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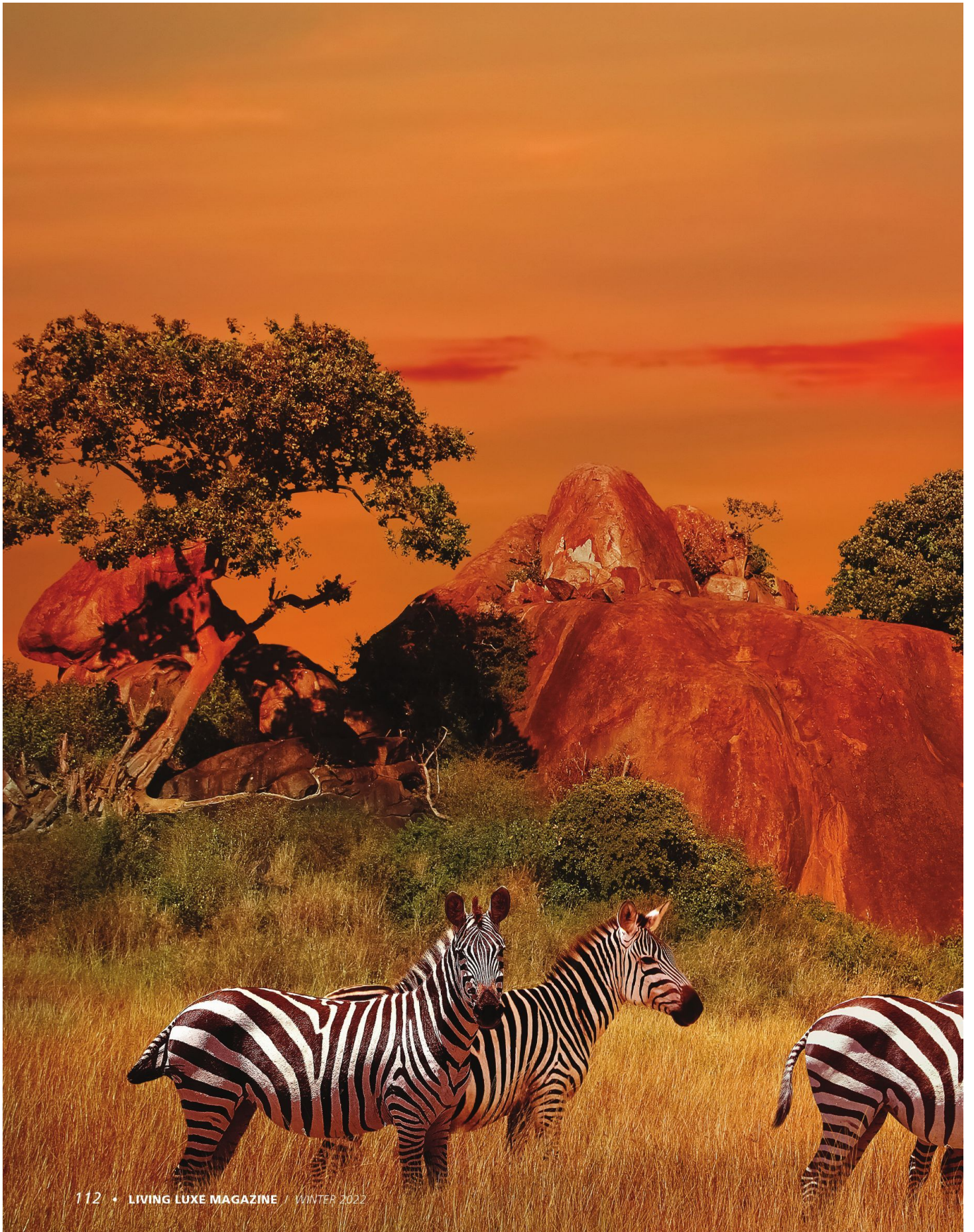
A local jeweler's African travels yield dazzling diamonds, and so much more

Through the Lens

Get an exclusive peek inside the best of First Coast happenings



Staff of the Virunga Lodge carry a colorful breakfast service to guests during a Rwanda luxury safari. Photo courtesy of Virunga Lodge.



STANDOUT SAFARIS

Getting outside in South Africa, Namibia and Uganda

By Johanna Read

The animals seem to comprehend photo composition. Groups of zebra and impala dip their heads to drink from the water hole. Behind them, elephants and spiral-horned kudu patiently wait their turn. Two oryx clash their saber-like horns together for a bit of drama.

