

AFRICA / MIDDLE EAST TRAVEL

Insight

For African tourism, the future means 'profits with principles'

By [Dorine Reinstein](#) / April 23, 2015 A+ A-

Responsible tourism is the future for Africa, as travelers increasingly want authentic, genuine and responsible holidays. This was the key focus at the World Travel Market Africa Responsible Tourism Conference (WTM Africa) in Cape Town, South Africa, this month.

During WTM Africa, heroes of responsible tourism in Africa were honored at the 2015 African Responsible Tourism Awards Ceremony. Among the winners were Chumbe Island in Zanzibar, Coffee Beans Routes in South Africa and Chobe Game Lodge in Botswana. The overall winner of the awards was Gansbaai Tourism in South Africa.



Speaking at the awards ceremony, Heidi van der Watt, managing director of Better Tourism Africa, said the winners of the awards all have a vision that extends beyond the commercial, linking business success with the well-being of local communities and the longevity of their environments.

“They want to make profits with principles, communicate balance sheets alongside beliefs and won’t undermine passion in the pursuit of professionalism,” she said. “They are the future of tourism in Africa.”

But, although industry players strongly believe that responsible tourism is the future for Africa, inbound tour operators to Africa report that there is still a lot of work to be done when it comes to educating the public on responsible tourism.

The problem, according to Onne Vegter, CEO of Wild Wings Safaris, is that although most travelers show awareness about responsible tourism, it means different things to different people and can include anything from treatment of staff and community impact to carbon-offset measures and contributions to conservation.

Brian Tan, CEO of Zicasso, pointed out that travelers rarely ask for an establishment, an attraction or a tour to be sustainable. He says: “At the moment, it’s much more common to see travelers asking for a hotel with a gym than for a sustainably managed hotel. On a scale of 1 to 10, I would rate U.S. travelers as a 3 in terms of being responsibly aware. It’s in the beginning stages; travelers can benefit from a lot more education on this topic.”

James Wilson, business development manager for Chobe Game Lodge, added that responsible practice is not a major issue for U.S. travelers at the moment.

“We find that guests are seeking an establishment that will offer them the best experience in that region,” he reported. “The sustainable tourism initiatives taking place are a feel-good factor for our guests and something we actively make them aware of during their time with us.”

But even if U.S. travelers are not actively asking for responsible tourism providers, travel agents should keep in mind that dealing with sustainable and responsible operators and establishments will often mean a more superior experience for their clients.

“In Botswana, properties using solar or electric vehicles ensure guests have little to no noise pollution on safari or in camp where [at other, less responsible properties] they might otherwise hear generators,” Wilson said. “Responsible operators also ensure staff is treated fairly. We know that our guests appreciate this as they consistently commend the guides on how passionate they are.”

Robyn Stalson, philanthropy specialist for Giltedge Africa, said that the emphasis from the tourism sector on responsible tourism has indeed had a significant impact on U.S. travelers who are becoming increasingly savvy about sustainable travel.

“It is through the efforts of the tourism community that this awareness and affinity has grown,” Stalson said, adding that sustainable travel has become a two-way affair: As travelers’ interest in environmentally friendly holidays continues to grow, so, too, does the number of innovative and luxurious travel experiences on offer.

Iain Harris, spokesman for Coffeebeans Routes, warns, however, that many apparently responsible enterprises still perpetuate stereotypes and binary ideas about how and who Africans are. They will, for example, present the “real” Africans as poor and coming from the townships. “Sustainable travel needs to focus more on challenging these assumptions, offering or suggesting new ways of seeing things,” he said.

According to Harris, the reality is that within travel, the industry and the travelers who have disposable cash are conservative and actively seek ways to affirm rather than challenge their worldview.

“So it's one thing to seek a hotel or lodge that saves water and uses solar and bio-digesters, it's another thing to seek a business or lodge that challenges assumed views of the world and doesn't pander to what it thinks visitors want,” Harris said. “There is a lot of work to be done.”

Although it can be difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to selecting responsible tourism providers, there are a few pointers travel agents can keep in mind:

- Look for the story that is being told; that is the best indicator, said Coffeebean Routes' Harris. It's easy to talk about your light bulbs, the nice things you do for your staff and suppliers. Look at the photographs on the websites; seek images that are telling different stories, stories beyond baobabs, wild animals and happy, dancing Africans. The companies seeking to tell new stories will have different images.
- Educate yourself, said Zicasso's Tan. If an establishment, for example, offers an opportunity to walk with lions in Africa, dig deeper to learn about it, read what experts like Dereck Joubert (a filmmaker who directed "*The Last Lions*," a film by the National Geographic Society) have to say about such promises, and it's not good!
- The best thing to do is to just ask questions, said Wild Wings Safaris' Vegter. How does the organization practice sustainable and responsible tourism? Ask about the projects or charities they support and how they ensure a percentage of their profits benefit either conservation or a social cause, such as a disadvantaged community.
- An ecofriendly stamp alone is not enough. There are a lot of green rating companies that promise to audit your property and give you listing and exposure as an ecofriendly property, said Wilson. Their main objective, though, is to collect annual membership fees and to use members to improve their exposure. Look out for properties that are accredited eco/green/responsible by government or tourist board bodies.

- Travel agents need to partner with organizations that are accredited or have won awards for sustainable programming, said Giltedge's Stalson. This is to ensure that they are fiscally responsible, have tangible reporting on their progress and show success and growth over the long term
- Stalson adds travel agents also need to stay away from the theater of experiences. There are many nonprofits/travel agents that capitalize on the drama of vulnerability instead of on authentic growth and development.

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