



ARMCHAIR SAFARI It's possible that in 20 years' time, it will be possible to view wildlife live through hi-tech virtual reality goggles, making Africa accessible to all.



Looking to the future

What will safari be like in years to come? Perhaps we will be moving around in driverless Land Cruisers with robots for guides, or setting off on a drone safari above the Great Migration? **Aaron Gekoski** lets his imagination run wild

In 1836, a young English artist, explorer and hunter by the name of William Cornwallis Harris led an expedition to Africa to record wildlife. Every morning, Harris and his team would follow a similar routine: they would wake for sunrise, spend their day walking and observing the animals, enjoy an afternoon nap somewhere shady, resume wildlife-watching late afternoon, and then share stories in the evening over a slap-up, alcohol-and-tobacco-fuelled dinner.

Harris had embarked on what many regard as the world's first safari; a formula high on romance that is now repeated across the continent millions of times a year. The world, however, has changed somewhat since Harris's time — for better, for worse. Technology has opened Africa up to the rest of the world, while a mind-boggling array of gadgets and gizmos help us map, observe, track, record

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and protect animals like never before. But what would happen if we were to teleport Harris on a safari 20 years from now, 200 years after his expedition? Well, let's take him on a theoretical trip to one of Africa's wildlife reserves.

First off, we'd need to give the 'reserve' some context. Up until recently, wildlife numbers were severely depleted. But thankfully, Google Parks stepped in and restocked it, along with many other national parks throughout the continent. Outside of these carefully managed, fenced-off areas, few animals exist. There sure are a lot of people though. The population has exploded beyond imagination.

Next up, we lead Wallis into his game vehicle, an experience that must be all kinds of weird for our intrepid explorer. Stranger still is that no one appears to be controlling this shiny, solar-panel-covered lump of steel, which whirs along, silent as a prowling lion.

Inside each eco-machine sit tourists of all ethnicities, wearing headphones. A confused Harris is handed a pair. "Welcome to your Tesla-fari," a voice proclaims. "The greenest wildlife experience on the planet — powered solely by Mother Nature and you." Harris has no idea what this means, but it certainly sounds intriguing.

As they set off, the guests reveal small black boxes with telescopes attached to them. They sit in silence, occasionally lifting said black boxes to their eye, while aiming them at passing elephant. People might have changed a little, but the glorious sights, sounds and smells of the wilderness are timeless, remaining much as they were hundreds of years ago.

Alongside the elephant, text appears out of thin air — "augmented reality", Wallis is told — as scrolling type reveals the age, size and sex of each animal. Following this, a beautiful lady emerges, rubbing lotion on her face. It's an

advertisement: "Rough skin? Try our new Pachyderm-alogica Cream, with hide-smoothing technology for a wrinkle-free appearance."

Through their headphones, a voice speaks — in English, Chinese, Spanish — supplying guests with additional snippets of information. "Poor Engelbert broke his tusk last year in a fight. Look at young Edna — isn't she growing? Did you know that elephant eat for around 16 hours a day?" Fascinating!

Next up, the lions. They are located 10km away and are currently basking under their favourite acacia tree.

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geo-mapped and their movements recorded via more 'magic boxes' — some of which can fly, others of which are attached to trees — which are not only useful for guaranteeing sightings but also for protecting them from poachers.

To finish the day, Harris and his new friends are driven to 'Projection Plains: Brought to you by Facebook'. The reserve might not contain actual dinosaurs, but here anything is possible. Each month, different endangered or extinct species frequent these savannahs in dazzling 3D projections. By now, Harris is feeling a little overwhelmed, and hopes a trip back to camp will provide a dose of normality.

Over an extravagant meal, whisky and cigar, the group discusses tomorrow's agenda. Harris suggests walking around, shooting things, as was the norm in the 19th century. The tourists would prefer a sunrise drive to the rhino, followed by giraffe at 9am.

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Auntie Jean in London would like to see buffalo ("preferably mating") before she heads to her yoga lesson. For in 2037, you don't need to travel to Africa in order to experience a live safari, as every moment is streamed. Friends, family, schoolchildren, college students and wildlife enthusiasts live and breathe every sleepy lion and passing elephant through their virtual reality goggles. A primary school in Zimbabwe has requested the 'Cheetah Conservation Programme' in the afternoon. Harris's companions opt for cheetah, so they can educate the children, who, of course, are the conservationists of tomorrow.

Itinerary confirmed, Harris retires to his lavishly appointed room, where highlights of the day's safari play out on the big screen. With the press of a button, the ceiling parts, unveiling a blanket of stars and in the distance the sound of trumpeting elephants echoes throughout the wilderness. Will a safari lose its romance by 2037? Not on your Nelly.

