

Post-Pandemic Active Travel: Your Best Safari Vacation Plus Exercise

BY ALLISON OLMSTED

Today is World Elephant Day (August 12), and the day before yesterday was World Lion Day, so it seems like a perfect time to talk about African safaris.

With a post-pandemic light at the end of the tunnel for the beleaguered travel industry, one of the fastest growing segments is my favorite one, active travel. Tour operators, adventure lodges and hotels specializing in active travel are reporting greatly increased interest, and in many cases, record reservations, especially for 2022. The same is true for safaris, with one of the best-known tour operators reporting 300 % more bookings for next year than they had a year in advance for 2020, before the pandemic.



Active travel can take many different forms, and my last three columns have covered the appeals of cycling, hiking/walking and all-inclusive adventure lodge vacations, as well as how to plan your perfect trips for each. Today is all about safaris, which may come as a surprise.

There has long been confusion among consumers between the terms active travel and the better-known adventure travel - which frankly does not always include much adventure. The latter has come to be used for exotic destinations or unusual activities, so taking an Antarctic cruise on an icebreaker is considered adventure travel, though from the physical exertion perspective, at the end of the day it's another cruise, maybe without the buffet.

Likewise, things like zip-lining are often used to promote adventure travel, and while it can be a lot of fun, with gravity doing all the work it is hardly an active pursuit. Hot air balloon rides, fishing and even campfire cooking classes are often evoked to make claims of adventure travel.

Safaris fall on both sides of this fence, though more commonly they offer a sense of adventure with very little physical activity. For many guests the trip consists of sitting in an open off-road safari vehicle observing wildlife, enjoying lunch, sitting by the pool, going for another game-viewing drive, then having dinner, usually with ample adult beverages at all meals, and often in between. Given how amazing the wildlife is, this can still be a stellar, if sedentary, vacation. But it doesn't have to be.

Better quality safaris are hosted at lodges that tend to be all-inclusive and allow guests to create their own schedules outside of the main events each day, an early morning game viewing drive and second one in the late afternoon, each lasting typically 3-4 hours. This is because animals are most active when it is not hot, and these are the prime times. That means that you usually have a good chunk of the day free, 6-7 hours, and while it's tempting to catch up on that very early wakeup call with a nap, there are plenty of other active options, from tennis to much more adventurous pursuits. In fact, active safari options are more plentiful than ever before.

There are a few types of safaris that are quite active by their very nature, number one being gorilla and primate trekking. This is almost always done in Rwanda and/or Uganda, home to the bulk of world's population of mountain gorillas. The gorillas live on mountains, in dense vegetation, without roads, so seeing them means meeting them on their own terms by foot, which can include several hours of hiking, sometimes on steep terrain through bush so thick your guides need to hack the way with machetes. Gorilla safaris demand a certain level of fitness and exertion and are typically paired with additional days of trekking to see chimpanzees, baboons, golden monkeys and other primates. This is a very different take on the African safari experience and ideal for those who want to combine mind-blowing wildlife encounters with a bit of a workout. It is a true once in a lifetime Bucket List trip, as detailed in this piece here at Forbes.

I've not been personally, but many parks in Zambia and Zimbabwe offer true walking safaris, where guests eschew vehicles and do it the old fashioned way, in some cases on multi-day excursions where you set up camp each night - with professional guides and rangers.

Want to get more hardcore? **Micato Safaris**, a record 9-time winner of *Travel + Leisure's* Award for Number One World's Best Safari Outfitter, offers avid runners rare access to the Kenya's high-altitude training centers for elite marathoners. As their website describes the trip, "On the Micato Kenya Elite Running Safari, guests get access to the training facilities and the professional marathoners... and, of course, safari. Both the casual running aficionados and hardcore racers will enjoy literally running in the footsteps of champions on this 10-day itinerary. Included are training stops at two of the most lauded high-elevation running centers in the world, Eldoret and Iten. Guests will meet and train with elite runners, race with up-and-coming local athletes and, if they so wish, end their marathon training by racing in a local half- or full marathon."

Besides these intrinsically active itineraries, another option is to schedule some prime outdoor activities in conjunction with your safari, before or after entering the bush. On one trip to South Africa, I went with Micato, the choice of Hillary Clinton, David Beckham and Princes William and Harry (according to *Travel + Leisure*). I asked about the possibility



of climbing Table Mountain, Cape Town's most famous landmark, a flat-topped rock peak rising steeply more than 3300 feet over the city. They arranged for a guide and we tackled the India Vester Trail, which runs steeply up the cliff face almost directly beneath the much more popular scenic cable car route to the top, a sizeable day hike by any standards, taking 2-4 hours one way.

