WHAT’S NEW IN 2017…

NAMIBIA

Namibia has continued to be one of our most popular destinations in recent years. The favourable South African rand (which is tied to the Namibian dollar) has made trips to Namibia more affordable and as a result we’ve seen a large increase in the number of people planning holidays here. While this has been fantastic news for the tourism industry in Namibia, it has brought its own challenges in terms of lodge availability – although our sophisticated computer system has been invaluable in helping us slot together complex trips where others may struggle.

Because of Namibia’s popularity in 2016, many travellers deferred their trip to 2017 to ensure availability at the more popular lodges, so these are already starting to get very booked up; it’s never too early to start planning.

In the meantime, a range of new camps and hotels in 2016–17 is opening up hitherto hard-to-access areas and bringing added diversity to the mix.

CAPRIVI STRIP

A smaller, more intimate sibling of the better-known Nambwa Tented Lodge, the new Nambwa Lagoon Camp has just five elevated rooms overlooking the quiet backwaters of the Kwando River. Guests share meals and activities with the Tented Lodge, so this is a good choice for those wanting a smaller and simpler set up, yet a convivial atmosphere.

DAMARALAND

The Spitzkoppe area boasts some of Namibia’s most spectacular landscapes, but until now the only place to stay has been at the rather uninspiring campsite. As we went to print at the end of 2016, however, we heard that the luxury Spitzkoppe Lodge had just opened, giving travellers the chance to break the journey between Swakopmund and Damaraland. We gather that the new lodge has 15 comfortable chalets, each positioned to take advantage of the stunning views, and that activities will focus predominantly on hiking along waymarked trails, each taking between four and eight hours to complete.

SKELETON COAST

We’ve been eagerly awaiting the opening of Shipwreck Lodge for some months now, and after a few delays it finally looks set to open its doors during 2017. When it does, it will bring a really exciting area of Namibia, currently accessible only to those on high-end fly-in itineraries, within reach of other visitors. The lodge will be located within the Skeleton Coast Central Concession, where you can expect to see remnants of infamous shipwrecks and the abandoned Westies diamond mine, or to venture further into the park with the possibility of seeing wildlife including desert-adapted elephant, lion or brown hyena. The roaring dunes are another extraordinary reason to come here, the huge sound that reverberates when you slide down the dune filling the usual silence. We’ll be monitoring progress of the camp closely over the coming months, and while logistics of how to reach it are still a little up in the air, do ask us about including it in your itinerary.

SWAKOPMUND & WALVIS BAY

The newly re-built Strand Hotel is an exciting new development. It sits on the historic ‘Mole’, enjoying uninterrupted sea views and a buzzing atmosphere. Its 125 well-designed, contemporary rooms are very comfortable, and many have balconies and guaranteed beach or sea views. The hotel also boasts five restaurants within immediate reach, including an excellent sushi and seafood restaurant, and even a micro-brewery! The service is excellent, and despite the relatively large size of the Strand, we think it’s a fantastic base for visitors to Swakopmund.

“ We were pleased with every aspect of our booking, the quality of accommodation, the transfers and car hire. It is rare to return from a holiday without having something that disappointed, but we could not fault a thing!”

Mr J, Leicestershire, July 2016
SOUTH AFRICA

Spectacular scenery, great food and wine, and the many attractions of Cape Town give a perennial appeal to the Cape of South Africa. One of the Expert Africa team, Lucy, lives here permanently, and a member of our UK-based team made a family visit in 2016 to take a fresh look at what we can offer younger travellers.

From a plethora of B&Bs, guesthouses and lodges, we have hand-picked a prime selection. These cover different tastes, styles and budgets – each with different kinds of travellers in mind. Here are a few words on our latest additions.

CAPE TOWN – CAMPS BAY

With great views over the ocean (the sunsets from the Leopard Bar terrace are renowned), our newest addition in Cape Town, The Twelve Apostles, is just a short drive from the heart of Camps Bay. An excellent option for couples and families alike, it’s a five-star hotel with 70 elegant, well-appointed rooms, yet despite its size it has highly attentive and personal service, and is very child-friendly. Along with two restaurants, a swimming pool and a couple of small ‘rock’ pools, it boasts a private cinema and a spa, and offers walks in its own small reserve in the foothills of Table Mountain.

