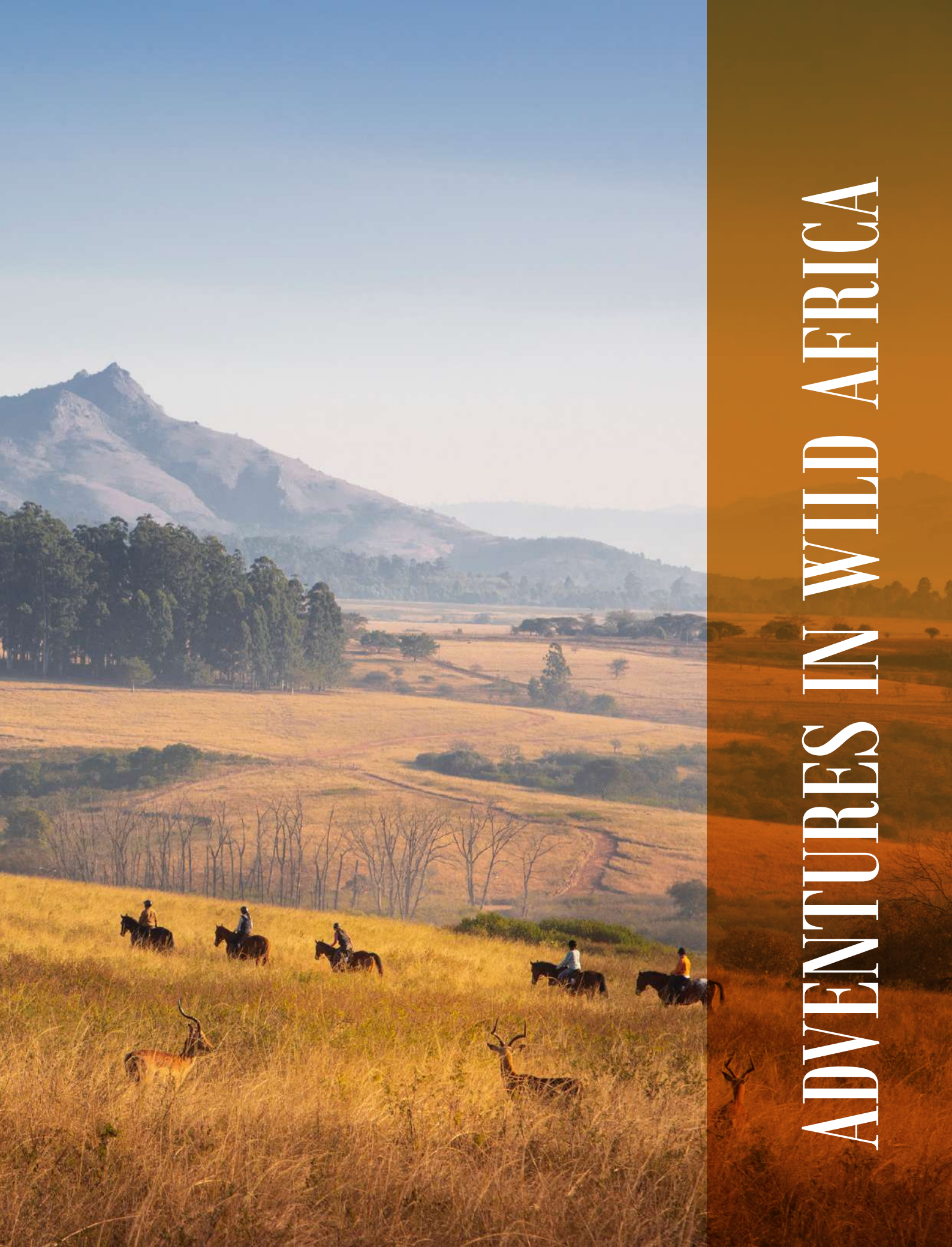
With her deep expertise, personal touch, and unwavering passion, Sheri Fazleabas has earned her place as one of the most trusted travel planners in the industry. Whether you’re dreaming of a safari in Africa, a cultural journey through the Middle East, or a sun-soaked escape to the Maldives, Sheri is the guide you need to turn your dreams into reality. 

➤ To start planning your next adventure, visit **ANS Journeys and talk with Sheri**. She’ll make your travel dreams come true.





