

STORY DANIEL SCHEFFLER

TO PROTECT AND SERVE

Preserving the habitats of wildlife and plants is a key feature of luxury accommodation funded by billionaires





Some simple and sustainable lodges at Indonesia's Nibirwatu resort.

BELOW RIGHT
Beautiful design at Singita's resort helps convert guests into conservationists.

Conservation is an ethic – from the use of resources to their allocation and their protection. It has been the biggest focus for the health of the natural world to maintain fisheries, habitats and biological diversity for the last few centuries, not to mention rare materials and the ever-growing sector of energy conservation. Wildlife conservation also plays a massive part in all of this: protecting endangered plant and animal species, and their fragile habitats. Various luxury brands, funded by billionaires, are now taking to the world in a new way: to protect and conserve large tracts of “wild lands”.

According to eco-psychologist Megan de Beyer, “true wilderness [untouched by hand] is down to 1 per cent” and, although there are large tracts of reserves in the world, “most countries only protect roughly 9 per cent of land impacted upon by humans”. The rate of extinction of various animals – remember the dodo bird – have spurred on the message, but it seems now that the right people, with the right funding and right ideas, are starting to realise the world does not need another island, or tract of land, simply plundered with casinos and condos.

American billionaire Paul Tudor Jones, who also happens to be a member of the Robin Hood Foundation and the founder of the Tudor Investment Corporation, described something called a “Just Index” in his TED talk in March. This index, he says, promotes “an increase in justness in corporate behaviour” which he believes can be achieved by everyone. “When we put justness on par with profits,

we’ll get the most wonderful thing in the world: we’ll take back our humanity,” Jones says.

Singita Grumeti, part-run by Jones, is an example of how this objective can be achieved in a real case study. The 141.6-hectare concession manages to not only combine the graceful ambition of Cécile and Boyd’s design – to work on projects where wild lands are being restored and protected for the future – but also inspired a new way of enjoying lavish mores in a conscious way. This, according to Dutch trend forecaster Li Edelkoort, is becoming the way of being as “conservation takes precedent in the luxe industry”.

Guests who stay at these properties often feel a deep sense of appreciation for their surroundings. “Glamour, luxury and beauty through design and architecture has created a portal to convert guests into conservationists,” says Boyd Ferguson, CEO of Cecile and Boyd’s, and designer of all of Singita’s properties. “Beautiful design and making nature attractive to the uninitiated is what brings appreciation and thus philanthropy to the wilderness of now and of tomorrow.”

The Grumeti Reserve in Tanzania, for example, which was established in 1993, has recently added Serengeti House to its portfolio. This former manager’s house has been altered into an exclusive-use “private hotel” complete with unshared staff. “Privacy and exclusivity are the new luxury: combine them with a personalised approach surrounded by hectares of pristine African wilderness, and you have Singita’s Serengeti House,” says Lindy Rousseau, ➔





RIGHT
Visitors who go on Singita's game drive can get close to wildlife in their natural habitats.

BELOW
It's back to basics at Singita's resorts, where the focus is on sustainable living.



chief marketing officer at Singita. This is similar to the strategy of Cisneros Real Estate – fuelled by Adriana Cisneros, CEO and vice-chairman – and their latest “forever” project 45 years in the making: Tropicalia, a master-planned resort development (with the Four Seasons) encompassing 2,428 hectares of land along the southern coastline of Samana Bay in the Dominican Republic.

“This will be a case study for the rest of the world on how to see conservation as an integral part of real estate and hospitality,” Cisneros says. “We didn’t just want to build a hotel – we wanted to do this in the most responsible way to ensure we could preserve this land.”

An advocate in all conservation causes, he worked closely with the government and had the family’s philanthropic side of the business “roll up their sleeves and get actively involved”.

Luke Bailes, CEO of Singita, says: “The shift is now towards philanthropists interested in saving the earth.” The demographics show that by 2050, there will be 2.4 billion people in Africa, all forced to exploit the continent’s resources. “Pristine wilderness as we know it is under threat, and although the world is becoming more urban, there are giant local communities directly next to reserves and parks that are expanding rapidly,” Bailes says.

As the world gets hotter, flatter and more crowded, these pristine wild areas will increase in value and become more sought after as the ultimate in luxury. Singita’s latest project, in Mozambique, is, according to Mark Whitney, chief operating officer at

WE DIDN'T JUST WANT TO BUILD A HOTEL. WE WANTED TO PRESERVE THIS LAND **ADRIANA CISNEROS OF CISNEROS REAL ESTATE**



Singita, part of their offering of “unique, bio-diverse, one-of-a-kind areas that are at risk and in need of protection”. Singita is often approached by governments, NGOs and sometimes competitors to enact the Singita model. The process itself, a long and complicated one, often starts with a long lease from the government, as it does not hand out title deeds. “Each stage requires motivation for the conservation/tourism project and commitments with regards to investment and job creation. This can take anything from two to 10 years depending on the size of the project,” Whitney says.

Singita establishes all infrastructure, including roads, fences, water and electricity provisions, and the legalities involved vary from country to country. “In Tanzania, there are leases in national parks, community land leases and hunting concessions [with which] it is not required that the areas are hunted, and we pay for the hunting licences in spite of not utilising them,” Whitney explains. Singita has a strong strategy: educating children in their formative years and beyond with bursaries – this also includes environmental education, water provisions, and small- and medium-sized business enterprise development.

Indonesia’s Nihiwatu has similar aims. The profits from entrepreneur Chris Burch’s 550 hectares of land plus a hotel support local nature and culture in conjunction with the Sumba Foundation. According to Jarra Campbell, marketing and business development director at Nihiwatu, this encompasses “water, education and malaria protection/prevention”. The returns on high-cost projects like these and others are, however, mostly of a non-financial nature.

“There is something very fulfilling about being involved with the preservation of nature,” Whitney says. Campbell calls the expected return “long-term land appreciation” and refers to it as “an investment for generations to come”.

This long-term vision and idea that luxury and social responsibility need not be mutually exclusive are key to building on these brands’ visions. As Cisneros says: “The bigger picture is what is important to me.” **T**

ABOVE
Indonesia’s Nihiwatu resort offers cliffside dining with an amazing ocean view.

BELOW
Tropicalia encompasses 2,428 hectares of land along the southern coastline of the Samana Bay in Dominican Republic.



PHOTO: FER FIGHERAS

GREEN DESTINATIONS

ASIA

Laucala Island, a private refuge island in the South Pacific, has recently opened with 25 villas and a submarine for guests. The resort has been set up with sustainable farming, environmental protection and more with the fragile ecology in mind. Visit laucala.com.

Amanpulo, a resort in the northern province of Palawan in the Philippines, has environmental programmes protecting mangroves and marine life. There are also private villas on the beach. Check out amanresorts.com.

AFRICA

Singita, with lodges in Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa, has recently reopened and totally rebuilt their famed Ebony lodge in the Sabi Sands Reserve. With only 12 suites on the banks of the Sand River, the lodge is the perfect place to learn about conservation in the heart of “big cat country”. For more information about stays and their conservation efforts, visit singita.com.

Singapore Airlines, with new suites for couples in some of their A380s, has direct flights every day to Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa, where Singita will escort you to the lodge. The airline also has daily flights to Nadi, Fiji, where Laucala will pick up guests in their private plane, and the same goes for Manila, from where the Aman will deliver you to paradise. Book flights at singaporeair.com.