

A camping excursion
at Phinda Private
Game Reserve.

Up Close and Personal

The thrill of safari is no longer just about spotting the Big Five—savvy travelers now want to go deeper, learn more, and give back.

WILD BY DESIGN

A new itinerary at andBeyond's Phinda Reserve in South Africa takes you behind the scenes of its conservation success story.

BY ERIN RILEY

“DID YOU KNOW that you don't have to kill a rhino for its horns? For an elephant's tusks, you do, but not for rhino,” says Les Carlisle, andBeyond's conservation manager. We're speeding along a dirt road in the Phinda Private Game Reserve, the safari company's 56,800-acre flagship reserve in northeastern South Africa, and the dense bush has given way to open grassland and a deep, overcast sky. In front of us, a truckload of young volunteers is hurtling toward a helicopter that's diving and darting in the distance. I catch sight of a mass of gray flesh trotting along the same road some 20 feet ahead. Within minutes, it comes to a stop, and us with it. The two-ton white rhino begins losing her bearings; she sways right to left, her front hoof reaches out for a step that isn't there, and eventually, she comes to her knees. It's a heart-wrenching sight, even before the hard-to-watch part we've been prepared for. But this feeling dissipates as soon as the teams are on the ground.

From the helicopter emerges pilot Harry Hensburg, who flew Prince Harry during Malawi's elephant translocation two years ago, ecological monitor Charli De Vos, and veterinarian Mike Toft, who, moments before, was hanging out of the chopper with dart gun in hand. The team quickly performs a range of tasks, injecting the sedated rhino with a counteractive agent to help stabilize her breathing; applying a blindfold and earplugs so that she's less affected by external stimuli; and adjusting her legs so that they don't fall asleep. My group is invited to help the team take blood, tissue, and hair samples that will populate a database at the University of Pretoria, a resource for researchers seeking to match horns found in Vietnam and China to rhinos poached in the area. Then comes the hard part: Toft begins the dehorning, carefully positioning his chain saw to cut right above the horn's growth plate. An antidote to the tranquilizer is injected and, within a few minutes, she's off, a little disoriented maybe, but otherwise okay. As I examine the sawed-off piece in



Clockwise from left: The team waits for the tranquilizer to take effect after darting a rhino from a helicopter; a researcher explains Phinda's sustainability initiatives to South

African rugby players; the exclusive-use Phinda Homestead has four bedrooms, an indoor living and dining area, and a pool and dining deck overlooking a watering hole.

my hand, I notice how it splits at the edges, revealing the strands of human-like hair that it's made of. All of that, for *this*?

AndBeyond began dehorning rhinos three years ago as a way to deprive poachers of their bounty. "It felt like losing the war," says Carlisle of the practice. "But it was the only way to take away the reward for poachers." Since the start of their rehabilitation 27 years ago, the reserve has built up anti-poaching units and implanted microchips to enable radio telemetry, but found those measures insufficient. The spike in demand for rhino horn, coupled with shrinking numbers of black and white rhinos elsewhere on the continent, have made the growing population at Phinda more susceptible in recent years. But, since starting the dehorning, they've only lost seven to illegal killing. In fact, the growth has been so great that the reserve has been acting as a source for translocation of rhinos to Botswana through the Rhinos Without Borders program. A collaboration with fellow safari operators Great Plains Conservation, the initiative has moved 87 rhinos to date.

Witnessing a rhino dehorning, tagging, or ear notching is now among the many activities that make up the new Phinda Impact Journey, a seven-day itinerary that takes guests behind the scenes to show how the reserve is managed and its conservation initiatives carried out. In addition to one remaining scheduled date for 2019, in November, and two next year, guests of andBeyond's 16-suite Forest Lodge and the Phinda Homestead can also request the itinerary for private groups.



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: COURTESY ANDBEYOND (2); COURTESY HOWARD CLELAND/ANDBEYOND; COURTESY ASILIA. PREVIOUS SPREAD: COURTESY ANDBEYOND



Asilia Africa's walking safari across the greater Masai Mara.

The Road Less Traveled

Three safari experiences that go beyond the game drive.

