



FAMILY TRAVEL

How We Spent Our Family Vacation: A Nine-Day Safari in Botswana

Where a family of seven relaxed in hammocks, flew over the Delta, and exhilarated in thrilling wildlife encounters.

BY JORDI LIPPE-MCGRAW

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How We Spent Our Family Vacation is a new column that unpacks a single trip down to the cost, from the point of view of families who love to travel.

The Furner family—Sarah, her husband Mateo, and their five kids, Ethan (18), Ella (16), Zadian (14), Niko (12), and Lulu (8)—had always been globe-trotters, but this safari in Botswana was something entirely different. For a family who had called Asia, Europe, and the US home, thanks to Mateo's career in the Swiss perfume industry, this wasn't about another city to explore or a culture to immerse themselves in. This was about stepping away from their busy lives in Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania, and diving headfirst into the wilderness.

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"We're used to adapting to new places," Sarah says, "but there's nothing like a safari. You're truly at nature's mercy." This journey was a chance to create one more family

memory before their eldest left for college. What unfolded over nine unforgettable days was a mix of wildlife encounters, luxury, and lessons they'll carry forever.

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Inspiration behind the trip

Sarah and her husband visited Botswana for their 40th birthdays and promised to return with their kids when the time was right. When it was just the two of them, the experience was social, filled with group dinners and new friendships that they still maintain. As a family, however, they took a more private approach, choosing accommodations where they didn't cross paths much with other safari-goers. The focus was entirely on family time.

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Yes, the family wanted to see the animals. But they also wanted a way to celebrate a family milestone. Their eldest, Ethan, was about to embark on a two-year humanitarian church mission, meaning this wasn't just a regular send-off before college; it would be years before they could take another full family vacation. "We wanted this to be something we'd always remember together," Sarah says. And with that, the planning began.

Leave the planning to the experts

Coordinating a safari for seven sounds daunting, but the Furners had Philippe, a South African guide launching his own safari company, [Power Down](#), on their side. "Philippe's knowledge made the trip seamless," Sarah says. He handled everything—from the logistics of inter-camp flights to choosing family-friendly accommodations—so the Furners could simply enjoy the adventure.

They started with a night in Johannesburg before heading to the [Royal Livingstone Hotel](#) by [Anantara](#) in Zambia where hammocks overlook the Zambezi River.

From there, the safari unfolded in stages. Two nights at [Chobe Bush Lodge](#) brought the family face-to-face with elephants, hippos, and buffalo during game drives and river cruises. The lodge's spacious setting gave the kids room to roam, and the river activities were a major highlight.

Next, the family ventured to [Little Machaba Camp](#) in the Khwai Conservancy, staying in luxury tents surrounded by the Okavango Delta. Here, their guides introduced them to animal tracking, and the kids couldn't get enough of spotting predators and watching giraffes graze just feet away.

The most adventurous part of the journey was two nights of bush camping in [Moremi](#)

Game Reserve. Under a canopy of stars, the Furners slept in dome tents and woke to the sounds of the wilderness coming alive. Philipp and his co-founder, Thabo, engaged the kids by letting them help plan the day's routes and learn survival skills.

The final stop was two nights at **Lebala Camp** in the Kwando Concession, blending thrilling game drives with spacious, open landscapes. The remote setting meant incredible wildlife sightings, and the kids loved watching elephants from the pool deck.

These spots had a ton of space, activities and engaged guides which made them **ideal for kids**. Thabo, in particular, was a standout, acting like an older brother to the children. His passion for conservation and work with underprivileged kids back home left a lasting impression. "Kids were involved in everything, from looking at maps and helping plan the day to learning survival techniques," Sarah says. The variety of transportation methods, from canoes and boats to jeeps and tiny airplanes, turned the entire experience into a grand adventure with the perfect balance of relaxation.



At Little Machaba Camp, luxury tents are surrounded by the Okavango Delta. *Andrew Howard/Machaba Safaris*



Little Machaba Camp guides taught various animal tracking skills, a highlight for the kids. *Andrew Howard/Machaba Safaris*

Balance adventure with comfort

Whether soaring above the **Okavango Delta** in a tiny plane or sipping tea while elephants wandered nearby, the Furners found so much charm in Botswana.

Sarah reveled in the quiet magic of game drives, saying, "Feeling the wind on my face and seeing the world so raw and untouched was incredible." For Mateo, the **camping**—despite his initial hesitations—became a highlight. "Listening to hyenas circle our tents was both nerve-racking and exhilarating," he says.

