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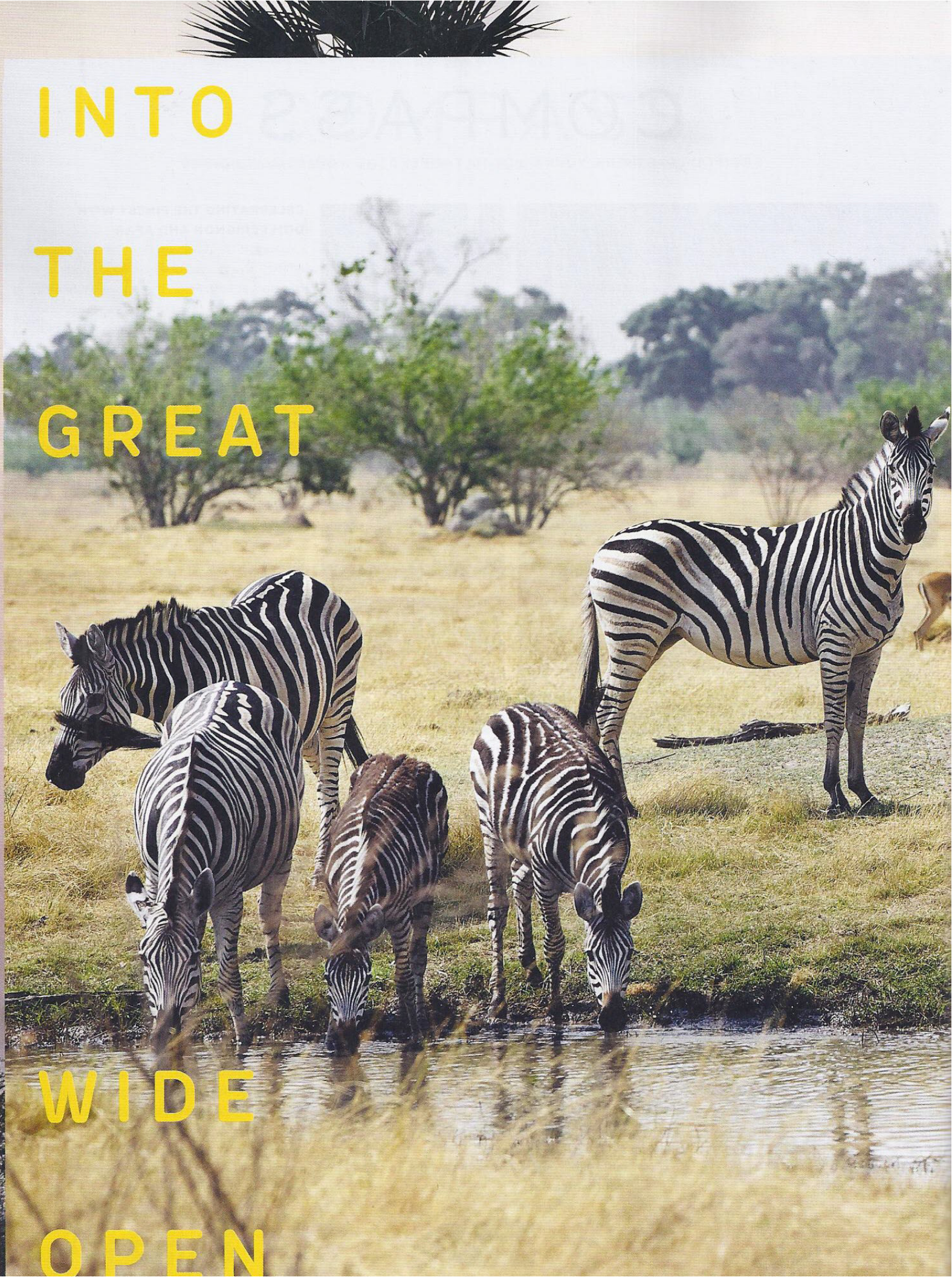
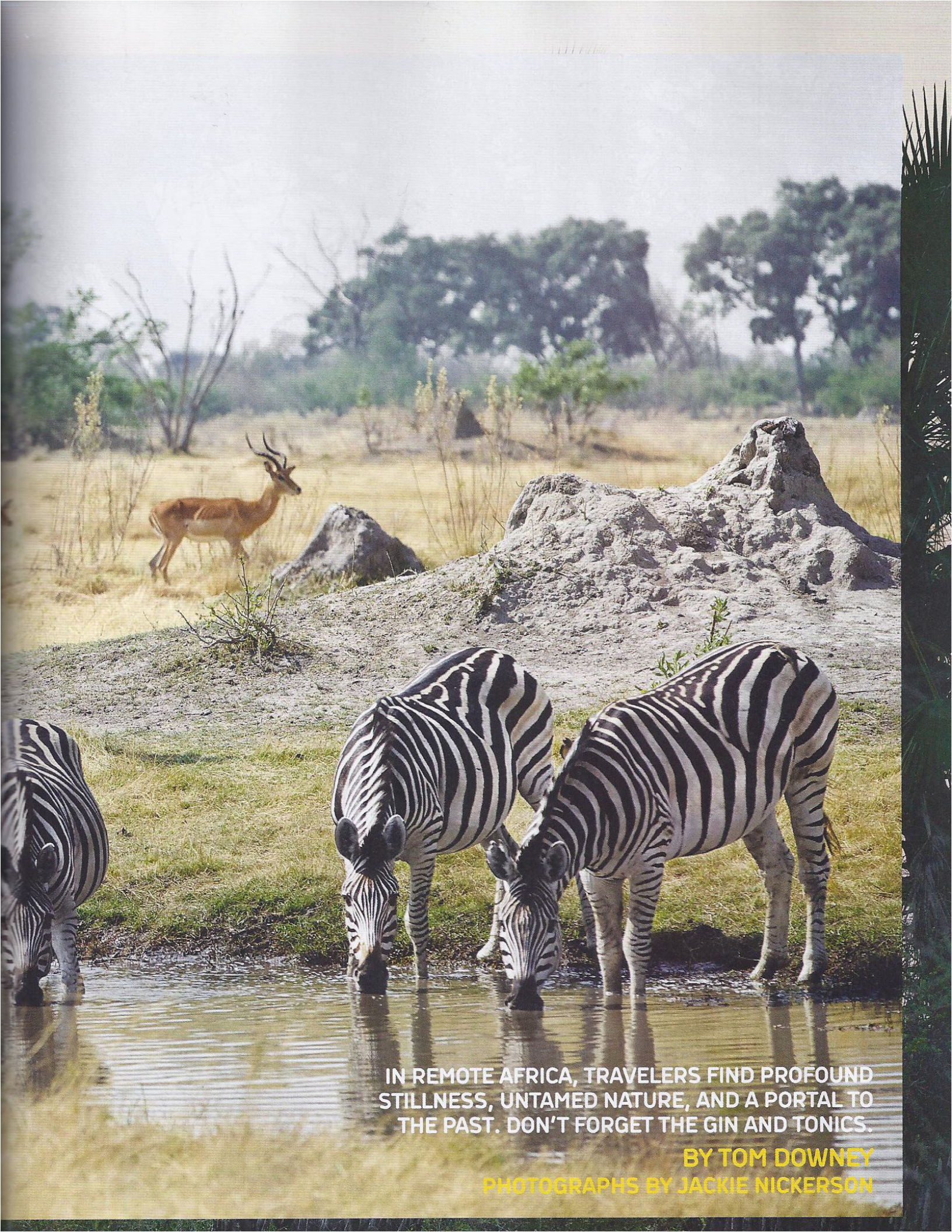
COVER PHOTO: ANDREW ROWAT

