

The Rewilding of Africa



Sunset over Zimbabwe's Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve, home to Singita Pamushana

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he southeast of Zimbabwe is not an easy place in which to live. With an average annual rainfall of 300 millimetres, temperatures of up to 50°C and poor soils, it's not prime agricultural land. There is little industry and few jobs. And with international borders closed during the pandemic and only a trickle of vehicles passing through, desperate vendors have few opportunities to sell their little piles of tomatoes, corn and mangos from the roadside.

In and around the Malilangwe Nature Reserve, though, life continues much as normal. Elephant roam the bush, stopping under marula trees for the fruit they so love, and (tagged, monitored) rhino browse the thickets. A team of dedicated rangers patrols the wilderness, alongside electric fences that separate wild animals from people. Between villages, a clinic is open, caring for the sick, testing for Covid and delivering babies. And in the vegetable gardens, women are weeding their beds and driving their cattle to a borehole-fed trough.

That this little pocket of semi-normality exists is thanks to the Malilangwe Trust, the brainchild of Paul Tudor Jones, one of America's most successful traders and one of its leading philanthropists. Since the trust purchased the former cattle farms in 1994, the game reserve, with the Singita Pamushana Lodge at its heart,

has become Zimbabwe's leading high-end, low-impact safari destination, ploughing millions of dollars a year not only into conservation projects but the community around.

Jones funded the trust, he says, because, like many conservationists, he realised that if governments didn't have the will or money to save wildernesses, private funders had to step in. "The biggest threat in Africa," he explains by phone from Malilangwe, "is the extinction of its creatures. Things are disappearing every single day, thanks to population explosion and land encroachment in areas that were formally wild."

For wildlife to be valued, though, he adds, Africa's populations have to appreciate its value and benefit from its survival. "You have to take care of the people first, many of whose ancestors lived off that land," he says. "So the wildlife has to have a consumptive value."

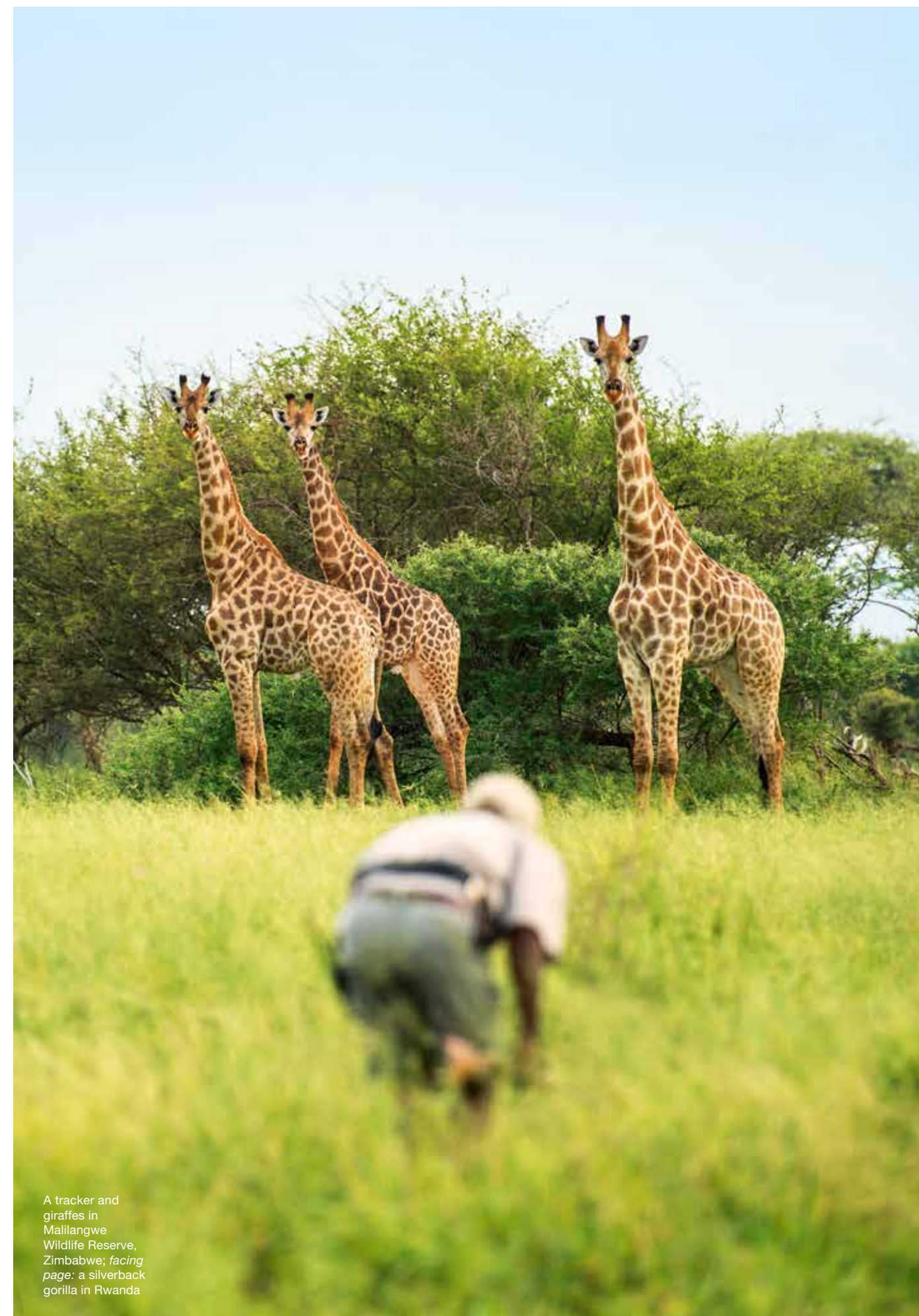
Given the rapid growth of the population across Africa – predicted to rise from around 1.36 billion people today to 2.5 billion by 2050 – the need to set land aside is more urgent than ever, he adds. When the philanthropist created the Grumeti Game Reserve in Tanzania in 2002, "there were 10,000 people on our 130km border," he says. "Now there are close to 130,000." Which is why he, and other international investors, have ramped up the speed of their work in Africa around national parks endangered by human encroachment – places where animals are being poached for food, ancient forests cut for furniture, brush destroyed for firewood and charcoal-making, and wilderness transformed into agricultural land.