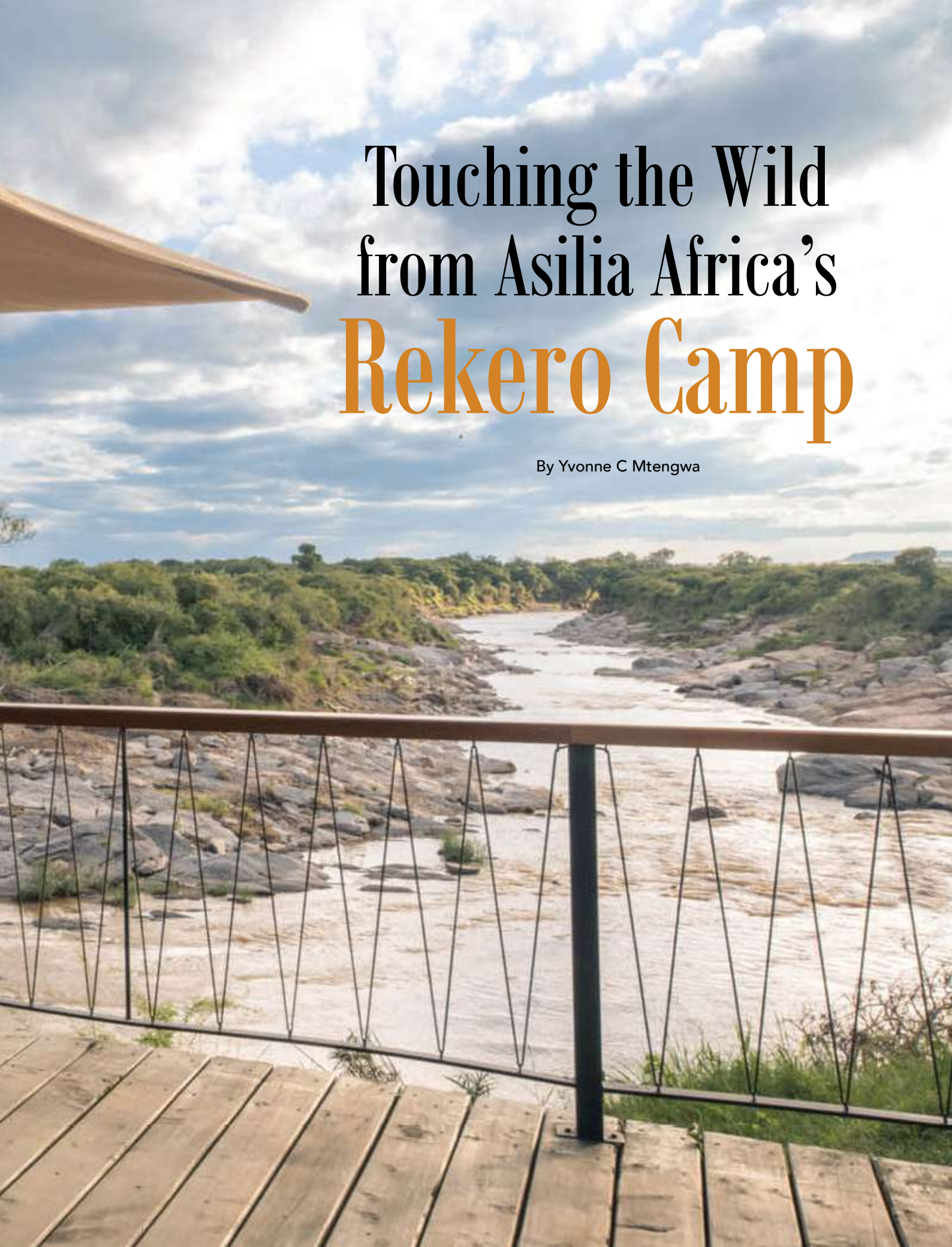




ADVENTURES IN WILD AFRICA

ADVENTURES IN WILD AFRICA • REKERO CAMP





Touching the Wild from Asilia Africa's Rekero Camp

By Yvonne C Mtengwa

As the charter aircraft descended upon the lands of the prolific Masai Mara, I couldn't help but pinch myself in appreciation of the sweet reality that befell me. Since beginning my journey of intentionally discovering Africa's great destinations, Kenya's most renowned National Park had long been a part of my bucket list.

And so finally, I was on my way, courtesy of one of East Africa's most impactful luxury safari operators – Asilia Africa. I long yearned after a packed schedule of juggling the tug of war that comes with being a city dweller, for a restorative few days in the pulse of the continent's grassland savannah. To say I couldn't wait is an understatement.



Dare I say most travellers underestimate the exhilarating nature of going on safari. Throw in the opulence of luxurious camp settings, the most bountiful dishes made from locally grown ingredients, and the constant sweeping views of your surrounds, and your adventure really turns into something special. While travel and transit times are often long, the internal rumble of excitement is almost palatable. Given a chance to experience sensational wildlife in the heart of the Masai Mara National Reserve at Rekerro Camp, one must oblige.

Before my travels from the great desert metropolis of Dubai, I had learned from Asilia's safari specialists about how for more than 30 years, Rekerro Camp had garnered acclaim as a firm-favourite amongst the camps of the Masai Mara. It all made sense upon my arrival in camp after landing at Ol Kiombo Airstrip, a mere 15-minute drive from Rekerro Camp, accompanied by what safari enthusiasts well appreciate as an "African massage" while onboard a game viewer assigned to me.

My dedicated guide Livingstone, who shared a little about the Maasai culture as we drove in, assured me that I would enjoy the wildlife sightings that were quite rampant when in camp which, nestled among the trees and overlooking the Talek River, is a perfect sanctuary for those desirous of complete immersion with the wilder side of nature.

Rekerro Camp was one of the first camps established in the Masai Mara, and its location was carefully considered and wisely



chosen, making it the highly sought-after safari destination it is today. One of nine classic and spacious safari tents awaited me – tent No. 4 – which had since June 2024, welcomed guests to experience a camp bearing a fresh new look after having received a significant refurbishment.

A Perfect Stay on the path of the Great Wildebeest Migration

The camp is perfectly positioned in the heart of the Mara, overlooking the Talek River from where spectacular river crossings, particularly during the Wildebeest Migration, can be seen from the comfort of the camp. The surrounding plains are endless, stretching to touch the seemingly blue mountains in the horizon where a ridge borders the National Park.

A delectable lunch was served on arrival, where I joined other guests in a family style buffet set up, laid out before us on the stunning hanging deck that frames Rekeró's main camp area. Here, post introductions between myself, the solo traveller at the table, and two couples, one made up of a husband and wife on their retirement bucket list safari and a mother and son duo, we traded stories of what made the Mara so special to us since our arrival a few days before for some, and only a few minutes for me.

With the dining deck perfectly positioned, it wasn't too long before we heard the grunting and splashing of a nearby pod of hippos. With bellies full and all guests ready to retreat to their private spaces under canvas, I looked forward to a quiet afternoon of rest and appreciation of what would be home for the following few days.





➤ To learn more about Rekeru Camp, visit <https://www.asiliaafrica.com/camps-lodges/rekeru-camp/>

A sanctuary under canvas

Winding pathways lead guests to their tents, each made up of nothing more than flattened grass to ensure there is no interference with the natural surroundings. Shrubbery is dense around each tent, guaranteeing privacy from the sight of staff and other guests nearby. My tent, like the others, almost hung on the higher banks of the Talek River, which offered such the treat of a front row view of animals coming in for their drink of water. Just a few minutes in, a tower of seven giraffe casually strolled across the plains before me, a joy for me to view one of my favourite patterned mammals.

A king-size bed would be my nightly throne and resting place, and just as perfect for a much-needed afternoon siesta. Linen was crisp, bedding plush and the mesh windows enveloped me while providing an immersive view of the shrubbery under which my tent was set. For us city dwellers who often struggle to stay disconnected from the outside world for too long, it was a treat to be able to dart in and out of the internet through highspeed connectivity in my tent.

A haven for wildlife viewing

Action is unending while in camp, with animals making their way into the camp uninterrupted. During my first night, I was woken by the sound

of a screeching tussle, which we later learned was a cheetah that had taken down a small bush buck under the night's skies. Relaxing in camp after each morning's drive was particularly enjoyable; a confluence of calm and the sound of birdsong or hippo grunting upstream.

Between July and October, nearly 1.5 million wildebeest migrate across the Mara and Talek Rivers, braving the lurking crocodiles as they search for premium grazing. A Talek crossing point is only 150 meters (490 feet) from Rekeru's dining area, and the Mara River is a short drive away, awarding guests the opportunity to have front row seating as they observe one of nature's most intriguing yet action-ridden spectacles.

But one need not worry if they miss the migration. The Masai Mara is Big 5 territory, replete with a wide species of big and small game that make for excellent game viewing year-round. Rekeru Camp also closes for two months each year to give the surrounding bush time to regenerate during the peak of the rainy season. This eco-friendly measure allows a new wilderness to emerge, for the next set of visitors to enjoy its beauty.

Plenty to love about Rekeru Camp

Rekeru Camp leaves a lasting impression on its guests, from the sweeping river frontage views that will captivate you at each turn, the exquisite meals served by passionate chefs, tents that make it quite difficult to leave once cocooned within them, to the call to learn from some of the greatest concentrations and diversity of wildlife in Africa. The cherry on top is by far the warm hospitality rendered by a remarkable and energetic team of largely Maasai heritage and world-renowned safari guides with years of expertise.

Asilia Africa boasts a spectacular portfolio of camps across East Africa, offering a genuine safari experience that will remind you of the brilliance of people connecting with untamed nature. 🌍



Exploring Eswatini:

A Solo Traveller's
Paradise





Tucked between South Africa and Mozambique, Eswatini—formerly known as Swaziland—is one of Africa’s smallest countries. Despite its modest size, this landlocked kingdom is a hidden treasure of stunning landscapes, vibrant culture, and warm hospitality. For solo travellers seeking adventure, serenity, or cultural immersion, Eswatini offers an experience that is both accessible and unforgettable.

