



Into the

Forget what you think you know about safaris in Africa and discover five new ways to experience the oldest inhabited continent on earth, writes Catherine Marshall.

wild

David Rogers

Okahirongo Elephant Lodge
in Kaokoland, Namibia



NAMIBIA

Namibia Desert Discovery By Air

The Namib Desert seems an unlikely place for a safari. It ripples inland from the Atlantic seaboard, flows into cracked pans, climbs wind-sculpted ranges and reaches into grasslands. But this south-west African wasteland is deeply inscribed with animal tracks; they intensify between July and October, when zebras kick up clouds of dust on their way to ephemeral rivers and gemsbok tiptoe along skyscraper-high dunes, their horns spiralling in sharp counterpoint to their moonscape surroundings. When the rains come, flamingos colour deluged salt pans and lions pad through alabaster drifts tossing their manes in rhythm with swaying grasslands.

The setting

A diorama of desertscares is revealed on this Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.com.au) itinerary. A private aircraft transports up to 12 guests from the capital, Windhoek, to Ongava Reserve, a wildlife sanctuary abutting Etosha Pan in the country’s arid north-east. The journey continues westwards to the Kunene River, a waterway sluicing a boundary between Namibia and Angola. Then it’s on to the reclusive Kaokoland and the world’s oldest desert, the Namib.

The stay

The campsites bloom like desert roses amid apparent desolation. Anderssons at Ongava echoes the raw beauty of the environment; here, guests learn from scientists working at the nearby Ongava Research Centre. Okahirongo River Camp peers out from the boulders across the Kunene River, heaving with crocodiles and humming with birdlife; a cruise provides the opportunity to step foot on Angolan soil. In Kaokoland, the adobe-clad Okahirongo Elephant Lodge rises from the earth. It’s not the

only settlement in this solitary region: Namibia’s last nomads, the Himba people, offer guests a rare insight into their culture during village visits. “One of the highlights is the scenic flight south from Swakopmund, as we follow the famed Skeleton Coast, flying over colonies of seals and deserted shipwrecks,” says Patrick Clementson, product manager at Abercrombie & Kent Australia. “[Then] we head inland over the sand dunes and circle the famous Dead Vlei, a white clay pan surrounded by majestic sand dunes, in Sossusvlei.” All eyes turn to the heavens at night: the Sossusvlei Private Desert Reserve, an ocean of dunes around the Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, is on the boundary of the International Dark Sky Reserve of the NamibRand Nature Reserve. Retract the skylight above your bed and let the stars lull you to sleep. The surprise Desert elephants are found in just two countries: Namibia and Mali. If luck is with you, Himba guides will lead you to these rare, endangered creatures.

ZAMBIA

Chisa Busanga, Kafue National Park

For seven long months the rains fall, transforming Busanga Plains into a luminescent, grass-flecked sea. In July the skies cease their rumblings, the deluge recedes and wildlife converges on shrinking waterholes and wilted grasslands. African wild dogs dissolve into this stippled landscape; black-maned lions wear socks of mud as they traverse the waterlogged basin. At least their locks are dry – during the rainy season they’re forced to swim to the other side. Only the amphibians and water-loving antelope, such as sitatunga, puku and lechwe, lament the seasonal change.

The setting

Receding waters also signal the return of adventurers to this little-explored plain in Kafue National Park in central Zambia, accessible by road and plane from the country’s capital, Lusaka. This is the oldest and largest of Zambia’s national parks, yet it flies far beneath the tourism radar. This is set

to change, for Kafue is brimming with untapped potential. “Zambia is often overlooked in favour of its better-known counterparts, Botswana and Zimbabwe,” says Lara Behrens from Bench Africa (benchafrika.com). “Zambia’s ecosystems are just as diverse, with many of its regions known for greater concentrations of wildlife. In Kafue, travellers are even further off the beaten track, meaning they often have these remote wilderness areas to themselves.”

