

#SAFARI #ADVENTURE

Where the wild things are

Abundant wildlife comes out to play on a luxury Abercrombie & Kent safari around Botswana and Zambia. *By Katrina Holden*

O

UR GUIDE HAS JUST PURCHASED passes to Chobe National Park, the first of its kind in Botswana. But rather than moving forward, he promptly makes a U-turn and drives right out the front gates. Off the main road, we veer left down a discrete side-track of dirt road.

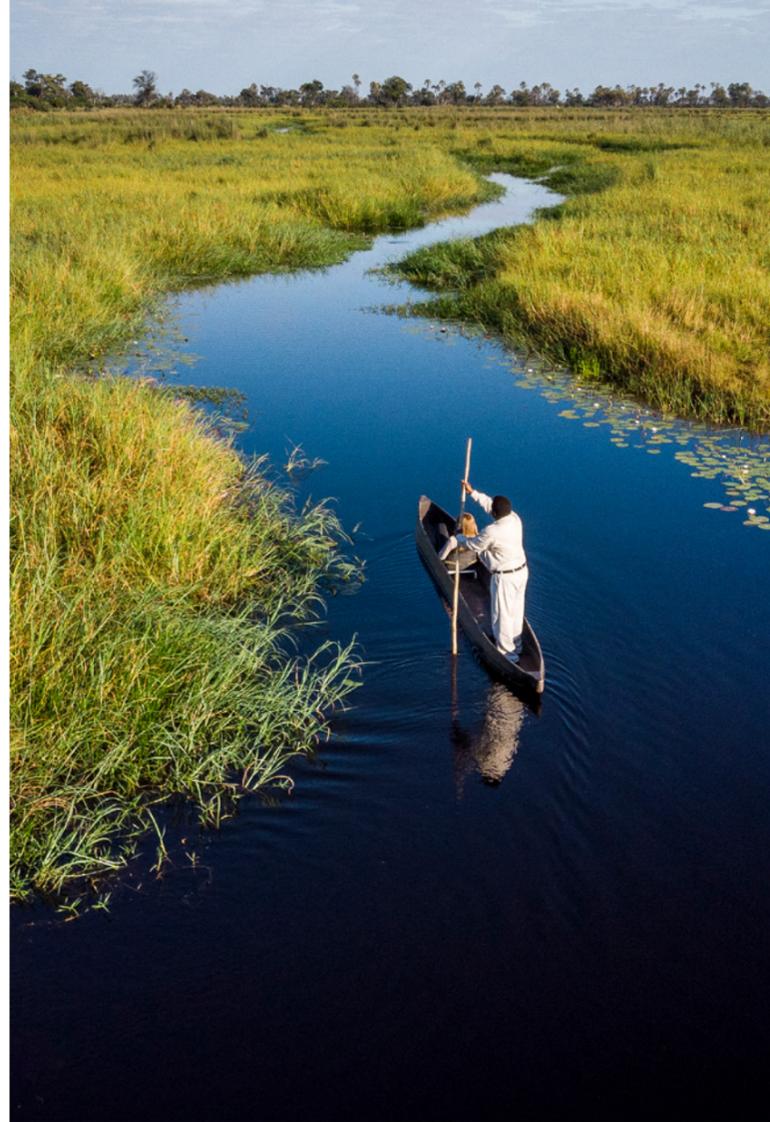
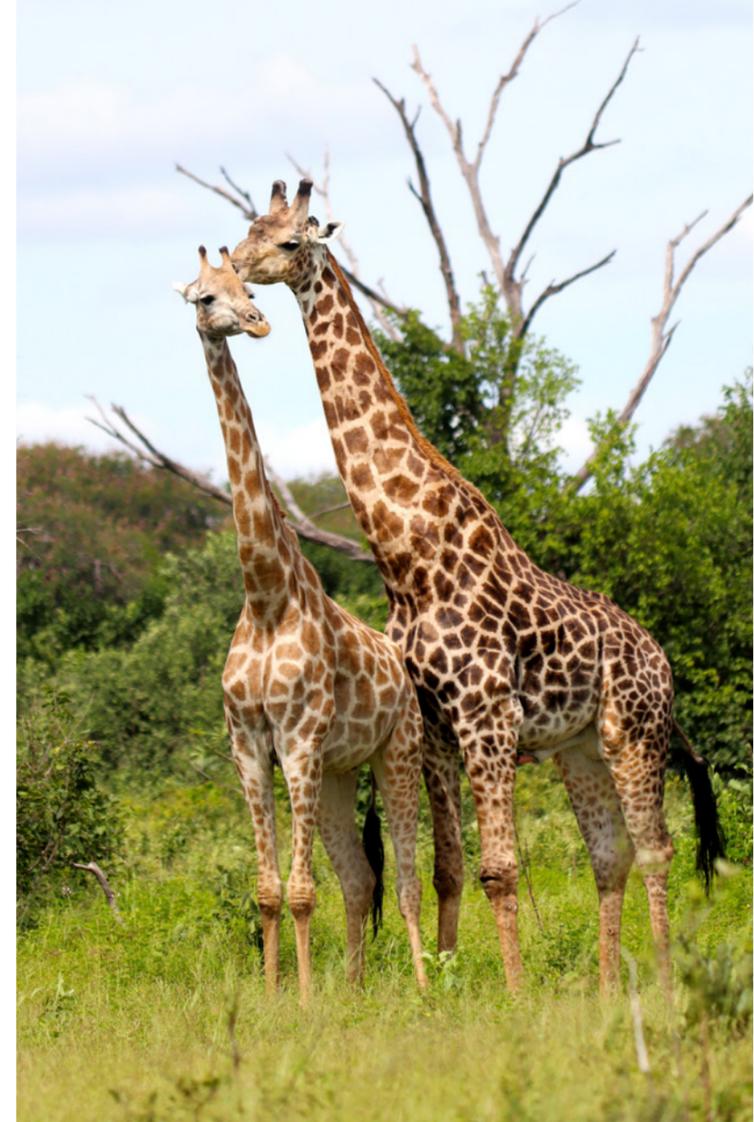
"I want to show you something very special – hold on," cautions Cavin, holding the steering wheel with intent. The morning wind whips through our hair as we speed through the bush in our open-air safari vehicle. "Woo-hoo!" I hear myself (and others) hoot as we charge along. Cavin comes to a complete stop, reminding

