

These Sustainable Safari Lodges Are Among The World's Best Luxury Camps

EXCERPTED FROM AN ARTICLE BY LARRY OLMSTED

If you could take a truly great, once-in-a-lifetime type vacation that was also greener and more sustainable without making any sacrifices in terms of quality, why wouldn't you? In the case of African wildlife safaris, you don't just skip sacrifices, you get what just may be the very best product available. Period. Even better is that this dream trip comes in a range of price points, from ultra-luxe to more affordable.

Sustainability has become a hot trend in travel, with numerous surveys confirming its importance in travel planning among consumers. For instance, the most recent annual edition of the large (31,000 travelers in 34 countries) global survey by travel website Booking.com shows that 83% of travelers see sustainable travel as "important," with 75% planning to travel more sustainably in the next year. The prestigious American Express Trendex Consumer Trends report 2024 edition found that 54% of respondents listed "Booking accommodations that prioritize sustainability" as a top travel priority.

Well, if you want to book sustainability focused accommodations, you can't do much better than the safari camps of Great Plains Conservation.

One of the biggest problems with the green travel trend is information and misinformation. Just as resorts add a yoga class and claim to be wellness vacations, hotels and resorts often "greenwash" their practices and claim sustainability through long established hospitality industry practices such as offering you the chance not to have them wash your sheets and towels or putting larger reusable shampoo dispensers in. With dozens of competing "certifying" bodies, some of them self-serving or selling endorsements, and no Forbes 4 and 5-Star



You never know who is going to join you for lunch at one of the Great Plains Camps, like this elephant stopping by Zarafa Camp's main deck
Photo: Great Plains Conservation

equivalent seal of approval for sustainability, it can be very hard for consumers to separate the truly green from the hangers on. You have to look at every property in a deeper dive and drill down on the details, and I've done that in this case. Great Plains Conservation is the real deal.

It's also one of the very best, period, proving that you don't have to make sacrifices to do good. I've traveled many times on safaris to Africa, visiting eight different countries and almost all of the best-known luxury safari lodge brands. There are a lot of exceptional high-end safari camps and lodges, but even in this elite field Great Plains stand out.

If you have the National Geographic Channel, or like me, grew up with their documentaries on network television, you probably already know the force behind Great Plains, Derek and Beverly Joubert. He is a legendary nature filmmaker, perhaps the greatest ever, and she is an acclaimed wildlife photographer. They have co-produced more than 40 films for National Geographic, where they are both explorers-in-residence, including one of the most popular wildlife films ever released, *Eternal Enemies: Lions and Hyenas*, which has been watched by an estimated one billion viewers around the world. It won an Emmy and was filmed at the Great Plains property in Botswana (many of the films were made at their camps). They have also won eight other Emmys (and 23 nominations), a Peabody, a Presidential Order of Merit, and the World Ecology Award. They've authored more than a dozen books, and in partnership with National Geographic, founded the Big Cats Initiative and Rhinos Without Borders.

But the biggie is Great Plains Conservation, which they co-founded in 2006. The group works with local governments and communities to protect the environment and its wildlife through low-density, environmentally responsible tourism. As explained below, they take "low density" extremely seriously. Revenue from the 18 camps, suites and lodges in Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe has helped protect more than 1 million acres of wild lands in Africa.

The Great Plains model has been to find areas that are under threat and stress, secure landscapes large enough to protect its wildlife populations, and go through the required processes to change the status of the land to protected areas that still offer economic benefits. They have successfully transformed former agricultural or hunting land to wildlife conservation, with an emphasis on photographic tourism. Camps are small and built ultra- sustainability, designed so that they can be removed and leave virtually no trace. No new wood is cut, they build foundations out of reclaimed railroad ties, buildings are almost exclusively recycled hardwoods and canvas, they have state of the art solar farms, green water purification systems, waste treatment systems, even a biogas process that converts vegetable waste into cooking gas. In their newer projects they have managed to almost completely eliminate the use of plastics across the board.