The stay

Like the weaver bird nests dangling high in the trees, the rooms at Chisa (pictured) – Nyanja for “birds nest” – are designed to withstand seasonal flooding. Garbed with intricately woven twigs and secreted amid terminalia trees, these human-sized nests deliver a bird’s view from their stilted perches; the

window is a gaping aperture overlooking the dambos (shallow wetlands) and sweeping plains. Twitchers could spend their days watching for the 500-odd bird species; the outlook remains unimpeded even when you’re showering. Resemblance to structure is where the avian similarities end: no other nest is as special as these canvas-lined, stylishly appointed dwellings. Entry is via a stairway (or an elevator in the accessible suite). Stroll down to the campfire for a sundowner and dine beneath a lavish tent with the plains as your entertainment.

The surprise

Silent safaris have arrived: the camp’s solar power plant charges electric Land Cruisers and e-bikes for the most tranquil of game viewings – nothing to hear bar the engine’s hum and the heart-stilling sounds of the bush.

Olwen Evans. Stevie Mann

68 Okavango Explorers Camp

From above, the Okavango Delta is veined with waterways and mottled with bushveld. After the rains have fallen in January and February, water surges into the Selinda Spillway, leaks across the savanna and floods the woodlands. Elephants lumber through the mire, displacing the clouds that dance upon its mirrored surface. Giraffes splash towards higher ground, where leopards keep their paws dry on sun-warmed outcrops. Every nerve is alive as you glide along the swamp in a mokoro (traditional dugout canoe): crocodiles’ eyes blaze amber above the waterline and spear grass conceals predators come to drink.

The setting

The Great Plains Selinda Reserve unspools below as a bush plane flies you from the Okavango’s gateway city, Maun. Overlooking the intersection of two pristine ecosystems – the upper Okavango Delta and the Selinda Spillway, which tunnels a path from the delta to the Linyanti Swamps – the remote campsite

is the newest addition to Great Plains Conservation (greatplainsconservation.com), which was co-founded by National Geographic explorers-in-residence and filmmakers Dereck and Beverly Joubert.

“The latest camp in our Explorer Collection is set within what might just be Great Plains’ best-kept secret – the Selinda Reserve,” says Dereck.

“It offers some of the highest concentrations of wildlife in the region. Our guests can expect to spot lions, leopards and wild dogs, all of which hunt regularly in the area, along with elephants, giraffes and rare antelopes.”

The stay

The romance of bygone expeditions is evoked in the comforts concealed within your tent: mosquito-netted beds, writing desks, travel

chests. A swimming pool offers respite from the midday heat and a solar-energy plant heats the water for an evening shower. The call of the wild is amplified as the sun sets and you gather around a bonfire for aperitifs; this is a private utopia for family groups, since it sleeps only a maximum of 12. Wake up at dawn to head out on a game drive, a guided walk across the floodplain or a paddle along the spillway (thousands of elephants throng the watercourse at the height of the dry season in late September).

The surprise

Dip your toes into forbidden waters during a lantern-lit dinner on a submerged sandbank. Guards will be on the lookout for danger as you dine with the stars blazing above you and the moon shimmering on the water at your feet.



Andrew Howard

The Great Walk of Africa

As the rivers course down from the Kenyan highlands and across the Tsavo wilderness on their way to the sea, hearts beat in time with elephants’ footfall and pulses race at cheetah speed. Every sense is piqued as you set off in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro on Africa’s longest walking safari, a 10-day, 160-kilometre expedition modelled on the hunting safaris of lore. But the continent’s revered species will be preserved in memory rather than as trophies as you trace the Tsavo and Galana rivers. These wilds are inhabited by the last of the Great Tuskers, elephants whose ancestors were hunted for tusks so immense they would scour runnels into the ground as they walked.

The setting

“Our safari crosses the largest pristine wilderness region of East Africa and it’s thrilling, while you’re on foot, miles from vehicles, to see lions, leopards, buffalos, giraffes, zebras and wild hunting dogs that have made their homes along these spectacular rivers,” says veteran trekking guide Iain Allan.