us to be quiet. "Can you see the tail?" he whispers. "It's a monkey," suggests a fellow passenger. "A baboon?" offers another.

The lithe animal emerges from the shrub just metres before us, slinking along as the unmistakable print of its fur catches the light of the sun filtering through the trees. Leopard! And not one, but two – a male and female pair. It's a rare sight, Cavin assures us, as the elusive cats normally travel solo.

It's our first full day on safari with Abercrombie & Kent at its property Sanctuary Chobe Chilwero. And within five minutes of strapping into





our vehicle, we're treated to this mind-blowing spectacle. How can it possibly get any better than this, I wonder? But it's merely the start of what proves to be a whirlwind adventure filled with wildlife spotting, awe and reverence.

PARK LIFE

It's my first time on safari, but it doesn't take long to fall into sync with the daily mantra, which is unscripted, wild, raw and energetic: there are no promised sightings or encounters, and anything is possible. To come with a checklist of expectations is missing the point – although, at this park, you are basically guaranteed parades of elephants, spotted up close and on numerous occasions, as Chobe has the highest population of these gentle giants in all of Africa.

Seeing animals in their natural habitat is a poignant reminder that these

special creatures do not exist for our amusement or entertainment. Observing them interacting, tending to their young, sourcing food and mating – all unfiltered – is an unparalleled experience that affects me more deeply than I'd ever imagined.

Heading to the Chobe River, we pass through pretty passages of Zambezi teak, mahogany and baobab trees. A large troop of baboons is playing beside the water – a female sits grooming a male, crushing parasites found in his fur with her teeth. Impalas leap high into the air like reindeers, while buffalo graze in the distance. Closer, we spot partly-camouflaged hippopotamuses and a crocodile, sunning itself on a rock.

We break for morning tea in the bush, all very civilised with hot drinks, biscotti and white linen tablecloths. Back in the vehicle, we encounter a tower of 13 giraffes, including calves and a male

OPENING SPREAD: Wildlife abounds around Sanctuary Chobe Chiwero © Mark Williams/Sanctuary Retreats. **ABOVE, FROM LEFT:** A lioness and her cub © Katrina Holden; Sanctuary Chief's Camp in Botswana © Sanctuary Retreats; a tall wildlife order in Botswana © Katrina Holden; cruising Zambia's waterways © Sanctuary Retreats

and female pair mating like nobody's watching. On another track, we see a lioness in the distance, strutting through a field. On our final day, we come across a dazzle of zebras, their distinct black and white stripes contrasting beautifully against the lush green landscape.

