

FIVE ALIVE

Here's a thought, says **Sophie Baker**: isn't it sensible to redefine the 'big five' through sight, sound, taste, touch and smell?

For decades, operators have sold African safaris through a single sense: sight. The lion padding through golden grass; the elephant raising its trunk against the horizon; the leopard's eyes glinting in torchlight. But the most unforgettable journeys are never just about what you see. They're about what you *hear* in the dark, what you *taste* at the fire, what you *smell* in the air after rain and what you *feel* in your hands and beneath your feet.

It's no wonder that multi-sensory safaris are on the rise. Increasingly, guides and lodges are encouraging guests to engage all five senses, shifting focus from passive observation to full immersion. Neuroscience backs the approach: the more senses you recruit, the stronger and more enduring the memory. When you let every sense lead the way, it opens the door to a different kind of safari experience.



ISHARA

Colour watch. Enjoying dawn from the starbed at Ishara

SIGHT: HEAVENS ABOVE, HUNTERS BELOW

Vision may dominate a safari, but it doesn't end with a few animal sightings from a vehicle. At Ishara in Kenya's Maasai Mara, a night in their starbed gives sight fresh focus. Perched above the plains on a private deck, you fall asleep beneath a scatter of constellations. Fireflies drift past, shapes stir below — a lion's silhouette, a jackal's trot — and dawn arrives in stages. The first hints of soft pink spill out behind the acacias, a silvery blue brightens the river, and finally the clarity of detail as the sun lifts over the savannah.

Other lodges emphasise the visual impact after dark, enabling perspectives you'd otherwise miss. Night drives at Mara Bushtops use specially adapted vehicles with thermal imaging and night-vision to detect movement. This is relayed to screens in front of your seat, so you can watch lions quartering the grass or leopards slipping between thickets without a spotlight.

In Botswana, the new Atzaró Okavango Camp adds altitude: helicopters lift guests above reed beds, lagoons and elephant herds cutting channels through papyrus. From above, the vastness of the Delta is apparent in a way no game drive vehicle can achieve.

SOUND: THE BUSH ORCHESTRA

So many safari memories involve sound: the whoop of hyenas at night, lions roaring over a kill, and the crackle of campfire and crickets over dinner. At Sashwa River of Stars (pictured, below) in Greater Kruger, their Sound Safaris use directional microphones and headsets to capture noises up to five kilometres away: a leopard's cough, the wingbeat of a hornbill, the chorus of frogs swelling in a pan. In camp, meditation and yoga fold these soundscapes even deeper into the experience.

Also in the Kruger, The Outpost also offers sound safaris too. With more than 350 bird species here, the dawn chorus becomes a layered composition: the liquid notes of the yellow-bellied greenbul, the guttural croak of hornbills, the chatter of starlings. Travellers often describe these auditory encounters as more intimate than even the closest visual sighting.



SASHWA RIVER OF STARS



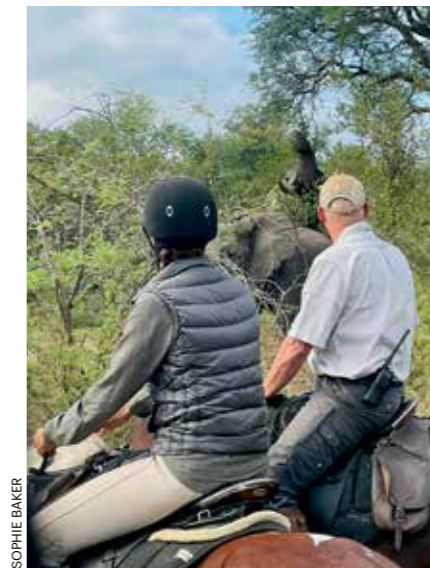
Local flavour. Baobab, sourced on the island, is used throughout the menu at Tsowa Safari Island, near Victoria falls

CHANTELLE MELZER / TSWOWA SAFARI ISLAND / ISIBINDI AFRICA LODGES

TOUCH: CONNECTION THROUGH CONTACT

Touch on safari is perhaps most profoundly appreciated on horseback. You feel the ground change underfoot through the sway of the horse's back. Galloping with reins warm in your hands, the brush of grass against your legs and the wind against your face, you're exposed to the same elements as the wildlife you ride among. Herds tolerate horses in a way they don't vehicles, so you find yourself startlingly close, with zebra at arm's length, rhino curiously reaching out to sniff at your steed's scent, and giraffe gracefully cantering alongside.

Getting hands-on helps, too. In Kenya, Angama's Beading Studio invites guests to meet the Maasai Mamas and try their hand at the craft. In workshops at OI Lentille, in Laikipia (Kenya), you can work alongside artisans to create a piece whose patterns and colours carry stories of age, family and celebration.



SOPHIE BAKER

Natural approach. Observing elephants at Wait A Little, in Karongwe Private Game Reserve, South Africa



BABOHI / NEWMARK HOTELS AND RESERVES

Makes scents. Locally-blended fragrances create strong sensory memories of time on safari

TASTE: AFRICA ON A PLATE

Food has always been an integral part of the safari experience, but increasingly the focus is on local rather than international cuisine. In the southern Kalahari, Tswalu's culinary team builds tailor-made menus around what the desert itself provides: tsamma melon, Kalahari truffles and sustainably sourced venison, all reimagined in fine-dining form, but inseparable from the terroir of the desert.

Upriver from Victoria Falls, guests at Tsowa Safari Island walk past centuries-old baobabs, their silhouettes anchoring both landscape and menu. The fruit itself appears in cocktails and desserts: a baobab and Amarula welcome drink, tangy cheesecake, even turmeric-infused tonics. Dinner might feature Zambezi bream and playful 'sadza fries', a Zimbabwean take on fish and chips. With nearly every ingredient drawn from surrounding farms and markets, the flavours feel bound to the island itself.

A safari that lingers

The so-called 'Big Five' will always headline brochures. But the safaris guests remember best are defined not by five animals, but by five senses. Sight is important, of course, but so are the scents of sage and rain, the feel of reeds brushing your legs, the cacophony of frogs at dusk and the tang of baobab on your tongue. These are the experiences that linger — not just because you saw them, but because you lived them.

SMELL: THE AIR CARRIES MEMORY

Smell is the most delicate sense, often alerting guides before their binoculars do. On a walk, you may notice the musk of elephants hanging in the air. A metallic tang signals lions have sprayed nearby. When the first rains hit dry ground, the scent of petrichor can be overwhelming — it's an earthy, sweet and unmistakable smell that settles into memory with as much force as any photograph.

Some lodges try and celebrate this in ritual. At Babohi in Qwabi Private Game Reserve, guests choose a signature scent on arrival — rooibos and honeybush, aloe and cucumber, or a wood and spice blend known as Velvet Breeze. That fragrance threads through the stay: misted onto pillows at night, diffused into rooms and infused into spa rituals. Guests can even take it home, so months later one inhale transports you right back to the Waterberg.