

YOU MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

Spectacular scenery. Incredible wildlife. Crowd-free sites. But by visiting one of these five wish-list destinations on your next trip, you'd also be delivering help and hope where it's needed the most

WORDS MEERA DATTANI

BEFORE YOU GO
 In all cases, it's key to use common sense: check current advice and quarantine requirements before booking.

It seems another lifetime ago, doesn't it? When we lived for our next trip, planning routes, comparing flight prices, getting annoyed with booking apps, and then wondering where we'd last spotted our passports in the heady anticipation of airports and adventure? But while many of us can't wait to get back on the road, there are plenty of destinations who have missed travellers too. Desperately, in fact.

Of course, anywhere reliant on tourism has suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but some more so than others. These five places will not only welcome you when it's safe to visit, but if you travel mindfully with a social conscience as well as an exploratory one, you can leave a positive impact on the communities who live there and the wildlife too – plus, without the crowds you'll have an even more exceptional time. So if you've always fancied the Inca glories of Machu Picchu or Sri Lanka's exceptional wildlife without hundreds of others, the next season could be your time. ▶

Llama lookout
When visitors are allowed to return to the Inca trail, you may be sharing Machu Picchu with only the local wildlife; (inset) a porter hard at work



1 Support porters plus go crowd-free in... **Machu Picchu, Peru**

The impact of COVID-19 in Peru has been monumental. In the absence of incoming travellers, many guides, porters, hotel staff and vendors have had to return to their family homes, reliant on subsistence farming and occasional work. Peru has been hard-hit with over half a million cases and over 26,000 deaths (at time of writing). As a result, lockdowns continue and international flights are temporarily suspended.

While there's no firm date for Machu Picchu opening, the one-day Inca Trail will open before longer treks, with 120 people a day instead of 250. Visitors to Machu Picchu citadel may be limited to 75 people an hour (750 a day) – given the usual number is around 2,500 a day, sometimes higher, this is a sea change. As Paul Cripps, managing director of Amazonas Explorer (amazonas-explorer.com), says, "It will be spectacularly deserted, if you get to go. Groups will be limited to eight people with one

guide, with groups kept apart, and there'll be two set routes inside."

"So if you're fairly fit, you can do the trip in a day," he adds, "exploring the ruins in the even-quieter late afternoon and then catch the train back to the Sacred Valley, pretty much avoiding both Machu Picchu town (Aguas Calientes) as well as the bus and entrance queues. You could be in for a real treat."

Cripps predicts the way visitors experience Peru will change. "The 'Airports of Peru' tour, where people shuffle from one hotspot to the next will hold little appeal," he says. "Moving daily, queuing for photos, buses, buffet lunches and tourist markets is not 'COVID-friendly'. We envision more in-depth travel using a single base."

If travellers want to have a positive impact, it's important to go beyond the price as companies

try to recoup costs. But, says Paul, many travel-related businesses in Peru are classed as 'informal' which means no operating licenses, staff protection policies, insurance etc.

"It's also about how that company has protected its people during the pandemic and after," says Paul. "We set up a GoFundMe project to send food boxes to porters, cooks and muleteers who have lost work. We're also helping guides access funds to re-invent themselves as there will perhaps be zero work till 2021.

Ask tour operators how they'll run sustainable and environmentally friendly trips such as joining www.travelersagainstplastic.org and actively reducing plastic use."

You can contribute to Paul's GoFundMe project at gofundme.com/f/help-peruvian-porters-during-covid19 ▶





How to help re-revive tourism in... **Sri Lanka**

Tourism in Sri Lanka had, until recently, been enjoying a deserved and exciting renaissance. However, the Easter terrorist attacks of 2019 was a crashing setback. Then, 11 months later, COVID-19 hit, leading to income and job loss for guides, craftspeople, food vendors, hoteliers, and rangers.

"There's been limited help from the government so it's had a profound effect on the one in ten people who depend on tourism for a livelihood," says Farzana Dobbs, chief curator at Sri Lanka specialists Travel Gallery (travel-gallery.co.uk) and owner of Rosyth Estate House (rosyth.lk) near Kandy.

