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Why the decolonisation of safaris is long overdue

A new breed of lodges, initiatives and individuals are challenging the status quo of safari holidays

By Sarah Marshall

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For too long safari holidays have been mired in nostalgia, stuck in an Out of Africa time warp. Thankfully, the industry has finally realised that it's time to move on.

Once the preserve of an old guard dressed in desert boots and linens, safaris have become much more inclusive and respectful of local cultures – from the motifs and materials used

in lodge designs, right through to the range of activities offered. Shifting away from the idea this is one big play park where rich foreigners get to gawp at the animals, communities are as much a part of the picture as a bush campfire and a sunset G&T.

“There has been a belief that if you want real expertise, you have to import it from outside Africa,” says Richard Vigne, Executive Director of African Leadership University’s School of Wildlife Conservation, in Rwandan capital Kigali, set up to nurture the homegrown talents of tomorrow.

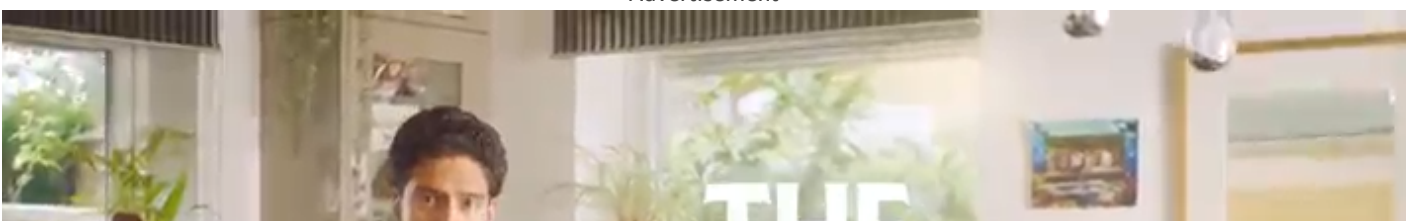


The new style of holiday is breathing fresh air into plains and valleys | CREDIT: Lolebezi

“It has occurred throughout the safari and conservation industry, from camp managers to researchers to protected area managers. Our role is to prepare young Africans for careers in the wildlife economy so they can be the custodians of their own natural resources and wildlife heritage.”

Breathing fresh air into plains and valleys, a new breed of lodges, initiatives and inspiring individuals is challenging the status quo. This new style of decolonised safari is more exciting than ever – here’s why.

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Designs are daring

Out with wooden travel trunks and pith helmets; in with abstract artistic designs. Shifting away from 50 shades of beige, the A-frames of old have been replaced by glass, adobe and thatched structures, often championing tribal traditions.

Responsible for outfitting and Beyond's new Grumeti Serengeti River Lodge in Tanzania (from £909pppn; andbeyond.com) and African Bush Camp's Lolebezi in Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park (from £590pppn; africanbushcamps.com), Johannesburg-based Fox Browne Creative has shifted away from colonial clichés. Marble vanity islands and mood lighting meet modern demands, while art and textiles celebrate local culture.



Marble vanity islands and mood lighting meet modern demands at the Lolebezi in Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park

“Each lodge or camp has to reflect a strong sense of place – relevant to the region, the environment, the culture, the people and wildlife,” says creative director Chris Browne.

Drawing on local techniques and talents is similarly important to Caline Williams-Wynn, founder of Artichoke Design, who has masterminded some of Africa's most recent eye-catching designs – including Bisate's teardrop nests streaming down a hillside in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park.

“I love to go to countries and breathe in what they do, says the Cape Town-based designer, who contracts local craftspeople and is currently using Maasai beadwork in a refurbishment of Asilia's Naboisho camp in the Mara (from £622.50ppn; asiliaafrica.com). “There's a place for a traditional feeling, but I use colonial as a swear word. We need to move away from that.”



Bisate's teardrop nests stream down a hillside in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park | CREDIT: CrookesAndJackson

New faces are taking charge

Once dominated by white ownership, the safari industry has some exciting new faces bringing greater diversity. Hailing from a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds, these entrepreneurs are buzzing with fresh ideas.

Amos Wekesa, founder of Great Lakes Safaris and Uganda Lodges, has an extraordinary story. A cleaner living on less than \$10 a month, he scrimped, saved and defied prejudice to launch his own tourism business. Next year, he will open a new chimp-viewing camp in the Budongo Forest (ugandalodges.com). "I realised tourists from different parts of the world are actually very happy to see their money stay in the hands of local operators," he says.



(L-R) Zimbabwean Beks Ndlovu, founder of the African Bush Camps portfolio and Amos Wekesa, founder of Great Lakes Safaris and Uganda Lodges

Zimbabwean Beks Ndlovu, founder of the African Bush Camps portfolio (africanbushcamps.com), featuring high-end lodges across Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana, has also worked hard to prove himself. “The barriers to entry for somebody who was white would have been far less,” he says.