For the kids, each moment brought something unforgettable. Ethan, 18, ranked Botswana among his top three destinations out of the 60-plus countries he's visited, calling the sunsets and star-filled skies "breathtaking." Ella, 16, loved riding on the safari vehicle's roof at golden hour, sipping rooibos tea and soaking in the views. Zadian, 14, was mesmerized by a pride of lions devouring a fresh kill, saying, "It was fascinating to be so close to something so wild."

Niko, 12, couldn't learn enough about animal tracking from the guides. "They showed us how to read the ground like a storybook," he says. And for Lulu, 8, the wild dog puppies stole the show. "They were so cute," she says. "They played just like our dog at home."

Early mornings? Bring coffee...and layers

Game drives kick off around 5 a.m., a tough sell for any non-morning person. "If your kids aren't early risers, you're going to need a solid pep talk... and coffee," Sarah jokes. But the pre-dawn starts came with rewards: crisp, cool air, quiet landscapes, and the chance to spot animals at their most active.

Mornings began by the fire with porridge and tea before heading out for the first game drive of the day. Afterward, the family tucked into hearty breakfasts back at camp. Afternoons offered a chance to relax before evening drives, which often ended with sundowners—mocktails for the kids and local drinks for the adults. Thoughtful touches like hot water bottles, fondly nicknamed "bush babies," kept everyone warm during the cool nights.



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Rolling with the unexpected

Despite the careful planning, not everything went smoothly—but those hiccups became part of the story. One notable mix-up involved an overbooking issue at one of their planned camps. The family's disappointment quickly turned into delight when they were unexpectedly upgraded to a [top-tier luxury camp](#). The experience included clawfoot bathtubs, gourmet meals, and even afternoon tea served on fine china. "It was such a surprise," Sarah says. "We went from [bush camping](#) one night to feeling like royalty the next. The kids couldn't believe the contrast."

Then there was Mateo's lost phone. During a photo stop near the river, it slipped out unnoticed. "We thought it was gone forever," Sarah recalls. But their guide, Jinxi, found it days later and went above and beyond to return it. He radioed other guides and eventually handed it off to an American couple who carried it back to the US. When the family finally got the phone back, they felt both grateful and amazed by the kindness of strangers.

Equipment they couldn't do without

A good [pair of binoculars](#) made a world of difference, allowing them to appreciate the finer details of a bird's intricate plumage or catch a glimpse of elusive leopard cubs hidden in the brush. While some travelers bring professional cameras with zoom lenses, the family found it more rewarding to stay present and soak in the moment rather than worry about getting the perfect shot. Photography safaris with expert guides might be something they explore on a future trip. A physical book, rather than an e-reader, was also a must-have, offering the perfect escape during the midday lull when even the wildlife took a siesta.



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Would do differently

Next time, the family might combine a safari with city or beach destinations, balancing the intensity of game drives with time to relax. "Maybe four or five days of safari, then sometime in a city like [Cape Town](#), and a few days at a beach like [Zanzibar](#)," Sarah says.

The bottom line

Group size: Seven (two adults, five kids)

Days: Nine

Safari cost: \$3,500 per person x 7 = \$24,500 (includes accommodations, meals, guides, transportation by vehicle, boat, and inter-camp flights)

Flights: \$900 per person (Geneva to Botswana via Johannesburg). Mateo's company covers the family's home leave to Switzerland each summer, so they only needed to book flights from Geneva to Botswana.

Additional stays: Two nights at the Royal Livingstone Hotel (friends and family discount) and one night in Johannesburg

Total cost: Approximately \$30,905

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Jordi Lippe-McGraw is a contributing writer for *Condé Nast Traveler*. As a lifestyle reporter/editor for almost a decade, she's written for various outlets including the *New York Post*, *Travel+Leisure*, and *Ocean Drive*, and appeared on TODAY, MSNBC, and E! for her expertise. In addition to being a travel writer, ... [Read more](#)

