



MY BELOVED AFRICA

It has given me some of the happiest and most exciting times of my life.

In return, I've loved it with all my heart and soul

by David Skillan

I first set foot on the African continent in Morocco, in November of 1962. I was immediately smitten with the exotic sights, sounds, smells, and smiling people. But it wasn't until some weeks later, when I went on safari in Kenya and was struck by the abundance of diverse wildlife, that my love affair with Africa really began.

As a youngster, my natural curiosity and vivid imagination had been fueled by tales of Stanley and Livingstone, Burton, Speke, and other early white explorers who'd blazed trails and opened up this amazing continent to European eyes. It was a place that held great promise and adventure for me.

And it has never disappointed me. Africa has had a profound effect on my life, and from what I gather, it makes a similar impression on many people. If you've been there, you know what I mean. Africa is good for the soul!

"Africa grabs a piece of your heart and never quite lets go."

~Robert Ruark, author of Uhuru, Poor No More, and Something of Value

"On safari . . . each breath you draw gives pleasure. You wake each day with a new sense of wonder."

~Elspeth Huxley, author of The Mottled Lizard and The Flame Trees of Thika

"Once you fall in love with Africa, it haunts you till the day you die."

~Beryl Markham, author of West With the Night

I've lived and worked in Africa. I've built homes for refugees in Algeria and Ethiopia. I've trained convoy drivers in South Africa. I've run safari camps in Kenya and Tanzania. I've travelled across the continent from east to west, from north to south, exploring by jeep, bus, truck, train, light aircraft, steamer, launch, and dugout canoe. I've travelled the hard way, eating banana sandwiches and dust thrown up from so-called highways and camping out in sleeping bags under the stars, and I've travelled the easy way, staying in beautifully appointed game lodges, enjoying gourmet food, and riding in comfortable four-wheel-drive safari vehicles.

Africa has been good to me. It has given me some of the happiest and most exciting times of my life. In return, I've loved it with all my heart and soul. Over the years, I've promoted and defended it as much as one person can. I've written about it lovingly and at length in my travel articles and newsletters, publicized it through videos, public slide shows, and radio commercials, and taken hundreds of people there on tours and safaris. It's been gratifying to know I've increased so many people's awareness of this incredibly diverse, wonderful part of the world, making many of them unofficial goodwill ambassadors for the continent.

I've encouraged a number of people to foster African children, as I do. Many of my tour members have gone back to Africa to volunteer their time and expertise—an altruistic spinoff of tourism known as voluntourism—to help with wildlife research and charitable projects such as eye and dental clinics and the building of villages and schools. Many of my clients have been involved in fundraising for various African causes, and some have helped send entire containers of clothing and furniture there.

But it hasn't all been good news. Since my first visit, Africa has experienced wars, riots, revolutions, droughts, famines, floods, and the decimation of entire species. In the early 1960s, Kenya had roughly 10,000 black rhino. Today it has fewer than 400. And the lion population of the entire continent, which stood at approximately 70,000 in 1980, is less than 40,000 today. That's why I tell people to go now, before some species disappear forever.

And, sadly, I've lost four driver-guides over the years. One died of malaria, another of a heart attack. Yet another was murdered in a shocking case of mistaken identity, and the last, who had everything to live for—including a baby he never got to see—died when his vehicle rolled over. At least he wasn't carrying passengers at the time.

Africa . . . is the feeling of dew on the grass in the early morning, the shape and colour and smell of the country, and the feeling that time has ceased to matter.

~Ernest Hemingway, author of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and The Green Hills of Africa

A Feast for the Senses

Africa is seductive and addictive. The more you see of it, the more you want to see. Be prepared to be captivated by extraordinary bird and wildlife, including all of Africa's Big Five—elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo, and rhino. Expect to be greeted by mind-boggling scenery and an agreeable climate. And don't believe all the negative reports you may hear about African countries—they boast the friendliest, most cheerful people I've ever met. Africans are the same as everyone else, intent on making decent, happy lives for themselves and their families.

Maasai Mara, Ngorongoro, Serengeti, Kilimanjaro, Zanzibar, Mpumalanga . . . these are just a few of the African names that conjure visions of high adventure in exotic settings. You'll come away from these places with their names rolling easily off your tongue and unforgettable memories in your heart. There can be few more endearing and amusing spectacles than a baby elephant splashing around in a river or waterhole, for example, then slipping and sliding in the mud as it tries to get out.