There are several other well-marked hiking routes that are less demanding, but in any case, hikes up Table Mountain are an unforgettable part of a trip to South Africa, and there are many other active add-ons available to safaris. One memory-filled outing popular in the region is a 2.5-hour snorkeling with the seals boat trip to the Cape Fur Seal Colony at Duiker Island. Similarly, the peninsula below Cape Town is famous for its penguins, where you can do a kayaking excursion with them, and surfing is extremely popular in the beachfront heart of the city, as is stand-up paddle boarding. There is also rock climbing, caving, mountain biking and more.

Likewise, many safari-goers to East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) add on a visit to stunning Victoria Falls, an area filled with action. There are hikes on both sides of the massive cataract and one of the world's most coveted whitewater raft trips below the falls.



A Micato trip planner in the New York-based company's South Africa office told me that interest in more physically demanding activities on safaris has been on the rise and noted that Cape Town is an active epicenter. "Pick what you want, and it is here... Table Mountain has literally hundreds of hiking trails all around it, from an extreme 2 hours to a casual all day trek. Going on hiking and nature walks is a very popular activity in Namibia –the 'Living Desert Experience' which is a popular tour where the dunes are (Sossusvlei Desert Lodge). Also known as the 'Little 5' tour, it explores the local dunes - some of the highest in the world - so whilst it may not be a long walk, it is certainly strenuous." Once you get on the actual safari, there are still a lot of active options.

Walking Safaris: I've had the good fortune to enjoy safaris in Kenya, South Africa and Botswana, and just about every lodge offered the option of ranger guided walking safaris during the mid-day, known in the trade as interpretive game walks. In my experience these are underutilized, and most guests opt out, mainly because it is hot and the chances of great wildlife sightings are lower. But at the worst, you enjoy an educational and intimate experience in the bush, learning about the flora and geology, while getting exercise. At best you have a unique wildlife experience in a way that is far more up close and personal than when you are in a vehicle. In Kenya we crouched hidden behind a stand of trees while a herd of elephants thundered by just in front of us, and in South Africa our guide tracked two leopards until we found them lazing in the grass in front of us. It was exhilarating.

Mountain Biking: This is a newer twist not offered at every lodge but certainly available at several. When I did it we rode with a guide on dirt roads, while a ranger in a safari vehicle drove behind to keep an eye on everything. It's not technical, just a nice ride, but I've cycled in a lot of places and there's something pretty special about doing it in the wilds of Africa.

Running: Same concept as mountain biking.

Lodge Recreation: Some lodges offer facilities like tennis courts, and many better ones have fitness centers. If it's too hot for you to go out on a walking safari, you can still take advantage of the ample downtime to work out.

Fun With Dogs: One of the latest activities offered at a handful of top lodges is participating in canine anti-poaching exercises. Some lodges have been training dogs to detect poachers and protect wildlife, and allow guests to play the part of poachers and trackers on the chase. One such lodge is Kenya's posh Segera, whose representative Jens Kazany said, "We love to share with our guests' insights on day-to-day conservation work on Segera and we usually have them join the daily operation of our canine anti-poaching unit. This gives them a chance to be out in the field participating in field patrols and training programs of the sniffer dogs and gives a great insight into what it takes to conserve 50,000 acres of land in the heart of Kenya." I did one of these exercises at Kenya's Loisaba Tented Camp, part of luxury safari lodge group Elewana, and it was both physical and tons of fun, trying (unsuccessfully) to evade four bloodhounds on my trail (Loisaba also offers great mountain biking).



Excursions: Many safari lodges offer special alternatives to sitting around camp. At one of my all-time favorites, South Africa's Tswalu, in the Kalahari Desert, you can opt for a guided hike to see ancient petroglyphs carved in stone. In Botswana, many top lodges are clustered around the rich watershed of the Okavango Delta and offer paddling opportunities. Namibia is one of the best destinations for active safaris, home to world's tallest sand dunes - some of which you can hike just like mountains. The most famous is "Big Daddy" in the Namib-Naukluft National Park, and it is a legit "active travel" experience for sure.

Wildlife Tracking: Tracking animals on foot for prolonged times is a very special experience, typically offered in the more desert setting, such as Namibia (Ultimate Safaris does this) and the Kalahari (so does Tswalu), and especially for rhinos and elephants.

The bottom line is that you can enjoy the eye opening scenery of a safari while remaining active - and still enjoy "sundowners," the traditional post-game drive cocktails as the sun goes down.

Essential Gear Recommendation: Perhaps your biggest concern on an African safari is insects, especially mosquitoes carrying malaria. While it is no substitute for

whatever medicine your physician recommends, it's worth it to stock up on clothes treated with permethrin, the best repellent for treating clothing. This is a good substitute for (or addition to) spraying your skin, lasts much longer than one vacation, and comes in a wide range of light neutral colors like khaki, which is what you want for your safari. The result is the exact kind of clothing you should wear on safari anyway, plus bug protection. The best-known name in this niche is Insect Shield, which makes its own gear and also licenses fabrics to top outdoor brands like Orvis, Craghoppers, L.L. Bean, Ex Officio and many others.