

selling **TRAVEL**

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INSPIRING THOSE WHO LOVE TRAVEL

ALL EYES AND EARS

*Conservation initiatives and
sustainable experiences are
leading the way for safari holidays*

STANDING
BY TRAVEL
AGENTS

how to sell...

Texas

Sri Lanka

Winter sun

Northern Lights cruises

Africa's new Golden Age

Safari destinations across Africa have used the down time from Covid-19 to build back better with experiences that support local communities and wildlife conservation, says **Lauren Jarvis**

A whisper of wind strokes my face and wakes me gently from sleep. It's 3am and for a moment I forget where I am, until I open my eyes and see the silver pixie dust of the Milky Way shimmering overhead, and the faintest glow of a dying campfire low on the horizon.

I'm snuggled under a duvet in bed, but surrounding me are no walls or canvas, above me no ceiling, and under foot no carpet or rug. Tonight, a dome studded to infinity with twinkling stars forms my roof, and the crunchy, shell-scattered layer of salty earth is my floor. I'm sleeping out on Ntwetwe, one of three vast pans which cover 12,000 square kilometres of northeastern Botswana and form the Makgadikgadi Pan, ranked among the largest salt flats in the world.

My day began at dawn at Leroo La Tau, one of Desert & Delta Safaris' dreamy lodges overlooking the Boteti River, a lifeline for the thousands of zebra and wildebeest which migrate between the pans and the mighty Okavango Delta.

From my terrace, I have a front-row seat for the action, as herds of African elephant join the dazzle of zebra at the river to drink, while I sip my tea, mesmerised.

Before sunset, I'm transported by helicopter to another world, touching down on a shimmering plain where drinks and an amazing meal are magically served, before we share stories around the camp fire, as others have done for millennia in this ancient land.

Like a prehistoric sundial, 10 equidistant mattresses form a semi-circle signalling sleep. Leaving the security of the fire behind, we spread out for bed, reassured that in this expanse devoid of water or game, predators won't pass through.

As a star streaks through the inky sky I make a wish, before the desert's sound of silence soothes me back to sleep.

Reconnecting responsibly

While prehistoric salt pans and ancient migrations have endured, there is much that has changed across Africa in our post-pandemic world.

As camps and lodges laid empty, and safari companies struggled to retain bookings and staff, some used the time for renovations and a rethink, brainstorming how to bounce back better.

With travellers keen to tick off bucket-list experiences or celebrate belated milestones after a turbulent two years, the safari trip is set to enter its second 'Golden Age', and thankfully this time, conservation – not hunting – is driving the boom.

"People are seeking a real 'out-of-this-world' experience, and there's no better way to get that than by immersing yourself in the best that the natural world has to offer," says Andrew Flatt, Marketing Manager at Desert & Delta Safaris, which owns nine lodges in Botswana's prime wildlife regions, including the Okavango Delta.

"Remote, secluded and wild have been real buzz words, words that perfectly sum up Botswana's tourism offerings," says Flatt.

Other countries including

South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania are also proving popular, with customers combining a safari with time at the beach, or on islands including the Seychelles and Zanzibar.

Beyond traditional game drives, safari specialists are now offering experiences that meet customer demand for authenticity and deeper connection.

"The pandemic made us very aware of our impact on our natural world and how we have removed ourselves from it," says Hilton Walker, Chief Marketing and Sales Officer at Great Plains, which runs 14 luxury safari properties in Kenya, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

"A safari is a life-changing, emotive experience that fills that void, helping us to connect with nature, ourselves and others."

Once seen as a holiday choice for retirees, the demographic for safari adventures has changed. "We are seeing lots of enquiries from families and multigenerational groups," says Walker, "while younger travellers are seeking out experiences like horse riding, mountain biking, canoeing and photographic and walking safaris, which we offer at a range of our camps."

The climate crisis has also left many looking

for greener ways to travel, with safari companies improving their eco-credentials in response, moving away from single-use plastics, introducing more vegetarian and vegan meals, and making the switch to solar power and electric safari vehicles and boats. Customers are also investing more time researching safari company credentials.

"Travellers have become far more conscious of where they are spending their money, opting for responsible companies that support conservation and community initiatives, and which provide genuine, proven opportunities for the people of the country," says Flatt, pointing out that Desert & Delta Safaris employs Africa's only all-female guiding team at its five-star Chobe Game Lodge, and offers the first luxury safari circuit to be managed exclusively by locals. "The power is in the hands of the traveller, who is now informed, educated and aware. Companies which run sustainable and responsible operations definitely stand to benefit from this shift."

