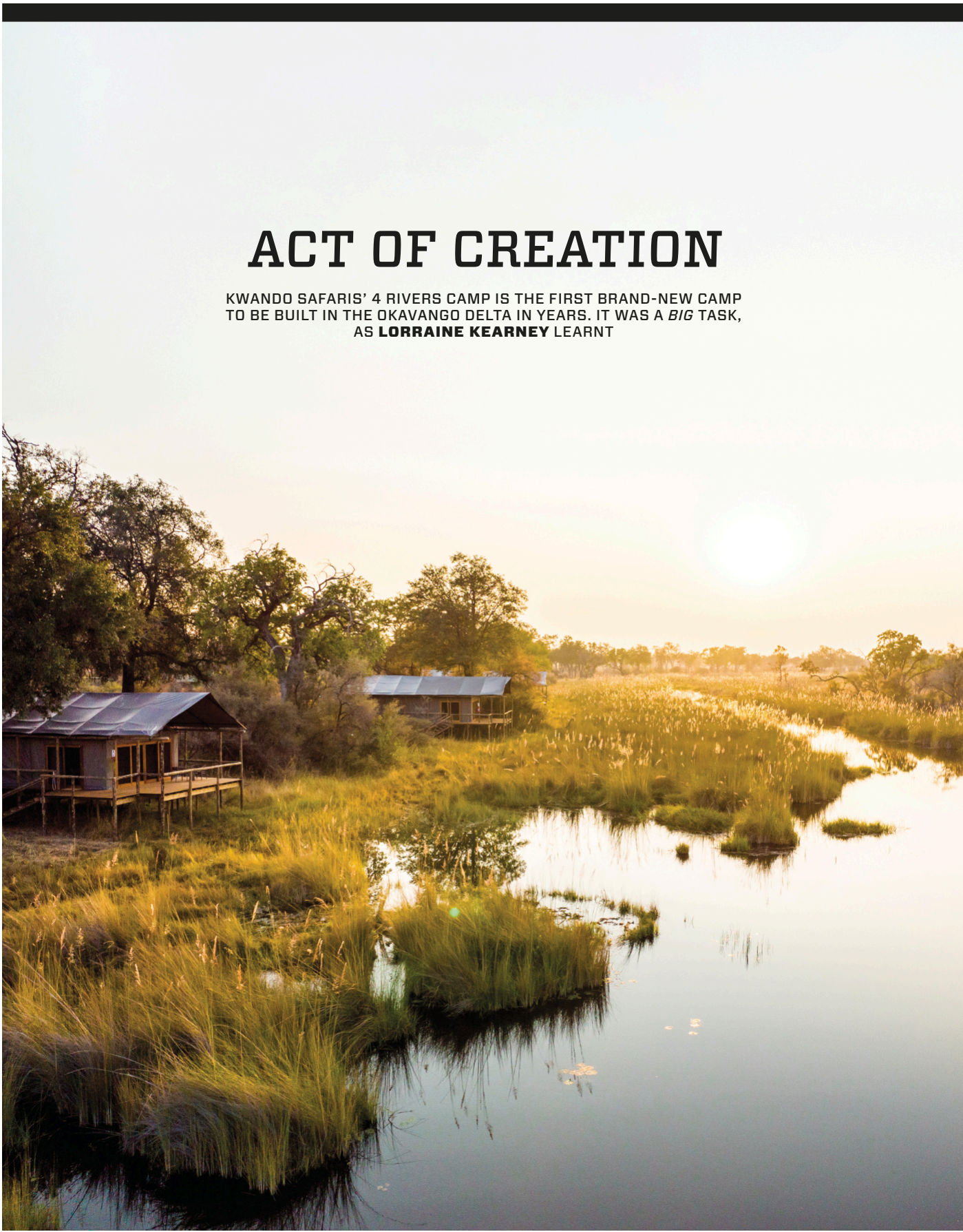


# ACT OF CREATION

KWANDO SAFARIS' 4 RIVERS CAMP IS THE FIRST BRAND-NEW CAMP TO BE BUILT IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA IN YEARS. IT WAS A *BIG* TASK, AS **LORRAINE KEARNEY** LEARNT



The first thing you need to know is that Kwando means 'at our home'. The second is that this particular home is the western side of the 175 000 ha Kwara Private Concession, arguably the last pristine and unexplored place in the Okavango Delta.

To put that 'unexplored' idea in perspective: Kwara is two-and-a-half times the size of the Sabi Sand Game Reserve and has about 10 tents in just three camps; Sabi Sands has about 20 lodges.

It is a refuge to stunning biodiversity: African wild dog, lion, cheetah leopards, eland and more; bat-eared fox, roan and sable antelope, tsessebe, steenbok, herds of wildebeest and buffalo, zebra, kudu, giraffe and warthog.