"But the perverse upside of both 2019 and COVID has been the overtourism issue experienced by several national parks such as Yala has been reigned in and we're promoting lesser-known national parks."



Tourism plays a significant role in Sri Lanka's economy and while the country is exempt from the UK's 'avoid all-but-essential travel' list, Colombo airport remains closed for now. "We will need tourists to return," says Farzana, "but we're hoping to see travellers embrace more immersive travel styles and explore the culture and food more deeply. We're also promoting longer stays and a slower pace to itineraries too."

For travellers, the slow-travel approach is one way to ensure they're travelling responsibly in Sri Lanka, especially if visiting lesser-known places in what will already be a less-crowded travel experience.

Places such as Flood Plains National Park, 200km north-east of Colombo, help share the tourist dollar, as does choosing ethical wildlife experiences such as avoiding elephant-riding or elephant trick shows, and staying in

locally owned, perhaps community-run, guest houses and operators.

Visiting with a historical perspective is also key to understanding a nation's psyche – Sri Lanka went by the name of Ceylon after the British East India Company's conquest in the 19th century. Take tours that go beyond admiring colonial-era buildings in Colombo – you could 'create-your-own' with Urban Adventures (urbanadventures.com) or take their food tour that engages with local vendors while sampling the capital's mix of Sinhala, Muslim, Tamil, and Malay cuisines.

If you're visiting a tea plantation, check it operates to Fairtrade standards and openly ask about working conditions for tea pickers. Alternatively, head north to Jaffna, off-limits during the civil war, to enjoy a lesser-visited region and its history.

Sri Lanka is also part of the UN Environment's CleanSeas campaign (cleanseas.org) against ocean pollution and has banned single-use plastic products since 2018 – travellers can contribute by watching their own usage. ▶



Rising above it
Stilt fishermen in Dalawella, at Sri Lanka's southern tip; (inset) Minneriya National Park

3 Boosting conservation and safari tourism in... Kenya

Tourism accounts for 8-10% of Kenya's economic output and employs around two million people, so it's an understatement to say that COVID-19 has impacted on the country hugely. In July, the tourism minister announced that the nation had lost £570 million in tourism revenue due to the virus and lockdowns – about half of 2019's total. But this doesn't just affect the locals. When tourism dips, poaching also increases as rangers are fewer, a tragedy in a country that's made huge strides in conservation.

While international passenger flights resumed on 1 August, Kenya still (at time of press) falls within UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice against 'all but essential' international travel. That's frustrating for many, including Paul Goldstein, wildlife photographer and co-owner of Kicheche Bush Camp (kicheche.com) in the Olare Motorogi Conservancy bordering the Masai Mara Reserve.

"There's no greater time or place to view predators and the vast herds than the Masai Mara, particularly the properly-run Conservancies [non-for-profit wildlife management companies]," says Paul. "Many of

these privately-run precious parcels have raised millions of shillings from guests to look after their favourite backyards, but there may be a limit to their generosity. As Kenya is open for tourism, you could have the migration to yourself. The airports, camps and lodges are open, and a thousand guides are waiting."

