

ON A DESIGN-HIGH IN THE DELTA

Art and Nature Collide at Xigera Safari Lodge

Xigera Safari Lodge is a staggering integration of sublime setting, innovative eco-engineering, and the unleashing of imaginations. Occupying a magnificent concession in Moremi Game Reserve, it affords first-rate access to the Okavango Delta at its blissful best, and manages to exert itself as a creative tour de force.



With every new super-swanky safari lodge, there is the worry that it will be some sort of overblown wedding cake in the bush, a kind of Afro-Disneyland steeped in mass-market curios, animal skins, or – heaven help us – leopard-print face masks.

How do you go all-out without slipping into OTT territory? How, when money is no object and your objective is to create a place that celebrates the continent, do you avoid the slippery slope into cliché? How do you exude luxury and opulence without pandering to swagger and excess?

It starts, of course, by understanding why people go on safari, and by having cultivated a deep and intimate love of wilderness that you want to share with others. Knowing that, for many, this may be the holiday of a lifetime, their one opportunity to commune with Africa, to finally have that safari they've waited for

their entire lives.

Apart from having that kind of skin in the game, you need a team that understands what is at stake. With that in mind, you gather architects, designers and conservation-minded safari experts and you explain your dream: create something extraordinary, you tell them, make it the very best.

THE PINNACLE OF PLENTY

It is no secret that Xigera Safari Lodge, which opened at the end of 2020, is built on the site of long-standing earlier incarnation of itself. Eponymous Xigera Island, within a startlingly sublime pocket of the Okavango Delta's Moremi Game Reserve, is a magnificent concession streaked with water channels and reed beds, dotted with tall termite mounds and ancient trees, plains of long grass, and an unimaginably rich bounty of animal life – starting with leopards, lions, and elephants that you seem to see as a matter of course.

The idea for Xigera's new owners was not to compete with that natural setting, but to create a place inspired by it, somewhere truly worthy of its location. So, when Stanley Tollman and his family (owners of such places as the Oyster Box Hotel in Durban and Bushmans Kloof in the Cederberg) took up the opportunity to recreate the lodge from scratch, they decided to put every ounce of energy into the project – nothing short of the finest of everything would go into what would emerge as a living tribute to their love of the



continent, and their passion for the bush.

And that is what they did.

Along with architectural designer, Philip Fourie, they hauled Cape Town architect, Anton de Kock, into the wilds and had him live and breathe Xigera, get a real feel for the milieu, imbibe its mysteries, its idiosyncrasies, and its wonder. Architecturally, the starting points were specific, but open to interpretation. Apart from the instruction to “make it extraordinary”, the lodge he was to design had to comply with a daunting

list of mandated eco-requirements. De Kock had to ensure that the entire lodge is, ultimately, impermanent. For that, the engineers came up with an innovative steel suspension super-structure on which the whole thing rests, so that it can be removed without a trace - in other words, no concrete, nothing to blight the land.

The real artistry, though, is what came to de Kock as he soaked up the environment. One day, while drifting through one of the channels on a mokoro, he witnessed a bird taking off. It's the kind

of miracle you often see in this primordial setting, but for the architect it was a moment of inspiration. It sparked ideas for the design of the twelve suites that are essentially huge glass and wood pavilions on stilts, enclosed to conserve energy, but capped by tented canopies, their roofs undulating like the wings of birds in flight.

And while there are visual details inspired by its surrounds, what is most striking is the way it integrates with its environment, how it is designed to make you feel like you are harmoniously at



one with nature while being cocooned in luxury. The sprawling, open-to-the-elements architecture features raised boardwalks that meander through ancient trees to reach distant suites, while the main lodge makes judicious use of terraced alcoves, shaded lounges, and elevated decks. Some are recessed under deep shade, while others extend over the waterways like manmade

promontories. The effect is to afford a multiplicity of perspectives, ensuring a choice of views of the waterways, riverine forests, and tawny grasslands.

It is vast, too, meaning that even when Xigera is at capacity, you enjoy tremendous privacy – whether you want to soak up the sun at the pool deck or bliss out in the spa, or find a secret spot to watch elephants gambolling by. It is quite something.

A UNIQUE SHOWCASE

While all these architectural elements alone are spectacular, Xigera has also been revolutionary in its approach to design. Eschewing anything cookie-cutter or “done before”, the idea has been to make the lodge a functioning showcase for contemporary African craft, art, and artisanship.

Overseen by design maven, Toni Tollman, Xigera’s extensive collection is the culmination of an in-depth collaboration with Southern Guild, Cape Town curators and gallerists who have spent years scanning Africa for talent and craftsmanship that can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the best in the world.

They brought together over 70 of the continent’s top talents – ceramicists, bronzesmiths, woodworkers, bead workers, weavers, and artists – and enlisted them to contribute to the

practical and decorative requirements of the lodge.

