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COVER STORY

Glamping's next level

From tented pavilions to Jungle Bubbles, resorts are adding inventive, cost-effective glamping options. And guests are willing to pay a premium.

By Christina Jelski



Anantara's Camp Nujum is a Bedouin tented camp concept in Abu Dhabi.

When Luca Franco, CEO and founder of design firm Luxury Frontiers, began shopping ideas for high-end tents to hospitality executives back in 2011, few showed interest.

At the time, glamping — “glamorous camping” — was gaining prominence but was still viewed largely as a fad.

“I’d speak to the CEOs of these major hospitality brands, and they would say, ‘Oh, this is interesting, but this is a safari tent. Good luck with that,’” Franco said. “But now, those same companies are knocking on my door, asking to work with us. Glamping is everywhere. I don’t think you can even call it simply a trend anymore.”

His prescience has paid off. Launched nearly a decade ago, Luxury Frontiers has become one of the industry’s most sought-after experiential travel specialists, crafting everything from tents to treehouses and other alternative structures for some of high-end hospitality’s biggest names. Among the brands it has designed, developed and operated experiences for are Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton, Belmond, Six Senses and Auberge Resorts.

“The whole idea was to take these safari tent experiences, which have been successful in Africa, and export them to America and then to Asia and the Middle East,” Franco said. “Fifty to 70% of the guests that go on high-end African safaris are from the U.S. Ten years ago, there were only four or five of these concepts operating in America; I knew there was consumer demand but very limited supply.”

Supply and demand have certainly grown over the past decade, with numerous small operators crowding into the sector in recent years. But with the recent uptick of these luxe options offered by well-established hospitality players, Franco predicts the glamping sphere may be due for a shakeout.

“I do try to stay away from the term ‘glamping,’ because what we do isn’t just about pitching tents somewhere,” Franco said. “Many of these mom-and-pop operations

don’t really have the hospitality or service components built out, but they charge \$500 or more per night, which is insane. It’s a bit of a bubble. But I do think the idea behind glamping is here to stay, and there is so much room to create a truly amazing product and experience, with amazing service, for that same amount of money.”

High-end design and service

Luxury hotel company Aman, one of the first to incorporate glamping into its offerings, recently tapped Luxury Frontiers to spearhead the design of its Camp Sarika tented camp project. An offshoot of the brand’s Amangiri resort in Utah, the camp’s April opening has been pushed to July because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It’s not Aman’s first foray into unconventional accommodations. The company has been ahead of the curve, unveiling 20 luxury tents in 1993 as part of its Amanwana resort in Indonesia and later launching another 10 tents at Aman-i-Khas in Rajasthan, India, in 2003.

Camp Sarika, however, is part of a new generation of luxury tented accommodations that are blending increasingly ambitious, out-of-the-box design ideas with enhanced services and hospitality. The camp’s “tented pavilions” are surrounded by drywall and fully insulated and climate controlled. And thanks to high-performance materials and engineering, the units are also able to withstand Utah’s desert winds, which can reach 100 mph.

“The Amangiri tented pavilions are a hybrid structure, fully enclosed but with a canvas top that evokes a camp feel,” said Julien Surget, general manager for Amangiri. “It remains a year-round destination.”

The 10 one- and two-bedroom units each feature a

private terrace, plunge pool and fire pit, and Camp Sarika also offers guests access to a communal pavilion and amenities such as a restaurant, spa suites, an all-property swimming pool and a whirlpool bath.

And if guests want to, they can opt to visit the flagship Amangiri resort, which is a 30-minute hike or five-minute drive away. There, they have access to Amangiri’s swimming pool, dining venues and Aman Spa, among other facilities.

“Having a satellite camp near an existing property can make a lot of sense, as does creating regional circuits where people can go from site to site,” said Luxury Frontiers’ Franco. “We’re starting to see a lot of both models popping up.”

He believes these models can be an attractive business proposition, enabling hoteliers to expand room count with a lower investment in time and money than might be needed to build more traditional guestrooms. Additionally, glamping accommodations can be sold at a premium, allowing for a fast return on investment.

