

Africa!

Go beyond safaris when planning a once-in-a-lifetime incentive trip to Africa, rife with giveback opportunities as well as luxury experiences.

By Kate Parham Kordsmeier

GREGOR JOHN

Silence falls upon your group, utterly captivated as they first glimpse the world's largest curtain of falling water.

Victoria Falls is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and natural wonder of the world. The guide finally tears everyone away, leading the group to the mighty Zambezi River. As your team canoes past mammoth hippos and crocodiles lining the river, an island appears ahead. Everyone crawls out of the boats, heading into the jungle where safari chairs are arranged under a canopy of trees.

After an elegant high tea, a notable local explorer walks out of the bushes, setting the scene for an extraordinary meeting location. Post-session, a small herd of elephants strolls by as your guide explains the intriguing wildlife protection story of these mostly orphaned animals.

Next you're ushered back to the banks of the Zambezi, where a sumptuous lunch awaits. As you eat, a village school choir and Shangaan warrior dancers and drummers perform. The sun begins to dip, and as your guide leads you back to your safari lodge, a luxe vintage steam train trundles up. Onboard, waitstaff in crisp white uniforms serve flutes of Champagne from silver trays, and as the train rumbles to a stop on the middle of the Victoria Falls bridge—straddling the nations of Zambia and Zimbabwe—you happen upon the ultimate setting for an exclusive sunset cocktail reception.

Though this adventure sounds straight out of a storybook, this is what an incentive meeting can look like in Africa—Zimbabwe in particular, says Glen Byrom, expert MICE ground handler and key product owner of the locally based Twice DMC. Byrom is right on the money. Named one of the top 52 places to go in 2015 by The New York Times, Zimbabwe now has a government as stable as its land is beautiful—plus, it's affordable. With a new international terminal at Victoria Falls Airport; a new Lufthansa route between Nairobi, Kenya, and Frankfurt, Germany; dozens of hotels under construction; and a handful of new convention

venues in the works, there's never been a better time to visit Africa. Take it from Conde Nast Traveler, which awarded more than a dozen African properties spots on its 2016 Gold List for hotels, including lodges in Botswana, South Africa and Kenya.

It's no wonder the Global Entrepreneurship Summit brought more than 2,000 people from around the world to Nairobi in 2015. Also in 2015, Kenya hosted the World Trade Organization's Ministerial Conference for the second time—likely due to the fact that the group's 2013 General Assembly there resulted in its highest attendance ever. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development will also hold its 14th session in Nairobi in 2016, joining many international brands (like BMW, Coca-Cola, Land Rover and Prudential) that have already chosen Africa for incentive meetings and trips.

The only U.N. headquarters south of the equator is in Kenya (the others are in New York City, Vienna and Geneva), which has a convention center that can host up to 1,000 delegates. Likewise, Kenyatta International Conference Centre has several meeting rooms, the largest of which can host 4,000 delegates. Also available are translators who can simultaneously interpret up to seven languages.

LUXURY INCENTIVES

With high-end safari excursions, decked-out glamping tents, first-class resorts and opulent spas, Africa fits the bill for companies seeking extravagant incentive trips. How many other destinations can claim up-close-and-personal wildlife interaction, postcard-worthy outdoor adventures and sophisticated dining and lodging simultaneously?

Incentive planners will find premium safari lodges throughout Africa, including a luxury tented

camp owned by Sir Richard Branson called Mahali Mzuri, which has infinity pools, community tours and nighttime game drives. Victoria Falls Safari Lodge—the area's flagship property with 72 en suite bedrooms equipped with private decks—provides stunning views of the Dark Continent's landscape. Conference packages include morning tea and coffee with pastries, lunch, and afternoon tea and coffee with biscuits. Don't miss The Boma Restaurant, a delicious cultural experience that tantalizes the senses with tastes, sights, sounds and smells of Africa at dinnertime. Guests staying at the lodge enjoy a courtesy shuttle to and from the award-winning restaurant.

At the edge of the Zambezi River within sight of Victoria Falls and Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, The David Livingstone Safari Lodge and Spa is a 77-room resort overlooking another UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's also home to Victoria Falls Conference Centre. Post-safari, indulge guests in spa treatments like the traditional detoxifying Zambian Ukuchina massage, which uses ancient techniques and hot towels.