When travelling in Africa, you're constantly stimulated. Your journey can be exhilarating beyond belief. You'll have close encounters or eye-to-eye contact with wild animals that leave you shaking with emotion or drunk with excitement. At times you can feel the tension in the air as you wait for the next drama to unfold. At other times, you'll experience moments of silence and solitude, allowing you to contemplate your own place in the world.

Over and above the Big Five—so called because white hunters once considered them the most dangerous of the big game—you'll see many animals, large and small, including some you've never heard of before. Vervet monkeys, banded mongooses, olive baboons, chameleons, spring hares, dik-diks, rock hyraxes, spotted hyenas, Thomson's gazelles, bushbucks, giraffes, cheetahs, zebras, and hippopotamuses are just a few. Birdlife abounds, too, ranging from crested cranes, kori bustards, Fischer's lovebirds, and superb starlings (yes, that's what they're called) to flamingos, African hoopoes, and a huge variety of weavers, storks, hornbills, sunbirds, lilac-breasted rollers (my favourite birds), and birds of prey. Wherever you go, you can hear the plaintive cry of the African fish eagle echoing across rivers, streams, and lakes. It's a haunting and romantic sound.



Similarities and Differences

As someone who has been closely associated with the so-called Dark Continent for many years, I'm often asked about the differences between the countries I visit. What makes each one special?

All of my safari destinations feature magnificent animal and birdlife, friendly people, and some of the world's most spectacular scenery. Despite constantly declining numbers due to hunting, poaching, and loss of habitat, all still boast great numbers of animal and bird species. A safari in any of these countries is exciting and rewarding. The standards of food, service, and accommodation—hotels, game lodges, and tented camps—are high, and often superior to what you get in many developed countries. Take my word for it.



Beyond that, however, each country is different, much like the various countries in Europe are different.

Kenya

One of the two most famous safari destinations in Africa (the other is Tanzania), Kenya gave the Swahili word *safari* (“journey”) to the English language. It was the first country to introduce big game safaris, back in the 1920s. Today's safari adventurers, of course, shoot mostly with cameras.

For maximum wildlife viewing and sheer multitudes of animals—including the annual Great Migration of wildebeest and zebra, considered by some to be among the wonders of the natural world—Kenya is unsurpassed. You're virtually guaranteed to see all of the Big Five when you visit.

Kenya was also the first African country to protect its incredible natural heritage by creating national parks and game reserves. Here you'll find a huge selection of beautiful, well-established game lodges and safari camps with all the modern conveniences.

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Tanzania

Tanzania is the other world-famous safari destination, sharing breathtaking scenery and the annual Great Migration with Kenya. Its game lodges and safari camps also offer luxury and adventure in unsurpassed natural settings. As in Kenya, you're sure to see all of the Big Five when you come here.

Tanzania's landscape features mountains, plains, beaches, national parks, and game reserves. Like Kenya, it's been a popular destination for Europeans and North Americans for many years. A safari incorporating both countries is a fabulous road trip, unlike any other. Look to Kenya for more rolling hills, and to Tanzania for flat plains, including the famous Serengeti.

Olduvai Gorge, "the Cradle of Humankind," where Mary and Louis Leakey unearthed the first conclusive evidence that humans evolved in Africa, is in Tanzania. So is the world's only source of the gemstone tanzanite, which is mined near the town of Arusha.



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Botswana

You may not see as much wildlife in Botswana as in some places, but you'll see a lot. All of the Big Five are here, and you may see a pack of wild dogs and as many as three or four leopards over a period of seven to ten days.

Botswana is home to the magnificent Okavango Delta—the world's largest inland delta. Instead of draining into the sea, the Okavango River simply empties into a depression in the Kalahari Desert, forming a swamp. Most of the water evaporates. The Okavango Delta is where you'll find the nationally protected Moremi Game Reserve.

Botswana's safari camps are more intimate than those of other African countries, and among the loveliest. In Botswana, unlike other places, you get to fly from camp to camp, rather than travelling by road. A Botswana safari offers an incomparable combination of air, boat, and open-vehicle excursions, enabling you to view wildlife from air, water, and land.



Zambia

This is a totally unspoiled, up-and-coming safari destination that's not so well known, but worth visiting—before huge numbers of tourists discover it!