LITTLE KAROO

Overlooking the Swartberg Mountains, Mooiplaas Guesthouse is situated on a working ostrich farm only 10km from the town of Oudtshoorn. It’s family-run with incredibly friendly staff, which makes for a delightfully relaxing stay. Although it has 28 comfortable rooms, these are spread around the grounds and it doesn’t feel big at all. With a swimming pool, climbing frame and swing, and lawns with space for children to run around, it’s a good choice for families – our four-year-old found it very sociable and loved the grounds! It’s also a great base for a farm tour – either here or at a nearby commercial farm – and for exploring the Cango Caves and Swartberg Mountains.

Not far from Montagu, on the scenic Route 62, the Galenia Estate is encircled by the Langeberg Mountains, and following renovation in 2016 now offers 10 luxury rooms in a Cape Dutch-style setting. Galenia offers a tranquil base for those wishing to escape the busier areas of the Winelands and Garden Route, with a number of nature trails, and opportunities to find out about the olive oil pressed on the farm or explore the vineyards of the Robertson Wine Valley. We have yet to visit Galenia, but we know the highly hospitable management couple from their time at a top lodge in Tanzania so we have high hopes for Galenia.

Namaqualand

Just 90 minutes north of Cape Town is the quaint fishing village of Paternoster, home to the privately owned Strandloper Ocean Boutique Hotel. Each of its 14 smart, spacious rooms – three of them facing the sea with direct access to the beach – is decorated in earthy, muted tones, and has a courtyard or small terrace. The hotel has a swimming pool and a good seafood restaurant, and its location – close to a nature reserve and with the West Coast National Park slightly further afield (60km away) – makes it a good choice for those who like the great outdoors.

Eastern Cape

One of our favourites has just got better! Kwandwe has always been great for game viewing and for being child friendly, but they now include a private vehicle for those staying in a family room at Ecca Lodge, sleeping four. They also offer a full babysitting service by staff members from early morning until late at night. Our four-year-old enjoyed everything from seeing rhino and cheetah, to baking cupcakes for lodge guests, to going on a bug hunt and finding a millipede exo-skeleton and a scorpion. Kwandwe is first class in every respect and we love it!

“As always with EA you know what you get: Expert Service! This time around it was no different.”

Mr W, London, September 2016
OKAVANGO DELTA SAFARI RESERVES

Following a total rebuild during 2016, the brand-new Duba Plains Camp is due to open on 1 March 2017, in a new location within the private concession. We’re expecting five luxury tents plus a two-bedroom tented villa, each with a private plunge pool and an outside sala. And as an added bonus, guests will still have use of the camp’s Canon DSLR cameras and Swarovski binoculars.

To plug the gap while Duba Plains Camp was closed, a temporary camp was opened just 3km away. With just six expedition-style tents and an open-air central area, Duba Expedition Camp stands on a tree-lined island, from where it offers both land- and water-based activities. We’re delighted to hear that it will remain open, as a second permanent camp in the concession, once the main Duba Plains Camp reopens – although it may be moved a little further north.

The brand new Gomoti Plains Camp, located in a community-run concession (NG32) in the south-east of the Okavango Delta, also looks set to open on 1 March 2017. We’ve been told there will be 10 luxury safari tents, eight of them doubles, and two geared to families. Day and night game drives are planned, along with mokoro activities and guided walks, subject to water levels. We’ve been thoroughly impressed by Gomoti’s sister camp, Machaba, so our expectations are running high. We aim to visit in 2017 so do ask us for details!

At Nxabega Tented Camp, all the chalets were rebuilt in early 2016, and visiting in September we were impressed: they seem to have maintained the essence of a tent, with clever use of space and design, and the added bonus of plenty of modern amenities and creature comforts. There are plans to renovate the main area in 2017, but in the meantime, Nxabega maintains high standards of guiding, cuisine and service.

