

VEGAN IN THE VELD

The rise of plant-based safaris

If the idea of biltong between game drives, steak on the fire and carnivorous boma dinners feels a little at odds with the premise of safari – admiring wildlife and championing conservation – you need to know about a new wave of safari lodges that are catering to a different kind of traveller

Flames lick high into the night, sparks spiralling toward a sky heavy with stars. Traditionally, this is when safari guests gather around the boma fire, plates piled with boerewors, lamb chops and steak. For decades, it was almost a given: game drives meant biltong in the car and dinners that leaned heavily into safari's meat-led traditions, where 'chicken is practically a vegetable' could almost pass as a proverb.

But on a growing number of African safaris, that's changing. For many travellers, the idea of admiring wildlife and championing conservation is at odds with the idea of eating meat products or sinking into leather couches. And across the continent, safari lodges are starting to evolve their offerings to be more inclusive. Guests are tucking into fine dining menus, sipping herbal cocktails infused with aloe, and pairing multi-course dinners with vegan wines. In some cases, rooms are kitted out with animal-free textiles, and even the wellness treatments are botanical-based.

Perhaps the boldest expression of this shift is Sashwa River of Stars, set in a private corner of Greater Kruger. Here, everything is plant-based, from the Ayurvedic-inspired tasting menus to the herbal tonics and handmade mocktails poured at sunset. Guests can stroll through the Abundance Garden, a permaculture project where turmeric, ginger and greens are pulled straight from the soil before appearing on the plate. The ethos extends well beyond the kitchen. The spa uses botanical oils, every pillow and blanket is animal-free, and even the minibars are stocked exclusively with vegan treats. Sashwa has even declined hosting groups which request meat, choosing to remain true to the philosophy of light living on the land.

Nearby, Klaserie Drift Safari Lodge offers dedicated vegan safari packages designed in conjunction →



Above:
Conservationist Kevin Garrard enjoys one of Sashwa's signature multi-course vegan meals

Left:
A plant-based feast at Sashwa: roasted butternut and sweet potato with caramelised red onions, dates, millet, garden greens, herbs, toasted pumpkin seeds and turmeric-cashew dressing, alongside miso-braised cabbage with pomegranate and a fresh green salad

No eggs here! A vegan Sashwa breakfast of overnight oats with chia and seasonal fruit, finished with date-sweetened salted caramel and a sprinkle of crunchy hazelnuts

with a vegan hospitality consultant. Plant-based menus, vegan wines and suites with animal-free fabrics and toiletries ensure that vegan travellers can immerse themselves in the bush without compromise, while omnivores still have traditional options available.

And at Kings Camp in Timbavati, thanks to a Certified Vegan Hospitality Consultant on staff, the lodge has built year-round vegan offerings into its menus. Guests enjoy everything from dairy-free breakfasts and plant-based cheeses to vegan treats at the customary sundowner stop, while meat-eaters continue to find their favourites. The result is an inclusive approach where no one feels like an afterthought.

KENYAN TRAILBLAZERS

Kenya, too, is at the forefront of this reimagining. At Ishara in the Maasai Mara, a farm-to-table ethos reigns supreme. Guests can harvest their own vegetables and join cooking sessions with the chefs, wandering through the lodge's aeroponic Shamba of Goodness tower farm and handpicking herbs and greens that Chef Isaac Muhika and his team transform into imaginative dishes. Inventive soups, vegan cheesecakes, and mushroom arancini served al fresco demonstrate that safari dining can be both restorative and sustainable, while reducing water use by 95% and supporting the Mara ecosystem. Sustainably sourced meats are served, yes, but the menu is plant-forward by design and a large portion of their guests are vegetarians or vegans.

Nearby, Emboo River has embraced a flexitarian model. Classic Kenyan dishes receive plant-based twists: coconut-rich githeri (beans and maize), chapatis warm from the fire, and ugali served with braised greens. Much of the produce comes from the lodge's

hydroponic garden, where lettuces and herbs grow in vertical towers by the river. In the evening, cocktails infused with hibiscus or ginger root prove that sustainability can taste every bit as stylish as it sounds.

A CHANGING MEAT CULTURE

What's driving the change is as much demand as philosophy. Vegan travellers often speak of the anxiety of visiting luxury camps, only to find themselves restricted to fruit plates or simple salads. By embracing plant-based menus at the same level as traditional fare, lodges are opening their doors to a growing community of conscious travellers. Along the way, they're surprising even devoted meat eaters, many of whom describe the dishes as among the best meals of their stay.

