



Courtesy of OI Lentille

Lighting the Way: Pool lanterns at OI Lentille

Wild Luxury

How to experience the wilderness in style.

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Driving through Deception Valley in the Kalahari Game Reserve, our safari guide spotted an entire herd of oryx boldly advancing toward a cheetah, chasing it into the bush. Thrilled with this rare sighting of an endangered cat, we headed back to our new solar-powered camp for a delicious gourmet dinner of local, grass-fed beef and South African wine.

Before my trip to Botswana, I thought an eco-friendly luxury adventure was an oxymoron. But Wilderness Safaris provides five-star service in remote spots in southern Africa while protecting the environment and giving back to local communities (\$475– \$2,500 per person per night; wilderness-safaris.com). With 16 staff members for just four guests at our small camp, it was impossible not to feel pampered—even when they suggested we take short showers to conserve water. "It feels like outrageous luxury in the middle of the wilderness," said my friend Heather, who joined me on the safari. "I haven't really moved a muscle since we arrived."

Most of the staff members were part of the local Basarwa tribe, also known as San or Bushmen. One even acknowledged that he'd been a poacher before protecting the wildlife became his livelihood. "Tourism dollars are the only thing keeping the environment intact in some of these areas," says Craig Beal, CEO of Travel Beyond, a tour operator that organizes ecofriendly trips to Africa with Wilderness Safaris and other outfits. "In Kafue, Zambia, there were lots of problems with poachers killing animals for food. They hired a lot of the poachers as guides and a lot of women from the local villages and shut the poaching industry down."

In fact, Wilderness Safaris, which operates more than 60 luxury camps and lodges on private reserves in seven African countries, was responsible for reintroducing rhinos into Botswana. Through its Wilderness Safari Wildlife Trust, it funds research projects, wildlife management and education. It also gives more than \$1 million a year to local communities through revenue-sharing agreements, equity stakes and lease fees.

Farther north, the Sanctuary at Ol Lentille in Kenya opened last year in partnership with the African Wildlife Foundation conservation organization, private investors and the Masai Community in Kenya. The solar-powered sanctuary features four luxury homes on a 14,500-acre private conservancy, complete with a spa, butlers and valets. In addition to game drives to find leopards, elephants, hyena and wild dogs, guests can go rock climbing and horse and camel riding, as well as participate in community projects and conservation programs (from \$585 to \$786 per person per night).

Nomad Tanzania, which offers chimp tracing and Serengeti migration trips, has done a complete carbon-footprint audit on all its camps. Its founders support three nonprofit trusts dedicated to securing the future of black rhinos in Tanzania, supporting education and women's businesses in the Loliondo community, as well as forest reserves, schools and other projects in the Tongwe community. The Greystoke Mahale camp on Lake Tanganyika is 100 kilometers from the nearest road, and nestled near the world's largest chimp population. The mobile-tented Serengeti camps move seasonally with the migrating wildebeest and zebra (\$450–\$950 per person per night; nomad-tanzania.com).

During my visit to Wilderness Safaris' Duba Plains camp in Botswana, an employee of the Okavango Community Trust rode along on our game drives, collecting valuable information about the animals' behavior as we explored miles and miles of wilderness. The lions had been fighting, he told us, even killing one mother's cubs, making it harder for them to hunt together as a pride. Having experts explain the animal behavior made the experience that much richer.

At the waterside Xigera camp, also in the lush Okavango Delta, we observed mating lions and baboons, stumbled upon a dazzle of 50 zebra and got a close-up of giraffes, elephants and hippos. We also took a traditional mokoro canoe ride through the delta, stopping along the shore for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. And we slept in large, furnished tents with indoor and outdoor showers, knowing that a portion of the fee charge went to nearby orphan day-care and AIDS-counseling centers. It was a great way to experience giraffes without guilt.

Best In Ecoluxury

- 1. Xigera Camp**, Botswana
- 2. Kalahari Plains Camp**, Botswana
- 3. Duba Plains Camp**, Botswana
- 4. Ol Lentille**, Kenya
- 5. Greystoke Mahale Camp**, Tanzania
- 6. Phinda Forest Lodge**, South Africa
- 7. North Island**, Seychelles
- 8. Serra Cafema Camp**, Namibia
- 9. Ol Donyo Wuas Lodge**, Kenya
- 10. Londolzi Tree Camp**, South Africa

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