BIRDING IN WEST AFRICA

There's a legend that Britain created the Gambia, mainland Africa's smallest country—which lies almost entirely inside Senegal—by sailing up its eponymous river and firing cannons at the shore, declaring the border to exist wherever the cannonballs landed. Today, only a few cruising vessels are allowed access to that waterway, including the *Harmony G*, a 177-foot yacht that contrasts strikingly with the mangroves and thatched-roofed dwellings lining the Gambia's banks. Operated by **Peregrine**, the *Harmony G* explores one of the world's least-visited countries on a weeklong voyage that's part cultural immersion, part birding extravaganza—millions of migrating birds lay eggs on the West African coast after a punishing flight over the Sahara (*from \$1,791; peregrineadventures.com*). Next door, **Steppes Travel** is guiding birders through Senegal's Djoudj National Bird Sanctuary, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Small motorboats shuttle twitchers to the prime

nesting grounds, where from September to April some 400 species pass through (*from \$3,000; steppestravel.com*).

WALKING THE SERENGETI

Most viewings of the planet's most famous migration of mammals happen in a car. But acclaimed Tanzanian operator **Mark Thornton Safaris** has pioneered the Great Serengeti Traverse, a ten-day walk with lightweight, mobile camps through specially designated conservation zones that ban vehicles (*from \$900; greatserengetitraverse.com*). In November, **Asilia Africa** will launch a five-night walking safari within the Naboisho Conservancy of the greater Masai Mara in Kenya (*from \$4,316; asiliaafrica.com*).

KENYA BY CAMELBACK

The ancient overland routes of Kenya's indigenous nomads are the inspiration for **Extraordinary Journeys'** camelback safari, which is as much an expedition to uncover the century-spanning traditions of the Samburu as it is a quest for wildlife. For three days, tribesmen lead guests through the arid land of north-central Kenya with the contents of comfortable mobile camps slung over their camels' backs (*from \$2,160; extraordinaryjourneys.com*). —Brandon Presser

I stayed at the Homestead, a private house that debuted in September, following a rebuild. With open-air living spaces and walkways that lead to four bedrooms, the lodge felt like the farmhouse of an individual obsessed with Zulu culture (reed tassel curtains, intricate basketwork, and mud-cloth textiles). And the food, courtesy of Lucky Zikhali, whose sweet humility belies his résumé (he was the private chef to the Getty family), was as exciting and varied as the settings we dined in. There was the lodge’s boma, a lantern-lit, mud- and wood-walled enclosure in the style of those traditionally used as a gathering place for community elders or to hold animals; our bush dinner, which was followed by sleep-out to the sound of hyena and zebra calls; and the Homestead’s dining deck, overlooking a watering hole frequented by nyalas, baboons, and, on one morning, a herd of elephants.

Our guide, Nikki Muller, who reminded me of an overgrown Boy Scout, and our cool and collected tracker, Bernie Mnguni, who grew up in a neighboring community, were a wealth of knowledge, but it’s Carlisle’s presence during every step of the itinerary that makes it so singular. As andBeyond’s second employee, hired back in 1991 (his wife, Lynette, was the first), he was an early proponent of involving the neighboring Makhasa and Mnqobokazi communities in making decisions about the park. “If you’re too hasty and think you know better than who and what you’re trying to help, you’re left with unused buildings and unhappy animals,” says the Swaziland-born, Zulu-speaking Carlisle. What he pioneered at Phinda—translocating game as a means of conservation (he’s moved more than 40,000 animals) and offering livestock-loss compensation for cattle farmers—has become a model for the continent.

While exceptional game viewing and elaborate gin-and-tonic pit stops make up part of the program, the experience doesn’t feel like a spectator sport, but rather direct involvement with

important and painstaking work. After setting out one morning to meet with ornithologist James Rawdon, we arrive at a wall of netting dotted with bursts of color. Rawdon and his team are busy untangling birds and taking them back to a station to attach coded metal rings to each bird’s ankle, which helps track the migration patterns, life spans, and diversity of the reserve’s more than 430 species. On that afternoon’s game drive, I notice my group’s previously passive interest in Muller’s bird-calling take on new life. We set a goal to identify at least 10 of the 20 “star birds” (those special to the area), either by sight or sound, and I’m soon remembering names, like black-bellied bustard and lemon-breasted canary, that had all seemed to blend together before.

