

By Stanley Stewart, Award-Winning Author and Travel Writer



INSIGHTS

Agents for change

By choosing innovative operators that support local communities and wildlife and exploring paths less trodden, luxury tourism can boost conservation while delivering unique travel experiences.

IN A PRISTINE valley in the Cardamom Mountains in Cambodia, arrival at the jungle lodge of Shinta Mani Wild is by zipline. They strap you in, push you off a platform, and you sail above a tumbling river, past glamorous birds fluttering through the canopy, over a cascading waterfall and finally, all being well, straight into the arms of the barman waiting to catch you on the lobby platform where he has already prepared a welcome cocktail. As dramatic arrivals go, it's up there with sailing into Sydney Harbour or abseiling onto a beach in Rio from Corcovado.

In the midst of the largest remaining tropical rainforest in Southeast Asia, Shinta Mani Wild could be described as pith helmet chic. That open lobby is all deep leather armchairs and steamer trunks, while the tented villas, down a boardwalk that meanders through the rainforest, have campaign desks, plush sofas, double copper sinks, wardrobes the size of the Northern Territory, and an outside bathtub. Should you need someone to scrub your back, you can summon a discreet butler on an old-fashioned Bakelite telephone.

Like other Southeast Asian properties designed by Bill Bensley, Shinta Mani Wild is elegant, theatrical and fun. But this remote lodge serves a more serious purpose than providing you with a soothing bath-time. Early one morning I set off with the Wildlife Alliance rangers, funded by the camp, who patrol

the forests looking for poachers and illegal logging. The real aim of this lodge is to save the vulnerable wildlife corridor in which it sits. In these regions, governments are often too poor, too distracted or too corrupt to offer serious protection to habitats such as these. The lodge protects these jungles and their myriad species. This is what tourism can do.

Once upon a time, deep in the dark days of the pandemic, when we sat gazing out the window at empty streets, we dreamt of a different travel future. Of course, I know our dreams were chiefly focused on a future where we could touch our faces again or wash our hands without singing "Happy Birthday". But when we did allow ourselves to think about travel during Covid, we had the idea that it would be different, like so much else, post-pandemic. Locked in our own homes, our own neighbourhoods, our own countries, we came over all virtuous and imagined how, once freed, we would become more careful about where and how we spent our travel dollars. Slow travel would be the thing. Travel less often, but stay longer. Consider the impact we were having. Make a contribution to the places we were visiting.

It's a pity that, for many people, it needed a pandemic to stir such thoughts. And a pity, too, that so many of these noble aspirations faded as the planes started flying again. But these ideas are not confined to a post-pandemic age. For decades now, many tour and lodge operators, concerned about sustainability, have seen tourism as a key tool in conservation and development. And it's an idea that is increasingly pushing its way to the front of travel trends. Conscientious travellers

now have the opportunity to make their travel plans count, to make a positive contribution to destinations they visit. If your third-world lodge or resort is not actively engaged with social and environmental concerns in its local communities, then you are staying in the wrong places.

For too long, travel and tourism have got a bad rap. There are legitimate concerns about carbon emissions and the way mass tourism can spoil some of the world's more fragile destinations. But there is another side to this coin, another narrative that needs to be told. The latest figures reveal aviation accounts for about 2.5 per cent of our global carbon dioxide emissions; tourism, as opposed to trade and business, accounts for only a part of those emissions. We can't pretend this is negligible. We should fly less often, and stay longer. But it is important to weigh the cost of emissions, which at any rate will decline over the next decades with new greener technologies, against the often unseen cost of not travelling at all. In Africa, the pandemic revealed the contribution that travel

makes to the continent's people and wildlife. It's estimated that vulnerable African economies lost around \$105 billion in revenue and 20 million jobs without its usual supply of eager travellers. And without the presence of rangers and guides, without the tourist dollars that support anti-poaching units, game reserves across the continent saw an increase in poaching and overgrazing.