Spotted on safari: a male reedbuck in Botswana's Okavango Delta (see page 96).

INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN





IN REMOTE AFRICA, TRAVELERS FIND PROFOUND STILLNESS, UNTAMED NATURE, AND A PORTAL TO THE PAST. DON'T FORGET THE GIN AND TONICS.

BY TOM DOWNEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACKIE NICKERSON

THE BOAT PUSHES OFF FROM

our home for tonight, a temporary camp on a small island in Botswana's Okavango Delta, and glides into the still waters of the Maunachira Channel. After a hot day spent spotting game from this boat, it's now dark, so the only indications of the many animals all around us are distant sounds that float across the water. John Barclay, our 25-year-old guide, gets down on his stomach, leans off the back of the boat, and shines a bright light into the murky river. Then, with one swift motion, he reaches down into the water, clamps his hands around the jaws of a baby crocodile, and wrestles it up on deck.

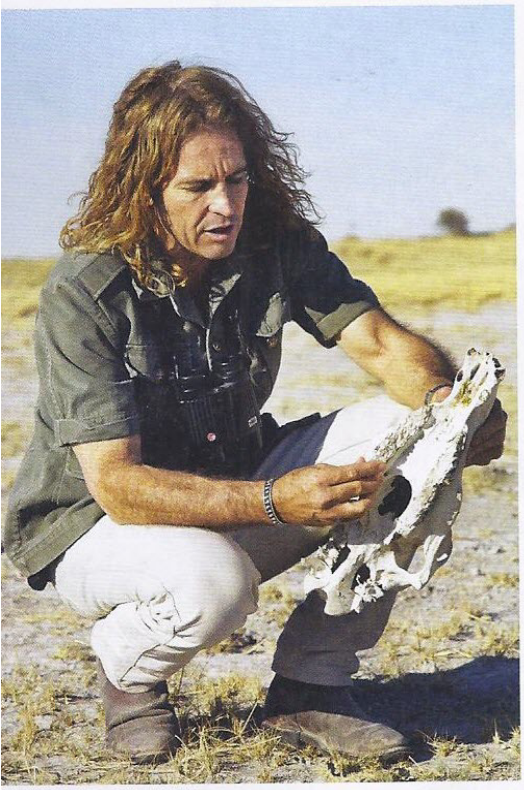
Barclay looks confident, but all of us on board jump back from the flailing reptile. Sure, it's small now, but it will grow into an animal that can easily devour a full-grown man. John's grandfather, Jack Bousfield, was one of Africa's most successful professional hunters. He specialized in obtaining valuable crocodile skins to sell to French fashion houses for fancy bags and shoes. Legend has it that he killed some 53,000 crocs. As I ponder the course of events connecting Jack's wholesale slaughter of the African croc to John's job today—guiding us to see and photograph, not kill, the animals of the delta—John tosses the croc back into the water, alive and kicking.

