

## HOTELS



### Chongwe River House

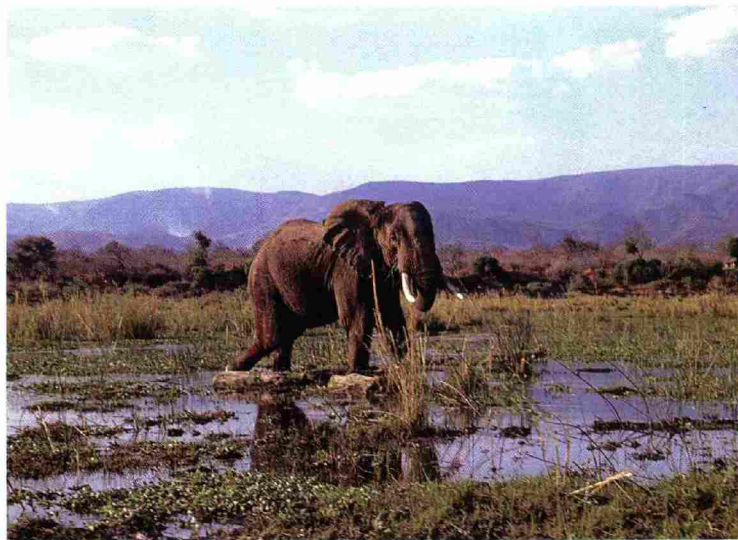
**LEFT:** In Zambia on the Chongwe River, a tributary of the Zambezi, Robin and Jo Pope hired safari guide Neil Rocher to design a safari retreat whose undulations follow the contours of the trees he used as the frame.

**BELOW LEFT:** The Chongwe is the primary water source for herds of elephants that feed in lush groves near the house. **OPPOSITE:** The main room contains the sitting and dining areas. A winter thorn trunk, appearing as if it had fallen there, serves as a table base and bench seating.

# Chongwe River House & Luangwa Safari House

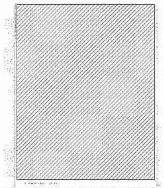
TWO ONE-OF-A-KIND GUEST RETREATS  
IN ZAMBIA ARE OUTFITTED FOR ROAMING OR RELAXING

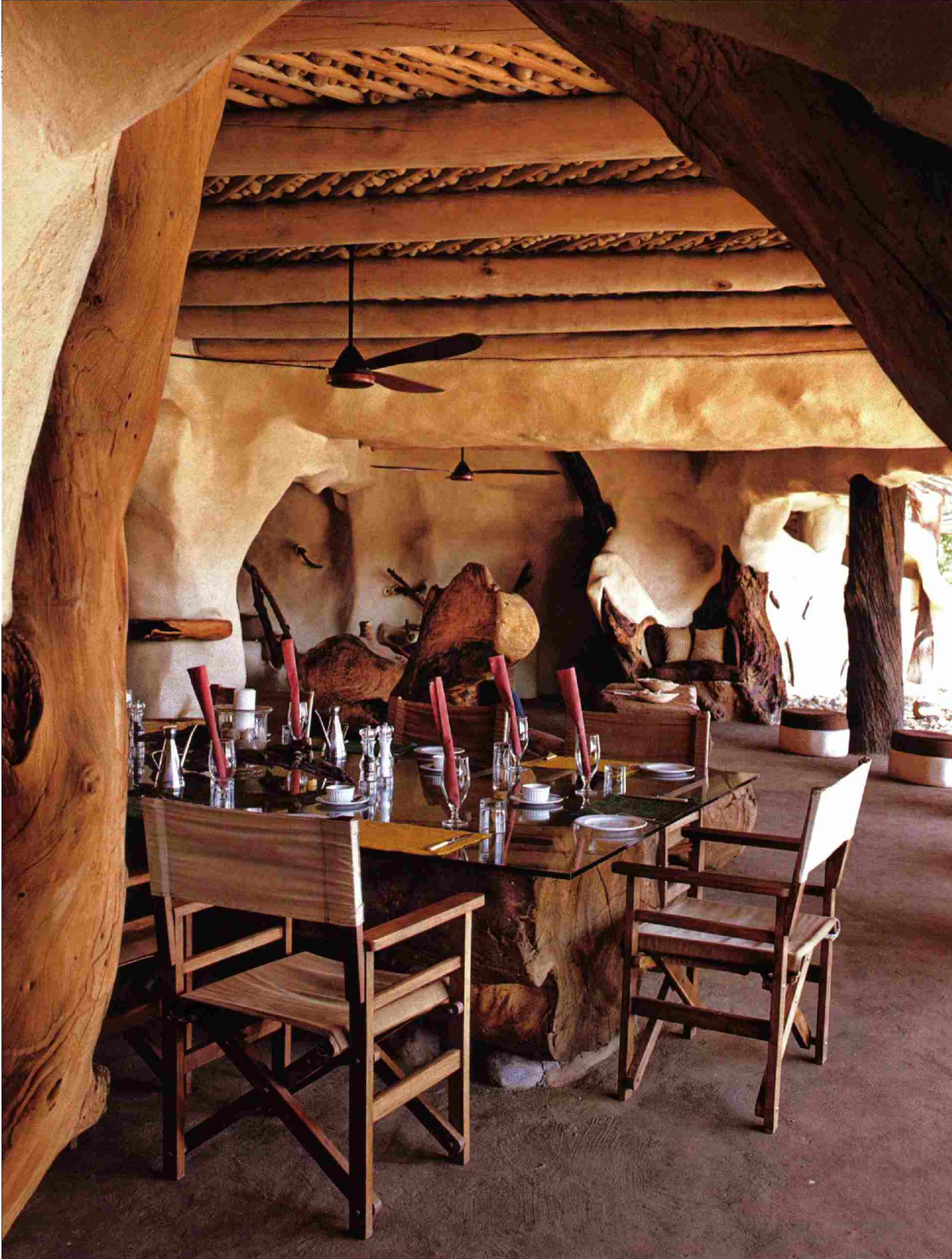
Architectural and Interior Design by Neil Rocher/Text and Photography by Tim Beddow



