

AT LEISURE

A JOURNEY WORTH TAKING

Let Sonja Piontek regale you with her experience at an exclusive fly-in safari in Botswana.

BY SONJA PIONTEK

I grew up in relative poverty in the otherwise rich country of Germany. When teachers announced field trips and all the other kids jumped up in joy, my gut churned as I knew my parents would deeply struggle to find the money required to join. When we went to the grocery store, my mum often carried no more than the equivalent of \$10, and that would have to last for the week. There was no way I'd ever drag her to the sweets aisle, grab a lolly near checkout, or ask for the hazelnut yoghurt I was so longing for. That simply wasn't possible.

Fast forward 40 years. As I am writing this, I sit on the sumptuous terrace of one of the most exclusive safari lodges in the world. Beyond our private pool, the vast wetlands of the Okavango Delta open the horizon to an awe-inspiring universe. A group of antelopes meander by in their unparalleled grace, followed by a herd of elephants, whilst the camp's private chef serves us exquisite treats for high tea. In the distance, we hear the majestic roar of a lion — claiming his territory in the sheer endless expanses of the pristine wilderness.

We are in Botswana, one of the most luxurious safari destinations in the world and started our bucket-list journey at Duba Plains Camp, a piece of paradise operated by Great Plains Conservation, a company renowned for its commitment to conservation, community involvement, and unparalleled luxury. Duba Plains Camp is situated in the heart of the Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, on a 33,000-hectare private reserve.

With me on this unforgettable journey is my oldest childhood friend, who had never been to Africa before, so why not start with a top end experience? I have chosen this unique place to celebrate my



birthday, our friendship, but most importantly, life and what I have made out of it. Because today, with deep gratitude and goosebumps on my entire body I can wholeheartedly say: I have made it.

How did I get here? Well... by helicopter. And figuratively? That journey was a lot tougher. Allow me to explain.

Having grown up the way I did, success was not a given and doors were certainly not opened for me. What got me here were years of endless effort, hard work, gutsy moves, tough decisions, failures, unfruitful attempts, disappointments, picking myself up, more ambitious moves, more effort, and all the many things that happen along the bumpy road to success.

Was it an easy journey? Definitely not. Was it worth it? Oh yes. Would I do it again? Immediately! However, this time, with the right partners, coaches, and mentors by my side right as this would have saved me endless effort, time, and small scale attempts when I could have already soared free and high.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONJA PIONTEK AND GREAT PLAINS CONSERVATION



My life's journey brought me from Germany to Austria, to Indonesia, to New Zealand, to China, and to Singapore where I left the corporate world as Director of Marketing for BMW Asia, founded my boutique agency Sonnenkind Pte Ltd, and finally had my breakthrough. Today I work as an executive coach for some of the most successful executives and entrepreneurs worldwide, am a bestselling author, an acclaimed keynote speaker and offer money-can't-buy expeditions to remote places, such as the Namib Desert or to the eagle hunters of Mongolia.

Every now and then, I treat myself to a journey – simply to celebrate life, reward myself, relax, and unwind. This is what brought me to Botswana. The Southern African country is known for some of the most exclusive and luxurious safari experiences in the world. The lodges we are staying in are operated by Great Plains Conservation, founded by Dereck and Beverly Joubert, National Geographic filmmakers and conservationists with a profound passion for preserving Africa's wild spaces and its magnificent species. What I particularly like is that the company operates with a philosophy that combines high-end tourism with impactful conservation initiatives. This approach not only enhances the overall guest experience, but also ensures the sustainability of the precious ecosystems they operate in.

Never before have I seen a population of elephants as healthy as the one we see on our daily game drives from Selinda Camp and Zarafa Camp a few days later. They are our third and fourth camps, both located in the spectacular Selinda Game Reserve to the north east of the delta. At times, we see hundreds of these magnificent grey giants over the course of no more than a few hours, their impressive silhouettes framing a picture of the African wilderness of the past. More impressive than their sheer numbers, however, is their behavior. Whilst wild and free, the different herds of elephants we encounter are surprisingly calm, friendly, and at times even inquisitive. Never would I have imagined being as close as at an arm's length from an elephant in the wild, hearing the impressive rumbling of their stomachs (which is one of their ways of communication), looking

straight into their wise eyes with the beautiful black lashes and even sensing their earthen smell. There is something truly spiritual about these encounters, calming and beautifully energizing for the soul.

Our private guide explains that there is a huge difference between the fenced safari lodges, the popular national parks where people can drive around in their own 4x4 vehicles, and the exclusive (and vast!) concessions with very limited numbers of visitors that Great Plains operates on.

"The elephants can feel that we deeply care about them and that everyone here treats them with the utmost respect. When we approach them carefully, we can get pretty close as they know we would never hurt or irritate them." Piet, like many of the other staff, comes from the area. Trained by the company, he is a true man of the bush – deeply passionate, caring, and loving of the many unique creatures that inhabit this wild bit of paradise. Based on the mutual respect between humans and the animals, we get to experience what I can, without hesitation, call the most unforgettable breakfast experience I have ever had.

Set up next to a waterhole is a luxurious breakfast table, fully laid out with silver ware, champagne glasses, a champagne cooler, freshly cut fruits and berries, a selection of French cheeses, muffins, scones, and more. Close to a nearby tree, the private Relais Châteaux chef has set up his bush kitchen and is working his magic together with his team. But if you think this is already it, we are still in for a surprise. As we sit down to enjoy the impressive bush setup, I hear a cracking noise to our right. We lift our heads. Nothing is to be seen. Yet there is the noise again – clearly someone is breaking off branches in the bush. And then – seemingly out of nowhere – they appear. The most magnificent herd of elephants. With babies, grown ups, youngsters, and a mighty matriarch. They look at us, hesitate briefly, then deem us harmless and proceed to have their vital morning drink of water at the hole. We lock eyes – they must feel the awe we experience, the shower of gratitude, the bliss and joy. What a unique gift – one we will store deep in our hearts for the rest of our lives.



Before we ventured off into elephant country and the vast savanna of the Selinda Game Reserve, we took a spectacular helicopter shuttle flight and dove deep into the Okavango experience as we spent a few unforgettable days in a water based camp – Sitatunga Private Island Camp. This exclusive property is the latest edition to the Réserve level camps, only opened a year ago and creates a totally different experience whilst equally offering the highest level of hospitality and accommodation for a maximum of eight guests.

Instead of taking safari vehicles, you travel on an open boat into the endless canals around the camp, as well as onto the mighty Okavango river itself. In amongst the swaying forest of papyrus and reed, there is a magnitude of life – bulky hippos, colorful birds, and crocodiles being our favorites. Being a water based camp, Sitatunga offers spectacular views across the private lagoon and sundowners drinks are traditionally served by the open fireplace on the floating deck with resident hippos creating the most magnificent backdrop music imaginable. Another thing that I deeply cherish at Sitatunga is the meditative calmness of the place and of our days. After a few hectic months and challenging business deals, this is exactly what my system and soul need.

The days we spent at Duba, Sitatunga, Selinda, and Zarafa are truly unforgettable. The people we met along this journey deeply touched our hearts. And the animal encounters we had will give us strength and perseverance in tough times to come.

As I said before, the road to success was not easy. But would I do it again? Oh yes! If only it meant to experience a safari like the one we just have. [P](#)

