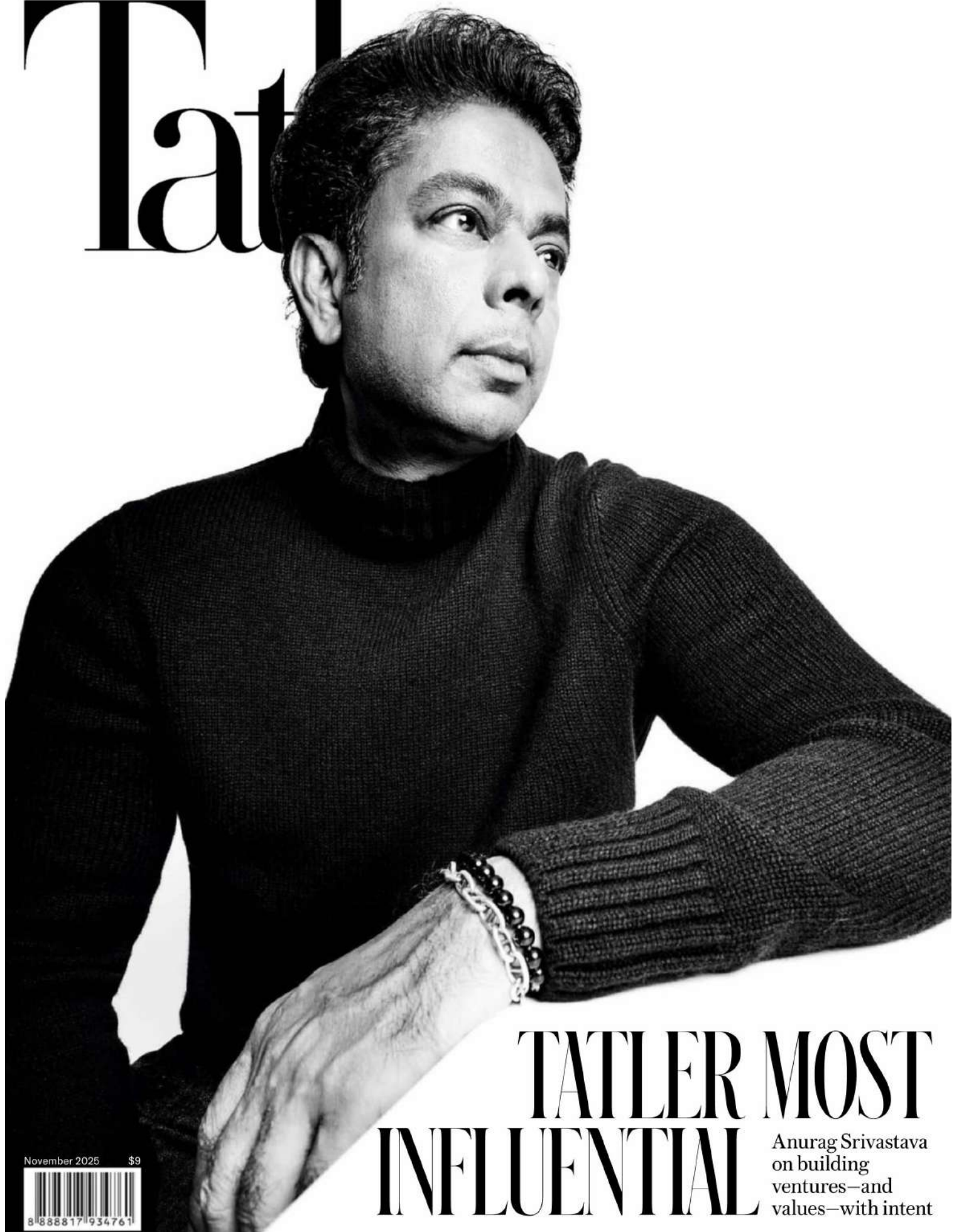


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TATLER MOST INFLUENTIAL

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Embrace the romance of slow travel with a journey through South Africa and Botswana, where unforgettable encounters with nature await *By Elaine Kim*

There are some journeys in life that leave an indelible mark on your soul, moments so vivid and magical that they linger long after you have returned home. My recent adventure with Belmond—a voyage from the cosmopolitan charm of Cape Town to the wild, untamed beauty of Botswana—was one such journey.

Travelling with my husband John, our trip began in Cape Town at the iconic Mount Nelson—a blush-pink grande dame set against the majestic backdrop of Table Mountain. Mount Nelson is more than a hotel—it is an institution, where writers, politicians, artists and travellers have gathered for over a century. We stayed in one of the hotel's villas, tucked into the lush gardens with its own sense of seclusion.

Our days in Cape Town unfolded like a curated tapestry of experiences that were reminders that sometimes the greatest luxury lies in the simple act of slowing down and savouring the pause moment by moment. The first afternoon there, I slipped into the spa for a treatment that felt like a reset button for both mind and body—its tranquil setting a sanctuary that melted away the weight of our busy lives.

Another afternoon, we indulged in the hotel's afternoon tea, an elegant affair of tiered trays laden with delicate pastries, warm scones, and fragrant teas poured into fine china. Afternoon tea at Mount Nelson is a Cape Town tradition, and sitting beneath crystal chandeliers while enjoying sweet delights and savoury bites felt like stepping back into another era.



