Research Note

Wildlife Watching for Fitness Fanatics: Integration of Home and Holiday Lifestyles?

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Ecochic evolves quickly. The title of world's best hotel, and world's most expensive hotel, are both currently held by ecolodges (Flowers 2013; Luxury Hotels 2013). Since many low-volume upmarket enterprises can offer luxury and location, they compete to offer the most exclusive experiences. This has led to a series of new fashions, some long-lived and pervasive, others less so. Here author summarizes such trends and identifies a new addition, which may signal increasing integration of holidays with valued components of home lifestyles.

The models for most of these changes (Brooker and Joppe 2013; Buckley 2013a) are upmarket wildlife-watching lodges in Africa (e.g., Great Plains Conservation 2013; Odzala 2013) and to a lesser extent in Latin America (e.g., Explora 2013) and Asia-Pacific (e.g., Taj Safaris 2013). This contribution focuses on Africa, which can now boast a large number of luxury game lodges across much of the continent. Three large-scale trends may be identified, two of them ongoing, and the third is new. The first is a gradual increase in luxury. The second is an addition of new activities and experiences. The third, identified here, is the addition of activities which allow guests on holiday to continue aspects of their lifestyles at home.

Continual increases in luxury and service quality are widespread throughout the outdoor tourism industry (Buckley 2007, 2010). Wildlife watching accommodation in Africa was originally provided using mobile tented camps, as for former hunting safaris; then fixed-site tented camps; then fixed-site lodges of relatively rustic design; and recently, fixed-site camps and lodges of increasingly luxurious design and appointment. Increasing levels of luxury have been provided through: larger and larger bedrooms, bathrooms and suites; larger and larger baths and showers, both indoor and outdoor; individual outdoor plunge pools; rooftop star-beds; spas and massage facilities; and lounge furnishings including couches, tables, writing desks, travel trunks, and so on, either in period style from the hunting era (Buckley

2013b) or in a variety of individualized styles ranging from pastel palettes to art deco glass. The most upmarket lodges now offer world-class wine lists, personal butlers, and no-menu (order anything) dining options (North Island 2013). Essentially the marketing message is that no matter how wealthy you may be and how much you may be used to at home, there will be a lodge that can match or exceed your expectations.

As lodges competing for high-end clients continue to copy and outdo each other in trappings and service, their emphasis has shifted from accommodation to activities, and especially to the ability to offer exclusive experiences. This could be seen as parallel or analogous to the way in which 5-star and 6-star urban hotels advertise their concierge services. Options such as open vehicles, night drives, guided walks with a gunbearer, overnight fly camps, and private game guides are now standard. Horse-riding stables are also becoming more commonplace. In Kenya, for example, Ol Donyo Lodge (Great Plains Conservation 2013) partners with Ride Kenya (2013), whilst Lewa Wilderness Trails (2013) operates its own stables. Balloon flights have become commonplace in the Mara and Serengeti regions of Kenya and Tanzania. Low-altitude flights in open-cockpit light aircraft are on offer in some locations (Lewa Wilderness Trails 2013). Some lodges can provide access to private helicopters.

As one particular example, some lodges now keep top-of-range binoculars, professional cameras and large telephoto lenses on site, to loan to guests during their stay (Great Plains Conservation 2013). Many wildlife-watching tourists are already keen photographers, and bring their own intermediate or professional-quality equipment. In addition, it has become commonplace for lodges to host professional photographers, use their images in social-media marketing such as Facebook, and offer specialist photographic courses led by internationally-renowned professional photographers. At a number of lodges, some of the experienced wildlife guides are also skilled photographers, and will routinely assist and tutor their guests in both technical and artistic aspects of wildlife, nature and scenic photography. It is now commonplace that people on holiday like to record their experiences photographically, as a component of social capital. It is also characteristic of many of the guests at upmarket ecolodges that they are keen to prove themselves competent at everything they do, at play as well as work; and this includes photography. They are thus glad to pay for opportunities to bring home their own publication-quality wildlife images.