One of Eswatini’s most appealing qualities is its reputation as a safe and welcoming destination. The country is known for its low crime rates and the friendliness of its people, giving solo travellers the confidence to explore freely. Whether you’re strolling through lively markets, hiking scenic trails, or attending cultural festivals, the environment feels secure and inviting. Swazi locals are famously warm, often

engaging in conversations, offering advice, or sharing stories about their heritage. Even when travelling alone, it’s easy to feel connected in Eswatini.

Another advantage for solo travellers is the country’s compact size, which makes it easy to navigate and explore. Unlike larger nations where travel between destinations can be time-consuming, Eswatini allows visitors to experience a variety of attractions without enduring long journeys, or ever venturing into remote areas. Public minibuses are available for budget-conscious travellers, while rental cars offer flexibility for those who prefer to set their own pace. The manageable distances mean that even in a single day, you can visit nature reserves, cultural villages, and craft markets without feeling rushed. Wherever you go and whatever activity you want to try in Eswatini there will always be an option to join up with a like-minded group.

For lovers of the outdoors, Eswatini is a natural haven. Its diverse landscapes, ranging from rolling hills and lush valleys to towering mountains and wide plains, are dotted with parks and reserves that offer unforgettable experiences. The Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary, Eswatini’s oldest protected area, is a favourite among solo travellers. Free of large predators, it’s ideal for walking safaris, horseback riding, and mountain biking. The tranquil surroundings provide an intimate connection with nature, allowing visitors to explore on their own terms and at their own pace.

For a more traditional safari experience, Hlane Royal National Park offers encounters with Africa’s iconic wildlife, in-





cluding elephants, lions, and rhinos. Guided game drives ensure a safe and thrilling adventure in the African bush, perfect for solo travellers seeking unforgettable memories. Another must-visit is the Mkhaya Game Reserve, renowned for its conservation efforts and its population of rare species such as black rhinos and sable antelope. With an unrivalled conservation record, this is one of the best places in Africa for rhino experiences.

Adventure enthusiasts will find plenty to love in Malolotja Nature Reserve, home to Eswatini's famous canopy tours. Zip-lining across a dramatic forested gorge is an exhilarating way to experience the landscape. For hikers, Malolotja's trails offer breathtaking views and the chance to explore rugged terrain. Sibebe Rock, the second-largest granite dome in the world, is another must-see for adventurous solo travellers. Its challenging climb rewards visitors with stunning panoramic vistas, making it an unforgettable highlight.

Eswatini's vibrant culture is probably its biggest attraction, with opportunities to immerse yourself in local traditions and heritage. If you time your visit well, you might witness one of the kingdom's traditional festivals, such as the Umhlanga Reed Dance or the Incwala Ceremony. These events, filled with colourful pageantry and cultural significance, offer a unique glimpse into Swazi customs.

For a more intimate cultural experience, Mantenga Cultural Village provides insight into traditional Swazi life. Guided tours showcase local customs, music, and dance, offering a deeper connection to the country's heritage. Eswatini is also renowned for its artisanal crafts, and the





country is a hub for handmade goods such as woven baskets, jewellery, and glassware. At Ngwenya Glass, visitors can watch artisans create stunning works of art from recycled glass, blending sustainable practices with remarkable craftsmanship.

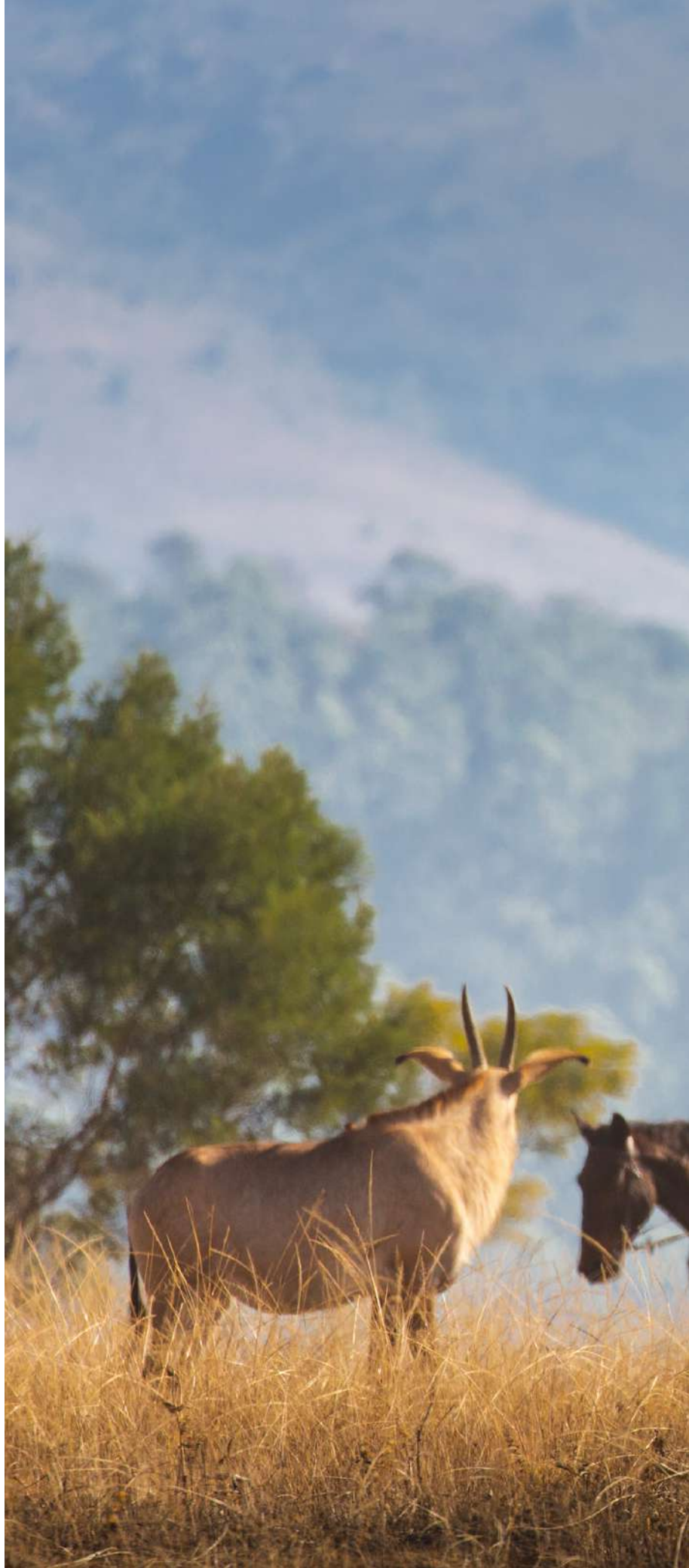
One of the best aspects of travelling solo in Eswatini is its affordability. Accommodation options cater to all budgets, from backpacker hostels and guesthouses to luxury lodges. Many places offer single rooms or dormitory-style setups, making it easy to find comfortable and economical stays. Dining is equally budget-friendly, with traditional meals like pap (maize porridge), stews, and grilled meats available at local eateries. The affordability allows visitors to enjoy authentic experiences without stretching their budgets.

For those who thrive on adventure, Eswatini offers activities that are perfect for solo travellers seeking excitement. Whitewater rafting on the Great Usutu River delivers thrilling rapids, while Gobholo Caves provide a unique caving experience with underground chambers and tunnels to explore. These activities provide both an adrenaline rush and the opportunity to challenge yourself in new ways.

