

A travel adventure through 'real SA' will open your eyes to greener pastures

Claire Allison

IN A WORLD that is slowly, yet steadily, becoming more green, eco-friendly and aware, people are becoming mindful of their impact on, not only the environment, but also the economy.

Everyone is talking about it and it is fast becoming a global trend – but what is a responsible travel? What does it really mean for us as travellers and what's it all about?

Working for a non-profit organisation that uses tourism as an economic platform to create and sustain jobs in rural Africa, I'm exposed to the positive effects of responsible tourism and the lives of the

people affected by it (including my own) more than your average person. Visiting the rural communities throughout South Africa, it's plain to see that these areas are rich in culture, history and beauty and need the economic boost major tourist hubs like Cape Town, Kruger National Park and the famed Garden Route enjoy on an annual basis.

If it all sounds a little bit overwhelming, the good news is that it's not. You can be part of an easy solution, just by travelling.

In a nutshell, responsible travel creates better places for people to live in and better places to visit. It's tourism that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits and minimises impact and cost. The

long-term effects of visiting an area are the backbone of responsible travel.

What this means for us as travellers is that we need to put ourselves out of our comfort zones once in a while. That's not too much to ask, is it?

Travelling responsibly will expose you to more of your country, take you into some of the most breath-taking destinations and allow you to get a taste of the "real South Africa".

You will experience more meaningful connections with local people and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues will leave you feeling energised and refreshed.

It'll also open your eyes to the true

beauty of South Africa and its people.

Visiting your nearest game or nature reserve won't quite cut it, I'm afraid. While supporting conservation is responsible, it's not quite the same as venturing out to explore South Africa's less travelled areas to support local tourism-based businesses and fair trade in tourism to help the people and communities that really need it.

Travelling to off-the-beaten-track destinations doesn't always have to involve camping in the most remote place on top of the most hard-to-reach mountain top either.

It means travelling to areas you wouldn't normally travel to and stopping off to check out the little dorpiés along the way

to support the small businesses that exist in these towns.

Check out some of Open Africa's self-drive travel routes, cast aside your South African cynicism, be brave, be bold and venture forth – you never know how many lives you might change.

By creating and sustaining employment through travel, rural communities will take a pride in their area. If it's attractive to tourists, it's attractive to them!

One of the biggest and most important effects of responsible travel is the conservation of wildlife and the surrounding environment of rural communities. Once communities start to value the environment and see the tourism potential in it,

they will begin to feel more passionate about protecting it.

If rural communities don't need to rely on their environment for food and shelter, we may even start to see a decrease in the number of endangered species being poached, such as rhino. Once rural people can make a sustainable living from tourism, they will no longer be forced to take desperate measures for money, such as tipping off poachers or even becoming poachers themselves.

● Allison is marketing manager for NGO, Open Africa, which was last year nominated as a finalist in the Imvelo Responsible Tourism Awards for their work in social involvement programmes.