

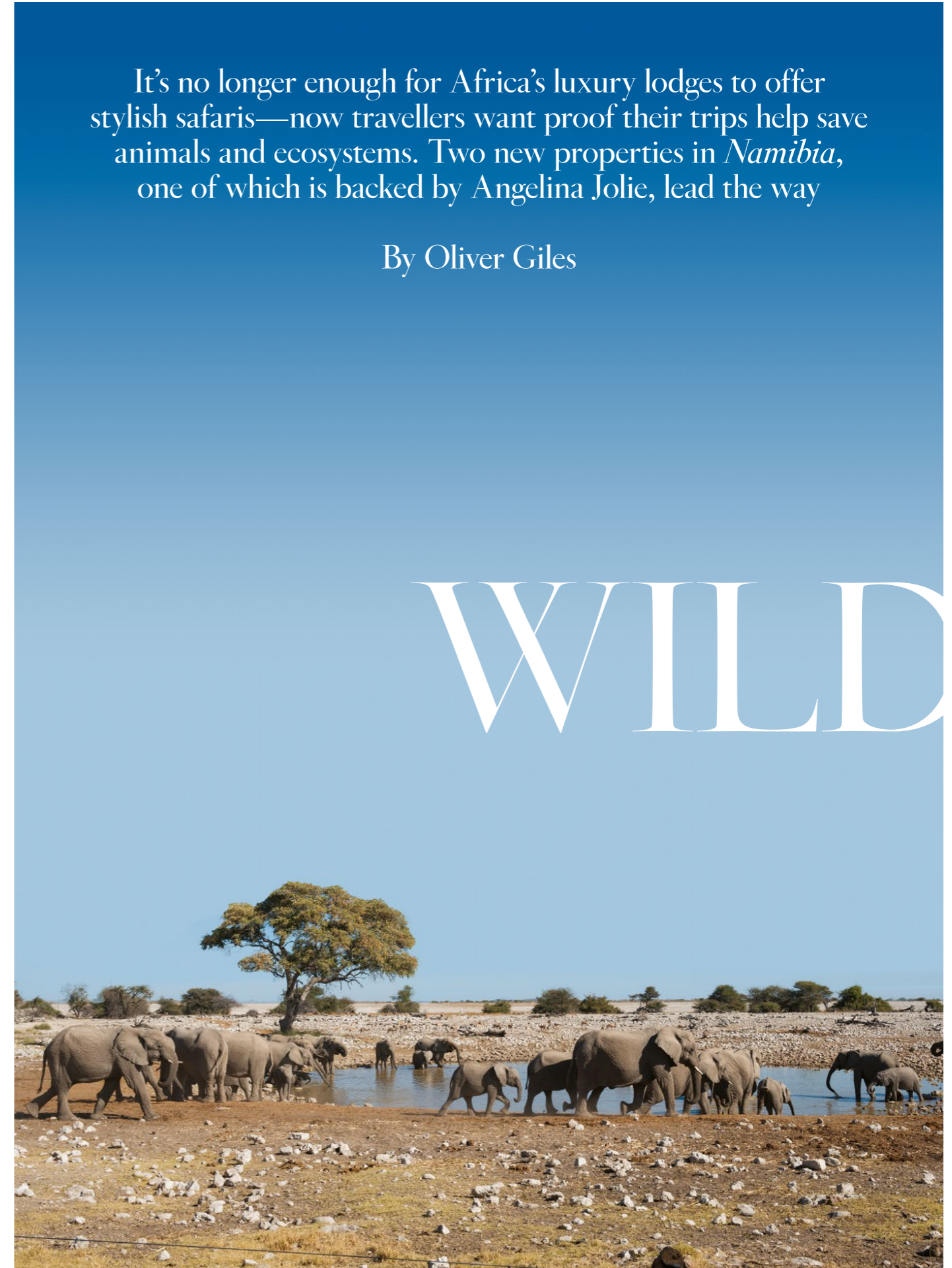


INTO *the*

CREATURE COMFORTS

Clockwise from bottom left: Inside Omaanda; a black rhino at Ongava; a private deck at Anderssons at Ongava; lions. Opposite: elephants gather at a waterhole at Ongava

