



Consider a Better Safari: 4 Innovative Ways Lodges in Africa Are Going Green

by Jaclyn Trop



Photo: Courtesy of Few & Far Luvhondo

Machaba Mentions

Link to website

We didn't wake the pride of Mohawk lions as they napped during our afternoon game drive around South Africa's Kruger National Park. Nor did we disturb the hippo bathing in the dam behind the pool, its eyes peeking out above the water.

At Cheetah Plains, an opulent oasis within Kruger's private Sabi Sand Game Reserve, we could even sidle up to a baby elephant wrestling with a tree trunk under the watchful gaze of its mother.

The sound of an engine or a puff of exhaust can send a herd of elephants stampeding, but our custom-built, open-top electric Toyota Land Cruiser allowed us to get closer to the wildlife without disturbing the ecosystem.





Photo: Courtesy of Cheetah Plains/Dook

Though few safari lodges in Africa have embraced electric vehicles — due to the costs and the long distances their trucks cover daily — sustainability is becoming a key concern for tourists to Africa, according to search data from Go2Africa, a travel agency based in Cape Town.

Interest in sustainable safaris has surged more than 1,000% over the past four years, said Liesel van Zyl, head of positive impact and product development at Go2Africa.

"We're definitely seeing an increase in our guests' interest in sustainability and connection with the local communities. Our clients look for experiences that foster authentic community engagement during their trip to Africa."

Increasingly, African safari lodges and operators are taking note.



Photo: Courtesy of Cheetah Plains/Elsa Young

Though the fleet of electric 4x4s at Cheetah Plains, the first carbon-negative safari lodge in the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve, is unusual, you don't need an EV to go green in the bush. There are many ways to become more sustainable, and technology is providing safari operators an unprecedented chance to re-think the experience while conserving the environment, from harnessing the sun's energy to training local poachers to work as tour guides.

The world's greenest safaris reveal a blueprint for eco-conscious travel: Keep reading for four ways African safaris are becoming more sustainable, plus some of the most eco-friendly operators out there.

Using Solar Power



Photo: Courtesy of Cheetah Plains/Dook

Most of Africa's safari camps are powered by generators and a paltry electric grid. But over the past decade, many lodges have converted to solar power. That said, harnessing enough energy from the sun can be tricky on overcast days when the power must be rationed.

Cheetah Plains' solar plant uses more than 1,200 rooftop panels to power everything from the electric fencing that surrounds the lodge to the air-conditioning, hot water, and lighting in the trio of bespoke, modern art-filled guest villas. The camp also has three dual-access trackers, a type of solar panel that tilts to follow the sun to realize maximum energy output.

"Every day we need to get a little bit of math done to have enough power for the lodge and villas, particularly after a game drive and before dinner," Renier Ackerman, Cheetah Plains' technical manager, said during a tour of the lodge's solar plant.

On most days, the lodge harvests enough solar energy, stored in batteries, to power all three of its villas. On cloudy days, if there's not enough power stored in the batteries, the camp pulls its power from a generator. "Our goal is to be able to sustain a whole overcast day on solar power," Ackerman said.

Training Poachers to Become Guides



Photo: Getty Images/Ivan Pantic

Asilia Africa's Usangu Expedition Camp in Tanzania is helping conserve the environment by training local poachers to become guides. Set on a former hunting block on the Usangu wetlands in Tanzania's Ruaha National Park, the camp conducts scientific research while employing people from the surrounding community as guides, chefs, and hospitality bingwa, a Swahili term loosely translated as "service champion."

Depleted by decades of illegal poaching, fishing, and farming, the land was converted into a research-based safari camp in partnership with safari operator Asilia and the Tanzanian government. Its profits from tourism — the camp has six glamping tents with en-suite bathrooms and hot water showers overlooking the open plains of the Usangu wetland — support Usangu's conservation work and reduce the need for locals to rely on illegal poaching for income.

The program gives them "a job, a future, and reason to protect the area and make it sustainable for non-consumptive tourism as opposed to poaching and gleaning from the National Park," says Gregg Hughes, an independent safari and adventure operator. "They can also influence their fellow villages and local children when they return home not to encroach on the park."

Anderson, my endlessly enthusiastic private guide at Usangu, poached hornbills — which he liked to barbecue and wash down with honey, which he also poached — before the camp opened and hired him as a trainee. Now he's protecting that very habitat by helping gather research on the fauna. On our evening game drive, he excitedly showed me how to set up an overnight video feed — an iPad connected to a thermal camera — that detects the heat print of the local wildlife as they roam the night.

