

# SHAKE THEM BONES

THE OWNER OF THIS LODGE ONCE KITE-SKIED TO ANTARCTICA, COLLECTS MILITARY ROCKETS, AND WAS ARRESTED 10 TIMES FOR SPEEDING IN THE GUMBALL RALLY ACROSS AMERICA. NOW HIS ALL-ADVENTURE DEN IN SOUTH AFRICA CAN BE TAKEN OVER FOR CRAZY HIJINKS OF YOUR OWN

BY LISA GRAINGER. PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG COX



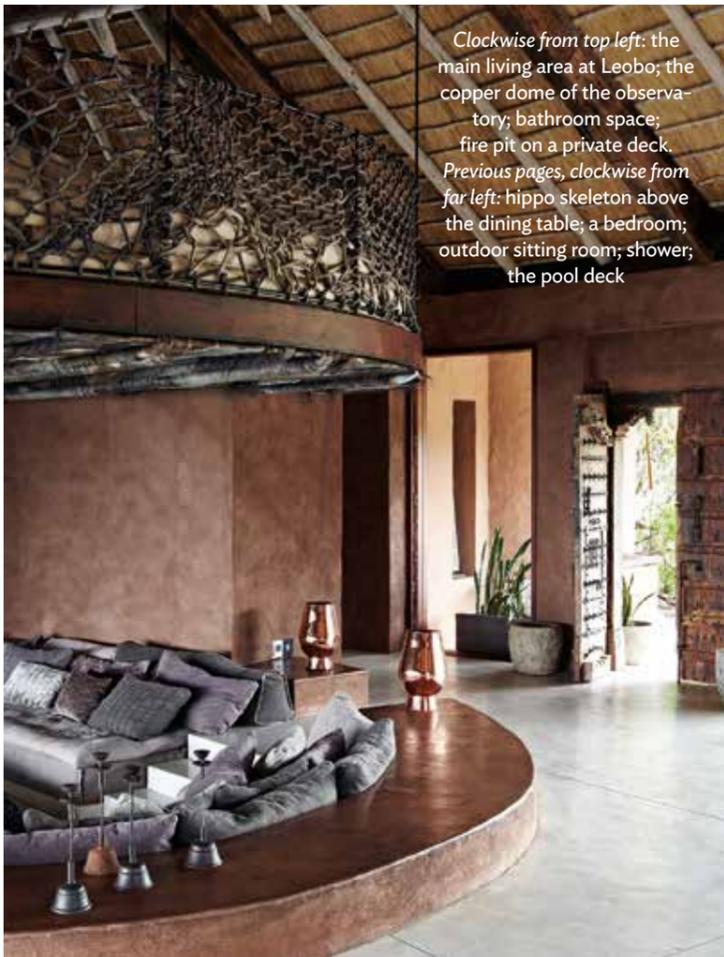
WAY OF LIFE



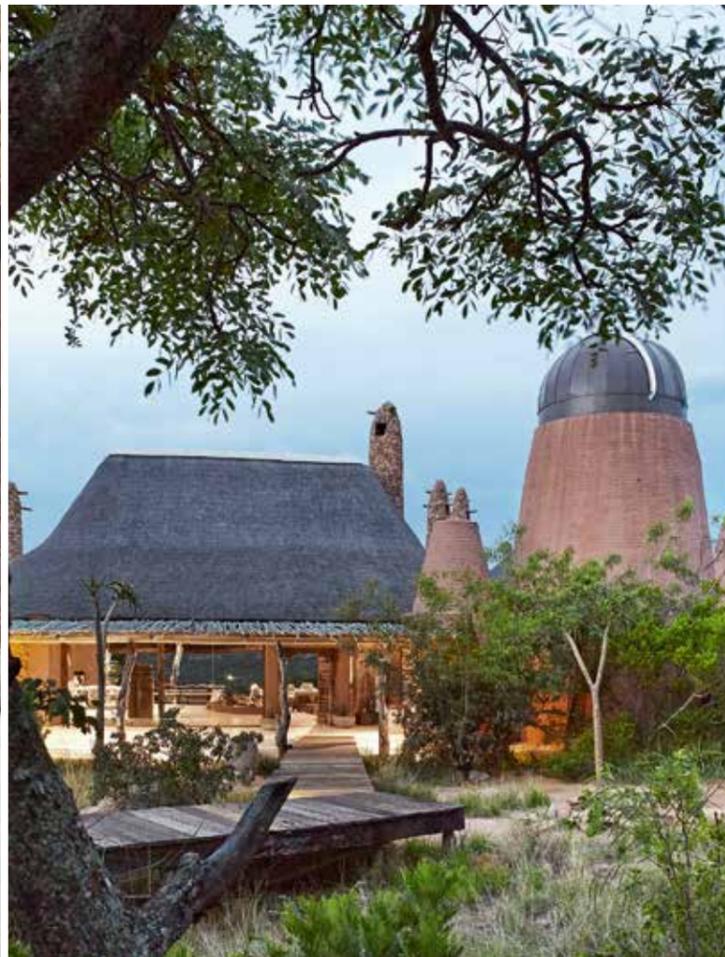
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRODUCTION: SVEN ALBERDING



November 2017 Condé Nast Traveller 000



Clockwise from top left: the main living area at Leobo; the copper dome of the observatory; bathroom space; fire pit on a private deck. Previous pages, clockwise from far left: hippo skeleton above the dining table; a bedroom; outdoor sitting room; shower; the pool deck



HAVING MARRIED ON NORTH ISLAND in the Seychelles, British polar adventurer and tech millionaire Rory Sweet and his wife Lizzy knew precisely which architects they wanted to create their home in the Limpopo bush, three hours' north of Johannesburg. The star South African duo Lesley Carstens and Silvio Rech – responsible not only for North Island's interiors, but those at Miavana in Madagascar, Angama Mara in Kenya and Jao Camp in Botswana – were tasked with an ultra-stylish but liveable design. The result is part tactile, earthy hideaway and part high-octane adventure playground. The Observatory Bush Villa at Leobo is deeply private (within 20,000 acres of pristine reserve), built on the top of a hill facing west to capture the setting sun, with four-poster beds, egg-shaped baths and open-air showers. A place where – with its organic shapes, curving waxed-mud walls and starlit rooftop pool – you could hunker down and lose your heart. Or bring a whole bunch of your closest friends and dance your desert boots off.

