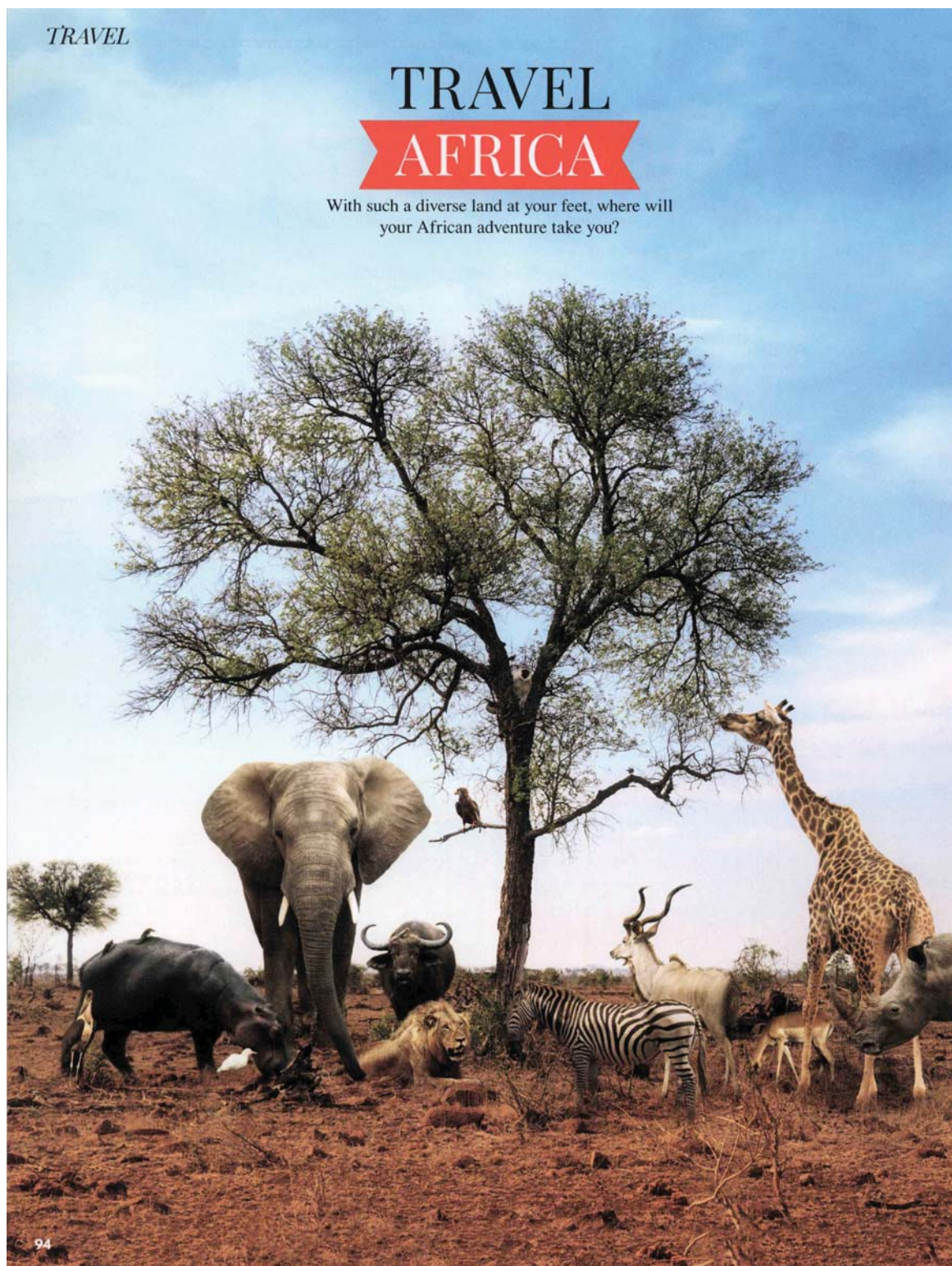


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TRAVEL

Africa is the second largest continent in the world, it's where you'll find the world's longest river – the Nile, which runs for a staggering 4,100 miles from Burundi to Egypt – and where Arabic and English are the most spoken languages followed by Swahili and French.