Also this year, in the picturesque Jao Concession, the charming and fairly rustic Pelo Camp has been upgraded with an eye to increased comfort. Its five reasonably spacious tents have been raised on low wooden decks, each with their own veranda with views out over the water. Each tent now has a ceiling fan, and the bucket showers have been replaced with plumbed hot and cold water. The main

BOTSWANA

Consistency and quality are the name of the game in Botswana, both in the excellence of game viewing offered and the level of comfort of the camps and lodges. Botswana is a top safari destination, with prices to match, and while there is a high level of stability within the sector, camps are continuously engaged in keeping up appearances through upgrades and makeovers. Some of the latest are mentioned below.

One trend we noticed in 2016 was that our Private Mobile Safaris are becoming increasing popular – and we’re putting this down to two main reasons.

First, the cost of fixed camps in Botswana is rising steadily – some to quite dizzying heights. In contrast, private mobiles can offer really good value for money, particularly in peak season, and especially for a group or friends or a family travelling together. Yet gone are the days of ‘roughing it’ on a mobile safari; now you can expect proper beds with fluffy duvets, and your own private open-air en-suite bathroom.

Second, we think that many of our travellers are becoming more adventurous, and seeking more of a whole safari experience than some of our static, luxury camps can offer. Thus, in addition to conventional lodges, they’re including three or four days on a private mobile, with a superb guide, for a totally different experience. Back home, they often report that this slightly ‘retro’ part of their trip was a real highlight, commenting that they felt much more connected to the environment and the wildlife than they did in the more ‘insulated’ environment found in some permanent camps.

MOREMI GAME RESERVE

Chief’s Island
When we visited the rebuilt Chief’s Camp in October 2016, it looked stunning. The ten luxury bush pavilions now have even more space, including an enormous deck featuring a private plunge pool overlooking the floodplains on Chief’s Island, and a gigantic bathroom with indoor and outdoor showers and a large bathtub. Chief’s Camp seems perfect for travellers looking for modern, cosmopolitan luxury in one of Botswana’s best game-viewing areas, with amazing guides. For families and small groups of friends (up to 6 people), in spite of its far-from-enticing name, the new flagship two-bedroom Geoffrey Kent Suite is positively opulent, with its own private entrance, staff, chef, guide and game-drive vehicle.

Khwai River
Our newest offering in the productive Khwai Community Concession is Little Machaba, which overlooks the Khwai River’s beautiful floodplains. This intimate little camp opened in April 2016 with just four tents, two of them two-room family tents. While it’s similar in style to its independently run sister camp, Machaba, there are small differences, including the use of raised wooden platforms to give the tents an elevated view of the bush. Little Machaba promises to be excellent for families or a group of friends looking for authentic African luxury that does not need to be booked on an exclusive basis.

THE DIRECTORY

"Everything went so smoothly on the ground, in large part I’m sure to your and the camps’ expert organization. And to the amazing people of Botswana, your beautiful country is such a pleasure to travel around."  
Mr S, Switzerland, September 2016
area has also been raised onto a large wooden deck and a gorgeous breakfast bar sits in one corner facing the sunrise. This is a special little camp that is ideal for more adventurous travellers looking to focus on water-based activities.

**Abu Camp** is known for its work with orphaned and abused elephants, who have come together to form the Abu Herd. For over 20 years, guests have been able to interact with these rescued elephants, and had the opportunity to ride and walk with the herd. We’re very pleased to say that as of 31 December 2016, the camp will no longer allow guests to ride these elephants. Their elephant programme will now focus on elephant conservation and the opportunity to spend time walking with them through the bush, observing them up close in the wild and getting to know their individual characters.

**KWANDO–LINYANTI AREA**

In March 2016, **Selinda Adventure Trail** was launched in the excellent Selinda Concession. This five-day trail expands on the **Selinda Canoe Trail**, and in 2017 the period of operation will be extended from April to September. Given the seasonal nature of the Selinda Spillway, activities here focus on walking at times when water levels are low. For a little extra frisson, the trail gets off to an exciting start with a helicopter flight to the remote campsite offering an amazing aerial perspective of the channels and lagoons that make up the Spillway.