I'm in Botswana, a landlocked nation in the center of southern Africa, to spend time with two generations of this family, which has been leading safaris here for more than half a century. My trip is taking me, along with four other travelers, to two starkly different but equally spectacular locales. The first is the Okavango Delta, a vast floodplain in the far north of the country. It is Botswana's premier wildlife-viewing zone. Crisscrossed by rivers, channels, and tributaries that grow, shrink, or disappear depending on the seasonal rains, the delta nourishes a range of trees and plants that attract legions of herbivores—who then bring predators in their wake. Our second destination is a place called Jack's Camp on the edge of the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans. Jack's Camp was founded by Ralph Bousfield, who is John's uncle and Jack's son. The journey will allow me to see the evolution of the modern-day safari through the eyes of one of the last old safari families still guiding people into the bush. As safaris have become big business, multinational companies have taken over properties across the continent's two safari belts—in the east and south—making family-run outfits like this one, with generations of experience on the land, increasingly rare. The Bousfield family is counting on those travelers who seek out locally sourced food, wine, and crafts to also care about the heritage of their safari operators.

Later that night, John and I huddle around the fire. "I used to come to the bush as a little kid," he says. "When I was three or four years old, Cobra, a Bushman who worked with my grandfather, would carry me around everywhere. I remember him leading me to an abandoned aardvark hole and then reaching in and pulling out a handful of writhing, freshly hatched pythons." John grew up outside Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, and, after college in South Africa, went to work in Europe for a couple of years. "Then my uncle Ralph called and asked me to work for him," John says. "I'd spent six months here in the bush during my gap year. I missed it: the beauty of the land, the challenge of living on the edge. So I got on a plane and came back."

The next day, we float down the channel until a group of elephants swims across our path. It's striking to see the herd going about its business, paying no heed to us. We scamper to the front of the boat, almost close enough to touch these mighty beasts, and watch them swim gracefully, purposefully, across the channel. Our boat slows down to let them pass; then the boatman snugs us to shore on an island covered in fig trees. Thousands of marabou storks, sacred ibis, and yellow-billed storks fight for precious space to perch.

We continue our lazy day on the water, spotting more elephants and stopping for a swim. After a five-hour boat ride we dock and jump into a four-by-four for the drive to our tented camp. We cross a river, and John yells at us to lift our gear off the floor just as water starts to flow into the vehicle's cabin. When we pause on the opposite bank to drain, we see a group of zebras drinking at the side of the river, antelope galloping past them in the background. As we continue to our camp, we spot Cape buffalos and baboons, hippos and crocs, wildebeests and more zebras. As soon as we arrive, John urges us to drop our gear and get back in the car: His crew has spotted a lion.



RALPH BOUSFIELD, LEFT, EXAMINES A ZEBRA SKULL NEAR JACK'S CAMP, NAMED FOR HIS FATHER, A LEGENDARY HUNTER AND SAFARI GUIDE. RIGHT, A YOUNG ELEPHANT COOLS OFF IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA.

We drive to a nearby island, and sure enough, a lion with a gleaming mane is gnawing on an antelope. We get so close that we can smell the antelope's rotting flesh. Behind the lion, baboons have congregated to groom themselves. When the lion gets up from his meal, the baboons suddenly erupt in alarm calls.

Back where we're sleeping, the crew has prepared a simple, subtly elegant camp of the kind John's grandfather would have known. Chef Wamuka Keobeile lingers over the bread he is baking in an oven made out of an old metal steamer trunk. My tent is equipped with a private outdoor shower, and in the morning, I shave over a canvas basin with water I pour from a copper pitcher. We have left modern life, but not all of civilization, behind.

We spend our last day in the delta spotting more lions, enormous kudu antelope, mongooses, many herds of elephants, and snake eagles locking talons as they battle for territory in the sky above us. The delta is a picture-perfect dreamland of the African safari experience: a lush landscape with a meandering river, densely populated by the animals we've flown here to behold. The next morning we board a prop plane for the hour-and-a-quarter flight southeast to Jack's Camp. We touch down on a private airstrip owned by the lodge, which sits at the edge of a vast, bone-dry, mostly empty region.

If the Okavango safari is African Bush: Intermediate Level, Jack's Camp is African Bush: Advanced. We'd spent our time in the Okavango chasing great game, but Jack's Camp isn't primarily about spotting lions. It's about getting to know a remote, difficult, and stark corner of the world, through people who have lived there for a long time. Ralph's aim is to give his guests a chance to live the way safari-goers did more than half a century ago, in tents outfitted with antique chests and rugs, with a full bar and afternoon tea, but without Internet, telephone, electricity, or room service.