The highlight comes late one afternoon when we spot a male lion, king of the pride, resting in grass. Just steps away, five cubs play and four lionesses sit idly, keeping watch. One lioness licks a cub's

fur with her thick, pink tongue – the young cat rolls innocently from front to back. It's another rare sighting, viewing the male lion in residence with his pride. I'm moved to tears, overcome with emotion.

ROOMS WITH VIEWS

Back at Sanctuary Chobe Chilwero, my room is beautifully appointed in tasteful, neutral tones with a canopy four-poster bed, air-conditioning, a deep-soaking bath and a deck from which to watch baboons dart across the lawn. Gourmet lunches are served on a terrace overlooking the Chobe River in the distance, while sundowners are offered upon returning from safari; staff meet us with cool towels and cocktails, which we sip while reclining on director's chairs by the large fire pit.

In the morning, a small boat carries us down the river, its banks lined with parades of elephants drinking and bathing.

We are mesmerised by a tiny calf, still learning to master the power of her trunk. Her little ears flap as she slides beneath mum's belly, sandwiched between the matriarch's mighty legs. Other pachyderms that we pass in our jeep barely register our presence, as they flick red dirt over their backs to cool themselves down. Chobe National Park has been a protected wildlife area for more than 60 years, so the animals here are incredibly relaxed about the presence of people in safari vehicles.