If unwinding on stunning beaches is more your group's speed, head to Zanzibar White Sands



Clockwise from top: Victoria Falls; a monkey in his natural habitat; waterfront dining at Royal Zambezi Lodge; luxury tents at Mahali Mzuri.

JACK BROCKWAY

Luxury Villas & Spa for expansive, beachfront one- and two-bedroom villas, private rooftop terraces and water sports like kite surfing and paddleboarding.

Foodies will find paradise at Villa Rosa Kempinski Nairobi, a high-end hotel where the utmost in luxury commingles with iconic architecture, a serene spa and world-class dining, plus state-of-the-art conference facilities for up to 500 people.

GIVEBACK OPPORTUNITIES

Luxury accommodations and activities are an important component of any trip to Africa, but they're equally an integral part of the country's economy. Tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments in Africa's economy, amounting to more than \$36 billion in 2012, according to a report by the World Bank. One of the first things many travelers and attendees will notice upon arrival in Africa is the gap between the rich and poor.

Fortunately, there are plenty of opportunities to support local communities during your visit, whether your company is interested in wildlife conservation, orphanages and hospice care, education or technology. Newbies can start small by simply packing differently. The nonprofit Pack for a Purpose encourages travelers to skip extra pairs of shoes and use the spare room in their suitcases to bring school supplies, camping equipment and other materials to aid those in need. Donations can be directed to organizations such as Campfire Association Zimbabwe, the



Destination management company Cansaf Creative Teaming connects corporate groups with giveback opportunities in local communities.

Disablement Association of Zimbabwe and the Lilayi Elephant Nursery.

Once on the ground, it can be helpful for your group to find a cause by taking a township tour, where guides take small groups to different communities to see what life is like for Africa's poorest people. Often these trips help visitors connect with the community and leave them inspired to give back.

"There are many children living in children's homes in Nairobi waiting for adoption," says David Karanja, managing director of Crane Consulting House, who helps organize trips to Kenya and Ghana. Karanja recommends donating resources and time to Thomas Barnardo's Children's Home or getting active to help young boys hone their soccer skills at Ubuntu Football Academy, which was founded by a pastor and soccer coach from Raleigh, North Carolina. The academy needs help running soccer clinics on Football Fridays in neighboring townships, or groups can come to the school and help with projects around the dorms.

Similarly, hundreds of schools in Africa are looking for volunteers to play with the children. Local DMCs can help you make connections.

For example, Cansaf Creative Teaming, a Victoria Falls DMC that also has offices in Harare, Zimbabwe, and Johannesburg, offers a CSR program that combines teambuilding, education and giveback. Groups can help run soccer matches in villages, refurbish schools or old homes, and partake in tutorial-style giveback events, such as tree identification or animal tracking and darting. "Combining activities and meal venues wherever possible, the concept is simply to expose our clients to the most unique, enriching, educational and experiential program possible," says Robin Brown, managing and operations director of Cansaf Creative Teaming.

Wildlife preservation is another way to give back. "It's no secret that our wildlife and habitats are under threat," says Brown. "The community in the [Victoria Falls] region depends solely on tourism, so organizations such as Victoria Falls Anti-Poaching Unit are [important]." Groups can take a three-hour anti-poaching patrol and snare sweep, learning skills in animal tracking and navigating the bush.

Many endangered species of elephants and rhinos are poached from East Asia, but you can

Ebola and Safety

Africa still has work to do to fix perceptions after news of an Ebola outbreak spread like wildfire over the past year. It's important to know that only four of Africa's 54 countries were affected, notes David Karanja of Crane Consulting House. "Today only two countries are currently affected by Ebola in West Africa, which is thousands of miles away from Kenya. In fact, Italy is closer to the affected countries than Kenya is," he says.

Ross Kennedy, CEO of Africa Albida Tourism (a group of luxurious hotels, lodges and restaurants in Africa's Victoria Falls region), is also reassuring the safety of groups coming to Africa. "Our government and authorities took all precautions recommended by the [World Health Organization], including health checks and border checks to make us a safe destination, and we did not have one recorded case of Ebola in Southern Africa."

In fact, the WHO declared the end of the Ebola outbreak in Liberia on Sept. 2, 2015, in Sierra Leone on Nov. 7 and in Guinea on Dec. 28, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention downgraded the travel notice for Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia to level 1, no longer advising against nonessential travel, and no longer recommending that all persons practice enhanced precautions when traveling to these countries.

