



Courtesy Natural Selection

Skybeds Let You Sleep Under the Stars on an African Safari

by MARY HOLLAND
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The best way to see the African bush is to sleep in it, sans windows, walls, or doors.

My first overnighter in the middle of the African bush was in 2000, on a school trip to the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park in South Africa's Kwazulu Natal. It started out much like a walking safari—we crossed the park on foot during the day, and slept under the stars in sleeping bags. When we were allowed to sleep. During the night we'd pair up, armed with just a flashlight and our eardrums, to do a rotating watch. I remember sitting back-to-back with my partner, staring into the blackness, listening for distressing sounds that might prompt us to wake the guide (who had a gun). We didn't want to rouse him unnecessarily, so we tried very hard to distinguish 'alarming noises' from sounds with no significance. But at 3 a.m. in the bush, absolutely anything audible is paralyzing. A beetle shuffling over a leaf? A lion! Someone rolling in their sleeping bag? A rumbling elephant!

Fifteen years later, I found myself curled up under the stars again, listening for a hint of an elephant rumbling or hippo grunting. The experience wasn't nearly as primal or scary as my first: I wasn't responsible for the lives of my classmates this time, and I wasn't sleeping in a bag on the ground. I was in a **Skybed** in Botswana's Okavango Delta, a snazzy double bed—sheets and all—atop a wooden structure that looked more like an observation deck than a bedroom. It had no roof, no windows, and the four 'walls' were waist high, but it had a bathroom and a gate that required human hands to open. The room couldn't be described as luxurious, but it was a vast upgrade from my previous sleeping situation—as authentic a wild bush experience as I could hope for.

Skybeds isn't your typical safari camp—and not just because the rooms don't have walls. There are only three accommodations available and few staffers. Guests only stay for one night, in addition to a few nights at the camp's posher sister safari lodge, **Sable Alley**. "It's not equipped for lengthy stays," says Colleen the manager, who's aware that the lack of shade isn't suitable for a quintessential afternoon nap. Guests are transported to Skybeds from Sable Alley via an afternoon game drive. On arrival, drinks (gin and tonics!) and snacks (biltong!) are served. Dinner is cooked over the fire and eaten at a lantern-lit makeshift table outdoors. Activities at Skybeds include star-gazing and campfire chatter. There's absolutely no Wi-Fi or reception; it's a window into what going to the bush really should be like.

I love a luxury safari lodge as much as the next person, but in my home country of South Africa, going to the bush generally isn't a luxurious experience. I remember staying in basic rondavels (round huts) or camping, braaing (grilling) toasted cheese sandwiches and boerewors (sausages) over the campfire for dinner. Just like the chef did at Skybeds. For breakfast, my mom would make bacon-and egg sandwiches, which she'd wrap tightly in aluminum foil and pack in a cooler bag in preparation for breakfast on the go. We'd fill our flasks with coffee, pile into an old Land Rover, and head into the game reserve before the sun had risen. Our first stop would be mid-morning, to eat our sandwiches at a lookout point while watching elephants romp around in a watering hole. There was no afternoon high-tea and we didn't have a guide that poured premium wines at sundown. It was simple, fuss free, and all about the animals.

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Well, maybe there's a *little* fuss: sunset drinks from a Skybed.

Courtesy **Natural Selection Travel**

That night at Skybeds, we sit around the campfire listening to it hiss and crackle, talking about the day's sightings: a large buffalo herd of outcast bulls; two lions ready to mate. It was as every campfire experience should be—peaceful. Until Tony, our guide, came running over, his eyes alight. “Come quickly! The chef saw a leopard nearby,” he roared. Ah, there it is, that terrifying-invigorating feeling all over again. Unsure whether he is warning me to *run away* or go *in search* of the leopard, I followed Tony to the game vehicle. He fired up the engine, dialed up the red nightlight, and steered into the darkness. We circled the landscape, shining the light across the bush, but couldn't find the animal. They're elusive, so this wasn't entirely surprising. “Next time,” Tony said as we pull back into camp and made our way back to the campfire—unsure I wanted there to be a *next time*, considering my sleep situation.

“If I could work here full-time, I would,” said Tony, taking a deep breath and filling his entire body with the unspoiled air, as we continued to watch bush TV (the fire) and chat about the day's events. As the fire turned to embers, Tony walked us to our rooms, one by one. The air had turned cold, so I climbed into my bed in full garb—a beanie on my head, scarf up to my eyes—and lay under a dome of stars so bright it felt like someone had flicked them on with a switch. The other rooms were only a few feet away, and in daylight, you could see the other guests shuffling about, but at night, you feel entirely alone. Save for the distant rumble of elephants and gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze. I didn't need to stay awake, but I didn't want to fall asleep.

The next morning I woke to the sound of my favorite morning visitors: the birds calling between trees. Tony brought up a cup of coffee and I watched the sunrise from bed. We all met back at the campfire for another cup of coffee and a rusk (a typical South African morning biscuit) before being transported to a watering-hole-facing hyde. From the cooler box, the staff handed us tightly wrapped bacon-and-egg sandwiches. We unraveled them in the hyde as we watched the elephants stream in for their morning drink. I still had the smell of campfire in my hair and I'm wearing the same clothes from the day before. Just how it should be. ♦