Tsavo encompasses two wildlife belts bisected by the railway line from Mombasa to Nairobi: Tsavo West and Tsavo East national parks, Kenya’s largest protected wilderness.

Mount Kilimanjaro and the Loita Hills are the poignant backdrop for this Classic Safari Company (classicsafaricompany.com.au) expedition, which is best undertaken during the cooler months between May and September. A maximum of nine guests are led by guides and trackers along game trails through a mosaic of riverine forest and doum palm groves, rocky outcrops and floodplains. Rivers are crossed in tandem to warn off crocodiles and every bend promises a new sighting. “To walk up to an unsuspecting

family of elephants, using the wind to its advantage, silently photographing, before leaving them oblivious to our presence, is one of the greatest experiences Africa can offer,” says Allan.

The stay

Oases of luxury accommodation appear miraculously at the end of each day, when walkers come upon the night’s mobile camp, positioned to make the most of river views. Dust is washed away under hot showers, stamina fortified with gourmet meals, bodies restored on comfy camp beds. No trace is left behind when the camp is packed up every day or two; only your tracks will remain.

The surprise

Theories vary as to why Tsavo’s maneless male lions lost their crowning glory: male-pattern baldness due to high levels of testosterone, perhaps an evolutionary cooling-down trick? Their forebears were notorious for terrorising men labouring on the railway line in the late 19th century but armed guides offer peace of mind for today’s visitors.





TANZANIA AND KENYA

The ALU WILDeconomy Masterclass

The Serengeti is a place of dreams. Of leopards sashaying through waist-high grasses, zebras with their jailbird coats, thorn trees traced in black against the burning sun. Tanzanian savanna flows across the border into Kenya’s Maasai Mara National Park, where Africa’s legendary Big Five roam. What lies beneath this idyll’s surface is less easily seen: the vital synergy between conservation and community. &Beyond’s (andbeyond.com) in-situ masterclass, run in collaboration with the African Leadership University (ALU), prompts guests to consider how their expedition contributes to broader environmental preservation.

“What became blatantly obvious at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the resilience of conservation is compromised when we rely on a single activity, such as tourism, to drive economic benefits for communities and governments,” says Joss Kent, &Beyond’s executive chairman and CEO. “There are far more activities than simply tourism that need to be understood in order to create a successful and balanced wildlife economy.”

The setting

The entry city of Arusha sprawls across the edge of the Great Rift Valley in north-east Tanzania, foreshadowing an extraordinary journey. Mount Meru and Mount Kilimanjaro anchor a landscape of ranges and calderas, valleys and salt lakes, woodlands and savanna. Communities and wildlife live side-by-side in the midst of this grandiosity.

The stay

Far from the madding safari crowd, Grumeti Serengeti River Lodge (left) is located at a remote tributary filled with hippos and crocodiles. Curved eaves mimic the bow in the river and elegant circular features – the open-air bar, private plunge pools in each of the 10 suites – honour Maasai manyattas (huts). At mealtimes, guests oversee the chef’s preparation of local specialities, including fish from nearby Lake Victoria. Across the border, Kichwa Tembo Tented Camp overlooks the

Saparingo River and a great sweep of the Maasai Mara. Even though it’s sumptuous, the camp treads lightly on this fragile tract: organic vegetables are served straight from the shamba (food garden), bathing water is solar-heated and drinking water is bottled on site.

The surprise

Interactions with fishing communities, foragers, Maasai warriors and a traditional doctor allow guests to consider the grassroots context of Africa’s wildlife resource management and the implications for sustainability and development. Masterclass host and director of research at ALU’s School of Wildlife Conservation Dr Sue Snyman provides research-based insight into issues such as carbon markets, hunting and wildlife ranching. “Travellers will understand that conservation and development are not mutually exclusive,” she says. ●