**C**hongwe River House, on the Lower Zambezi River, and Luangwa Safari House, bordering the South Luangwa National Park of Zambia, are most certainly not houses in the conventional sense of the word. The latter structure has no rear wall, and the first—well, it has no straight lines to speak of. But these exclusive safari retreats are equally remarkable. Says Jo Pope, who runs the retreats with her husband, veteran safari guide Robin Pope, “The whole concept was aimed at the wow factor.” Few could dispute that this has been achieved by Robin Pope Safaris, whose proprietors have pushed the boundaries of safari living. There are simply no other African properties of this caliber operating under the same umbrella.

To design them both, Jo Pope recruited Zanzibar-based Neil Rocher, who had worked with Anthony Russell on

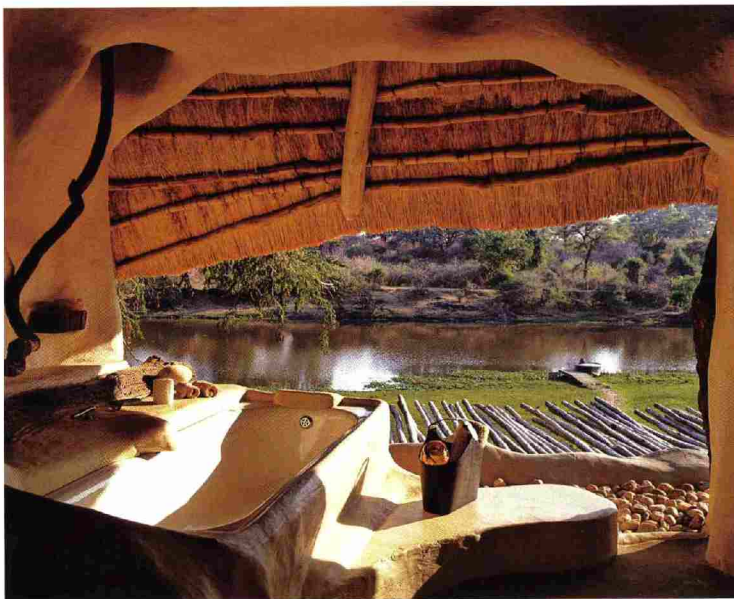






ABOVE: The Popes gave Rocher carte blanche to experiment with forms. He molded the reinforced-concrete walls so that no surface is flat and no corners meet at right angles. "The concept," he explains, "was an organic termite mound coming up from the ground."