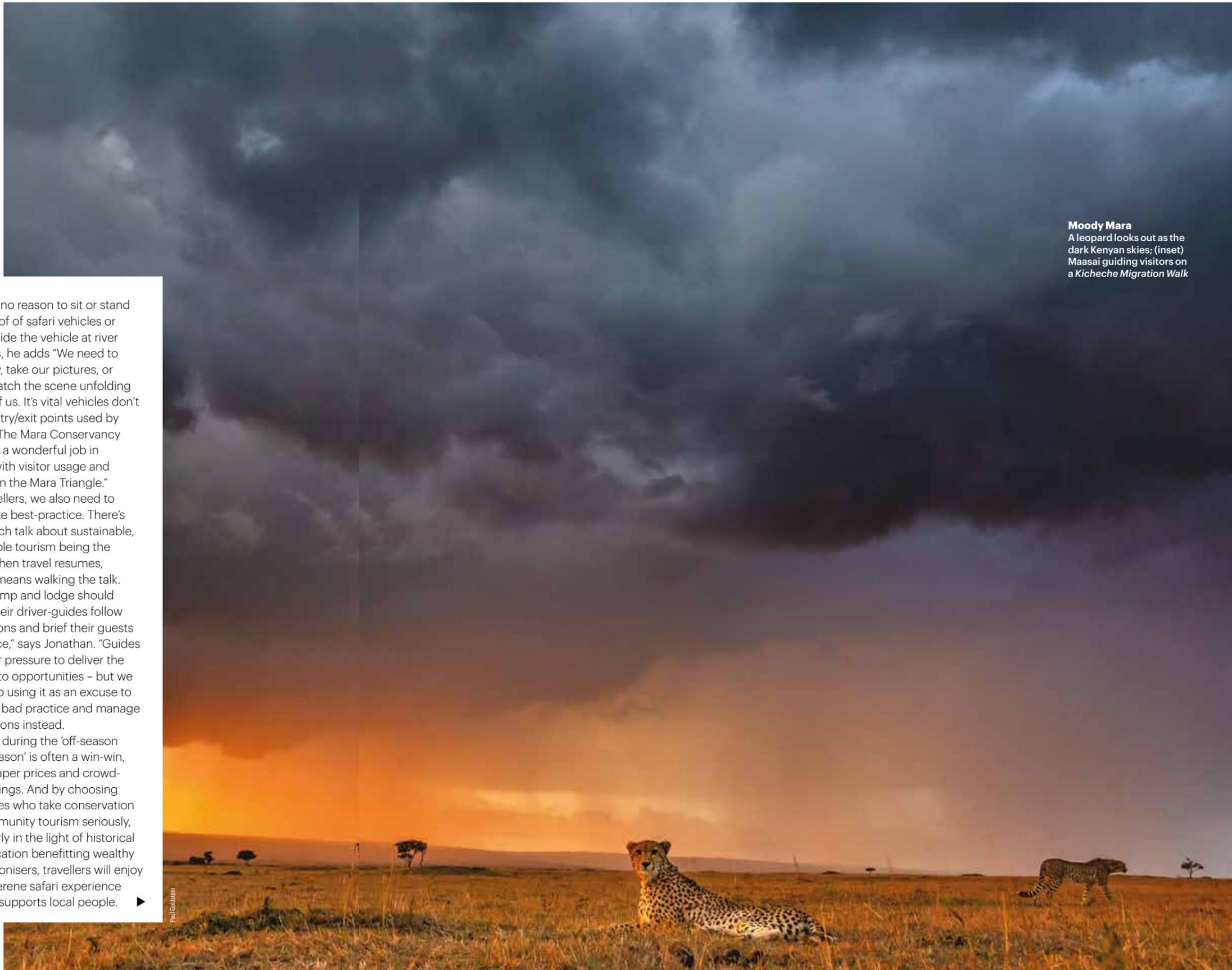
Poaching is another issue. "Stopping people travelling is putting millions into penury and has grave implications for wildlife. Parks and reserves with healthy tourist numbers have little or no poaching," says Paul. "Bush meat and poaching are already raising their sinister heads over Africa and will become commonplace without tourist dollars and policing eyes."

How can travellers help – when they do visit? "Kenya has incredible sights such as the wildebeest and zebra migration in the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem," say Jonathan and Angela Scott, The Big Cat People (jonathanangelascott.com). "But people are viewing it as entertainment instead of standing in awe. This endangers the very creatures we've come to watch." ▶

There's no reason to sit or stand on the roof of safari vehicles or walk outside the vehicle at river crossings, he adds "We need to sit quietly, take our pictures, or simply watch the scene unfolding in front of us. It's vital vehicles don't crowd entry/exit points used by animals. The Mara Conservancy has done a wonderful job in dealing with visitor usage and vehicles in the Mara Triangle."