Similarly, in mid-2015, Zambia was voted Africa's safest nation, adds Glen Byrom of Twice DMC in Africa. "Groups must always be vigilant of Ebola reports, and if they choose to visit West Africa, they should know about the specific countries they are visiting," says Karanja. As with any international planning, check with the U.S. Passports & International Travel office for any travel warnings and advisories before you go.

CANSAF CREATIVE TEAMING



AFRICAN INCENTIVE HOTELS

For truly unique incentives, consider the following:

Royal Zambezi Lodge

In Zambia, on the banks of the Zambezi River and bordering the famous Lower Zambezi National Park, 15 luxury suites can accommodate up to 30 people. A spacious veranda serves as a prime spot where large groups can dine and socialize against the scenic mountain backdrop of the Zambezi Valley escarpment.

Victoria Falls Safari Lodge

Two conference rooms, two breakout rooms and an open-air amphitheater round out this flagship lodge with 72 en suite bedrooms equipped with private decks boasting panoramic views of the African landscape. Conference packages include the room hire, morning tea and coffee with pastries, lunch for 30 guests, and afternoon tea and coffee with biscuits.



Kite surfing

Zanzibar White Sands Luxury Villas & Spa

With large one- and two-bedroom villas, informal group meetings are a breeze at this beachfront resort, where private rooftop terraces and exhilarating water sports (think kite surfing and paddleboarding) are the norm.

The David Livingstone Safari Lodge and Spa

This 77-room resort is located at the edge of the Zambezi River within sight of the spray of Victoria Falls and Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, another UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Labadi Beach Hotel

Groups seeking beachside expos and events should consider Ghana's premier resort, where tropical gardens and postcard-worthy beaches make for a unique backdrop to any meeting for up to 600 people.

Villa Rosa Kempinski Nairobi

Planners hunting the utmost in luxury can check attendees in to this Kenyan paradise, where iconic architecture, a luxurious spa and world-class dining collide alongside state-of-the-art conference facilities for up to 500 people.

help prevent this by teaming up with WildlifeDirect to donate financially and learn more about how poaching negatively impacts the ecosystem. There are also opportunities to adopt elephants through organizations like The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Or visit a local community and undertake an education and awareness project to help bring in clean water.

BEYOND SAFARI

Safaris are once-in-a-lifetime experiences on many bucket lists, but there are dozens of other ways to explore Africa outside of off-road Jeeps. Each country lays claim to its own set of thrills, but unparalleled outdoor adventure is the unifying theme.

In Kenya, daredevils can bungee jump, kite surf, ride in a hot air balloon or—for the expert climbers—summit Mount Kenya (the equator's only snowcapped mountain). The following morning, organize a breakfast meeting at The Safari Collection's Giraffe Manor and eat pancakes among giraffes at one of Nairobi's most iconic buildings. Foodies will want to check out the many all-you-can-eat meat buffets to sample game, says Karanja.

The region around Victoria Falls known as Zambezi or the KAZA region—which includes parts of Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and Botswana, as well as a section of Angola with the Chobe, Okavango and Zambezi river systems—is the only place in the world where four countries meet at one specific point. Reaching that point alone is an adventure.

Consider dinner in the bush in one of Africa's many wildlife parks, or canoe with a guide through waters rife with hippos. You'll find dozens of water explorations throughout the continent. Take a coach and boat transfer from the airport to your hotel and float down the river at sunset with Champagne and canapes in hand. Or tour the Victoria Falls Rainforest with a knowledgeable guide. For something a bit bolder, consider organizing a float down the Zambezi on an eight-person raft. Whitewater rafting and exhilarating jet boat rides through the gorge make for memorable group events as well, particularly if you opt to eat lunch on the gorge and take a helicopter flight back to town through the falls, as Brown suggests.

To make even more authentic memories, attend a street party with music and fanfare to learn about New Age African retro (a combination of dance, drumming, afro-jazz and other cultural activities, according to Brown), or tour a village to catch a glimpse of daily life and traditions. Karanja suggests catching a show put on by Kenya's Maasai community, a group known for its members' ability to jump incredibly high. Afterward, pay a visit to the Bomas of Kenya village and learn about the country's tribes for a truly immersive experience.

No matter how you choose to plan an Africa adventure for your meeting or incentive group, you're sure to leave with a story to rival "The Lion King." ■