A decade or more ago, we loved the tiny **Linyanti Tented Camp**, on the east side of the Linyanti Concession, close to the western boundary of Chobe National Park. Having been closed to independent visitors for some years, it is now available again between May and November for use as a private camp for a minimum of two nights. The four tented rooms of ‘LTC’, as it was often known, overlook the expansive Linyanti Marshes, which can attract huge herds of elephants between May and October. There are also robust predator populations here with good sightings of lion and hyena, particularly in the dry season. This simple camp offers a level of exclusivity and flexibility that would suit families or small groups wanting a good value, back-to-basics safari.
ZIMBABWE

After several years of gradual recovery in the number of visitors to Zimbabwe, both the country and the national parks are starting to see fresh investment, and significant new developments. Luxury camps are opening, old camps have been completely redeveloped, and isolated areas are receiving better access. These developments have given Zimbabwe the infrastructure to rival the country's southern African neighbours, and its low visitor numbers and exceptional standards of guiding mean it provides a top safari experience.

VICTORIA FALLS

Following enlargement in 2015 of the ever-popular Ilala Lodge, in Victoria Falls, a total make-over is planned for its original 34 rooms during 2017. We’re looking forward to new décor and new bathrooms, bringing them in line with the new rooms.

About 40km from the hustle and bustle of Victoria Falls town, Matetsi River Lodge reopened in July 2016, after a major facelift. Set in a private concession on the banks of the Zambezi, the lodge had been closed for at least 15 years, but travellers here can now expect 18 river-facing suites with exceptional standards of luxury.

MANA POOLS NATIONAL PARK

With a change of name from Zambezi Lifestyles to Zambezi Expeditions in 2016 has come a soft refurbishment and a slight rethink. Accommodation has been upgraded to larger walk-in tents, and in future the camp will remain in the same location for a full year, moving only once at the end of each season rather than several times. The result is a camp that feels midway between a mobile camp and a permanent property, which we love for a more adventurous safari in Mana Pools.

July 2016 brought an extra bit of luxury to Mana Pools National Park with the opening of the brand-new Little Ruckomechi. A sister camp to the long-established Ruckomechi Camp, it sits in the same private concession to the west of the park and has just three large tented rooms. Little Ruckomechi itself offers game drives and walking safaris, but guests here can also take part in boat trips, canoeing and fishing at the neighbouring Ruckomechi Camp.

MATUSADONA NATIONAL PARK

The long-running safari operator African Bush Camps has taken over the management of Bumi Hills Safari Lodge, located in a private concession bordering Matusadona National Park. ABC is planning a complete refurbishment of the existing lodge, which we expect to reopen for the peak season in 2017. It will then form part of a great circuit with ABC’s other camps in Mana Pools and Hwange.

GONAREZHOU NATIONAL PARK

Until now, Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge, just outside Gonarezhou National Park, could be accessed only by a very lengthy road transfer from Bulawayo or Harare, or by light aircraft charter into the nearby Buffalo Range airstrip. The good news is that from April 2017, there will be two flights a week from Johannesburg to the airstrip, putting this beautiful, remote part of Zimbabwe firmly on the map for visitors.

This was another well organised and excellent safari from Expert Africa. Yet again their expertise and advice on where to go within Zimbabwe proved to be correct.

Mrs B, Belfast, July 2016

The original tents from Somalisa are earmarked for a simple new camp nearby. To be called Somalisa Expeditions, it will have much of the character and style of the original Somalisa camp, and should be opening in 2017.

HWANGE NATIONAL PARK

During 2015, Somalisa underwent serious renovations, converting the camp from a simple rustic property to one of the most luxurious and stylish camps in Hwange National Park. The tented rooms are huge, and have been decorated in the style of an old-world explorers’ camp, albeit with creature comforts such as a cast-iron wood-burning stove for cold winter nights.