Botswana's stunning Okavango Delta is one of the very best safari destinations on earth. Photo: Great Plains Conservation

But true sustainability is not just about power and recycling. What Great Plains Conservation does so well is to protect and enhance the environment it lives in, and their initiatives have greatly improved the populations and security of wildlife, especially threatened species such as rhinos and African wild dogs. This in turn benefits their customers—I've been on dozens of game drives but never had the kind of over-the-top African wild dog sighting I had this spring in Botswana, and that's because they helped that species survive. Because of insane poaching, it has become hard to see rhinos at all in many of their traditional African habitats, but in the Okavango Delta of Botswana, the private concessions of Great Plains are some of the most protected habitats on earth. Sustainability is also about the locals, and the Great Plains Foundation is their U.S. based 501c3 charitable arm that backs land protection, conservation programs and community programs including childhood education and rural solar power projects in Africa.

Frankly, if you go on any luxury safari to Africa you are going to have a very good time, you cannot miss, and I think it's the epitome of the "Bucket List" vacation, the definition of (at least) once in a lifetime. But it's even better if in addition to having a very good experience, you feel very good about it, and that's what Great Plains adds to the mix. These lodges are feel good places, if not feel great places.

I was first introduced to Great Plains a decade ago by Dennis Pinto, Managing Director of Micato Safaris and a good friend (and conservation collaborator) of the Jouberts. New York, Nairobi and Cape Town-based Micato is the gold standard in the safari world, the best tour operator specializing in the field, and I don't say that lightly, because there are a lot of good ones. Micato is not just the best safari company I have worked with; they are the best tour operator in any form of travel that I have seen in more than 30 years covering the industry.

They are the only 10-time winner of *Travel + Leisure Magazine's* World's Best Award—in any sector. Winning #1 World's Best Safari Outfitter ten times is simply unprecedented, but having traveled with them several times, I totally understand why. They turn every customer into a VIP who can completely stop thinking and start enjoying while on vacation, and have insider access to individuals and experiences no one else can match. They've also won just about every other big award there is, including the sustainably focused World Savers Award from Conde Nast Traveler—five times—the World Tours Award presented by the *New York Times*, Best Outfitters on Earth from *National Geographic Traveler* and 50 Tours of a Lifetime from *National Geographic Adventure*.

Micato Safaris is a luxury experience for sure, but I have told every friend who has ever asked me for safari advice the same thing: "If you can afford to do a luxury safari, you cannot afford to not use Micato."

When it comes to these trips, the devil is in the details, and no one has those details—and VIP insider access—wired better. If you don't want the best room and the best guide at your camp when you arrive, if you prefer not to use the diplomatic line to get out of the airport, and if you are comfortable sitting on a dirt runway in the middle of the bush waiting for your propellor plane with no back up plan if it doesn't show, than you don't need this kind of help. But most people who go on safari do, even if they are booking these amazing Great Plains Lodges, because lodge companies do one thing very well, operate lodges, but there are a lot of other moving parts, like the arrival and departure stays stay in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Johannesburg or Cape Town, pre and post safari extensions such as Victoria Falls, Zanzibar or gorilla trekking, and the actual process of getting to the safari lodges and their off the grid airstrips. If you use a good travel agent or advisor (and you should) they can



In-room dining, Zarafa Camp-style. All the Great Plains Reserve camps are Relais & Chateaux members, with a serious dedication to culinary experiences. Photo: Great Plains Conservation

take care of this for you—but chances are good that they are just calling Micato (and maybe marking it up).

So, when Dennis Pinto told me “You need to go check out what Great Plains is doing in Botswana,” I took it seriously, especially since Micato sells all the other top brands (Singita, One & Only, Wilderness, etc.). I was so impressed by their flagship camp, Zarafa, that I named my dog after it. I cannot even imagine a higher level of endorsement than that. My Zarafa is eight now, and an everyday reminder of how awesome a trip can be. At that time, it was the best safari camp I'd been to, including a lot of heavy hitters. I just went back in May, and it is even better after renovations and improvements. In recent years there have been a lot of ultra-luxury safari lodges opening that wow with creature comforts, and some are even “fancier,” but few offer the same combination of quality and doing good. Plus, the guides are amazing, everyone wants to work for the Jouberts, and the private acreages are so vast that the wildlife viewing experiences, which at the end of the day is the reason why we go, are off the charts. There is a reason why National Geographic makes its movies and does photo shoots at these places—the animals.

