

# The Culture Issue A to Z DEPARTURES

MAY / JUNE

Is for  
*Sinatra*

WOOF!  
Life (and Death)  
of a Show Dog  
BY JANE STERN

Africa  
Should I Stay  
or Should I Go?

True Blue  
THE MAGIC OF  
YVES KLEIN  
BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

THE CHICEST  
SUITE IN  
Paris  
and Where Else  
to Stay Now

Coming  
Into  
CUBA  
BY JUDITH MILLER

The NEW  
NEW YORKER  
A Fashion Portfolio

MEXICO  
CITY  
IS ON FIRE  
BY MICHAEL GROSS

Plus  
James Wolcott on  
BRADLEY COOP  
— AND —  
Manohla Dargis  
on BERNINI





# Africa

## Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The iconic lure of Africa: elephants photographed by the author while on safari on the Maasai Mara National Reserve, in Kenya, on March 4, 2015.



In the wake of last fall's Ebola hysteria, the continent's safari industry took a major hit, to the tune of 70 percent decreases in bookings. **SOPHY ROBERTS** goes to sub-Saharan Africa—thousands of miles from any Ebola hot spots—and finds an industry that's still reeling.

**R**EKERO CAMP, KENYA—It is late in the afternoon on New Year's Eve. The sun is turning Kenya's sun-scorched Mara into a honeypot of gold all the way from Rhino Ridge, a hump of ground on the northern edge of the Maasai Mara National Reserve, to Rekero Camp on the banks of the Talek River. In the distance, giraffes stand tall on the savanna; wart-



hogs trot across the land. Where our safari vehicle stops, 18 lions lie among flat-topped acacia and a coiled python sleeps in the grass.

Despite this abundance of wildlife, there's something missing. On the Mara, it's not unusual to have gatherings of 10 or more safari vehicles around the resident prides. Today there's no one else. This is iconic Africa, a once-in-a-lifetime experience, which families save for a lifetime to visit; the Christmas and New Year's holidays are a traditionally busy period. Instead, today the Mara is empty, with operators offering "added value" activities to packages, giving travelers as much as 30 percent more bang for their buck, according to Nigel Vere Nicoll, CEO of the African Travel and Tourism Association, which represents private tourism-sector interests in 22 African countries.

To be honest, this dearth of tourists is why I've come, on a last-minute 10-day Mara-Serengeti family trip, taking opportunistic advantage of the culture of fear that's built up around safari vacations since the Ebola story began to dominate headlines in October 2014. We stay at Rekero, one of the top camps on the Mara, which hasn't had an empty bed over the holidays for a decade. On the opposite side of the river is Nai-bor Camp; on New Year's Eve, it's empty.

"We're only now beginning to analyze the impact of the Ebola crisis," says Helen Gibbons, CEO of Kenya's Maasai Mara Conservancies Association, which brings together 11 Mara conservancies on the reserve. "Across the 42 properties in these conservancies, it's looking like a 40 to 70 percent falloff in bookings compared to their best year in the last five years." Michael Lorentz, a Cape Town-based guide who leads high-end family-group safaris all over Africa, says that Ebola is arguably the single largest crisis to have affected the tourism sector since 2000: "It's been a bloodbath of cancellations stemming from an isolated disease on a continent covering 20 percent of the globe's landmass."

While the virus has devastated a corner of West Africa, not a single case has been found in East and southern Africa. In Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—the six African countries that I visited in the first two months of



A tented suite at the Singita Faru Faru Lodge, in northern Tanzania, part of the Serengeti.

## "IT'S BEEN A BLOODBATH OF CANCELLATIONS STEMMING FROM AN ISOLATED DISEASE ON A CONTINENT COVERING 20 PERCENT OF THE GLOBE'S LANDMASS."

2015—the virus is acknowledged with signs at international borders. Travelers are given extra forms on which to declare their state of health, while staff in white coats take travelers' temperatures on arrival. Much of the time, these measures feel like lip service. But then the Mara is 500 miles farther from Guinea, where the first recorded case of Ebola hit in December 2013, than Guinea is from my hometown of London. This geographical fact hasn't stopped Ebola from emptying out not just Kenya's plains—already negatively affected by terrorism fears (Kenya Airways reported a 6 percent drop in sales from April 2014 to February 2015)—but also other swaths of the continent. Guides are unemployed; camps and safari vehicles are being offered up for sale.

The impact caught the sub-Saharan tourism industry (estimated at \$36 billion annually, about 2.8 percent of the region's GDP) off

guard. Jane Goldring, a cofounder of the country's leading tour operator, Wild Frontiers Uganda, recalls the March 1999 attack in Bwindi National Park, when eight Westerners, visiting Uganda to track rare mountain gorillas, were murdered in cold blood by Rwandan Interahamwe rebels. The tourists, including two Americans, were sleeping in their tents. "The repercussions were always going to be dramatic," says Goldring. "But the drop-off from Ebola has been as bad, if not worse, even though we've not had a single case of the disease on this side of the continent."

"For Ebola to affect gorilla tourism in Uganda and Rwanda is bizarre," says Praveen Moman, the founder of Volcanoes Safaris, the premier gorilla-tracking company for both countries. "Our bookings are down by about 30 percent year over year, with Ebola affecting not only fragile business models but also



the conservation agenda's bottom line."