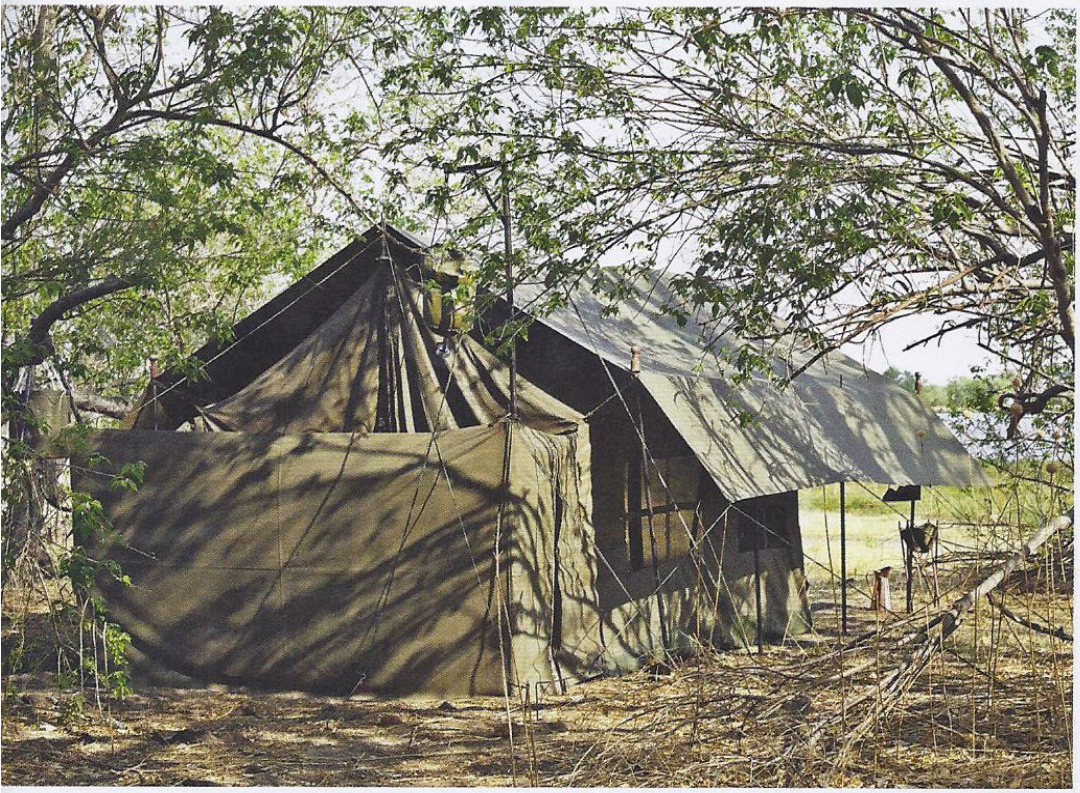
The morning after we arrive, I head out for a walk with Ralph and photographer Jackie Nickerson through the dry plains. "When my father used to go on safari, it lasted three months," Ralph says. "Now people have a week or two—max—for a trip. They want to see all the animals they can. So how can we get them to understand the very different reality of this place in such a short time?"

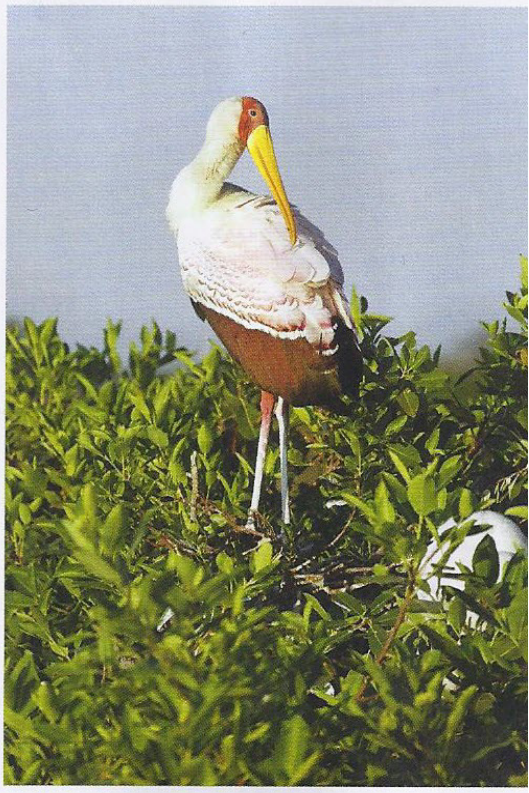
Ralph, whose wavy, sun-streaked hair makes him stand out in the African wild, tells me his story as we walk, watching for lions, elephants, and antelope. Ralph spots a set of lion tracks: a mother and cub. "We need to be careful," he says. "If it's a mother trying to protect her child, then there's a greater danger that she'll perceive us as a threat, even though no one has hunted here for decades."

The safari of yesteryear was, of course, a hunting expedition. A safari like this one, in which the goal is to see animals, not shoot them, was a novel idea until just a few decades ago. Ralph's father, Jack, famously broke from the hunting tradition in 1966. He delivered a speech to a group of his fellow hunters declaring that professional hunting had no future in Africa. He believed that as big game populations shrank, organized hunting would become unsustainable. He urged his peers to put down their guns and start new kinds of ventures.