IMAGES: OLWEN EVANS (RHINO, LIONS AND ELEPHANTS); DANA ALLEN (ANDERSSONS); © ZANNIER HOTELS (OMAANDA)



It's no longer enough for Africa's luxury lodges to offer stylish safaris—now travellers want proof their trips help save animals and ecosystems. Two new properties in *Namibia*, one of which is backed by Angelina Jolie, lead the way

By Oliver Giles

WILD

BLUE-SKY THINKING

The view towards the Auas Mountains from Omaanda. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: A bedroom at Anderssons; local crafts at Anderssons; local crafts at Omaanda; Land Cruisers on the Zannier Reserve; a fire pit at Anderssons



“You’re in room one, so if a lion roars in the night you’ll feel it in your bones,” says Etienne Fourie, camp manager at Anderssons at Ongava, a luxury safari lodge situated on the edge of Etosha National Park in a remote corner of northern Namibia.

He’s not joking. Anderssons, which opened in April, is made up of eight plush huts that curl into the surrounding scrub around a central waterhole, leaving black and white rhinos, elephants, whole herds of antelope and Africa’s famous big cats free to pad in and out of the camp in search of water, sometimes mere metres from guests’ beds. Room one is the farthest into the bush, giving a front-row seat to this parade of wildlife. Within an hour of my arrival, a family of glossy black-faced impala stride past, two calves pronking playfully. Shy kudu slip silently between acacia bushes. Six angular giraffes peek over the treetops. Later

that night, the silence is broken by the snap of a twig followed by what sounds like a bird’s warning call. All I can do is peer vainly through my windows into the pitch black—at night, the outdoor deck is out of bounds. “You might not see the lions in the dark, but they will definitely see you,” my guide warns.

This complete immersion in the wilderness has long drawn travellers to Ongava, a 300-square-kilometre private game reserve that encompasses desert-like scrub, woodlands and vast open plains. At any of Ongava’s four lodges—of which the hyper-luxe Little Ongava and the new Anderssons are the top offerings—guests can watch wildlife from their rooms or venture out in Land Cruisers in search of hundreds of species that call the reserve home. But recently, Ongava’s team has discovered that people want to do more than look—they want to learn.

That’s where Anderssons comes in. A new model of safari camp, Anderssons encompasses not just luxury

lodgings but also the Ongava Research Centre (ORC), a state-of-the-art laboratory that’s home to a team of researchers. Here, scientists work on everything from mapping the territories of the park’s elusive leopards to vast projects that will analyse the health of the whole ecosystem. There’s also space for visiting academics—soon after opening, the ORC hosted a group of hyena experts from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

“ORC provides the perfect opportunity to conduct serious research in an academic environment while being based in the field,” says Stéphanie Périquet, an ecologist who recently joined the ORC team. “It’s unique in Namibia and, to my knowledge, a set-up with this purpose does not exist anywhere else in southern Africa.”

Anyone staying at Ongava lodges can visit the ORC’s interactive visitor centre, which gives a comprehensive introduction to local flora and fauna, but Anderssons

guests are offered a more hands-on, in-depth experience. ORC team members give regular talks at Anderssons on their latest findings, and they’re developing a system that allows visitors to submit photos and observations from game drives directly to the research team, turning safari-goers into citizen scientists. “Guides and guests are out and about in the reserve on a daily basis and can provide data at a scale that our team cannot cover,” says Périquet.

There’s no pressure to contribute to research on game drives. If you’d prefer, you can sit back, relax and enjoy a traditional luxury safari at Anderssons. But most guests get involved. “Conservation-oriented travel is increasingly popular with our clients from around Asia,” says Jose Cortes, founder of A2A Safaris. “Conservation is more and more important to millennials and subsequent generations. It’s also a big draw for Namibia, as almost 40 per cent of the country is under some form of protection as a national park, like Etosha, or a private reserve, like Ongava.

