

Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report[®]

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TRAVELING THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF TRULY ENCHANTING PLACES



2016 GRAND AWARDS

HIDEAWAY OF THE YEAR

Song Saa, Cambodia

COURTESY SONG SAA

A 35-minute speedboat ride from Sihanoukville on Cambodia's west coast, Song Saa lies in the pristine Koh Rong archipelago. Its name means "The Sweethearts" in Khmer, a reference to the paired islets, Koh Ouen and Koh Bong, that comprise the resort. The exquisite beauty of the setting inspired an Australian couple who were sailing through the islands to construct the hotel. Their brainchild, with its 27 villas, opened in early 2012.

A member of staff escorted us along a sand pathway to our 2,475-square-foot Ocean View Villa. With soaring ceilings, its main room displayed a skillful combination of woods and fabrics. Local art helped to create an air of authenticity. My favorite example was a framed aggregation of faded planks salvaged from area fishing boats. A few steps beyond the large four-poster bed, a sunken seating area opened onto a wooden deck and a private infinity pool. There are two other villa categories at Song Saa: 11 Jungle Villas nestled on the central hill afford views of the surrounding

islands and waters, while eight Overwater Villas enable guests to step directly into the ocean from private balconies.

Although in-villa dining is an attractive option, we loved going to *Vista*, set just off the shoreline, where we enjoyed dishes such as spring rolls with local crab and fresh vegetables, and marinated chicken breast with a mint-cream sauce and couscous. The culinary highlight of our stay, however, was a Khmer feast, which included superb beef lok lak, stir-fried chicken with ginger and spring onion, and prawns with Kampot pepper.

Although there is no centralized spa facility, outdoor treatment salas are scattered through the rain forest and along the ocean shore. Yoga and meditation are also available. Activities include kayaking, rain forest tours guided by a member of the resort's Conservation Team and snorkeling trips through nearby coral gardens led by a marine biologist. The atmosphere of Song Saa is blissfully relaxing and otherworldly. This is a truly exceptional hideaway.

Each year, we have the pleasure of recalling our travel experiences over the past 12 months and singling out a number of particularly memorable hotels and resorts. To be considered for our annual awards, properties must be relatively small in size, possess strong individual personalities, offer relaxing atmospheres and demonstrate a consistent devotion to personal service.

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AFRICA



SOUTH PACIFIC

Singita Pamushana MALILANGWE WILDLIFE RESERVE, ZIMBABWE

For the past two decades, Singita properties in South Africa and Tanzania have set the standard for luxury wildlife lodges. Only one member of the portfolio has remained relatively obscure: Singita Pamushana Lodge in Zimbabwe. Located in the remote southeastern corner of the country, it is surrounded by the 130,000-acre private Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve, a sanctuary for endangered species.

The main lodge at Singita Pamushana is built of stone in a style that evokes Great Zimbabwe, capital of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe from the 11th to the 15th centuries, and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Passing through a conical entrance tower, we emerged onto a wide wooden deck with a cobalt-blue free-form pool and a serene backdrop of a glassy lake and green wooded hills. The lodge's seven air-conditioned suites are on a gentle slope and are surrounded by huge baobab trees and massive boulders. Inside, we found a sizeable lounge decorated in a vibrant African style. The separate bedroom opened out onto a deck with a private plunge pool and loungers, from which it was possible to gaze at the lake 200 or 300 feet below.

The terrain at Malilangwe varies from open grassy plains to tangled bushveld. Elephant and giraffe are seen frequently, as are cheetah and hyena. And the guides can usually track down lion. One of the Malilangwe's great draws, however, is the ease with which you can observe both black and white rhino. This superb lodge is a wonderful extension to an itinerary in Botswana or South Africa.

Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp NAMIB DESERT, NAMIBIA

The new Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp is located on a private concession close to the dry bed of the Hoanib River just outside Skeleton Coast National Park. The Atlantic, and hence the actual coast, lies some 40 miles to the west. We arrived to find spacious open-sided public areas, covered by steeply pitched tented ceilings, that flowed unimpeded into the desert landscape. The accommodations comprise seven tented suites, plus one two-bedroom family unit. They are set wide apart and come with shaded outdoor decks that are ideal for a languorous afternoon with a book or a tranquil sundowner. Although partly made of canvas, our suite had large glass windows, sturdy wooden doors and electric lights. A sizeable bath provided twin sinks and an excellent shower with abundant hot water from a nearby solar panel.

As well as game drives to view desert-adapted lion and elephant, more adventurous and athletic guests can go on escorted hikes. The one activity that no one passes up is the four-hour drive across the desert plains and the subsequent dune sea to the Skeleton Coast. Although the dirt road is rutted and potholed — Land Cruiser tires last a maximum of six months — the feeling of being somewhere close to the end of the world is overwhelming. Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp is a remarkable place that fully deserves its many accolades. It cannot be compared with ultra-luxurious safari camps such as the Singita properties in South Africa; rather, it aims to provide a wilderness experience that is nonetheless very comfortable and reassuringly safe.

Nanuku

VITI LEVU, FIJI

Fiji is at its most magical in the outer islands, which, until now, have been home to all of my recommended resorts: Laucala Island, Yasawa Island and The Wakaya Club. However, Auberge Resorts recently opened a property on the south coast of Viti Levu. Curious to see whether Fiji's main island had finally acquired a luxury hideaway, I flew for 30 minutes across the emerald interior to the resort's airstrip.

The entire Nanuku development, which comprises an 18-room resort and private villas, stretches along almost two miles of sandy beach. Families tend to stay in one of the six beachfront villas (which offer two or more bedrooms), whereas couples opt for the Vunikau Suites atop a hill. Thatched roofs give all of the buildings traditional profiles and allow them to blend into the palm-studded landscape behind the resort. All accommodations have sea views.

It required some effort, but we did leave our exceptionally comfortable suite from time to time, descending the hill in our golf cart (every accommodation includes one). Nanuku organizes daily scheduled activities such as kayaking, yoga and bike rides. We also went on a "food safari," during which we toured a crab farm and watched a woman fetch prawns from a creek. We enjoyed the crustaceans at dinner that evening, along with *kokoda*, a ceviche-like appetizer; feta-stuffed pork fillet with wild ota fern and a pumpkin croquette; and a papaya bavaois with passion fruit coulis and coconut sorbet. Viti Levu finally has a resort that I can enthusiastically endorse.