The next day, we meet with Charli De Vos, who describes her work monitoring each species’s populations and the measures in place to keep their numbers sustainable. We learn that the reserve’s carrying capacity for elephants is around 110, because “their destructive habits mean that the park’s plant regrowth can only handle so much,” she says. And we learn that they’ve begun performing partial hysterectomies on female lions to reduce litter sizes to two or three instead of five or six—“prides bigger than five are more likely to attack a cheetah mother and her cubs, putting their fragile population at risk,” De Vos says.

Everyone who has been on safari has likely been told that their very presence contributes to conservation (and there’s no denying that), and those who’ve spoken to more than one conservationist will have heard just as many opinions on what works and

what doesn’t. As someone who has always thought of safari as witnessing nature taking its course, what I came to realize is that, in today’s world, nature requires constant and active management—and maybe that’s where the truly authentic experience lies. To go on safari and not have an idea of the underlying mechanisms perpetuates misconceptions that no longer seem sustainable. But to go on safari and come out with a deeper understanding of how it all works—well, that seems like a step in the right direction.

On our last day, we join De Vos in tracking, through radio telemetry, a rhino due for translocation. The weather makes it so that we can’t find him, but Mnguni spots five lions napping on a sandy bank. I feel a moment of panic when I think I see a sixth, thinking back to De Vos’s talk on capping prides to five, and worry briefly for the fate of the two cheetah cubs we saw a half hour earlier. But it was just my eyes—or my concerns as a newly aspiring researcher—playing tricks on me. *Seven-day Phinda Impact Journeys* from \$8,790; *andbeyond.com*.



A sedated rhino is blindfolded prior to dehorning, tagging, or ear notching. Below: A bedroom at Phinda Homestead.



Singita's Faru Faru Lodge in Tanzania has reopened following a top-down renovation.

On Our Radar

Four destinations where new and redone lodges are enough reason to go—or to go back.

BOTSWANA

Opening in July in the Khwai Private Reserve, in the northern reaches of Botswana’s Okavango Delta, is Natural Selection’s most upscale lodge in the region, **Tuludi** (from \$1,020 per person; *naturalselection.travel*). The seven spacious tented suites have outdoor showers and plunge pools, all with a view of the floodplains. Beyond the traditional safari, guests can canoe, boat, or walk the 500,000-acre reserve, where the dry Chobe Game Reserve meets the lush wetlands of Moremi.

KENYA

A sister camp to the five-year-old Mara Plains, Great Plains Conservation’s latest expedition-style camp, **Mara Nyika** (from \$1,735 per person; *greatplainsconservation.com*) will open in August with four elevated tents set in the private 50,000-acre Naboisho Conservancy. The Masai Mara National Reserve is nearby, but because it has far less traffic and a higher density of big game, there’s no need to leave the community-owned conservancy.

TANZANIA

Five years ago, Asilia Africa’s **Namiri Plains Camp** (from \$479 per person; *asiliaafrica.com*) pioneered safaris in the remote eastern Serengeti, which for 20 years was only accessible to big-cat researchers. In September, the ten-suite camp, after a top-down rebuild, will open with the addition of a two-bedroom family suite, a pool, a bar, and a fossil library. As important, Asilia Africa still has exclusive use in this area—the closest camp is an hour’s drive away. In the north, Singita’s beloved **Faru Faru Lodge** (from \$1,475 per person; *singita.com*) reopened in December following a full renovation. Its nine suites, which include a family suite for four and a two-bedroom villa with a private pool, have a new Scandinavian-cool look.

RWANDA

In addition to Wilderness Safaris’ two-year-old **Bisate Lodge** (from \$1,300 per person; *wilderness-safaris.com*), Volcanoes National Park is getting new bases for gorilla trekking with the opening of **Singita Kwitonda** (from \$1,495 per person; *singita.com*) in August and **One&Only Gorilla’s Nest** (from \$1,700 per person; *oneandonlyresorts.com*) later this year. In the country’s Akagera National Park, a protected wetland, Wilderness Safaris has the new, six-tent lakeside **Magashi Camp** (from \$470 per person). — Jane Broughton

FROM TOP: HOWARD CLELAND/COURTESY ANDBEYOND; COURTESY ANDBEYOND

COURTESY SINGITA

A CLASSIC RETURNS

Wilderness Safaris comes back to one of Zimbabwe's most stunning sites with the reopening of Chikwenya.