Left to right: The pool at Mount Nelson in Cape Town; the writer and her husband embarked on a sidecar adventure along the coast

But the most exhilarating experience on our Cape Town sojourn was the sidecar adventure arranged by the hotel. Wearing vintage helmets and leather jackets, John and I cruised along the coast, the Atlantic Ocean sparkling beside us, the wind tangling through our hair. We stopped to take in the windswept beauty of the Cape of Good Hope, watching the ocean crash dramatically against rugged cliffs.

From the sophistication of Cape Town, we flew north to Botswana and into a world where elephants roam freely and the rhythms of nature dictate life. Our first safari stop was Savute Elephant Lodge, set deep within Chobe National Park—a place where wilderness is not just observed but lived. The lodge struck the perfect balance between elegance and immersion. In our tented



sanctuary, a four-poster bed framed sweeping views of the wilderness, and the suite opened out onto a private deck that overlooked a watering hole.

From this vantage point, we found ourselves mesmerised for hours as elephants—whole herds, from towering matriarchs to playful calves—came to drink and bathe. To sip morning tea while watching baby elephants splash and trumpet was to witness pure joy, the kind that stirs something elemental inside you.

Days at Savute unfolded in a rhythm that was both thrilling and serene. Dawn began with game drives, led by guides and trackers whose knowledge of the land and its creatures felt almost instinctive. Their ability to read tracks and anticipate animal behaviour led us into encounters that felt nothing short of miraculous. We followed elephants known to our rangers by name, mothers guiding their calves, young bulls testing their strength, and tiny babies stumbling adorably through the mud.

One morning, we watched a wildebeest gallop majestically by not far from where we were admiring an ancient baobab tree with its trunk the size of a hut. On another, our trackers led us into the quiet, tense thrill of following a leopard, its spotted coat flickering in and out of the bush like a phantom. We followed in rapt quietness as it moved silently through the brush, its muscular body gliding with lethal elegance.

Back at the lodge, afternoons invited relaxation. We rolled out a yoga mat on the deck beside the pool, moving through poses while elephants ambled in the distance. We would take lunch alfresco on the canopied deck, and dip into the pool with its views across the savannah.

Evenings at Savute were equally magical. Some evenings we chose quieter moments—dinner on our deck, or by the pool as the sun melted into the horizon, painting the plains in shades of fire. Each meal of Botswana-inspired cuisine, prepared with care and authenticity, was rich with the flavours of the land.

However, the dinner that lingered longest in memory was the private *boma* dinner that the lodge arranged for us. We were ushered into the traditional African *boma*, or communal spaces to gather, where a candlelit table awaited by a crackling fire. Beneath a canopy of stars, we dined on tender meats grilled on the barbecue, as the local lodge staff shared their time with us with warmth. They filled the air with storytelling, song and dance, inviting us to join in a celebration of culture, community and heritage.

Savute reminded us that it is possible to create that juxtaposition of luxury in wilderness, of hospitality meeting authenticity, of richness in the rustic, that makes memorable moments here shimmer with magic

THE DELTA DREAM

From Chobe, we journeyed into the Okavango Delta, one of the world's great natural wonders, where water channels carve a labyrinth of life into the land. Here, our adventure took on yet another dimension. If Savute was defined by elephants, Eagle Island Lodge was a symphony of lions, leopards, and plains alive with movement.



Our tent at Eagle Island was a private haven with soaring canvas walls, a plunge pool on the deck, and views that stretched endlessly over the delta. Each morning, monkeys paid cheeky visits, clambering across our deck railings as if to remind us that we were only guests in their kingdom.

Game drives were exhilarating. We found ourselves face-to-face with a pride of lions, their golden eyes gleaming in the dawn. We watched them bask in the golden light, cubs tumbling over each other while their mothers rested watchfully. We saw towering giraffes lumber across our path. We witnessed a herd of zebras galloping in unison across the plains, their hooves thundering like a heartbeat against the earth

The magic of Eagle Island, however, was not only in its wildlife. Perhaps the most unforgettable moments were those of stillness. As the sun dipped low, we would stop for sundowners. Tea was poured, biscuits were offered, and glasses of gin and tonic or Baileys on the Rocks caught the light of the setting sun.

Eagle Island taught me that safari is not just about seeing animals—it is about feeling life in its rawest, most authentic form. There were stretches where we opted to stay in our tent instead of venturing out, simply lingering by our pool, watching the world drift by, listening to the distant calls of the wild. With the sky ablaze and the land stretching endlessly around us, I felt both impossibly small and deeply connected to the vastness of the world.





This page, from top: Elephants roam freely at Savute Elephant Lodge, set deep within Botswana's Chobe National Park; the area surrounding the lodge offers superb birdwatching opportunities. **Opposite page:** The couple enjoying a game drive through the Savute region; coming face-to-face with a lioness at Eagle Island Lodge in the Okavango Delta

In a place as dramatic as Botswana, stillness becomes its own form of theatre.

As John and I boarded our flight home, I couldn't help but reflect on how deeply this journey had touched us. This journey to South Africa and Botswana was, for us, a rare and romantic escape—a time to reconnect, to share awe and wonder, and to write our own chapter of adventure together.