

second *nature*

Style and sustainability make perfect bedpartners at a new breed of luxurious safari camps across Africa. By Sue Watt

AFTERGLOW
Animal spotting on the Chiawa River, Zambia, at sunset



Mention Africa and most people think of vast savannah plains busy with wildlife, a sparkling coastline dotted with desert islands and tribal communities whose lives seem to have stayed unchanged over centuries. All of these images are very real – but all, in one way or another, are under threat.

Fortunately, Africa is today benefitting from a boom in responsible tourism that has the protection of the continent's fragile environment and indigenous people at its heart. Tourists are becoming part of the solution, rather than the problem, as luxury lodges work to protect the truly priceless elements here without compromising on style. From Mozambique to the Seychelles, Tanzania to The Gambia, lodge

owners are demonstrating their commitment to local communities and the environment, upping the continent's accommodation ante all the while.

Tanzania: Ngorongoro Crater Lodge

Overseen by upmarket safari group &Beyond, this stunning lodge is the epitome of opulence. On arrival, your butler will pour you a glass of champagne and run you a petal-strewn bath; from your perch you'll enjoy uninterrupted views across the Ngorongoro Crater and Ngorongoro Conservation Area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site teeming with animals. Rooms are all raw silk and velvet, and fine wines accompany delicious degustation dinners. But there's much more to the lodge than sumptuous surrounds. Almost all of the staff are local Maasai people and

the &Beyond Foundation supports a whole variety of conservation and community projects focusing on education and healthcare.

Seychelles: North Island

They say you can't turn back time – but that's exactly what seems to be happening on North Island. Conceptualised by eco-tourism operators Wilderness Safaris in 1997, this private island is one of the most ambitious rehabilitation projects in Africa. It's also one of the most coveted thanks to a certain royal honeymoon – Kate and Will vacationed here in May. Abandoned following the collapse of the coconut industry in the 1970s, the island was overrun with feral animals and invasive plant life, which were destroying its natural habitat. Today, these are

being eradicated and indigenous plants, endangered birds and tortoises are returning, with the help of a resident ecologist. But this is no stuffy science laboratory; it is one of the most exclusive barefoot luxury destinations in the world. Each of the 11 individually designed villas has its own plunge pool overlooking the Indian Ocean, and guests are encouraged to participate in activities that range from scuba diving to fly fishing and sunset cruising. The price tag may be high but the conservation work it funds – and the island's solitude and serenity – are priceless.

South Africa: Ulusaba

Sir Richard Branson's private game reserve unites style and sustainability in South Africa's Sabi Sand Reserve. On the verge of

Kruger National Park, the property offers a collection of dramatic accommodations, from rooms and suites in the Rock Lodge – perched on a hilltop overlooking the Drakensberg Mountain range – to Cliff Lodge suites with private pools and Jacuzzis, and the Safari Lodge, where guests bed down in luxurious treehouse-style villas accessed by rope bridges. Needless to say, wildlife safaris are among the excursions on offer. But if you're looking to give something back to the community you can also volunteer your time to the lodge's charitable project, Pride 'n Purpose, working to improve local access to food, water and health services.

Kenya: Elsa's Kopje

Named after Elsa the lioness of *Born Free* fame, this discreet lodge

AFRICA, AS YOU LIKE IT

Clockwise from above: Dusk falls over Fundu Lagoon lodge in Tanzania; beachside bliss at the Seychelles' North Island resort; old waterfront mansions make up Mozambique's Ibo Island Lodge



FROND MEMORIES

Clockwise from above: Water views at Fundu Lodge; North Island is ringed by coral atolls

lies just above George Adamson's original campsite in Meru National Park, northern Kenya, and is the justifiable winner of the 2010 *Good Safari Guide's* Best Safari Property in Africa. Its private house and eight cottages blend in seamlessly with the surrounds – indeed, in some instances the surrounds have become the lodge, with trees growing inside rooms and rocks and boulders taking the place of walls. Elsa's was established in the 1990s when the park was in serious danger of being de-gazetted, having lost much of its wildlife to poaching;

its owners, Liz and Stefano Cheli, have helped restore the area to its natural state, at the same time providing employment and education for the local Tharaka community.

Zambia: Chiawa

On the shores of the Zambezi River, this family-run lodge, opened in the late 1980s, was the first of its kind in Lower Zambezi National Park, and it hasn't lost one iota of style with age. Indulgent "tents" have king-size beds, sofas and armchairs, timber flooring and his-and-her washbasins. Yet, you still feel as though you're in the middle of the bush – look out your window and you might spot an elephant wandering past. Since opening, Chiawa has been heavily involved in conservation, working to reduce poaching, lobbying to achieve a ban on killing fish in the ower Zambezi and assisting in myriad environmental research projects. The camp is also renowned for its owners' commitment to establishing and supporting health and education projects among local communities

and for its Safari Guide Training Course, ensuring your guide will be one of the best in Africa.