BY STEPHEN WALLIS

OUR ARRIVAL AT CHIKWENYA couldn't have been more perfectly choreographed. The camp, located in a secluded area of Zimbabwe's Mana Pools National Park, nestles into a densely forested embankment overlooking the majestic Zambezi River. As our Land Rover pulled up to the clearing at the center of camp, the sinking sun was casting a spectacular salmon glow across the vast floodplain, while the mountains of the Rift Valley escarpment formed shadowy silhouettes in the distance. A herd of water buffalo grazed along the riverbank below, and the absolute serenity was broken only by the intermittent bassoon-like groans of hippos submerged near the shore. It was a moment, as one of our guides, Luke Terblanche, later said to me, "when there are just no words to express the peace, the beauty, the magnificence." This place, he added, "exposes you to the soul of Africa."

I was among the fortunate first visitors to the new Chikwenya, which briefly reopened after a two-year total rebuild last fall before closing during the November-to-March rainy season, when the soft ground makes the area difficult to navigate. The camp is a collaboration between local Zimbabwean owners and Wilderness Safaris, which operates more than 40 camps across southern and eastern Africa. It's part of a significant investment Wilderness is making in Zimbabwe as the country begins to emerge from years of corruption, violence, and economic devastation under Robert Mugabe, the liberation hero turned dictator whose close-to-four-decade rule came to an end in 2017. His ZANU-PF party remains in power under president Emmerson Mnangagwa and the economic situation is still tenuous—as evidenced by ongoing fuel and food shortages, currency instability, and sky-high unemployment—but there is

real hope, something long missing, that Zimbabwe can finally turn a corner.

And that is good news for the tourism industry, which suffered badly in the final years of Mugabe's regime. "Those were really dark, tough times," said Wilderness Safaris CEO Keith Vincent, a native Zimbabwean. He explained that the company was forced to scale back its operations in the country as bookings, particularly from Americans, dried up. In 2006, Wilderness pulled out of Chikwenya, where it had operated a camp since 1998. The 6,200-acre private concession was taken over by Capmount Lodges, an operator that focused mostly on river and fishing expeditions for a predominantly regional clientele. "As a company, we had a choice," said Vincent. "We could pack up our bags and leave Zimbabwe completely or we could try to keep a few people employed, look after these areas with spectacular wildlife, and hope to live long enough to see us come out of that era."

A few years ago, as signs of positive change were afoot, including the opening of a new airport in Victoria Falls, on the



COURTESY WILDERNESS SAFARIS

Zimbabwe's Mana Pools National Park is among the region's best areas to see elephants up close.

group of impalas cautiously approached, while the lionesses—one pregnant and both apparently satiated—barely took notice.

As we made our way through the forest, past centuries-old termite mounds rising several feet, there was wildlife at every turn. In addition to elephants and impalas, we encountered groups of water buffalo and eland—the shy, oxlike antelope with faint white stripes and thick, twisting horns—as well as gracefully antlered waterbuck, whose shaggy manes provide buoyancy when swimming. We spotted plenty of smaller creatures too, such as vervet monkeys, mongooses, and an array of birds, including iridescent-blue long-tailed starlings and brilliantly colored little bee-eaters. Down along the river we saw one of the crocodiles that make the Zambezi treacherous, and we watched a massive hippo graze briefly before disappearing into the water until dusk.

What we didn't come across at Chikwenya was other people. Unlike in some places, we never found ourselves sharing our once-in-a-lifetime animal encounters with a dozen jeeps. It was just me, another couple (an American actress and her filmmaker husband) and our guides. And boats are rarely seen on this stretch of the Zambezi. The most visible sign we saw of other people was the distant smoke of fires across the river in Zambia. When I asked my guide, Tendai Mdluli—who has worked

at multiple camps and is now part of Wilderness's corporate team—what makes Chikwenya special, he didn't hesitate. "The location," he said. "And the remoteness—we're way out in the middle of nowhere."

