

# Africa's Untapped Tourism Niches

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A Blueprint for Growth







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# A Blueprint for Growth



Naivasha, Hells Gate Park, Kenya

## Africa is on the verge of a tourism transformation

Today's traveller wants meaning, depth, and purpose - a new wave of niche tourism is changing what it means to experience Africa... from stargazing in certified dark-sky reserves to reconnecting with ancestral roots.

And the world is watching.

Across the continent, rural communities are building hands-on agritourism stays. Women are opting for all-female expeditions that offer connection on their terms. Travellers are swapping ticking off wildlife checklists for nature therapy under

ancient trees, or sound-driven safaris that reveal the bush in all its multi-sensory beauty.

These are new experiences – and they're also new economies.

This whitepaper explores six of the most powerful emerging niches – Roots Tourism, Nature Therapy, Women-Only Safaris, Rural Tourism, Multi-Sensory Safaris, Dark-Sky Tourism – and the rare opportunities they represent.

The global visitor is transforming. Africa has what they're looking for.

Now is the time to lead...



**This whitepaper explores several key niche tourism markets that are already gaining momentum**

## **1 Roots Tourism**

A deeply personal and increasingly lucrative travel segment as African heritage travellers seek meaningful connections to their ancestral homelands through immersive cultural experiences.

## **2 Nature Therapy**

Leveraging Africa's unparalleled landscapes to promote physical and mental well-being through guided mindfulness experiences, grounding practices, and eco-therapeutic safaris.

## **3 Women-Only Safaris**

Offering an alternative to traditional safari experiences with itineraries that foster connection, confidence, and exploration on women's terms, free from conventional expectations.

## **4 Rural Tourism**

Unlocking economic growth for Africa's rural communities through agricultural travel, locally led cultural exchanges, and off-the-beaten-path experiences that showcase the rhythms of village life.

## **5 Multi-Sensory Safaris**

Evolving and enhancing the traditional game drive into fully immersive wildlife encounters that incorporate hearing, touch, taste, and scent for deeper engagement – particularly for travellers with visual impairments.

## **6 Dark-Sky Tourism**

Conserving Africa's pristine night skies while creating unforgettable celestial experiences. This niche is about sustainability and cultural storytelling as much as it is about stargazing.

**Attracting more visitors is just the beginning.  
This is about deciding what lies ahead for African tourism.  
Are we ready to seize the moment?**



Serengeti National Park, Tanzania



## A Game-Changing Niche for Africa's Tourism Industry

**“Diaspora tourism is exciting because it allows people to reconnect with their roots. With genealogy tools and tracing ancestry becoming popular, more African Americans are coming forward to discover where they're from. And now they're ready to invest in trips to those regions – not just for holidays, but for meaningful, life-changing experiences.”**

- Cynika Drake, an expert in African travel experiences

For Africa's tourism industry, this is a market ripe with untapped potential. Ghana's Year of Return in 2019 proved that roots tourism could be a significant economic driver – and an emotional and cultural connection point. The landmark campaign celebrated 400 years since the first enslaved Africans were taken to the Americas, inviting African descendants to “come home”. The response was monumental: over a million visitors arrived in Ghana, contributing \$3.3 billion to the economy, according to the Ghana Tourism Authority.

But roots tourism is not another catch-all trend. It's a deeply personal

journey, and for tourism operators, it's an opportunity to create transformative experiences that go beyond traditional attractions. As Cynika explains, “Diaspora tourists aren't looking to tick off boxes or ‘see the highlights’ alone. They're drawn by a connection to the land – they want to immerse themselves and leave with a sense of identity and pride.”

Yet, as demand grows, not all African destinations are prepared to make the most of this global opportunity. From local partnerships to intentional marketing campaigns, here's how tourism players can lead the way.



## What Makes Roots Tourism Different?

Roots tourism isn't your typical luxury or heritage travel segment. It sits uniquely at the intersection of cultural curiosity, ancestral connection, and emotional discovery. For travellers, it's about tracing their lineage and honouring the lives of their ancestors. For African destinations, it's about welcoming these visitors home and offering them a deeper sense of belonging.

Cynika recalls one particularly moving story: "We had a multigenerational family – grandparents, parents, and their children – who travelled to Ghana for a naming ceremony. They

visited local villages and really immersed themselves in the culture. Even three years later, they say it was the most meaningful holiday of their lives."

But this isn't solely about cultural rituals. Roots tourists are often savvy, well-travelled professionals. Many are in their late 40s to 60s, travelling as couples or with families. A significant proportion take their children or grandchildren on what Cynika describes as "multi-generational journeys," where the goal is to pass lessons of history and heritage through experiences.

“

**The biggest expense is definitely the flight. But beyond that, many of our clients are professionals or executives who have the income and time to dedicate to trips like this.**

**This isn't last-minute tourism – it's purposeful.**

”



Masai woman, Island of Zanzibar, Tanzania, Africa

## How Africa Can Tap Into the Roots Tourism Market

The demand is real. But for tourism operators and destinations, engaging the diaspora means shifting away from business as usual. Thoughtless, one-size-fits-all packages won't appeal to this niche. And attempts to focus solely on "poverty tourism" may do more harm than good.

**INSTEAD, CYNIKA PROVIDES ACTIONABLE IDEAS FOR STANDING OUT IN THIS GROWING MARKET**

### 1. Say No to Poverty Tourism

For years, African tourism campaigns have been weighed down by harmful stereotypes: images of impoverished children or township slums have corrupted how the world sees the continent. This approach alienates roots tourism travellers, many of whom are seeking dignity and pride in their ancestral homeland.