Zambia has gorgeous lodges and camps, masses of wildlife, and wonderful game parks. You'll see a great variety of birdlife, and almost every African animal you can imagine.

Well known for its walking safaris, Zambia also shares Victoria Falls with Zimbabwe. The largest in the world, this waterfall in the Zambezi River is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and considered by some to be among the [Seven Wonders of the Natural World](#).



Zimbabwe

Although it's another wonderful safari country, Zimbabwe, formerly southern Rhodesia, has for many years been spoiled by the horrific policies of dictator Robert Mugabe. When Mugabe is gone—as he undoubtedly will be, sooner or later—the country will again be open and safe, and tourists will flock there. I can't wait until that happens, and I can go back. I'll be on the first plane!

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Uganda

Uganda is famous for its chimps and gorillas, which you see in few other safari countries. It also boasts more birdlife than anywhere else in Africa—more than 1,000 resident and migratory species, including the relatively rare shoebill stork. And there's lots of game, including the Big Five. Uganda is another great road trip.

Accommodation consists of game lodges and tented camps that range from rustic to luxurious. Lush, green mountain scenery, gracious people, and thrilling boat trips are just some of the attractions in this fascinating East African country.

Though not so well known as Victoria Falls, Uganda's Murchison Falls (sometimes called the Kabarega Falls) are worth a visit. Here the Nile River squeezes through a seven-metre gap in the rock to hurl 300 cubic metres of water per second over a 43-metre cliff. It's a sight you'll never forget.



Namibia

The Republic of Namibia, formerly known as German South-West Africa and then South-West Africa, is the second most sparsely populated country in the world (after Mongolia), and the seat of a stable parliamentary democracy.

Namibia offers some of the most remarkable scenery in all of Africa. It seems to stretch on forever. Here you'll find endless coastlines teeming with sea mammals and fishing grounds. There was a time when you could pick up diamonds from the beaches, though that's now illegal. Namibia also contains the formidable Namib and Kalahari deserts, which contain the world's highest sand dunes. The Bushmen, Damara, and Namaqua have made their homes here for thousands of years, joined in the fourteenth century by the Bantu.



Namibia's lodges and camps are comfortable indeed. While the land isn't as game-rich as some African countries, it does sustain species that are unique to this area, including the comical meerkat and the desert elephant.

If you've seen much of Africa, you must visit Namibia sooner rather than later. The unequalled solitude and scenery will leave you breathless. Add German orderliness to the equation, and you have a must-see destination.

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While the other countries I visit are primarily wildlife-tour destinations, South Africa offers those and just about everything else, including world-class cities.

It's an astonishingly beautiful country. From Cape Town, Durban, and Pretoria to ostrich farms, cheetah and rhino sanctuaries, beaches, game parks, and sumptuous hotels and lodges, South Africa has something to suit even the most sophisticated (or the most jaded) of travellers. The food and service are superb, and the roads are the best in all of Africa. You can wander through botanical gardens, for example, marvel at the Cape Dutch architecture, shop for gold and diamonds, and take an excursion to Robben Island to see Nelson Mandela's lonely jail cell.

If your main interest is wildlife, this isn't the country for you. If you crave variety, however, you'll love South Africa. There's an enormous amount to see and do here. It's a fabulous tourist destination in every way, and one of my favourite places to visit.



Making a Choice

You can see pictures of some of these marvelous countries on my [slide show page](#).

To learn more about them, please read some of my articles:

- [“On Safari in East Africa”](#)
- [“Botswana—The ‘In’ Place for Safaris”](#)
- [“Uganda—The Pearl of Africa”](#)
- [“A Visit to Cape Town”](#)

And don’t forget to visit my [tour pages](#) for information about my various tours. You can request colour brochures and detailed itineraries about the specific places we visit on each trip.

I hope this information helps you decide which of the safari countries you’d most like to visit. No matter which ones you choose, you’ll have the time of your life and come home refreshed and rejuvenated, with plenty of tales to excite your friends and tell your grandkids. Whether you go on safari independently or with me, you’ll understand why I’m so passionate about the African continent.

Go well, as they say in South Africa, and *safari njema*, which means “travel safely” in Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa. ➔



David Skillan, seen here in the fabled Serengeti, has lived, worked, and travelled throughout Africa. He has led more than 100 tours there from Canada.