IMAGES: © ZANNIER HOTELS (AUAS MOUNTAINS, TABLE SETTING, LAND CRUISERS); DANA ALLEN (FIRE PIT AND ROOM)

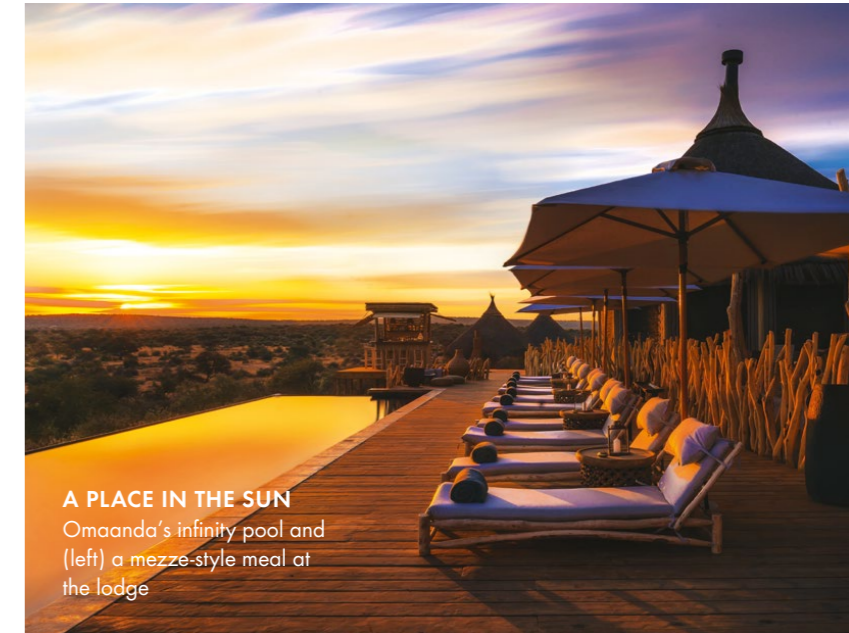


OUT OF AFRICA

Clockwise from above: Cheetahs at Ongava; a Kalahari Sunset, one of Omaanda's signature cocktails; a baby zebra finds its feet at Ongava; reception at Omaanda; a southern yellow-billed hornbill; Omaanda's spa; one of Ongava's resident lions



IMAGES: OLWEN EVANS (ZEBRA, HORNBILL, LION AND CHEETAH); © ZANNIER HOTELS (ALL PHOTOS OF OMAANDA)



A PLACE IN THE SUN
Omaanda's infinity pool and (left) a mezza-style meal at the lodge

Two lionesses that were both pregnant when rescued are now raising a trio of healthy cubs

Botswana has less than 40 per cent, so Namibia takes the gold medal.”