If your solo journey is more about relaxation and rejuvenation, Eswatini's serene environment. The peaceful surroundings and warm hospitality create an atmosphere perfect for unwinding and reconnecting with yourself.

While Eswatini's well-known attractions are unmissable, the country also has hidden gems that enrich the solo travel experience. Shewula Mountain Camp, a community-run initiative, combines stunning views with cultural tours, providing insights into rural Swazi life while supporting local development. Phophonyane Falls Nature Reserve offers a tranquil escape with its cascading waterfalls, lush forests, and charming accommodations. These lesser-known destinations are perfect for travellers seeking scenic splendour, solitude and discovery.

Eswatini may be small, but it's bursting with opportunities for solo travellers. Its combination of safety, natural beauty, cultural richness, and thrilling adventures makes it a truly special destination. Whether you're seeking solitude in nature, meaningful cultural connections, or adrenaline-fueled experiences, Eswatini promises a journey that is both enriching and unforgettable. 🌍









THE WANDERLUST WITHIN



OMAN

From Minarets to Mountains

By Sarah Kingdom



ABOUT THE WRITER:

Travel writer, mountain guide, yoga teacher, trail runner and mother, Sarah Kingdom was born and brought up in Sydney, Australia. Travelling around Africa at 21, she fell in love with the continent and stayed. Sarah guides on Kilimanjaro several times a year, and has lost count of how many times she has stood on the roof of Africa. She has climbed and guided on mountains all around the world and now spends most of her time visiting remote places in Africa. When she is not traveling, she runs a cattle ranch in Zambia with her husband.

AS THE PLANE BEGAN ITS DESCENT INTO MUSCAT, I PRESSED MY FOREHEAD AGAINST THE WINDOW, KEEN FOR A GLIMPSE OF OMAN'S CAPITAL. JAGGED, RUST-COLOURED MOUNTAINS GAVE WAY TO A SEA OF WHITEWASHED BUILDINGS, THAT IN TURN GAVE WAY TO A COASTLINE KISSED BY THE TURQUOISE WATERS OF THE ARABIAN SEA.

O

n the southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman is renowned for the warm welcome it gives visitors. The country manages to combine a rich history and strong traditions, with stunning natural landscapes, enchanting cities and a decidedly modern outlook. From the bustling markets and ornate mosques of Muscat to the dramatic Jebel Akhdar mountains Oman is a tapestry of sights, sounds, tastes and activities. The country has been attracting intrepid travellers for years, but the







relaxing of visa rules, a few years ago, has opened this desert sultanate up to a wider audience.

Untouched by mass tourism and without the skyscraper flashiness and crowds of its UAE neighbours, what sets Oman apart from many of its neighbours on the Arabian Peninsula, is its commitment to authenticity. Oman has resisted the pull of mass tourism, instead preserving its cultural and natural treasures, while embracing modernity. Visitors can find themselves wandering centuries-old souks one moment, marvelling at sleek Islamic architecture the next, or revelling in a diverse geography that includes dramatic mountains, vast deserts, palm-filled oases and beautiful

beaches. Whether planning to explore ancient forts and castles, wander markets and mosques, hike rugged mountain ranges, or visit some of the most stunning beaches of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman offers so much.

After some speedy immigration formalities, we were through the airport and into our waiting chauffeur-driven car. We were heading straight out of town and into the Hajar Mountains. The road wound through the outskirts of Muscat, lined with palm trees and whitewashed villas. The bustle of the city gave way to the rugged vastness of the Omani desert. As we got closer to the mountains the landscape became even more dramatic, with jagged peaks rising against the clear blue sky.

The air grew cooler and fresher as we climbed, and we passed small villages and traditional stone houses clinging to the hillsides.

It took construction crews seven years to finish the twisty and steep road that took us from Muscat up to the remote Saiq Plateau. The road was a marvellous feat of engineering that changed the lives of the local villagers, who'd previously had to negotiate the rugged terrain by donkey. And at the end of the road, and the end of our two-hour journey, lay the stunning Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort.

We were ushered to our room which, perched on the edge of a steep canyon, 2,095m above sea level had the most incredible of views. Light



the resort is Diana's Point, perched over the canyon on a glass-sided platform and named after the late Princess of Wales, who visited in the 80's. Diana's Point became our favourite place for sundowners, although the view from our villa was almost as good. We devoted much of our stay to our poolside sun loungers and the dramatic vistas of the canyon and the terraced slopes below.

The resort's layout is carefully designed around the rugged landscape and the overall design reflects the cultural heritage of Oman, with fortress-like stone walls, arched windows, and intricately carved details. The interiors combine traditional elements like tadelakt plasterwork and zellij tiles, and pathways through the grounds lead to a luxurious spa and ham-



filled the room, glistening and reflecting off our private swimming pool, and we could see remote-looking clusters of buildings dotted along the opposite side of the canyon. We decide to head out and explore.

The path was rocky and steep, uneven steps led down to three small villages, that clung to the almost vertical sides of the ravine. The villages had once been inhabited by farmers and their families, but were now predominantly abandoned. Fifteen or twenty years ago most of the inhabitants had moved to a new nearby town, attracted by an easier life than eking out a living in this remote and tough place. Many of those who had moved had retained their houses in the village though, and still visit to attend to their crops and maintain the ancient 'al falaj' irrigation system, essential for keeping their crops and fruit trees alive.

Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar is one of the world's highest luxury resorts, and with this great height comes some amazing views. One of the signature features of

mam, multiple dining areas and secluded spots for stargazing and quiet contemplation. It took four years in total to build the property, but it was time well spent!

From the mountains it was time to head back down to Muscat and explore a little more. Muscat, clings to the coastline, sitting between the Gulf of Oman and the towering Hajar Mountains. Surrounded by the shiny megacities of the Gulf, Oman favours tradition, and in line with the general local belief that no building should be taller than a coconut tree, the country has banned skyscrapers in favour of a low-rise, whitewashed aesthetic.

The Chedi Muscat was our home for the next few days, and it was a marvellous blend of a central city location with gorgeous ocean views. Meandering pathways, swaying palm trees, soothing water features, 21 acres of manicured green lawns, three azure swimming pools, and a private 370m long beach. The hotel has a legendary reputation in the Middle East. As the first luxury hotel in Oman, the Chedi became the benchmark for Omani hospitality, and two decades later people still flock from all around the world to experience its understated luxury and relaxing atmosphere.

When we could drag ourselves away from swimming in the deliciously warm ocean, it was time to explore the city. We signed up for a private tour with local guide Hajer Al Muzayni. Hajer had her finger on the pulse of the city and aside from all the regular sights, she showed us some of the hidden gems and quirky corners of Muscat that most tourists might miss - beachside BBQ street food, Omani coffee, flavoured with cardamom, saffron and rosewater, plus the best place in town for halwa, a sweet, sticky, traditional Omani dessert that's seasoned

with rosewater, saffron and nuts.

First stop was the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. Oman's mosques are a notable exception to the country's 'no tall buildings' policy and the mosque, in the heart of Muscat, dominates the city's skyline with its 91m minaret. Quietly imposing from the outside, this fabulous example of modern Islamic architecture can accommodate 20,000 worshippers and with its ornate courtyards, mosaics, prayer halls and beautifully manicured gardens, is one of the prettiest sights in the city.