Luke Bailes, a cofounder of Tanzania's Singita Serengeti lodges, as well as properties in South Africa and Zimbabwe, shares Moman's frustration with consumers' misplaced perceptions of Africa, especially in terms of geography. Unlike Kenya's, Tanzania's security hasn't been undermined by Al-Shabaab, and while the Mara hasn't been specifically targeted—and is safe, according to Narok County governor Samuel Ole Tunai (who oversees the Maasai Mara National Reserve and is currently working with Israeli security specialists on improved antipoaching protection, which overall will improve security on the reserve)—other parts of the country have, including Nairobi and the coast. Yet, in the last quarter of 2014, Singita's Tanzania reservations fell 14 percent.

The numbers are, however, beginning to improve, according to Bailes. Joss Kent, CEO of &Beyond, which owns 33 lodges across East and southern Africa, also acknowledges some "faint green shoots." During the height of the Ebola crisis, from October to December 2014, &Beyond reported between a 50 to 70 percent drop in advance sales compared to the same period in 2013. This has since improved to a 30 percent drop.

Bas Hochstenbach, a cofounder of Asilia Africa, the operator of 17 safari lodges in Kenya and Tanzania, says that large companies can just about handle the slump (Asilia reports a 20 percent drop-off in sales), but the small, privately owned camps are less able to weather the storm. According to Hochstenbach, a number of camps in the Mara conservancies are struggling to make their fixed payments to local communities—effectively the rent paid by concession holders to the Maasai people.

"The socioeconomic impact is huge. The conservation impact is even bigger," says Lorentz. "And all because the media took a phantom fear—a heart-of-darkness disease—and turned it into a frenzy."

If there's any good that has come out of the situation, it's the spotlight that now shines on the expert safari outfitters who know what they are selling and to whom. "At the end of 2014, when many pictured Africa to be a morgue, I was proud that we managed to hold on to all of our existing bookings," says Cherri Briggs, the founder of safari tour operator Explore Af-

rica. "Our job is to be objective, to talk clients through every single detail." Briggs reports a significant recent pickup in business; others are more sanguine. "It's a tough market to operate in now. Post-Ebola, we have to work so much harder to reassure our guests all will be well," says Lorentz, with hand-holding being the premium service that's managing to retain a slow trickle of visitors at the very top end.

During my stay at Rekero, I get talking to a family of seven Americans. They are the only

other clients staying. They admit that they almost canceled their three-week trip. They stuck with it, communicating closely with their New York-based agent, Lisa Lindblad, who also provided a 24-7, on-the-ground Kenyan guide, Tim Melesi. When I get home, I call Lindblad to better understand her mechanisms of persuasion. "When it comes to people's fears, I never come out and pooh-pooh them," says Lindblad. "I listen and I simply tell them what I am comfortable doing myself." ♦

## FOUR SAFARIS IN A POST-EBOLA WORLD



On the Tanzanian side of the Mara-Serengeti are Sabora Tent Camp and the newly opened Mwiba Lodge. Stay at both with private charter hops in between and the

result is a combination of polished service and gastronomic cuisine alongside extraordinary topography (rocks and rivers at Mwiba and endless plains at Sabora). The 10-night trip (from \$18,450 a person with a minimum of four people; [geoex.com](http://geoex.com)) was designed by the deeply knowledgeable **KATE DOTY** at Geographic Expeditions. Travel in September and there's a high chance of catching 600,000 wildebeests during their annual migration.



I would recommend private guide **MICHAEL LORENTZ** for any trip on the continent, not just by virtue of his naturalist's knowledge but also his attention to logistical detail.

For those still nurturing Ebola fears, Lorentz recommends Botswana—"the Switzerland of Africa." He has devised a 10-night family-oriented first-timer itinerary (\$18,500 a person for a group of six people; [passagetoafrica.com](http://passagetoafrica.com)) combining a tented camp on the Moremi Game Reserve, a Fly Camp night on the Okavango Delta, three nights in the Kalahari Desert at San Camp, and three nights at Zarafa, the four-roomed Ritz of the African bush on the Linyanti Reserve.



**LISA LINDBLAD** is committed to Kenya's enduring lures. She also knows how to make more of the country by exploring its margins, not just its Mara heart. Traveling with

private guide Tim Melesi, Lindblad's 12-night itinerary (from \$16,500 a person for a group of six people; [lisalindblad.com](http://lisalindblad.com)) starts with an airside meet-and-greet in Nairobi, before being whisked into a private charter up to Amboseli National Park for a mobile safari, then north to Enasoit, a private game sanctuary. The tour finishes on the Mara with a four-night stay at Rekero Camp on the banks of the Talek River or at Topi House or Acacia Camp.



**CHERRI BRIGGS**, based in Zambia and the United States, matches good-value bush camps with the firsthand experience of local guiding expertise.

She has devised a new 15-night, three-country southern Africa itinerary (\$22,305 a person for two people; [exploreafrika.net](http://exploreafrika.net)) combining four of her favorite private guides in parks richly endowed with wildlife: Manda Chisanga in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, Charles Chanesta on the Lower Zambezi, Charles Ndlovu in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, and Khan Bouwe on Botswana's Linyanti Reserve.

—S.R.

**KEEP IN TOUCH** To qualify for publication, letters must include a name, address, daytime phone number, and e-mail address, if available. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. **Fax** 212-768-1568. **E-mail** [departures\\_email@timeinc.com](mailto:departures_email@timeinc.com) with "Letter to the Editors" in the subject line. **Phone** 212-522-1212. **Mail** DEPARTURES, 1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036. **Online** at [departures.com](http://departures.com), where you will find an archive of past articles, select pieces from the current issue, and special offers of interest to you. **THE KEY** Hotel rates start from the lowest-priced double. Hotel is a member of Fine Hotels & Resorts. Restaurant is a member of Fine Dining. Establishment either accepts no charge/credit cards or accepts cards other than American Express.