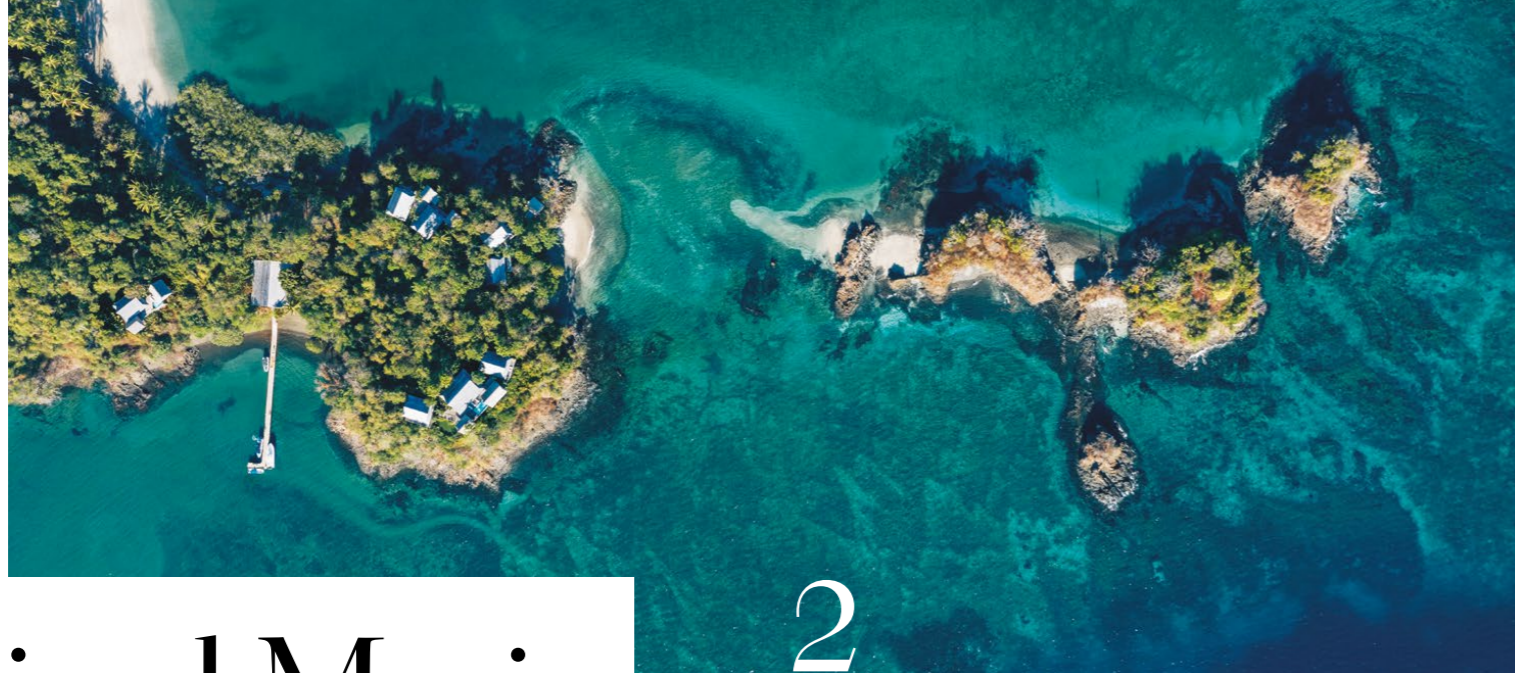
Five hours' drive to the south, Omaanda, which was recently named the leading luxury safari lodge in Africa at the World Travel Awards, is pioneering a different approach to conservation. The 10-room lodge was willed into existence by Angelina Jolie, who in 2016 discovered that a 90-square-kilometre plot of land next to the Naankuse Foundation Wildlife Sanctuary, a reserve run by her friends Rudie and Marlice van Vuuren, was at risk of being turned into a residential estate of 400 houses. The film star sprang into action, inviting Swiss hotelier Arnaud Zannier—whose property in Cambodia, Phum Baitang, she frequents—to Namibia. Zannier flew in, sensed what was at stake and made a counter-offer with only days to spare.

Since it opened last year, Omaanda has received much acclaim for its sleek design—the way its ochre clay huts tumble down the hillside, its collection of tribal art and fabrics, the shimmering infinity pool—but beneath the glossy exterior lies a serious mission. “Conservation has always played a major part in Zannier Hotels’ DNA,” says Zannier. “When I met the Van Vuurens, I immediately understood that conflict between humans and animals was the main cause of fauna extinction in Namibia. There was a

need of having a transitional land close to Naankuse where animals saved by the foundation could be reintroduced to the wild safely.”

So he founded the Zannier Reserve by Naankuse, a space for the Van Vuurens to release wildlife they rescue, usually from irate farmers. Guides lead twice-daily game drives into the reserve, but this isn't a safari experience where you can tick off the Big Five in a day or two. Many of the animals on the Zannier Reserve are scarred by their interactions with humans and hide as the car rumbles closer. Populations here are also fluid. If a more suitable reserve can take an animal, the Zannier Reserve happily relocates them, their well-being coming first.

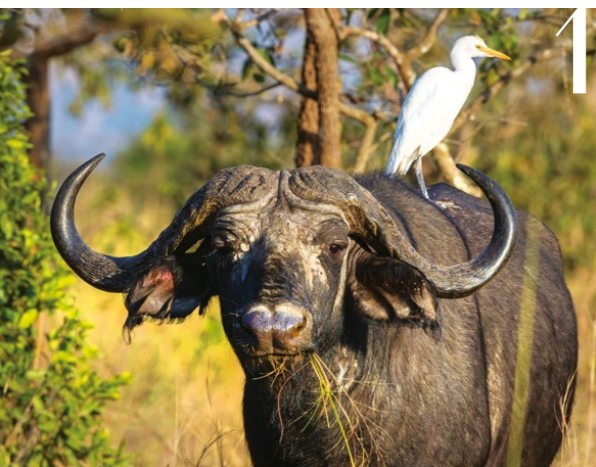
That said, wildlife thrives here. Two lionesses that were both pregnant when rescued are now raising a trio of healthy cubs. From the pool one afternoon, I spy an oryx leading its days-old calf, still shaky on its spindly legs, out of a dense thicket. As with all safaris, whether or not you spot these animals often comes down to luck. But even if all you see on a dawn drive is the flick of a leopard's tail as it melts into the bush or a flash of fur as a springbok bounds past, it's a thrill to return to Omaanda, look out over the sprawling reserve and know that vulnerable animals are making a home here—and that they're safe. 🦁



