

Cheaper, easier and more romantic – why we eloped to Africa

There were no drunk uncles or placement terrors to deal with

By *Leslie Woit*



Leslie Woit and her partner wed at Victoria Falls and honeymooned in Botswana

Love may be blind but it still has optics. Having reached an age more suited to mother-of-the-bride than bride-herself, a meringue-gown wedding and Peter Jones registry was out of the question. So I grabbed my groom and eloped to Africa.

Our wedding for two at the edge of Victoria Falls slid in just under the Covid wire last year. News of the escalating crisis penetrated our safari tent flaps, alongside the butler-delivered Champagne and private pool-side lunches. Yet even before social distancing started a trend for the tiniest possible weddings, the idea of swerving the stress and expense of traditional celebrations was already gaining traction.

The UK wedding industry is valued at over £10 billion a year and an average special day rings in at just over £30,000. An elopement not only damps down the chatter (handy for grooms such as mine who are already two weddings to the bad), it also cuts the costs.

We cross the churling Zambezi River in a small tin boat, alighting on the sandy bank of Livingstone Island. With the bride in hot pink pleats and the groom in a natty Ted Baker suit, we were travelling in the footsteps of the intrepid, Scottish missionary David Livingstone made the same journey in 1855, viewing the precipice of the “Smoke that Thunders”.

I take the hand of purple-robed Presbyterian Pastor Chris and aim for the billowing mist that rises before us like an atomic cloud. A stone’s throw from the 100m abyss, seven young men in T-shirts sway to their sonorous acapella songs in the local Tonga language. A small marquis tent is beautifully laid for lunch and an arch is adorned with ribbons and white roses. Champagne lies in icy wait while a photographer discreetly nymphs about capturing the angles.

All this, and much more, comes to both of us as a grand and glorious surprise. It’s this Livingstone thunderbolt moment that underlies the joys of eloping. Giving over to the unknown, taking a leap of faith... isn’t that what getting married is? **We’d asked for “the bare minimum” and – magically curated behind the scenes by the brilliant African specialists at Micato Safaris – received the full monty.**



The ceremony went off without a hitch

It could not have been easier. Every detail I’d never thought of executed without fuss, with no drunk uncles or placement terrors to deal with. Pounds saved on harpists and limos were also easily redirected into a rock-star honeymoon. For the ne plus ultra of romantic retreats, sampling the world’s very finest safari camps is difficult to best. After all, nothing says married life like a herd of cape buffalo being hunted by a pack of hungry lions.

Following the legalities at quirkily charming Livingstone town hall, the joyful ceremony at the Falls, and a too-brief stay in a romantic thatched cottage at Tongabezi Lodge, a 13-passenger Cessna lifted us westwards to the remote red-earth airstrips of Botswana.

The first of four camps on our grand tour, plus a pitstop in Cape Town, was to be Selinda Camp, the second largest private game concession in Botswana reserved for the delight of just 10 guests. Safari camps are a who's who of Hollywood, industry and politics. Every time we touched down, it seemed like we'd just missed Michael and Catherine, or Celine, or Bon Jovi, all of whom appreciate the salubrious and very private tents that form the ideal vantage from which to experience Africa's wild intimacy. (When I say "tent", think stand-alone copper bathtubs and four-poster beds a la Hemingway, plus wifi, air con and bluetooth in the manner of Bezos. Several of the lodges also provided use of long-lens cameras and gave us the SD card to take home.)

Among the exclusive Selinda guest manifest that week was Ian Khama, ex-president of Botswana between 2008 and 2018. A bodyguard stepped discreetly behind a wooden pillar as we arrived for a breakfast fit for royalty: starched linens, polished silver, no plastic in sight (even Champagne bottles are crushed on site to make sand for village building). This is conservation chic at its apogee.



The set-up at Botswana's Selinda Game Reserve CREDIT: Graham Prentice

When founders Beverly and Dereck Joubert first started offering photographic safaris, it was a means of subsidising their passion for conservation rather than a commercial enterprise, and the sophistication quotient ramped up quickly. The latest of nearly a dozen Great Plains camps, Selinda opened in 2019 with each piece of furniture and artifact – doors from Zanzibar to firepit fashioned from a ship's bulbous bow – collected on the couple's travels.

