



Safari with a difference

THE DREAM NIGHT OUT?



Skybeds are the latest must-do experience. But what is it really like to overnight under the stars? **Sue Watt** explains

It's a crisp, clear night in Botswana's deep midwinter, so cold we can see our breath as we whisper. By rights, we should be in some cosy lodge with a warm, roaring fire in our room. But no, we're sleeping outdoors, five metres up in a Skybed, with nothing but stars for a ceiling.

Sleeping out in the Okavango Delta has long been on my wish list, lured by the romance of twinkling skies above a vast, untrammelled wilderness. My partner Will and I had slept in star-beds before, but they'd always been on the decking of our rooms or tents, and that sense of wild open space under the night sky had somewhat eluded us. Skybeds in Khwai Private Reserve, bordering Moremi, is very different.

As our wild night out approached, I admit to wondering about the practical realities. What about privacy? Where do you get undressed – or don't you? What if I need the loo in the middle of the night? And just how cold is it going to be?

We arrive from sister lodge Sable Alley in time for sundowners at what must be one of the Delta's best bars – a rustic, roofless and wall-less top floor of a three-storey wooden tower with 360-degree views. From here we have clear sight of a group of bull elephants slurping their own sundowners from a waterhole about 50m away while impalas and baboons amble nearby.

The three 'bedrooms' are similarly simple structures, well-spaced so you can't see your neighbours. Stairs take us to the shower-room on the first floor, with canvas walls, a dressing area, hot running water and a flush loo that all help to alleviate my earlier concerns. The bed is on the top floor, devoid of walls or ceilings and open to the elements, with solar lights, a sofa and table, and heavy down duvets.

Before we settle in, we head for a dinner cooked on the camp fire by Max, Skybed's host, cook and bottle-washer. He conjures up a delicious meal of beef stroganoff and rice followed by fresh fruit salad.

Back at our room, we're cocooned in thick, fluffy robes cuddling our hot water bottles under that enormous duvet, not exactly a recipe for romance. We have a fit of giggles over nothing in particular – perhaps it was the heady night air or too many brandies, or just the sheer excitement of sleeping under a sky jam-packed with twinkling stars. Then we see our first shooting star whizzing across the inky darkness, then another and then another. Mesmerised by the Milky Way and endless sparkles, we count 17 shooting stars and finally succumb to a blissful sleep until dawn gently awakens us, casting a baby pink glow across the landscape.

Sue Watt travelled with British Airways, Abercrombie & Kent and Natural Selection.

PICK OF THE PILLOWS

Star-beds are now available in most countries. Here's four others we're dreaming of.

1 Loisaba, Kenya

The original, but still one of the most alluring. Handcrafted four-poster wooden beds on raised platforms overlooking the Loisaba Conservancy in Laikipia.

2 Elephant's Eye, Zimbabwe

Sneak a night on the sleep-out deck overlooking a waterhole in a concession bordering Hwange National Park, particularly well frequented by hyenas.

3 Nkwichi, Lake Malawi

We love the sound of sleeping on a secluded beach with water lapping at the shore, reflecting the night sky.

4 Little Kulala, Namibia

You simply can't go to Namibia, with its ginormous night sky, and not sleep out under the stars. It would be doing it a huge disservice.



NATURAL SELECTION