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Animal Magic

Safaris come in many forms, as shown by the wild but indisputably luxurious experiences offered by these eight new camps and lodges



1

▲ **1. MAGASHI CAMP, RWANDA**
The new six-tent Magashi Camp, operated by Wilderness Safaris, is the first to offer a luxury safari experience in Rwanda's wetlands, where wildlife such as Nile crocodiles, swamp-dwelling sitatunga antelope and more than 500 species of birds thrive. Magashi is situated in Akagera National Park, one of 15 protected areas managed by African Parks, a non-profit organisation that works with governments and local communities to rehabilitate and conserve invaluable ecosystems around the continent. Since African Parks took on management of Akagera in 2010, lions and black rhinos have been successfully reintroduced to the reserve.

▲ **2. ISLAS SECAS, PANAMA**
A dedicated "adventure concierge" is on hand at the remote Islas Secas resort in Panama to help curate your trip—and what adventures they can plan. This nine-room island hideaway is a scuba diver's paradise, offering unparalleled access to the Gulf of Chiriquí and its more than 750 species of fish, including whale sharks, giant manta rays and bluefin and yellowfin tuna. Next year a field station is set to open on the island, enabling a resident team of scientists to study migrating humpback whales in the summer.



3

▲ **3. HOTEL MARI MARI, CHILE**
Whether you're after a land- or water-based adventure, there's something for everyone at Hotel Mari Mari, which is set in Chile's Mari Mari Natural Reserve. From the lodge's base on the country's rugged Pacific coast, guests can venture out on foot or horseback to try to catch a glimpse of puma in the nearby woods or set out in boats or kayaks to meet the penguins, dolphins and sea lions that zip along the shoreline beneath the hotel's villas.

▲ **4. LEKKERWATER BEACH LODGE, SOUTH AFRICA**
Safaris in South Africa are often focused on seeing the Big Five—lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and Cape buffalo—but Lekkerwater Beach Lodge turns travellers' attention from the land to the sea. From its perch overlooking the Indian Ocean, guests can enjoy some of the best land-based whale watching in the world as hundreds of southern right whales pass majestically by from July to November.