No longer about big game hunting, an African safari now focuses on capturing the continent's majesty both on camera and in memories that will last a lifetime. Africa itself casts a spell on all who wake to its dramatic red sunrises and gaze at its sweeping landscapes — vast, unscarred by civilization and untouched by time. These expeditions present rare adventures for intrepid explorers — opportunities to take in the cinematic beauty of a unique wilderness and the mesmerizing predators and prey that roam freely across the bush. To engage in a luxury safari is to experience nature in the raw, but by no means does this mean “roughing it.”

On more upscale safaris, guides tend to their guests' every preference. Groups are smaller, meaning more time in the field and, on occasion, closer proximity to wildlife. As well, lavish lodges are usually in prime locations with animals occasionally wandering onto the grounds — perhaps an antelope sipping from the swimming pool or an elephant eyeing you curiously while you soak in an outdoor tub on a private veranda.

Africa's safari destinations are concentrated in the east and

south, with each country offering variations in the animals on display and accommodations ranging from basic to luxury. Outdoors, in the region's natural splendor, there's plenty to do pre- and post-safari, too. Here's just some of what South Africa, Namibia and Uganda have to offer.

What to Expect on a Safari

Though self-drive and day-trip safaris are possible in some countries, the best safari experiences are based at high-end lodges within game reserves. Stays are in luxury tents or thatched bungalows, complete with en-suite bathroom, veranda and perhaps a personal plunge pool. A typical day consists of two game drives and maybe a post-lunch walk to look for smaller creatures. Because wildlife is most active at dawn and dusk, the day starts bright and early — though there's plenty of time to follow the animals' lead and grab a midday nap.

Meals are taken at the lodge, perhaps outside on a balcony above a water hole that's lit up at night. While sipping cocktails and enjoying international and African cuisine (be sure to try kudu, known as the world's tastiest game meat), guests often watch antelopes cautiously approach the water hole — their eyes, ears and noses twitching to sense any predators camouflaged nearby.



Africa's Big Five and Little Five

Most folks want to see the "Big Five" — Cape buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion and rhino — so named because they were most sought after by trophy hunters. With photographs the new trophies, the list of most popular safari animals is changing since giraffes and zebras are much more photogenic than, say, buffaloes.

The intrepid safari-goer prefers to experience a diversity of wildlife, including what's known as Africa's "Little Five." These small animals are more easily spotted on foot than by vehicle, though it's quite a challenge to check them all off the list. The most frequently seen of the Little Five is the buffalo weaver, a nine-inch-long bird that makes a large and messy nest. The tiny elephant shrew is a mammal with a long nose that cutely resembles its namesake's trunk. The leopard tortoise is the largest of the Little Five, with attractive shell markings similar to leopard spots. The group's smallest species is the antlion, while the other insect member rounding out the five is the rhino beetle, complete with ferocious (for its size) horns.

Everything Under the Sun in South Africa

South Africa reigns as one of the most popular safari destinations. Tourists often combine game park explorations with stays in the city — visiting nearby vineyards, basking on the beach, plus attending festivals like March's Cape Town International Jazz Festival or September's Hermanus Whale Festival, where migrating whales are visible from the shore.

Though safaris are possible year-round, spotting wildlife is easiest during the southern hemisphere's winter (June through

August), when trees have dropped their leaves and the dry weather brings thirsty animals to water holes. Other times of the year usher in lush foliage — more vivid in photographs, but only if your subjects choose to pose in front of leaves and greenery rather than hide behind them.

Kruger National Park is the country's most well-known nature reserve. Creatures wander from Kruger through fenceless borders into neighboring private wildlife reserves where luxury lodges predominate, and there's an excellent chance of witnessing a wide array of species.

Those keen to see the world's fastest land animal flock to the southernmost country in Africa, where cheetah numbers increase by about 8% every year. South Africa is the only nation with a rising wild population of the endangered predators (so much so, that some are relocated to other parts of the continent to help dwindling populations). The best way to learn about and photograph the wild spotted felines is via an organized trip like Ker & Downey Africa's 13-day cheetah safari which guides guests to several conservation spots around the country.

Cheetahs are challenging to reintroduce into the wild, as they need careful acclimatization to their new homes, plus massive amounts of space (Namibia's acclaimed AfriCat Foundation, for example, has therefore shifted their focus from cheetahs to leopards). When big cats are released into a new reserve, they're equipped with radio collars for a few months while they establish their new domain. Using VHF antennas, rangers track the cats (and check on them after they've graduated to no longer needing radio transmitters) and invite tourists to tag along, providing almost-guaranteed sightings.