Here a third approach is reported, still in its infancy but growing rapidly. This is the addition of activities which are unrelated to wildlife watching itself, and which allow guests to continue or extend their home interests or passions at the same time as gaining a game-watching experience. For both logistic and social reasons, these activities are commonly marketed on a group basis, being made available to all guests at a particular lodge for a particular period. The main examples are related to physical fitness. The focus on physical wellbeing had its antecedents about two decades ago, when lodges began to install spas and massage rooms. These formed part of a marketing message which started at that time and still persists, namely the combination of adventure and pampering. In fact, many adventure tourism enterprises such as surf, ski or kayak lodges, had offered basic massage facilities for a long period previously. For upmarket wildlife lodges and ecolodges, the massage menu involved additions such as aromatherapy, and was correspondingly more expensive.

After spas were introduced, a number of lodges worldwide began to offer yoga retreats, capitalizing on scenery, silence and serenity. These were, and still are, aimed principally at clients who are already adept at various forms of yoga, and have integrated yoga practice into their daily life to such a point that they are reluctant to forgo it even on holiday. Some tour operators offer yoga in conjunction with other activities, either adventure activities such as surfing or nature-based activities such as wildlife watching. Others offer the chance to study with well-known yoga instructors and practitioners, where the focus is entirely on the yoga, and the lodge provides only the setting.

The most recent trend is the addition of fitness programmes. It is now possible to combine game viewing with boot camps. Companies with names such as BushFit (2013a) and Wildfitness (2013) offer an African holiday which involves running across the savannah, climbing up trees, and lifting logs and rocks. Bush fitness programmes are very new, and the market is heterogeneous and has not yet established a stable structure. There seem to be three main contributing factors. The first, a facilitating factor, is that staff and guides at many lodges need to keep fit themselves, and having worked out ways to do so which take advantage of their wilderness location, have found that some of their guests are keen to join them. The second, the main driving factor, is the growth of fitness fanaticism within some source markets. That is, there are people who do not want to interrupt their fitness training even whilst on holiday. This is coupled with a growing belief within source markets, perhaps driven by mass media reports of celebrity fitness programmes, that anyone can achieve a

rapid transformation in health, fitness, attractiveness and lifestyle through short-term involvement with a sufficiently aggressive personal trainer. Advertisements for physical and lifestyle transformation programmes and adventure boot camps have become commonplace at all market levels.

The third factor is the increasing popularity of competitive outdoor events in non-urban locations. Examples include the Safaricom Marathon, run across the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in northern Kenya, with appropriate precautions to protect runners from potentially dangerous wildlife (Lewa Wildlife Conservancy 2013). There are also well-publicized fund-raising fitness challenges, such as the Girls Great Migration (BushFit 2013b), a 400km run across southern Kenya in late 2013. These have links to a wide range of charity challenge events, competitions and rallies, which combine socialization with fundraising (Coghlan and Filo 2013).

It remains to be seen whether or not bush fitness programmes will become a major trend in the fitness and lifestyle industry, and how broadly they may or may not be adopted by the upmarket ecolodge and safari industry. Currently, however, it appears that they may signal a trend towards increased integration of activities at home and on holiday. This mirrors the trend for tourist accommodation, even remote wilderness lodges, to provide Wi-Fi internet access so that guests can remain in contact with their work or professional obligations if they feel the need to do so (Buckley 2011: 330). If tourists want to stay in touch with their work whilst on holiday, lodges can gain a competitive edge by providing the means. Similarly, if their guests want to maintain their fitness regimes whilst on safari, lodges may well try to accommodate their requests through bush fitness programmes. We can thus foresee that in the same way that lodges have partnered with horse riding stables and aircraft operators of various types, they may well partner in future with bush fitness instructors, at least in locations where safety can be assured.

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