The long-running safari operator African Bush Camps has taken over the management of Bumi Hills Safari Lodge, located in a private concession bordering Matusadona National Park. ABC is planning a complete refurbishment of the existing lodge, which we expect to reopen for the peak season in 2017. It will then form part of a great circuit with ABC’s other camps in Mana Pools and Hwange.
ZAMBIA

Consolidation seems to be the watchword in most of Zambia’s national parks and visitor areas, but 2017 will still see some important developments. New camps are expected to come on line in both the South Luangwa and Kafue national parks, while others will undergo significant refurbishment during the year. We’re particularly excited at the potential for the Bangweulu Wetlands, now under the management of African Parks.

SOUTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

Lion Camp will be closed during 2017 for extensive refurbishment, with a view to reopening at the start of the safari season in 2018. We look forward to seeing the latest version of this popular safari camp.

New to the South Luangwa is Three Rivers Camp, which is set to open in mid-2017 after a few delays. As a third offering from Kafunta Safaris, it will offer game drives and walking safaris in the remote southern corner of the park, and will form part of a safari loop with its sister camps, Kafunta River Lodge and Island Bush Camp.

KAFUE NATIONAL PARK

Both of Jeffery and McKeith Safaris’ camps will have received significant upgrades by the start of the 2017 safari season. Their main property, Musekese Camp, has changed its rooms from walk-in tents to rustic reed-and-thatch chalets, constructed from local materials. These rooms are more stylish and spacious, but maintain the rustic charm of the camp, and we are certain that the friendly atmosphere, great guiding, and overall safari experience will remain unchanged.

Musekese Mobile Camp will be experiencing a much more significant upgrade, changing from a set-departure camping trip to a more permanent camp. To be known as Ntemwa Busanga Camp, it will offer a simpler alternative to Musekese, in a different area of the park, at the southern edge of the Busanga Plains. With walk-in tents and en-suite bathrooms, it will have a more solid structure, and will be able to take bookings on an ad-hoc basis, rather than the set-departure trips of the old mobile camp.

LOWER ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK

Kasaka River Lodge will also be closing for extensive refurbishment in 2017, although its sister property Chongwe River Camp will remain open. We look forward to seeing the changes at Kasaka when it reopens in 2018.

NORTHERN ZAMBIA

The Bangweulu Wetlands in the far north of Zambia have always been one of the least-visited areas of the country. The good news, however, is that full management of the area was recently taken over by African Parks, and given their success in other parks on the continent – including Zambia’s Liuwa Plains – we anticipate that this will lead to considerable rejuvenation of the area. While the only practical place to stay in the wetlands, Shoebill Island Camp, is closed for renovation and possible relocation, it is scheduled to reopen in mid-2017, in time for the main season.

LIUWA PLAIN NATIONAL PARK

Having gone through several name changes, a new permanent camp is due to open in the remote Liuwa Plain National Park under the name of King Lewanika Lodge. Due for completion in early 2017, the plan is to have six luxury villas designed by the leading architects behind North Island in the Seychelles, and Mombo in Botswana. We will keep up to date as construction finishes, so call us for the latest information.

———

“We could have just booked directly ourselves but I think using Expert Africa really helped us to make the most of our short time in South Luangwa.”

Mr B, Stirlingshire, November 2016
MALAWI

Malawi is becoming ever more popular as a stand-alone destination. Once it was largely considered as an add-on to a safari in neighbouring Zambia, with Lake Malawi the main draw, but now, with established parks such as Majete and Liwonde, and the regenerated Nkhotakota, visitors are focusing on Malawi for their whole trip – combining a safari with a few days chilling out on the sandy lakeshore.

NKHOTAKOTA WILDLIFE RESERVE

In 2016, just a year after African Parks took over management of the pristine Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, they embarked on one of the largest elephant translocations ever attempted. In the first phase, 261 elephants were moved into the reserve, along with some 1,200 other animals, including sable, buffalo, waterbuck, kudu, impala and warthog. Then in 2017, there are plans to introduce a further 250 elephants.

Nkhotakota is a massive reserve, covering some 1,800 km². So to safeguard these first animals they are being kept within a 190km² fenced sanctuary. In time, it is planned to fence the whole reserve, with the work being carried out in phases, slowly extending the boundaries of the sanctuary each time.

