TRAVEL

Stay Wild

A controversial camp in Kenya raises the stakes for sustainable travel. From there to Zimbabwe and Zanzibar, these ecolodges prove that conservation and community can go hand in hand

BY JONNY BIERMAN





Top: Cheetah spotting in the Maasai Mara; Left: safari-chic tents at Elewana Elephant Pepper Camp

Every year, nearly two million wildebeest and other herbivores make a 800-kilometre loop across East Africa, chasing fresh grass and rain under the watchful eye of predators. Their circular journey–known as the Great Migration–takes them from Tanzania's Serengeti up into Kenya's Maasai Mara and back again. One of their most critical crossing points is at the Sand River, a narrow channel where the herds bottleneck between the two countries.

And it is right there, on the Kenyan side, that the Ritz-Carlton Masai Mara set up its tented safari camp in August 2025, stirring up a year-long controversy and legal dispute that eventually sided with the luxury hotel group. A presidential directive in July 2023 had originally banned new construction in wildlife corridors, buffer zones and dispersal areas, but the camp went up anyway–approved through internal channels and defended by Narok County as lawfully leased and compliant.

Maasai leaders, whose ancestral lands border the reserve, say they were never properly consulted. Kenya Wildlife Service insists the camp does not block migration, despite reports that wildebeest have been turning back from crossings they've used for generations. But the disruption is not only an ecological one–it's also cultural.

Strip the logo off the tent and the pattern shows. Luxury in Africa is all too often done to a place rather than built from it–a global brand over a local deal, the conservation story in the brochure rather than on the ground. When it comes to choosing a sustainable safari in Africa, the operators worth supporting consider not only the wildlife encounters, but also on whose terms the place stands and who keeps the upside.

ELEWANA ELEPHANT PEPPER CAMP MASAI MARA, KENYA

Elewana's Elephant Pepper Camp has been answering this question since 2009, the year the Mara North Conservancy was formed as a partnership between tourism operators and the Maasai who own the land. That is the move a franchise deal skips: building the lease from the ground up. The conservancy–more than 28,000 hectares of private wilderness along the reserve's northern boundary–pays a stable, transparent income to hundreds of Maasai landowners, which makes the people who live on the land its partners rather than its obstacle.

Luxury at Elephant Pepper Camp is deliberately quiet. With the firepit as the centrepiece, wildlife passes just beyond the unfenced camp, silhouetted by the sunset. The safari-chic tents run on solar power, vehicles are spread thin enough that a walking safari or night drive is ordinary here, and when the wildebeest arrive in July, they come on their own schedule, not the camp's.





Left to right: Elephants interacting with guests at Somalisa Camp; the underwater room at The Manta Resort

SOMALISA CAMP, HWANGE NATIONAL PARK, ZIMBABWE

In Zimbabwe's Hwange, Somalisa makes the ownership question literal. Beks Ndlovu guided across this country before he built a company in it with trusted partners and investors. African Bush Camps is his, and Somalisa, the first camp he raised, sits just outside the village where he grew up.

"You cannot build a safari business from behind a desk," he says. "You have to understand the land, the wildlife and, most importantly, the people who live alongside it." The camp deals in the old safari fantasy without apology: seven canvas suites strung under an acacia grove, a copper slipper bath deep enough to disappear into, a fire lit each evening against the Hwange cold.

The proof is at the pool. It runs to the edge of the bush–and most afternoons, so do the elephants. Herds come to drink at the deck's edge, sometimes from the pool itself, because the camp was set along their path rather than across it. Elephants, lions, leopards, cheetahs and endangered African wild dogs move through the same ground.

The camps he builds, Ndlovu says, are "rooted in their surroundings, where conservation and communities are part of the story rather than something added afterwards." Here that means running entirely on solar, recycling 80 per cent of the camp's water and earning the first Gold Green Tourism Certification awarded in Zimbabwe.

THE MANTA RESORT, TANZANIA

Not every conservation story in Africa is a safari. On the northern tip of Pemba, Zanzibar's quieter neighbour, The Manta Resort is built from the coast it sits on–Swahili-Pemba architecture, retired outrigger canoes rebuilt into showers, and beyond the sugar-white beaches, some of East Africa's richest reefs await.

What keeps it worth the visit is the Kwanini Foundation, the resort's non-profit organization, which set up a fishing exclusion zone off the beach in 2013. "Without community buy-in you have nothing," says Matt Saus, the resort's managing partner and the foundation's chairman. Trust came first; the protected area followed, and the proof is in what came back: the reef refilled, fishermen work the spillover beyond the protected area, and in 2023, turtles nested here for the first time in memory. Guests experience the richness of the sea from the new underwater room, and by diving and snorkelling, with a portion of proceeds going to the foundation.

Further away in the southern Kalahari, Tswalu–the largest privately protected conservation area in South Africa, its name Setswana for "rebirth" –has turned dozens of overgrazed farms back into functioning Kalahari, with fences pulled up and indigenous species returned; in 2024 it earned The Long Run's Global Ecosphere Resort status, the sustainable tourism body's highest rating.

In Cape Town, Cape Cadogan Boutique Hotel occupies a restored Victorian house, kept by a South African family four generations deep who fund early childhood education in Mfuleni township. None of it was airlifted in; each was built from the place it stands on.

The Ritz-Carlton debacle proves that even a presidential ban can't always stop a global brand from planting its flag where it pleases. But it also proves something else: the debate isn't settled by a lease or a court ruling: it's settled by the people who choose where to spend their money.

Both versions of an African trip have always existed. The one where you're a spectator, flown in and ferried out, consuming wildlife like a drive-thru spectacle, leaving little behind but footprints and cash. And the one where you're a participant–where your stay funds a conservancy, supports a community and helps keep the migration running for another century.

How to verify sustainable choices:

Certification
Search for certified sustainable options and look for independent, third-party standards, such as EarthCheck, B Corp, The Long Run and Green Tourism rather than a brand's in-house eco badge.

Partnerships
Employment does not equal partnership. Real partners get named—the conservancy, the co-operative, the community holding the lease—and paid a published share. Where culture is on the itinerary, book it from the people who own that culture, not a performance staged at the lodge.

Non-profit involvement
Find experiences and accommodations that have direct involvement with non-profit and NGO conservation, cultural preservation and community development programmes that help protect the places they exist in.

Educate yourself
Read up on responsible travel practices through the RISE Travel Institute and their RISE Traveler Pathway programmes.