But it isn't only individual lodges driving the change. Tour operators are increasingly joining the movement and tailoring itineraries for plant-based travellers. Vegan Safari Africa specialises in fully vegan packages, with cruelty-free toiletries, plant-based menus and vegan-certified accommodation woven seamlessly into the experience. Alluring Africa curates bespoke safaris where plant-forward dining and sustainable lodges are built into the itinerary from the outset. And Mahlatini Travel now publishes detailed guides to vegan and vegetarian-friendly properties, flagging which lodges can best accommodate strict diets.

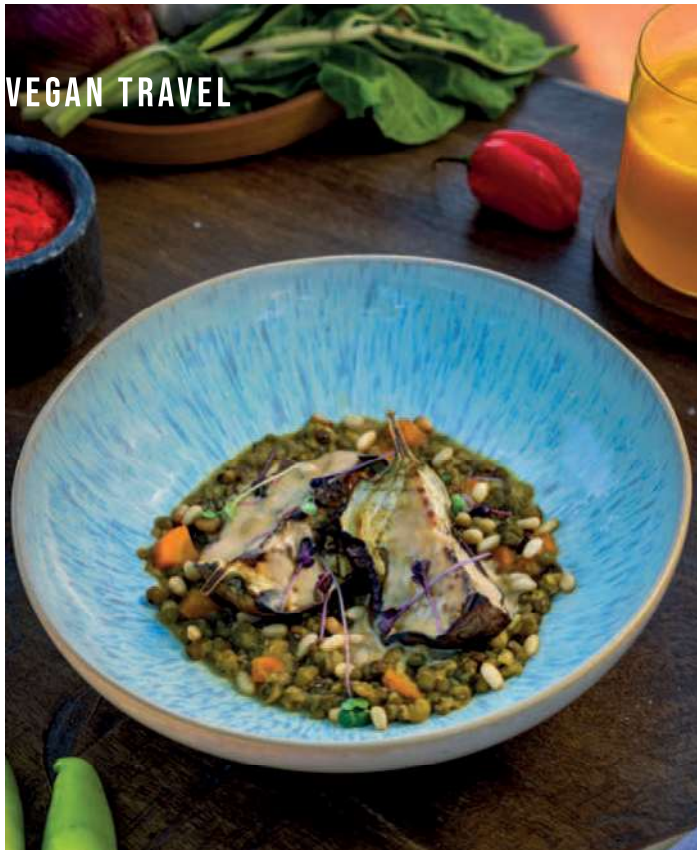
It helps that Africa's own food heritage lends itself well to plant-based reinvention. From Zimbabwe's nutty groundnut stews to Kenya's coconut-laced githeri and Ethiopia's injera with lentils, many of the continent's most beloved dishes are rooted in vegetables, pulses and grains. For lodges, drawing on these traditions has meant they can create menus that feel both authentic and forward-looking. ➔



Above: At Klaserie Drift, butler Cedric plays an integral role in the vegan safari experience, here serving falafel lollipops in tomato relish

Below: A hearty roasted aubergine steak on coconut rice, paired with saffron cream and carrot purée, finished with a crisp rice cracker and a squeeze of lime





A NEW SAFARI APPETITE

The rise of plant-based and vegan elements to safari travel reflects more than a passing trend. Conscious travellers are asking how their choices, from what they eat to where they sleep, align with conservation and community. For many, it feels like a logical extension of what safari has always celebrated: wildlife, wilderness and sustainable ecosystems. What better way to honour that than with a cuisine that treads lightly on the environment and doesn't rely on animal products?

None of this means the old boma dinner is gone. At many camps, meat still features, but the table is widening to include everyone. Guests who once struggled to find more than a salad are now feasting on five-course plant-based menus paired with wines or herbal mocktails. In some cases, like Sashwa, the transformation is total; in others, like Emboo, it's a conscious broadening of choice.

And perhaps that is the most exciting part. Plant-based safaris are not a niche for vegans alone; they represent a new way of experiencing Africa's wild spaces, one that feels aligned with conservation, community and a lighter touch on the earth. 🌱

Above: Oven-roasted aubergine with curried green lentils, tahini and pine nuts

Right, top to bottom: At Ishara, guests can visit the Shamba of Goodness garden to pick their own vegetables and have the chefs prepare a dish with their chosen ingredients; a chilled beetroot soup with a swirl of vegetable cream and a sprig of parsley as garnish

Below: Ishara's Executive Chef, Isaac Muhika, with freshly harvested produce from the tower farm



Ishara's Tropical Fruit Symphony is a refreshing way to begin or close the day. The colourful mix of strawberries, kiwi and other tropical fruits is served fresh, reflecting the lodge's farm-to-table ethos, and works equally well as breakfast or light dessert

