

Melania Trump Gave Us All a Valuable Lesson in How Not to Dress in Africa

Town & Country's travel editor has been to Africa many times. Here's what she's learned about the practical—and diplomatic—consequences of making the wrong choices.

Excerpted from an [article](#) by Klara Glowczewska

I wish people would focus on what I do, not what I wear,” First Lady Melania Trump lamented on the final day of her solo four-country trip to Africa, which took her last week to Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, and Egypt. She was reacting to criticism of the pith helmet she had worn earlier in Kenya.

It's a sentiment any serious person would sympathize with—but it was difficult to honor her wish. The objectives of her trip weren't clearly defined, and some of her clothes were, well, distracting.

Take the pith helmet. That's a hat with a history. It was widely worn by European colonial armies in Africa and Asia and by the end of the 19th century had also become common civilian wear for Westerners in the tropics; it is considered by many a symbol of colonial oppression. Why, one can't help but wonder, would the first lady of the United States want to lift up that rock?

Furthermore, at the precise moment she was making her plea, Trump was standing on the Giza plateau outside Cairo; behind her was the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid of the pharaoh Khufu, the only remaining wonder of the ancient world. And with her attire she was inexplicably channeling 1930s, gangster-era Chicago: What else to make of the wide, black-belted trousers paired with a white shirt and a black tie, a menswear-style double-breasted jacket draped over her shoulders, and a black-banded fedora on her head?



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I lived in Cairo as a child; I've traveled to Egypt numerous times since; I cannot imagine what the inspiration for this might have been. (In telling contrast is what Princess Diana wore at the pyramids in 1992: The same pale, desert-appropriate colors, but her flowy mid-calf skirt and matching belted jacket had a demure, timeless elegance that both flattered her and detracted not at all—as did Melania's—from the magnificence behind her.)

There was nothing truly wrong with Melania's Al-Capone-ish get-up: It wasn't immodest, something to always consider in a majority Muslim country. Nor was it head-scratchingly inappropriate or insensitive, like the "I really don't care do u?" jacket she wore to visit migrant children at the Texas-Mexico border in June.

But it was weird. Not clothing, but costume. And costume always attracts attention, invites interpretation, and sends its own message.

So yes, I have quibbles with what Melania Trump packed for her African adventure. Think of it a constructive criticism for future forays.

I'll start with her "I'm off to Africa" departure outfit, in which she disembarked from her SUV at the Andrews Airforce Base in Maryland and headed for her plane. Her stilettos were leopard print, her skirt leather, her coat suede, in a warm ocher color that would have blended nicely with the red-earth airstrips of the African bush. Leopard print, animal skins, semi-safari colors—why these sartorial clichés?

It was an excellent outfit for many occasions except, in my opinion, when you're off on a diplomatic mission to the African continent, and to countries, moreover, as diverse as Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, and Egypt.

Africa, writ large, is not safari land. It is reductive to exoticize it that way. It has vibrant and varied cities, where increasingly the majority of the continent's immense population lives. It has its problems for sure, but also rich and exciting contemporary art, music, food, and fashion scenes and cultures.

Consider the sapeurs, the extraordinarily dressed dandies from the Congo, who in the midst of war and abject poverty are killing it style-wise, in tailored suits in flamboyant colors, silk ties, and immaculate footwear, and have been documented in a book, *The Gentlemen of Bacongo*. (Talk about costumes!) On my recent travels, a walking tour of Johannesburg's new hipster neighborhoods and venues was as thrilling and eye-opening as any safari walkabout.

Do people wear safari garb? Sure. But not everywhere. Dennis Pinto, the Kenyan-born managing director of Micato Safaris, parsed the geography of safari-wear this way: "Growing up in the bush in Kenya, everyone wore safari khakis for practical reasons and even in the cities, because wardrobes were limited and we didn't concern ourselves with fashion back then. And yes, even today there's a large segment of people in East and southern Africa who continue to do so. My family and I do when we're there, and my wife and daughter accessorize it to make it look more stylish." East and southern Africa. Not West.