Having already invested in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Mozambique and Rwanda, alongside philanthropists such as Bestseller CEO Anders Holch Povlsen and the late Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, Jones is now involved in three big new projects: a reserve around the Kafue National Park in Zambia, and two tracts of land in Mozambique, a 200,000ha private eco-tourism reserve and 130 kilometres of coastline, where he is working with fellow American traders Louis Bacon and Ken Griffin as well as Bedari founder Matt Harris.

While these men are at the forefront of creating new reserves, they are following in the footsteps of others who have spent decades trying to make a difference to conservation and communities. In South Africa, the Getty family has developed Phinda into a leading private game reserve, funnelling profits through its charitable Africa Foundation. In the Maasai Mara, the Norwegian former banker Svein Wilhelmsen has >

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PHOTO ROSS COUPER



A tracker and giraffes in Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve, Zimbabwe; facing page: a silverback gorilla in Rwanda

created a lasting partnership with the Maasai through his Basecamp Explorer camps. In São Tomé and Príncipe Mark Shuttleworth, the high-tech billionaire, has invested millions in revitalising the reefs and forests of Bom Bom, alongside its community. And in Mozambique, American voicemail billionaire Greg Carr has invested tens of millions of dollars into trying to restore Gorongosa National Park while uplifting its war-ravaged communities.

Although nature lovers have been buying or leasing land across Africa for over a century, in the past ten years – and particularly since the outbreak of Covid, when people have had more time to appreciate the inter-connectivity of humans, nature and climate – there has been a marked rise in investment in the natural world, says Justin Francis, the founder of Responsible Travel. “If there is a silver lining to Covid, it has been that the number of billionaires has increased, and they are far more aware of climate change and how that impacts their legacy.” In the UK, he adds, “we have previously thought of legacy in terms of a wing of a university or an art gallery. But in America, philanthropy has often been driven by landscape and nature. And that’s now catching on elsewhere.”

During the pandemic, when safari camps had to close, that philanthropic funding has been invaluable, says Charlie Mayhew, the chief executive of Tusk Trust, a conservation NGO. Most wildlife reserves and national parks, he says, rely on tourism. (The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that, pre-Covid, wildlife tourism generated more than \$29 billion a year across Africa, and employed 3.6 million, contributing more than ten per cent of Tanzania’s GDP and almost 15 per cent of Namibia’s.) “Without any tourism, and with so many people losing their jobs and livelihoods and food, there was a sudden spike in poaching for bushmeat, and logging for firewood and charcoal,” says Mayhew. “Thankfully, our donors could see what was happening and stepped up to the plate – some new donors, some corporates, some our old donors.” One new donor, Mayhew explains, gave £50 million towards Covid-related causes “and £5 million for us, towards our Wildlife Ranger Challenge, where he matched every dollar we raised with one of his own. He realised that rangers on the front line were critical and Africa couldn’t afford to lose the protection they gave.”

In spite of the heroic efforts of African rangers, the drop in the number of visitors on the ground means that

there’s been a significant increase in the bushmeat trade “as people have struggled in some places to feed their families,” says Dr Kirstin Johnson, the UK director of the Africa-based NGO the African Wildlife Foundation. Mayhew says Tusk has also seen a rise in poaching. “When borders closed, and so moving ivory or rhino horn became very difficult, poaching went down. But it’s started again in Botswana and South Africa, which is worrying. Perhaps they are taking the opportunities to get in while they can – when fewer tourists’ eyes and ears are on the ground.”

