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*The name's Madden...
Richard Madden*

Story by **Stuart McGurk** Photographed by **Matthew Brookes**



ARNAUD ZANNIER

Zannier Hotels, worldwide



French hotelier
Arnaud Zannier,
(below) poolside
at Omaanda



Say what you like about Namibia and chances are, however fulsome, fact-filled or simply fanciful, it won't touch the sides of a country the size of Britain and France combined, which nevertheless gets by with just two major roads (north-south and east-west) serving a minuscule population not much larger than Botswana or Macedonia's.

And yet, for all its splendid isolation, it's *the* safari destination for 2019, due in no small part to the efforts of a young French-born, Belgium-based hotelier impelled to join the urge to conserve by one of his more high-profile guests.

When Arnaud Zannier opened his second resort, Phum Baitang, in Cambodia, in 2016, one of his first guests was Angelina Jolie, who enjoyed its quietly luxurious vibe so much that when word came that a 9,000-hectare farm next to her friend Rudie van Vuuren's N/a'an ku sê reserve, 45 minutes outside Windhoek, was up for sale and

threatening his conservation work, she knew just who to ask to step in.

"Namibia was not in my business plan," says Zannier, smiling at the memory. "After opening in Cambodia we were looking at Myanmar and Vietnam. Then Angelina talked to me about Namibia. She said I'd like it; the environment is beautiful and it really fits the philosophy." So Zannier flew down with his family (co-investors in Zannier Hotels) and the deal was done.

Omaanda (which may or may not mean "rhino" in the local dialect) boasts ten traditionally hewn, thatched huts, all with stunning views of the beautiful, rugged landscape, that deftly add ultra-high-end lodging to a country that until recently boasted next to none. The hospitality certainly matched Zannier's aim for his brand ("I want to create the perfect environment when I travel, with the kind of interiors I like and a philosophy that fits my beliefs"), but the project runs far deeper than simply expanding the brand's global footprint (besides, Myanmar and Vietnam are now well underway). "It's important that we do things right," says Zannier, "so we've opened the border to the reserve and Angelina has made an investment through her foundation to open a clinic for rhino. Rudie was limited because he was missing a major piece of land for carnivores and large animals, but with our help he's been able to develop."

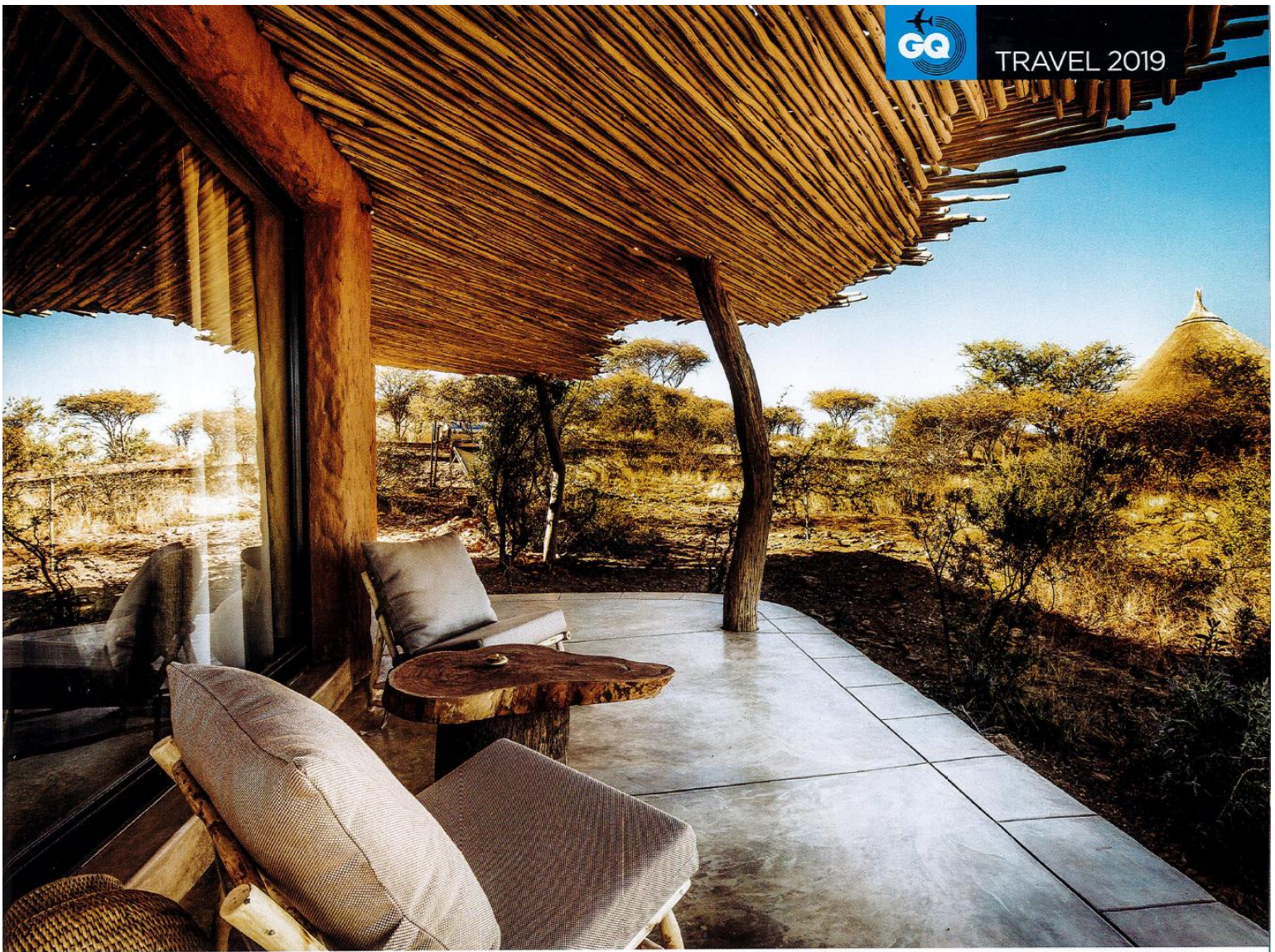
Right now, a walking safari will have you spotting the aforementioned rhino,

as well as jackal, kudu, springbok, ostrich and, if you're lucky, leopard and cheetah (the two young male elephants released onto the plot have proved obstinately elusive). But then, "It's not like a normal game reserve," as Zannier explains: "The animals that you see will change all the time, because we have animals coming in that have been injured, or they need land on

which to grow, and then we will release them into a national park in a few years' time."

By which time, Omaanda will have been joined by three more Zannier lodges, designed to expand and extend the guest experience in a country ripe for discovery. "The idea is that you can come for a week, just as you would go to the Maldives, but nobody is bringing the destination resort idea to these surroundings. That's what we want to do." **BP**

● From £2,975 per person, including flights and transfers from London Heathrow. 01242 787800. redsavannah.com



Sited on a 9,000-hectare reserve, Omaanda is the first of four lodges planned for Namibia by Zannier Hotels. Overlooking the savanna in the heart of a private animal conservancy, home to rhino, jackal, springbok and cheetah, it features ten huts inspired by traditional Namibian building techniques

