

# ANIMAL ATTRACTION

< By Les de Villiers >

“We couldn’t do anything except think about getting back to Africa. We talked Africa, we dreamed Africa, we even held African parties. It’s something in your blood. A combination of the climate, the landscape, the wildlife, the whole atmosphere. You somehow feel that you’re missing everything when you’re not there.”

This passage in *The White Lions of Timbavati*, by American wildlife expert Chris McBride, neatly encapsulates the feedback that I get from my safari clients. Going on safari is addictive and few people stop at one trip. As a South African-born, hunter-turned-wildlife-photographer, even I still need to get my “fix” in the wild on two or more safaris per year.

There are those who contend that promoting Africa on the basis of its wildlife is perpetuating the misconception that it is a jungle. These are the same critics who are also opposed to the idea of showing off Africa’s rich tribal culture in fear that the world might think that it is not fit for Western-style business.

However, I am of the school that maintains that there is nothing wrong in luring tourists to the Continent on the basis of these two unique selling propositions. While other parts of the world also offer pristine beaches, spectacular scenery, bustling city life, and spectacular

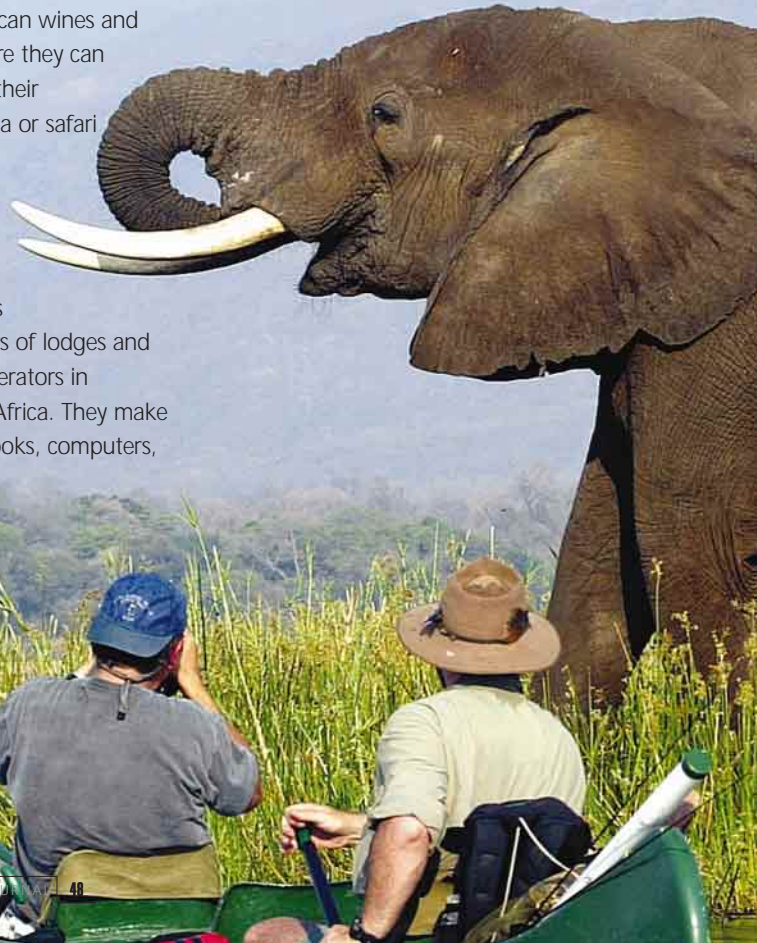
restaurants, none can compete with Africa when it comes to wildlife and a wealth of culture, with more than a thousand languages and dialects spoken.

Foreign visitors usually overnight in cities before they are transported by bush plane to lion country. Many take side trips to meet the locals, eat in good restaurants, taste the wines and get a feel for the country. They buy local products and on their return they go to their local wine store shopping for African wines and online to find out where they can buy objects to furnish their newly-established Africa or safari room. They become Africa promoters.

Some get involved in community development programs spearheaded by owners of lodges and other game reserve operators in southern and eastern Africa. They make donations and send books, computers,

and sporting equipment after their return to the United States. Their kids establish a lasting link with the young Africans that they have met on these trips.

The late actor Paul Newman inspired his safari hosts in Botswana to start a program for children styled after his famous Hole-in-the-Wall program. For two weeks every year Wilderness Safaris open up their luxury lodges in the Okavango Delta to



*Elephant encounter*

HIV/AIDS orphans and other needy children from the region, giving them a true wildlife experience. But Newman is just one of a long list of notable Americans who were drawn to Africa's wildlife and ended up serving it in one way or another.

Ernest Hemingway and Robert Ruark romanticized and immortalized safari life in their writings while George Eastman, of Eastman-Kodak fame, sponsored the first wildlife documentaries, and U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt promoted knowledge of Africa through several well-publicized safaris and books. In Kenya, the William Holden Wildlife Foundation continues the work of the late actor and his companion, television star Stephanie Powers.

The movie industry contributed largely to the promotion of Africa with films based on safari adventures. Among the first to be shot on locale in East Africa was *The Macomber Affair*, based on a Hemingway short story, starring Gregory Peck. Next came *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, with Susan Hayward and Ava Gardner, followed by *Born Free* and the blockbuster *Out of Africa*, co-

starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford.

The rates at game reserves and lodges normally include sizeable levies to promote not only conservation but education and development in the local neighborhoods. In 2002 American billionaire commodities trader Paul Tudor Jones embarked on one of the most ambitious conservation projects in Africa when he leased 340,000 acres of Tanzania's western Serengeti - along with its abundant wildlife - for \$70 million. Since then, two lavish lodges at Sasakwa and Faru Faru as well as a tented camp at Sabora under the design and management of Singita - one of South Africa's premier safari companies - were established in the eco-reserve, offering guests 21st-century service in a sumptuous bush-chic setting.

This is only one example of foreign capital not only stimulating growth in the tourist industry, but promoting conservation of natural resources and community development. At latest count the Singita Grumeti Reserve is providing jobs for 800 locals and schooling, medical and other services for their relatives in adjoining villages.



*Lion encounter.*

Photo: Mike Myers

Tourism based on wildlife and game reserves is the largest single source of foreign exchange for both Tanzania and neighboring Kenya. It also accounts for a major portion of the earnings in Botswana, Namibia, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe and contributes largely to South Africa's overseas tourist traffic.

Not surprisingly, countries like Ghana and Gabon are in the process of updating existing and constructing new facilities in their national parks and reserves to take advantage of the outside world's hunger for wildlife in their natural surroundings. Like the established safari destinations of southern and eastern Africa they will soon discover that this animal attraction often leads to bonus benefits far beyond merely observing and photographing Africa's creatures. ●

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