What's new

Conservation initiatives: Great Plains has opened several new safari camps, including Mara Toto Camp, Mara Plains Camp and Mara Expedition Camp in Kenya; Tembo Plains Camp and

NIGHT DRIVE IN LEROO LA TAU, BOTSWANA



BOTSWANA IS HOME TO 350 SPECIES OF BIRD



ELEPHANT CROSSING AT CHOBE GAME LODGE



MAKGADIKGADI SALT PAN SLEEP OUT

► Mpala Jena Camp in Zimbabwe; and Great Plains Okavango Explorers Camp in Botswana. Profits from its luxury, walking, flying, photographic and horseback safaris support communities and conservation across Africa, including its new Project ReWild Zambezi, one of the world's largest wildlife relocation initiatives. greatplainsconservation.com

Audley Travel has added two new properties with a conservation focus to its Africa portfolio: Asilia's new Usangu Expedition Camp in the wetlands of Tanzania's Ruaha National Park, and Marataba Conservation Camps in a private section of Marakele National Park, South Africa. audleytravel.com

Cottar's Safaris' Budding Conservationist programme hopes to inspire the David Attenboroughs and Jane Goodalls of tomorrow with the chance to join female conservation rangers on their daily duties, monitoring wildlife species, removing wire poaching snares, reforesting land and protecting the animals that roam the Olderkesi Conservancy, bordering

Kenya's Maasai Mara, Serengeti and Loliondo reserves. cottars.com

New product: Onguma Safari Camps is offering overnight stays overlooking a waterhole in Namibia's Onguma Nature Reserve in a custom-built 'Dream Cruiser'. The vehicle has a four-poster bed and lounge on its upper deck, with a downstairs fully-equipped shower room, and will be offered alongside a stay at the Onguma Camp Kala, opening near Etosha National Park in November 2022. onguma.com

Top experiences

Help protect rhinos: Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Laikipia, Kenya, offers the opportunity to join K9 anti-poaching dogs in training. The Conservancy also allows responsible up-close encounters with the world's last two surviving northern white rhino, the chance to view black rhino in their natural habitat, and a range of accommodation from camping to luxury lodges, with 100% of profits reinvested into conservation and community development. Join Helping Rhinos' Global Gala for Rhinos on World Rhino Day, September 22, to raise funds for rhino conservation projects. olpejetaconservancy.org / helpingrhinos.org

See the marine 'Big Five': South Africa is known as one of the best places to spot the Big Five – elephant, rhino, lion, buffalo and leopard – but Sodwana Bay also offers the chance to see the Marine Big Five on a Zululand Dive Adventure with Coral Divers, a PADI five-star Resort and Dive Centre. Set within the UNESCO iSimangaliso Wetland Park in KwaZulu-Natal, the bay is home to humpback whale, ragged-tooth shark, giant manta ray, leatherback turtle and bottlenose dolphin. travel.padi.com / zulu.org.za

Go on a desert safari: Ultimate Safaris have two luxurious new camps in Namibia, offering unique encounters with the desert-adapted wildlife. Built at the base of two granite outcrops, Onduli Ridge enjoys elephant and rhino tracking from its self-sustaining six-suite lodge near the UNESCO site of Twyfelfontein, while the intimate Camp Sossus has six tented rooms on the Namib Tsaris Conservancy, roamed by giraffe, oryx, leopard and cheetah. ultimatesafaris.na / visitnamibia.com.na

Support indigenous change-makers: While historically Africa's safari companies have had white owners, the tide is turning, with more black African men and women now running successful operations across the continent.

African Bush Camps Founder and CEO Beks Ndlovu is a Zimbabwean who worked as a guide, and recently opened his 17th property in the Lower Zambezi National Park in Zambia. Completely solar-powered, luxurious Lolebezi has four suites and two family units with private plunge pools, and offers walking safaris and canoe trips on the Zambezi River. africanbushcamps.com / zambiatourism.com

Where to book it

AFRICA COLLECTION – 01403 256 655

Stay eight nights at four Desert & Delta Safaris properties – Chobe Game Lodge, Nxamaseri Island Lodge, Camp Xakanaxa and Leruo La Tau, including the Makgadikgadi Pan sleep-out experience – from £5,495pp, with return flights on Qatar Airways from London Heathrow via Doha to Johannesburg, Airlink flights from Kasane to Maun, and internal transfers. africacollection.com / desertdelta.com



GREAT PLAINS MASAI MARA CAMP, KENYA