Rates at Camp Sarika are expected to start at about \$3,500 per night for a One-Bedroom Mesa Pavilion, including all meals and based on double occupancy.

“These types of accommodations have a very compelling, unique selling position,” Franco said. “You can generally sell them for 20% to 30% more than regular guestrooms, yet the cost and time to build them can be halved. And on top of this, the media loves anything experiential, sustainable and beautiful, so it can provide lots of [press] exposure.”

One of the glamping world’s more recent media darlings is Costa Rica’s Nayara Tented Camp, which opened in December. The newest offering from Nayara Resorts, the property joined existing sister resorts Nayara Gardens and Nayara Springs, with all three properties located within Arenal Volcano National Park.

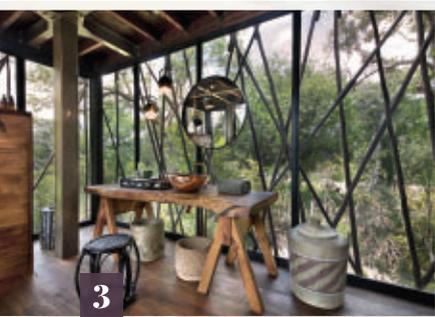
Designed in collaboration with Luxury Frontiers, Nayara Tented Camp comprises 21 tents, some of which can be connected in order to accommodate families and larger groups. The units also feature terraces, infinity-edge plunge pools fed by mineral hot springs and double-head outdoor showers.

Additionally, according to Nayara Resorts owner Leo Ghitis, the low-impact nature of the tents made them an ecofriendly development option.

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1) Accommodations at the Nayara Tented Camp in Costa Rica feature infinity-edge plunge pools fed by mineral hot springs. 2) Some of Nayara’s 21 tents can be connected in order to accommodate families and larger groups. 3) A tented pavilion at Camp Sarika, an offshoot of Aman’s Amangiri resort in Utah. 4) A bathroom at Camp Sarika, which features 10 one- and two-bedroom units. Camp Sarika’s April opening was pushed back to July because of the coronavirus pandemic.



1) A tented accommodation at Camp Nujum, part of the Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara in Abu Dhabi. 2) The roof deck and outdoor bed at AndBeyond's Ngala Treehouse in South Africa. 3) The walls at the Ngala Treehouse allow for an immersive experience. 4) The indoor bedroom and staircase at the four-story treehouse. 5) One of the two Jungle Bubbles at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort in Thailand.

GLAMPING

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"Sustainability was a priority," Ghitis explained. "Each tent is built on stilts, so they touch just four points of the earth below. The tents are less disruptive to the land and less invasive on the environment."

Though temporarily closed, response to Nayara Tented Camp's winter opening "was above anything we expected," said Ghitis, and the property expects demand to pick back up post-pandemic.

"Our return guests have been eager to experience the camp," he added. "And upon arrival to one of the sister properties, many guests see the Tented Camp and decide to add additional nights so they can experience both. We've also opened up to a new traveler base — large groups of multigenerational families — that we hadn't seen much of before."

Rates at Nayara Tented Camp start at \$1,200 per night, including daily breakfast and morning yoga.

Also expanding into the glamping space is Minor Hotels' Anantara brand, which in November augmented its Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara in Abu Dhabi with the launch of Camp Nujum, a Bedouin tented camp concept.

Intended to complement a stay at the core resort property, the Camp Nujum package is designed as a one-night experience. Guests who opt for a visit can choose to travel to the site by camel or four-wheel-drive vehicle. Activities include sandboarding and archery, and in the evening, a bonfire barbecue is organized.

The Camp Nujum overnight experience starts at roughly \$435 per person.

Likewise, the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort in Chiang Rai, Thailand, is building major buzz following the December launch of its Jungle Bubble accommodations.

Custom-designed by inflatable bubble lodging specialists Eye in the Sky, Anantara's two Jungle Bubbles are mostly transparent and made with high-tech polyester fabric. The units are nestled within the property's elephant sanctuary and feature a king bed and a non-transparent, en suite bathroom.