As travellers, we also need to appreciate best-practice. There's been much talk about sustainable, responsible tourism being the winner when travel resumes, but that means walking the talk. "Every camp and lodge should ensure their driver-guides follow conventions and brief their guests in advance," says Jonathan. "Guides are under pressure to deliver the best photo opportunities – but we must stop using it as an excuse to condone bad practice and manage expectations instead."

Visiting during the 'off-season or low season' is often a win-win, with cheaper prices and crowd-free viewings. And by choosing companies who take conservation and community tourism seriously, particularly in the light of historical land allocation benefiting wealthy white colonisers, travellers will enjoy a more serene safari experience that also supports local people. ▶



Moody Mara
A leopard looks out as the dark Kenyan skies; (inset) Maasai guiding visitors on a Kicheche Migration Walk

Paul Goldstein

How to travel more consciously in... **Nepal**

4

The spring season was barely underway when COVID-19 entered the scene, and lockdown was imposed. At time of press, Nepal remains closed to international tourists, and changing guidelines, rise in infection rates, European quarantines and general uncertainty will certainly affect the rest of the season. The repercussions are huge in a nation where tourism is one of the biggest employers – hundreds of thousands of people lost their income as guides, drivers, porters, hoteliers, restaurant owners and street vendors.

And, as Raj Gyawali, responsible tourism expert, founder of socialtours (socialtours.com)

in Nepal and part of Norway-based Ethical Travel Portal (ethicaltravelportal.com), says, “It doesn’t help that countries like Nepal lack strong government cover to support and protect industries, so they’re left to cope on their own. We’re in a situation where tourism providers are desperate for business to come back, while mountain communities not involved in tourism don’t want it back before the virus threat is over.”

In the meantime, a vision for ‘better’ tourism is underway with several professionals setting up better protocols for mountain tourism. “Tourism happened organically in Nepal without much planning,” says Raj, “The pandemic is giving us a fighting chance to forge a better relationship between industry, communities, travellers and locals. If we can really reimagine it, it might even be regenerative, where tourism leaves more of a positive impact than a negative one.”

With adventure travel often the first to resume, Nepal, thanks

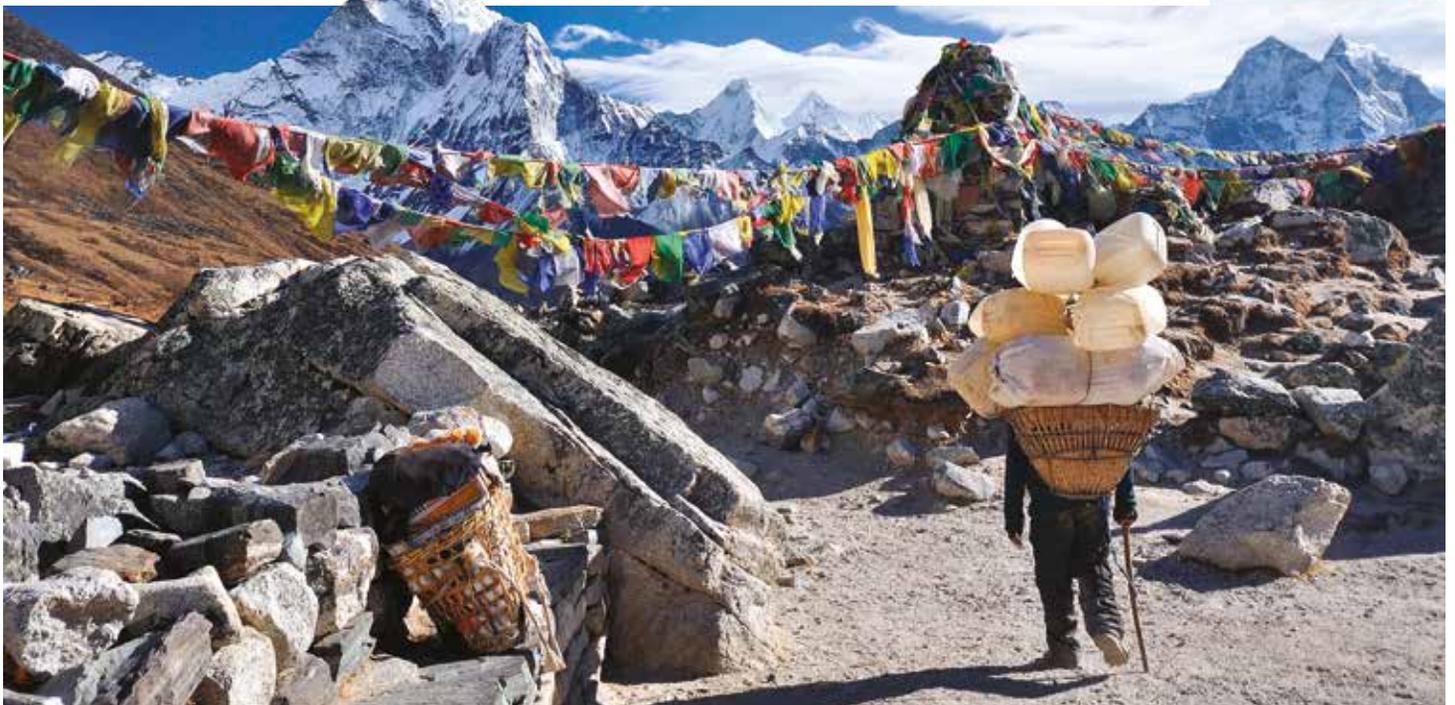
to a little something called the Himalaya, may well benefit from a swifter resurgence while travellers enjoy crowd-free treks, a stark contrast to recent images of queues around Everest. But how can travellers play their part when they do go?

