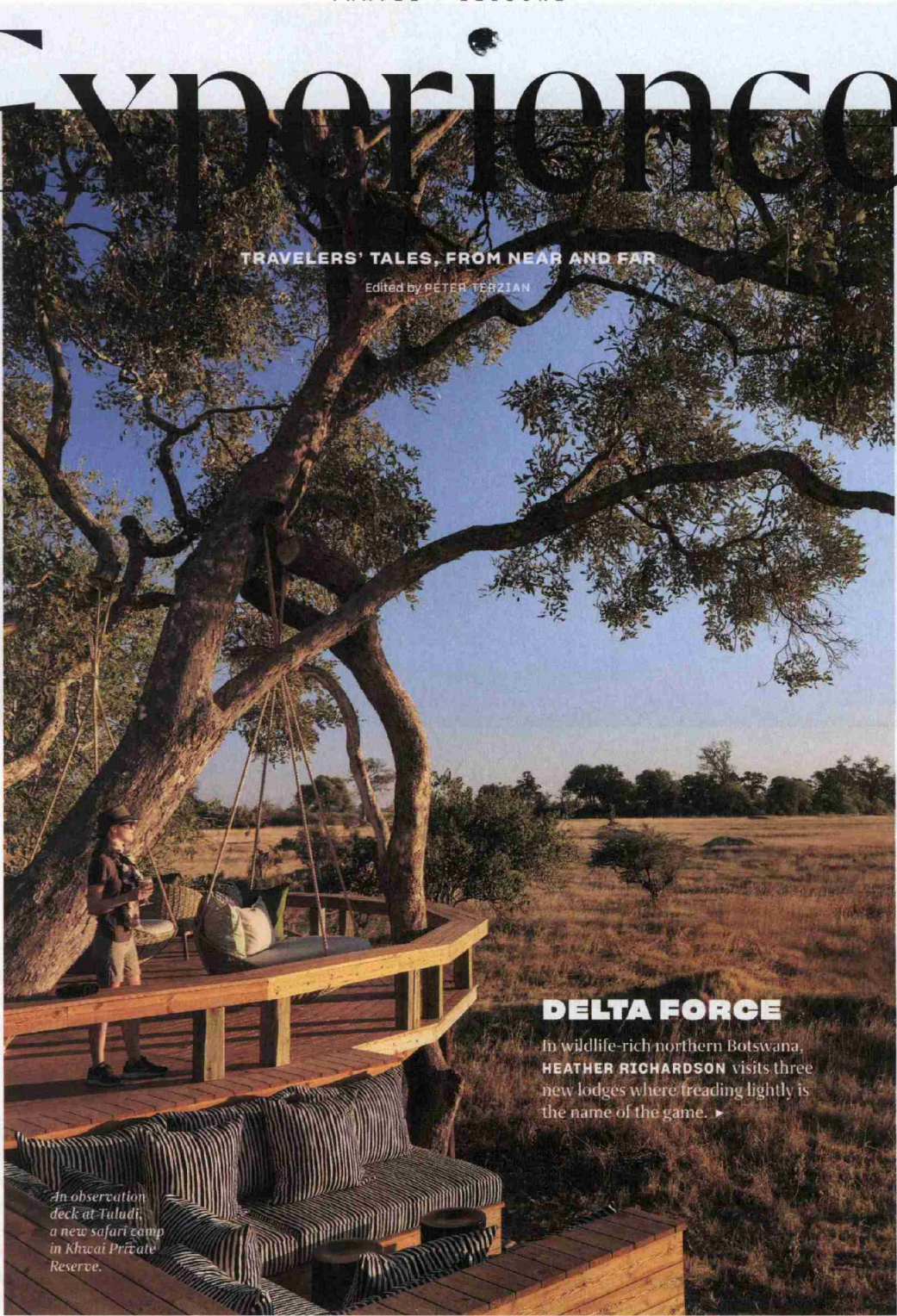


TRAVEL + LEISURE

# Experiences

TRAVELERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR

Edited by PETER TERZIAN

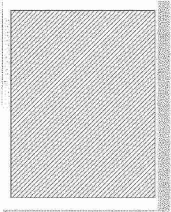


## DELTA FORCE

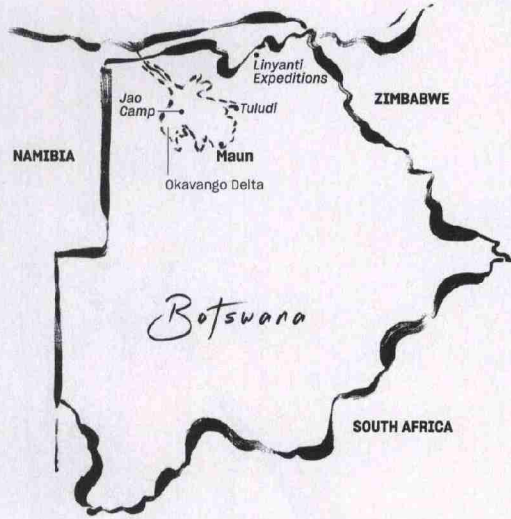
In wildlife-rich northern Botswana, **HEATHER RICHARDSON** visits three new lodges where treading lightly is the name of the game. ▶

An observation deck at Tuludi, a new safari camp in Khwai Private Reserve.

COURTESY OF NATURAL SELECTION







THE LEOPARD was easy in our presence, climbing a tall termite mound to pose with her front paws set primly together. The creature's pale eyes narrowed against the sun as she gazed into the distance, scanning thickets of scrub for warthogs or, perhaps, an impala. Our guide, Oetile "Butler" John, reckoned she was about five years old. But neither he nor the researchers in another vehicle alongside us recognized this leopard. She was a newcomer to the Khwai Private Reserve, in the Okavango Delta, and a symbol of the positive momentum there.

A flurry of lodges has opened in and around the delta in the past year. From classic no-frills bush camps to cossetting luxury properties, this growth proves how popular Botswana remains, even as safari-goers are spoiled for choice across southern Africa. The country's high-cost, low-footprint tourism model has helped keep its wild areas free of crowds, while its unusual environments—including the delta—make for thrilling wildlife sightings.