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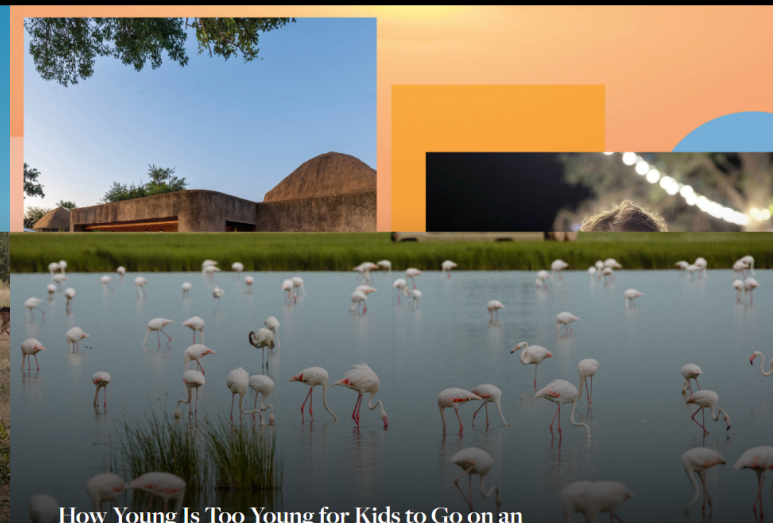
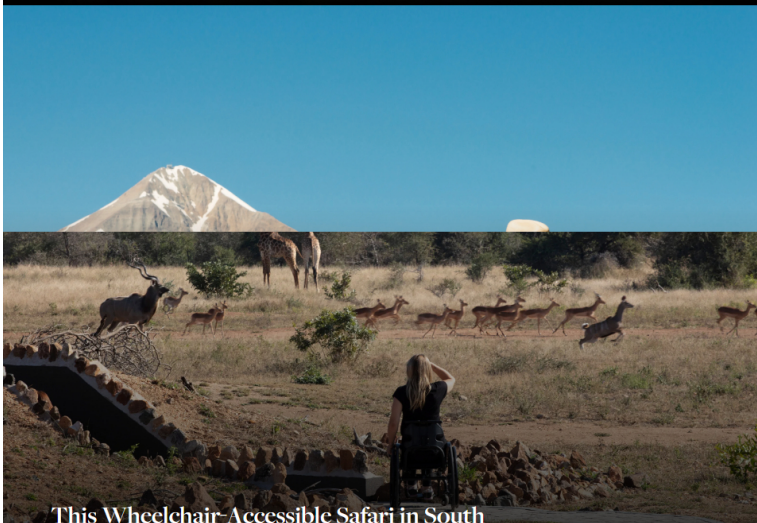
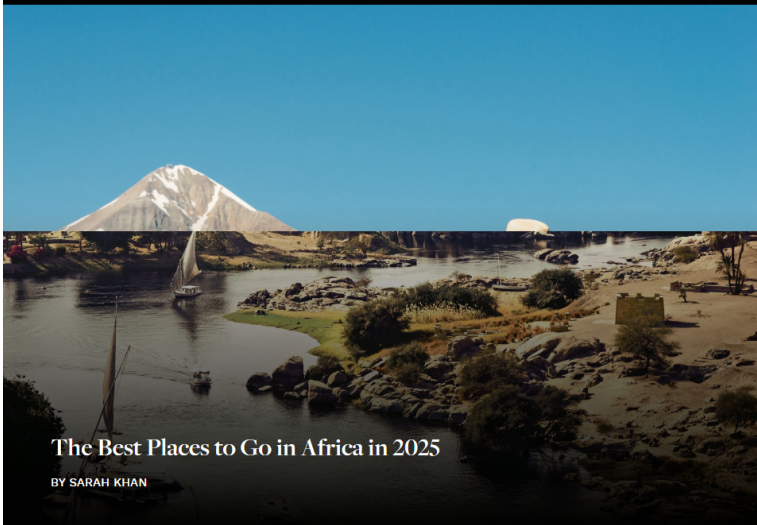
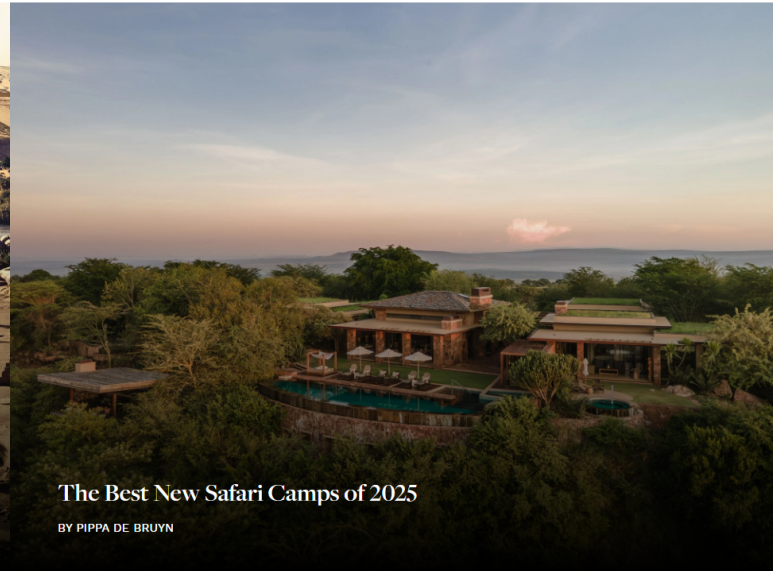
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