Escorted by a swooping pair of turquoise-orange carmine bee eaters, our guide Vundi swash-buckled the safari vehicle across the dry golden savannah, deftly threading through a dense stand of fig and sausage trees. Popping out a clearing near the River Liente to a chorus of ring-necked doves and hippo grunts, he pulled to neat stop. Voila, just feet away, a gamboling gaggle of lionesses and cubs were at play, soaking up the late afternoon warmth in a patch of sunshine.

During the first two game drives over one perfect day, we encountered lions, a loping leopard, two lounging cheetahs, and multiple memories of elephants, towers of giraffes and antelope in their hundreds. Among the advantages of game viewing in a private concession rather than in a national park

is that guides are permitted to drive off road for special visions such as big cats or – shhh – a romantic G+T sundowner blanketed by a particularly enchanting sunset.

Sunset fell ahead of schedule a few days later at Little Mombo Camp, inside the Moremi Game Reserve on the edge of the watery, animal-rich Okavango Delta. O.B., our guide had tracked eight female lions, focussed with intent on 50 magnificently be-horned cape buffalo. (My groom was rooting for the buffalo which he considers bad boys of the veld, while I'll cheer for a dedicated, blood-thirsty lioness any day.)

Suddenly, the sky turned an eerie bronze and swirling tempests of sand began thundering in off the Kalahari Desert. Lateral rain and fine grit swirled in all directions, as the sides took intermittent and near lethal forays. O.B. had given us another standout day: a baby and three adult rhino; a leopard slinking alongside the vehicle like hungry house cat; and many beves of pumbas, or warthogs, skittling about with tails on high alert and lovable snouts on perma-grin.



There were wildlife sightings aplenty

Later, availing ourselves of a full bar in our lavish private villa, bride and groom held their own private deck safari: a panorama of elephant, antelope and baboons parading past the languid comfort of the tented day bed and plunge pool. It's impossible to tire of spotting, snapping and generally ogling in wonder the sites that safari dishes up.

Tengile River Lodge on the Sabi Sand Game Reserve is renowned for ethereal night drives and prolific leopard sightings: for us, a languid beauty appeared in cameo each day. The Reserve's 31-mile unfenced boundary with Kruger National Park means right of passage for, as well as the Big Five, magnificent packs of wild dogs who split up each day to hunt and reunite in happy howls rituals.

Moving to our final camp, Singita, Kruger Park is as manicured as its guests, the sandy-red roads groomed by ploughs and grassy tracks trimmed with mowers. It was here, in the land of the smiling cold-towel greeters, by the three-storey wine tower (choose anything that appeals or invite the sommelier to work a little magic), that the honeymoon drew to a close and reality bit.

“This is a nightmare,” the groom jokes sarcastically, as the penny dropped. Horror of horrors, this most prestigious of camps was the first to leave us high and dry without a private pool. Granted, the “public” ones are long and wide and our villa comes with a tented day bed on its broad balcony, a full bar, sexy indoor-outdoor shower, panorama tub with a princely view onto Mozambique, even a watercolour kit. But really. A couple can get accustomed to bubble baths drawn by butlers, to Micato gifts on the pillow each night (the thoughtful ostrich bracelet became my something new, the groom’s cashmere South African flag socks soaked up the supplementary nervous sweat), to a dozen delectable courses at The Test Kitchen in Cape Town. (Note to the value-conscious: travelling with Micato means all tips and meals are included, and by all, we mean even a whim to dine at, in our case, a World’s 50 Best Restaurant at no extra charge).



The happy couple

These glittering memories will always, I feel, compare favourably to a day-long marathon with a few hundred closest friends and family. Among the most enduring of all of these was a frisson at the edge of the Falls. In Africa, bush wisdom abounds. “Never take nature or a wedding photo for granted,” said Alex. Truer words were never spoken by a guy looking us in the eye and checking for pupil dilation. One at a time he lead us over the rocks and into the waist-deep well known as Angel’s Pool, inches from the bubbling curtain-top of Victoria Falls – a reality-show worthy test of a marriage just 10 minutes old.

“Congratulations,” said Alex, stepping nimbly out the frame. “You may now kiss the bride, African style.”

The details

Weddings, honeymoons and luxury safaris in East and Southern Africa with **Micato Safaris** (020 7036 8073; micato.co.uk) start from US\$10,050 (£7,345) per person for 10 days based on double occupancy, including all accommodation, meals, alcohol, tips, internal flights, guiding. International flights not included.