Mozambique: Ibo Island Lodge

At Ibo Island Lodge in the heart of the Quirimbas National Park, Kevin and Fiona Record have sensitively restored three century-old waterfront mansions fitted out with mahogany beds, silk throws and luxurious linens. As dedicated to the local community as they are to their property, the Records have helped to restore the island's traditional silversmith industry, setting up a training facility through which younger islanders can learn the ancient craft. On guided visits to nearby villages, guests can get real insights into the lives of local people, who benefit directly from tourism. A recent addition is the resort's island-hopping safari, in which guests sail on a traditional Arab *dhow*, stay on remote uninhabited islands and explore the culture of people who rarely encounter travellers.

Botswana: Zarafa Camp

Imagine having 130,000 hectares of natural wilderness almost entirely to yourself: this is Selinda Reserve, and Zarafa is one of just two camps here. Owned by National Geographic filmmakers Dereck and Beverly Joubert, Zarafa was once a private reserve for trophy hunting of lions, elephants and leopards; when the Jouberts took over, the plains were sparsely populated with wildlife that was nervous and aggressive. Today's guests shoot only with cameras, and the reserve is now a haven for animals, particularly the endangered African wild dog, which returns each year to breed. The camp – four oversized marquis-style tents with verandahs overlooking the floodplains of Zibadianja Lagoon – offers every indulgence imaginable, yet it is dedicated to reducing its carbon footprint through initiatives such as solar power and extensive recycling programs.

Uganda: Sanctuary Gorilla Forest Camp

Almost half of the world's 700 mountain gorillas live in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, a UNESCO World Heritage Site within Bwindi National Park. So don't be surprised if you bump into one as you leave your luxury tent here – they've been known to saunter casually around the grounds. After an exhilarating day tracking the mighty primates, Gorilla Forest Camp is an idyllic spot to return to, overlooking the jungle canopy. Sanctuary Retreats, who own this remote, atmospheric camp, support Bwindi's local communities, particularly the Batwa Pygmies who were evicted from the forest in 1993 when it became a National Park. Guests can learn about their lives and culture by spending a day at the new Batwa Conservation Project and can also help support health projects at the Bwindi Community Hospital.



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travelfacts

gettingthere

Under a codeshare agreement, South African Airways and Qantas fly direct from Perth and Sydney to Johannesburg. From here, SAA have connections on to other African cities. Kenya Airways also offers flights from Sydney to numerous African cities.

- Kenya Airways. 1300-787-310; kenya-airways.com
- Qantas. 131-313; qantas.com.au
- South African Airways. 1300-435-972; flysaa.com

gettingaround

Tour companies offering guided trips around Africa include:

- Adventure World. 1300-295-049; adventureworld.com.au
- Creative Holidays. creativeholidays.com
- Wildlife Safari. 1800-998-558; wildlifesafari.com.au

whentogo

Avoid the rainy months in East Africa, which include April to June. The best time to visit Southern Africa is between April and October. The Gambia is best visited from November through March.

wheretostay

- Chiawa Camp. 260-211/261-588; chiawa.com
- Elsa's Kopje. 254-20/600-3090; elsaskopje.com
- Ibo Island Lodge. 27-21/702-0285; iboisland.com
- Fundu Lagoon. 44-192/343-7634; fundulagoon.com
- Mandina River Lodge. makasutu.com
- Ngorongoro Crater Lodge. 27-11/809-4300; andbeyond.com
- North Island. 248-4/293-100; north-island.com
- Sanctuary Gorilla Forest Camp. 254-20/695-0002; sanctuaryretreats.com
- Ullusaba. 27-11/325-4405; ullusaba.virgin.com
- Zarafa Camp. 267/625-0505; wilderness-safaris.com

furtherinformation

For tips on travelling around Africa:

- Botswana. botswanaturism.co.bw
- The Gambia. visitthegambia.gm
- Kenya. 61-2/9959-4277; magicalkenya.com
- Mozambique. mozambique tourism.co.za
- Seychelles. seychelles.travel
- South Africa. 1800-238-643; southafrica.net
- Tanzania. tanzaniatouristboard.com
- Uganda. visituganda.com
- Zambia. zambiatourism.com