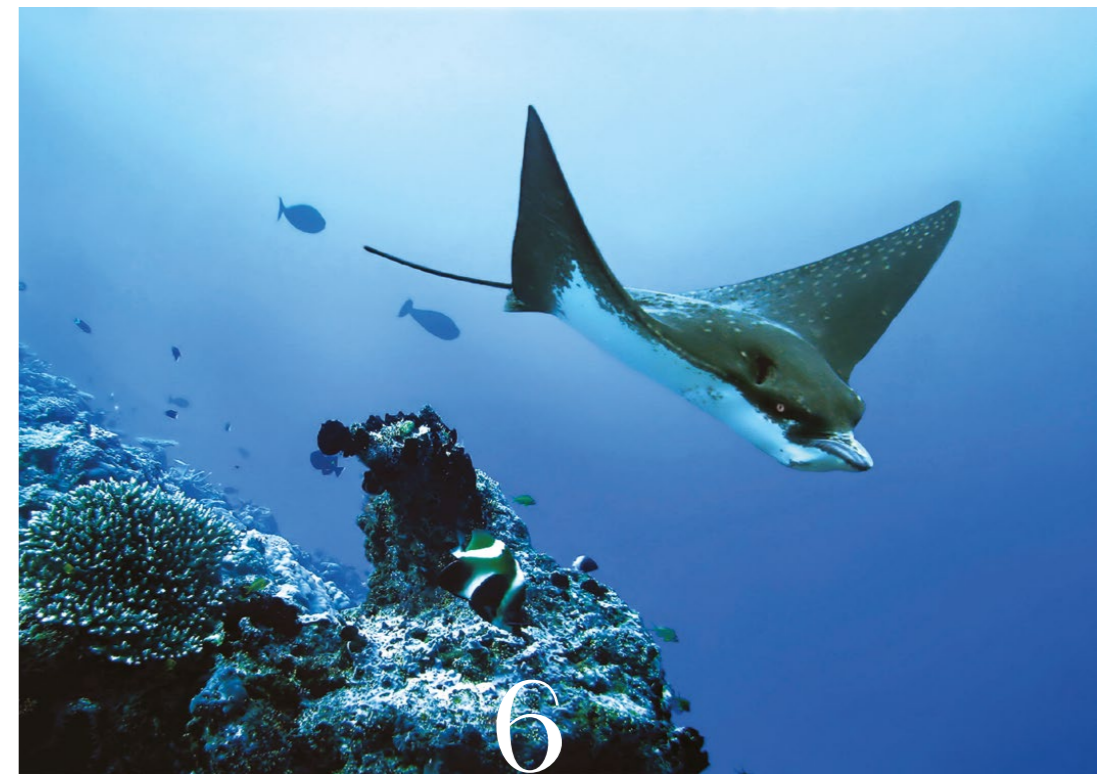


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▲ **5. CARDAMOM TENTED CAMP, CAMBODIA**
A partnership between two NGOs—the Wildlife Alliance and Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation—and sustainable travel brand Yaana Ventures, Cardamom Tented Camp sits in dense tropical rainforest close to the Thai border. Here, guests can get hands-on with the lodge's conservation programmes, joining rangers on forest patrols, setting up camera traps and cataloguing flora and fauna for researchers. If you're lucky, you may encounter some of the rainforest's elusive wildlife, such as clouded leopards, pileated gibbons and slow lorises, along the way.



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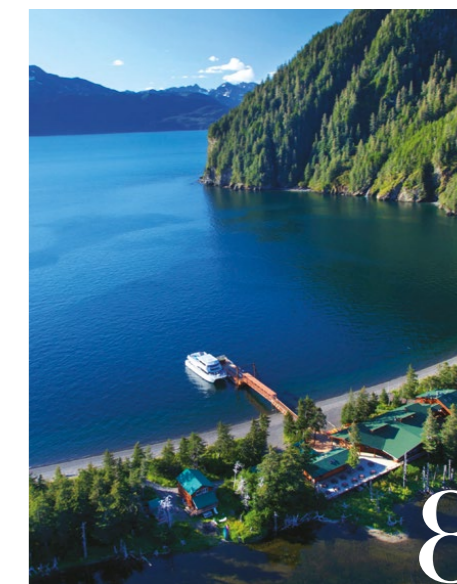
▲ **6. WA ALE ISLAND RESORT, MYANMAR**
It's a long journey to Wa Ale Island Resort in the remote Myieck Archipelago, some 100 kilometres off the coast of Myanmar, but it's well worth the trip. This 11-villa property is in the heart of Lampi Marine National Park, which is home to hundreds of land and marine species, including Sunda pangolins, whale sharks, and loggerhead and green sea turtles. Guests can take part in organised activities such as jungle treks or while away their days snorkelling in the resort's private cove, tropical fish circling beneath them and sea eagles soaring above.



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▲ **7. MOUNT MULLIGAN LODGE, AUSTRALIA**
Having already opened a luxurious bolthole in Australia's Daintree rainforest and a plush private island camp on the Great Barrier Reef, billionaire Chris Morris has now unveiled this outback retreat at the foot of Mount Mulligan, a sandstone monolith 10 times the size of the more famous Uluru. Hundreds of bird and animal species live in the lodge's 280-square-kilometre reserve, but plant lovers in particular should keep their eyes peeled; a new species of flora was discovered on Mount Mulligan in 2017, and the area is so wild that there are sure to be others to be discovered.

▶ **8. KENAI FJORDS WILDERNESS LODGE, US**
There's no wifi or phone signal at the Kenai Fjords Wilderness Lodge, but there's plenty to keep you entertained. The eight-room property is the only dwelling on the remote Fox Island in Alaska's Resurrection Bay, which is home to killer whales, sea lions, porpoises, otters and a huge variety of birds, including bald eagles. Wildlife-watching boat tours can be organised, or guests can kayak from the lodge straight into the bay.



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