



**Silent safari:**  
The solar-powered game-viewing boat used by Ila Safari Lodge in Kafue NP

GREEN SAFARIS

## A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Most new camps and lodges are generally constructed with a lower carbon footprint in mind, while older properties are adapting to lower their environmental impact. To see what goes into a sustainable camp, we look at a pioneering example, Green Safaris' Ila Safari Lodge in Kafue, Zambia. Perhaps your choice of accommodation has adopted some of the same principles?

### 1 CONSTRUCTION

The guiding principle is: if the lodge was to be removed, could it do so without leaving a trace? When building Ila, Green Safaris removed and replanted any vegetation on the site. It minimised the use of concrete and steel, using the ancient art of sandbagging — filling bags with sand from the direct vicinity — to build the walls, which avoided transporting truckloads of materials from Lusaka. The sandbags also regulate the temperature, reducing the need for air conditioning and heating.

### 2 WATER AND WASTE MANAGEMENT

To remove the need for plastic bottles, most lodges, including Ila, employ a water-filtration system; while recycling is another important aspect. Further, to avoid polluting the Kafue River, it channels any sewage, along with food waste, into a biogas unit — enabling it to produce its own gas.

### 3 POWER

Green energy means ditching generators in favour of eco-friendly alternatives. Ila invested in a solar-power plant that provides over 90 per cent of its power, including being able to charge its electric safari vehicles and boat.

### 4 FOOD SOURCING

Being able to grow your own produce and source ingredients locally is paramount. Ila set up a nursery on site to grow vegetables and herbs and has developed an organic farm just outside the park.

### 5 CONSERVATION

Giving back to local communities and the environment is another cornerstone of the green ethos. Ila supports predator research and anti-poaching, helps build schools and educates kids on the importance of conservation. This year, it plans a large-scale reforestation project to negate its remaining carbon footprint.

## FINDING A RELIABLE OPERATOR

SafariBookings.com is the world's largest online marketplace for African safaris, and conducts extensive research to verify the operators it partners with. We asked co-founder Wouter Vergeer to offer his advice to help you to find an operator who is trustworthy and professional.

There is no more important decision to make when going on safari than choosing a tour operator. That company will have its hand on every experience you have, from the initial communications to the quality of your guides, and accommodation in Africa. A good operator will ensure your safari is the trip of a lifetime. A bad one — of which, thankfully, there are few — will leave you wanting more, or worse. The problem is that when you set about planning your safari, it can be difficult to tell the difference. There are, however, a number of things you can do to increase your chances of finding the right operator for you.

### PLAN WELL IN ADVANCE

Never leave your planning until the last minute. Safaris often involve relatively short and concentrated high seasons and, in some regions, the best accommodation can be booked out up to a year in advance. But planning early is also about making sure you have time to conduct the research that is necessary when choosing an operator.

### CHECK THEIR REVIEWS

Google the tour operator to see if there are websites, such as SafariBookings or TripAdvisor, that have reviews about them. A reliable operator will have a good number of positive reviews that cover a significant duration. Invest time reading them: it is the best way to get an idea about how the company is run and deals with clients. A bad review shouldn't disqualify an operator — as long as the majority are positive, cover a period of time, and are written by travellers from different countries.

### TRADE ASSOCIATIONS

Does the tour operator claim to be a member of a trade association in the country in which they are based? If so, check the member directory on the association website to confirm if it is indeed listed.

### HOW WELL DO THEY PRESENT THEMSELVES?

The face that any prospective tour operator presents to you is another crucial test. Does its website make a professional impression? Smaller tour operators may not always have the resources necessary to compete with larger companies when it comes to tech capabilities, but it's less about slick presentation than the overall feel that the website gives you. If you're looking at an inspiring, clearly presented and comprehensive safari website, chances are it's probably the work of a professional tour operator.

### HOW WELL DO THEY COMMUNICATE?

If you're interested enough to make an enquiry, see how well they communicate with you. This begins when you request a quote, and runs right through until the time when you make the booking. How well they correspond and deal with you is usually a good indication of the company's professionalism.

### IS THEIR OFFER CLEAR AND TRANSPARENT?

When you make contact, have ready a list of questions. These can be anything, from what's included as part of their standard safari, to group sizes, to questions about accommodation or payment. The questions themselves are often less important than the company's willingness to answer them. If an operator is at all evasive, or if they suggest the details can be worked out later, this can be a worrying sign. A patient, detailed response from the operator, and an openness to further questions, are, on the other hand, very promising.

### GIVE THEM A CALL

Aside from email, give them a call at some point during the sales process (use Skype, WhatsApp or another service to save call costs if possible). A professional operator will answer calls at any time during office hours. Be mindful, of course, that if there is a time difference, you should call during office hours in the country the operator is based in.

### THE CHEAPEST OPTION ISN'T ALWAYS THE BEST OPTION

The price you are quoted can be an indicator of many things: whether you're on a private or group safari; the season in which you're travelling; or the degree of comfort for your accommodation. You may not understand the precise reasons behind many price variations, except to say this: if the price for a safari seems too good to be true, it usually is. Don't always go for the cheapest option, but find the right balance between price and how trustworthy a tour operator appears to be.

### AFRICAN OPERATOR OR TRAVEL AGENT IN YOUR HOME COUNTRY?

A final question: is it best to book with a local African operator or through a European or other non-African travel agent? This has more to do with personal preference than anything else, and is less important than the other factors listed here.

There are excellent safari companies with headquarters in Europe (which are usually required to be part of a consumer protection scheme or bond), and there are similarly excellent operators based in Africa. At SafariBookings we can see that whether or not a company can organise the safari of your dreams has nothing to do with where they are located.

What matters instead is following the advice outlined above. If you do this, there's a great chance that you'll find a reliable company who can organise your ideal safari. 🦁

## Protect and serve

Using a member of a trade association may give you some added protection. But what exactly do they do? Here's a sample of the more common acronyms

**ATOL** Air Travel Organisers Licence is a financial scheme that protects you when you book a trip that includes a flight and, in some cases, flight-only bookings (check before you pay). If you run into difficulties, ATOL ensures you can stay in your accommodation (if possible), reimburses you for any money spent to replace those ATOL-protected parts of your trip and arranges flights home if needed.

**AITO** The association for specialist travel companies makes sure its members provide the finest personal service, have expert knowledge and that customers are financially protected when booking a trip through them.

**TTA** The UK's Travel Trust Association is the only such group to guarantee 100 per cent financial protection for all customers, regardless of what service they have booked or how much they have paid.

**ABTA** The Association of British Travel Agents ensures its members operate at the highest standards. Should you encounter issues with a trip booked through an ABTA member, or if that operator goes out of business, you can turn to the UK trade association for impartial advice to help you through the 'what-to-do-next' process and with seeking alternatives or reimbursements, among others.

**SATSA** The Southern Africa Tourism Services Association strives to maintain credibility, value and authority as well as providing recourse for travellers; its Bonding Scheme guarantees against deposits held by its members.

**USTOA** The United States Tour Operators Association promotes integrity within the industry. Its member bonding requirement — recognised as one of the strongest — protects consumers' payments in the case of bankruptcy or cessation of trading.