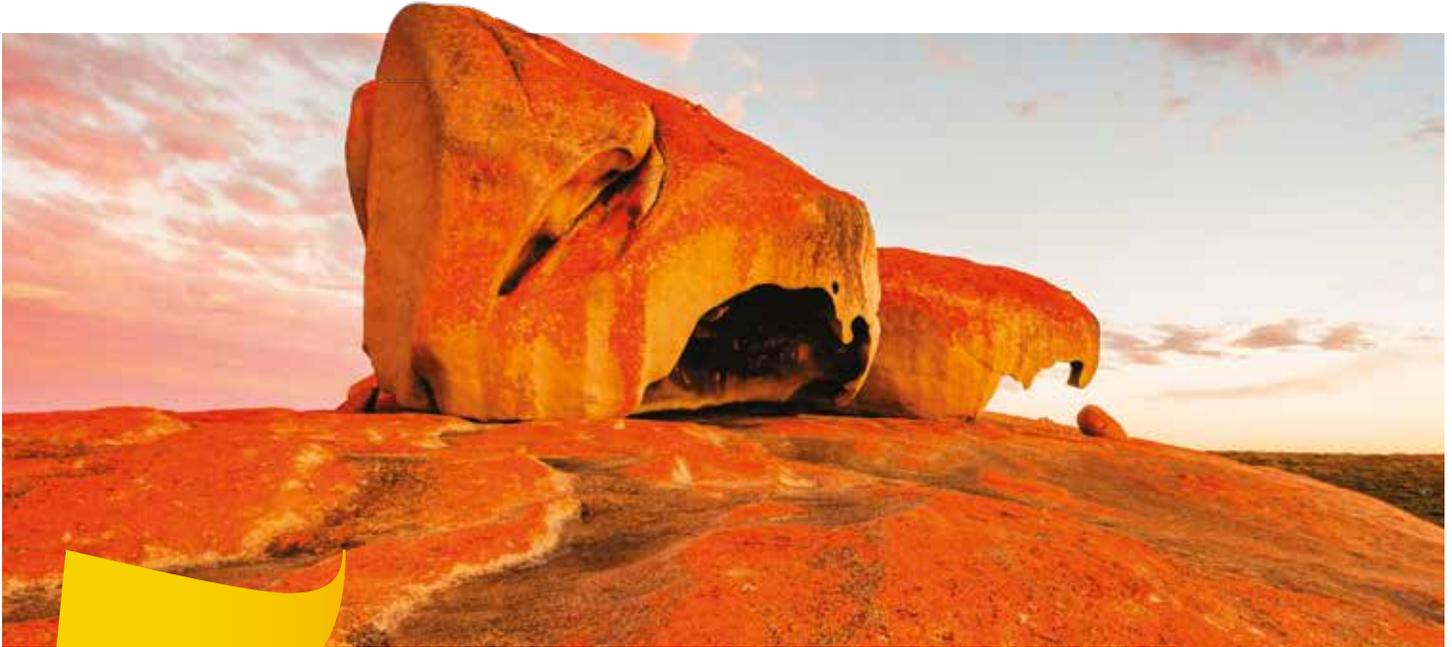
Raj suggests visitors learn more about the destinations they’re visiting – not just from a “Is it safe?” perspective, but about the communities they’ll encounter and why they want to travel there.

