

Leave only footprints

Whether you're a thrill seeker, a culture vulture or an easy-going explorer, the idea of travelling not only to enrich your own life, but also those of others is taking off.

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Lake Sibaya, South Africa's largest freshwater lake is perfect for kayaking.

We ensure that we 'tread gently on the earth' and that the community shares in our commitment to protect and promote this majestic land



Thonga Beach Lodge created job opportunities for locals, many of whom had no previous work experience.



The sweeping coastline of the 332 000 hectare iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

Ecotourism, as with most other 'eco' things, is on the rise. The core idea behind the concept is that travellers should consider the impact that they have on their destination – be it the environment or the people who live there. While planning trips that have a smaller carbon and cultural footprint will take you to more remote locations and create more authentic experiences, it's not just the 'in' thing to do. Ecotourism has a major role to play in the development and preservation of rural areas, cultures and economies.

It's projected that 57% of the 1.8 billion international tourists expected to be trotting the globe in 2030 will visit emerging market countries. That means more than a billion people will travel to destinations where they have an opportunity to create a holiday that can contribute to economic development and facilitate meaningful cultural exchanges.

So what can you do to be a responsible ecotourist? The simplest way is to visit destinations that operate under ecotourism principles, like the ones included below. Do your research and ask lots of questions so that you can have a fabulous holiday and make a positive impact.

UPLIFT A COMMUNITY

Nestled in the north-east of South Africa, iSimangaliso Wetland Park in KwaZulu-Natal is an unspoilt landscape. This UNESCO World Heritage Site and protected marine reserve boasts lively coral reefs and a golden beach, Mabibi, that is a nesting site for loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles. The area also has unique and diverse flora, as well as South Africa's largest freshwater lake, Lake Sibaya.

Despite this astounding natural beauty, the 3 000 people living in the area find themselves isolated, with very few employment prospects. When Brett Gehren established the Thonga Beach Lodge (www.thongabeachlodge.co.za) inside of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, he was very cognisant of this fact.

Brett, the founder of the ecotourism-focused Isibindi Africa Lodges, is passionate about preserving local culture and the environment, and talks excitedly about the growing demand for ecotourism. When he decided to open Thonga, he made special effort to ensure that the local people would benefit from its presence in their community.

When the lodge was built, many people in the community had the opportunity to gain experience in construction and other trades. Once it was up and running, 50 locals were trained as hospitality staff, and more gained a source of income through selling handcrafted souvenirs to tourists. Besides this, some of the lodge's turnover is used to employ additional teachers at the local school and pay for two meals for each child every week.

It's for these reasons, Brett says, that the lodge has had a significant impact on the community, and why locals and visitors can see the value that ecotourism brings with it.

Brett's top tip: "Go out and interact with people in the local community. These don't have to be formal cultural experiences; you can simply make an effort to go out and befriend local people."

The undiscovered wilderness often offers the most surprises

RESTORE NATURAL HABITATS

Tswalu Kalahari Reserve (www.tswalu.com) is the country's largest private game reserve. Covering 110 000 hectares of semi-arid grassland and open savannahs in the Northern Cape, conservation has been the cornerstone in rebuilding this park.

Russel Binks, the managing director at Tswalu, explains that the reserve is a work-in-progress conservation project. The area is made up of previously denuded farmland that Russel and his team are restoring to its former glory.

The reserve was created to provide a safe haven for some of Africa's most endangered species – and not just the “charismatic” big game like lion, cheetah, wild dog, desert black rhino and buffalo, he adds. There's also a surprising array of smaller animals, birds and plants here, including aardvark and pangolin.

There are currently 12 research projects underway in the park, including studies of various pangolin species that are all under threat of becoming extinct. Tswalu is regarded as one of the best places in the world to view these elusive creatures and visitors couldn't ask for a better location.

Guests of the lodge have the opportunity to rediscover the beauty of the savannah, see rare animals and interact with



Storm clouds gather over the plains of the Kalahari.

researchers working at the site, all while staying in luxury accommodation.

Russel's top tip: “Don't necessarily follow the masses. We are blessed with so many incredible destinations around the globe. The undiscovered wilderness often offers the most surprises....”

EDUCATE AND INNOVATE

The Cape floral kingdom is famed for its biodiversity. With more than 9 500 known plant species, 70% of the flora in this extraordinary biome is unique to the Cape area.

It's this natural beauty and diversity that inspired Paul Boutinot to purchase the Waterkloof Wine Estate in 2004. Set on the slopes of the fynbos-covered Schapenberg overlooking False Bay, the



Tswalu is home to creatures both big and small.



A peacock roams among the vines at Waterkloof.



Horses plough the vineyards of Waterkloof overlooking False Bay.

estate’s ongoing rehabilitation and conservation efforts have earned it the World Wildlife Fund’s Biodiversity and Wine Initiative’s Champion status.

Paul’s philosophy towards winemaking emphasises natural processes and working with the terroir. He believes in creating “honest” wines that reflect the flavours of their origin while respecting and celebrating the full circle of life. It was this thinking that drove the decision to adopt biodynamic farming methods at Waterkloof.

The farm uses no chemical herbicides, pesticides or fertilisers in producing its crops. Horses are used to plough the land, cattle are kept to provide manure for compost, and sheep graze on weeds, while hens roam freely, eating vine weevils and aerating the

soil. The result is a healthy, thriving ecosystem and the finest wines.

Nature-lovers can take guided tours through the estate and learn about the flora and fauna, as well as the conservation and farming methods used on the grounds. Guests can then learn more about the art of winemaking on a cellar tour, followed by a wine tasting. Finally, sample the estate’s produce with a two or three course dinner, the perfect end to an all-encompassing experience that savours the ‘circle of life’.

Paul’s top tip: “Ask whether there are local conservation or social projects that you can learn more about, or hire a local guide to give you an authentic insight into the place.” 🍷



Tswalu Kalahari Reserve is one of the few places in the world where you might be lucky enough to see aardvark.

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