Ker & Downey Africa's conservation cheetah trip starts with a few days in Cape Town including a visit to the Ashia Cheetah Sanctuary in the Winelands, where travelers may spot the animals in full sprint. That leg is followed by a stay in the Eastern Cape's Samara Private Wildlife Reserve, with outings to track the cats on foot plus see Samara's 60 species of mammals, including the Big Five.

Near Johannesburg, guests visit the Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre, where the first-ever in-captivity birth of a king cheetah occurred, and visitors are likely to see one of these rare creatures that sports both stripes and spots. Originally thought to be a hyena-leopard hybrid, king cheetah populations have fallen to but 50 worldwide, with only ten remaining in the wild.

Ker & Downey Africa's trip concludes in the Sabi Sands Private Game Reserve, next door to Kruger. Sabi Sands is the country's oldest private reserve and is part of the largest conservation area in all of the southern region.





UNESCO Sites Around Cape Town

Many who go on safari elect to begin or end their trip in Cape Town. Called the Mother City, highlights here include towering Table Mountain and historic Robben Island, the former political prison during the Apartheid era.

All of Cape Town, the beaches of Clifton and Camps Bay, and even Robben Island are visible from the top of Table Mountain (unless its “tablecloth” cloud is too low). Take the cable car up; it slowly rotates so that everyone inside gets a 360-degree view. Along the paths, keep an eye out for dassies. Also called rock hyraxes, these mammals look like large guinea pigs, though their closest genetic relative is the elephant. Due to their poor ability to control body temperature, dassies like to soak up the sun on warm rocks, making them convenient photo subjects.

Another top Cape Town attraction is Robben Island, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site where Nelson Mandela spent 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment for opposing South Africa's system of Apartheid. Boats leave from the Victoria & Alfred (V&A) Waterfront several times daily with former political prisoners leading the walking tours and sharing stories of being incarcerated on the harsh island.

Most travelers stay in the V&A Waterfront neighborhood, with its five shopping districts, abundance of hotels and restaurants, and attractions like the Two Oceans Aquarium and the 130-foot-tall Cape Wheel. Still a working harbor (the southern hemisphere's oldest), it's named for Queen Victoria and her second son, Alfred, who launched its construction in 1860. Wander through the V&A in the sunshine and admire architecture like the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa where architect Thomas Heatherwick transformed abandoned grain silos into a masterpiece of faceted-glass windows.

The V&A's iconic stay is the five-star Table Bay Hotel, which Nelson Mandela himself opened in 1997. The 329 rooms in this neo-Victorian building offer stunning views over the water and out to Table Mountain, and the elegant lobby features displays of South Africa's indigenous protea flowers.

Save time for a day trip outside the Mother City to South Africa's Winelands or down the Cape Peninsula to see the colony of penguins plus UNESCO-recognized Cape Point. The dramatic tip of this headland feels like the last piece of solid ground until Antarctica, and it looks as if the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet right here (though that's actually at Cape Agulhas, about 100 miles east).

Towering Table Mountain seems to stand guard over Cape Town, South Africa.



Namibia's Rare Desert Elephants

Easy to reach from Cape Town via a two-hour flight northeast is Namibia's capital, Windhoek. The country is known not only for safaris but for its unique sand dune landscapes that make for stunning photographs.

Located in the north, Etosha National Park has the most abundant wildlife. During the southern hemisphere's winter, Etosha is dry and all animals must seek out water holes to survive. Endangered black rhinos, elephants and lions might even take a drink together. Summer's rains turn Etosha lush and green but can make travel more challenging with occasional flooding on the roads.

West of Etosha, in the Kunene region and along Namibia's Skeleton Coast, live a few hundred desert elephants. Safari-goers can only see them in Namibia, though Mali also has a small and elusive population. They're not a separate species, but a desert elephant's body size is smaller than other African bush elephants. They also exhibit different behaviors than their massive cousins — migrating much farther and even digging wells to access water. Perhaps sensing the fragility of their desert environment, they only nibble on trees rather than uprooting them or tearing off large branches. Photographers dream of spending a week in Namibia's desert and pointing their lenses toward a herd.

Southwest of Windhoek is immense Namib-Naukluft National Park, another scenic wonderland of colorful contrast. While it's possible to see wildlife here, the big draw is the Namib Desert's massive sand dunes. Red in the early morning light and

turning orange as the sun rises higher, these dunes are ideal for photos both from the ground and from a hot air balloon. Some can be climbed and some even surfed — either while strapped to a snowboard or lying down on a polished plank and reaching speeds of up to 50 miles an hour.