So what's keeping us from exploring this wondrous land? Fear of the unknown, a media portrayal of conflict and unrest, or a lack of knowledge about the safe experiences that are actually out there for us, perhaps.

We've all seen Gorillas in the Mist and wondered what it would be like to see these creatures for ourselves, and how many of us have tuned in to David Attenborough on the television? He has spent most of his life bringing home the astonishing African environment for us to marvel at from the comfort of our sofas.

At nearly 19 million square miles, Africa is a totally diverse mixture of cultures and ethnicities – there are 54 countries – and it's this undiscovered beauty that draws us to the travel possibilities. From desert safari, to jungle trekking, from paradise beaches to cultural cities, nightlife, arts and food – Africa is a diverse land with an experience to suit any traveller, explorer and holiday maker. So just how adventurous are you feeling?



Thanda Island



Amphibious adventure in Gabon

Gabon is split down the middle by the equator and is made up of dense jungle, rivers and spectacular waterfalls. The amphibious adventure takes you through Gabon's 3,000km Inwindo National Park where you'll follow the route of the Djidji and Kongou rivers, seeking out some of Africa's highest and most impressive waterfalls, navigating rapids by packraft and the dense jungle by guide.

The park is a natural crossroads of unique ecosystems and biodiversity and is at the heart of Gabon's conservation efforts. As part of the trip, you'll also visit and stay at the Institut de Recherche en Ecologie Tropical as well as meeting and travelling with members of The Foundation Internationale Gabon Eco-Tourisme to truly understand the complexity and importance of the environment surrounding you.

Private Island Paradise

Opened last year, Thanda is an exclusive private island located in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Southern Tanzania. It's a 100 per cent secluded destination that you access by helicopter and where you can snorkel the coral reef from your very own white sandy beach, pick oysters straight from the rock and enjoy them with tabasco and lemon juice while your feet are still in the soft white sand.

Sound like the holiday for you? Of course, but it doesn't come cheap, it's estimated around \$10,000 USD, about £7,700, per night for exclusive use of the island. It features just one spacious villa with five suites and two stylish 'Bandas' (Tanzanian style beach huts) accommodating a further eight guests, along with an impressive glass rim-flow swimming pool, a boat house full of every water sport imaginable and a tennis court.

Off-grid, solar-powered, environmentally sensitive, thoroughly relaxing, and lots of fun, the island is a complete paradise. Activities include swimming with whale sharks, watching turtles hatch and sightseeing excursions to nearby islands. And if this isn't enough to satisfy the use of your very own island – you can also bathe in a copper roll top bath, outdoors, with the ocean lapping at the shore beside you. Well, why not?

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TRAVEL



Ready for some wildlife spotting? Africa is home to the tallest land animal in the world - the giraffe, and the largest living land animal - the African elephant.




Gorilla spotting in Uganda and Rwanda

Fancy channelling your inner Dian Fossey? Tracking for rare mountain gorillas can only be safely undertaken in Rwanda and Uganda and here you can also stay in luxury lodges to make your stay even more epic.

Carefully located for optimum sightseeing results, you can embark on a number of unique excursions from tracking the endangered mountain gorillas of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest to summiting volcanoes, or simply sharing the heritage of the indigenous Batwa tribe.

Stay in the thick of the Bwindi Forest, or choose to stay below the Rwenzori Mountains on the Savannah Plains at the edge of the Queen Elizabeth National Park, or at the foothills of the Virunga Volcanoes - all situated in Uganda. Or stay in the hilltop lodge overlooking the Virunga Volcanoes and shimmering Ruhondo and Bulera lakes in Rwanda. Each lodge has its own breathtaking views and mystical setting.

Tour packages start from £3,890 per person.
Find out more at www.volcanoessafaris.com






Climb Morocco's highest mountain

For a quick trip to Africa, why not scale one of northern Africa's highest mountains, Mount Toubkal, the highest peak in the Atlas Mountains, and explore the bustling city of Marrakech once you are done.

