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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

Secret Safaris: Little-Known National Parks in Africa

Some of Africa's most exciting new destinations are in the wildest corners thanks to an ambitious conservation non-profit. Here's why you should add Rwanda, Zambia and even Chad to your travel bucket list

Zakouma National Park in Chad, one of the 15 parks and reserves currently managed by African Parks. AFRICAN PARKS/MARCUS WESTBERG

By Nina Sovich

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MOST PEOPLE ON their first great African safari tend to flock to South Africa, Kenya and increasingly Botswana. Chad and the Central African Republic aren't usually the first stop, or even the fourth. But African Parks, a Johannesburg-based nonprofit, is endeavoring to attract more daring wildlife lovers to lesser-known pockets of the continent.

Founded in 2000, the NGO has been tasked by nine African countries to take over existing national parks and protected areas that have been ravaged by poaching and deforestation. The group, which currently manages 15 parks, has brought back to life roughly 40,000 square miles of land in places as varied as Benin, Chad, Congo, Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia. African Parks staff and partners fly in animals from other parts of Africa to repopulate species, cordon off areas so grasses can grow back and train locals in military tactics to deal with poachers. In an effort to make the parks self-sustaining, African Parks CEO Peter Fearnhead says the group takes a business approach to conservation. It builds lodges and campsites and invites high-end operators like Wilderness Safaris and Robin Pope Safaris to create their own facilities. It even has the Windsor House stamp of approval—Britain's Prince Harry has served as African Parks president since 2017.

The Next Safari Spots

A few of the national parks and reserves—from Malawi to Chad—in the Africa Parks portfolio



Tinga Camp at Chad's Zakouma National Park, south of the Sahara desert. AFRICAN PARKS/KYLE DE NOBREGA

Michael Lorentz, founder of Passage to Africa, takes tourists to Zakouma National Park in Chad, one of the parks in the African Parks portfolio. He has worked with the organization since 2011 and says the NGO's top-to-tail approach has changed the conservation game. "So much of Africa is going the wrong way in terms of conservation," said Mr. Lorentz. "But African Parks has created some good stories."

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African Parks demands complete control over the park, from staff and ranger training to how the money generated is used—it must be reinvested back into the park. Mr. Fearnhead said the cause of protecting animals and protecting people are closely intertwined. He noted that in Zakouma, Janjaweed militia would raid the park for ivory, upending crops with their horses and preying on village women. The park lost all but 400 elephants who were chronically miscarrying due to stress. The African Parks ranger force beat back the raiders and both the park and villagers

live in a more secure environment, said Mr. Fearnhead. The elephant population has since risen to 600. Tourists are coming to the park, though their numbers remain small.

Some places are harder to resuscitate. The Central African Republic has struggled for years under a civil war. But African Parks is laying the groundwork to open the Chinko Nature Reserve—one of the few places in Africa where savannah and jungle animal share the landscape—to tourism. Mr. Fearnhead said the commercial future of the reserve lies in extreme fishing. In the Chinko River, avid sportsman can battle the goliath tigerfish, a vicious freshwater fish that can grow to 5 feet in length and have been known to attack humans. For those with a taste for adventure, but perhaps not that much adventure, here are three other rehabilitated parks that welcome visitors.



Camp Nomade at Zakouma National Park. PHOTO: AFRICAN PARKS/KYLE DE NOBREGA

Chad

Zakouma National Park

Unchecked poaching and a rebel insurgency between 2005 and 2010 reduced the park's elephant population by 90%. Now the park has about 600 elephants and 50% of the existing Kordofan giraffe population (some 1,000 animals). Last year six black rhinos from South Africa were reintroduced. Zakouma, once an animal desert, is now known for its abundance. Visitors can stay at Camp Nomade, an upscale tented camp that operators set up in various places within the reserve depending on the time of year. Passage to Africa runs seven-day excursions (passagetoafrica.com).



Akagera National Park in Rwanda. PHOTO: AFRICAN PARKS/SCOTT RAMSAY

Rwanda

Akagera National Park

The 433-square-mile park sits in eastern Rwanda abutting the plains of Tanzania. After years of neglect and rampant poaching, the park was short of wildlife. In 2010, African Parks took over the management. In 2015, the park reintroduced lions and in 2017, the rare East black rhinoceros. Now the park hosts the big five, a sign of its ecological health. Ruzizi Tented Lodge offers nine tents with en-suite bathrooms (*from \$195 per person per night, africanparks.org*). In late spring, luxury outfit Wilderness Safaris will open its Magashi camp (*from \$470 a night, wilderness-safaris.com*).

Zambia

Bangweulu Wetlands



A shoebill stork in Zambia's Bangweulu Wetlands. PHOTO: AFRICAN PARKS/MANA MEADOWS

One of Africa's greatest wetlands, Bangweulu offers a welcome alternative to the typical grassland safari. Overfishing and deforestation severely threatened the fish and bird population. When African Parks took over in 2008, they scaled back fishing and introduced a three-month ban to get stocks back to healthy levels. The shoebill stork population—the impressively leggy birds can stand 4 feet high—continues to expand, with 10 nests protected by community guards. The nicest accommodations, Shoebill Island Camp, opened last year with four comfortably furnished tents overlooking the vast plains and waterways (*from \$650 per person per night, africanparks.org*). Steppes Travel also organizes custom trips to Bangweulu (steppestravel.com).