“Be inquisitive and learn more about the positive impacts you can make,” he says. “Travel with deeper immersions that respect the local culture and intelligence. Use this knowledge to uplift oneself, build lasting connections and not just travel for the sake of ticking a bucket list. All this builds resilience via respect, tilting the balance in the relationship beyond just pure economics to something more meaningful and lasting.”



Big draw
The trail to Everest Base Camp has been criticised for overtourism; (inset) porters waiting





After the fires... Kangaroo Island, Australia



Not just a clever name
The Remarkable Rocks
in Flinders Chase NP;
(inset) Kangaroo Island's
titular species

B

ush fires devastated this small island in December 2019. It's estimated that around 211 sq km – 49% of the island off Adelaide on the south coast – was incinerated by three weeks of non-stop burning, leaving many homeless and two people dead.

Then COVID-19 struck another blow, further delaying the island's recovery. Now, inter-state travel is opening up and there's talk of flights between Australia and New Zealand, but visitors from further afield will have to wait, even though Australia is currently exempt from FCO advice against all-but-essential international travel. But when they do come, they'll be welcomed.

Craig Wickham, managing director of Exceptional Kangaroo Island (exceptionalkangarooisland.com) and chair of Australian Wildlife Journeys (australianwildlifejourneys.com), says there are plenty of ways travellers can leave a positive

footprint when they do visit. Citizen science is a big tourism experience here, appealing to travellers who want to feel part of the conservation story. Travellers on the *Glossy-black Cockatoo Recovery Programme* go into the bush looking for the birds, checking out nests, tree-planting, noting observations, and learning what's needed for cockatoos' long-term survival.

Other programmes that tick the box of delivering memorable experiences while helping conservation include *A Day in the Life of a Wildlife Researcher* with Dr Peggy Rismiller (echidna.edu.au), a world echidna (spiny anteater) expert, and *Dolphin Watch* with Tony Bartram (kimarineadventures.com.au), which includes monitoring dolphin pods and an open-ocean swim.

Kangaroo Island is ripe for crowd-free encounters as it is, but that will be felt even further as tourism slowly opens back up. Sights such as Remarkable Rocks in Flinders Chase National Park will feel like they're for your eyes only, while encounters with sea lions, koalas

and the namesake Kangaroo Island kangaroos may even be enhanced due to fewer people around.

Travellers can choose operators that directly support wildlife conservation activities, for example, via donations or payments to researchers. "There's also an ongoing voluntourism program called BlazeAid (blazeaid.com.au)," says Craig, "where people come with their caravan or camper and join work teams going out fencing."

It's an easy place to add impact as a traveller. "Simply by visiting and staying within our region, travellers bring benefit," adds Craig. "There's significant crossover between our visitor economy and local producers of wine, honey, figs, eggs, oysters, marron (freshwater crayfish), potatoes, gin, and soon, truffles. And with most businesses locally owned, there's little economic leakage from our community." 🍷