"I don't promote township tours," Cynika shares frankly. "The image many people already have of Africa isn't positive. Why reinforce that? Instead, we should focus on celebrating the continent's beauty and success. Highlight the winemakers, the local artists, the jewellery makers – people creating something truly inspiring."

This strategy can involve completely rewriting the script of African tourism marketing. Picture stories about thriving African entrepreneurs, boutique designers, or cutting-edge cultural institutions attracting roots travellers eager to see modern Africa triumph.

### 2. Build Local-First Partnerships

**“Partnerships are everything. If you want guests to immerse themselves in your culture, you need local ambassadors to tell the stories no one else can.”**

For example, this could mean collaborating with a jewellery maker to host bespoke, hands-on workshops. Or it could involve artists leading interactive gallery tours. The key is creating connections that feel genuine, not transactional.



Cynika adds that these partnerships don't just improve tourist experiences – they also help foster local job creation and economic development, benefiting African communities directly.

### 3. Invest in Personalised Experiences

Roots tourists often travel with emotional reasons underpinning their journeys. Whether they've traced their ancestry through a DNA test or heard family stories of heritage, they want a trip designed for their unique motivations.



An effective tactic, according to Cynika, is to create category-exclusive partnerships: “If I work with a lodge in Tanzania, they know they’re my go-to partner for that market. They aren’t competing with five others, so there’s more space for trust and creativity. In South Africa, that might mean highlighting one boutique winery or one small lodging property. The idea is depth over breadth.”

Offering personalised options – such as a curated lodge stay featuring VR tours of local heritage or an artist meet-and-greet – ensures tourists leave with stories worth sharing when they return home.

#### 4. Embrace Roots-Led Narratives

The secret to tapping into the diaspora

travel market is to let their narratives take centre stage. Trust the diaspora to lead outreach campaigns, utilise their insights, and understand their expectations.

Campaigns like Ghana’s Year of Return worked because they genuinely resonated with diaspora communities worldwide. By engaging African American celebrities and influencers, the campaign created a ripple effect in social media and personal storytelling.

“When people go back home,” Cynika says, “and they talk about their experiences, they want to feel proud. They want to say, ‘This is where I’m from. Look how beautiful it is.’ Destinations that deliver on that will thrive.”

The roots travel wave is here.

**Will you help shape it – or wait  
for others to claim the opportunity?**

#### Why the Time to Act Is Now

Roots tourism is more than a financial opportunity – it’s about shaping Africa’s global image for generations to come. Those in the travel industry who embrace this niche with care, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration will find themselves leading the narrative.

“It’s not about volume. It’s about creating meaningful experiences that people will be proud to share,” Cynika concludes. “With 54 countries, there’s room for every destination to create something different. But the key is doing it now – not waiting for someone else to lead.”







## Africa's Best-Kept Secret

Nature therapy – or eco-therapy – takes many different forms. Perhaps the most widely known is forest bathing, which has been gaining a steady following since the movement first took root in Japan in the early 80s.

As Grant Hine, eco-therapist and founder of Zen Guiding explains, forest bathing is a direct translation from the Japanese term *Shinrin-yoku*, which means to bathe in the atmosphere of the forest using your senses.

Hine has now adapted the forest bathing model to Africa's safari environment, including grounding, different methods

of meditation, awareness exercises and even blindfolded guiding – but all with a very intentional connection to nature.

Nature therapy represents a new approach to the traditional safari, one which Hine believes is utterly transformational.

"Nature therapy has the potential to change people's lives. It changes their perspective on the natural environment, and they come to understand the connection between nature – be it trees in the savannah, the earth or the animals – and their mental and physical health," says Hine.

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**“Eco-therapy is a way of using nature, or benefiting from nature, through a facilitated process, that leads to personal growth and development. And the wonderful thing? It's all based in science.”**

As more travellers seek personalised, experience-driven adventures and meaningful connections beyond standard sightseeing or Big 5 game viewing, this niche offers a unique opportunity to do something out the ordinary in a way that benefits both

visitors and the environment – and as Hine says, guests may forget what you've told them on a drive, they may forget facts and figures, but they're never going to forget how they felt during a guided eco-therapy experience.

## The Science Behind Nature Connection

For Hine, it isn't just a feel-good philosophy – it's backed by science. "Research shows that even seeing green spaces through hospital windows helps patients recover faster. Patients who can see green have less pain than those who look out on a brick wall. Nature has a calming and relaxing effect on us."

Studies also show that grounding (or earthing), whereby people have direct skin contact with the surface of the Earth (most commonly, by walking barefoot) improves sleep, reduces pain and inflammation, reduces stress, regulates blood pressure and even speeds up wound healing.

As Hine explains, there is also research being done on children's mental and physical health – and the impact of technology.

"Unfortunately, there is a belief that the next generation of children may not live as long as their parents, and it's down to a disconnection from nature."

Thankfully, nature therapy is an easy sell. "We've always instinctively known that we feel good being in nature," says Hine. "Now that science has proven why, people really embrace it!"



## Who's Seeking Nature Therapy?

Hine, who is currently based at Grootbos Private Nature Reserve in the Western Cape, says today's travellers want more from their safari experience. They want to see the Big 5, but they also want to feel something. They're looking for experiences that allow for introspection, reveal personal insights, and foster connections.

