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African safaris: As experiential as it gets

By Dorine Reinstein



African safaris are undeniably a growing and flourishing niche for U.S. travel agents, especially as experiential travel remains a buzzword among travelers in 2014.

Great Safaris' CEO Dave Herbert, explains that travelers are increasingly looking for once-in-a-lifetime moments where they can connect with an indigenous culture, taste local food and explore exotic landscapes. The African safari experience ticks all these "experiential" boxes for most travelers. Herbert says: "Travelers want to have a unique and personalized experience. They often see a trip to Africa as the penultimate journey. Travelers want it to be very special and full of personal memories, something that a one-size-fits-all group tour cannot provide."

Integral to this once-in-a-lifetime safari experience is the concept of exclusivity. Travelers don't tend to feel the experiential buzz if there are 10 vehicles around one lion, all trying to catch a "unique" photo shot of the animal. Elizabeth Gordon, co-founder of Extraordinary Journeys, explains the need for exclusivity is one of the reasons why private mobile camps have grown in popularity. She says: "Mobile camps are set up in more remote areas, and there may be days at a time when one sees no other tourists. The rhythm of the safari is adapted perfectly to the interests and stamina of the client. Some will be out at 5 a.m. while others sleep in until 10 [a.m.]. Some will walk for miles examining the bush on foot, others will photograph every bird, while others will wait patiently in one spot all day to get that one perfect lion shot."



Dorine Reinstein

However, as more tour operators are trying to jump on the bandwagon of experiential tourism, it is important for travel agents to be able to weed out the "fake experiences" and recognize those operators that offer a true experience that is not detrimental to the environment, the wildlife or the local culture. Kathleen Garrigan, communications and marketing officer for the African Wildlife Foundation, explains that where countries have unique natural resources and wildlife there is a desire not only from the tourism industry to preserve those resources through their own operations but for tourists to want to contribute something toward protecting those resources.

"I would urge travelers to support businesses that benefit local communities because these communities have to live day to day with the wildlife and are the first line of defense when it comes to protecting wildlife. If they are benefiting from wildlife tourism, then they are more likely to want to participate in conserving wildlife. Ultimately, conservation begins and ends with people. When people benefit from a conservation-based enterprise, wildlife ultimately benefits," says Garrigan.

The demand for experiential travel has created a renewed need for the expertise and know-how of travel agents with a solid understanding of the industry. The Internet, although great for basic research, can't possibly offer travelers the assurance of a soul-enriching, authentic African experience. They will undoubtedly turn to travel agents who have taken the time to become African specialists. Herbert explains travelers in 2014 will increasingly seek out agents and U.S. operators with reliable, authentic connections on the ground in Africa who can piece together top-notch experiences.

Dave Bennett, Wilderness Safaris chief sales officer, agrees that excellent product knowledge is one of the most important aspects of luxury experiential travel. He explains there is a need for experts in their field, with firsthand experience. "They will be able to convey a sense of luxury to the agents and impart the right knowledge and recommendations to ensure that travelers will experience the luxury safari of their dreams," he says.

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For travel agents wanting to know more about what Africa has to offer, a new trade show called We Are Africa will be held in Cape Town, South Africa, from May 5 to 8. It is being launched by Beyond Luxury Media, the organizers of the leading travel trade events, Pure Life Experiences and LE Miami. Although We Are Africa will not be exclusively about luxury travel or experiential travel, it will showcase brands and operators that constitute the very best of African tourism.

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