Perhaps it's time as well to think more imaginatively about where we go, to try to choose paths less trodden. Peru's Machu Picchu may be an extraordinary site. But trust me, it's packed, and the noisy selfie stick-wielding crowds on its terraces make any contemplation of the mysteries of the Inca Empire a little challenging. Far better to head for the wonderful treks organised by the Mountain Lodges of Peru that take you to remote reaches of the Andes where you can be alone with mountain summits among haunting Inca ruins without having to navigate group selfies. And where, in the evenings, you will have the chance to meet the Inca's descendants, the local villagers, in the happy knowledge that part of the income from your stay in their stylish lodges will go to local health and educational facilities. This is the global trend in luxury travel, by its nature low impact and high value. It seeks unique experiences away from the maddening crowds and wishes to make a contribution to remote and vulnerable regions. It helps to conserve environments, protect wildlife, provide employment and give value to local traditions.

In Sumba in Indonesia, luxury lodges like Nihi Sumba and Cap Karoso, with their philanthropic pursuits, provide a welcome alternative to busy Bali. In East Africa, escape the clustered safari jeeps in the Serengeti for lodges like Borana in Kenya or Tafika

"The noisy selfie stick-wielding crowds on Machu Picchu's terraces make any contemplation of the mysteries of the Inca Empire a little challenging."



WILD AT HEART
Shinta Mani Wild in Cambodia's Cardamom Mountains is theatrical and fun, but it also has a serious purpose.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELISE HASSEY

Camp in Zambia's South Luangwa, which are dedicated to empowering local tribespeople. In Odzala-Kokoua National Park, in the Congo Basin, the world's second largest rainforest after the Amazon, I tracked lowland gorillas from the small luxury lodges of the Congo Conservation Company, who act as the protectors of this remote and rarely visited park as well as playing host here to a team of researchers whose studies are central to the survival of the gorillas. Meanwhile, in the Southern Ocean last year, I discussed the environmental challenges facing Antarctica aboard the small luxury cruise ship *Le Commandant Charcot*, which provides wet and dry labs for polar scientists on every trip.

I recently returned from Brazil, the poster child for habitat loss. I visited three wildlife lodges that are central to the protection of three different Brazilian habitats. On the Cristalino River in Amazonia, I drifted downstream among the reflections of clouds and trees, watching the families of endangered white-cheeked spider monkeys scampering along riverside branches as they peered at me through the leaves. Cristalino is a private reserve protecting a large swathe of southern Amazonia. Its funding is from a small private luxury lodge of a dozen cabins.

Further south, in the Cerrado, the grasslands that are Brazil's dry heart, I tracked the illusive maned wolf, finally spotting the region's alpha female, elegantly long-legged, trotting along a back-country road. In this remote place, Pousada Trijunção – all hammocks and divine Caipirinhas, rustic lodge furnishings and a swimming pool where swallows dive – offers guests a chance to savour a rare habitat with diverse bird species while offering a base to Onçafari, a conservation and rewilding organisation founded by former Formula One driver Mario Haberfeld.

South again, in the wetlands of the Pantanal, I followed giant anteaters swaying through the long grass like Victorians in elaborate ball gowns before watching a jaguar mother and two cubs ghosting through the long grass. Onçafari works here as well, taking guests out on safari, tracking and rewilding jaguars and assisting a program to protect the endangered hyacinth macaw. Here, too, eco-tourism is a central component of a wide program to protect and rewind these vulnerable habitats.

It's not necessary to carve up half a mountain in Italy to source marble for a luxury bathroom in Brazil, one of the lodge managers said to me. Real luxury has more imaginative faces. At its core it's about the quality and uniqueness of the experience, but these lodges and camps would make it into style features on their sheer good looks. They are all sophisticated design-led projects, using local materials – wood, thatch, stone, textiles – while leaning into a charming vernacular aesthetic. They're about high-end spas, secluded swimming pools, fine bedlinen, superb menus exploiting the possibilities of local ingredients and bright young guides bringing the stories of these habitats and their animals to life. Eco-tourism no longer means anoraks and hiking boots. At Shinta Mani Wild, you don't even need to do the zipline if you don't want to. For the more faint-hearted, there is road access in retro 1950s jeeps. Though, frankly, you will be missing half the fun. ▀