

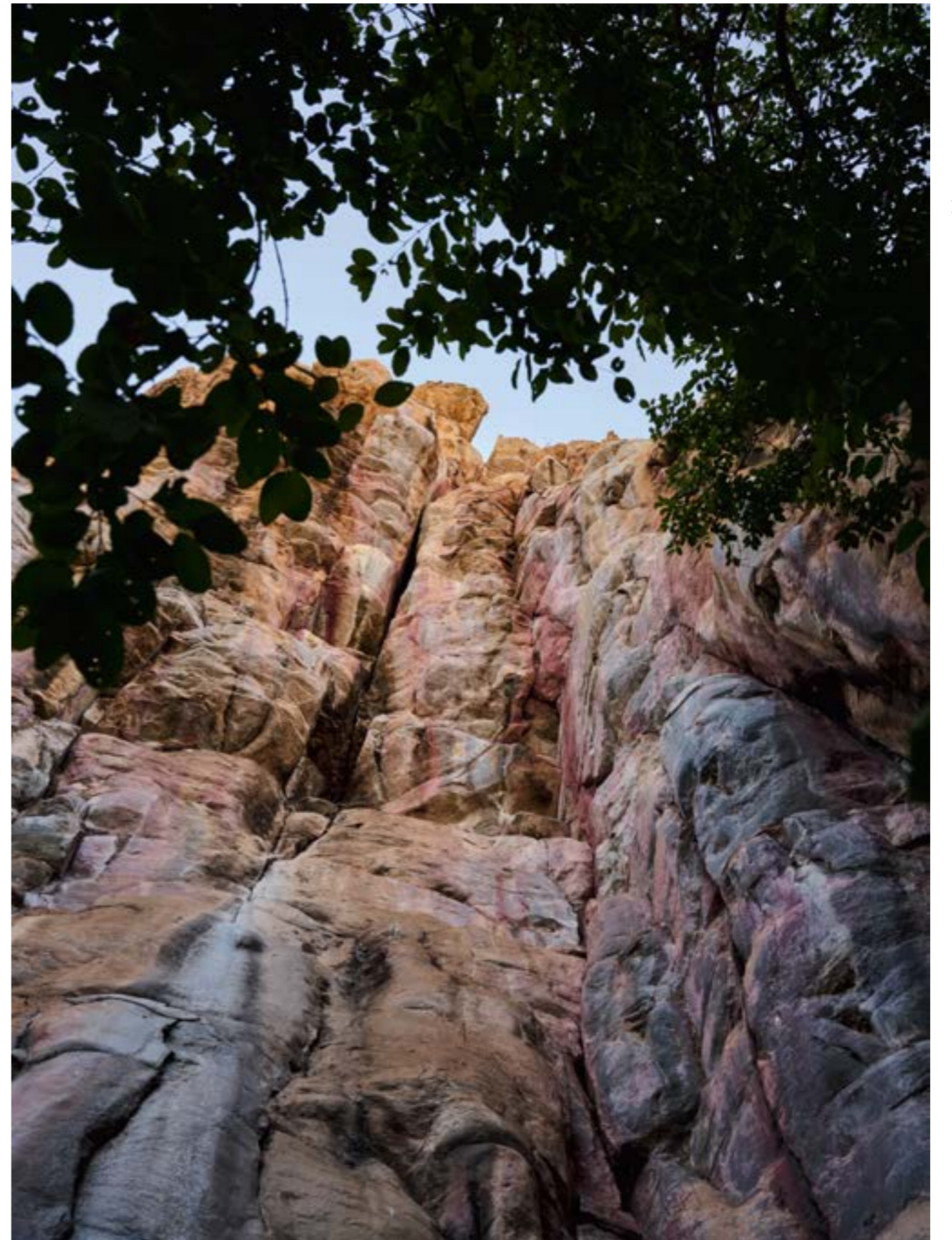
IN THE REMOTE LANDS OF
BOTSWANA'S NORTH-WEST, SLEEP
IN TRADITIONAL SAN DWELLINGS
AND IMMERSE YOURSELF IN A
SUBLIME GALLERY OF ANCIENT ART.

R O C K
O F
A G E S

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In the beginning, God poured a bucket of paint over Tsodilo Hills. It slipped like a rainbow down cliffs and over ledges: rose-pink and umber, copper and mauve, violet and yellow ochre. Sunset turned the quartzite stacks gold; the rainy season welted them with slick runnels. Year round, the Kalahari Desert's primordial sand dunes and fossil lakebed lapped the thicketed massifs like a boundless ocean.

"God made the colour [on the hills and] told us people, 'Now, start to make a picture,'" says guide Xontae Xhao, pointing his walking stick at a russet orb staining the rock face. "They make

first... the sun. The sun is very important for people and animals. They make the light." This artistic activity, said to be at least two-millennia-old, triggered an eons-long creative streak at the sacred site, a chain of inselbergs that have been christened Female, Male, Child and Grandchild by the San inhabitants.