"Look, a porcupine!" he exclaims, pointing to its eyes: two glowing orbs on the grainy screen. "Oh, there it goes, walking away."

Focusing on Sustainable Agriculture and Farm-to-Table Ingredients



Photo: Courtesy of Few & Far Luvhondo

Few & Far Luvhondo, a brand-new eco-lodge within UNESCO's Vhembe Biosphere Reserve in Limpopo, South Africa, emphasizes sustainable agriculture and local ingredients.

CEO and co-owner Sarah Dusek says Luvhondo's farm-to-table culinary program will use fresh fruits and vegetables grown

on-site and picked at their seasonal peak, thereby shortening the safari supply chains that typically come with a heavy carbon footprint.

"We're cutting down the ecological footprint associated with shipping food from distant suppliers and creating a closed-loop system where food waste is composted and used to nourish the soil, reducing waste and supporting a regenerative cycle for our produce," Dusek said.

The camp will also partner with local farms that support its culinary philosophy: farm what's in season, harvest what the land provides, and fertilize the fields with compost food waste.

Prioritizing Conservation



Photo: Courtesy of Machaba Safaris

One night I am awoken at Machaba Safaris' Gomoti Plains Camp in Botswana's Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage site, by two elephants grazing at the entrance to my cavernous, three-room canvas tent — far too close for comfort, actually.

I later learned my concern was unwarranted. "They've learned that people aren't threats and that there's nothing there to harm them," said Kris 'Kaz' Sexton, conservation manager for Machaba Safaris. "They just go on with their daily business, and pretend that we're not there."

The camp is located in one of Africa's most remote and biodiverse areas, a thriving ecosystem where the circle of life is in full swing. All 10 luxury tents are situated on the banks of the Okavango River with direct access to the more than 150,000 acres of wilderness beyond. During our morning game drive, we see lilac-breasted rollers chattering noisily in a territorial dispute over a nesting hole in a tree, as a pair of giraffes looks the other way with nonchalance. Farther down the savannah, we catch a trio of hippos bathing in the river, a sounder of warthogs trotting across the savannah unwitting of its predators, and a pride of lions lying in wait under a tree.

Gomoti Plains Camp conducts more than 50 anti-poaching patrols each month to protect vulnerable species and their habitats. The camp employs gate guards, a dedicated patrol team, and specialized anti-poaching vehicles and a boat to safeguard the area. Their efforts have thus far helped identify and report 42 instances of illegal poaching activity to relevant authorities. "It has significantly helped us in protecting the wildlife that roams our concession," Sexton said.

This way the wildlife — say, a herd of elephants — feels safe enough to ignore safari-goers and trudge through the camp to make their way down to their local watering hole.



Top 4 Sustainable Safaris



Cheetah Plains, South Africa

Cheetah Plains, a carbon-negative gaming lodge in South Africa's Sabi Sand Nature Reserve, sets itself apart not only through its green initiatives but also with its contemporary design and three private-use villas designed for up to eight guests that have pools and media rooms. It also features a customized diamond experience and a resident gemologist. Fly into Johannesburg and charter a flight to Sabi Sand.

Gomoti Plains Camp, Botswana

Gomoti Plains Camp is located in Botswana's Okavango Delta, one of Africa's most remote and biodiverse areas, and features 10 open-air canvas tents with a wraparound wooden deck and outdoor baths and showers. It's a three-hour drive from Maun, the largest nearby city, but it's easier to charter a flight from the local airstrip.

Usangu Expedition Camp, Tanzania

Set on a former hunting block on the Usangu wetlands in Tanzania's Ruaha National Park, this intimate camp of just six tents conducts scientific research while providing guests with a luxury experience and five-star cuisine. Charter a flight from Dar es Salaam to Jongomero airstrip and prepare for a two-hour drive to camp.

Few & Far Luvhondo, South Africa

This newly opened 60-room eco-lodge nestled within UNESCO's Vhembe Biosphere Reserve features a first-of-its-kind, solar-powered cable car system for game viewing high above the treetops. It also features six futuristic-looking suites with private plunge pools perched on a cliff and farm-to-table cuisine. Charter a flight from Johannesburg, or hire a car for the four-and-a-half-hour drive.

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