Crediting a deep understanding of “local dynamics” for helping him earn the trust of communities, the former guide has built a successful brand anchored in African culture and believes the continent’s raft of “great storytellers” should follow suit. Hoping to inspire more black entrepreneurs and black travellers, he adds: “There is a world of possibilities out there waiting for every single person of colour on this continent.”

Activities are changing

Shaking up the tired formula of game drives, bush breakfasts and sun downers, lodges and operators are finding new ways for people to engage with wildlife. Biking, walks and horse riding are now options. Natural Selection has launched a six-night cycle tour through the Okavango Delta, staying in mobile camps (from £4,765pp, excluding flights; naturalselection.travel).



Natural Selection has recently launched a six-night cycle tour through the Okavango Delta | CREDIT: Botswana

Proof passive safaris are a thing of the past, a new trend for citizen science is emerging. At Asilia's Usangu Expedition Camp, which opened in southern Tanzania's Ruaha National Park earlier this year, guests set camera traps and participate in animal counts to build a baseline study of a new wilderness area (four nights from £3,950pppn including domestic flights; abercrombiekent.co.uk).

andBeyond's flagship reserve Phinda, in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal (from £475pp pn; andbeyond.com), also champions this approach. Behind the scenes activities include dehorning rhinos and monitoring rewilded pangolins.



Charli de Vos and crew searching for a pangolin using telemetry | CREDIT: Sarah Marshall

And it's not all about the animals. A world away from voyeuristic village visits and contrived dance shows, cultural tourism is now conducted in a respectful and sensitive manner. Leading the way is the new exclusive-use Kalepo Camp in northern Kenya's remote Mathews Range (from £830pppn including domestic flights; aardvarksafaris.com) where the Samburu communities take centre stage. Hear pastoralists chanting to their cattle at the singing wells and watch traditional warrior games.

New parks are emerging

It's no longer all about the Serengeti or the Delta. As an appetite grows for getting off the beaten track, new areas are stealing some of the spotlight.

An e-visa system, due imminently, will make Mozambique much more accessible. Running along an Indian Ocean coastline in the south, the newly formed Maputo National Park combines turtle and humpback viewing with a chance to see elephants inland, staying at the community-owned Anvil Bay (from £379pp pn; anvilbay.com).



Odzala Discovery Camps run trips into the Congo Basin, to see gorillas, chimps, bongos and butterflies | CREDIT: Getty

For a rainforest adventure, parts of the Republic of Congo (not to be confused with its troubled neighbour) are safe to visit. Odzala Discovery Camps run trips into the Congo Basin, to see gorillas, chimps, bongos and butterflies (seven nights from £11,600pp, excluding flights; congoconservation.travel).

“By travelling to destinations such as Odzala-Kokoua National Park, travellers are helping to make them economically viable for the long term,” says Dave Wilson, Head of Commercial Development at African Parks.

In the north of Uganda, on the border with South Sudan, Kidepo National Park has the potential to become a top-tier safari destination. More than 77 mammal species gather on a valley floor surrounded by mountains. Pioneers in community conservation, Kenya’s Northern Rangelands Trust is working with the park’s neighbouring Karamoja tribes to establish conservancies. Prince William joined them in the park earlier this year to collar elephants. Apoka Lodge is the best camp (from £654pppn; wildplacesafrica.com).



In the north of Uganda, Kidepo National Park has the potential to become a top-tier safari destination | CREDIT: Sarah Marshall

Conservation is key

Conscious of their footprints, camps and lodges are shifting to more sustainable means of operation. Setting a new standard for truly eco safaris, Emboo River Camp in the Mara is Kenya's first carbon neutral lodge (from £1,053pppn; emboo.camp). All vehicles are electric, wastewater is recycled and meals are cooked with biogas.

Going one step further, Grootbos, a private reserve a two-hour drive from Cape Town, has been carbon negative since 2018 (from £1,014pppn; grootbos.com). By reforesting, regenerating fynbos vegetation and using renewable energy, they give back more than they take.



Emboo River Camp in the Mara is Kenya's first carbon neutral lodge | CREDIT: brian siambi

Donating a few footballs to a local school is no longer enough to justify setting up a business on borrowed African savannahs. Conservancies, where land is leased from local people (the real custodians of nature), are a win-win alternative to government-run parks – and wildlife sightings are often better too.

Acknowledging travellers should know where their money is going, The Long Run conservation collective (thelongrun.org) has launched a new impact bill initiative for its members to cut through any green sheen. One of several participating lodges, Borana Lodge (from £695pppn; borana.co.ke) in Kenya's Borana Conservancy presents guests with a receipt at the end of their stay, with a percentage breakdown on how their cash has made a positive impact. Transparency is the new norm.

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