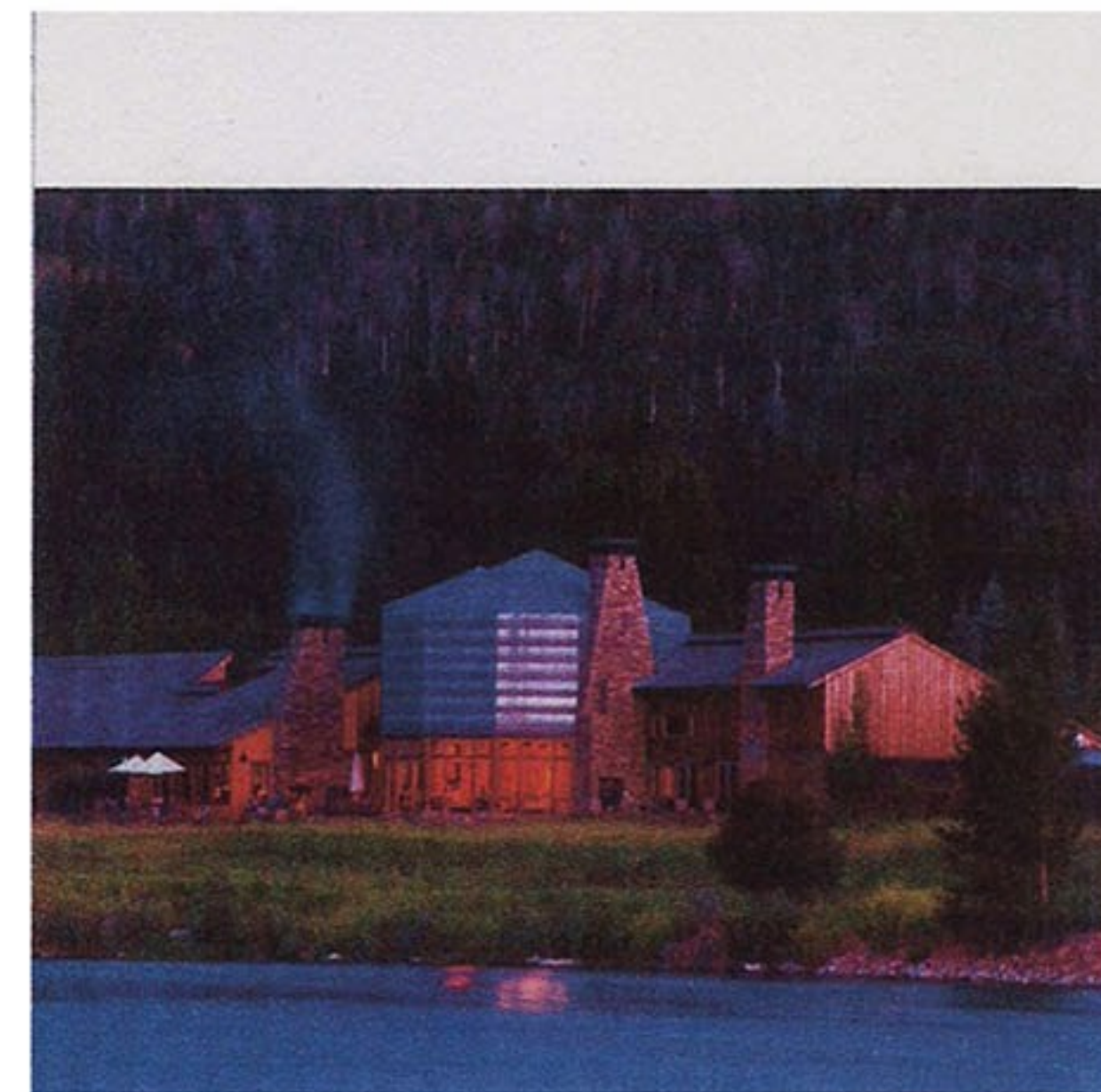


“The 1920’s style Sher Bagh Tented Camp (in Ranthambhore National Park, Rajasthan) was among the first to emulate an African model: 70 per cent of its staff are locals.”



**A NATURAL HIGH**  
REMOTE LUXURY RETREATS  
WITH A LIGHT FOOTPRINT



*It is a crucial part of the Natural Retreats formula that its lodges should be immersed in bravura landscape. This is why the improbable John O’Groats won it over*

agency either renting or selling activities, clothing and equipment. It occupies a 14th-century whitewashed stone cottage – in 1496 the home of Dutch ferryman Jan de Groot, from whom John O’Groats derives its name.