Next on the agenda was the Mutrah corniche. We strolled the 2km promenade, pausing for cups of sweet cardamom tea, known as karak chai, while marvelling at the Masjid Al Rasool Al Adham, the blue-domed Shia mosque dating back to the 15th century. We called in at the Mutrah Souq, one of the oldest in Oman, and wandered the length of the covered market. Vintage furniture, souvenirs, jewellery, traditional Omani daggers, spices, incense and perfumes, we saw it all.

Muscat's glistening white marble Opera House was the last of the city's sites we visited. It's the city's hub of arts and culture, regularly hosting musical performers from all around the world. Performances are surprisingly affordable, but you can also just admire the Opera House from the outside or, like us, take a guided tour of the inside if you prefer.

After five hours with Hajer, we felt we'd had a good taste of the city. Back to the hotel and the beach. The rest of our Muscat visit was spent at the Chedi. Yoga classes, spa visits, swims in the ocean, walks along the beach, and eating until we could eat no more. We loved Oman, we loved the people, we loved the mountains and the Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar, we loved Muscat and the Chedi. We'd happily return and do it all again. 🌍



› Chedi Muscat <https://www.ghmhotels.com/en/muscat/>
Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar <https://www.anantara.com/en/jabal-akhdar>
With Locals Muscat Tours <https://www.withlocals.com/experiences/oman/muscat/tours/>





Taking On Hatta Resorts: An Adventurer's Oasis In The Hills Of Hatta

By Yvonne C Mtengwa

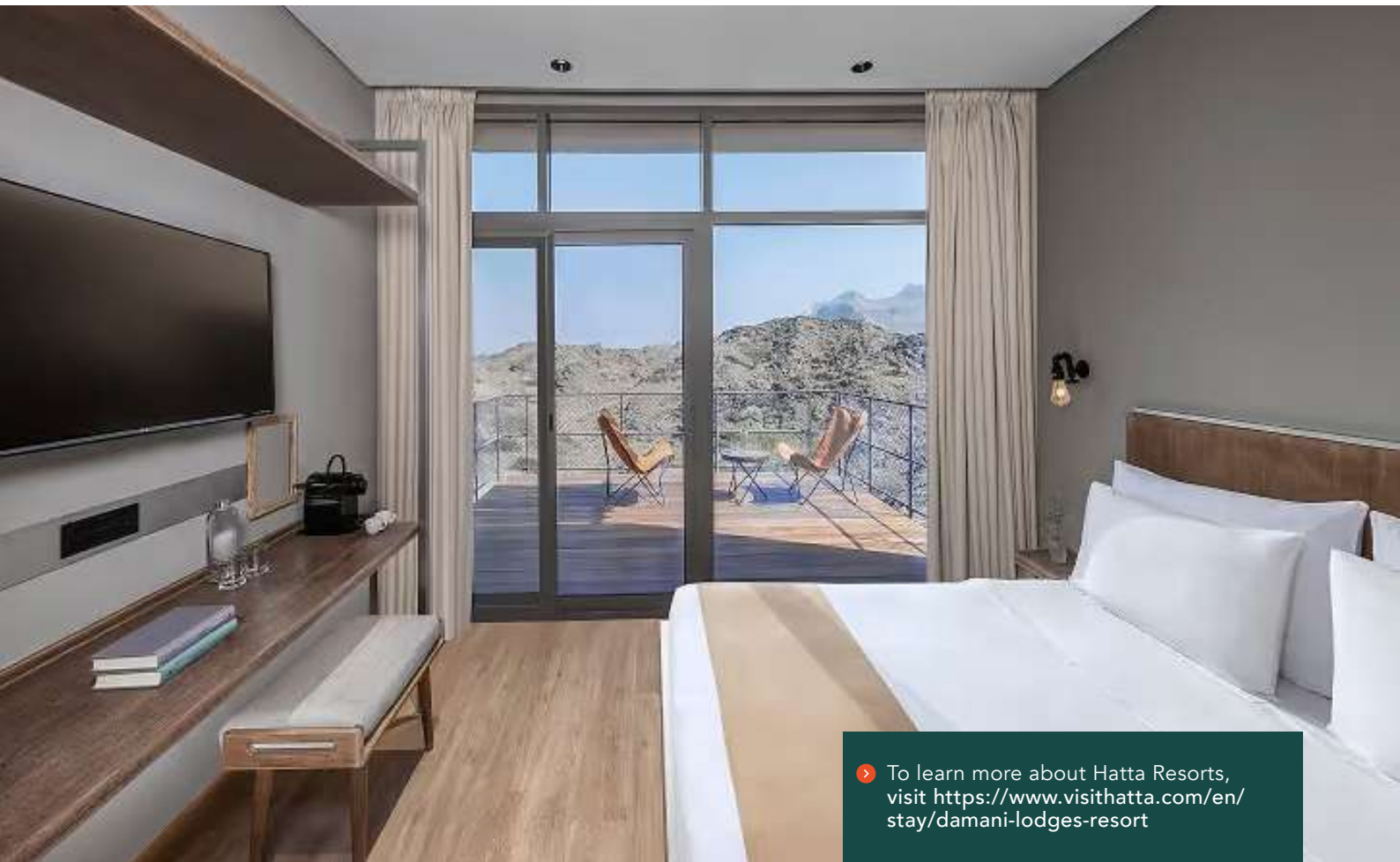
It's under a 90-minute drive from Downtown Dubai, making it a perfect escape even during the week. That was our quest; to see if it was in fact practical to steal a day away from the city by heading out to the border of Oman, where the remainder of the day could possibly be made up of virtual meetings and short breaks from screens for a little adventure. Possible it was! For those seeking a break from the dazzling urban landscape of Dubai, Hatta Resorts showed me that a refreshing escape into the heart of nature is something that every city dweller should add to their list of things to do often in a bid to maintain a healthy work-life balance.



Nestled amidst the rugged mountains that separate Dubai emirate from the Sultanate of Oman, over the years the little town of Hatta has grown in popularity as a haven for adventurers and outdoor enthusiasts alike. My journey began with a scenic cruise, with the drive to Hatta itself a captivating experience. Leaving the city behind, the landscape gradually transformed, revealing the dramatic beauty of the region. The drive, typically anywhere from 60-90 minutes long from Dubai, winds through picturesque valleys and rocky terrains on a smooth, carpet-like roadway, offering glimpses of the stunning natural scenery that awaits.

A scenic drive to natural beauty and perhaps adventure...

I arrived at the eco-friendly Hatta Resorts; a



➤ To learn more about Hatta Resorts, visit <https://www.visithatta.com/en/stay/damani-lodges-resort>

somewhat impromptu decision to head out during what felt like a never-ending, stress-infused week. Nature is my happy place, and so it was either going to be an early morning sunrise solo drive out to a neighbouring emirate with a return later in the day, or an overnigher at Hatta Resorts, a destination of which I highly anticipated seeing what the hype was about. With confirmed availability given how often it is fully booked, I joined other visitors arriving for check in, who were greeted by an enthusiastic team of staff at the Resort's reception area. Upon a brief orientation and check-in procedures, the instruction was to leave my car in the parking lot, where I would be transported up to my abode for the night in a rugged outdoor terrain vehicle.