Zarafa Camp is part of Great Plains' Reserve collection, its highest luxury tier, and all the Reserve-level properties are Relais & Chateaux members—the only ones in their respective countries. Relais & Chateaux is the oldest and most respected consortium of smaller independent properties with a luxury and culinary focus, and fine food is a requirement. This is something Great Plains delivers in spades across all its camps, which are

all-inclusive with food, wine, spirits, amazing guides, first rate vehicles, and all activities except spa treatments and helicopter flights. The most unusual inclusion is the use of a very high-end camera and zoom lens setup for every room. This reflects the Joubert's history as photographers, and just the giant lens on my camera would have cost me over \$2,000—and I'd have to lug the heavy equipment around. Photos are a big part of doing an African safari, but I'd guesstimate that less than 1 in 20 visitors brings gear of this quality. At each camp they give you the loaner camera, help you use it, and then download all your photos to a thumb drive to take. I've been to a lot of safari lodges, and this is definitely not business as usual.



I also visited the latest property in the collection, the new and very unique Sitatunga Private Island, named for the rarest of all antelope species, which I saw here, from my tent deck, and nowhere else in all the countless times I have been on African game drives. There are many full-time rangers across Africa who have never seen a Sitatunga. The camp is on its own island in the middle of the Okavango Delta and just opened last July, and I was there this spring. It is the company's only water-based Reserve-level camp, and all the activities (except heli-flight seeing) are by boat. Besides exploring the ecosystem in boats, Sitatunga offers the rare opportunity to visit uninhabited islands and do ranger led game walks on foot among the full spectrum of African wildlife, but in a setting where they have not been habituated to human tourists, a really authentic—and potentially scary—experience. Sitatunga is not the place to go for a one-stop first-time safari, it should be tacked on to more conventional wildlife experiences with game viewing drives, but if you have been on safari before it is something totally new and different, and it can be coupled with the Selinda properties (see below) using a boat transfer.

Another thing the Great Plains lodges have in common is that they are small and very intimate but set on huge private reserves. Zarafa has just four suites, each of which holds one couple and spans about 1,100 square feet inside, plus extensive decks, infinity plunge pools and outdoor showers, as well as showers and copper soaking tubs inside. Each is also equipped with very high-end binoculars and all the creature comforts, including a fully stocked bar and mini-bar, all on the house. Many of the camps, including Zarafa, have actual gyms, despite holding no more than a dozen guests, and

Bush lunches are one way safari lodges try to outdo each other, but at Sitatunga Private Island, you do it by traditional watercraft. Photo: Great Plains Conservation

others, such as Sitatunga, add exercise bikes, yoga gear and weight equipment to each suite.

In addition, there is the Dhow Suite, so private and inclusive they market it as its own camp. The Dhow Suite is two-bedrooms and 2,600 square feet and set up as a self-contained safari lodge for up to four, with its own chef, butler, ranger, vehicle and wine cellar, so guests staying here do not have to use the common areas or interact with anyone else if they do not want to. But even if you include this unit, all of Zarafa camp never has more than 12 guests. There are now similar self-contained two-bedroom private chef suites at several of the Great Plains Reserve properties, including Selinda Camp and Duba Plains Camp in Botswana, Mara Nyika and Mara Plains in Kenya, and Tembo Plains in Zimbabwe.

The way Great Plains protected reserves are typically structured is that they are very large, with a handful of camps at different price points or dramatically different settings in different parts of each reserve. So, there are two luxury headliners in the 320,000-acre Selinda Reserve, Zarafa and its Dhow Suite, along with even smaller Selinda Camp, a luxury three-suite camp on par with Zarafa, and its private Selinda Suite. This camp sits on the Selinda Spillway, the main source of water feeding the Okavango Delta, the world's largest inland delta and the main appeal of Botswana safaris. This unique and fascinating eco-system breathes life into much of Southern Africa and is the reason why Botswana typically has the very best game viewing in Africa. The Selinda Camp is in a very watery area, and while it has world-class conventional game drives, the

Land Cruisers often ford rivers, and they have boating options as well. While Zarafa and Selinda are in the same huge reserve, they have such dramatically different settings that simply splitting your stay between them—within driving distance so no bush plane flight is needed for the transfer—is like going to two very different places, just easier.

Then there is the Selinda Explorers Camp, the opposite of the Dhow and Selinda Suites, the most affordable option here. But while it is less opulent and less pricey, it is no bigger, with just three regular tents and one 2-bedroom family tent. The “tents” are still very comfortable and have full bathrooms and showers, and instead of plunge pools there is a main common swimming pool at the camp. You are hardly roughing it, with exceptional food, beverages, and the full array of activities included, game drives, night drives, daytime guided bush walks, fishing, children’s activities and so on. All-inclusive rates begin at \$1,105 per person nightly, which for this level of safari is a great value. Zarafa Camp begins at \$1,935, though all the properties offer stay 3-nights and get one night free or stay 6-nights and get two free specials almost all the time, plus additional value-added packages and deals in shoulder and off-seasons, even throwing in things like helicopter transfers.

