

## 7 luxury safari horror reviews that will kill your business – and how to turn them into fairy tales



**By Ilse de Vries**

For many local and international travellers, a visit to a luxury safari lodge is the epitome of the good life. Bewitching entrance gates, chambers designed for bush royalty, true adventure on the game trails. Sundowners on a vast wooden deck overlooking the hazy grasslands, before decadently feasting in die lanterned boma.

Luckily, South Africa's safari lodge industry has an exceptional reputation thanks to its deeply passionate people, and things rarely go terribly wrong (even a sudden flood can be turned into a victory with the right team spirit). However, the true danger of a horror review lurks elsewhere: The let-down.

Here we share 7 themes from horror reviews in the words of real-life contributors on [Hellopeter](#) and [Tripadvisor](#). Avoid them with our practical tips and safeguard your lodge's reputation online.

But we won't stop there – we know the actual end goal is a trove of spectacular visitor reviews that will ignite the desires of future safari-goers. We'll do this with the help of [Liesel Jonkheid](#), a customer experience specialist and owner of the [Consumer Psychology Lab](#). Once you understand how to rewrite potential horrors into fairy tales, you're on the road to conquer hearts and dominate the safari lodge landscape.

1.

### **“Come here if you have money to throw money down the drain: overpriced, overpromised, underdelivered”**

Nothing ruins a long-awaited African bush getaway quite like regret. Paying an arm and a leg for a so-so experience causes disappointment so deep that it borders on feeling betrayed. And even though safari businesses deal with diverse currency-earners, everyone expects the same 'once in a lifetime' experience.

#### ***What visitors also say:***

*“You would think with the amount of people they have stuffed in here, they could at least not charge you for the drinks on the game drives.”*

*“The wifi sucks – I know it's the bush but at such a price one would expect better.”*

#### **How to avoid it:**

- Ensure your safari lodge's price-to-product ratio is on par with the rest of the industry – if you charge more, can you clearly justify it?
- Identify your weaker performing areas (e.g. food or rooms) from previous reviews to recreate all-round value that is designed to impress and delight your visitors every step of the way.
- Check that your website and other communications reflect your lodge accurately.

**The fairy-tale version:** “The best travel experience of my life!” “Service Beyond Our Wildest Dreams”

**Liesel's advice on getting to the fairy-tale:** “Create a [Voice of the Customer Programme](#) for your guests. Let them tell you about their experiences to identify where you miss the value mark and the opportunity to do some damage control.”

2.

## **“The staff was cool and impersonal – like they didn’t want us there”**

Did your heart sink when you read this one? Any passionate safari business owner or manager knows that although the industry mainly sells the dream of exotic animals and game drives, blasé staff members can leave that magic dead in the water. And it’s often a rotten apple scenario – but it can be through the influence of your management, that your team is either infused with a genuine desire to bring joy to your staff, or switched off.

### ***What visitors also say:***

“When we ordered soup and bread (which was an option on the lunch menu), the waitress rolled her eyes at us.”

“There seems to be a lot of politics going on between the management and rangers.”

### **How to avoid it:**

- Be honest about why there is a problem: before you jump to generic customer service training, ask yourself: is there currently a breach in the trust or communication between the lodge and the staff? Maybe a recent change that has not been handled well? Be mindful of any changes in the team or structure. This is often the cause of changes in behaviour and attitude of staff when they interact with guests.
- Inspect your people-structure closely: does it resemble a family, a team? If not, your guests will pick it up in an instant and they too, will not feel included.
- Think long-term: to groom an exceptional team with rave reviews takes time – only a clear employee engagement strategy will get you there.

**The fairy-tale version:** “Everyone was pampered and treated like royalty!” “We were treated like family by the wonderful staff of this intimate lodge.”

**Liesel’s advice on getting to the fairy-tale:** “Get your entire team to love and believe in your dreams with a designed [employee engagement programme](#). Your team will be empowered with knowledge and skills with the added benefit to awaken their passion and purpose within themselves.”

3.

## **“The guide made up facts and incorrectly identified animals and birds”**



While this example in itself is cringe-worthy, it goes beyond a guide not knowing his or her stuff: it ties into a bigger theme of breaking your guests' trust.

Visitors also feel this pain when lodges do not stick to their promises: staff 'forget' about the complimentary cocktails during an anniversary weekend, get the reservation wrong, cancel a booking on short notice, or need to be reminded repeatedly of an agreed refund.

We know that safari lodge businesses are complicated animals and things *do* go wrong – but how do you keep the trust intact?

***What visitors also say:***

*"It's been 3 months and endless emails – we still have not received our money back."*

*"We complained about the incorrect booking, but the manager just shrugged like it was not his problem."*

**How to avoid it:**

- Cultivate a culture of honesty, integrity and human connection in your business – this gets you a lot further than typical customer service training.
- Empower your staff to find creative solutions and deal with the problem right there and then – timing is everything and the managers can't be everywhere at once.
- Apologize in a way that makes a difference – acknowledge the pain or disappointment, give a clear explanation, and offer a workable solution. People react well to people who are authentic, not information.

**The fairy-tale version:** "Our room wasn't ready when we arrived, which was fine because we were spoilt with free head massages and cocktails on the deck while we waited. Exactly what we needed after a long day's travel!"

**Liesel's advice on getting to the fairy-tale:** "Build your team's ability to turn challenging situations around with practical [customer experience training workshops](#). Don't leave the handling of service failures to chance and give your team the tools to create the desired experiences."