And 4 Rivers has exclusive use.

It's built around hard timber trees, such as tall mopane and jackalberry, and is designed to make nature the star of the show. The interiors use natural light as much as possible and are specifically designed for natural airflow to help with cooling – read: no walls.

The camp, with nine large Meru tents, including a family room, sits on raised wooden decks.

It is gorgeous, and when you're not being busy, you can just sit and watch the world go by, which includes wallowing in the pool while the hippos wallow in the Tsum Tsum River beside you.

'Only in 2023 did this isolated area – the last pristine vestige of the Okavango – open to pioneering guests. This is the great unexplored,' says General Manager Kate Nelson.

This wild and isolated wilderness sprawls around a confluence of waterways, open plains, forested islands and towering cathedral mopane woodlands forests. It is so wild, the Kwando team had to carefully trace ancient animal pathways to lay down fresh game drive roads.

## IN THE BEGINNING

'A huge pro is that the area is largely unexplored, and that's exciting for people (guests and staff



alike),' says Kate. 'A huge con is that the area is largely unexplored, so we had to do a lot of things from scratch, like developing the road infrastructure and getting to know the animals and their movements.'

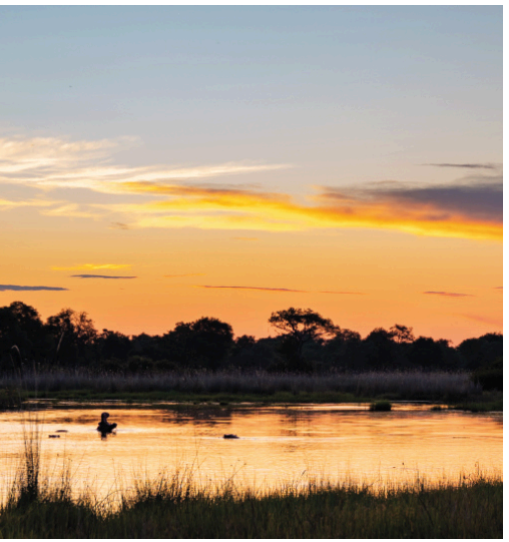
The ideal site for a camp has a combination of shade and an interesting view, says Duncan Britton, Kwando Safaris managing director. 'Camps in Botswana must, by law, be semipermanent, meaning natural cooling during the day is a huge consideration when building for guests and staff.' Think a good dose of shade.

**ABOVE** In building 4 Rivers, the team spent a lot of time on site getting the right placement of each tent in terms of view, privacy and midday shade.

**BELOW** In a first step, the team followed the waterways by aeroplane and helicopter, looking for the perfect place to build a camp.

**LEFT** Nature is the star of the show at 4 Rivers, which is built on the water and surrounded by trees.

**RIGHT** Sunsets are jaw-dropping in the Delta. Even the hippos agree.



Luckily, good shade usually means permanent water, which provides the best views, as is the case with 4 Rivers. ‘To find the site, we flew over the general area on fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, following the waterways looking for larger, well-established islands,’ he says. ‘Then, we visited the spots we saw by vehicle at different times of year, often taking half a day or more to reach them on non-existent roads.’

Once the idea site was chosen, there were many camping visits over a year – including by the architect – to take into account seasonality, and how to incorporate the river and the many trees into the design. ‘A lot of time is spent on site getting the right placement of the main areas and each tent in terms of view, privacy and midday shade, explains Duncan.

He says there was a lot of considerations to take into account: the trees; the river levels and the seasonal flooding; typical animal movements through the site throughout the year; environmental impacts; provision of a 100% solar-powered electricity grid; provision of fresh water; treatment of wastewater; building with non-permanent materials such as wood, gum poles and canvas; and setting up a temporary camp to house the construction team, which was almost 60 people at its most.

The development team has been developing and operating camps together in remote parts of Botswana for more than 30 years; some have worked together for even longer. ‘The vast majority of the build team are citizens or have worked in Botswana for decades, from the builders all the way through to the architect, designer and consultants. And



**ABOVE** The area is unexplored, and roads had to be hacked by hand, following the animals’ paths, for game drives.

**BELOW** (from left) Kwara Private Concession is pristine, unexplored wilderness; the tents – along this walkway – are on raised wooden decks; safari walks on Maboa Island take in the massive termite mounds.

Kwando procures locally as much as possible – either directly or through local distributors. It was a very experienced, local team who knew what they were doing,’ says Duncan.

Head guide Tom Nkwazi – Big Tom – was in the team, too. ‘There was no existing road infrastructure in the area at all so we had to develop it as a guiding team,’ he says. ‘During the construction period (which began in late 2022 and was completed in May 2023), we dragged tyres in various areas and came back 12 hours later to see what spoor we could find. We discovered that the 4 Rivers area acts as a transition for big predators like lions, wild dogs, leopards and hyenas, all of which were spotted from camp during the construction.’