Ralph had grown up hunting in the bush, so when it came time for him to get a job in 1982, he flew to Gaborone to interview with the top hunting outfits in Africa. After he received three job offers, Ralph thought some more about his future and decided that he agreed with his father. Though the jobs he had been offered would pay well, he thought one day African countries would realize that they needed to protect their natural patrimony, and hunting would end. He had to be prepared for what would follow. He and Jack were right. On January 1, 2014, trophy hunting on public lands in Botswana will become illegal.

"I didn't want to be a hunter, but I knew I had to be in the bush," Ralph tells me. "The safari business is what I was raised to do. And it's what I love." He scouted for a location to set up a new safari camp with his business partner, Catherine Raphaely, and his father. Ralph

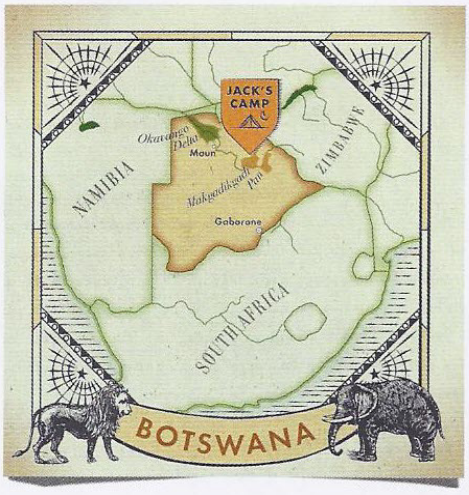




ON MOBILE SAFARIS IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA, CAMP LOCATIONS, LEFT, CHANGE WITH THE WEATHER AND THE LOCATION OF GAME AND BIRDS SUCH AS THE YELLOW-BILLED STORK, RIGHT.

shuttled them across the country in a small plane he piloted. One day in 1992, they took off from an airstrip in the Okavango Delta, and as they ascended, the accelerator cable snapped. The plane plummeted to the ground. Ralph and Catherine, both injured, struggled to get out of the cabin. When they stumbled out they realized that Jack was still pinned inside. As Ralph went back in to get his father, the cockpit burst into flames. Jack died the next day from his wounds. Ralph survived, after being medevaced to a burn center in South Africa. He spent four months in the hospital being treated for burns that covered 40 percent of his body.

When he was finally fully recovered two years later, as a tribute to his late father, Ralph started the camp they were meant to open together. Though he knew that spotting big game would always be important to visitors, he also wanted to give them something more lasting than a few fleeting glimpses of predators. The Okavango Delta, packed with wildlife, was the obvious choice of locale, but Ralph shared Jack's contrarian sensibility. He wanted to strike out on his own, away from other operators. For years, his father had brought the family to visit a plot of land next to the salt pans. When Jack first ventured into this region, others told him that only idiots go there. "Fine," said Jack. "That's me."



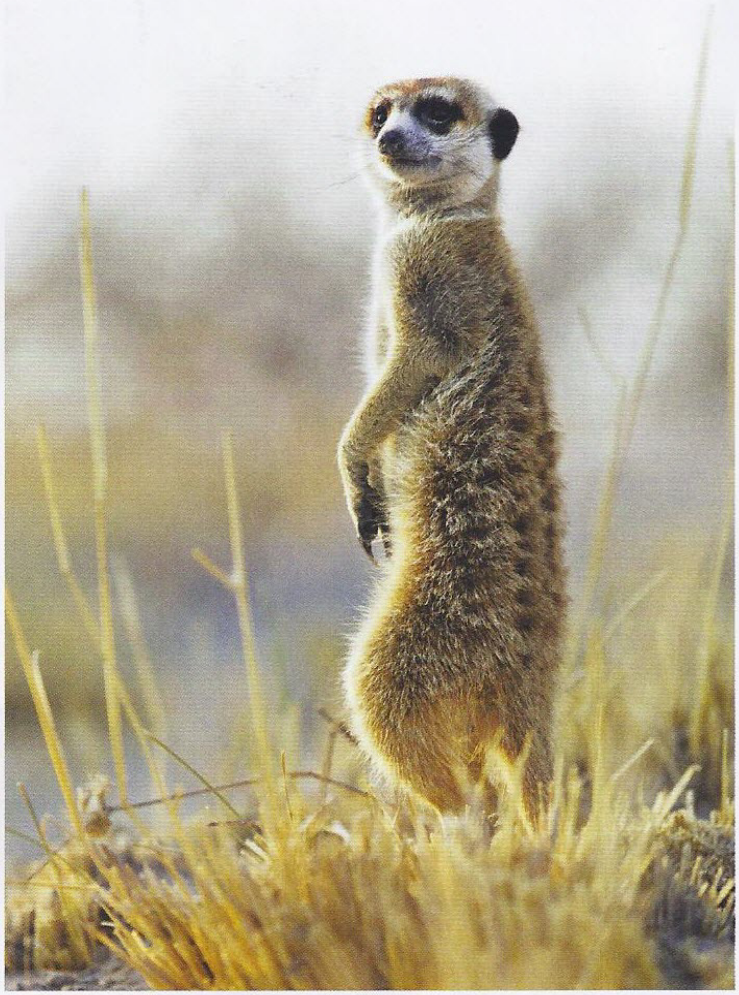
Ralph built his camp in this place of stark and singular beauty that feels, in its isolation and its expansive views of virtually nothing for miles, as if it is the end of the earth. It doesn't have the density of animal life that the Okavango Delta does, but that's also what has kept it free from the dozens of safari operators plying their trade in the delta. And, Ralph explains, that is what keeps it true to the original safari experience. Early safari-goers often would not see other hunters for weeks as they worked their way across the continent. In the delta, the desire to see big game dictates just about everything. And it's undeniably exciting to see superpredators up close, to confront hordes of animals that could rip you apart or trample you dead. But there's also a kind of mania in that game-viewing experience. The quest for sightings can make it nearly impossible to appreciate the place you're in. Jack's Camp is a complement—or an antidote—to that. It's where you go after you've already been on a typical safari, after you've felt the thrill of seeing those life-list animals and you're ready for something deeper.