You'll love Damani Lodges: **A Sanctuary of Refinement**

For those seeking respite after a day of exploration or like me, just a space to call "time-out" in the palms of the outdoors, Damani Lodges offer an unparalleled retreat. These are not mere accommodations; they are private sanctuaries that deliver an unsurpassed glamping experience in the area, one seamlessly designed to harmonize with the

natural surroundings.

My afternoon in was spent shifting between the comfort of my cozy space, and resting on a giant beanbag laid out onto my private terrace, which seemingly hung from the rocky terrain. I tried to work but felt having my eyes glued to my laptop screen was doing the environment and opportunity to get away for the night, an injustice! Panoramic mountain views washed over me, with the occasional exhilarating screams of enthusiastic adventurers conquering the elevated terrain by zipline.

Meals would be served for me at a time of my choosing at check in, with a barbecue dinner prepped for the night and an Arabic or international breakfast option to be delivered the next morning. I also learned that given the concept is glamping, guests also have the option to make their own meals should they choose, with raw prepped ingredients brought to your accommodations for you to try a hand at outdoor cooking as you would with traditional camping.

As twilight descended, I had the option to pull my camp chair towards the edge of a crackling fire pit, enjoying the stars - a celestial canopy above, while indulging in my gourmet barbecue selection of tender lamb, beef, chicken skewers and wings. These were accompanied by a healthy serving of two salads, dips and Arabic breads. Being solo on this occasion meant that I wasn't quite up for the admin of preparing my meals alone, and so I enjoyed my culinary

experience under the vast expanse of the night sky, with sultry music playing from my travel companion, my miniature JBL speaker, which is always ready to usher me into a quiet serenade after a long day.

An abundance of options.

Beyond the lodges, the exclusive charm of Hatta's other offerings carries across the pristine terrain. The domes, with their private pools, redefine luxury glamping, offering a secluded oasis of indulgence. The caravans, meticulously appointed, provide a home away from home, while the vintage campers, lovingly restored, evoke a sense of nostalgic elegance. And for the purist, the campsites offer a return to the elemental, a communion with nature under the starlit sky.


Hatta Resorts offers a curated experience, a symphony of adventure, glamp-style luxury, and cultural immersion as you venture out beyond the compound's periphery. It's a place where the soul finds solace in the embrace of nature, where every moment is a treasured memory, and where the discerning traveller or busy city-dweller carves out moments to discover a world of simple beauty that collides with refined adventure.

THE DESTINATION BOASTS A DIVERSE RANGE OF EXPERIENCES, ALL DESIGNED TO CATER TO VARIOUS INTERESTS. HATTA RESORTS AND ITS WADI HUB PROVIDE A PLETHORA OF ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING:

1. **Hiking and Biking Trails:** Explore the rugged terrain with numerous trails catering to different skill levels.
2. **Hatta Dam Kayaking:** Paddle across the serene waters of the Hatta Dam, surrounded by breathtaking mountain views.



3. **Adventure Activities at Wadi Hub:** Engage in thrilling activities like ziplining, mountain biking, archery and more.
4. **Cultural Experiences:** You can visit the Hatta Heritage Village a short drive away to delve into the region's rich history and traditions.

The Hatta district of Dubai Emirate continues to evolve, with ongoing developments aimed at enhancing the visitor experience while preserving the region's natural beauty. With its diverse range of activities and accommodations, Hatta has solidified its position as a prime destination for those seeking an unforgettable outdoor adventure in the comfort of stellar spaces. 





PULSE OF THE CITY

La Clé Franschhoek: Unlocking the Essence of Epicurean Luxury

Nestled in the heart of the Cape Winelands, Franschhoek exudes an old-world charm that captivates visitors with its picturesque vineyards, gourmet restaurants, and breathtaking scenery. It would be considered an anomaly to not immediately fall in love with one of the Cape Wineland's most iconic destinations, where among the gems of this enchanting town lies La Clé Franschhoek, a haven of epicurean luxury that seamlessly blends opulence, design, and unforgettable experiences.

A SYMPHONY OF DESIGN AND OPULENCE

La Clé Franschhoek comprises two distinct properties: La Clé Lodge and La Clé Villas. Each exudes its own unique charm, offers spacious settings that speak to the most discerning of tastemakers, while the service rendered maintains the highest standards of luxury and sophistication.

La Clé Lodge, a beautifully restored Cape Dutch farmhouse, welcomes guests with its warm, inviting ambiance. The delightful manor was designed by the renowned Jacques Erasmus of Hemelhuijs, such that the lodge's interiors showcase a harmonious blend of modern styling and classic charm. High ceilings, generous living areas, and carefully curated décor create an atmosphere of refined elegance, cosying guests up to ultimate settings where views of surrounding mountains, vineyards and manicured lawns deliver on relaxation.

La Clé Villas, on the other hand, are perfect for families of friends traveling together, ushering guests into a realm of unparalleled levels of privacy and exclusivity. These individually designed villas, each with its own private pool and garden, are perfect for those seeking a more secluded retreat. The villas' interiors are a testament to impeccable taste and spectacular theming, with handcrafted furniture, exquisite fabrics bearing hues

of various shades and prints of bold colouring, as well as state-of-the-art amenities.

AN EPICUREAN JOURNEY

La Clé Franschhoek is not just a feast for the eyes; it's also a paradise for the palate. The culinary offerings at both the Lodge and the Villas are a celebration of fresh, local ingredients and innovative flavours.

Guests can indulge in a variety of dining experiences, from casual poolside lunches to elegant multi-course dinners set on dining tables set for royalty. The chefs at La Clé are passionate about showcasing the region's finest produce, and they artfully create dishes, from the famed South Afri-



can Braai with a contemporary twist to delightfully plated international dishes that are both visually stunning, incredibly delicious and an ode to the spirit of the place from which they are served.

BEYOND THE WALLS OF LA CLÉ

While La Clé Franschhoek offers a world of its own, it also serves as the perfect base for exploring the wonders of Franschhoek and its surroundings. Franschhoek's story is woven with threads of Huguenot resilience and vinicultural heritage. In 1688, a group of French Huguenots, fleeing religious persecution, arrived in the Cape and were granted land in this fertile valley. They brought with them their expertise in viticulture and winemaking, laying the foundation for the region's now-famous wine industry. The name "Franschhoek," meaning "French Corner," stands as a testament to their enduring legacy. Their influence is still visible today in the architecture, the names of many wine estates, and the town's distinct character.

WITH A HOST OF ACTIVITIES TO CHOOSE FROM WHILE IN FRANSCHHOEK, HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE EXPERIENCES THAT AWAIT YOU:

Wine Tasting: Franschhoek is renowned for its world-class wines, and a visit to the region would not be complete without indulging in a wine tasting. Because La Clé sets a premium on awarding its guests distinctively curated experiences on and of site, beyond wine pairing dinners and tastings from your villa or lodge, the team can also arrange private tastings at some of the most prestigious estates in the area.

Gourmet Delights: Franschhoek is a culinary hotspot, with a plethora of award-winning restaurants offering everything from fine dining to casual bistro fare. You're simply spoiled for choice when in Franschhoek, but be rest assured that while staying at La Clé, you may very well find little reason to venture out beyond the




estate gates, as the chefs are ready to deliver dishes and platters to satisfy every craving.

