The crowd-free fantasy:

Safari

You can't wait to get up close and personal, but you don't want to share. **Sue Watt** shows you how

Where's best for a first-time but crowd-free safari?

Most of us want the Big Five (elephants, rhinos, buffaloes, lions and leopards) in a classic destination, say, Kenya's Maasai Mara. To escape the crowds, I'd recommend that you choose one of the conservancies that border it, among them Mara North and Naboisho, which attract more wildlife than the reserve, yet have limited camps and far fewer tourists. Come between January and March after the Great Migration. Stay in Topi House in the Olare Motorogi Conservancy: all yours with a private guide, chef and pool (asiliaafrica.com; doubles from £1,360, all-inclusive).

Which is the best of the more remote, lesser known parks?

For me, it has to be Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe's southeastern corner, a raw wilderness with dramatic landscapes of winding rivers and sandstone cliffs glowing gold as you sip your sundowner. It's home to about 11,000 elephants, painted wolves, predators and plenty of prey too. I love the *manangas*: four reed-and-mud rooms rebuilt annually by local women. It's semi-exclusive (they accept a maximum of two groups on site, with a four-person minimum) and, as safaris go, it's good value (gonarezhou.org; doubles from £151, self-catering and self-driving). Or try Zambia's wild North Luangwa National Park, home to just a couple of camps. Stay at Mwaleshi and the new Takwela, both on riverbanks busy with the Big Five, although rhinos can be tricky to spot here (remoteafrica.com; doubles from £1,100, all-inclusive).

How can I help with wildlife conservation?

Wannabe Attenboroughs can muck in at South Africa's exclusive-use >

Founders Camp in Marataba, near the border with Botswana, which sleeps up to eight, with a four-person minimum. You can track and monitor animals, as well as help with camera traps and nocturnal wildlife counts. For an additional £2,355 per group, you can even join in rhino 'notching', which involves darting and registering them (marataba.co.za; from £1,984 a night for four, all-inclusive). Choosing safari operators that are heavily committed to conservation and communities helps too. Check out Imvelo (imvelo safarilodges.com) and African Bush Camps (africanbushcamps.com) in Zimbabwe, and Natural Selection (naturalselection.travel), Sanctuary Retreats (sanctuaryretreats.com) and Wilderness (wilderness-safaris. com) in southern and eastern Africa.

What about a more active safari?
Crowd-free walking safaris were first developed in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park and it's still the best place for exploring the bush on foot. My most exhilarating wildlife encounters, really up close and personal, have been at Mapazi, a remote walking-only bush camp with just three tents and exceptional guiding by its owner Deb Tittle (surefootsafaris.com; doubles from £1,270, all-inclusive). Or try canoeing and wild camping along the Zambezi, in Lower Zambezi, and then Mana Pools National Parks, spying crocodiles and hippos (zambezi. com; from £830pp for five nights, all-inclusive).

Can I combine a crowd-free safari with somewhere else?
Absolutely! Bush and beach is a classic combo. I'd pair a safari in Malawi's up-and-coming Liwonde National Park with a short flight-hop to Likoma Island, on Lake Malawi, for its fab 'barefoot luxury' lodge, Kaya Mawa (greensafaris.com; doubles from £510, all-inclusive). Or try remote Ruaha National Park in southern Tanzania, followed by Zanzibar's quieter little sister, Pemba Island. It's crucial to book through Africa-specialist tour operators. Not only will they have detailed experience of destinations, camps and lodges to advise you, but they'll often be able to secure you better rates. Check out Aardvark Safaris (aardvarksafaris.co.uk), Expert Africa (expertafrica.com), Safari Consultants (safari-consultants.com) and Yellow Zebra Safaris (yellowzebrasafaris.com).

Animal magic: clockwise from top left, yawning hippo in Mana Pools National Park; giraffes at dawn in the Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya; waiting by the Shire River in Malawi's Liwonde National Park; zebras in the Maasai Mara; the bar at Takwela Camp, Zambia