### These visitors tend to be:

- Well versed in nature-therapy, especially forest bathing
- Keen for a Big 5 lodge experience, but with a deeper connection to the natural world
- Ready for a total break from the 'always-on' digital world they work in
- Looking for a deeper connection to Africa – and the chance to discover their own true nature
- Interested in personal growth, wellness and nature conservation



## How Nature Therapy Changes the Safari Experience

Rather than simply observing wildlife, nature therapy guides invite and facilitate deeper engagement.

**“ I train guides to help guests 'become' the elephant. To imagine what it feels like to move as they move, to sense as they sense. After that kind of connection, you never look at an elephant the same way again. ”**

For those struggling to imagine what a nature therapy session might look like, Hine recalls one of his favourite moments:

*"Once on a walking safari, we stopped, took our shoes off, and walked down to the river to do a water meditation. The next thing, a large herd of elephants came into the river. We sat there for 45 minutes, just connecting with about 60 elephants, grounding. So, we're touching the rocks. We're touching the water. And we're connecting with the elephants in a different state of consciousness. What's special is that animals pick that up, and they're not threatened by it, they don't want to attack, and they don't run away. They just carry on with their normal behaviour. The guides, who had worked at that lodge for many years, said it was the best elephant encounter they had ever had."*

## Leading Destinations

Nature therapy is still finding a foothold in Africa.

"I started doing training on Zen Guiding back in 2016 with a few lodges, including The Outpost, Tswalu and Singita Lebombo in the Kruger National Park. I've spent the last three years with Grootbos, as well as introducing Nature Connection Ecotherapy within Singita," says Hine. "They're embracing nature therapy completely, and I keep revisiting their lodges,



Kalama Wildlife Conservancy, Samburu, Kenya

training new guides and other staff members. It's exciting to see nature therapy evolve as the industry realises the importance and value of this type of guiding – and the effect it has on travellers."

Equally exciting is the buy-in from guides who are able to enhance the safari experience by inviting guests to make use of their senses (sight, hearing, smelling, touch and taste) as well as other connection exercises, for example, closing their eyes and listening to the sounds of nature, birds calling, or elephant and buffalo feeding sounds, feeling the energy of trees, feeling the earth under their bare feet, even taking a barefoot walk to view animals in an alpha state of consciousness. Guides can also, alongside carrying out various exercises and meditations, talk to the science behind nature connection, including grounding and energy exchange and how negative ions from trees and other natural environments can reduce stress, improve sleep and boost the immune system.

## Steps for Operators

Hine smiles when asked about the infrastructure required for nature therapy. “Any wilderness setting can host these experiences. You don’t need special infrastructure, just trained guides and the natural environment itself,” says Hine.

Zen Guiding is the only organisation doing this kind of training in South Africa at the moment – but the potential is huge. The 5-day programme has both a theory and a practical component, and it gives guides the knowledge and confidence to conduct ecotherapy, forest bathing, zen guiding, mindfulness and meditation experiences.

For tourism businesses wanting to incorporate nature therapy, Hine recommends:

### 1. Investing in proper training

Guides need to understand different

mindfulness techniques and nature connection exercises.

### 2. Selecting your guides carefully

Guides themselves need to be connected to nature and lead a certain lifestyle before they can facilitate these experiences with guests.

### 3. Starting small

Introduce elements gradually to gauge interest before expanding programmes.

### 4. Focusing on the science behind nature therapy

This will help sceptical guests understand its benefits.

### 5. Keeping it simple

Use basic tools like blindfolds or drawing materials to enhance sensory experiences.

## Why the Time is Now

People are increasingly recognising the power of nature. Being in nature enhances our bodies capacity to heal itself, and people who are more connected, go barefoot, garden, or play in the soil are generally much healthier and happier than those who don’t.

But there’s more to it.

For Africa's tourism industry, nature therapy represents an opportunity to lead global wellness tourism while promoting conservation through connection.

“ When people truly connect with nature, they protect it. We're not just creating experiences; we're nurturing environmental stewards. ”



# Beyond empowerment, toward something deeper



© Natural Selection | Nwetwe Pan, Botswana

## WOMEN-ONLY SAFARIS

**When people hear the term ‘women-only safari,’ they often assume it’s just another offshoot of the well-worn trends of empowerment tourism or self-discovery trips.**

Travel companies dedicated to serving female travellers have increased by **230%** over the past few years – and the messaging from most travel brands follows an all-too-familiar script:

“Women are breaking free. Women are finding themselves. Women are

stepping into their power.”

It sounds inspiring – until you realise it’s oversimplified and doesn’t truly reflect why women choose to travel in all-female groups, or why women-specific safaris are growing faster than ever.

### **Why women choose women-only safaris**

Let’s set the record straight: most solo female travellers aren’t always travelling solo.

They may take certain trips alone, but

they also regularly travel with loved ones. They don’t book a women-only safari because they can’t experience Africa in mixed-company. They book it because it offers something different.

## So, what is that “something different”?

For many, it's freedom – not in the performative “We Are Strong” sense, but in the deeply personal, liberating sense of moving through a space differently than they would in mixed-gender groups.

“You definitely see more women solo travellers as opposed to men solo travellers. Botswana is one of the best destinations for that because women feel comfortable and relaxed. But they also feel a part of the family because when you come to our lodges, you're never just squeezed into a table on your own. You sit down with our staff and with your fellow guests, so it's very convivial, very family-oriented, and very safe

and progressive,” says James Wilson of Desert & Delta Safaris.

For others, it's immersion and depth, a departure from “tick-the-box” safaris that prioritise the Big Five over personal connection with the environment. Many women are leaning away from traditional sightseeing-heavy itineraries and more towards experiences that allow for reflection, meaningful human exchanges, and slower, richer engagement with nature.

