2016

How's the serenity? (Part 1 of 2)

Mike Grenby

Bond University, Mike_Grenby@bond.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd_papers

Part of the Journalism Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


This Popular Press is brought to you by the Faculty of Society and Design at ePublications@bond. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty of Society and Design Publications by an authorized administrator of ePublications@bond. For more information, please contact Bond University's Repository Coordinator.
HOW’S THE SERENITY?
(PART I OF 2)

In this special two-part edition of DESPATCHES, esteemed travel writer Mike Grenby takes MBGC readers with him on a tour of Botswana and Namibia.

Here in part one he indulges in some glamping on the edge of the Kalahari Desert, before trekking out on a classic safari adventure for part two in the Winter 2016 edition of MBGC.

WRITER AND PHOTOGRAPHER Mike Grenby
Expect the unexpected in Africa. You won’t be disappointed.

Fly into the comfortably tiny airport at Maun, in Botswana, transfer via a one-hour small plane flight to an almost surreal sight on the edge of the Kalahari Desert: a line of white tents under palm trees along the horizon. You have arrived at San Camp and are about to enjoy an absolutely premium safari experience.

It’s either the flight or a three-hour drive from Maun, but at journey’s end you feel – and indeed you are – completely removed from civilization.

The lodge, a series of giant vaulted tents standing eight metres high on a thatch-covered wooden platform, features gathered curtains of heavy white fabric.

The lodge washroom is out back with walls made of branches, a flush toilet and a copper-washed basin – complete with liquid soap and body lotion.

"There is a safari for every budget, but sometimes it’s worth the extra money to stay at the smaller, more exclusive camps, where fewer guests mean more personalisation attention and activities," says Monika Korn, of The Safari Source agency.

This is how royalty went on safari, with heavy wooden campaign trunks and hurricane lamps to illuminate the 200-year-old four-poster canopy bed – although in 2016 the toilet in the en suite bathroom of the tent flushes and solar power provides, if not electricity, at least hot water for a rain shower.

Colonial royalty had its servants; San Camp has staff that cater to every request in a willing yet non-subservient manner.

"Could I have a plain hard-boiled egg to take back to my friend in our tent?" are guest asks – and before he knows it, Islamole has prepared a full breakfast tray with all the trimmings and is carrying it the five-minute walk back to the tent.

"We like to make things special," says James Sterne, San Camp’s expeditions manager.

Peak season is July, when the winter nights and early mornings often take temperatures down close to zero – making you very grateful for the hot water bottle (or three) you find in your bed, as the tent canvas doesn’t provide much protection from the outside cold.

One morning you bundle up to visit the meerkats (officially "suricates", one of the most sociable mammals on earth). A short drive from the camp, you find them, standing up tall with paws together to catch you – the classic pose most will recognise from documentaries or Disney.

Because of regular visits from camp guests, the meerkats are accustomed to interacting with people and accepting them into their routine, which in winter includes their kittens frolicking together making small "chirp" sounds, mimicking their elders’ start-up poses and clinging tightly together around mum.

You sit on the ground just a few metres away to your left. The meerkats are so tame, they climb up on your head to take advantage of the extra height.

Just when you think it can’t get any better than the meerkat experience, you see off the next morning to engage with a group of San Bushmen, indigenous hunter-gatherers of southern Africa staying temporarily in the area as part of a program to support their tribes in the western Kalahari.

You meet them huddled around a campfire to keep warm. In the chilly morning, although they wear brightly coloured clothing made of animal skins, their milk chocolate brown skin is warm to the touch.

You sit down on their cloth-soled shoes and they chat away happily in their click language, squatting every so often to examine a rock on the ground or to identify what looks like a corn cob, but turns out to be a large onion. They offer you a little bit of rare and valuable moisture which they dig up to show you.

We examine a small – live – scorpion; several members demonstrate how to twist a stick to start a fire, or set a ground trap to catch a bird.

You don’t need to speak the same language; it just feels natural to be with them, to show them the photos we take of them, to laugh with them. They accept our group unreservedly.

Most visitors to Africa expect big animal safaris, but can’t limit your expectations – Africa offers so much more.

Mike Creaney teaches travel writing, journalism and public speaking at Bond University. He has been writing travel articles and taking travel photos since he was 24.

The adventure recounted here was co-ordinated by The Safari Source, a safari agency specialising in Southern Africa. safarisource.co.za