Trump's first stop on the continent was the west African country of Ghana—notable not for its wilderness areas but, historically, for being the major point of embarkation for African slaves. Culturally, it is renowned for its many diverse ethnic groups and their strikingly colorful attire, especially as worn by the country's traditional, powerful tribal chiefs.

During his meeting with Trump, Osabarimba Kwesi Atta II, chieftain of the Fante tribe, sported a crown and an exuberantly patterned and colored robe—purple, blue, red, hot pink, yellow, green, turquoise. Trump was in high-end safari (except for the high heels): kakhi pants and dark olive shirt.

It was elegant; I wish I had that outfit for my next trip into the bush. But missing was even the slightest nod to the specific African culture where she was a diplomatic visitor. As with the outfit she wore on the plane, the First Lady of the United States was communicating that for her, the entire African content is Disney's Wild Kingdom.

In Malawi, the first lady stuck to cinched beige dresses both for arrival and to visit a school in Lilongwe. Pretty and appropriately restrained, I thought, for one of Africa's poorest, most populated, and most resource-strapped countries, which is struggling to provide education and health care for its citizens and whose national parks are only just making a modest comeback after being almost utterly depleted by deforestation and poaching.

FLOTUS did not strive for flash here; she was not costumed; and she looked comfortable. It was easy on this leg of Trump's trip to focus on her warmth and the genuine pleasure she seemed to take being around the kids—one of the more natural moments of her tenure as first lady.

The animal theme roared back when Trump deplaned at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in a white dress with a bright tropical-bird pattern. And she departed in much the same way—in a green dress covered in beige silhouettes of cavorting rhinos, zebras, and flamingos.

It's as if Brigitte Macron, the first lady of France, had arrived in the United States dressed in cowboy boots and left wearing something made of fabric printed with images of American buffalo and feathers evoking Native American headdresses.

Back to the safari outfit that was Trump's choice for her visit to a Kenyan orphanage and a game drive in Nairobi National Park—the aforementioned pith helmet, plus white shirt, pants, and high boots.

“Melania's pith helmet made us smile,” Pinto told me when I asked him for the safari veteran's take. “She looked beautiful, of course, like a Ralph Lauren advertisement along with those jodhpurs, but we haven't seen that look in East Africa since Meryl Streep was filming *Out of Africa* 30 years ago!”

In addition to the outdatedness (and the pith helmet's historical tone-deafness), there were practical problems with Trump's outfit—reasons why you wouldn't actually want to wear it on your own safari.

Take the riding boots. Chic, sure. And great if you're going on a riding safari. But otherwise, as any rider will know, high riding boots are not made for easy walking, or for jumping adroitly into and out of game-drive Landcruisers. You want sturdy brown leather for sure (it protects feet better than sneakers and camouflages dirt), but you want ankle-high.

But perhaps the biggest issue in safari wear is color. The traditional hues—khakis, beige, and muted safari greens—were adopted for specific reasons. “Studies have shown that animals notice bright colors,” Pinto points out, “and our goal on safari is to be unnoticed by wildlife.” (Interesting aside: “It is also believed that East African lions shy away when they see the color red, instinctively fearing Maasai warriors who have hunted them for generations wearing red shukas.”)

White—the color of Trump's pith helmet and shirt—is a no-no. For two reasons. First, white will quickly show the dust and dirt that gets kicked up by tires and even while walking. More importantly, it can be dangerous. As Cherri Briggs of Explore Africa (and long my Africa travel whisperer) points out, “white, like bright colors, makes you stand out. And if you are charged by an elephant, it will go for you in your whites rather than others dressed in desert-drab. You'll be the easy-to-see target. White can work for lunch at the lodge—not on a drive.”

And the packing motto I like best is Joy Pinto's, which she says works anywhere in Africa: “Light heart, light luggage, lots of bangles.”

Really, it works for everywhere.