BELOW: Even the baths—where the showers are waterfalls and some of the basins are carved out of Zambian stone—look right out over the river and the bush. There are no doors in the house, but curved entrances ensure guests' privacy.



Shompole Lodge in Kenya. Rocher, a safari guide, has had no formal architectural or design training, but he has an affinity with the landscape, coupled with a vivid imagination.

"The Chongwe River," observes Rocher, "has the feel of a fairy glen filled with adventure and mystery. So I wanted the house to reflect this with new textural discoveries, unusual views, and angles that would slowly unravel over time."

On the banks of the river, near camps made in different eras by explorers David Livingstone and Frederick Courteney Selous, Rocher dreamed up a house constructed around a frame of salvaged wood, with reinforced-concrete walls that follow the natural lines of the branches. Colored pebbles from the river decorate the ceilings, while all the furniture in the main living area has been carved from a single fallen winter thorn tree. It is organic, challenging and faintly surreal. And elephants, for which the area is renowned, "were occasionally found actually in the house," says Rocher, "which delayed work until they had moved on."

There are just four en suite guest rooms, each with its own quirky charm. The two downstairs are approached through tun-

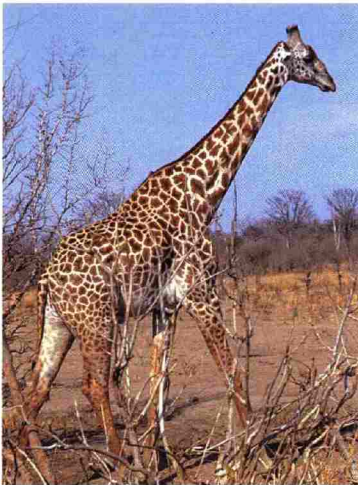


## Luangwa Safari House

**LEFT:** Situated on the Popes' private land next to Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, the house is shaded by ebony trees. Rocher aimed for a fortified aesthetic, though he left one side entirely open. "Nature on your doorstep," proclaim the hosts.

Rocher salvaged 25 dead leadwood trees, weighing five to seven tons apiece, to form what he calls the superstructure of the house. **BELOW:** In the double-height main room, hand-painted fabrics from a local factory pair with furniture and lamps made by Lusaka craftsman Matt Peacock.





TOP: A first-floor suite known as the coral room opens onto a private tiled terrace. ABOVE: Guests on safari might see Thornicroft's giraffes, which are endemic to the region. The Popes, who have been in the safari business for several decades, provide vehicles, experienced, armed guides and a private chef and house manager.

nels; upstairs, the showers are waterfalls. The signature baths have basins hand-carved of wood or stone and views of the bush through cavelike windows.

A 90-minute hop in a light plane takes one to a very different yet no less singular vision. Says Rocher, "Luangwa was harder to design, and I wanted it to embrace the valley and its history. The area is very harsh and masculine for most of the year, so the house grew to be big, powerful and strong, yet softened by the interiors and curves of the leadwood trees that form the structure. It had to blend in and grow out of the grove it was built in and not be at odds with it." Transporting 25 giant leadwood trees over 25 miles and erecting them with little more than manual labor was a considerable feat. "It is the hardest of woods," remarks Rocher. "Often it would take a day and two chainsaw blades to cut each plank!"

At Luangwa the four en suite rooms all lead off a double-height living room that is crowned with a regal chandelier. The main room overlooks a seasonal lagoon—usually

replete with herds of elephants that come to bathe—and the distant Chindeni Hills.

As befits exclusive private houses, it is unlikely that you will see another tourist here. "What we have found is that these places are ideal for families and friends to share a special African experience," says Jo Pope. "We often have three generations of a family or a group of friends from disparate parts of the world meeting up here."

These safari houses are not appointed with private helipads, monogrammed linens or other such luxuries. Jo Pope acknowledges this: "We believe, in these days, that private space is the greatest luxury and that these two particular places give you that in great comfort and style." And, as their guest books attest, visitors agree that is what really matters in the end. □

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