The cottage is the oldest building, but not the most striking. That title goes to the turreted Victorian hotel on the seaford – slate roofed, whitewashed and bristling with gabled windows. It was derelict when Natural Retreats arrived. “Ninety nine people out of a hundred would have said, ‘Bulldoze it,’” declares Bruce Mackay, onsite project manager of GLM Edinburgh, which was in charge of its restoration. Now it will reopen in June as the Inn at John O’Groats by Natural Retreats, with 16 self-catering apartments. Half will be in the hotel and half in a modern extension painted in vivid Nordic colours – red, yellow, blue and green. It was too early at the time of my visit to tell what the suites will look like, but if the arresting exterior is any indication, they will be truly impressive.

This dramatic renovation is symbolic of everything else Natural Retreats has planned. Contemporary architecture in dazzling colours is only the start of it. Schemes for

some of the old, drab, pebble-dashed buildings may include a glistening boutique whisky distillery, brewery, shops and, eventually, primary school and homes for a population of about 1,000. “We want people to live there. This is not a resort, this is a living village,” says Spence.

For visitors, it will be an experience unmatched in Britain. Spence has expanded his company, with Rockefeller’s help, to reinvent the way some of the most beautiful and precious natural places in the US, UK and, eventually, points beyond are perceived and experienced – and, ultimately, how they are protected. It’s no small ambition. This is one instance where “retreat” isn’t likely to be read as a failure to advance. +

**NATURAL SELECTION**

Peter Hughes was a guest of **Natural Retreats** (0844-384 3166; www.naturalretreats.co.uk). Three nights at **John O’Groats** in a lodge sleeping up to six costs from £350. Return flights with **British Airways** (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) from Gatwick to Edinburgh cost from £96, and with **Flybe** (0871-700 2000; www.flybe.com) from Edinburgh to Wick-John O’Groats, from about £122. A suite at **South Fork Lodge** with two queen-sized beds costs from \$480, with breakfast. Return flights with **BA** from Heathrow to Denver cost from £684, and with **US Airways** (+1800-428 4322; www.usairways.com) from Denver to Idaho Falls, from £214. **Bungle Bungalows**, +618-9193 7778; www.kimberleywild.com.au, about £1,038 for a five-day package. **Norman Carr Safaris**, 0845-468 2177; www.normancarrsafaris.com, from \$275 per person full board including activities. **Sher Bagh**, +9176-4225 2120; www.sherbagh.com, from about £330 per person full board excluding activities. **Taj Safaris**, 0800-4588 1825; www.tajsafaris.com, from £260 per person full board including activities.

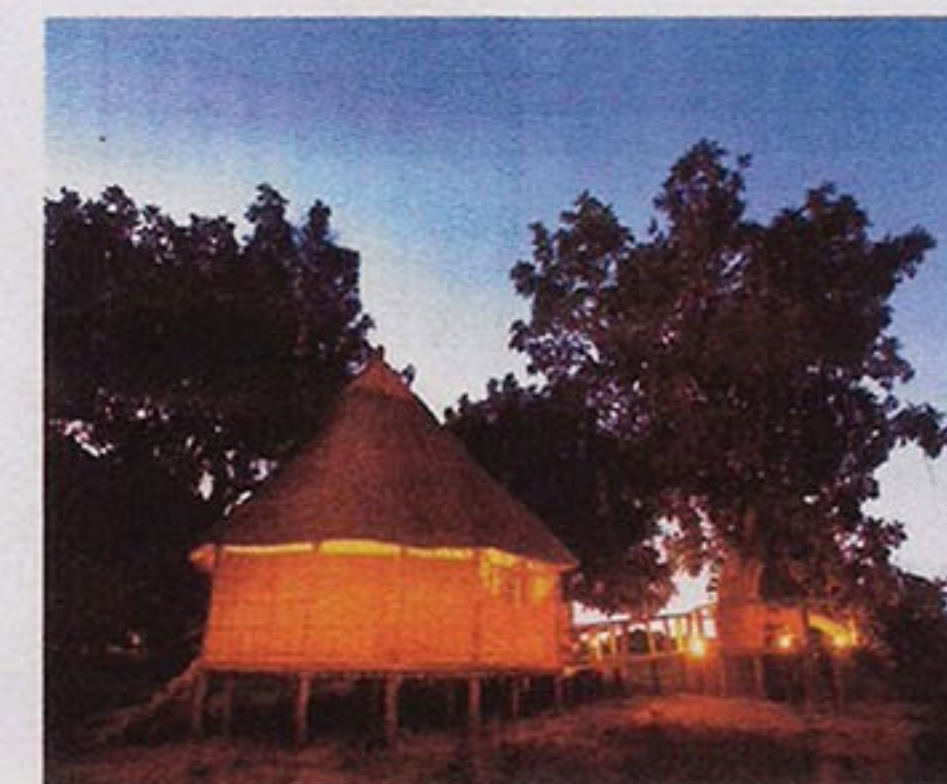
Carr Safaris in Zambia was nearly 50 years ahead of anyone in involving traditional landowners in tourism. Since 1950, when its first camp was set up in conjunction with one of the regional paramount chiefs, the partnership principle has underwritten all its bush camps in and around South Luangwa National Park (example pictured right). It is now standard practice through almost the whole of safari Africa.