This is something Natural Selection understood deeply when designing their Kalahari Desert Women's Safari & Expedition.



**“ We weren't interested in doing a women's empowerment safari just for the sake of it. What we noticed was that women – particularly in small groups – engage with these landscapes in a different way. They aren't just here to see wildlife; they want to experience it, to feel a real connection to the environment. ”**

On this six-day journey through Botswana's great salt pans, guests trade game drives for quad biking across vast, surreal landscapes, walking with the indigenous Bushmen, and sleeping beneath open desert skies. No fast-paced wildlife viewing – it's about suspending time and allowing nature to unfold around you... with plenty of adventure mixed in! Definitely not your typical ‘women-only’ safari as most might envision it.

“That's the beauty of this experience – there's no set script,” says Smith. “We love giving women the freedom to shape the expedition as they want it: to rough it, to relax, to seek out

adrenaline, or to simply be.”

Gaby Grieveson – another great mind behind this women's only expedition and an executive assistant at Natural Selection – agrees: “It's really about being yourself as a woman – free from any pressures, free from routine. You get those endorphins flowing with adventure, but you also slow down. We have moments where we say, ‘Just walk. Walk for 100 metres and take five minutes on your own.’ And it's amazing – you can pray, meditate, sing to yourself, or just lie down and stare at the sky. It's a space where we, as women, can connect, relate, and just have fun.”



## How can the industry catch up – without falling into the ‘empowerment’ trap?

As demand for women-focused travel rises, more safari operators are beginning to explore how to cater to this growing demographic. But the real question is: Are they doing it right?

Too many companies still follow a paint-by-numbers formula when marketing to female travellers:

### Option 1

Frame the trip as an empowerment adventure:

“Women on safari alone? Look how groundbreaking!”

### Option 2

Position it as a soul-searching journey: “Come find yourself under the African sky.”

When asked what advice she’d give to other suppliers developing women-focused experiences, Smith had a clear response:

“

**It’s really about managing guest expectations and thinking outside the box. You don’t have to do the same thing everyone else is doing. Be creative. Listen to what female travellers are actually asking for rather than assuming what they want.**

”

**Most importantly, gather data and listen to traveller feedback:**

- Don’t rely on outdated notions of what women look for in travel experiences. Instead, conduct direct research through surveys, focus groups, and post-trip feedback from female guests to understand their evolving preferences.
- Monitor online forums, Facebook groups (e.g., “Solo Female Travelers”), and Instagram trends to discover organic discussions about what women want from adventure trips.
- Collaborate with local female artisans and musicians to create deeper cultural connections beyond traditional sightseeing elements.
- Before launching a full-scale women-only itinerary, test small-group expeditions with beta participants who provide structured feedback on everything from pacing to accommodations and activity intensity.
- Offer an “open design” approach – where guests shape elements of the itinerary themselves – to reveal unexpected preferences that traditional trip planning might overlook.



© Natural Selection | Nwetwe Pan, Botswana

## Women-only safaris: A trend that's here to stay

Moving forward, the industry has a choice to make:

- Stick to easy narratives – or dig deeper?
- Market to female travellers – or truly design for them?
- Talk about empowerment – or create experiences that naturally empower?

“ Forget empowerment and focus on possibility. Women don't need companies to tell them they're strong – they know already know that. What they need are experiences that meet them where they are. ”

**Powerful words.  
And maybe, just maybe,  
an overdue industry wake-up call.**



© Natural Selection | Kudu Island, Makgadikgadi Pan, Botswana





# The Chance to Reshape Africa's Tourism Landscape

©Stew Nolan | Lesotho

Rural tourism sits at a unique intersection of countryside, community, culture, farming and sustainable development. Unlike conventional tourism, it's deeply rooted in the rhythms of rural life and agricultural seasons. For travellers, it offers an escape from the stresses of city living and an opportunity to experience something completely different.

For Jacqui Taylor, Founder of Agritourism Africa and Regional Committee Chair of the Global Agritourism Network, rural tourism goes far beyond farm stays:

“

**When done right rural tourism offers travellers authentic connections with local cultures while providing rural communities with vital income diversification.**

”

According to [Grand View Research](#), the global agritourism market, valued at USD 8.10 billion in 2024, is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.9% over the next five

years. This represents a significant opportunity for Africa's tourism industry – to the benefit of both visitors and host communities. But what's holding Africa back?



Taylor believes education – and a unified approach – is key.

“Unfortunately, not many tourism leaders understand agritourism. They keep referring to farm stays or accommodation,” explains Taylor. “Agritourism is rural tourism development, and it includes many different rural activities and experiences, from star-gazing to farm-to-fork lunches. Agritourism also includes physical activities, for example, mountain-biking, trail running, fishing and more. It would benefit all, if there was a unified approach to agritourism, otherwise we won’t make the impact we need from a rural tourism development perspective.”

The biggest challenge says Taylor, is that

education about rural communities within Africa is both time-consuming and overwhelming.

“Despite agriculture being the backbone of Africa, supporting 70% of the continent's population, there's a striking lack of understanding about agritourism – and its potential. While people recognise the value of ecotourism and national parks, there's close to zero knowledge about rural tourism services and products. Since founding this initiative in 2016, I've seen how government structures themselves create barriers, with departments of tourism, agriculture, and rural development operating in separate silos. Only a few countries, like Namibia, have begun to bridge these divisions.”



