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Mara Naboisho Conservancy in Kenya is a haven for big cats, including cheetahs. Conservancies are now where some of the best safari experiences can be found. Previous pages: One of the last refuges for mountain gorillas is Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, where nearby Singita Kwitonda Lodge is helping to protect the endangered animals through habitat restoration.

SAFARIS IN AFRICA, for most of the 20th century, often meant stalking big game with a rifle. Then a new generation of camera-toting adventurers showed up. It was the 1970s, and Kenya was among the few countries that travelers could easily visit on a continent still reeling from the era of colonialism. Zebra-striped mini vans were the popular “bush” vehicle and the only guides were men.

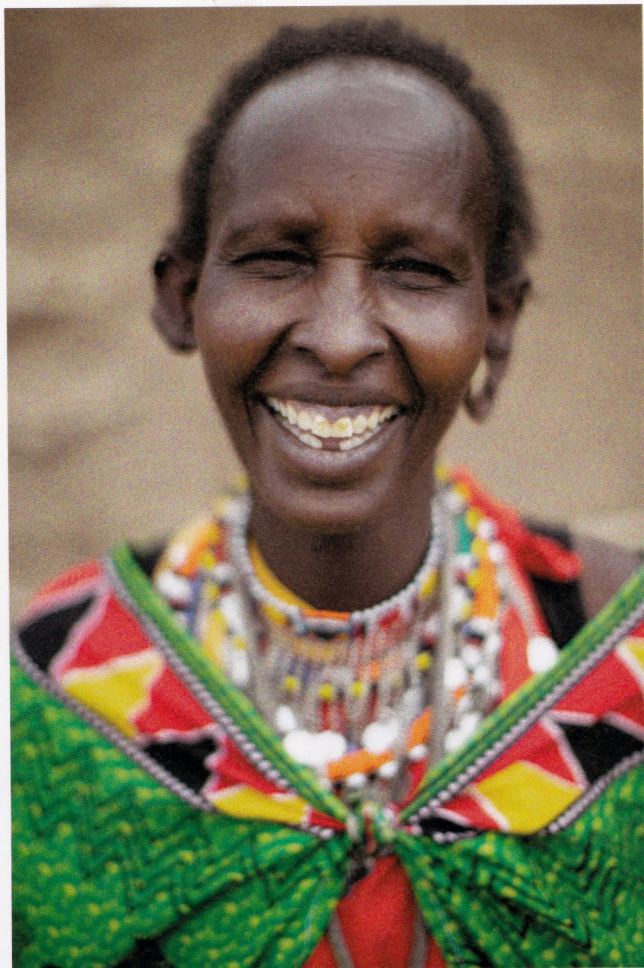
Not anymore. From emerging wildlife havens to women-led expeditions, the future of Africa safaris has arrived. “Community conservancies like Naboisho in Kenya were an important turning point,” says Judy Kepher-Gona, one of Africa’s top ecotourism experts. “Local villagers went from mostly being porters and cooks to becoming partners and leaders in protecting wildlife.” The results are impressive—conservancies in Kenya now encompass more than 15 million acres and protect some of the world’s rarest species, including the black rhino.

As governments have struggled to effectively manage their national parks, private organizations have also stepped in to help, including African Parks, a nonprofit group founded with the sole purpose of saving Africa’s parks and their wildlife by focusing on economic development and poverty alleviation. Success stories include Zakouma National Park, in Chad, which went from the edge of collapse to becoming a jewel in the crown of wildlife encounters today. “We are in a game-changing moment of innovation where local people and travelers alike are benefiting from a new safari vision,” says Keith Vincent, CEO of Wilderness Safaris, one of the continent’s most celebrated outfitters.

Going on safari may once have been about hunting. The safaris of today are about conservation—a good thing for local communities and the planet.

ANNE FARRAR/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC (CHEETAH); PREVIOUS PAGES: CHRIS WHITTIER (GORILLAS)





TREND 1
WE TOO

From Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female president, to Kenyan conservation crusader Wangari Maathai, Africa has had no shortage of dynamic women leaders. And now a new generation of African women are making it known that they have what it takes to challenge gender norms in the safari industry. "It was typical of men to insist that we did not possess the skills to be good guides," says Tshepiso Vivian Diphupu, the head of Africa's first all-female guide team at Botswana's Chobe Game Lodge. "But in my experience, women are well suited to this work. We tend to be better communicators, are more sensitive to guests' interests, and are confident and always willing to learn more." Dubbed "Chobe's Angels" by some, Diphupu and her colleagues, now 19 strong, are among the first—but not the only—women to break into what was once solely a fraternity.

"My goal as a guide is to make every safari unique, educational, and fun," says Maggie Duncan Simbeye, founder of Maggie's Tour Company, one of the few safari companies owned by an African woman. "I have always loved nature, and my knowledge of plants and animals runs deep." Working as a safari guide in Tanzania inspired Simbeye to establish the Dare Women's Foundation, a local NGO working to empower women and girls to pursue their professional ambitions.

Both Noolamala Taek (above left) and Nareyio Koshal (opposite) are members of Kenya's Basecamp Maasai Brand, an economic initiative that aims to empower Maasai women. Members earn enough money selling traditional beadwork online and to guests at Basecamp lodges to send their children to school, build homes, and purchase livestock.

Pursuing a passion for learning about wildlife and ecosystems, Lorna Serseri (above right) made a decision to go to guide school. She is now a full-time safari guide and wants to encourage more girls to enter this field. By being a guide, she says, "I really feel empowered."

Male elephants on the Naboisho Conservancy spar with their sharp ivory tusks, which also prove alluring to poachers. One of the conservancy's goals is the eradication of poaching and illegal possession of wildlife products.