Big Tom explains they wanted to focus on walking. In March 2023, the guiding team moved on site and began establishing game drive routes, developing the designated walking range, the mokoro station and a fishing spot.

#### THE LOGISTICS OF THE BUILD

There were absolutely no roads in this area, says Operations Manager Cornelia Rautenbach. ‘A typical trip would consist of anything between a seven- to 10-tonne truck with 4x4 or 6x6 capability, which is essential. Coming from Maun, a trip like this would take about 14 hours of continuous driving, first on tar, then on gravel, and the bulk of it on simple bush tracks ... that is without the trip being lengthened by getting stuck in the deep sand on the way or suffering punctures, breakdowns, etc.’

A new road had to be cut through the bush by hand – a task that took a team of eight men three months to complete, having to consider the most direct route, but avoiding water, cutting down trees and so on. Some roads took months to form as they meandered around ancient trees, standing resolute while avoiding as much of the thick Kalahari sand that grew deeper with each passing traveller.

#### THE DESIGN

The whole camp design (even more than just the decor) was inspired by termites. Yes, termites. And termite adjacent aspects such as pangolins (which eat only termites) and the large Maboa mushrooms that grow on the mounds in the rainy season.



Termite mounds are basically high-tech greenhouses and termites are champion recyclers, says Big Tom. Termites are a keystone species and a vital part of the Okavango ecosystem – they eat dead plant matter, recycling nutrients, and tunnel through the soil, which leads to better irrigation, meaning that plants and trees grow better near termite mounds, which in turn provides better grazing for animals. It’s a perfect symbiotic cycle.

In the decor, this means earthy tones, repurposed driftwood and traditional baskets made from Okavango reed fibres.

‘We built a camp inspired by termites, named the large island south of the camp Maboa Island, and we became a founding partner of the Botswana Pangolin Working Group at the same time the camp was under development,’ says Kate.

#### SUSTAINABILITY

And it was built as sustainably as possible – 100% solar; best in breed waste management; organic building materials.

Water is pumped into the camp via a natural borehole providing fresh running water, hot showers and flushing toilets. It first goes through a water treatment plant, and drinking water is further purified to make it safe for human consumption. An on-site treatment centre takes care of the waste: all wastewater is treated using above-ground state-of-the-art sewerage treatment

plants, ensuring no cross-contamination of the soils or groundwater through grey or black water discharge. The fully treated end product eventually returns to the soil.

Drinking water is purified on site using a reverse osmosis machine while 4 Rivers has energy-efficient lights, fans and even ice machines to lessen the energy load on the solar system. Insulated cladding for hot water geysers reduces heat loss from the system overnight, especially during the year’s colder months. ‘Our morning kettle boils over the campfire. At other times of the day, we store hot water in thermos flasks rather than reboiling kettles. We use solar power for geysers and electricity. Insulated walling – where applicable – and thatching within the design of the camps avoid the need for air conditioning systems,’ says Kate.

This putting the planet first runs through to food, too. Chefs are trained to avoid wastage by adjusting recipes to the number of guests in camp. Waste audits are frequently conducted.

And camp waste (even old engine oil) is carefully separated and sent by truck to Maun to be recycled.

‘In keeping with Kwando’s traditional bush spirit, this camp, and every camp, is designed with true luxury in mind: a state of connecting with nature, deeply,’ says camp manager Keduetswe Mojela.

**SADC rate from BWP6 900 (about R9 247) pp pn**  
**kwando.co.bw**  
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**LEFT** There is nothing quite like an outdoor shower in Africa’s wild lands.

**BELOW** A pack of African wild dogs denned on Maboa Island, including a rare leucistic puppy.



#### The Facts

4 Rivers is on a lagoon on the northern banks of the Tsum Tsum River, the source of the four crossings from which the camp takes its name.

To the west, the vast floodplains allow for excellent off-roading and tracking of predators. These open floodplains harbour high-canopied mangosteen trees, sausage trees and strangler fig islands.

To the east, the Tsum Tsum River forms a mini-delta – a combination of wetland marsh and wooded islands best explored by mokoro and on foot.

The largest of these islands, Maboa Island, is directly in front of the camp, and its forests can be discovered on safari walks – a 4 Rivers speciality. During the summer, trees such as marula trees attract animals like elephant, baboons and monkeys. In winter, jackalberries attract everyone, including tourists on walking safaris.

Maboa Island was home to a big pack of 27 African wild dog denning in 2023, including a rare leucistic puppy.



#### 4 Highlights at 4 Rivers

- Exclusive use of the pristine western side of the Kwara Private Concession.
- Nature walks on Maboa Island.
- Roan and sable antelope in ancient woodlands.
- Cape clawless otters and elephant herds in the Tsum Tsum River.



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