## Unlocking the Benefits of Rural Tourism in Africa

For Taylor, community development through rural tourism should be a key driver in African economies, not an after-thought. Projects need to be identified by regional and local experts (not necessarily tourism experts) who are connected to rural communities, who understand agriculture, and the role it plays, and who listen to what rural communities have to say – bottom-up communication is essential,

not top-down.

In this way, communities can create unique and authentic experiences that draw visitors from urban centres to experience the gentle pace of rural life, including harvesting, caring for animals, traditional craftsmanship and artisanal techniques, for example wine, bread and cheese making.



## What Makes Rural Tourism Different?

“ Every farm, village or rural destination is unique, and activities change with the seasons, making each visit different from the last. ”

The rural tourism niche typically attracts conscious travellers looking for:

- Authentic cultural immersion
- Sustainable and responsible travel experiences
- Direct engagement with local communities
- Farm-to-table culinary experiences
- Outdoor activities in natural settings

Rural tourism experiences also appeal to domestic travellers and those on a budget, as it's often cheaper for a family to enjoy a farm holiday than a city break. Rural escapes are also great in terms of physical and mental wellbeing,

but there's an even more important impact: when visitors immerse themselves in farm life and village rhythms, rural communities flourish.

“When travellers take the time to understand agricultural seasons and participate in local activities – from harvest festivals to traditional crafts – they create meaningful economic opportunities for farming families and entire villages,” says Taylor.

In Africa, where rural youth unemployment is intertwined with underemployment and working poverty, rural tourism creates transformative opportunities. When young people and women engage in tourism activities – whether leading agricultural experiences or managing homestay programmes – they gain not just income, but valuable business skills and leadership experience.

For young women especially, these opportunities can break generational cycles of poverty. As Taylor explains, you can see young people transform from job seekers to job creators, rebuilding rural economies while preserving their cultural heritage.



© Jacqui Taylor - Agritourism Africa | Bee Hive Experience, Rwanda



## How Africa Can Develop Rural Tourism Effectively

Many agritourism farms and opportunities are within a three-hour radius of a city or town and close to national roads. This makes them easily accessible. In addition, people who live (and farm) in rural areas are unpretentious, down-to-earth and natural story-tellers and, as Taylor explains, happy to share their knowledge and skills.

**But they need the right mindset, support and investment, including:**

**1. Meaningful community engagement.**

"Operators need to engage with rural communities to understand the context within which any activity or experience is possible," Taylor advises. "By involving rural communities, operators can ensure guests are welcomed, while offering a broader tourism service."

**2. A focus on authentic experiences.**

Rather than creating artificial attractions, successful rural tourism initiatives build on – and celebrate – existing community strengths.

**3. Investment in basic infrastructure and essential services, including electricity, water and sanitation.**

Internet connectivity is also a must as this enables communities to participate meaningfully in the digital tourism economy while maintaining their traditional ways of life.

**4. A practical approach.**

Agritourism Africa suggests rural initiatives create (and follow) a solid checklist that includes risks assessments; the necessary permits required; first aid facilities, firefighting plans and places of safety; accessibility (including driving conditions and parking arrangements); adequate signage; and, importantly, insurance.

**5. A 'seasonal' mindset.**

Agricultural seasons naturally create different experiences throughout the year. By embracing seasonal opportunities, from harvest festivals to planting activities, these rhythms and variations can become unique selling points rather than limitations.

**6. A commitment to responsible and eco-conscious practices.**

Think green energy solutions, water harvesting, recycling and waste management.





## Set for Success: Rural Tourism in Action

Taylor is clear: agritourism is not about creating artificial attractions – it's about celebrating and sustaining our rural communities through thoughtful tourism development. The potential is enormous, and many community-based projects are seeing success.

In Gabon, Fanelly Agnouga's community homestay project is offering visitors direct engagement with rural life, ensuring that economic benefits stay within the community.

In Rwanda, Eco Terra Vista runs a social enterprise offering eco-friendly tours and treks to showcase the agricultural and natural beauty of the southern shore of the twin lakes.

In Ethiopia, rural coffee tours allow you to visit coffee plantations, learn about coffee production and experience local culture in the Kafa Biosphere Reserve, one of the few remaining wild coffee forests in the world. Visitors also have the chance to visit small-scale honey and spice producers – getting a real feel for rural life in this magical region.

In Uganda, in Kahangi Village, just next to Kibale National Park, 13 integrated communities leading an agricultural life share their knowledge of basket weaving, cooking, beading, tea picking, and art with travellers keen to learn more about the region's rich history, cultures and traditions.

In South Africa, Naledi Farm in Centurion, Gauteng focuses on educating young people about food systems and agriculture, while the Trail's End Bike Hotel in Grabouw, in the Western Cape, supports adventure tourism while working with a community-driven non-profit to create employment opportunity and skills training.

Each example demonstrates the power of rural tourism in terms of economic growth and community upliftment, but it also preserves agricultural land and champions heritage and sustainability.

Today's international travellers are demanding more sustainable and immersive travel experiences, especially those that connect them with authentic activities and rural lifestyles. Africa has these experiences in abundance – and the potential to redefine rural tourism globally.

With strategic investment in infrastructure, targeted training programmes, committed partnerships, and community education, our rural destinations can transform from hidden gems to world-class experiences. The foundation is already here, now it's time to build something extraordinary together.