We do not promote Nkhotakota as a game-prolific destination, not least as until the new arrivals have settled down, visitors will not be allowed to enter the sanctuary. What we can promise the reserve’s Tongole Wilderness Lodge, though, is unparalleled wilderness and tranquillity in which to relax and connect with nature – best done by drifting along the river, or exploring on foot.

MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique remains one of our most off-the-beaten-track beach destinations, with wonderfully remote lodges dotted the length of the country. Some offer incredible levels of luxury, while others remain low-key eco-lodges offering uncontrived cultural experiences.

During 2016 we have seen a few exciting upgrades and changes to existing lodges, though sadly we also saw the closure of a few others. We hope these closures are temporary, but at the time of writing we simply do not know.

BAZARUTO ARCHIPELAGO

We are sorry to announce that in 2016 the Pestana Bazaruto Lodge – once a favourite of ours for its low-key atmosphere and good value – was closed. With no further news since, we can only assume that it will remain closed for 2017.

More positively, the luxurious Azura Benguerra continues to go from strength to strength, and 2016 saw the opening of the Royal Beach Villas. These two huge new suites, each, covering an extraordinary 172m², are the lodge’s largest villas and also (we are told) their most private. Each has a spacious main bedroom and bathroom, a large adjoining lounge that can be converted into a second bedroom for children, a wide deck with outside seating, and a 10m infinity pool with a Jacuzzi. These new villas are a great option for a family, or a couple looking for real exclusivity and privacy.

NAMPULA PROVINCE

In early 2017, Coral Lodge 15.41 is changing ownership, though as we went to print the new owners had not been confirmed. As a result, no bookings were being taken at the end of 2016 for those wishing to travel after mid-January 2017, but do contact us for the latest details: there is every chance that we will be able to make reservations for later in 2017.

QUIRIMBAS ARCHIPELAGO

Matemo Island will remain closed in 2017, though there is a chance that work will start and the lodge might re-open in 2018. Medjumbe Island Resort, however, has undergone extensive refurbishment. We have in the past been sceptical about the high cost of this lodge in the context of the level of luxury it offered, but the interior now appears to be much smarter than before, and although we haven’t yet seen the upgrade, we are cautiously optimistic.
TANZANIA

Although 2016 wasn’t a year of major change in much of Tanzania, it did see several significant improvements for visitors, notably in Ruaha National Park and Zanzibar, with others in the pipeline for 2017.

Renowned for great game viewing and a real sense of wilderness, Ruaha has an exciting new lodge in hand, and old favourites have been refurbished. Meanwhile competition in the luxury top-end market on Zanzibar is increasing, with several brand-new lodges there, too. James, Richard, Lyndsey and Olivia visited every corner of Tanzania during 2016 and some of their discoveries are below.

RUAPA NATIONAL PARK

Kwihala has long been a favourite of Expert Africa travellers for its superb guiding. It provides luxury and comfort without compromising on the sense of wilderness. The six spacious en-suite tents, each with a flush toilet and hot bucket shower, are tastefully decorated with woven textiles and pottery vases. In 2016, Kwihala was relocated to a secluded valley on the edge of the Mwagusi River, to make way for the building of its grandiose sister, Jabali Ridge.

Due to open in September 2017, Jabali Ridge promises to be an exciting high-end option in Ruaha National Park. Owned and managed by the same team as Kwihala (see above) and several other high-quality safari camps across Tanzania, we expect it to have similarly excellent guiding and standards. The camp is being built on a rocky hill, or kopje, in a prime game-viewing area, offering commanding views over the park. The ten stylish rooms will be constructed of wood and natural materials and each will have a large veranda to optimise the views. There are plans to include an infinity pool, and Jabali will also be the only lodge in Ruaha to boast its own spa!