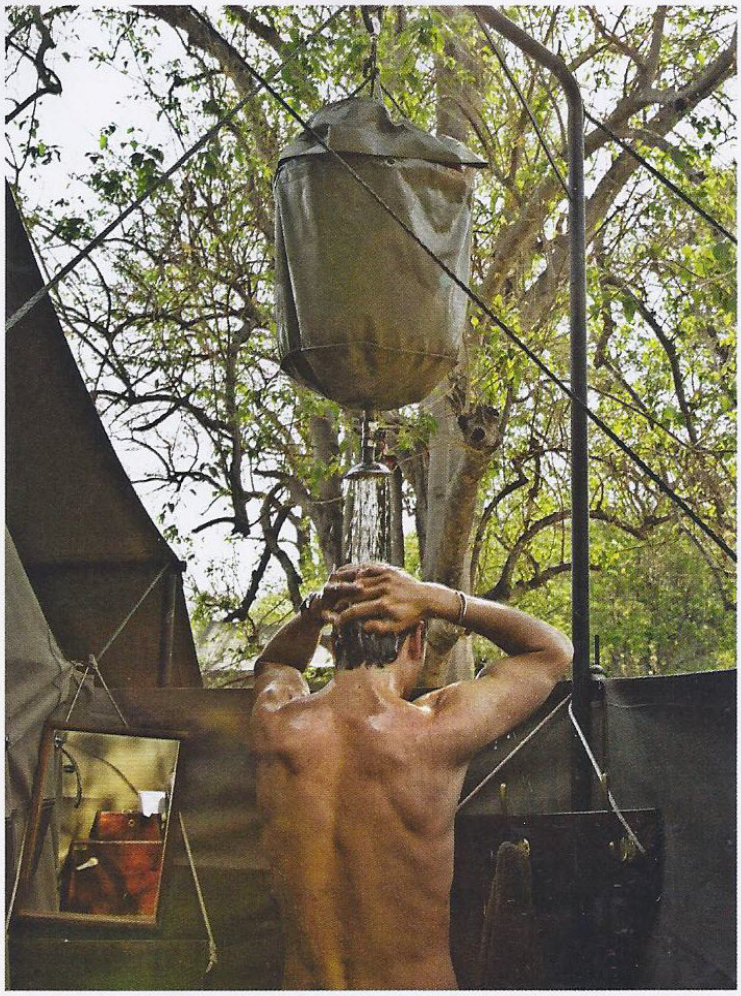
During my walk with Ralph, he spots some vultures circling above. When we approach, we can see that they are swooping down to eat from a cow carcass. "We have people grazing their cattle in this area now," says Ralph. "I understand that the owners are just trying to feed their animals. But those animals can disrupt a very fragile ecosystem." In rural areas especially, Batswana—as citizens of Botswana are known—still measure social status by the size of their cow herds. Grazing land like this draws cow owners, even if it's a serious schlep from anywhere else.

The cows aren't the only threat to this region: The night before, we saw a herd of elephants pushing down trees, a behavior that perplexes even Ralph. Fewer trees means fewer places for vultures to nest. Fewer vultures means more disease. Carcasses that sit uncleaned by scavengers can spread anthrax to live animals. All of these are prob-


SQUELETTE DE LAPIN.
PETER BEAR
STRESS & DENS
KUNSTHAUS
9. SEPTEMBER 1999

THE MESS TENT AT JACK'S CAMP CONTAINS A LIBRARY AND A MUSEUM.





LEFT, A MEERKAT PAUSES NEAR JACK'S CAMP. RIGHT, A SOLAR-HEATED SHOWER BRINGS OLD-SCHOOL COMFORT TO A MOBILE CAMP IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: NXAU NKWE, KARIVEZUA KEHARARA (HOLDING DAUGHTER PEDRO NQISI), AND XIXAE MANDLA XHAMME LEAD WALKS AT JACK'S CAMP.

lems of the natural world, problems that many wildlife sanctuaries can more easily manage—another subtle difference between this and the standard safari experience. Many game parks are semicontrolled environments where animal populations can be regulated and the animals become habituated to humans, making them easier to spot. Here things persist as they were in Jack's time: There is plenty of wildlife, as we can hear from the roars of the lions at night, but it's harder to see. The animals are not used to people, so they keep their distance.