Tea fields, Rwanda

# New Engagement in African Tourism



© Sound Safaris | Kwalata Private Game Lodge, Dinokeng Game Reserve

## MULTI-SENSORY SAFARIS

“ Demand is already growing amongst conscious travellers seeking something more memorable. ”

The global tourism industry is shifting toward experiential travel, where engagement and immersion take priority over passive sightseeing. This has given rise to multi-sensory safaris, a natural extension of a traditional game drive that offers more involvement and enrichment. “Now all senses are involved – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. It’s a rewarding and stimulating adventure for all,” says Sound Safaris co-founder Sarah Solomon.

Multi-sensory safaris are for anyone looking for a deeper connection to nature, as well as those who want to

appreciate and learn about the many aspects of the wild world beyond just seeing.

These safaris enhance the way travellers engage with nature while also increasing accessibility and inclusivity. “Multi-sensory safaris open the door for people who perhaps thought a traditional wildlife viewing experience wasn’t easily accessible to them due to its mainly visual component,” she adds. By using more than just sight, these safaris cater to a broader audience, including travellers with visual impairments.



## What makes multi-sensory safaris different?

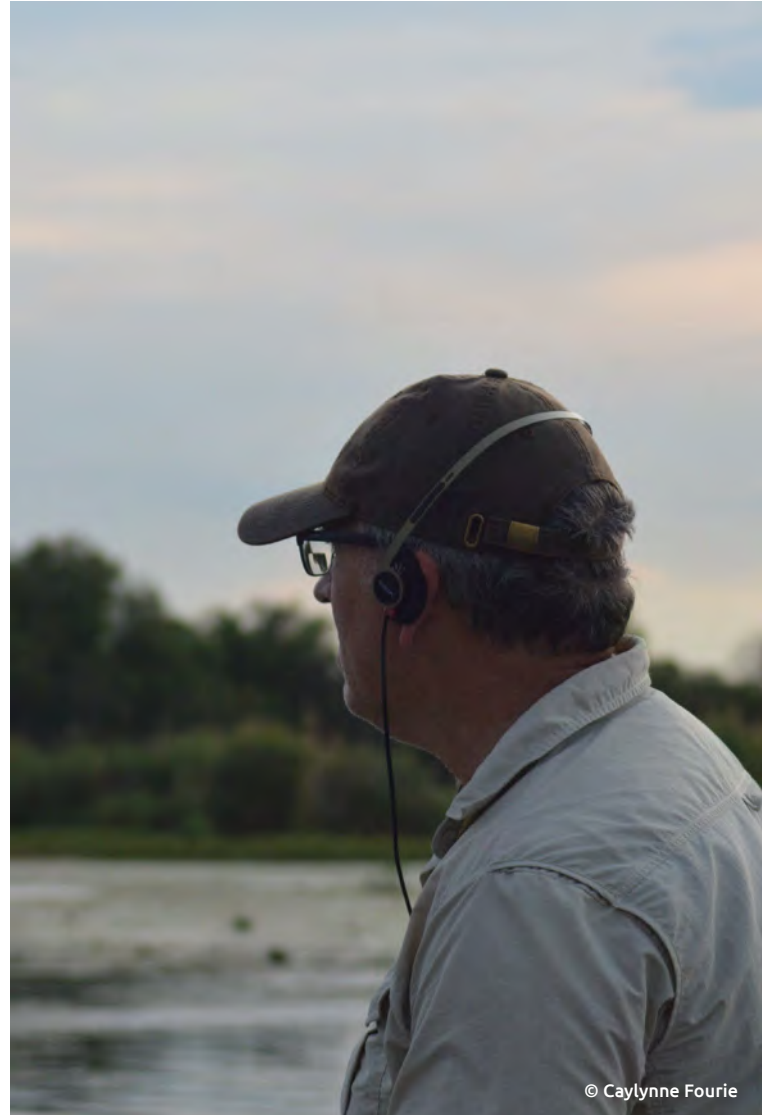
Traditional game drives rely primarily on sightings – spotting animals from the vehicle. “A game drive is so much more than just the visual appeal,” emphasises Solomon.

### MULTI-SENSORY SAFARIS CONNECT GUESTS TO THEIR SURROUNDINGS BY ENHANCING OTHER ELEMENTS, LIKE:

- **Sound:**  
The distant roar of a lion, the rustling of leaves, or the symphony of bird calls.
- **Touch:**  
Feeling the texture of animal hide samples, tree bark, and even the earth itself.
- **Smell:**  
The distinctive aromas of crushed leaves, damp soil, and wildflowers.
- **Taste:**  
Sampling local flavours, such as wild honey or marula fruit.

“We recently ran a sponsored sound safari for visually impaired teens where microphones were fitted to the vehicle and the sound amplified through individual guest headphones,” Solomon recalls.

The Sound Safaris guide also drove past dung piles, water puddles, and foliage to allow them to feel and smell the bush up close. And, whenever they stopped to listen to animals, the guide passed around a binder of animal hides for the children to feel what they were hearing.



© Caylynne Fourie

## How can Africa tap into the multi-sensory safari market?

Despite its growing demand and appeal to various audiences, multi-sensory safaris are a relatively new concept for Africa’s tourism industry. They require a different mindset, investment in technology, and new partnerships to be successful.

### Solomon shares her advice for making the most of multi-sensory elements:

#### 1. Invest in the right technology

Sound is a powerful yet often overlooked aspect of the wilderness. Enhancing the auditory experience with technology can transform a safari. “I could hear a lot more than just footsteps,” one of Sound Safaris’

visually impaired guests said. “It was like having my 20/20 vision back.”

Advancements in acoustic technology can significantly enhance auditory immersion. Special microphones amplify wildlife sounds making it possible to detect infrasound and ultrasound used by animals, such as elephants and bats, for communication.