'People say all the time they've had more fun here than anywhere else,' says Sweet. 'As far as I'm concerned: that's what holidays are about. There are no rules. So, everyone feels liberated. They can do whatever they want.' Which clearly, in Sweet's case, is to dress up. In the hallway, there's a hat rack of wigs and a couple of silver spacesuits to step into. Climb the twisting stairs

non-threatening giraffe, zebra and antelope. Which means guests are free to roam wherever they like during the day. And there is virtually no light pollution. At night, lying on the enormous deck, floating in the rooftop hot tub beside the imposing Angus Taylor sculpture or sitting round the fire pit just staring at the thick, glittering band of the Milky Way, it's not unusual to be interrupted by the slow blink of a satellite or the fizzing tail of a shooting star.

But Sweet doesn't sit around much. With half a dozen children aged between one and 20, he and Lizzy are kept busy during March and November, when they decamp to Leobo. The family are all keen riders, and own eight local Boerperd horses on which they cross the 190 miles of tracks on their land. There are also mountain bikes on which to whizz through the scrub and a range on which to practise clay-pigeon shooting. One serious adrenalin junkie was set up to be trained by and taken out on patrol with a former SAS combat specialist.

Not everyone has quite the same zest for action as Leobo's owners. After fishing at the small dam (where guests can play tug-of-war with a crocodile, using a rope baited with a chicken), exploring the ruins of a post-Stone Age citadel and sipping cocktails on the deck, I was happy just to pad about the house, to admire their collections (which include a wallet made from human

### THE OWNER LOVES HELI-PAINTBALLING, WHERE GUESTS ON QUADBIKES TRY TO AVOID BEING SPLATTERED BY SHOOTERS FLYING ABOVE THEM IN A CHOPPER

to the mezzanine sitting room, and you find a trunk of onesies to borrow for chilly nights, alongside a haphazard collection of fantastical outfits left by previous merrymakers. And then there are the boys' toys.

Back in his Wiltshire home, Sweet's playthings include an unused Russian HFL Kholod rocket which he bought at auction because 'it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen and flew 5,000 miles an hour'. In Leobo his kit is slightly more useful: Polaris off-road vehicles, 700cc quad bikes, zip wires and rifles of all sizes. He also has access to the ultimate bush toy: a helicopter. 'Whenever we're here, we have it on standby,' he says. 'Some days we'll fly to the top of a mountain for sundowners, on others we'll go to a river, land in a narrow canyon and spend the afternoon fly fishing, swimming and picnicking. Some people skydive from it – I don't because I have six kids, and it's pretty scary up at 12,000ft. But some people go for that. An 11-year-old tried it last time.'

What he loves best after heli-paintballing (people on quad bikes try to avoid being splattered by shooters above them in the chopper), is spending hours in his observatory, which is equipped with two NASA-grade telescopes. 'They're incredible,' he says. 'One is a 20-inch Dall-Kirkham for gazing at stars, planets and nebulae – I've seen the shadows on Saturn from the rings, and every detail of the Moon.' The other is an eight-inch hydrogen-alpha scope for looking at the sun, 'so you can see solar flares'. Best of all, you can type into a computer the star you want to see, and the telescope will swing round, find it, and focus in.

Even without the telescope, in this part of the world the stars seem to hang just above you. The Waterberg area is not a Big Five safari destination. It's made up of a patchwork of farms, hunting concessions and game reserves stocked with

skin, a monk's skull and sharks' jaws), and to swim in the cliffside pool to a soundtrack of twittering birds.

As at Angama Mara and Jao Camp, where Carstens and Rech used stone, thatch and sinuous pieces of tree-trunk to create what they call their 'evolved Afrocentric style', the house feels distinctly African. The architecture, Rech says, reflects the composition of a local homestead, 'a collection of cells cobbled together to make a home in which the materials and refined detailing stand out'.

In Leobo it's clear that each detail has been considered, refined and considered again, to allow its simplicity to sing – whether that's the polished earthen walls and the exotic old Zanzibar doors, aged by the sun and sea air, or the hand-beaten copper lights and the piles of linen cushions that reflect the silvery bark outside. It's a house that is deeply rooted in the Bushveld landscape. But there are quirky touches too: the chandelier above the dining table made of a full hippopotamus skeleton. The eclectic African art, including an AK-47 bedecked in flowers. The ceiling covered in hand-stitched wildebeest skins. The semi-circular banquette that looks like it's come straight out of *Austin Powers*. And the triple-bunk children's room painted with a giant frog sticking out its tongue. Yes, you can come here to play but you can also just press pause: fill your lungs with air scented with leaves and dust and sun-baked grass, eat slow, mezze-style lunches or smoky pig-spit barbecues in the bush, and watch lightning split the thunderously black African skies.

The Observatory Bush Villa at Leobo Private Reserve, which sleeps six adults and four children, costs from about £6,500 a night (the adjoining Leobo Lodge has eight cottages that can also be booked) through Aardvark Safaris (+44 20 8150 7216; aardvarksafaris.co.uk)