It wasn’t simply an exercise in prettifying or embellishing, though. Rather, the aim was to add to the sense of place, to add a narrative component to the aesthetic, and to visually pay tribute to the geography and ecology of the setting. Which is why, for example, the bar counter evokes the Delta’s different moods and seasons, and – also on the bar – there are Ardmore lamps in which you’ll find a leopard hiding in the branches. In the adjacent sunken fire lounge – a huge lily-design hearth cast by Cape Town’s Bronze Age Studio celebrates the flowers you’ll see when being poled through the water in a mokoro.

It is a paradox in many ways. An homage to nature created through technology and human imagination. A lens on a primordial world viewed from the most cutting-edge contemporary designs. It is wood shaped to sit on, metal beaten to look like lily pads, steel cast to represent a baobab and transformed into a three-storey luxury “treehouse” that you can spend a night in, set adrift at the edge of a vast plain. It is the humungous “nest” woven from kooboo cane resembling the homes of weaver birds and set at the lodge’s main entrance for guests to loll in. It is clay transformed into cups and saucers and plates, and paints and dyes and beads bringing dazzling colours alongside earthier hues like bronze and tan and brown.

The result is a capturing of Africa’s creative spirit in a way never before achieved – a living, breathing gallery that showcases this continent’s skill and imagination like nowhere else on earth.

Just about everything is a handmade, bespoke creation for Xigera – from terracotta seats on the main deck by visionary ceramicist, Andile Dyalvane, to ceramic side-tables by Chuma Maweni, and from the one-off “Techno Loafer” waxed steel chair by Xandre Kriel to mouth-blown glassware by Ngwenya. There are sculptures by Madoda Fani; dining tables by Kenyan-born sculptural artist, Stanislaw Trzebinski; and, in the boma fire-pit, a

totemic sculpture by blacksmith, Conrad Hicks. Even the ceramic coffee mugs (Chuma Maweni again) in the suites, the mealtime place mats (by Eswatini textile enterprise, Gone Rural), and the various bespoke ranges of crockery (by Cape Town's Mervyn Gers), are works of art.

This gathering of crafters and artisans wasn't only a boon for the lodge, establishing it as the biggest repository of contemporary African design on the continent, but also a great boost for the many artists and artisans who were sustained by their work for the lodge during the fierce pause of the pandemic. Many of the artists were brought to Xigera at huge expense, all the while navigating complicated quarantine logistics so they could work on site during difficult times. One woodworker, Adam Birch, spent seven months working at Xigera to transform fallen tree trunks into more than 150 sculptures, mostly organically shaped benches that have been placed throughout the lodge.

LIVING AT THE LODGE

All this talk of design and we've not even peeked inside the suites. They are nothing short of palatial, and each is individually curated, and is decked out in custom-created furniture, fabrics, artworks, and mood. Each boasts a full

lounge, bedroom, dressing room, and, in addition to a gorgeous bathroom, an outdoor shower on a huge private deck that includes its own gazebo.

Inside, apart from the exquisite detailing, bespoke this and fascinating that, the entire suite is designed to train your eye towards the immensity of floor-to-ceiling glass doors and walls that let you peer out at the majestic scene outside. Nothing's been left to chance, either. The temperature is perfectly maintained, beds are ravishingly comfortable, linens a balm, and behind the doors of an enormous cupboard is everything you might need to refresh, restore, or spoil yourself between meals. There is even a watercolour paint set, should the muse take you. It is one of those spaces you step into and can't imagine ever wanting to leave.

But leave your suite you will. Because, despite the unmitigated stylishness and relentless comfort of your sleeping quarters, there is simply no resisting the opportunity to dive deeper into the wilderness that enfolds you. While you will no doubt see plenty of creatures traipsing around in front of your room and will have your eyes and ears peeled while eating lunch or when sprawled out at the pool or in the spa, there is just so much more of this labyrinthine watery wilderness to explore.

VASTNESS OF THE DELTA

The Okavango Delta is evidence of Nature at the peak of her creative powers, and Xigera's rangers know how to reveal the very best of her. These expert guides will not only show you the extent of this paradise, but they make leopard- and lion-sightings seem almost unavoidable, and enhance the beauty of a tree with tidbits of knowledge or make a bird's antics seem even more special with an infusion of scientific fact. You will, for example, be touched to learn that the word "xigera" in fact refers to the hovering action of a pied kingfisher when it's hunting above the water.

Whether you're driving across the island in a game-viewer, being poled through the clear-water channels in a glass-bottomed mokoro, are exploring by motorboat, or tracking animals on foot, you will feel the Delta getting under your skin. It is precisely that sensation – that feeling of falling in love with Africa all over again – that the Tollmans were hoping to evoke. 📍



learn more

Xigera Safari Lodge is part of The Red Carnation Hotel Collection. Accommodation is on an all-inclusive basis: all meals, beverages, safari activities (game drives, boat rides, mokoro outings, bush walks), and seasonal catch-and-release fishing, as well as a few other memorable surprises, are included. Private yoga instruction, spa services, gratuities and gift shop purchases are extra. It is recommended that you stay at least three nights. www.xigera.com