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TRAVELER

ALL TRAVEL, ALL THE TIME | July-August 2010

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the **CROWDS** | *AN EXPAT*
SHARES
HOW

Canada's

Last Near Frontier

ESCAPE TO THE LAND OF
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*The World's
Happiest Place?*

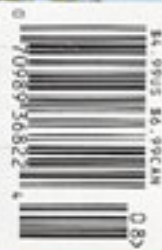
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BEST
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SMART TRAVELER

[TRAVEL AT ITS BEST]

Wildlife: Horseback riders canter alongside a giraffe in Kenya's grasslands.



The African Safari, Reinvented

Beyond the game drive, new ways to experience this classic trip. | By COLLEEN CLARK

THE MODERN SAFARI model generally goes something like this: Fly in, bump around in a jeep, photograph the Big Five, have a sundowner, fly home. But there's more to a good safari than an album full of elephant pictures. The following camps are redefining the experience, opening up previously unseen landscapes, improving conservation efforts, providing more meaningful cultural interactions, and generally making things more interesting. Mountain biking with wildebeest, anyone?

OFF THE BEATEN PATH As tourists crowd popular parks such as Kenya's Masai Mara and Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater, innovative safari companies are forging new frontiers, and while they're at it, protecting wildlife populations in previously at-risk areas. On the forefront is southern Tanzania's *Lukula Selous*, a nonhunting camp set on a reserve zoned for big-game hunting (yes, shooting big game remains a legal—and lucrative—practice in Tanzania). The camp pays the Tanzanian government the hefty fees that it would otherwise receive from allowing the land to



Botswana's Planet Baobab lodge. Along the Zambezi, a canoe-level view of elephants (right).



be hunted. As a result, the camp's eight guests have exclusive run of more than 300,000 acres of floodplains, riverine forest, and savanna, and the local wildlife population has rebounded. The project retains aspects of the hunting experience—guests jump out of a jeep to track animals on foot, wade into rivers, and scale ridges to observe herds of buffalo—but the only shooting being done is of the photographic variety.

Other groups have partnered with former cattle ranches and farms to form land reserves for safari use. Starting in the early 1990s, lodges such as **Oi Donyo Wuas** in Kenya experimented with the practice, signing agreements with Maasai communities to lease former cattle lands for conservation. The resulting collective helped curb destructive grazing and reopened

wildebeest migration routes while compensating rural Maasai families for land and for livestock lost to animal attacks. A similar project in Namibia at **Wohwedans** combined nine sheep farms into a wildlife sanctuary in the Namib desert. Numerous other reserves—South Africa's **Phinda**, Zimbabwe's **Matetsi**—have had similar success, ensuring that large tracts of land and resident animals are protected.

PEOPLE CONNECTION For too long, the only interaction many travelers had with locals came in the form of awkward photo ops with “tribesmen” costumed in ceremonial garb or afternoons spent doling out toys to schoolchildren. But safari operators such as Botswana's **Uncharted Africa** are making local interactions more meaningful. Its quirky desert camp **Planet Baobab**—

fronted by an enormous gray anteater and complete with a bar lit by a beer-bottle chandelier—offers visits to nearby villages that are less about gawking and more about hanging out. Local guides introduce guests to students at Gweta's primary school, elders at the court, and a traditional healer. And the local sorghum beer, a hearty brew so thick it puts Guinness to shame, always helps to break the ice.

Those interested in jumping in even deeper can join the eight-night Ju/'hoansi Bushmen initiation hunt, a collaboration between Uncharted Africa and community leaders aimed at respectfully integrating a small number of tourists into the rituals and traditions surrounding eland hunting. “This is not a cultural hit-and-run but a very personal interaction,” notes Ralph Bousfield, who co-founded the company. “Guests start to explore the similarities and not the differences between cultures.”

HANDS-ON CONSERVATION Many travelers, struck by the plight of Africa's endangered wildlife, want to do more than give a cash contribution. Now they can. At places such as Kenya's **Campi ya Kanzi**, guests can tag along with trackers for a day or sign on to help for an entire week, recording GPS locations of lion sightings, observing group movements, and interpreting the data. “You get firsthand knowledge of how to protect wildlife,” says founder Luca Belpietro. The Simba Project, a program that compensates the Maasai for any livestock killed by lions, has helped to increase the local lion population threefold in the past three years. South Africa's **Sabi Sabi** gets kids in on the action with its Junior Rangers program, teaching the little

BEYOND EAST AND SOUTH

These new safari destinations are truly off the beaten track.

Gabon: Ten percent of the country is set aside as national park land, including beaches frequented by sunbathing lowland gorillas and savannas presided over by elephants and hippos. **Madagascar:** You won't see the Big Five, but you will see

lemurs and other exotic fauna. Africa's answer to the Galápagos makes an ideal complement to a mainland safari. **Mozambique:** The government and lodge owners alike have learned from the missteps of other African countries and created a model for sus-

tainable development focusing on high-end, low-impact tourism for the more than 1,500 miles of pristine Indian Ocean coastline and national parks. **Rwanda:** This equatorial country bridges the dense forests of the Congo and the Rift Valley of East Africa, making for a unique topography that plays host to primate tracking and big-game viewing. —C.C.



(TOP) UNCHARTED AFRICA; (MIDDLE) UNCHARTED AFRICA; (BOTTOM) UNCHARTED AFRICA; (LEFT) UNCHARTED AFRICA; (RIGHT) UNCHARTED AFRICA

ones how to respect the bush, read maps of the area, and track animals. Grownups, meanwhile, can assist renowned conservationist Wim Vorster in tracking brown hyenas as part of the lodge's four-day predator workshop. In Gabon, guests share the **Loango Lodge** with researchers, studying everything from whales to the western lowland gorillas that visit the nearby beaches. Resident specialists invite guests into the field to learn about the rehabilitation of gorillas and chimps.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE JEEP Some companies have devised creative (and sustainable) ways to transport guests for game viewing. The **Zambezi Queen**, the continent's first luxury safari cruise, plies the croc-filled waters of the Chobe River between Botswana and Namibia. This floating boutique hotel uses solar water heating, low-emission power systems, and jet propulsion to avoid damage to the riverbeds. Floor-to-ceiling windows allow guests to observe bathing elephants from the comfort of their cabins. If cruising



Cabin with a view on the *Zambezi Queen*.

isn't your style, paddle even closer to the action on **Wilderness Safaris'** canoe trip down the Zambezi in Zimbabwe. Travelers take to the river during the day, making impromptu stops to track elephant and sable on foot, and camp in tents on the riverbanks. Those who prefer dry land can traverse the savanna via horseback or mountain bike through programs at both Tanzania's **Singita Grumeti** and Kenya's **Ol Donyo Wuas**. Accompanied by an armed guide, pedal bikes alongside herds of wildebeest and antelope or gallop between watering holes on thoroughbred horses as supplements to traditional safaris. Saddle up at Ol Donyo Wuas for longer horseback safaris with outfitter **Ride Kenya**, cantering across dry lake beds and up through the Chyulu Hills during the day and bedding down in vintage colonial-style tents set up by porters each night. ■