

SLEEPING UNDER CANVAS



It's not what it used to be!

by David Skillan

Most of us have happy memories of camping as kids—sharing fireside meals with family and friends, enjoying singalongs, and roasting potatoes and marshmallows over an open fire, followed by crawling into a too-small tent and fighting with the other kids over who had to sleep in the middle.

Some people are even nostalgic for those long-gone days when, to escape extremes of cold, wind, sun, or rain, trappers and mountain guides would rig up makeshift shelters with nothing but branches and tarpaulins.

Nowadays, people camp out in style. Today's tents are different from those of years past, particularly in Africa, where they've really perfected the art of camping. Today's tents come in all shapes and sizes, including Mongolian-style yurts, which are gaining in popularity. The classic peaked-roof tent was introduced in the 1930s and has been continuously improved.

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On my African safaris, I notice that people of all ages get excited at the prospect of spending a night under canvas, and positively childlike about sleeping under mosquito netting for the first time. They love being closer to nature, with only canvas separating them from the elements. The sounds of the African bush are amplified when you sleep under canvas, sounding closer and clearer. This can be particularly exciting at night when a leopard coughs or a lion growls nearby.

The fashion of camping comfortably in the bush started with Hemingway-style hunting safaris in Kenya, where the tents were moved as the hunters followed the game. The design and manufacture of tents for commercial use has since evolved to accommodate today's tourists and safari-goers. Tents are now permanently sited centres of luxury—not just in Africa, but in many parts of the world.

No matter where you go in Africa—Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia, Uganda, Namibia—odds are, you'll spend at least one night in a tent in the bush. The tents are spacious and comfortable. You no longer have to stoop or crawl on all fours to enter.

Today's tents are walk-in rooms with zip-up door flaps specially made to outwit monkeys and bears. They have all the comforts of home, and most of the facilities you'd find in fine hotel rooms, including bathrooms, showers, and even desks where you can write your journal and postcards. Solar power provides hot water and lighting.

The beds are very comfortable. On cold nights, you may even find that a caring staff member has placed a hot water bottle under the blankets.

At first glance, some tents look flimsy, but when you pause to consider where you are—in the African bush, hundreds of miles from civilization—they become not only attractive and comfortable, but downright cozy. Even romantic.

You'll see several types of tents in Africa. The peculiar square ones in the Kalahari desert (centre right), for example, have viewing decks out front and sleeping decks up top. You can sit on the front deck and focus your binoculars on the vast plain before you, lie on the upper deck and study the star-filled sky, and even sleep under the stars, if you wish.

Most commercial tent enterprises are part of permanent sites referred to as tented camps. They come with all the amenities of game lodges and hotels, including swimming pools, dining rooms, and bars, usually connected by well-defined pathways or wooden walkways.

They're a huge step up from the old-style camping many of us remember. Camping these days can be a luxurious getaway as well as a healthy fresh-air experience in the romantic African bush. ➔



For information about David Skillan's African safaris, please visit www.skillansafaris.com/david-skillan-tours.html.