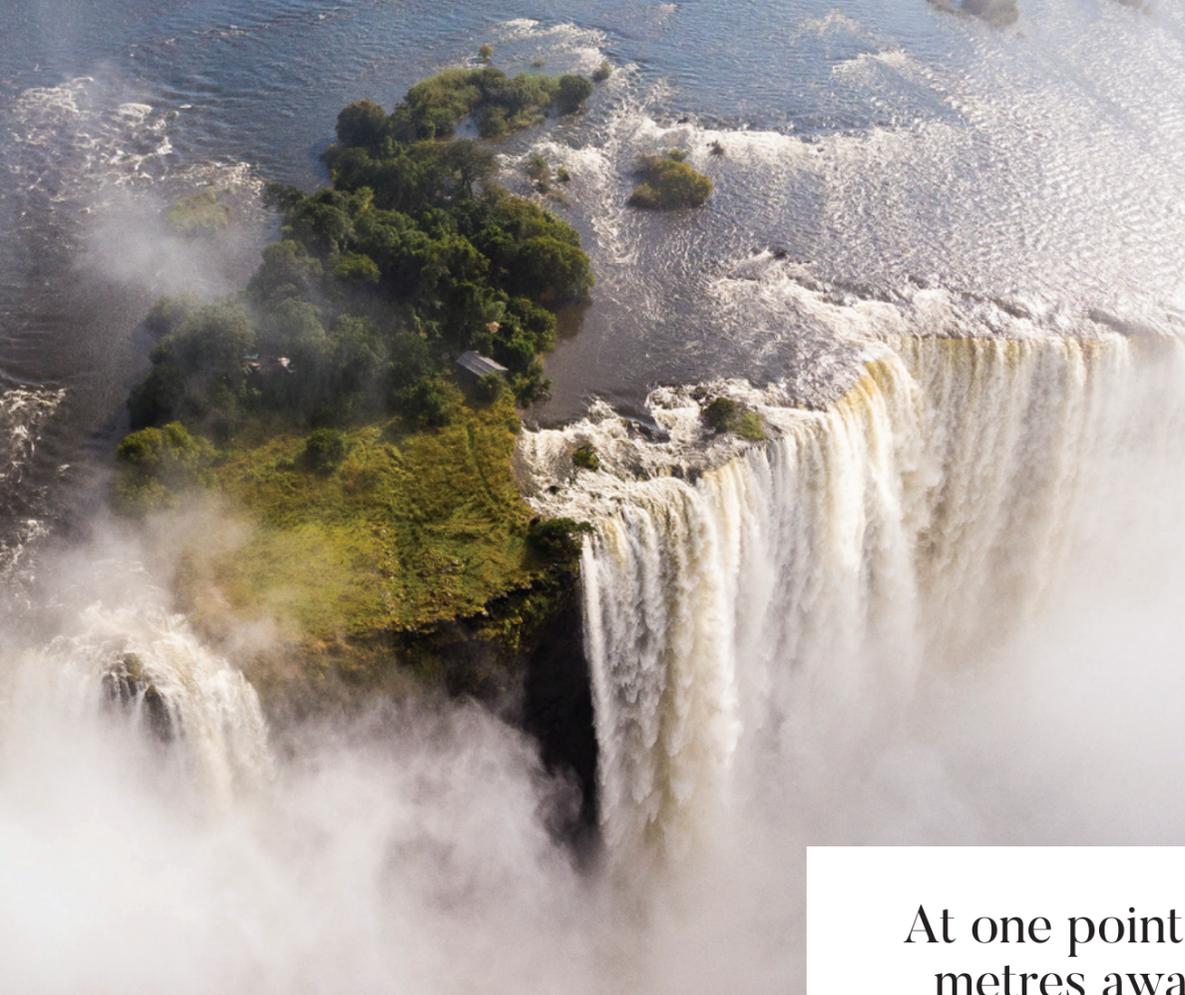
ZAMBIA CALLING

Travelling north over the border into Zambia by car and by boat, we make a beeline for Sanctuary Sussi & Chuma. Here, 12 treehouse lodges line the banks of the famed Zambezi River. Another large timber deck beckons, and we while away sunset chatting with new friends over a gin and tonic. Some of us dive into the

property's petite pool, right on the river's edge, cooling down to a soundtrack of Cape turtle doves, trilling in the background.

Our new guide, Shadreck, drives us to World Heritage Site Mosi-oa-Tunya (Victoria Falls), just near Livingstone – it's only a 15-minute drive from the lodge. The noise is all-encompassing, as 500 million cubic litres of water from the Zambezi River cascades down a 108-metre-deep gorge every second, hitting rock when it lands. We make our way across a bridge with the nerve-inducing name Knife Edge, spotting people on a cliff viewing the falls from over the border in Zimbabwe.

Later, a visit to nearby Nakatindi village allows guests to see the positive impacts that the work of Abercrombie & Kent Philanthropy and Sanctuary Retreats Philanthropy is having at a grassroots level, with villagers turning their hand to enterprising work running a bike shop (an



At one point we stand just metres away from eight white rhinos, including a mother and baby.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Thundering Victoria Falls; blissful moments at Chief's Camp; sunset moments on Zambia's waterways; sweet dreams are guaranteed at Chobe Chilwero in Botswana © Mark Williams. All images © Sanctuary Retreats

essential mode of transport) for locals, and making jewellery out of old glass bottles.

HIGH FIVE

It's here in Zambia that we get close, on foot, to one of the 'Big Five': a rhino. Driving into Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, we alight from the vehicle and walk through shrub in single file, flanked by two armed rangers – they're carrying rifles to shoot warning signs into the air if required; we're reassured this is rarely necessary. Still, it doesn't stop bursts of adrenaline charging through our bodies.

At one point we stand just metres away from eight white rhinos, including a mother and baby. They continue to eat as we watch, transfixed and amazed at their shape and curved, protruding horns.

Back at the lodge, a group of us relax on the outdoor lounges, as the setting sun casts pink streaks in the sky over the Zambezi. We hear a sudden splash and see a hippo launch dramatically into the water with a wide, open mouth revealing pink flesh and sharp teeth. It's the perfect end note to an unforgettable safari journey. 📍

📍 TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Qatar Airways operates flights to Kasane International Airport Botswana, via Doha and Johannesburg. [qatarairways.com](https://www.qatarairways.com)

TOURING THERE

All accommodations are included in Abercrombie & Kent's 10-day luxury small-group journey, 'Botswana Safari in Style', which is priced from AU\$14,115 per person for 2022. Enjoy stays at Sanctuary Sussi & Chuma in Zambia, as well as Sanctuary Chobe Chilwero, Sanctuary Stanley's Camp and Sanctuary Chief's Camp, all in Botswana. [abercrombiekent.com.au](https://www.abercrombiekent.com.au), [sanctuaryretreats.com](https://www.sanctuaryretreats.com)