Finally, there is the six-tent Okavango Explorers Camp, at the same level, so that even at the lower price point you can combine two distinct experiences within the same reserve. Zarafa and Selinda Camps are both over-the-top Relais & Chateaux Reserve-level camps, while the Explorer Camps are more “normal luxury.”

If you were counting, there are a total of 19 accommodations holding a maximum of 44 people, including the luxury suites, across four camps in an otherwise totally private 320,000-acre reserve—or nearly 7,300-acres per person. When you see a leopard or African Wild Dogs (very rare but this is one of the best places to see them), you might well be the only party at the viewing, unlike Africa’s mini-van jammed National Parks.

Selinda is one reserve, but in similar fashion, the Duba Plains reserve, also in Botswana, has the Reserve level 5-suite Duba Plains Camp, the one-party Duba Plains Suite, and the 5-tent Duba Explorers Camp, all within an 82,000-acre private reserve. It’s even lower density in Zimbabwe, where just the 10-person Reserve-level Relais



Duba Plains Camp has an experiential kitchen where chefs make Michelin Star-style 7-course tasting menus in front of you. Photo: Great Plains Conservation

& Chateaux Tembo Plains Camp and its sibling luxury suite occupy the private 290,000-acre Sapi Reserve, which is also a very important land restoration project and part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. When the Jouberts describe their ethos as low-volume, low-impact tourism they are not kidding, with less than one visitor for every 20,000-acres of wilderness.

In Kenya, the private 70,000-acre Mara North Conservancy borders the public Maasai Mara National Reserve, essentially a National Park, so guests of the Great Plains property here, the Mara Expedition Camp (an Explorer-level property), can explore both the private acreage and the enormous public region. The all-new Mara Toto Tree Camp just opened here this month (July 2024), housing just eight guests in treehouse-style accommodations elevated in the tree canopy. The Relais & Chateaux Reserve-level Mara Nyika Camp is on a similar private reserve bordering the Maasai Mara, the 50,000-acre Naboisho Conservancy. Mara Plains Camp is another Reserve-level luxury property on its own 33,000-acre Olare Motorogi Conservancy, also abutting Maasai Mara. This property adds one of the self-contained ultra-luxury suites.

Ol Donyo is Great Plains “biggest” camp, a Relais & Chateaux Reserve-level luxury spot with eight suites and one “regular” two-bedroom suite, sleeping 20. It is the only lodging within a 274,000-acre private reserve between Tsavo and Amboseli National Parks and adds unique activities such as horseback rides and mountain biking.



Yes, you will see a LOT of lions.. Photo: Great Plains Conservation

They also have Mpala Jena Camp, a single party staffed home at Victoria Falls, the most desirable of the many post-safari extensions, and truly one of the wonders of the world. Stays can be easily coupled with safaris at the Zimbabwe camp.

The variety of camps and settings is amazing, but there is a continuity, a feeling you get at every Great Plains Camp, and when you leave one and arrive at another for the first time, you feel like a regular. The hardest decision most people make going on safari is whether to go to East Africa or Southern Africa, though if you have the time, you can do both. I can't help you choose, it's a close call, which is why you need to use an expert safari tour company, but in either region, you cannot go wrong with these camps.

To give you more detail, the following is from the Great Plains Conservation Mission Statement: "Our model takes stressed and threatened environments, surrounds them with compassionate protection and intelligent,

sustainable management, and funds them with sensitive, low-volume, low-impact, tourism.

Communities are an intrinsic part of this model and benefit directly from it. The final piece of the puzzle is you – our clients and guests – who pay to visit the camps we create, and through doing so, become our valued partners and agents of positive change.

Most eco-tourism companies are primarily involved in the business of travel, occasionally getting involved in conservation initiatives to help sustain their tourism operations. But Great Plains is first and foremost a conservation organization that uses eco-tourism as a tool to sustain conservation programs.

We even coined a new name for what we do— 'Conservation Tourism.' We define it as the use of quality led tourism experiences that are environmentally sound, with the benefits going specifically into making the conservation of an area viable and sustainable."