In India, the apathy of communities around tiger reserves sometimes threatened the species’ survival. Not only did villagers have no stake in the parks, they considered tigers to be cattle-killing pests. The 1920s-style Sher Bagh Tented Camp (pictured top right) in Ranthambore National Park, Rajasthan was among the first to emulate an African model: 70 per cent of its staff are locals. Taj Safaris’ supremely comfortable lodges at the four major tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh (example pictured on previous page) are exemplary in the way they have used tourism to fund welfare and education, as well as benefit local economies – and protect prized natural resources.

The issues perceived by Spence in the US are somewhat different. He wants to upgrade the standards of lodges around the national parks to far more luxurious levels, to attract a different sort of visitor; but he also wants to make them more relevant to conservation, in particular by creating programmes and providing unique access to imbue a younger generation with his fervour for the wilderness.

In the meantime, in the UK, he has John O’Groats to revitalise along these same lines. So far, 23 lodges have been erected, their fronts turned wide-eyed towards the sea (example pictured on opening pages). Clad in larch wood and, like old crofters’ cottages, roofed with grass, from the outside they nevertheless look a bit like a park of large sheds (partly a by-product of rigorous adherence to eco-standards; planned further landscaping will help). Inside, though, light and spacious living areas have stone chimney breasts, copper light shades and pale timber furniture. Each has a high-spec kitchen and a lounge, where an L-shaped sofa confronts a flatscreen TV, DVD player, wood-burning stove and small library – acknowledgement that Scotland’s climate is not always conducive to days outdoors. (Though Natural Retreats does have a central concierge service, possibly unique in UK self-catering, that advises on and arranges activities.)

Each lodge front is a huge floor-to-ceiling window some 10m long, with big sliding panes that open on to



Clockwise from top left:  
**Natural Retreats’ South Fork Lodge, Idaho, Sher Bagh Tented Camp, Ranthambore National Park, Rajasthan, Norman Carr Safaris’ Nsalo Bush Camp, Zambia**

a deck and views of the coast. Behind the living room are two double bedrooms and a good-sized family bathroom, and a larger master bedroom with a small shower room en suite. Duvets are goose-down, linen is Egyptian cotton and the decorative fabrics are handmade

Scottish Anta tweeds. The overall effect – unfussy, sleek design splashed with bright fabrics – is of a beach house in a Scandinavian thriller.

Ecological concerns are also paramount. Waste disposal, energy saving and rainwater collection reduce the cottages’ environmental impact, and many materials are recycled. Except for the electrical appliances, everything is made in Britain, much of it in Scotland.

It is a crucial part of the Natural Retreats formula that its lodges should be immersed in bravura landscape. This is why the otherwise improbable John O’Groats won it over; the coast here is as dramatic as any in the UK. Aboard the company’s 12-seat RIB, I went bucking into the Pentland Firth, the narrow sluice of water separating Caithness and Orkney, famous for its fearsome tides. We circled the island of Stroma before lingering at the Duncansby Stacks, pillars of rock layered in plates of rosy sandstone (pictured on opening pages). We saw grey seals and porpoises, gannets and fulmars. In summer there are puffins and sometimes minke whales and orcas.

So far the Natural Retreats project has cost about £7m, 30 per cent of which came from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the investment arm of the Highland Council. As well as the self-catering cottages, it has opened an “outfitters”, a term used in its American sense of an