Not that the country hasn't had its issues. In 2014, Botswana joined Kenya in banning elephant trophy hunting. But because the nation has Africa's largest population of the animals—an estimated 130,000—deadly human-wildlife conflict is a major problem. In 2019, President Mokgweetsi Masisi overturned the ban—a move that was popular with voters, but met with stiff criticism from naturalists, who say even limited hunts will reverse years of progress.

▲ Tents at Linyanti Expeditions have mesh walls, so guests can bird-watch and stargaze from their beds.

▼ Spotting elephants on a game drive near Tuludi.

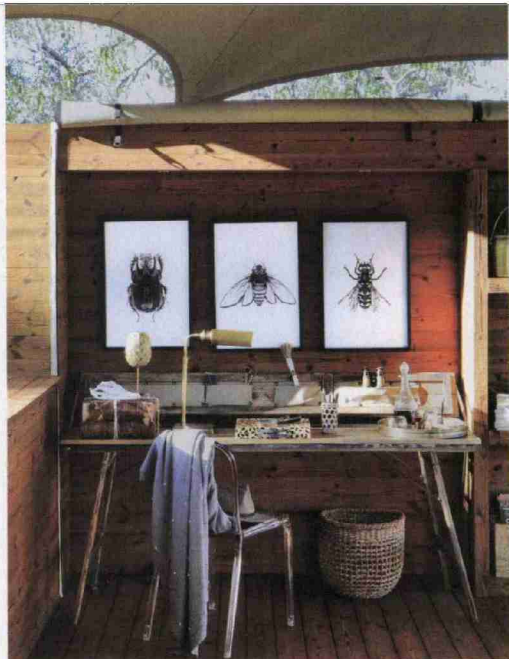
But at one new camp in Khwai, the conservation story is unequivocally upbeat. Permanent water sources bring plenty of wildlife to Tuludi ([naturalselection.travel](http://naturalselection.travel); doubles from \$1,225 per person, all-inclusive), in contrast to other parts of the country, where drought is often a serious concern. African wild dogs, for example, are usually highly elusive, but there I saw two packs in three days. I also spotted two more leopards; the delta is one of the best places to see the big cats at their most relaxed—and John seemed to have a special knack for finding them.