Known collectively as the Mountain of the Gods, they rise above the landscape in Botswana's remote north-west to form one of the country's highest points. Secreted within them are an estimated 4500 rock paintings: fine-line figures rendered by the San in a paste of crushed rock and wild animals'

blood and fat, and later finger-painted works made from a whitewash of calcrete and fat by the Hambukushu, who migrated here from the north. Slowly, the Mountain of the Gods morphed into the Louvre of the Desert, a UNESCO World Heritage site that's been witness to 100,000 years of human habitation and offers a poetic counterpoint to Botswana's well-worn safari circuit.

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Xhao is from the Ju/'hoansi, part of the Indigenous San peoples. He doesn't know his age but remembers guiding *The Lost World of the Kalahari* author Sir Laurens Van Der Post when he visited the area in the mid-1950s. Now Xhao is

shepherding me around the crags during a three-night sojourn with Bench Africa (benchafrika.com.au). My journey began with a flight from Maun to Shakawe and a road transfer to Nxamaseri Island Lodge, which overlooks the Okavango Panhandle – apex of the better-known Okavango Delta. Guests staying here for three or more nights can detour overnight to the recently constructed Tsodilo Hills Sleep-Out Camp, an hour's drive west (or a short heli transfer at additional cost). I seized the opportunity.

The sky is pouring buckets of rain over the hills on the day of my arrival. Clouds swirl like hot breath around the





summits. But I'll stay dry tonight. The Sleep-Out's four platform-mounted huts (previous page) were designed with community input and are modelled on traditional San dwellings. Organic, ephemeral and pod-shaped, they're woven from thatching grass and secured with bark rope. "It's good grass – it's tight on the roof," says Xhao. "San houses, you start [building at] the bottom and [work towards] the top... [They] take the grass then rope [and make] one room like a tent then they make the gate. The people go there inside when [it's] wet."

Here, stripped-back luxury is a welcome concession: dome tents line

the huts' interiors as a precaution against heavy rainfall; solar-fuelled power banks and LED-powered lanterns sit on the nightstand; two single beds (four in the family suite) ensure dreamy slumber. The ground-level ensuites are discreetly screened with boughs; only the birds and the wreathed hills can see me beneath the hot bucket shower.

Operating in partnership with the Tsodilo Community Trust, the camp can be disassembled at a moment's notice: the septic tank disconnected, all evidence of foreign presence expunged. This transience is echoed in the Sleep-Out's design, which recalls a disappearing



tradition – though Xhao stayed in a hut as a boy, he and his compatriots no longer live nomadic lives. Prohibited from hunting, they inhabit villages constructed in the Hambukushu style: pitched thatch roofs, walls of mud and cow dung. Yet the Ju/'hoansi strive to preserve – and share – their culture.

Come evening, members of the M!duasi Cultural Group gather around a fire for a pre-dinner show. Tongues of flame taunt the weeping sky; anklets made from moth cocoons rattle and loin aprons flutter as they stamp the earth and chant entreaties for the very rain deluging them.

“We have our grandparents who are already teaching us how to clap our hands, to sing and dance, and then you sing the different types of songs,” says Tsetsana Xixae, group leader and the first female guide at Tsodilo Hills. “Some of them are based on the rain... when [the weather] becomes white, very hot... we need the help from our ancestors so that they... give us the rainy time.”

Those rains have released clouds of gossamer-winged flying ants (termites) – traditionally a sign for the hunter-gatherers to return home in case squalls disorient them. “We know [if it’s] raining to be careful about ourselves,”

says Xixae. “[We] teach the young generations that during the rainy season... sometimes they can be lost.”

The group won’t veer off-course tonight; they pile into a LandCruiser for the drive back to their village. I retreat to the dining tent for a feast of papa (maize porridge) with tomato relish, morogo (wild spinach), seswaa (shredded beef) and malva pudding. The stars are blotted out, the raindrops repelled from the thatching grass shell as I cocoon myself within it. Sleep is instantaneous.

In the morning I emerge to a blue sky straining at the clouds’ seams and the scent of magwinya (doughnuts)

and mabele (sorghum porridge). It’s a short drive to the Rhino Trail, a mostly flat, 3.5-kilometre-long path tracing the Female hill, where much of the rock art is concentrated (visitors can also hike to the Male hill’s summit).

Curiosities emerge around every bend: the rock shelter where Xhao’s father and grandfather camped in the rainy season; the cave floor slithery with a snake’s imprint; the lofty Van Der Post Panel, named for Xhao’s famous visitor. It memorialises wildlife largely displaced from this region by human encroachment: eland, giraffe, a gemsbok so finely wrought it looks holy. Indeed,

Van Der Post said he felt he was standing “in a great and ancient temple”.

Xhao’s memorable anecdote from that visit sees the writer hastily retreating after he and his companions disturbed a beehive while filming the paintings up close. Xhao chuckles, his timeworn face pleating anew, as he recalls the men clambering down rocks while battling the swarm. Perhaps the bees were a warning to future visitors: revere the ancestors’ artwork from a respectful distance. After all, they’re older by far than the Louvre’s *Mona Lisa* and are painted on a canvas colour-washed by divinity. ✎

