

# Why Sub-Saharan Africa is the Fastest-Growing Region for Wellness Tourism

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NEW YORK ([MainStreet](#)) — It's hard for some to develop a mental image of Africa beyond headlines about Ebola, famine, poverty and Somali pirates.

But there's a new headline emerging about the continent, one that's far more positive and welcoming for the global community.

Within the past few years, Sub-Saharan Africa in particular has become the fastest-growing wellness tourism market in the world, according to the *Global Spa & Wellness Economy Monitor*, an annual report published by the [Global Wellness Institute](#).

The institute's latest report says wellness tourism revenues in the region grew from \$2 billion in 2012 to \$3.1 billion in 2013, growth of 57%. Wellness tourism trips, meanwhile, spiked from 2.2 million annually to 4.2 million, growth of 90% - or nearly doubling in just a year.

Spas are multiplying too. In 2007, only 14 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa were home to any, but by 2013 that number jumped to 42.

There are now about 1,554 spas in Sub-Saharan Africa, growth of roughly 300% between 2007 and 2013.

"Sub-Saharan Africa has been plagued for so many years with bad press about harboring terrorism groups and disease and lack of infrastructure," says Anthony Berklich, founder of [Inspired Citizen](#). "But there are certain countries that are trying very hard to turn that image around."

Gabon and Gambia are two Berklich cites as an example of such efforts.

The Gabon government recently signed a deal with **Aman Resorts**, Berklich says, to bring in hotels and experiences geared toward ecotourism and wellness over the next five years. The first hotel will be in the country's capital, Libreville, and others will follow in some of the country's national parks.

"Gabon is really investing a lot of money and time trying to lure and attract the luxury travel market," Berklich says. "Out of all of the countries in Sub-Saharan African, it is a little bit more stable and very set up for luxury."

Gambia is making similar efforts, Berklich says, and with its coastline and ocean access, is faring well. One hotel worth noting in Gambia is the [Coco Ocean Resort & Spa](#) on Bijilo Beach, with its whitewashed buildings and villas, three pools, four royal suites with private pools and a spa that rivals the best with its 14 treatment rooms, traditional Moroccan hamam and thalasso pool.

Principe Island, with its [BomBom Island Resort](#), is also another up-and-comer, Berklich says.

"It's geared toward ecotourism and wellness, and you're on a secluded island," Berklich says. "There are all sorts of yoga and wellness experiences. It's pretty fabulous."

Additional countries seeing significant growth in wellness tourism, according to the Global Wellness Institute report, are Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania, Ghana, Senegal, Botswana, Mauritius and Seychelles. There is also a well-established market in South Africa.

"Almost every safari lodge has added massage, yoga or some kind of spa," says Beth McGroarty, research director for the Global Wellness Institute. "At the same time, the old safari model is getting more active. Instead of just sitting in a jeep, there's more walking."

Visiting does not always have to be mind-numbingly expensive. Yes, getting there is pricey, with airline tickets often between \$1,000 and \$2,000. Once there, however, and depending on the accommodations, the U.S. dollar can go a long way on wellness treatments.

"Here's the thing about wellness in sub-Saharan Africa - luckily once you get there it is really not pricey compared to the rest of the world," Berklich says. "Because the tourism market hasn't exploded yet, you're still able to capture a lower rate."



There are also safari camps to fit every budget, McGroarty says.

Typically, a wellness vacation in Sub-Saharan Africa encompasses nature, an eco-focus, outdoor adventure, safari or wildlife conservation and spa and massage wellness elements, including traditional healing approaches and yoga.

Specific wellness treatments focus on native ingredients and local healing practices.

"Every country in Africa has a deep wellness tradition," McGroarty says. "There are all kinds of massages in Africa. The Masai tribe will do certain kinds of massage using a Rungu baton. There is a lot of incorporation of ingredients indigenous to Africa, such as the Baobab fruit."

Dena Roche, a wellness travel journalist, certified wellness coach and co-founder of [Wellness Travel Media](#), visited Sub-Saharan Africa just last month, staying at the [One & Only](#) resort in Cape Town - home to one of Africa's most award-winning spas - and made plenty of time to indulge in wellness treatments while there.

"Their signature experience uses a local sea salt to exfoliate your skin, and then they wrap you in a South African seaweed. When that's done they put warm, locally gathered seashells on your body, instead of the typical hot stones. In other treatments they use native healing ingredients such as rooibos, an herb that reduces stress and is very calming."

Roche also recommends the [Saxon Hotel, Villas & Spa](#) in Johannesburg. A luxurious, holistic spa, the Saxon has dozens of treatments and advanced facials that blend modern understanding with ancient techniques.

Despite all this, travel industry insiders say Sub-Saharan Africa remains a place for the somewhat adventurous. It could take as long as another 10 years before the region becomes popular with all types of travelers.

"It's going to take a lot of rebranding and educating to show people that this is a destination that's worth the cost of the airfare," Berklich says. "A lot of Sub-Saharan Africa is really unspoiled because it hasn't had years of tourism

using and abusing it. It's really new, like back in the turn of the century ...That's the condition a lot of these countries are in right now, and they're just waiting to be discovered."

Here are a few additional properties and wellness vacations to the region worth noting:

### [Extraordinary Journeys](#)

This New York City travel company offers trips combining yoga and safaris.

### [Explore Inc.](#)

Another U.S. travel company, Explore boasts that its 10-day "Yoga Safari for the Soul" is the perfect blend of African adventure and rejuvenating yoga practice.

### [Segera Retreat](#)

Highly recommended by the Global Wellness Institute, the Segera Retreat in Kenya is "an example of how sophisticated and comprehensive" a wellness retreat in Sub-Saharan Africa can be, McGroarty says. This "standout" property is all about respectful wildlife monitoring and species conservation, local arts, locally grown food, African wines and spa and wellness activities.

### [One & Only](#)

Another property recommended by Roche. What makes this Mauritius location particularly special is the spa's outdoor treatments. "There is a river, lush foliage, and you can hear the birds while having your treatment, instead of the typical spa music," Roche says.

### [Spiritual Quest Journeys' Yoga, Game Viewing and Meditation Safari](#)

Spiritual Quest Journeys in Zambia has created a yoga, meditation and game-viewing safari it calls an unforgettable growth experience.

— *Written by Mia Taylor for MainStreet*