Do Safari Companies Really Want African Travelers?

During these lean times for tourism, travel companies are appealing to residents with special rates. But locals ask: Why didn't you reach out before?

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Giraffes at Asilia Africa's Encounter Mara camp in Kenya. The company says it has long had local rates, but this year marks the first time it has actively marketed them. Asilia Africa

By Tariro Mzezewa

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When the Safari Collection, which owns the Giraffe Manor, a popular hotel in Nairobi known for its roaming giraffes, posted a photo on its Instagram account in June with a caption saying that the hotel would be "welcoming those who can still travel within Nairobi" and Kenyans could pay a special reduced rate to stay at the hotel, it received backlash from the very people it hoped to entice.

For many Kenyans, the offer was seen as insulting and only extended because foreign visitors, the lifeblood of the safari industry, were largely absent because of restrictions on international travel. Offering local rates seemed like a desperate ploy from a hotel where locals say they previously never felt welcome.

"My eyes just rolled when I saw that," Harriet Akinyi, a Nairobi-based travel writer, said in a phone interview. "It's hypocritical that it took a pandemic for them to realize that they have to cater to the Kenyan market as well, not just the international market."

The Safari Collection said that the post was published by an independent agent and the wording was misconstrued. The hotel, the company said, has always been open to all guests, but this was the first time it ran a special, because it was the first time it had the empty rooms to do so.

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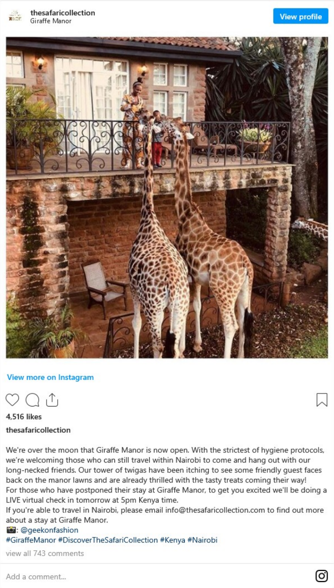
"The situation with Covid-19 has resulted in an opportunity to welcome local guests who wouldn't normally book in advance — we are usually booked up months in advance," said Jessica Pattison, head of sales and marketing for the Safari Collection, in an email, adding that the company employs more than 240 people and 95 percent of them are Black. The company would not reveal its local rates, but for international visitors, rooms range from $875 per night per person to $3,000 for a suite sleeping up to four per night, depending on the season and type of room.

Still, the incident renewed conversations among Kenyans and other Africans who live in countries that are home to safari companies, tour operators and luxury lodgings that focus on attracting American and European visitors. Who, they ask, is really welcome to take part in these offerings? People in South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Botswana said that the local rates have allowed them to enjoy their own countries in recent months, but as borders start to reopen, they remain skeptical about whether they'll still be invited. Ms. Akinyi shared an email from Arijiju, a private-home retreat in Laikipia, where she was told that the residence had 'a strict target list of top-tier international media,' so she could not visit.



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We're over the moon that Giraffe Manor is now open. With the strictest of hygiene protocols, we're welcoming those who can still travel within Nairobi to come and hang out with our long-necked friends. Our tower of twigas have been itching to see some friendly guest faces back on the manor lawns and are already thrilled with the tasty treats coming their way!
For those who have postponed their stay at Giraffe Manor, to get you excited we'll be doing a LIVE virtual check in tomorrow at 5pm Kenya time.
If you're able to travel in Nairobi, please email info@thesafaricollection.com to find out more about a stay at Giraffe Manor.
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Border closures, national lockdowns and other measures put in place to stop the spread of the coronavirus have devastated Africa's $39 billion tourism industry. The tourism industry funds wildlife conservation across the continent and the lack of international tourists has led experts to fear that threatened

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animals would be poached at higher rates, further endangering them.

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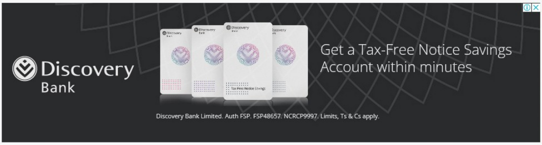

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Safari travel as marketed internationally is largely a luxury product, with beautifully appointed tent camps or lodges appealing to wealthy travelers. At the high end it can cost thousands of dollars a night, with guests flown between remote camps on private planes; even at the more modest end of the spectrum the cost tends to run to hundreds of dollars a night per person. That puts them far beyond the means of many Africans: In South Africa, for example, where Kruger National Park is a major draw for safari vacationers, the average earnings for Black residents between 2011 and 2015 were 6,899 rand ($413) per month, according to a 2019 report by the country's Department of Statistics. The same report showed that for white South Africans, who tend to go on more safari vacations, average earnings were 24,646 rand ($1,400) per month — more than three times what Black South Africans make.