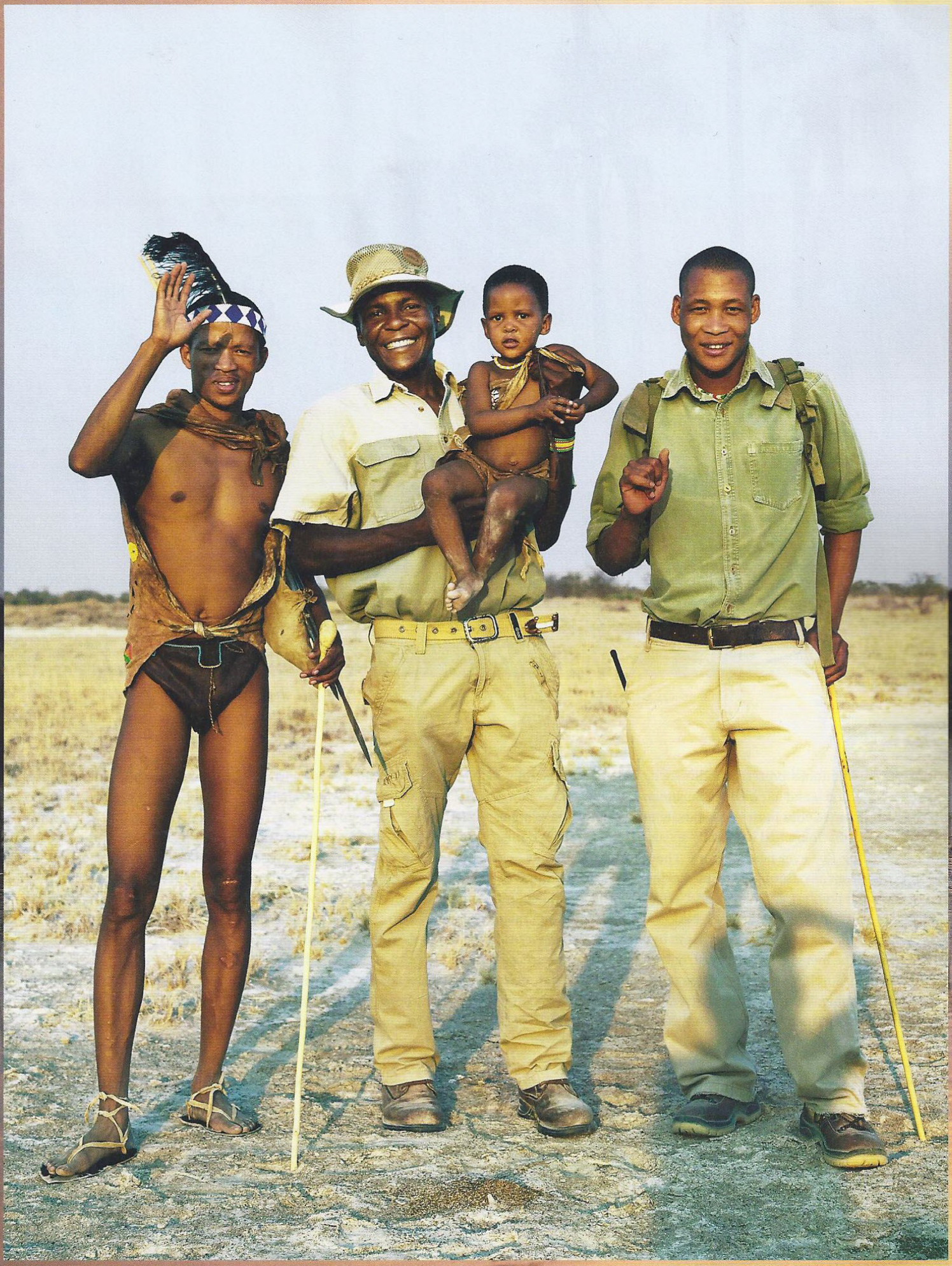
It's now midmorning, and we have hiked for two hours. Just as I'm beginning to dread the return trip, we come upon a small plane parked on a runway next to a giant tree: Ralph's plan all along. "It's getting too hot," Ralph says. "Let me fly us back." He checks the cockpit components and revs up the engine, and we take off. From above you can see how insignificant the camp is compared with the desert around it. Ralph takes us on a spin around the area, we spot a herd of elephants, and then we descend, touching down on the dry, baked earth right in front of our tents.

Back at camp, we discuss the future. "I didn't really think much about the legacy of this place until I had a child of my own," says Ralph, whose son, Jack, was born in the fall of 2012. "But it's important. And family doesn't just mean blood relatives: It's also the people who have become a part of this place—and a part of our lives—over the years. Super, one of our guides, is like a younger brother to me. Cobra, the Bushman who was at my dad's side for decades, is also a part of this family. There are many other people like that."

Later that night, I sit around the big dinner table with some of the men Ralph was referring to. "I started out as a bricklayer and a plumber here," Super Sande, a six-foot-five, 37-year-old man from the Ndebele tribe, tells me. He worked his way up to driver and, finally, to guide. "I learned to be a professional guide here, but I knew how to track animals from my childhood. We used to catch and eat steenboks and duikers [small antelope]." I ask Super and the other guides who are sitting around chatting whether their children would ever want to follow in their footsteps and become guides. "My kids grew up in a town," Super says. "They don't know how to track game. They're not drawn to the bush; they want to live in the big city."