Furthermore, silent electric safari vehicles contribute to sustainability efforts while reducing noise pollution and preserving the authentic soundscape of the wilderness.

Additionally, vibration-based technology enables hearing-impaired guests to experience wildlife through tactile feedback.

## 2. Training guides in multi-sensory interpretation

Guides play a crucial role in translating nature's sensory richness into engaging narratives. Comprehensive training should incorporate sensory storytelling techniques that help guests form deeper connections with nature. Descriptive language that vividly conveys sounds, textures, and scents can transform the way travellers perceive their surroundings.

Encouraging guests to engage with tactile experiences, such as touching animal hides and rubbing posts or feeling plants between their fingers, ensures more immersion. Additionally, understanding scent cues (such as the distinctive smell of an approaching rainstorm or the different animals) adds an

interpretive element.

## 3. Designing sensory-rich accommodations

Lodges and camps can enhance guest experiences by integrating multi-sensory elements into their architecture and interior design. According to Solomon, it's possible to engage many senses in small but meaningful ways.

Tactile exhibits featuring fossils, feathers, and handcrafted artefacts encourage hands-on exploration. Aromatic gardens filled with indigenous flora, such as wild basil and acacia, add a fragrant dimension to a guest's journey.

Culinary programmes that emphasise regional ingredients and traditional cooking techniques allow visitors to explore a destination through taste, strengthening their connection to local culture and biodiversity.

Integrating natural soundscapes, such as streaming ambient recordings of nocturnal wildlife, can also heighten relaxation and reinforce the feeling of being in the bush.

“

**Slow down!  
Not just the game drive  
– the whole safari experience. Take time to enjoy  
what you see and hear and to understand  
how the natural world ticks.**

”



© Caylynne Fourie



#### 4. Developing specialised sensory itineraries

It's possible to design safari itineraries to emphasise multi-sensory engagement, catering to a wide range of travellers, including adventure seekers and accessibility-conscious tourists.

##### For example:

- Nocturnal safaris shift the focus from sight to heightened auditory and olfactory

perception, where rustling vegetation and distant animal calls take centre stage.

- Guided scent trails help guests understand how animals rely on smell to communicate and navigate their environment.
- Sound-based wildlife tracking, such as identifying bird species by their calls, provides a unique, skill-building aspect to the safari experience.



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## The future of tourism is more inclusive

By integrating sound, touch, smell, and taste into safari experiences, the travel industry has an opportunity to transform the way people connect with nature.

"Multi-sensory safaris are an important part of the tourism market that should be encouraged – a slower-paced adventure that fully engages the audience and creates a memorable and often life-changing experience," says Solomon.

For Africa's tourism industry, embracing this approach is about more than enhancing guest experiences; it's also about future-proofing

safari offerings in an evolving global market. As experiential travel continues to dictate consumer preferences, destinations that invest in multi-sensory elements will distinguish themselves from competitors, attracting a broader audience and increasing guest satisfaction.

Moreover, multi-sensory experiences inspire greater social inclusivity and conservation awareness, which will significantly progress the continent's broader responsible tourism agenda.

# An African Gateway to the Universe

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While everyone seems to be talking about astro-tourism in 2025, there's an important distinction to be made between astro-tourism and dark-sky tourism – a nuance that Eleanor Muller, Marketing Manager at Transfrontier Parks Destinations, is keen to highlight.

Yes, South Africa's new astro-tourism strategy is putting serious money behind astro-tourism development in the country (and destinations like Sutherland and Carnarvon in the Northern Cape), and with good reason.

“

**South Africa, as a long-haul tourism destination is privileged to point towards the centre of the galaxy**

- Dr Laetitia Jacobs, Deputy Director - South Africa's Department of Tourism

”

"This allows us to see the densest, most interesting parts of the Milky Way. In addition, South Africa is also home to the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) in Sutherland and the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) project in Carnarvon. We really are perfectly positioned to deliver a worldclass astrotourism experience, while boosting economic transformation, enhancing the livelihoods of our local communities, and sharing our indigenous celestial stories with the rest of the world!"

But just as exciting is the dark-sky tourism niche. Which, as Muller reminds us, is quite different to astro-tourism.

"Dark-sky tourism comes out of the dark sky movement," explains Muller. "Rather than telescopes and planetary phenomena, it is, at its heart, a sustainability movement. It is about us, as humans, managing the use of artificial light at night, so that we don't lose the night sky."

For Muller, it's about handing the next generation a world that is as beautiful and as fascinating as the one we live in today – alongside an appreciation of our place in the universe, and an understanding of our environmental responsibility.



## Why is Dark-Sky Tourism So Important?

Although Africa has some of the best stargazing in the world, making it perfect for visitors looking for peace, silence and solitude, or the chance to experience the awe-inspiring beauty of the cosmos – dark-sky tourism remains deeply intertwined with sustainability, conservation, and the protection of our planet's natural nocturnal environment.

This is because light pollution is causing more problems than people realise. Muller highlights just a few examples:

1. Light pollution interferes with our natural circadian rhythms, leading to sleep disorders, increased stress, and even an increased risk of depression and other mental health issues. As Muller explains, in cities across the world, people are actually battling to see the night sky, and we're only now beginning to understand the impact of light pollution on human beings.
2. Animals are adversely affected by light pollution, including dung beetles who can't navigate if they can't see the Milky Way – and turtle hatchlings who will head in the wrong direction if light surrounding the beach pulls them away from the sea when they hatch.
3. Bats and many migratory birds struggle to navigate at night if it's not as 'pitch black' as they need it to be.

