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CALL OF THE *WILD*





What animal lover wouldn't want to see lions in the wild, a herd of elephants bathing, or giraffes nibbling the treetops? Get planning because there's a new breed of ethical safari.

Words: Amy Fallon

Imagine preparing meals over a campfire while listening to the calls of lion, elephant and hyena. It's certainly one way to make us realise how small and vulnerable we actually are. Today, the sustainable protection of this beautiful wildlife in most African countries depends largely upon creating meaningful income streams for local communities through travel and tourism. And while enjoying vegan meals on safari was once unheard of, this is changing rapidly with an increasing number of operators, mostly in the continent's south, embracing the needs of plant-based visitors.

SAFARI IN THE SOUTH

Why is a safari such a sought-after experience? "It seems to stir a memory from deep within of a time when a fire was the centre of a home and family," says Helene Forward, when asked what's so special about an African safari. "Survival then was something quite different to what it is today for most people."

Helene runs the travel agency Shangana Travel, which can help you seek out the most environmentally aware lodges and safari operators in Botswana and Cape Town, South Africa, as well as safari company Shangana Safaris, which specialises in vegan safaris in Botswana. Home to the Okavango Delta and the 'big five', Botswana has been leading the continent in conservation and eco-tourism for years, she says, while Cape Town is a foodie's heaven, home to countless vegan and plant-based eateries.

Visitors should be aware that sadly trophy hunting is still allowed in Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. While both Botswana and Zambia had previously banned hunting, these bans were lifted in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Despite this, Helene says that hunting is not occurring to the extent it once was, and there has been an outcry to stop it once again.

"In many countries, wildlife tourism has played a significant role in the conservation of wildlife populations," adds Beks Ndlovu, an award-winning guide and founder of African Bush Camps. They offer luxury safari experiences across 15 camps in Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, which includes amazing vegan cuisine.

During the global coronavirus lockdowns, tourism, being identified as a non-essential spend, has suffered greatly, says Beks. "Without a functional tourism system, many community projects come to a standstill and the risks of human and wildlife conflict increase. Through tourism, people can become self-sustainable, removing the need to hunt for food."

ETHICAL TOURISM IN AFRICA

According to Helene, who has recently left the travel industry to focus on ethical tourism projects in Botswana, increasingly essential for operators in southern Africa. "The conservation industry, about the management of natural resources, is a crucial part of the economic, social, cultural and local economy," she says. "Many of

The Linyanti Ebony camp in Botswana, one of the accommodation sites used by African Bush Camps.

Botswana's operators are well-known for contributing to conservation projects and community empowerment countrywide."

Good signs of an ethical operator would be their official link to an established and recognised non-profit organisation that serves communities. Look out for renders (visual images of projects that are in the process of being completed or which are planned). These often give misleading impressions of community projects without giving guests the opportunity to actually visit these project sites.

Desert & Delta Safaris, which owns eight premier safari properties all managed by locals, is a good example. Not only do they offer vegan options for guests, but its Chobe Game Lodge was the first safari company in Africa to have an all-female guiding team, and the current camp management group is 50 percent female.

In Zambia, responsible tourism is also growing. Many operators support local schools and communities, giving travellers the opportunity to participate in projects that help locals and conserve wildlife. The African Bush Camps Foundation assists with the development of schools and community projects in the Maunga village near the Mosi-Oa-Tunya National Park. The park is home to the immensely endangered white rhino. A short distance away, on the border with Zimbabwe is Victoria Falls, a must-see, while the mighty Zambezi River offers the opportunity to go rafting or to simply take in the view while sipping on a cool gin and tonic.

"You'll need to do your homework about ethical tourism and decide what experiences you'd like to add to your ethical travel bucket list", says Beks. "Be straightforward in requesting a conscious travel itinerary and what your expectations are," he says.

WHAT ABOUT EATING PLANT-BASED?

Before choosing a safari operator, it is advisable to read up on their values and look at photos of accommodation. "I usually request a sample menu by email of what

plant-based meals can be prepared," says Helene. A vegan herself, Helene says farming cattle is deeply ingrained in the cultures of many African countries and livelihoods depend on it, so there is still a long way to go before veganism is mainstream.