A popular Namib Desert excursion begins with an early wake-up and drive to Dune 45, so named because it's 45 kilometers (28 miles) from the national park's Sesriem Gate. After climbing the star-shaped, 275-foot-high dune in the cold desert morning (it's easiest with shoes kicked off and periodic breaks to warm cold toes in the sand below the surface), visitors are rewarded with a spectacular sunrise — a view like no other.

Nearby is Deadvlei, also known as a photographer's paradise. The dunes here are almost as tall as the Empire State Building and are a brilliant orange against a bright blue sky — most breathtaking in the first half of the morning and in late afternoon, because the midday sun fades their colors and minimizes the dramatic shadows.

In a flat area between several dunes is a white clay pan, so parched that it's cracked into what looks like geometric tiles. Seemingly growing from this mosaic-like surface are dead camel thorn trees. These black, leafless 900-year-old remnants cast stark shadows onto the baked ground. As the climate changed, the surrounding dunes shifted and blocked the Tsauchab River from reaching here. The desert's intense dryness prevented the forest from decomposing after it died. Instead, its specimens remained, gradually turning black under Namibia's 300 annual days of searing sunshine.



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Uganda: The Pearl of Africa

Winston Churchill called Uganda “The Pearl of Africa” after his 1907 visit to the landlocked East African country, remarking, “The kingdom of Uganda is a fairy tale. You climb up... and at the end, there is a wonderful new world...”

Indeed, Uganda has all the popular safari animals including Africa’s largest concentration of hippos, and it is one of only two places in the world with tree-climbing lions. However, the highlight of a trip here is a trek to see mountain gorillas (though standing with one foot on either side of the equator deserves a photo, too).

There are only about 1,000 mountain gorillas in the world, and they all live in either Uganda’s Bwindi Impenetrable Forest or in the Virunga Mountains which overlap the borders of Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Scientists aren’t sure why, but mountain gorillas can’t survive in captivity like their lowland cousins.

These great apes live at high altitudes — usually between 8,000 and 13,000 feet above sea level — noshing on thistles, leaves and roots. Juveniles take breaks to turn somersaults and swing on vines, only occasionally noticing the eight humans who arrive to take their photo for an hour every day.

Seeing mountain gorillas requires a fairly extensive hike through the high-altitude rainforest following guides who use machetes to clear paths through thick undergrowth. The primates choose a different spot to nest each night and wander throughout the day searching for their favorite foods. Every morning, trackers pick up the trail where they left their gorilla family the previous day. It’s up to chance where they’ll find them. It might be just 30 minutes from the base camp or much deeper into the forest.

Celebrating 25 years of operation is the pioneer of mountain gorilla tourism, Volcanoes Safaris, a luxury safari company with three eco-lodges



Each afro-chic banda at Uganda's Kyambura Gorge Lodge thrills guests with sweeping views of the rolling savanna and distant mountains.
 Photo courtesy of Volcanoes Safaris.

in Uganda plus one in neighboring Rwanda. In addition to mountain gorilla trekking, Volcanoes Safaris takes guests to see human's closest genetic relatives, chimpanzees, in the Kyambura Gorge; fluffy-cheeked, endangered golden monkeys that nibble on bamboo shoots in the Virunga Mountains; as well as elephants, Cape buffalo, lions, hippos and herds of the stately-horned national antelope, the Ugandan kob.

Adventures at the Source of the Nile

The source of the River Nile is in Uganda, as identified by John Hanning Speke in 1858. The town of Jinja — also known as the country's adrenaline capital — is the base from which to see it, as

well as for adventures on one of the world's most famous rivers. Plan a post-safari stay in Jinja, an ideal spot for resting calf muscles sore from gorilla trekking and for ignoring the alarm clock without fear of missing out on the lion posing perfectly in front of the rising equatorial sun.

The Nile's source is near the entrance to the continent's largest body of water, Lake Victoria. Sunset cruises pause where the underground spring water bubbles up to the surface, perhaps inspiring your next vacation to see where the water flows to in Egypt. Elsewhere on Jinja's Nile is whitewater rafting (in rapids graded up to class V), tubing, bungee jumping, as well as horseback riding along the river's banana-treed banks and through tiny Ugandan villages.

With its unmarred wildness, exotic animal life and engrossing safari adventures, Africa certainly gets into your blood. Which African destination tempts you most? 🌙



The elegant bandas of Rwanda's Virunga Lodge are perched high on a mountain ridge.
 Photo courtesy of Volcanoes Safaris.