Dark-sky tourism offers us the perfect opportunity to address – and reverse – the impact of light pollution, while highlighting the opportunity to:

- conserve our natural resources (and embrace sustainable energy practices),
- eliminate gratuitous lights that play havoc with the natural lifecycles and ecosystems of Africa's insects, birds and nocturnal animals,
- boost rural economies by offering new dark-sky experiences, and
- develop cultural tourism through indigenous storytelling.

“ Dark-sky tourism is an incredible way to design immersive and authentic experiences. Every culture has its own association with the night sky. We are not uniform. We are not all guided by Greek mythology. ”



Quiver tree forest, Ketmanshoop



## How Can You Tap into the Dark-Sky Movement?

Unlike astro-tourism, which requires telescopes, scientific observatories, and organised astronomy sessions with subject-matter experts, dark-sky tourism is about experiential travel. It emphasises immersion over education (although visitors will still learn a lot about themselves, and their place in time and space).

"Some travellers may wish to dive deep into the astrophysics of planetary movements, but for most, it is about the 'feeling' they get when standing beneath billions of stars," says Muller.

**“ At !Xaus Lodge we like to say that by day you see the world, but at night you see the universe. ”**

For lodges or tourism providers hoping to tap into the dark-sky movement, Muller suggests starting small and keeping it simple:

"Lodges often schedule stargazing experiences at the end of a demanding day. Guests who woke early for sunrise drives, spent hours on

safari, or participated in various activities find themselves offered drinks followed by a hearty boma dinner. By the time they're invited to observe the night sky, most guests are simply longing for sleep," says Muller.

Rather, says Muller, if you have guests who are particularly interested in the night sky, be very gentle and respectful of just how much energy they have. Instead of tacking a dark-sky experience onto the end of a long, exhausting day, ensure that guests can get the most out of the experience.

Of course, you also have to surrender to nature.

"Promising clear skies is just like committing to your guests that they will see wild animals when on safari," says Muller. "But you can never be sure. An operator needs to understand how important a dark-sky experience is to the guests, and to manage their expectations. Understand the lunar cycle, and if your guests want to see the very most of the Milky Way, please do not send them at full moon."

Lodges need to consider the perfect guide, the perfect spot and the perfect timing, because nature will have her way!



Milky way



## Embracing the Magic of the Night

As Muller explains, managing your light is incredibly important. For example, at !Xaus Lodge in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, every external light is properly shaded to direct illumination downward only where needed, preventing light escaping upward.

“We carefully select bulbs with a colour temperature of 3000 Kelvin or lower,” says Muller. “This means they provide ‘warm’ lighting rather than harsh brightness. Lights are also turned off when not required, conserving energy. For optimal outdoor lighting, fixtures should be positioned low – ideally at knee or hip level – rather than using tall, obtrusive lights that have become standard without purpose.”

Some of South Africa's most established private reserves are already working to align themselves with dark-sky tourism best practices. Among them, Lapalala Wilderness Nature Reserve in Limpopo, which is in the process of securing Dark Sky Park certification from DarkSky International. If successful, Lapalala will become Southern Africa's first officially certified Dark Sky Park, giving it a status currently held by only 195 locations globally.

The adaptations required to obtain a Dark Sky certification are extensive and time-consuming,

including:

- documenting sky glow and sky quality measurements (SQM),
- using different techniques to reduce bright light, including upgrading light fittings or covering spotlights with a red filter,
- motivating for essential lighting, for example, the light required for security and safety,
- raising awareness about the dark-sky movement in surrounding communities, and
- prioritising education.

“It is a serious undertaking,” explains Bronwyn Maree, Biodiversity Centre curator for the Lapalala Wilderness School. “It can take up to 10 years to reach 100% compliance, although you have to be 67% compliant when you submit to be certified. Luckily, you work with a Dark Sky mentor throughout the process.”

But for Maree, it's worth it.

“Imagine lying in a sky bed at one of the Lepogo Lodges on Lapalala Wilderness Nature Reserve or being a school-going learner on a bed roll at the sleep-out camp at Lapalala Wilderness School beneath an uninterrupted sky, hearing the calls of distant hyenas and night birds, realizing just how bright the Milky Way is when there's no artificial light for miles,” said Maree.

“ For city travellers, this is often their first experience of true darkness. And we want to protect this experience for generations to come. ”

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## Conclusion

For some visitors, the attraction of dark-sky tourism lies in deep contemplation. Others are drawn to the way nighttime landscapes transform – how familiar terrains become unfamiliar, bathed in moonlight and shadow. Some seek adventure, such as night drives in wildlife reserves, guided hikes under the stars, or cultural storytelling under a canopy of darkness.

Ultimately though, dark-sky tourism is about gaining perspective on our place in the cosmos, reconnecting with the rhythms of nature, and preserving one of Earth's most beautiful, vanishing landscapes: the night sky.

Dr Jacobs sums it up beautifully: "Before the invention of modern technology such as the telescope, Africa's Indigenous peoples used their knowledge of the sky in agriculture, reproductive cycles, rain making, navigation, and natural disaster management. It's important for unique, Indigenous star lore heritage to be acknowledged and celebrated – especially for tourists looking for an authentic experience."

With increased awareness, responsible conservation, and carefully crafted visitor experiences, dark-sky tourism has the potential to inspire generations of travellers while contributing to both environmental protection and rural economic development.

**For those who have never truly seen the stars, it remains one of the most breathtaking, transformative journeys one can take.**