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Some think it is time to reshape the industry.

"We can't expect that Covid is the last issue that may cause a pause in travel, and companies have now seen that solely relying on international travelers is not sustainable," said Naledi Khabo, chief executive of Africa Tourism Association, a U.S.-based agency that promotes tourism to and within Africa. "Having a consistent base of local travelers will be key to any safari business who wants to survive."

In Tanzania, another country with a fast-growing middle class that is a popular destination for safaris and luxury stays, local rates have become the norm. Lodges and safaris are being marketed at half price in some cases and at even less than that at others.

Andrew Mahiga, a project manager for a development project in Dar es Salaam, said that when he returned to Tanzania a decade ago, after living in the United States and Britain, he was committed to traveling the country and becoming reacquainted with his home. But he and his fiancée have noticed that at some hotels and resorts, the services offered to locals can differ vastly from those offered to international tourists. That hasn't changed since the start of the pandemic.

"Even though places are becoming more accessible to us right now, the experiences are still not equal to those offered to foreigners," he said. "When I stay someplace, they aren't as invested in me as a guest. They don't give suggestions for places nearby to see or excursions to go on and things to try, but foreigners — that's all provided at length."

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Mr. Mahiga, 35, said that recently he and his fiancée have been focusing on staying at Airbnbs that are owned by Tanzanians and going on tours that are run by locals.

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Although many safari and lodging companies have Black African guides and staff, the African Travel and Tourism Association estimates that 15 percent of its 600-plus members are Black owners, something that locals say plays a part in the feeling that they are not welcome.

“These luxury resorts and companies that focus on foreigners are finally being friendly to local Tanzanians and that’s good,” Mr. Mahiga said. “But since Covid started I’ve found myself wondering, ‘Why don’t I support really local business, especially when the foreign ones never wanted my money before?’”

For their part, companies say that locals tend to plan their trips later than foreign visitors, so that usually when they inquire, they are already booked.

For Beks Ndlovu, the founder of African Bush Camps, an independently owned safari company, promoting local rates has always been a key part of operating a business in any country. Mr. Ndlovu’s company has 15 luxury tented camps and lodges in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, and has, for years, offered advantageous local rates to residents of countries that are part of the Southern African Development Community, a regional economic community. For foreign guests, depending on the season, a stay can run between $400 and $950 per person per night, but for locals and people from the region it is $250 to $380 per person per night.

“This is not something that’s new to us,” he said. “We’ve actively promoted our offerings and the rate we offer is very favorable to locals because we understand the earnings in this part of the world are different from that of the international traveler.”

Mr. Ndlovu, who is Zimbabwean, said that offering local rates isn’t enough; he believes that his company has been successful among locals in the countries where it has camps because locals are treated as well as Europeans and Americans are — something that goes a long way, he said.

Some people, like Lelo Boyana, who works in finance in Johannesburg and hosts the travel podcast Chica Travel, worry that the push for local guests won’t last past the pandemic. Ms. Boyana said that although she has taken advantage of local rates throughout South Africa this year, she remains skeptical of how much of the money spent by travelers goes to locals, another common criticism of safari companies. Travelers, she said, need to ask more questions about where their money is going and companies need to do more than discount stays.

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“I think what’s obvious is that these companies are desperate for business,” she said. “If they wanted to have us, they would have made these rates available to us long ago and they would have publicized them before the pandemic. We are their last resort and their attempts are halfhearted. They still have a lot of work to do.”

Ms. Khabo of the African Tourism Association said she thought this might be a turning point. As leisure travel within Africa becomes more popular, with new flight routes and the easing of visa policies, it would be bad business for companies to ignore African buying power. She expects the shift to a focus on domestic travel to continue after the pandemic.

“There is now a new opportunity to engage the local market and cultivate local ambassadors, so we will see which companies keep it going,” she said.

In many cases, the decision to cater to local residents more aggressively is keeping camps busy. Asilia Africa, a company that operates 20 camps in East Africa, has always had local rates, but this year marks the first time the company has actively marketed them to residents. In previous years, people found out about the discounts by word of mouth and the occasional mention in the local press, Mercedes Bailey, a press manager at Asilia said.

Staying open and keeping rangers in the bush discouraged poaching, Ms. Bailey added. Resident sales in June were about 60 percent higher than during the same period last year. Those sales have also never been higher than 20 percent, but the company expects them to surpass 50 percent this year.

“We have a social media campaign, targeting Africans,” Ms. Bailey said in a phone interview. “That’s something we haven’t done before, but people are coming and we are now asking ourselves: Are people coming now because they can’t go anywhere else or have they always wanted to come, but didn’t feel welcome?”

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