

From the ground up



While traditional tented camps continue to have a certain allure, the standard lodges of the past – simple, comfortable bases for safari explorations – are increasingly losing out to chic structures that have become attractions in their own right. One of the leaders shaping the accommodation evolution is designer **Neil Rocher**. Are his concepts derived from successful commercial models found elsewhere in luxury travel market? No, they are born from the very African soil on which they are built.
By **Matt Phillips**.



Matt Phillips, Editor of *Travel Africa* magazine, has travelled to over two dozen African nations, and has an extensive knowledge of the continent's dynamic accommodation scene.





ROBIN POPE/SAPARIS (4)

When I first set eyes on Chongwe House, which sits on the fringe of Lower Zambezi National Park in Zambia, I didn't know who had inspired its design, Fred Flintstone or Antoni Gaudí. Beneath its steep thatched roof were flowing, organic-looking walls with crooked beams of wood piercing their surface much like a tailor's pins through fabric. Amazingly, once inside I felt more of a connection with the world outside, its open riverfront façade perfectly framing the wilderness on the doorstep.

However, the longer I spent within this airy shell the more I realised its design was not rooted in the past, but in the future. Low-energy LED lights shone down from between the river rocks nestled in the ceiling, illuminating the open-plan lounge, and a clever layout created a natural, cooling airflow, eliminating the need for air-conditioning units.

When I asked Neil Rocher, Chongwe House's designer, where the inspiration for his projects comes from, he replied: "It's a bit hard to explain. Each and every site will have its own story, history and feel. I also draw ideas from the local geography."

Having spent the last 20 years of his life in the bush, and 12 of those years guiding clients on high-end safaris throughout southern and East Africa, Rocher has honed his ideas of what elements are needed to create the perfect lodge.

"The big plus was listening to my clients' feedback about what they liked and disliked. The major thing I learnt was that lodges don't have to be practical. When a guest is only spending between three and five nights in a destination they are looking for something special, not necessarily something that they'd like to live in year round. This allows me a lot more creative freedom in the design process."

With this in mind, Rocher tries to design rooms that will take guests out of their comfort zone, but also ensure their security. "You want them to feel that they are being daring, while at the same time still feeling safe. If you get the balance right it works."

When a developer first contacts him about a future design project, Rocher has the usual list of questions to be answered. Is it a tented camp, lodge or house? What is its capacity? What is the build budget? What is the target market? Once these basic issues



Opposite page: Neil Rocher has ensured that Chongwe House is as interesting as its surroundings

Top, left: Perches aplenty – Luangwa Safari House

Top, right: Glass is one practicality that is happily thrown out the window at most of Rocher's projects (Chongwe House pictured)

Bottom, left: Night falls on Chongwe House

Bottom, right: With imagination the only barrier, straight lines and simple doors are often a thing of the past (Luangwa Safari House pictured)



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are dealt with he visits the site, spending as many days as possible exploring the area and weighing up the available options.

"While there are many factors in determining the perfect site, the most important things I look for are its orientation to sunrise and sunset, its daytime and night-time views and its available shade – I also work to understand patterns in rainfall and wind direction. If I find a better build location than the one the client has chosen, I'll explain why I would like to move the site and the pros and cons of each option."

Surprisingly, the actual concept and look of each lodge or camp design is determined by Rocher himself – his clients happily put their faith in his strong reputation.

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This is due to the fact that Rocher doesn't work from architectural drawings or sketches. After the floor plan is determined, each property is hand moulded from local materials, with the design morphing throughout the building process, the final product

NEIL ROCHER DESIGNS

- **Chongwe House**, Lower Zambezi National Park, Zambia
- **Luangwa Safari House**, South Luangwa National Park, Zambia
- **Albida Suite**, Chongwe River Camp, Lower Zambezi National Park, Zambia
- **Shompole & Little Shompole**, Shompole Conservancy, Kenya
- **Selous Safari Camp**, Selous Game Reserve, Tanzania
- **Jongomero**, Ruaha National Park, Tanzania
- **Kiba Point**, Selous Game Reserve, Tanzania
- **Kilindi**, Zanzibar, Tanzania
- **Ras Kutani Suites**, Tanzania

emerging much like a butterfly. “The evolving process allows me the creative freedom to grow along with my projects. It is impossible to design in a vacuum. I’m creating functional art, not architecture.”

