



# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

| TRAVEL |

## Travel's new philanthropists

These days, luxury travel is as much about hands-on engagement with a destination as it is opulent escapism, and increasingly that means conservation and community. | Thursday, 27 June 2019

By Francisca Kellet



Embarking on an African safari

PHOTO BY GETTY

The smell of burning rhino horn is exactly the same as the smell of burning human hair. I know this because I've helped a vet cut the horn off a live rhino with a chainsaw. This sounds brutal, but dehorning has become common practice in Africa. Cut off the horn, the thinking goes, and the critically endangered rhino is devalued; there's nothing left to poach. It's working, too. In Phinda Private Game Reserve, in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal, they've not lost a rhino in two years.

There is a push to turn experiences inside out by letting guests take part in what is being done at the community and conservation level.

These trips are one of a new slew of luxury philanthropic experiences that let guests get their hands dirty for a good cause, in between sampling the finer things in life. They might help collar lions, take part in cheetah tracking for a breeding project, or de-horn a rhino (the horns grow back). The idea is to allow a deeper understanding of how a game reserve works, with money raised going towards funding projects.

But that deeper understanding comes at a price. These trips cost from US\$8,800 (£6,900) per person for six nights. Translocation trips with safari tour operator Great Plains Conservation are also possible to capture and move rhinos from South Africa to poaching-free Botswana. Each trip is tailor-made for particular donors, with prices on request. There's a long waiting list.

There is a definite shift from passive observation to a more participative experience with a sense of purpose and as a result, many guests are becoming lifelong donors.

Ted Turner, the founder of CNN and owner of Ted Turner Reserves, agrees. "There are more people out there today who want to travel with purpose instead of just lying on a beach somewhere," he tells me.

Luke Bailes, founder and CEO of luxury safari operator Singita, says it's the access and experiences travellers are looking for. "There's a new breed of philanthropist genuinely worried about the state of the world. It's the experience they're looking for, not the luxury."

The luxury probably helps, though. Singita is known for running some of the most opulent lodges in Africa. A one-night stay at Singita Sasakwa Lodge in Singita Grumeti, fringing Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, costs from US\$1,234 (£967). A-listers love it (former guests have included the Clooneys, the Beckhams, Oprah Winfrey and Natalie Portman) and visitors can expect beautiful rooms, manicured grounds, a private vehicle and guide, superb food and an incredible wine cellar.

## **Filling the void**

The idea behind all this luxury is a high-yield, low-impact model that sees private companies charge a hefty fee for a very luxurious experience, limiting the number of visitors and thereby minimising the impact on the land. It's essentially a way of funding work previously done by governments and NGOs.

Singita now calls itself a 'conservation company', not a travel company; conservation has been at the forefront of the brand from early on. Part-funded by US hedge fund billionaire Paul Tudor Jones, Singita operates 12 lodges, protecting over a million acres of land in Africa. Tudor Jones first partnered with Singita 15 years ago, after

buying the rights to various concessions in an area of Tanzania that had been hard hit by unregulated hunting. Working with local communities to reduce poaching, fund education and offer jobs and training, the results have been impressive and wildlife is thriving: for example, there's been a tenfold rise in the buffalo population; 16-fold in the case of lions; and fourfold in the case of elephants.

“Educating local communities is key,” Singita’s Bailes tells me. “Giving them alternative forms of livelihoods, increasing the regional economy.”

Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo faces very particular challenges when it comes to the local community. Africa’s oldest national park is at risk from thousands of armed militias — and the illegal charcoal trade they support — in the surrounding area. The park recently reopened, following the kidnapping of two tourists and the murder of a ranger last year, with a huge conservation initiative driven by park director Emmanuel de Merode, who also happens to be a Belgian prince. While the immediate aim of the park is to protect its natural heritage and the rare lowland gorillas that live there, de Merode has said its “higher mission” is to create employment and bring stability to a war-torn and impoverished corner of DRC. The goal is to create 100,000 jobs for locals by 2022.

So employment is crucial. Generating tourism jobs, which require a high level of training, creates not only income but value and a reason for local support of a conservation initiative.

The Long Run, a membership organisation of nature-based tourism businesses, has gone so far as to include commercial success in its core values. Its members pledge to four ‘Cs’: conservation, community, culture and commerce. Launched by Jochen Zeitz, the billionaire former CEO of Puma, Long Run members currently protect 13 million acres of biodiversity. The goal is to conserve 20 million acres and improve the lives of two million people by 2020. All members strive to provide luxurious experiences that benefit the environment and locals — but they also need to make money to ensure long-term viability.

“The Long Run gives us ideas and guides us on what more we can do,” Michael Lutzeyer, the owner of Grootbos in South Africa, explains (see side panel, next page). His lodge is also part of National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, which has stringent sustainability markers — Grootbos is, for example, plastic-free and carbon neutral.



Gorilla in Virunga National Park  
PHOTO BY GETTY

### **Beyond the buzz words**

The trend for sustainable travel, or travel that has a positive impact, has gained marketing traction. ‘Sustainability’ and ‘conservation’ have become buzzwords, and greenwashing — where companies make misleading claims about their environmental credentials — can be a problem. Claiming a luxury hotel pool is made from recycled tiles is all well and good, for example, but when that hotel is unwilling to cut its plastic use or employ locally, it rings hollow.