The last year has seen several positive changes for Kichaka Expeditions, a small mobile camp that has a reputation for offering some of the best walking safaris in Tanzania. Run by the charismatic Andrew ‘Moli’ Molinaro and his partner Noelle Herzog, it gives guests a truly wild bush experience, in some of the most remote areas of Ruaha. After flooding in 2016 washed away the original base camp, it was relocated to a new location on higher ground, with beautiful new tents. Kichaka have also brought in a highly experienced South African walking guide, Jacques, to assist Moli with the walking safaris. If like us you are a safari enthusiast, then Kichaka is well worth considering.

"Loved every minute, excellently organised by Expert Africa, all ran very, very smoothly. Just wish it hadn’t come to an end."
Ms P, South Yorkshire, Leicestershire, September 2016
Three villas are great for couples, while the other three can accommodate families or couples travelling together. Guests have two beautiful swimming pools to choose from, too: a large infinity pool with adjacent pool bar and a smaller saltwater pool closer to the beach. Friendly staff and excellent food and service give Qambani a welcoming, homely atmosphere – perfect for a secluded beach holiday on Zanzibar.

Another brand-new boutique hotel on the Michamvi Peninsula, Zawadi sits on a low coral cliff overlooking the Indian Ocean, with a pretty beach that forms a small cove. Its modern beach-house design combines understated elegance with a very laidback atmosphere. Strung out along the headland are nine spacious villas, all with impressive ocean views. The designer has used neutral tones throughout, incorporating woven rugs and rustic wooden sculptures to create a simple décor, whilst the modern amenities ensure a high level of luxury. Guests can lounge by the infinity pool or go snorkelling in the nearby Obá-Obá Lagoon, which has water even at low tide. Zawadi only accepts guests over the age of 16, so is ideal for couples or honeymooners looking for a sophisticated beach retreat.

Paje
White Sand Villas is a high-end beach resort that opened in 2014 near the vibrant town of Paje. We finally got the chance to visit White Sands this year and we are delighted to add it to our portfolio. It has a minimalist Scandinavian design, and with excellent service and facilities it fits well in to the luxury end of the market. The complex offers 11 private villas spread through expansive tropical gardens. Each of the sea-facing villas is split into a large en-suite bedroom and a separate lounge and dining area, and has its own swimming pool and deck area. The one-bedroom villas lead directly on to the beach whereas the two-bedroom villas are ideal for families. You can relax and unwind in the tranquil spa, or turn up the tempo at the onsite kitesurfing and watersports centre.

Stone Town
New to us in 2016, Park Hyatt Zanzibar is one of the largest, and certainly the highest-end, properties in Stone Town. Situated on the seafront and just a stone’s throw from the town centre, it provides a relaxed retreat away from the hustle and bustle of the crowded alleyways of Stone Town. Set across two neighbouring buildings, the older Mambo Msige and the new, purpose-built Zamani Residence, the hotel combines traditional 17th-century Zanzibari design with 21st-century mods. As part of the Park Hyatt chain of hotels it benefits from consistently high standards, but it lacks the charm and personality of some of the smaller boutique guesthouses in Stone Town.

We researched Stone Town in even greater depth – discovering some great workshops, from Tingatinga painting to batik-making, plus music courses and engaging cookery lessons focusing on local spices. Best of all, we identified several amazing guides: well-informed Zanzibaris offer private walking tours. We were bowled over by their local knowledge, insights and sheer eloquence.

MAFIA ARCHIPELAGO

In April 2016 Thanda Private Island opened for the first time. It’s situated about 28km off the Tanzanian coast and 13km north of Mafia Island and offers an opulent desert island experience. The five-bedroom villa caters to only one group at a time who will be well looked after by private butlers and chefs. Inside the villa amenities include a cinema; marine aquarium; white grand piano and an air-conditioned gym. Outside the activities are very well provided for too, with several different boats, excellent diving kit for the many unexplored reefs in the area, plus kayaks, stand-up paddle boards, wake-boards, tubes and water ski equipment. The chef is superb, and produces stylish and high quality food. So if you’re looking for a luxurious, exclusive beach getaway for a group of 8-14 adults, plus children, then Thanda Island hard to beat!

