

Checkout What Will Keep People Coming To Africa In 2017

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Travel to Africa is booming for 2017, tour operators have reported. But what are travelers looking for? From 'IT escapes' to new concepts of luxury, African tour operators reveal what the hottest trends are for Africa travel in 2017.

1. In pursuit of the 'real' Africa

Safari Pros tour operators report that there has been a significant rise in travelers who are requesting itineraries that “go deeper, allowing them to feel African and the adventure of the land.” As a result, they have been adding components to itineraries that have multiday mobile safaris, more authentic experiences, traveling at a slower pace and less focus on luxury for luxury’s sake.

“People want more Africa feeling like Africa and less spa services. They’re [interested in] walking safaris (multiday, not just a one-hour activity); canoe trails; Hemingway-style adventure; fly camping and traveling at a slower pace. [They are] looking at locations that offer a real diverse array of activities with sleep-outs and treehouses. Maybe a client’s first trip to Africa is South Africa, Cape Town and the Sabi Sands (game reserve, near Kruger National Park), but they come back looking for more grit, and we are able to blow their minds in Botswana and Zambia,” said Teresa Sullivan, Safari Pros board member and owner of Mango Safaris.

Craig Beal, owner of Travel Beyond, agreed. He said travelers are seeking more active safaris in which they aren’t confined to a vehicle for the duration of their trip, so walking safaris will remain popular in 2017. He adds that tours that are experience-driven offering a variety of activities, high level of guiding, remote location and quality managers/hosts are in extremely high demand.

2. A new concept of luxury

U.S. travelers used to explore Africa in the lap of luxury, making the continent an exclusive destination reserved for the high-end market. Today’s savvy travelers are more focused on the experience and increasingly less on luxury accommodations. That is why Safari Pros’ tour operators have introduced a new concept that has been gaining popularity with travelers: the “High-Low Safari,” which consists of a few days roughing it on a canoe/walking trail in a dome tent followed by a stay at a luxury lodge. Affordable luxury in Africa can be had for \$750 to \$1,000 per day, according to Safari Pros.

Extraordinary Journeys’ founder Elizabeth Gordon said that there is a growing preference among clients for a “back to basics” approach and an understated luxury. She said clients are looking for a comfortable tent, meals cooked over an open fire, dining al fresco and the expertise of excellent guides.

According to Wilderness Safaris U.S. sales manager Craig Glatthaar, the more discerning traveler is indeed looking for luxury in an adventurous setting. He said: "Even though the demand for luxury product is continually evolving as travelers' expectations continue to rise and suppliers continue to modernize camps, it is important to emphasize the luxury of the safari experience itself and for operators to remain authentic and sustainable."

3. Conservation remains top of mind

Tour operators have seen a major rise in conservation-oriented travel, as clients want to experience that "feel-good" factor of helping wildlife/the environment but simply don't have the funds or time to commit to a long-term volunteer vacation.

Giltedge Travel's Julien Perreard explained that safaris have always been and will continue to be the biggest draw for travel to Africa. He added, however, that there has been a shift toward a more hands-on role in the conservation process. "Many of these activities are built around rhino conservation, for example: tracking rhinos on foot or joining a vet to assist in the microchipping of wild rhinos," Perreard said.

A popular choice for these kinds of holidays, according to Elizabeth Gordon, is rhino darting at Phinda, a private game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. She says: "This experience allows guests to take part in a four-day Rhino Capture and Research safari, accompanying vets and rangers into the bush to locate, dart and tag unidentified white rhino." (Editor's note: With darting, the rhino falls asleep, and then the vets either tag it or in some reserves plant microchips in their horns and mark their ears for identification. The chips gather information about the rhinos' movements and also act as a deterrent to poachers.)

4. Africa beyond the wildlife

Although wildlife remains the main reason most U.S. travelers visit Africa, there has been an increased interest in art-focused and cultural trips. Extraordinary Journeys' Gordon explained she has seen a major increase in interest in art in Africa.

“The interest is not simply museum and gallery visits; many of our clients also wish to visit studios, meet with artists and learn why they are producing the work that they do,” she said. “The majority of itineraries requested revolve around the South African art scene Cape Town, Johannesburg, etc.; however, Marrakech, Nairobi, Lagos, etc. are also producing auctions and festivals, with prices for artwork continually increasing. Art is seen as an investment for people with a discerning eye.”

Sherwin Banda, president of African Travel Inc., said that travelers may visit Africa for the animals, but they return for the people. “When guests experience the genuine sense of hospitality of Africa’s people, it is easy to understand their desire to return again and again,” he said. “Guests wish to delve into cultural experiences when they visit the continent to really walk away with the deeper understanding of the people.”

5. Wellness in Africa

Gordon explained that safaris, though thrilling, can sometimes be grueling: up early, out all day and sometimes very regimented. She said: “We have found that some of our clients opt for a more relaxed pace, at a lodge or camp where one can do as little or as much as they want without fear of missing out. These unique locations do not lack for their own activities, clients just get to plan them at a more laid back pace and it’s a much more enticing option than simply laying out on a beach all day.”

“Ironically, what we thought was the information age is now the age of ‘IT escape’ travelers are looking for an experience that promotes wellness, an opportunity to escape the stress of daily life, disconnecting to reconnect with self, family and nature,” said Glatthaar of Wilderness Safaris.

Glatthaar added that in general terms, activities that enable travelers to reconnect with nature and specifically with oneself are growing in popularity; the ever-increasing stress in people’s daily lives is forcing them to seek out travel experiences that are good for the soul, not pure travel consumption.