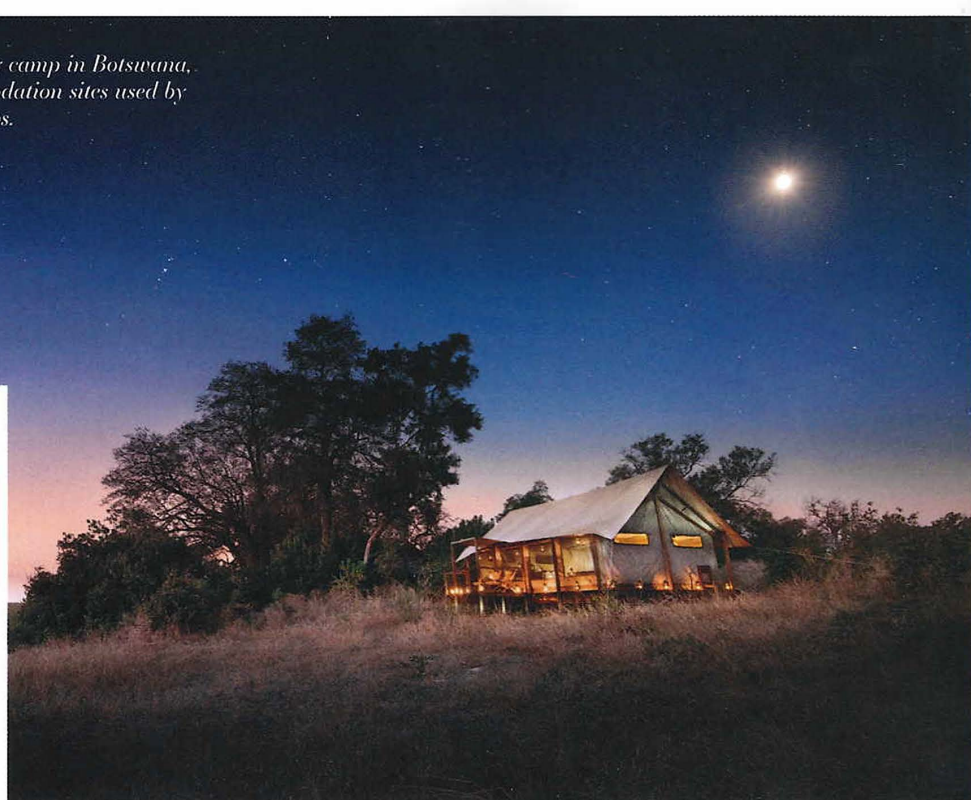
However, she adds, "I have found that many lodges are quite happy to have their chef outline choices." She also says it is good to check once visiting a restaurant to make sure that they have fully comprehended the avoidance of dairy products.

Beks advises visitors to specify items like fish, dairy, milk, cheese and eggs, write them in the local language, and share with kitchen staff, so that they know what should not be included in meals. This is best done when booking with a travel agent or when making a direct booking request online.

Eating out in southern Africa is a great way to sample the staple meals. Plant-based dishes are common even among local communities in Zambia, as meat can be an expensive commodity while corn grows in abundance there, points out Beks.

Nshima, made from corn processed into a fine white powder is cooked with water. The local equivalent of rice or mashed potato, it's mostly served with lunch and dinner. Vitumbuwa or fritters are fried dough balls of flour, sugar, yeast and water commonly found at markets and served in newspaper as a popular teatime snack.

Meanwhile, some supermarkets in Botswana and South Africa now stock The Beyond Burger!



SOUTH AFRICA

DO: In Cape Town don't miss a visit to Table Mountain to experience the aerial cableway and stunning views. There are also excellent wineries for those who enjoy a tippie. Avatara Guest House offers vegan breakfast options and what they call Reconnection Therapy, a complete wellness lifestyle program.

EAT: Raw and Roxy dish up great raw vegan food and also offer cooking classes. Check out the stalls at the daily Mojo Market, the weekly Oranjezicht City Farm Market, and the monthly Vegan Goods Market. Scheckter's Raw, with its pumpkin pie pancakes and other creations, was launched to take on the New York plant-based scene. The Kind Kitchen serve scrumptious wraps, salads and juices in two locations. At Nourish'd, the food is like art, but it's also truly edible.

A rainbow over Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, Africa

“IN MANY COUNTRIES, WILDLIFE TOURISM HAS PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE CONSERVATION OF WILDLIFE POPULATIONS”



African elephants drinking along the banks of the Chobe River in Botswana



FIND ONE, BE ONE

ETHICAL TOUR OPERATORS:

- Are committed to wildlife conservation
- Have sustainable tourism policies in place
- Support community projects
- Have anti-poaching units in operation
- Do not allow animal interactions (such as rides or petting)
- Do not offer recreational or trophy hunting safaris

ETHICAL TRAVELLERS:

- Follow the guide's instructions
- View animals on the animals' terms, not anyone else's
- Keep their distance from wild animals
- Don't disturb wild animals or try to get their attention
- Aren't too attached to ticking off a 'big 5' list, it puts pressure on guides to break the rules
- Switch off location services on smartphones when photographing wild animals to prevent poachers using geotags
- Respect the privacy of local communities
- Leave no trace

BOTSWANA

DO: The Okavango Delta is a vast delta of waterways that extend to the Kalahari Desert, supporting a wide variety of wildlife. Chobe National Park is known for buffalo and elephant in legendary numbers, along with lions, antelopes and hippos. Central Kalahari Game Reserve in central Botswana is dominated by grasslands, where you can find giraffes, cheetahs, hyenas and wild dogs.

EAT: Desert & Delta Safaris camps and lodges in Botswana dish up delightful vegan meals including bruschetta with tomato, basil and garlic, lentil curry with quinoa, and avocado chocolate mousse. Deception Valley Lodge, in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, boasts 'traditional bush food with a twist' and caters for vegans with meals like gazpacho or butternut and apple soup teamed with vegetable pie, rice and white wine gravy, plus vegan crème caramel for dessert.

ZIMBABWE AND ZAMBIA

DO: You simply can't be in the region of Victoria Falls without a visit to this enormous and thunderous waterfall. The great Zambezi River flows through six countries in Africa, its most notable feature being Victoria Falls, and supports large populations of many animals. Lake Kariba is the world's largest man-made reservoir, known for its stunning sunsets and wildlife-rich shorelines, best enjoyed by boat or even a houseboat.

EAT: African Bush Camps Thorntree River Lodge, in Zambia, serves a mean beetroot carpaccio, highly Instagrammable with its bright colours. They recommend having it with a chilled Pinot Noir. The vegan sweet potato, spinach and butternut lasagne with a chilled Chenin or beer is also suggested.