



They say an elephant never forgets, nor will I ever forget the moment I first saw an African elephant in the wild. Among the bushveld in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi National Park in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa, I was at the mercy of this giant. Watching from a respectful distance, the interaction was entirely on his terms – he came closer when it suited him, made us wait while he uprooted tree sprouts to eat and then sauntered off into the distance when he'd had enough. As we observed we were always aware of the elephant's space and environment, as it should be with animal experiences in the wild.

My previous encounters with wildlife had not always been so respectful. Rewind 20 years where I found myself perched upon Asian elephants in Bali, or beside myself as I cuddled lion cubs in South Africa. At the time, I thought how lucky I was to interact like this with wildlife.

I now cringe at such activities and am very much ashamed of my choices. Back then, however, I didn't know any better; I was uneducated and unaware that those experiences were part of a dark side of tourism harming the very thing I went to enjoy.

I have since learnt that the opportunity to travel to far-flung places and experience worldly wonders comes with great responsibility. I educated myself on how to give back to the people, wildlife and places I encountered along the way, with my travel philosophy changing from 'feeling good' to 'doing good'.

When you travel ethically and sustainably, it can be an eye-opening and soul-enriching experience. There are few things as captivating as witnessing wild animals in their natural habitats. From watching a cheetah sprint across

## CALL OF *THE WILD*

To support conservation and experience the wild world at its best, start by recognising tourism organisations that endorse ethical travel, writes Kate Webster.

the savannah to diving next to giant manta rays, wildlife encounters are among the most rewarding aspects of travel. Unfortunately, achieving this isn't always that clear-cut.

Many of the iconic wildlife species that captivate us are also threatened by human activities. Animal and plant species around the world are facing extinction at up to 1,000 times the natural rate. As the number of travellers seeking more impactful travel experiences has risen, so too have the scams which take tourist dollars to exploit wildlife, thereby doing more harm than good.

Tourism activities such as safaris, birdwatching, snorkelling and nature photography depend on healthy plants and animals. As wildlife tourism becomes increasingly popular, it's vital to ensure it happens sustainably. Tourism can, and should, protect global biodiversity, safeguard habitats and prioritise animal welfare.

## So how do you identify ethical travel experiences?

### Tourism boards

Start by researching at the source, putting the country's tourism board under the spotlight. Do they have a focus on conservation and green travel? Is there a national rating system for experiences, accommodations and facilities throughout the country? A great example of this is Rwanda's tourism board, Visit Rwanda. Rwanda has quickly risen as a must-visit destination thanks to its commitment to conservation and responsible tourism. Each year the country celebrates Kwita Izina, the baby gorilla naming ceremony. The ceremony is an opportunity to thank the communities that live around Volcanoes National Park, as well as research partners, vets, dedicated conservationists, rangers and trackers who protect the gorillas.



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01 Rhinos in the wild  
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04, 05 Tracking and monitoring rhinos  
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### Tour operators

Booking your travel through a tour operator may offer convenience and peace of mind, but where are your tourism dollars spent? Look for a company that has sustainable practices that follow strict guidelines. For instance, Abercrombie & Kent Philanthropy (AKP) focuses on positively impacting lives and livelihoods in the communities where its guests travel, with a commitment to ensuring visitors learn about their philanthropic investments as part of their travel experience. From Africa to Asia, Latin America to the Antarctic, AKP work with partner communities on education, health care, conservation and enterprise development programs with 46 projects across 24 countries.

Conservation is just part of the Four Pillars of Abercrombie & Kent Philanthropy. They partner with communities living on the edge of wilderness and support strategies to balance endangered species, fragile ecosystems and economic opportunity. An example of this is the work to save the critically endangered rhino.

Due to growing global poaching, it's forecast that rhinos will be wiped out by the year 2036, with the critically endangered black rhino disappearing much sooner. The AKP Rhino Conservation Program has stepped in with translocation and protection initiatives to address this dire situation, taking a stand against poaching before it's too late.

Along with Sanctuary Retreats, AKP has strategically partnered with Rhino Conservation Botswana, the Botswana Defence Forces and other partners to translocate rhino, both black and white, from South Africa into Botswana. Here they are better protected from poachers, under 24/7 surveillance and have a greater chance for survival. Tailor-made journeys through Abercrombie & Kent can include the opportunity to learn more about the Rhino Conservation Program.

Dehorning rhino has become commonplace in South Africa, where it has been effective in decreasing the reward for poachers' efforts. It is a drastic measure but has become necessary due to such a severe poaching crisis, with the approach, 'no horn, no poaching'. Together with increased protection on the ground and

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06 Working to preserve rhinos  
© Kate Webster 07 Community support © AKP 08 Tourism love to wildlife © Nick Axelrod

air by counter-poaching teams, it is a means of deflecting the problem. Tourism injects much-needed funds into such conservation activities, and often travellers will be able to get hands-on to assist in operations.

### Individual organisations

There are numerous organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and non-profits sprouting authentic, ethical experiences that give back to conservation. Sadly, not all of these are legitimate. Before booking your conservation experience, do your research. While we often like to help smaller outfits, it may be prudent to stick with the larger, well-established organisations.

A good checkpoint is the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's largest global network of government and civil society organisations. With some 1,200 member organisations working across 160 countries, the list is quite comprehensive. Other noteworthy organisations include David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, Jane Goodall Foundation, World Wildlife Fund, Save the Elephants, International Rhino Foundation, Charles Darwin Foundation and World Animal Protection. ♦



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### Travel file

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