The few tourists who have been back, says Deborah Calmeyer, the CEO and founder of the American safari operator Roar Africa, which has sent 80 travellers back to Africa since September 2020, have been overwhelmed

by the welcome they’ve received. Some of the thank-you texts, she says, have been “heartbreaking. They’ve said, ‘My children are back at school thanks to you’ or ‘Without you we would not have survived’. When you get daily texts like that, you really understand the lifeline that tourism is for communities, camps and conservation efforts.”

Because of that, she says, her clients have become far more aware of the impact that their travel has. On a recent trip, travelling on a private Emirates jet around Zimbabwe, Botswana, Kenya and Rwanda, “we offset 150 per cent of the entire trip through our partner Proof of Impact and all funds went into projects on the ground in Africa, from solar panels, to fresh water, bridges to planting trees”. On another trip, they raised almost half

a million dollars to donate to local community projects.

Nicola Shepherd, founder of The Explorations Company, who has been taking wildlife-lovers to Africa for more than 20 years, says many of her clients got on a plane the minute they were allowed to travel, to show communities their support. For those camps not backed by philanthropists, she says, “the impact of Covid has been enormous. What you have to remember is that one person employed in Africa supports an average of ten people. So losing one job means no food for ten people, no education, no medicine. In areas that rely on bed levies and entry fees, tourism is essential.” Without them, she adds, many of the community projects supported by camps have also vanished: beehives, schools, clinics, >



Oryx in Gorongosa National Park, Mozambique

PHOTO CLIVE DREYER

“Instead of development coming at nature’s expense, we develop because of nature”

vegetable gardens, beading co-operatives. “For many of those people, Covid has been an utter disaster. Without tourists they’ve had nothing.”

This realisation about Africa’s overreliance on tourism is why, Justin Francis says, so much new energy is being put into finding ways of creating funding. “In the past, tourism has been the one-shot solution for conservation,” he explains. “It has been the go-to methodology for generating the funding and jobs for local communities to make sense of protecting places. What the pandemic has made us realise is how vulnerable it is to be overreliant on one industry. Which is why there is a drive to diversify through other methods: things like carbon credits, biodiversity credits, the rhino bond and philanthropy. We have all realised that as part

of reducing carbon, we need to create carbon sinks. And that means preserving forests, peat, grasslands and savannahs. As well as cutting carbon, preserving nature has become a big part of the climate battle.”

Ghanaian conservationist Fred Swaniker says the diversification of the wildlife economy is a key part of research at his African Leadership University’s School of Wildlife Conservation. Instead of looking at it through the lens of protecting a shrinking asset, he explains, they’re looking at how they can increase the stock of nature through environmental investing: “Instead of development coming at nature’s expense, we develop because of nature.”

And that, he says, is the incredible opportunity that Africa has. “This is one of the last remaining parts of the world that has not completely lost its natural environment. If we can take full stock of this incredible asset, and invest more in that asset, it can create tremendous wealth for us as humans: think carbon, ecotourism, film, wildlife-ranching and other opportunities that help alleviate poverty. Africans do not want to cut down forests or poach wildlife. They simply want a livelihood because poverty levels are so high. So, if nature gives them that livelihood, suddenly we will want to give more space to nature. If someone gets paid for protecting a forest, then they will actually want to expand the size of that forest, not shrink it. The world underprices the contribution of nature in all its forms – clean air, water, soils etc – but these things are priceless. We want to put dollars and cents – the language that humans understand – on nature, so that we realise that it is in our best interests to invest more in nature, not to destroy it.”

Swaniker has little time for those who criticise wealthy philanthropists buying up land in Africa. “If done correctly, nature can be a powerful contributor to GDP, employment, foreign exchange, tax receipts and income for communities. The bottom line is that, when done well, the wildlife economy can actually help to release some of that pressure governments are facing to provide basic amenities and opportunities to their people.”

Which is why more people around the world need to go to Africa and fall in love with it – and invest in it – says Paul Tudor Jones. “The natural world there is one of the world’s most incredible assets. If I’ve learned one thing working in Africa it is that if you give Mother Nature a chance to breathe, it is incredible what she can do. If you protect her, she will blossom. You just have to give her that chance.” —



Zebras roam with Mount Kenya in the background

PHOTO © TUSK TRUST

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PARIS BRUMMER, © SINGITA, © JACK’S CAMP, © ASILIA AFRICA, CROOKES & JACKSON