RUB-A-DUB-DUB
An opulent bathroom at Ngorongoro
Crater Lodge, Tanzania

Tanzania: Fundu Lagoon

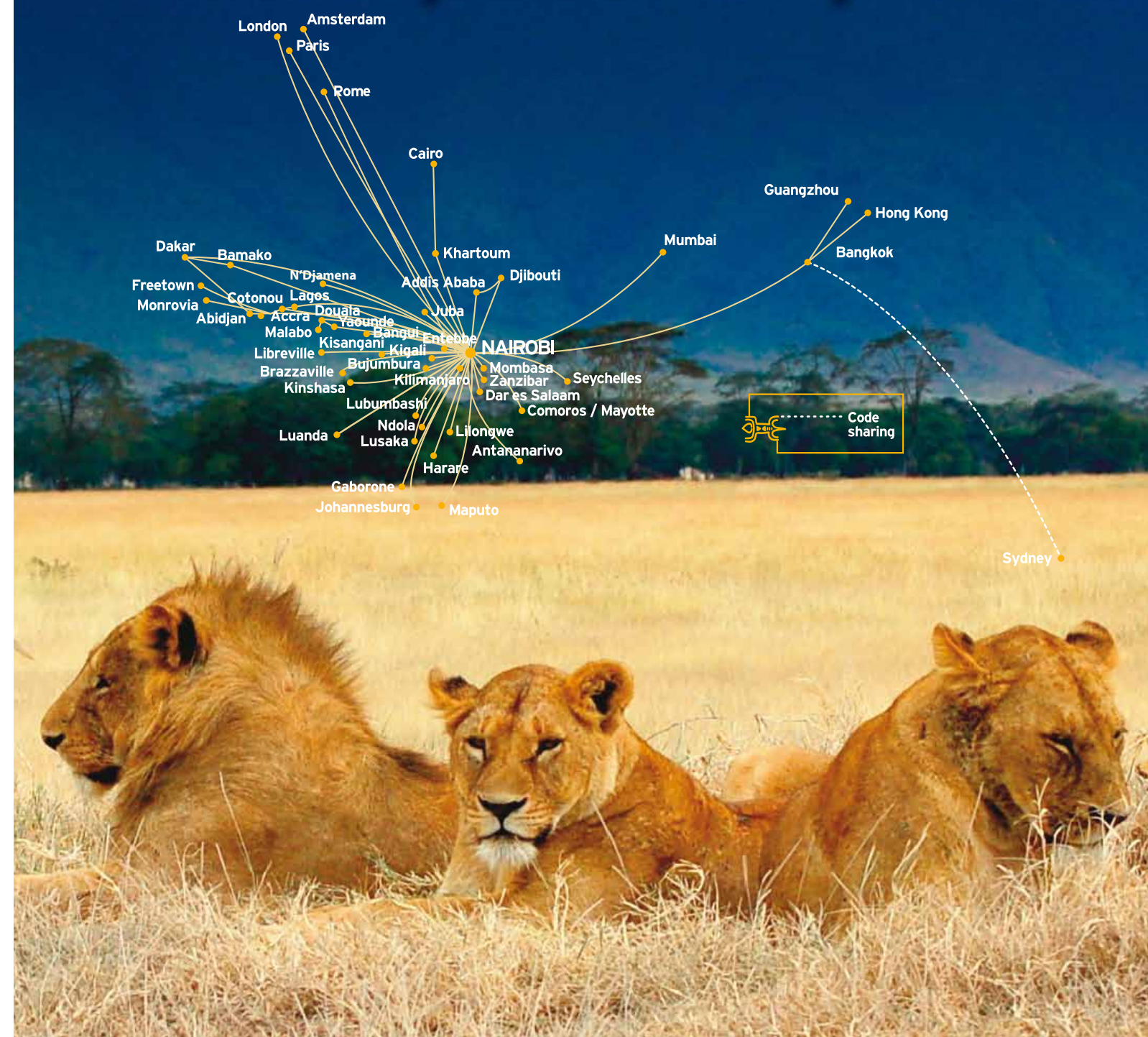
Pemba Island in Tanzania is Zanzibar's little sister, less developed and with fewer tourists. It's the ideal spot for an eco-friendly retreat with all the trimmings. Arriving at Fundu Lagoon by boat, the first thing you see is its extensive jetty, jutting out to sea and leading to the sunset bar. The 18 tented rooms, stylish and spacious, are dotted on lush hillsides above the shore and in secluded spots with access to the beach. Suites have their own plunge pools or you can take dips in the stunning infinity pool, enjoy scuba diving from the camp's private PADI centre and swim with whale sharks as they migrate. Fundu runs the Wambaa Village Community Fund, which is raising money to build a school for more than 500 children, a mosque and water wells, and its Light Up Wambaa Project aims to provide solar lamps for the entire village.

The Gambia: Mandina River Lodge

When James English and Lawrence Williams moved from the UK to The Gambia in 1992, they were so moved by the effects of deforestation and depopulation in the Makasutu region that they decided to establish a cultural forest centre to showcase the local heritage and reinvigorate the area. It was such a success they added the luxurious Mandina River Lodge. This hidden gem on the shores of the Mandina Bolong, a tributary of the River Gambia, has four serene floating villas and one house on stilts enveloped by tropical gardens alive with birdsong. Take a nature walk around the forests at dawn or dusk, make pottery with local artists, dance with the Jola tribespeople or visit the *marabou* (holy man) to have your fortune told – all proceeds go directly to the community. •

Photographs courtesy of
respective lodges.

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