One way of ensuring your tourist pounds are going in the right direction is by booking via a tour operator with a philanthropic slant. [The Explorations Company](#), founded by [Nicola Shepherd](#), charges £200 per booking, which is matched by the company. This fee goes to support projects that benefit the host community. Shepherd encourages her clients to visit a philanthropic project during their trip. “We find out what our clients are passionate about,” she says. The Explorations Company’s latest initiative, [Philanthropy Plus](#), includes a surcharge of at least 5% of the cost a trip, to be funnelled into a cause close to the client’s heart.

The flamboyant US hotelier and designer Bill Bensley has built his new lodge, Shinta Mani Wild in Cambodia, specifically to protect the land around it. The luxury tented camp is on a 400-acre wildlife corridor that spans Bokor and Kirirom National Parks, which is now protected from poaching, mining and logging.

“Ideally, we could put up a big Trumpian wall around the park, and not let anyone in or out,” Bensley explains. “That would allow this wildness to regenerate in the quickest possible way. But Trump ain’t here, so policing, with a sustainable income from rich people staying in tents as a privileged few, might be an answer.” It’s the high-yield, low-impact model, but on a much smaller scale.

Bensley has partnered with Wildlife Alliance, The Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Cambodian government to create a public-private partnership to protect the area, while also creating long-term employment opportunities for local people. “Our goal is to be able to afford to police a greater and greater area in the Cardamom National Park.” It’s a tiny area, but he has “big-time plans”.

On the opposite end of the scale is Tompkins Conservation, which recently became the largest private land donor in history. The foundation supports major conservation projects in South America, launched by the late North Face founder, Doug Tompkins, and continued by his wife, Kristine, today. Tompkins does conservation on a national scale, protecting and creating national parks in Chile and Argentina. In 2017, Kristine Tompkins signed an agreement with the President of Chile to expand national parkland by over 10 million acres. The gifted land was bigger than the size of Switzerland and created five new national parks. Last year, the resulting Route of Parks was established: a 1,740-mile route connecting 17 Chilean national parks.

African Parks uses a similar public-private partnership, bringing together donors and governments to take on the long-term management of national parks. It uses a business approach in its conservation model, with a focus on development and poverty alleviation, to ensure every park is ecologically, socially and financially sustainable in the long term. The backers range from the EU and WWF to private philanthropists and foundations, such as the Fentener van Vlissingen family and the Howard G Buffett Foundation.

When African Parks took over the management of Liuwa Plain National Park in Zambia in 2003, there was just one lion roaming the park. There’s now a healthy pride, while cheetahs and hyenas are thriving once again. Africa’s second-largest wildebeest migration comes thundering through here every year, attracting a new raft of tourists, who can stay at the recently opened King Lewanika Lodge, run by Time + Tide, where a room costs from US\$1,420 (£1,115).

You don’t have to cross the world to see high-end tourism supporting conservation. “Europe is undersold,” says Paul Lister, the former furniture mogul and philanthropist who founded The European Nature Trust (TENT). He calls himself a treehugger and is passionate about protecting Europe’s last tracks of virgin forest, half of which is in Romania and at risk from illegal logging. TENT recently launched trips to give visitors exclusive access to both the conservation areas and the people and foundations behind them — plus with the chance of spotting brown bears and wolves. “It’s about getting people out there to see it. You have to see it to connect with it,” Lister says.

While every trip has a £500-per-head supplement, which goes towards the foundations, his main aim is to connect people with wild places. Get a few high-net-worth individuals out there and show them what's happening, he hopes, and more large-scale donations will follow. TENT also operates trips to see rare Marsican brown bears in Abruzzo, Italy, and to Cantabria, Spain, to see Iberian wolves and chamois, while his Scottish retreat, Annadale, plans to reintroduce wolves. Wolves, he says, will bring in high-yield tourism, and create jobs. "We employ 10 people at the moment. With wolves, it would be more like 50."

It all comes back to client experience, commercial success and local employment. If high-end guests are willing to pay for exclusive access and experiences in pristine areas — whether that's dehorning a rhino, or diving in Indonesia — then the right operator or lodge owner can channel those funds to where they're needed most. But it has to work financially. It has to work on a local level, and it has to convince a local population that the land they want to graze, mine or farm will bring them more long-term revenue if turned over to tourism.

"To have genuinely successful, sustainable conservation you have to create shared, long-term economic value," &Beyond's Kent explains, "That means hard money flowing into communities at a local level. Training, community service support, and employment — that's the only answer".

## **Five lodges making a difference**

### **Grootbos, South Africa**

This luxury eco-lodge, set above Walker Bay on the Western Cape, has helped to regenerate the area's fynbos and funds community projects a horticultural school.

### **Soneva Fushi, the Maldives**

Soneva Fushi is carbon-neutral, the gardens are organic and the resort supports various community projects, including swimming lessons to local children.

*soneva.com*

### **Wilderness Safaris**

This adventure operator protects 6.2 million acres and has a raft of light-footprint camps, including North Island in the Seychelles.

### **Fogo Island Inn, Canada**

Decked out with locally sourced interiors, this Newfoundland lodge is about employing and involving the local community.

## **Misool, Indonesia**

Combining desert-island escapism with community-based conservation, this private island resort in Raja Ampat has created a marine reserve twice the size of Singapore.

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