

Los Angeles  
Daily News




**2 remain » Michigan to take on Villanova in the NCAA championship game.** Sports

Happy Easter



Local.  
News.  
Matters.

Los Angeles Daily News

TODAY	MON.	TUE.
 H: 71 L: 50	 H: 70 L: 48	 H: 74 L: 52

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# TRAVEL

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## BOTSWANA



Doug and Sandi Groves of Sanctuary Retreats walk with the elephants they look after in Botswana.

*Play with*  
**pachyderms**



**I**n Botswana, the most elephant-populated country on the planet, I am trekking through lion country when suddenly from behind, a pachyderm's elongated trunk — strong enough to knock down a tree — gently lands on my shoulder. Well, hello there.

"She's been awfully clingy and needy," explains Sandi Groves, the motherly companion of snout-draping Morula. All morning, far from human civilization, I have been wandering alongside massive Morula and 5-ton bull Jabu, both semi-habituated elephants rescued as traumatized orphans by Sandi and husband Doug. The unique quartet has ruggedly lived together in the bush for more than 25 years.

Mainly from safari 4x4s, I've observed dozens of majestic wild elephants during my extraordinary weeklong adventure, staying at three luxury Sanctuary Retreats camps ([sanctuaryretreats.com](http://sanctuaryretreats.com)) in Botswana. But this is out-of-this-world amazing: I'm actually a herd mate on a typical day of foraging. My heart flutters when Morula puts her trunk in my palm to lead her through the scrubby savanna; she frequently stops and stretches up her gray snorkel to rip tasty jackalberry leaves off high branches. I humbly stand under the gleaming tusks of towering Jabu before he inadvertently blasts me with dust he sprays to cool himself off. I hug their column-thick legs, touch their leathery, hair-pricked skin, and notice that their boulder-sized, spongy feet barely make noise when they walk. This is no casual stroll in the park, though — Doug points out fresh lion tracks and we repeatedly hear wild elephants trumpeting nearby. ("They sound upset about something," Sandi says.)

I get this opportunity because Sanctuary Retreats has long partnered with the Groveses and their charity experience, Living With Elephants, which educates people about the extremely social, intelligent and endangered species. Tourists who want to frolic with the floppy-eared duo must be staying at Sanctuary Baines' or Stanley's camps, both remotely located on a 260,000-acre private concession in the UNESCO-listed Okavango Delta. A day earlier, I arrive via a seven-seater plane that dodges warthogs on the dirt airstrip; from there, it's 45 minutes in a bouncy 4x4 through an animal kingdom to eco-enchanting Baines', constructed with 150,000 recycled beverage cans that have been plastered over and that Sanctuary paid locals to collect.

There are only five guest bungalows, each perched on an elevated platform over a reed-swathed floodplain (look, out my window, giraffes!) and connected by Tom Sawyer-like suspension bridges.

One evening, after a lengthy game drive, I return to find, surprise! A foaming bubble bath under the stars awaits on my balcony. Later, my four-poster, mosquito-netted bed is pushed outside on my deck so I can sleep under the shimmering full

moon. Lying awake, I listen to the freakish, stereophonic grunts, snorts and huffs of fighting hippos in the adjacent lily-dotted lagoon and then — yikes — one lumbers through the grass right below my bed.

Unlike elsewhere in Africa — where ruthless poaching is rampant — small, conservation-focused Botswana is considered a safer haven for elephants and rhinos, largely due to the government's hunting ban and "shoot on sight" policy against poachers.

In Africa, it's estimated that poachers slaughter nearly 100 elephants every day — around 35,000 a year — for ivory tusks, used to create trinkets and carved figurines. Of the 350,000 African elephants remaining, a third are in Botswana.

Jabu is 31; Morula, 41. When he was a nursing 1-year-old, Jabu's mother and entire herd were killed in a government culling operation in South Africa. He and a female culling survivor, Thembi, went to live on a game farm and were adopted at age 2 by the Groveses, both zoologists who had been caring for them. Sadly, Thembi died of colic last year.

Morula, a Zimbabwe culling orphan, at one point was a chained-up, malnourished pet on a family farm.

Later, after showing aggressive behavior at a game park, she was doomed to be shot at a staged hunt when the Groveses adopted her. She was 17.

Sandi recalls how Morula would angrily smash her head into trees when they got her; this day, the long-lashed giant plants snuffling kisses on my cheek. During our post-walk picnic, Morula humorously moseys over to a makeshift bar set up by Sanctuary employees, her swinging trunk just skirting a wine bottle. "She's like a toddler who needs attention," Sandi says, smiling.

I elephant-embed midway through my seven-day journey, which was perfectly planned by safari outfitter Travel Beyond ([travelbeyond.com](http://travelbeyond.com)). I quickly get why Sanctuary, which is affiliated with luxury tour company Abercrombie & Kent, is lauded for stellar hospitality (the beaming staff members greet you singing in their native language), delicious cuisine and hyperintuitive safari guides.

My first stop is Sanctuary Chobe Chilwero, where action-packed game drives begin with a pride of seven bone-crunching lions tearing apart a freshly caught buffalo.

At my final destination, Sanctuary's safari-swank Chief's Camp, we spot four rhinos in the wild, all flown here from poacher-plagued countries. Guests can learn how two Sanctuary conservation officers keep tabs on the roaming mammals, who have GPS anklets and microchips in their horns to deter poachers.

Later on, I'm taking a dip in Chief's swimming pool when a pachyderm parades by. Who would've imagined that?

But then, I never dreamed I would walk with elephants.

## BOUTIQUE ECOTOURISM GOES HAND-IN-TRUNK WITH CONSERVATION IN A WILDLIFE HAVEN DEEP IN THE AFRICAN BUSH



SANCTUARY RETREATS

At Sanctuary Baines' Camp, you can sleep outdoors amid the sounds of the forest.



A white rhino, whose horn was cut off by conservationists to deter poachers, was relocated to a reserve near Chief's Camp.



Two big cats share a tactile moment after a meal of zebra in the Okavango Delta's Moremi Game Reserve.

### IF YOU GO

#### The lodges:

I stayed at Sanctuary Chobe Chilwero, Sanctuary Baines' and the flagship Chief's Camp, all wonderfully different. Sanctuary Retreats operates 17 boutique safari camps throughout Africa; guests often combine them on trips. [Sanctuaryretreats.com](http://Sanctuaryretreats.com).

#### The planner:

Safari outfitter Travel Beyond and its enthused Botswana expert arranged my terrific itinerary that entailed planes, a helicopter and a mokoro dugout canoe. All went off without a hitch. [Travelbeyond.com](http://Travelbeyond.com)