It's fitting: tuludi is a native Tswana word that describes the markings of a leopard. The camp,

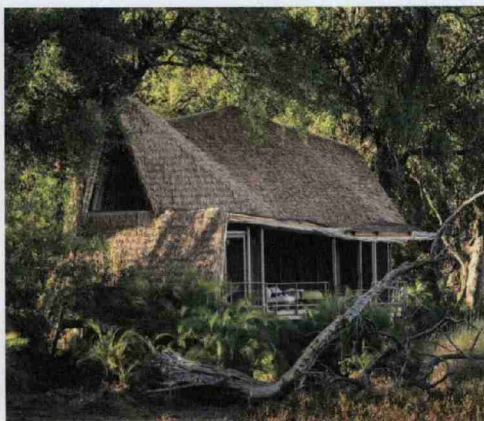


FROM TOP: COURTESY OF AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS; COURTESY OF NATURAL SELECTION. ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY





From left: The camp library at Tuludi; a guest room at Jao Camp.



WILDERNESS SAFARIS

## GETTING THERE

Maun Airport is the gateway to the Okavango, with nonstop flights from Cape Town and Johannesburg. From Maun, small planes ferry travelers to safari camps. A travel specialist, like T+L A-List expert Craig Beal ([craigb@travelbeyond.com](mailto:craigb@travelbeyond.com); 800-876-3131) can help with logistics.

owned by safari outfitter Natural Selection, consists of seven 650-square-foot guest tents spaced around a floodplain, which usually fills with water by August. The design is a playful take on safari style, with bright colors and patterns, rattan furniture, and a riot of textures. A central open-plan lodge, set among leadwood trees, has a curved bar covered in intricate mosaics of wildlife, from a pangolin to a leopard lapping up water. There's even a slide connecting the library to the dining area—and yes, people were using it.

From Tuludi, I hopped in a Cessna Caravan to fly 30 minutes north of the heart of the delta, to the Linyanti region. The new **Linyanti Expeditions** ([africanbushcamps.com](http://africanbushcamps.com); doubles from \$546 per person, all-inclusive) is deliberately rustic, surrounded by mopani and sausage trees and designed to feel as close to nature as possible. There are six tented rooms with bucket showers and shaded decks; meals are taken communally in the mess tent. It joins two existing (and higher-end) properties run by African Bush Camps nearby, all three on a tree-lined ridge, beyond which lies the Namibian panhandle.

For me, the highlight there was a bushwalk. These guided hikes—which are gaining in popularity at safari camps across Botswana—allow travelers to see wildlife at ground level, a thrilling, intimate experience. Our group of seven took care not to get too close to the skittish zebras and quietly crept past a big herd of buffalo. A large old bull elephant suddenly

emerged from the trees—and was as startled to see us as we were to see him. He gave a dramatic shake of his head, ears flapping, then jogged back into the bushes. I turned around to find two fellow guests, a man and his adult son, hiding behind me.

A few months later, I returned to Botswana to visit Wilderness Safaris' **Jao Camp** ([wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com); doubles from \$1,787 per person, all-inclusive). A mainstay on the Okavango safari circuit since 1999, Jao reopened in June after an extensive redesign. In the central lodge building, a giraffe skeleton stands in the ground-floor shop, its head poking into the library above. There are five expansive, open-plan rooms and a pair of two-bedroom villas; each has 25-foot ceilings that feel cathedral high, made from recycled-plastic strips that look like thatch—but require less upkeep. All have decks with swing chairs and an infinity plunge pool for beating the shimmering heat.

One afternoon my guide, Moengtsile "MT" Malebogo, drove me out to a lagoon, where the two of us sat for a while. (At Jao, all guests have private guides and vehicles.) We watched Nile crocodiles sunbathing and hippos protecting their sensitive skin in the water. A flock of fascinatingly ugly marabou storks, with their bald heads, pink fleshy sacks hanging from their necks, and legs stained white with their own droppings, stood along the banks.

There were no other vehicles around. In fact, I hadn't shared *any* sightings during my stay at Jao. The quietness was punctuated by the melancholy cry of the white-hooded African fish eagle. The world is running short of these wild spaces. In ever-evolving Botswana, I was glad to find, protecting them still matters. ●