Scenic Drives: Cape Town and its surrounds boast dreamy views no matter the direction you head towards. The Cape Winelands are no exception, and a feast for the eyes and adventurer. A leisurely drive through the vineyards and mountains is a must-do.

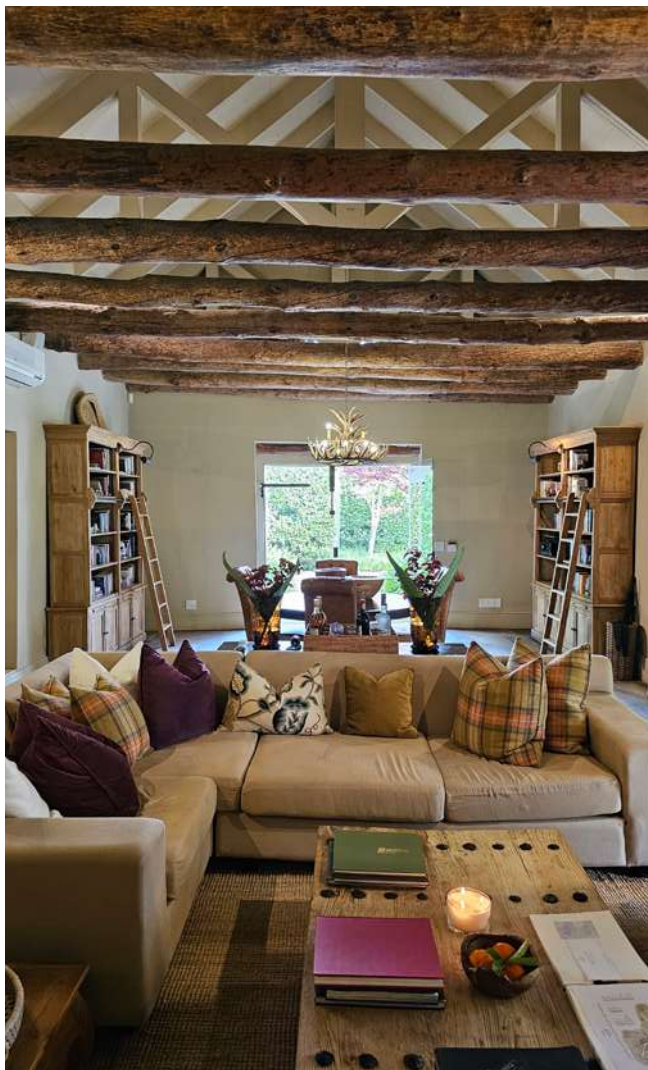
Hiking and Biking: The region offers a variety of trails for those who want to explore the natural beauty of the area on foot or by bike. If it's not a casual walk through the town's bustling promenades, a short drive or cycle will lead you to picturesque tracts that provide a fitting backdrop for a relaxed hike or cycle through Franschhoek's surrounds.

Art and Culture: Franschhoek buzzes with creativity, as exhibited by the countless little boutiques, galleries and stalls lining market-style retail spaces. Home to a vibrant arts scene, Franschhoek is an exploratory haven for gallery and studios enthusiasts, often showcasing the work of local artists and creatives.

UNLOCKING THE ESSENCE OF FRANSCHHOEK DURING YOUR STAY

La Clé Franschhoek is more than just a luxury hotel; it's an experience that unlocks the essence of Franschhoek. It's a place where opulence and design meet culinary excellence and unforgettable experiences for all ages. Whether you're seeking a romantic getaway, a family vacation, or a solo adventure, La Clé Franschhoek promises to exceed your expectations and leave you with memories that will last a lifetime. 

➤ To learn more about La Clé Franschhoek, visit <https://www.lacle.co.za/>



HOYA CAFÉ: Al Wasl Road's Family-Friendly Spot For Soulful Dining

A welcoming nook with food and stories to nourish your soul. At the heart of Hoya, you'll immerse yourself in tales of the food, the people around you or the stories that you bring along. Situated in the heart of Al Wasl Road, one of Dubai's most sophisticated neighborhoods, Hoya is a vibrant, refined multi-story villa where each floor offers a new experience – from secret doors to a quaint library.

A proudly homegrown Emirati owned Café, where the chefs are not just serving food; but the ethos is to craft unforgettable moments for families and friends. Recently opened, Hoya is a new go-to destination for delightful breakfasts and cozy dinners where great taste meets togetherness.

START YOUR DAY WITH A SMILE!

City life can be plentiful, and so on such mornings where the need lies in settling down for a morning with self or loved ones, one can certainly head over for a sunrise of flavors with Hoya's delectable Arabic Breakfast, perfect for sharing over a warm, welcoming cup of Saudi Arabic Coffee. This hearty meal isn't just a dish; it's a cultural experience designed for you and your loved ones to enjoy together. For those looking for a sweet start to their day, indulge in Hoya's fluffy French Toast or a stack of scrumptious pancakes that will make your morning magical.

DINE UNDER THE STARS

As day turns to night, Hoya Café transforms into a culinary wonderland, and a cosy spot to wrap up the day's activity. Delight your taste buds with Hoya's Fregula Chicken Roulade, a comforting dish that wraps savory flavors in every bite. Pasta lovers will appreciate the Pesto Pasta, bursting with fresh, vibrant ingredients. For seafood lovers, the Grilled Tiger Prawn and Grilled Prawn Roll offer a taste of the ocean that's sure to make waves. Diners are encouraged to also consider treating themselves to Hoya's Truffle Pizza—a gourmet twist on a classic that delights with every slice!