Chikwenya is a great place for touring on foot, as I did with Mdluli. On the ground, your relationship to the surroundings shifts—perspective, scale, awareness, vulnerability (even with a rifle-toting guide). It was humbling and thrilling to watch a couple of elephants, less than a hundred feet away, bathing themselves with mud, first splashing their chests and under their ears, then slinging the muck over their backs. This area is known for some of the best up-close wild elephant sightings in the world.

The only one of the Big Five safari animals absent from Chikwenya is the rhino, which roamed the Zambezi Valley until the 1980s, when poaching nearly wiped them out. With fellow operator and Beyond, Wilderness is participating in an ongoing project to replenish both white and black rhinos in Botswana. I asked

northwestern border, Capmount and its investors began a dramatic overhaul of Chikwenya. In addition to converting to solar power and installing a water-purification system, they updated the design and built an airstrip less than ten minutes away. They also asked Wilderness Safaris to come back to run the camp.

For Wilderness that meant returning a jewel to its stable of Zimbabwean properties—three in Mana Pools and three in Hwange National Park—all new or recently refurbished. "Reopening Chikwenya secures the long-term future of one of Zimbabwe's premier wildlife areas," said Vincent.

Early one morning, as our gregarious and endlessly knowledgeable driver Foster Siyawareva—one of Zimbabwe's first certified black African guides—was telling us about the sausage tree and its distinctive elongated fruit, I was the only one to notice a couple of female lions relaxing in a clearing perhaps a hundred yards away. (It was a proud moment, spotting those lionesses before our eagle-eyed guides.) Soon, several lumbering elephants emerged from the trees, accompanied by a few skittish baboons. Next, a

Arnold Tshipa, environmental officer, about the possibility of bringing rhinos back to Mana Pools and Hwange. “Not anytime soon,” he replied, without hesitation. “You have to guard them 24-7, and it’s very expensive.”

That harsh reality is a reminder of how fragile the search for human-wildlife balance is. And it’s a big reason why Chikwenya’s owners wanted a camp that sits lighter on this land that animals pass through daily as they move between forest and river. (On the night of my arrival, the armed guard who accompanied me to my tent casually mentioned that a lion pride was “hanging out” under my terrace.)

The seven cabin-like tents (two are multi-tent family units) stand on low wooden decks and are accessed by elevated timber walkways. The interiors, by South African designer Tanja Beyers, are outfitted in luxe-safari style with large, cozy beds, soaking tubs, and desks crafted from reclaimed wood slabs. Lighting is embellished with beadwork and ceramic disks, which were made by regional artisans, as are the hand-batiked robes.

In keeping with the Disconnect to Reconnect motto espoused by Wilderness, there’s no Wi-Fi, so you can blessedly forget about email, the markets, and the latest headlines. But there are plenty of spots for reading and relaxing. All of the tents have outdoor seating areas—a couple have their own plunge pools—from which you can take in the wildlife along the riverbank. One afternoon, as I enjoyed an outdoor shower beneath a towering *mulhute* tree, the only sounds came from birds in the canopy overhead, while baboons frolicked and groomed each other in the shade of a feverberry tree and the sun glinted off the river beyond.

The lure of the water is irresistible, and a boat excursion, especially in the late afternoon, is an essential part of the Chikwenya



A herd of eland grazing during sunset. Below: One of seven tented suites at Chikwenya.

experience. You can go angling for tiger fish (the closest I came to a catch, alas, was when a yellow-billed kite swooped down and tried to steal my bait), or you can just sit back, drink in hand, gliding past groups of submerged hippos and solitary elephants feeding on the reed grasses of small, marshy islands. Out on the river, time slows and primordial rhythms seem to take over. As the sunlight began to fade and the colors deepened, I felt the ineffable sense of inner peace and connection that Terblanche had described wash over me.

Back at camp, evenings began with cocktails and canapés in the palapa-style lounge or around the firepit. Dinner was served at a communal table in a large open-air pavilion or at tables out on the lawn, and the quality and diversity of the food—especially for a far-flung campsite—was impressive. While we dined on plates of perfectly grilled rib eye and roasted potatoes beneath the stars, just a stone’s throw down the slope a two-ton hippo was having its own moonlit feast of riverbank grasses.