4.

**"It's a zoo – we thought we were going to the Kruger"**

Remember that one about a picture and a thousand words? If that gorgeous lion cub picture on

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your website is actually a stock image (and you have no lions), or your words (i.e. marketing copy) leaves room for misinterpretation – you'll end up with a thousand angry words on [Tripadvisor](#).

***What visitors also say:***

*“The lodge pictures were not at all what we got when we arrived.”*

*“We didn't see the animals we had wanted to see; they only had two kinds of deer.”*

**How to avoid it:**

- If you have a smaller collection of game, be truthful and rather highlight any special offerings your lodge might have.
- Do not hide behind the small print – if there is a chance that a guest could misinterpret your location or value proposition, clarify it in a fun, interesting way and turn your human connection into your unique selling point.
- Ensure that your photos and descriptions on travel aggregator websites (e.g. Booking.com) or promotional platforms (e.g. DaddysDeals) are authentic and correct.

**The fairy-tale version:** “It's a smaller lodge and we only saw three of the Big 5 – but the owners' passion for the bush and interest in our family made this an absolute highlight on our South African trip.”

**Liesel's advice on getting to the fairy-tale:** “Know in what way *your* target customers are different and use this to turn your weak spots into strengths when you design your [customer journey](#).”

5.

**“We arrived at a construction site – a honeymoon from hell”**

For successful luxury safari lodges, the need to expand and renovate will crop up eventually. Handling your communication wrong can turn your potential return visitors into detractors: we all know that customers only turn to social media and [Hellopeter](#) when they have one of two emotions – elation or deep disappointment.

***What visitors also say:***

*“The luxury chalets that we originally booked were being renovated – we got a cheaper rate, but it was still a disappointment.”*

*“The building noise completely ruined the atmosphere while we ate dinner.”*

**How to avoid it:**



- Keep your booked guests in the loop – they will value your honesty and that you trust them with the correct information and adjust their expectations.
- Manage your guests' emotional journey (from before they arrive) with workable compromises.
- Give them options to avoid a feeling of disempowerment – e.g. to cancel (for a full refund of course), to go to an alternative lodge (where you have negotiated the same rates for them), or to get a meaningful discount and/or something extra like a complimentary game drive or a romantic picnic in the bush.

**The fairy-tale version:** “We were upgraded to the honeymoon suite because the swimming pool was being retiled – we spent our ‘swimming’ time in the romantic jacuzzi instead...”

**Liezel’s advice on getting to the fairy-tale:** “Step into your customers’ shoes and design your [customers’ journey](#). Where many only design for the desired experience, the trick is to design for when things go wrong, such as renovations or natural disasters. This will give your lodge an edge because your team will know how to create magic in these situations.”

6.

## “It’s Disneyland in the bush!”

Every one of your guests sees his or her African safari as an intimate, personal experience that they’ve dreamed and talked about for months (this ‘promise’ has also built into your romantic marketing images). The feeling of just being ‘one of many’ as they are simply ‘processed’, will break their hearts.

### ***What visitors also say:***

*“There was no flexibility, no individual attention, no feeling of personal warmth.”*

*“The whole trip felt rushed and like nobody paid much attention to us.”*

### **How to avoid it:**

- Take a good hard look at your customer’s ‘journey’ – is it built for a human, or for your bottom line? It might be time to redesign.
- Do an honest audit of your lodge’s current capacity in terms of time and effort that your staff can realistically commit to your guests’ experience. If they are under pressure, it will reflect back to the guests as a lack of interest in making their visit special.
- Check in with your staff weekly to find out how they are coping, and make sure everyone

feels they can be honest and contribute meaningfully.

**The fairy-tale version:** “We could start our safari as early as we wanted, whenever we wanted.”  
“The staff went out of their way to make our visit special!”

**Liezel’s advice on getting to the fairy-tale:** “Look at your lodge’s long-term approach to be the number 1 choice as a desired safari spot with a well-crafted [customer experience strategy](#). Considering all the elements of customer experience will keep you in business for the long haul with good reviews and happy guests and staff.”

7.

## “It was ok”

While this might not sound like a horrible travel experience, the word ‘ok’ in a review can be the kiss of death in an industry where the wow-factor is expected at almost every turn.

### **What visitors also say:**

*“The food was ok for a typical lodge, nothing to write home about.”*

*“The guide was ok; the one at a previous lodge was more knowledgeable.”*

### **How to avoid it:**

- Ask tough questions and be willing to scrutinize your business: would *you* be extraordinarily impressed by your offering? If not, get working on those areas – even if it’s just small things for now.
- Be present and observe your visitors’ stay – the atmosphere in the lodge and the casual conversations between guests will quickly illuminate if they are having a ‘just ok’ experience.
- Greet your visitors when they check-out to get a real, in-person sense of what their emotional state is – if the ball was dropped somewhere, you have a (very small) window to elevate their mood.

**The fairy-tale version:** “Too many highlights to mention – all we would conclude is that this should not be missed!”

**Liezel’s advice on getting to the fairy-tale:** “Elevate your lodge experience by thoughtfully and creatively [designing a magical journey](#) for everyone that visit you.”

**YOUR NEXT LUXURY SAFARI READ:** [The real 'big 5' of visitor joy on luxury safaris: How to get spectacular reviews and return clients](#)