Diamond mining has enabled the Botswana government to ensure that its citizens have enough to eat and a decent education. But that also means, as Super points out, that many young Batswana will no longer be attracted to a life in the bush. I can see that Super is proud that his son has the chance to do much more than Batswana of previous generations, but the guide also regrets that there may be no family to whom he can pass on everything he knows about this land.

One of the most important members of the extended family at Jack's Camp is Cobra, a member of the Sua-khwe (Salt People) tribe who is about 70. He earned his name for his skill at catching snakes. Cobra worked with Jack for decades, accompanying him every time he crossed through the region to hunt. When Ralph opened this camp, he wanted to show people the multifarious ways that Bushmen know the desert they live in, so he hired Cobra to work with him. The afternoon after my conversation with the guides, once the sun has gone down a little and is less punishing, our group takes a walk into the desert



with Cobra—who looks preternaturally young despite a hand-rolled cigarette addiction—and a few of his Bushmen kin.

We accompany Cobra back to his family camp, part of the larger Jack's compound. Cobra and his family speak a language that sounds unlike anything I've ever heard before. They communicate not just through words but also through a set of clicking noises. As the sun sets, the women and children huddle around a fire, and the Bushmen don a special kind of dress, with caterpillar-cocoon rattles adorning their legs and feathers on their heads, and begin to dance. The women sing rhythmically. The men fall into a trance, one by one, and circle around the fire, at times lurching perilously close to the flames, as if they can't see or feel anything. We sit and watch the dance for a couple of hours, mesmerized by the music, the fire, and the hypnotic movements of these men. "To be able to witness this is a rare opportunity," Ralph tells me. "We can't just tell them to do it on cue. They only do it when they have a real need to have a trance dance. That need is determined by their own complex spiritual calendar. Sometimes they tell us they don't want anyone else here. We feel privileged when they allow our guests to observe."

In the most modern safari lodges, from my experience, at times there is a sense that nature, even in remote corners of the world, can be harnessed, controlled through air-conditioning, telecommunications, and other advances. But these comforts entail a loss of some of the distinctive aspects of really being in the bush. Most U.S. travelers know the boredom of seeing the same malls, eating at the same chain restaurants, all over the country—even, it seems, all over the world.

5 PIONEERING SAFARI OUTFITS

1. UNCHARTED AFRICA SAFARI CO.

Ralph Bousfield and Catherine Raphaely's company leads mobile safaris in the Okavango Delta and throughout Botswana and runs Jack's Camp and other camps near the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans. *From $1,000 per night. unchartedafrica.com*

2. COTTAR'S SAFARI SERVICE

One of the original safari families in Kenya, the Cottars run a 1920s-style camp near the Maasai Mara game reserve. Guests can enroll their kids in Maasai Warrior School, where they learn traditional bush skills and crafts. *From $500 per night. cottars.com*

LEFT, THE SUN GOES DOWN OVER JACK'S CAMP. RIGHT, A DIRT ROAD LEADS TO THE SALT PANS AROUND JACK'S CAMP.

But we imagine that a place as remote as southern Africa is too far away to succumb to this kind of soul-defeating sameness. In fact, as more and more travelers want to go on safari and the business becomes more lucrative, safaris are drifting toward the uniform, the expected, the standardized.

Ralph has resisted the trend by locating this lodge away from everyone else, refusing to install Internet or electricity, and keeping Jack's Camp small. "We could build huge modern suites in the middle of the desert, and we'd be able to accommodate more guests and make more money," says Ralph. "But that's not what this is about." So what is it about? It is about this, my daily routine at camp: Awaken to a tray of hot coffee and a scone. Open up my tent flaps, watch a spectacular sunrise, and ponder not a busy agenda but the prospect of staying right here, reading a book, and gazing out at the emptiness. Going for a walk with Cobra. Or taking an ATV ride across the barren land. And then, at sunset, enjoying a perfect gin and tonic served on a bluff on the edge of the salt pans. It's a more patient, focused appreciation of this land and its people.

Ralph tells me that whenever he ponders a new opportunity, his first thought is, "What would Jack do?" Ralph's instinct isn't to consider what travelers fresh off the first-class flight from New York will want out of his camp. And that, perhaps, is why he often ends up giving them exactly what they need. **A**

Contributing writer TOM DOWNEY wrote about Lisbon in the May 2013 issue of AFAR. Photographer JACKIE NICKERSON is profiled on page 20.

3. ABERCROMBIE & KENT

Cofounder Geoffrey Kent grew up in Kenya. A&K's new "Connections" trip through Tanzania and Kenya includes a private archaeological tour of Olduvai Gorge and a visit with a Maasai elder. *From $5,495. abercrombiekent.com*

4. MICATO SAFARIS

Started by Felix Pinto, a businessman and a former member of the Kenyan government, Micato offers dozens of unique safaris, including a new 15-day insider's tour of Kenya and Tanzania. *From $16,960. micato.com*

5. SINGITA

The outfitter will soon reopen Castleton Camp, its third property in South Africa's Sabi Sand Reserve. The camp, six cottages furnished with antiques, has belonged to the family of CEO Luke Bailes since 1925. *From $7,240 for eight people. singita.com*