Organisers take you on an adventure to summit the 4,167-metre Moroccan mountain in just a weekend, and you'll have time to explore the vibrant souks and plazas of Marrakech too. You'll spend a night in a mountain refuge and climb the famous Mt. Toubkal in time to catch the sunrise from the summit. While in Marrakech, you'll have two nights of accommodation with breakfast in a Marrakech Riad, and get tips on where to experience the cultural city at its best - from the food to the markets.

So if you're fit, and a regular on the hiking scene, although organisers do say no previous mountain climbing experience is required, this mini adventure will be just perfect for you.

Prices start from £269 per person, excluding flights, for four days, three nights.

Find out more at www.muchbetteradventures.com






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Experience animal migration in Zambia

How about exploring the Liuwa Plains and Kasanka in Zambia with an expert guide?

Robin Pope began work in 1975 developing his bush knowledge and guiding skills, and you can join him on a trip to witness two of the natural world's greatest migrations. First, on the remote Liuwa Plains, marvel at the arrival of thousands of blue wildebeest and zebra, while staying in the luxurious surrounds of the new King Lewanika Camp.

Then travel to Kasanka National Park for the gathering of 10 million fruit bats, a spectacle that creates the highest density of mammals on the planet.

Aside from the spectacular migrations, guests will also see a variety of birdlife including the rare Pel's fishing owl, wattled crane and Ross's turaco.

Prices start from £9,995pp sharing, including nine nights of accommodation, most meals, international and domestic flights, transfers, and the services of Robin Pope.

Find out more at www.wildlifeworldwide.com

Cruising the Indian Ocean

If you want a more exotic Christmas this year, there is always a 14-night cruise of the idyllic Indian Ocean islands.

The trip starts in the luxurious Mauritius city of Port Louis, which has its own paradise setting with rich cultural diversity and fantastic cuisine, before you set sail for the breathtaking Seychelles, where Aldabra Giant Land Tortoises, one of the largest tortoise species in the world, inhabit, and you can discover the uninhabited island of Moyenne by catamaran. You'll also enjoy a scenic sunset cruise by Silhouette Island before arriving at Zanzibar.

Zanzibar is known for its fascinating African history, with many historical attractions including slave chambers, the old fort and the House of Wonders. But it also has its fair share of white sandy beaches, scuba diving hot spots and protected barrier reefs, and plenty of chance to spot tropical fish and dolphins. There's also chance to escape to Renunion Island's sweeping volcanic landscapes, dense forests and beautiful waterfalls.

Prices start from £1,299 per person for the cruise only.

Find out more at www.fredolencruises.com.



TRAVEL



The Gambia experience

Just six hours from the UK, The Gambia is an upcoming destination that offers beaches and city life with wildlife, culture, and food also a massive part of its destination appeal.

English is largely spoken in The Gambia and it has the same time zone as the UK making it a very easy introduction to Africa and perfect for those looking to get to grips with African culture while still enjoying a sunshine beach holiday.

Away from the beaches and hotels, there is plenty to explore and being a small country, nothing is too far away. Birdwatching is a particularly important part of The Gambian heritage with over 560 bird species making it a world class birding destination, with special tours by naturalist and broadcaster Chris Packham on offer at selected times of the year.

Learn to cook Gambian cuisine, enjoy a river cruise, or bask in the variety of culture and wildlife at places like the Makasutu Forest and the Chimp Rehabilitation Project Camp, among other attractions.

Several trip itineraries are on offer and start from £735 per person, including flights and transfers.

Find out more at www.gambia.co.uk.

Africa has over 25% of the world's bird species. From the African penguin to the Long Tailed Widowbird.





Journey the Kenyan highlands

Experience a 10-day journey through the Kenyan highlands, across the equator and along the Great Rift Valley, in search of The Big Five at four unique game reserves.

Look out for zebras, giraffes, lions and crocodiles on a drive through the Samburu Reserve, spot rare forest animals at the unique highland reserve of Aberdare National Park, explore the first national park to be declared an important bird area at Lake Nakuru, and enjoy three game drives at Africa's oldest and largest nature reserve, the Masai Mara.

Prices start from £1,904 per person, including VIP private home pick-up service, flights, transfers, services of a driver/guide, accommodation, selected meals and all airport taxes.

Find out more at www.cosmos.co.uk.







www.staffordshireliving.co.uk 97