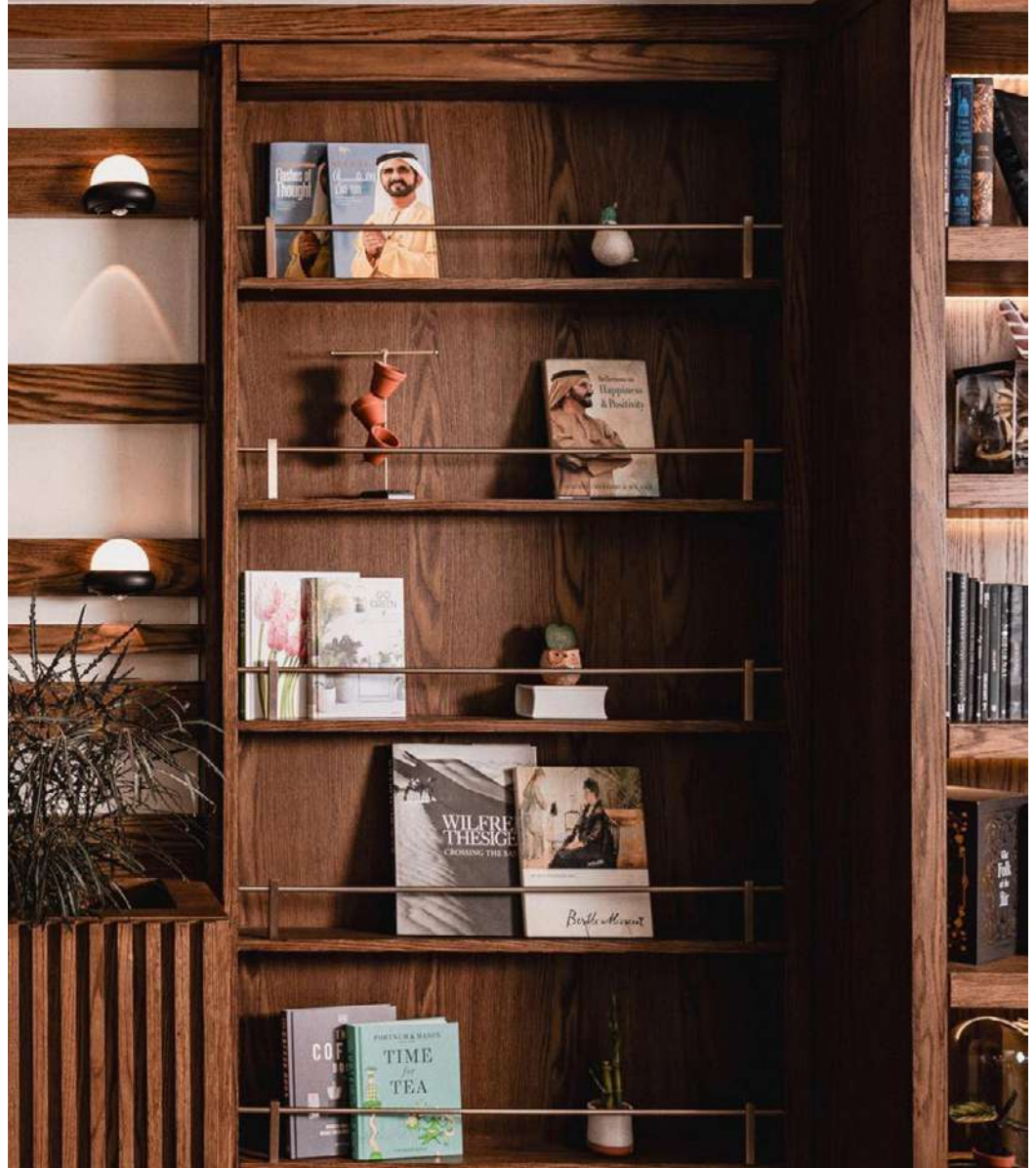
HOYA



RAISE A GLASS TO MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Complement your meal with one of Hoya's refreshing drinks! Sip on the floral notes of a Lavender & Hibiscus Lemonade, or refresh yourself with a zesty Yuzu Spritz. The Peach and Blackberry Iced Teas provide the perfect sweet touch to a dining experience, making every meal feel like a celebration.

At Hoya Café, the belief is that food tastes better when shared. The intimate café with reading nooks and a quaint backyard garden embellished with a sparkling pool and seating area, fosters a welcoming environment where families come together, friends reconnect, and new memories are created. With boardgames for children, a mini library carrying some of the owner's favourite reads as well as an indoor plant nursery where you can purchase a few seedlings or pot plants, Hoya provides a calming sanctuary for a quick meal or time spent working or chatting with your loved ones. One thing's for sure, Hoya Café Restaurant, located on Al Wasl Road, is your go-to spot for heart-warming meals! 🍷



> To learn more about Hoya, visit <https://facebook.com/hoyauae>





A Relaxing Sea-View Getaway
Awaits Aboard the Legendary
Queen Elizabeth 2



The unique opportunity of living out a few days as if out at sea awaits friends and families alike, with a staycation on board the Legendary Queen Elizabeth 2. Escape the ordinary and immerse yourself in the unparalleled charm of a sea-view escape aboard the iconic ship, now permanently docked at Port Mina Rashid. Dubai's only floating hotel offers an extraordinary retreat where breathtaking port, skyline and sea views meet timeless heritage and modern comforts.

Step aboard this legendary vessel and indulge in a unique experience that redefines relaxation. The QE2, steeped in maritime history, provides a serene sanctuary away from the city's hustle and bustle. With each stay, guests are enveloped in the ship's storied legacy while enjoying world-class amenities and personalised service designed to make every moment unforgettable.

"The Queen Elizabeth 2 offers more than a stay; it offers an experience that merges heritage, hospitality, and serenity in one unique destination," said Ferghal Purcell, General Manager of the QE2. "Guests are invited to unwind in the lap of history while enjoying our modern spaces and stunning sea views."

Imagine waking up to the gentle sound of the waves and the sight of shimmering waters from the comfort of your well-appointed room. Every sea-view accommodation on the QE2 comes with spacious interiors, plush bedding, and a touch of vintage elegance seamlessly integrated with modern conveniences.

Whether enjoying a leisurely breakfast or unwinding with a sunset view from one of the ship's decks, the QE2 promise a tranquil escape that soothes the soul. The ship's vintage charm, complemented by its contemporary enhancements, creates an ambiance that's both nostalgic and forward-looking.

A Floating Legend

Beyond a relaxing stay, guests can explore the ship's fascinating heritage with guided tours showcasing its past as one of the world's most celebrated ocean liners. In a world where voyages across the seas once evoked dreams of discovery and endless horizons, the Queen Eliza-






both 2 became an icon. Having sailed over six million nautical miles and completed 25 world cruises, she now stands proudly anchored in Dubai, inviting guests to experience the soul of an era when ocean travel was pure romance.

“The QE2 embodies an age of discovery, a time when people set sail not just to travel but to awaken a sense of wonder,” adds the General Manager, Ferghall. “As a hotel, one of our objectives is to keep the QE2’s legacy alive, making her history as relevant and inspiring today as it was during her sailing years. We invite visitors to step aboard, to walk where legends walked, and to share in the extraordinary stories of this beloved ship.”

Delve Into The Historical Details Through A Guided Tour

The QE2 offers a unique hotel experience and a journey into heritage. Each deck and corridor provide a glimpse into her glamorous past. Guests can wander through historic hallways adorned with precious art, sip cocktails inspired by her grand voyages, and explore dining venues and staterooms that once hosted the world’s most illustrious travellers.

The QE2’s guided Heritage Tours invite visitors and students alike to delve into fascinating stories – from her iconic voyages to her legendary steam-to-diesel transformation. For those seeking a destination that transcends time, the QE2 promises an experience unlike any other.

Educational and interactive tours, covering maritime history, engineering, and QE2’s celebrated role in global events, are especially geared toward school groups and young historians. Through these carefully curated experiences, students and families travelling with children, can explore a floating museum filled with original artifacts, captivating stories, and rare insights. 







A CALL FOR *Contributors*

ARE YOU A **HOTEL, TOUR OR WILDERNESS CAMP OPERATOR** OFFERING DISTINCTIVE EXPERIENCES YOU WANT PROSPECTIVE GUESTS TO KNOW MORE ABOUT?

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR MORE COVERAGE OF YOUR **TRAVEL, HOSPITALITY, LEISURE AND LIFESTYLE BRAND** AND OPERATION TO EXPAT TRAVELLERS IN THE UAE?

ARE YOU A **TRAVEL BLOGGER OR CONTENT CREATOR** LOOKING TO SHARE YOUR STORY WITH THE WORLD THROUGH AN ENGAGING TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE FOCUSED PLATFORM?

Register your interest in becoming a contributor or send your proposed content (press release, feature article, listing guides or reviews) to info@travelessencemag.com.

All content should be accompanied by relevant hi-resolution images or video content, facts sheets and a bio for personality profile pieces.

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