"We were really trying to push the envelope," said general manager Gauderic Harang. "We wanted to have a zero-contact activity but also allow guests to get as close as possible to observe the elephants. And I thought,

'Hey, we have 160 acres of land here. Why can't we bring in these bubbles?'"

Generally speaking, bubble-style accommodations aren't especially expensive to build and can be quickly inflated in a variety of locations, Harang said. Anantara's Jungle Bubbles, however, have been specially modified to increase comfort. Air conditioning is integrated into the flooring, and a dehumidifier helps keep moisture in check. An opaque gray covering is used to protect the parts of the bubble from harsh afternoon sun.

Other key additions include the bubbles' platform bases and surrounding fencing, which ensure the accommodations are "elephant-proof."

Like Camp Nujum, the Jungle Bubbles are designed to be experienced as an overnight add-on to a stay at the full-service resort. Rates for two start at around \$545 per night, inclusive of a picnic-style dinner basket, a fully stocked minibar, 24-hour, in-room dining service and tea and coffee.

"When you're in the bubble, you feel that excitement of being exposed to nature without actually being exposed," Harang said.



'The idea behind glamping is here to stay. There is so much room to create a truly amazing product and experience.'

—Luca Franco, Luxury Frontiers

New from the birthplace of glamping

As the glamping sector grows increasingly luxurious, it seems natural that Africa, the birthplace of the luxury safari tent, is helping to drive its evolution.

No stranger to tented accommodations, safari company AndBeyond recently upped the ante with the opening of its Ngala Treehouse in South Africa in February. The accommodation grows the group's hospitality footprint within its Ngala Private Game Reserve, which borders Kruger National Park and also includes the company's Ngala Safari Lodge and Ngala Tented Camp concepts.

The treehouse stretches 39 feet high, and accommodations in the four-level structure feature a roof deck with an outdoor bed as well as an indoor bedroom, full bathroom and outdoor shower. The structure is also entirely self-sustaining, outfitted with its own solar power supply, water-collection system and sanitation system.

The treehouse experience is available only if booking either of the other AndBeyond Ngala resorts. Overnight

rates for the treehouse start at approximately \$560.

Kenyan safari lodge Angama Mara plans to put a more playful spin on the classic safari tent experience with the upcoming launch of its Angama Safari Camp. On track to debut in July, the four-tent accommodation will be situated within the southwestern Mara Triangle and sleep up to eight guests.

"Our business is very seasonal," said Angama Mara owner Nicky Fitzgerald. "We find that we're sitting with capacity for eight months of the year, then four months of the year we are [booked solid]. So we thought, 'OK, how do we maximize on our peak season but not build

more rooms?' Because you can just keep building rooms forever and still have them sitting quiet during the off-season."

A mobile camp struck the team as the perfect solution. Located approximately 90 minutes

to two hours by vehicle from the main lodge, the Angama Safari Camp will also include a mess tent, an outdoor fire pit area and staff accommodations. The site can be set up in 48 hours, with the Angama Mara team hoping to eventually whittle that down to 24 hours.

"It's going to be a beautiful experience, and it will also link quite nicely with activities at the Angama Mara mothership," said Fitzgerald. "We also wanted to break away completely from the classic trunks, traditional cream canvas look. We'll be using bold Masai colors — reds, blues and whites — to create a sense of drama."

Despite the pandemic bringing business to an abrupt halt earlier this year, Fitzgerald remains confident that the lodge will be quick to bounce back. And although the Angama Safari Camp will mark the first mobile tent for Angama Mara, Fitzgerald hopes that it won't be the last.

"I'd be lying if I said the bookings were flooding in, as everyone is still shell-shocked at the moment," Fitzgerald said. "But I think our time will come. This camp is giving us something to look forward to. And what's great is that this can be easily replicable. If we find that this little camp does well and guests love it, by this time next year we could easily have four or five more. It's quite an exciting new beginning for us."