When Rocher arrived at the proposed site for Chongwe House it wasn’t long before he had grasped what he wanted to do. “It just had a strong feel to it, like a fairy glen loaded with myth and mystery. Hence the I wanted the design to play out like a story for each guest, slowly unfolding throughout their stay, repeatedly providing surprises and new things to discover.”

Rocher’s plans for Chongwe included a lofty concrete superstructure. Once this skeleton, was completed, he then started the creative elements of his design, slowly transforming something that bore more resemblance to a multi-storey car park into the living piece of art seen today. “We used the reclaimed wild wood to create the window and door frames, then started to fill in the surrounding blanks.” Using ferro cement within hessian sacking and chicken wire, they could create any shape they desired, much like working with plaster on giant sculptures. And what shapes they formed! The vast openings in the façade resemble bulbous cavities carved out of sandstone by river eddies, and the unique layouts of the four bedrooms manage to ensure privacy while at the same time making guests feel they are part of the natural world outside.

It was different when Rocher was charged with designing Luangwa Safari House in South Luangwa National Park. There he spent time looking at the area while trying to get a feel for its history and the emotions it evoked. Eventually sensing that the park seemed to be male-driven and testosterone-orientated, he built the exterior of the house up to be big, bold and masculine. Instead of the concrete frame seen at Chongwe House, 25 leadwood logs provided the structural strength while the soft thatch blended it all into the natural environment.

Once each of Rocher’s projects is completed he hopes guests will notice the local textures within the structure, not just through sight but also through touch; this could be feeling the stone floor beneath your toes in the shower or sensing the warmth and age of the wood railings in your hand as you descend the stairs. He also shapes each roof with the guests’ psyche in mind – the sweeping towers of thatch either reflect or stand in stark contrast to the skyline around them. “Most clients will only notice this on a subconscious level, but they will react to it.”



Perhaps most importantly, Rocher also ensures that each structure embraces its surroundings, allowing guests residing inside still to see, hear and smell the natural environment outside. There is no better example of this than Shompole. Dramatically located on the edge of the Nguruman Escarpment in southern Kenya, this lodge makes you feel a part of the landscape.

Rocher isn’t one to take kudos easily, quickly passing on credit to members of each build team who have contributed to his work – he particularly stresses that Shompole was a real collaborative effort with Anthony Russel.

“There has been a lot said about Shompole in various magazine and newspaper articles, but most of them have got it wrong. Anthony and I neither set out to create a Zen-like feel nor discussed influences of Japanese-style buildings. What we were trying to create was a place of simple beauty that blended seamlessly into the environment. Utilising local materials only helped in this regard.”

Where does Neil Rocher think lodge design is headed in the future?

“I feel they are going to be driven more and more by an ecological frame of mind. There is no doubt that camps need to get more eco-friendly, both in respect to the environment and the benefits they provide to the local communities. There is so much further to go even on the basics like rainwater harvesting, water recycling, waste management and disposal, heating and cooling methods, energy saving and power generation. While there will always be space and a market for the traditional safari style camp (and so there should be), the look of lodges will evolve as well – we are only limited by our imagination.”



CAMP LAYOUT BASICS

By **Nick Aslin** of Norman Carr Safaris

- Camp must have easy access to fresh water. Nearby waterholes, lagoons or waterways attract wildlife, which is a bonus.

- Spread the guests’ rooms out wherever possible. Noise travels well, especially at night, and your guests don’t want to hear their neighbours snoring.

- The kitchen needs to be within 60m of the dining area – food will get cold before serving otherwise.

- Staff areas should be separated from guest areas, and they should be grouped to make security and noise easier to control. The main stores and workshop should be furthest away (due to noise). Ideally, the behind-the-scenes areas are downwind from the guest areas, and there should be light barriers separating the two.

- In most cases guests are more likely to experience sunset in the bush than in camp (due to sundowners), so it is usually preferable to have your guest areas facing east to take advantage of sunrise.

Left and below: Part nature, pure paradise – Shompole and Little Shompole, Kenya