Back to Africa

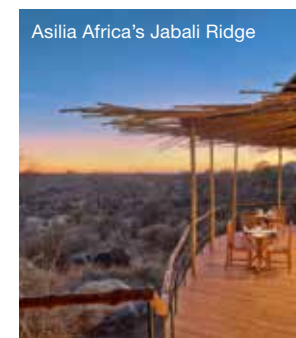
A whistle-stop tour of some of the continent’s most exciting and conservation-focused safari lodges, camps and experiences, from new openings and redesigns to old favourites. By Lisa Johnson



Angama Safari Camp

EAST AFRICA

It’s hard to imagine a more effective antidote to lockdown than Angama Mara (angama.com), a 30-tent camp “suspended in mid-air” on the edge of Kenya’s Great Rift Valley, overlooking the Maasai Mara. In 2020, the company launched a sole-use mobile camp in the Mara Triangle; a sister camp is upcoming in Amboseli’s Kimana Sanctuary in partnership with the Big Life Foundation (biglife.org). At the foot of Mount Kenya, Segera (segera.com) is known for its raised villas, its artworks from the collection of owner Jochen Zeitz, and the community-conservation work of the Zeitz Foundation: a second class of rangers recently graduated from its all-female anti-poaching academy. In the remote far north, Will Jones of Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com) recommends exclusive-use Kalepo (kalepocamp.com) in Samburuland as a launchpad for helicopter tours of the harsh but mesmerising Lake Turkana region, as well as “Greater Turkana” trips that take in Lae’s Camp in southern Ethiopia’s Omo Valley – an impact investment initiative of the company’s sister charity Wild Philanthropy.



Asilia Africa’s Jabali Ridge

Pre-pandemic, Singita Grumeti in Tanzania – the 1,416sq km private reserve bordering Serengeti National Park – was famed for its opulent accommodation, so redesigned Singita Sabora (singita.com) – a stripped-back, low-impact, “next-generation” camp – is a shift in focus. To the south, Asilia Africa flagship Jabali Ridge (asiliaafrica.com) is properly off the beaten track, overlooking the Mwangi River in the gargantuan Ruaha National Park. Its spectacular design by Caline Williams-Wynn includes a four-way infinity pool that’s perfect for watching elephants among the baobabs.

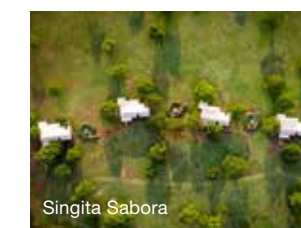


Mombo

SOUTHERN AFRICA

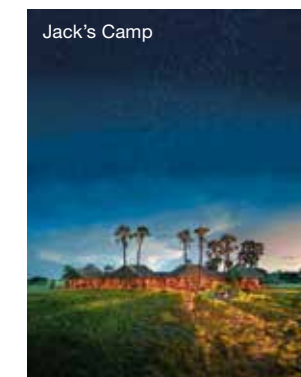
Sabi Sands in South Africa is known for its abundant wildlife, and Londolozi Private Game Reserve (londolozi.com) certainly has that, as well as an individuality that comes from fourth-generation owners the Varty family. In Marakele National Park, Alice Gully of Aardvark Safaris (aardvarksafaris.com) recommends Marataba (marataba.co.za), a privately managed section of the park, as a fantastic place to actively participate in conservation projects. In Botswana, Jack’s Camp (naturalselection.travel) has re-emerged bigger and better from its 25th-anniversary rebuild, but the 1940s campaign style is intact, and the setting, on the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans, is as haunting as ever. In the Okavango Delta, Wilderness flagship Mombo (wilderness-safaris.com) is another long-standing favourite, combining glamorous interiors with efforts to re-establish populations of black and white rhino. Chris McIntyre of Expert Africa (expertafrica.com) also rates the Great Plains (greatplainsconservation.com)

camps here: CEO Dereck and his wife Beverly Joubert are National Geographic filmmakers, who have played a key role in relocating rhinos from South Africa through Rhinos Without Borders (rhinoswithoutborders.com).



Singita Sabora

In Zambia, Time + Tide lodge King Lewanika (timeandtideafrica.com) is the first permanent lodge in the Liuwa Plains National Park, the site of an annual wildebeest migration second only to that in Kenya. Nicola Shepherd of The Explorations Company (explorationscompany.com) recommends Green Safaris (greensafaris.com), which has introduced electric vehicles at new camps such as Chisa Busanga, and plans to do the same at Tongabezi Lodge near Victoria Falls. And on the opposite bank of the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe, Matetsi Victoria Falls (matetsivictoriafalls.com) is included in a new “Greatest Safari on Earth” itinerary offered by Roar Africa (roarafrica.com) and Emirates Executive Private Jet. It also takes in the Okavango Delta, the Great Migration in Kenya and the mountain gorillas of Rwanda’s Volcanoes National Park (from Singita Kwitonda Lodge, singita.com), with environmental investments to offset carbon emissions.



Jack’s Camp