As well as superb diving and snorkeling, we’ve two great new activities in this archipelago – both with impeccable conservation credentials. Turtles have been nesting here for 150 million years, but only recently have they been closely monitored by a local village-run project. Now the hatching date of each safeguarded nest is predicted precisely, giving our travellers a chance to witness this spine-tingling spectacle. We’ve also linked up with a highly responsible, local operation which, between about October and March, offers our travellers the chance to observe whale sharks near the surface with a marine biologist, and even snorkel with them.
KENYA

With its magnificent scenery and unparalleled wildlife riches, Kenya is one of the best countries in Africa to experience the continent’s awe-inspiring megafauna. Kenya had a good year in 2016 and all the signs are that 2017 will be even better. Lower park fees, improved roads and airports, and thriving reserves and conservancies are all contributing to the rebirth of safaris in Kenya. However, the days of charter flights and mass tourism have not returned, which is all to the good from the visitor’s viewpoint.

James stayed at some of our favourite camps and lodges in 2016 and saw others for the first time. Here’s a word in your ear about his findings and other Kenyan news on our radar.

MAASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE

The newest addition to our Kenya programme is the awe-inspiring Angama Mara Lodge. Built by Steve and Nicky Fitzgerald, who have over 30 years’ experience of creating some of the finest safari lodges in Africa from their time at &Beyond, it’s a high-end, contemporary, retreat with a unique avant-garde design. Angama is made up of two identical self-contained camps, each with its own separate dining and lounge tents, and with 15 tented suites set along the rim of the Siria-Oloololo Escarpment, featuring stunning views over the Mara Triangle. It’s perfect for honeymooners with deep pockets who want top-quality food and service and all the comforts of a five-star hotel.

Inside the national reserve itself, the very reputable and well-located Governors’ camps are enjoying a major refit in 2017, courtesy of new partners Wilderness Safaris. Governors’ Camp is one of the oldest camps in the Mara and has one of the best locations, on a forested meander of the Mara River, next to Musiara Marsh, where the BBC’s Big Cat Diary was filmed. Close to the original Governors’ are the slightly more upmarket sister properties of Little Governors’ and Governors’ Il Moran. All three camps have benefited from refurbished tents and the rolling out of a new fleet of safari vehicles.

LAIKIPIA CONSERVANCIES

In 2016 we returned to the wild and thinly populated Laikipia region, north-west of Mount Kenya. Of several camps here that offer high-quality, responsible and low-footprint wildlife experiences, we were particularly impressed by the remote and informal Laikipia Wilderness. Its owner-managers have a delightfully relaxed and enthusiastic approach, and the activities menu always includes the chance to walk with wild dogs. There are few places in Africa that are better for seeing these engaging, photogenic hunters.

COAST

Kenya’s coast is as beautiful as ever, and the beaches south of Mombasa, close to the Tanzanian border, are quite the equal of Zanzibar. Diani Beach is the busiest area, with some great-value options like Diani Blue and The Sands at Nomad. Off the tarmac further south, hedonists gravitate to the outstanding privacy, excellent meals and chilled atmosphere at Kinondo Kwetu and Msambweni Beach House, or the sleek luxury at Saruni Ocean.

THE FAR NORTH

Desert-like Northern Kenya is for adventurers, and the area around Lake Turkana offers outstanding cultural and scenic rewards, with its lunar landscapes and vast, briny lake. We love putting together private road safaris up here, passing through the Samburu cowboy town of Maralal and maybe spending time at gorgeous Desert Rose on sacred Mount Nyiru or down at Oasis Lodge on the shore of Lake Turkana. Ask us for a verbal tour of this unique region.

SAMBURU

The semi-arid Samburu National Reserve and its neighbouring conservancies have long been Kenya favourites, with excellent elephant-watching and plenty of lions and leopards. Now, the superb Saruni Samburu Lodge has spawned a unique walking-with-rhinos offshoot in the shape of Saruni Rhino, in the Sera Conservancy north of Samburu National Reserve. We can’t wait to experience this innovative, rugged combination of cutting-edge conservation and adventure safari. See you there in 2017!