Over meals, the members of Chikwenya’s small team shared safari stories, talked of their families, and offered thoughts on Zimbabwe’s future. For them, the stakes are, of course, personal. “I hope by the time people leave this place they have a better understanding of Zimbabwe,” said Mduli, “and a positive view of our country.”

At one point during my visit, the discussion turned to the topic of evolution. I found myself caught off guard when a couple of the guides told me they rejected the theories of Darwin. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised. Whatever your spiritual beliefs, it’s not hard to embrace the idea that this magnificent natural setting was molded by a divine hand. *Suites from \$1,288 per person; wilderness-safaris.com.*

COURTESY WILDERNESS SAFARIS

COURTESY SINGITA

Choose Your Impact

A primer on how to direct your safari dollars to the causes that matter to you.

We asked trusted industry sources about how they advise clients who want to choose safari experiences with their personal causes in mind, whether that means traveling with operators that are transparent about their charitable and commercial practices, taking into account the ownership of the land the safari will take place on, or getting involved on the ground.

SMART GIVING

While most companies earmark percentages of their profits to various causes, a few have independent trusts to guarantee transparency—meaning the commercial businesses can transfer tourism dollars to the trusts but can’t pull from them. For example, **Wilderness Safaris’** independent affiliate, **Wilderness Wildlife Trust** (*wildernesstrust.com*), considered a leader in this space, focuses on three areas: anti-poaching and wildlife management, research and conservation, and community empowerment and education. Donors can contribute to the general fund or allocate donations for particular focus areas, or they can specify a project through its U.S.-based partner **Empowers Africa** (*empowersafrica.org*), such as establishing a mobile emergency-response veterinary unit in Malawi or studying zebra-migration corridors between protected areas. Likewise,

Wild Philanthropy (*wildphilanthropy.com*), an affiliate of **Journeys by Design**, allows supporters to make tax-deductible pledges of \$20,000 over a three-year period, 100 percent of which goes toward underwriting the operating costs of the trust, which focuses on growing community-led ecotourism. In return, the operator makes a series of special conservation experiences available exclusively to supporters.

THINK LOCAL

Consider going on a safari that takes place on a conservancy (land that is owned and operated by local communities and leased by operators), instead of a national park or private reserve (those have their own benefits, but less built-in transparency). Usually, these trips offer clear breakdowns of what portion of your daily stay goes to the conservancy. Take **Lewa Wildlife Conservancy** (*lewa.org*), a 62,000-acre sanctuary in northern Kenya, where \$126 per day goes straight to preservation, or an umbrella organization like **Northern Rangelands Trust** (*nrt-kenya.org*), which supports 39 conservancies that represent 18 ethnic groups across northern and coastal Kenya by employing them to govern their own land, creating development projects, and setting up savings and credit cooperatives. “It’s one of my

favorite conservation efforts in Kenya right now,” says Marcia Gordon, cofounder and president of **Extraordinary Journeys** (*extraordinaryjourneys.com*). It’s also a way to see a conservation model in which wildlife and local communities live side by side.

GO DEEPER

“Voluntourism can easily become voyeurism,” says safari specialist Cherri Briggs, of **Explore Inc.** (*exploreinc.com*), who has seen that clients who apply their skills and interests to their giving have more rewarding experiences. Briggs has connected an obstetrician with midwives from remote villages in Zambia for a three-day training program and a chef from Aspen with a fledgling restaurant in a township in Cape Town to advise on business operations. Alternatively, time your trip to join a big fund-raising event like the Annual Women’s Run, an all-female, 13-mile run held in partnership between luxury operator **Singita** (*singita.com*) and the nonprofit **Grumeti Fund** (*grumetifund.org*). In addition to the cost of the experience, guests must make a tax-deductible donation of \$16,500 each, which goes directly toward leadership programs for girls and women in Tanzania. This year’s three-day run across Singita’s private concession in the Serengeti will take place October 25–30.—*E.R.*

Many of Singita’s partnerships with nonprofits focus on female empowerment programs.

