

Adventure Without the Adrenaline:
A NEW INCENTIVE OPPORTUNITY

Adventure is about more than adrenaline. **Nic Shaw**, Chair of the **SATSA** Adventure Chapter, explores how South Africa's soft adventure experiences can create meaningful connections, enhance incentive programmes and deliver memorable rewards, while keeping inclusivity, safety and professional standards at the forefront.



I'd like to make the case that playing it safe is costing you more than you think.

Every incentive planner has faced the same anxiety. You have a group of forty delegates with a mix of ages, fitness levels, and risk appetites, and you need to design an experience that both brings them together and rewards them meaningfully.
The instinct, understandably, is to play it safe. Another sunset cruise. Another gala dinner.

ADVENTURE ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK IT IS

The root of the word "adventure" comes from the Latin advenio – to arrive. Not to survive or conquer, but simply to arrive somewhere uncertain, with curiosity and a willingness to try something new.

The global Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) defines adventure travel as any trip combining at least two of three elements: physical activity, a natural environment, and cultural immersion. Under that definition, a guided bush walk qualifies as adventure, and so does a township cycling tour or a morning spent paddling on a river. You don't need to throw anyone off a bridge. This broader definition is what SATSA's 101 Adventures initiative is built on, and it completely changes the conversation for incentive planners. South Africa has well over 101 adventure experiences available to groups, ranging from disorienting ecstasy to deeply grounding wonder.
The question isn't whether your group can handle adventure. It's about finding the right point on that spectrum for your people.

One framework I find useful is thinking about an Adventure Intensity Index. A simple 1-to-10 scale that accounts for physical exertion, technical skill, perceived risk, and remoteness. A classic game drive sits around a 4: no fitness required, but the thrill of not quite knowing what's around the next bend. A guided cycle through the Winelands on e-bikes might be a 3. A two-day slack-packing trail in the Cederberg, a 6.

This kind of thinking aids planners in designing experiences with honest expectations, and it helps groups with mixed demographics participate confidently, rather than opting out.

WHY SOFT ADVENTURE WORKS HARDER FOR INCENTIVE GROUPS

What I've observed over many years working in adventure tourism, including transformative expedition work with young people, is that shared uncertainty creates connection in a way that comfort rarely does. When a group navigates something together, even something modest that only feels uncertain, they build a story. And stories are the currency of incentive travel.

Soft adventure delivers this without demanding exceptional fitness or an appetite for adrenaline. It also delivers true wellness value and authentic cultural engagement.

Spending time outdoors and moving your body, even gently, has measurable positive effects on mood and cognitive function. So, rather than being nice-to-haves, guided walks in the bushveld or kayaking excursions speak directly to the wellness outcomes that HR directors and C-suite sponsors increasingly want to see reflected in their incentive programmes.
The cultural dimension is important too. Locally guided experiences give delegates direct engagement with South African communities and heritage – authentic encounters that no conference room can replicate, and that participants carry home long after the programme ends.

There's also a practical argument for soft adventure that doesn't get made often enough: it's truly flexible. E-bikes, for instance, have transformed cycling as an incentive activity.

What was once inaccessible to less fit or older delegates is now entirely viable. The technology closes the gap between what people want to experience and what they feel capable of doing.

Urban micro-adventures, such as a guided trail run through Cape Town's City Bowl or a street-art walking tour in Johannesburg, can be slotted into busy conference programmes without requiring a full day's logistics. Adventure, in other words, has become considerably more plannable than its reputation suggests.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS MOST: WHO IS MANAGING THE RISK?

Adventure activities need to feel exciting for participants. The perceived risk (that is, the sense that the outcome isn't 100% guaranteed) is precisely what creates the experience. But the objective risk, the actual likelihood of something going wrong, must be managed entirely by the operator. That balance is the whole point of professional adventure guiding, and it's where the industry has not always served planners well.

One poor experience can damage perceptions of an entire destination. It's not just about one operator's business – one incident becomes everyone's liability.

This is why SATSA introduced its adventure tourism self-regulation programme in 2023.

Rather than waiting for government legislation, the industry took ownership. The 101 Adventures framework, developed with direct input from operators, insurers, and adventure experts, provides practical toolkits for every major adventure category, including hiking and trekking, paddling and rafting, wheel-based activities, aerial experiences, and boat-based operations. Each toolkit includes a self-regulation roadmap, standard operating procedures, a code of good practice, and participant care guidelines. Operators who complete the self-assessment process receive a certification they can display to trade partners and clients.

When incentive planners are selecting an adventure operator for a corporate group, the SATSA certification gives you evidence that the operator has benchmarked themselves against internationally aligned standards, carries appropriate public liability insurance, and has thought systematically about risk management rather than relying on experience and good intentions alone. SATSA has also entered into a formal partnership with ATTA, the global industry body, which is progressively bringing South African standards into alignment with international benchmarks.

The self-regulation programme is still building momentum – not every operator has completed the process yet. But that's exactly why it's a useful filter for planners: asking whether a prospective operator has engaged with the 101 Adventures framework is a meaningful question, and the answer tells you something important.







WHAT TO ASK BEFORE YOU BOOK

When evaluating an adventure operator for an incentive programme, I'd suggest working through the following:

On safety and standards: What public liability insurance does the operator carry, and what does it cover for commercial group operations?

On guides and qualifications: Are guides formally qualified for this specific activity? Not just experienced, but trained and certified? For any activity in a remote location, do guides hold wilderness-appropriate first aid qualifications?

There's a big difference between basic first aid and wilderness-specific training (especially when you're an hour from the nearest road).

On group suitability: How does the operator assess and accommodate mixed fitness levels? What provisions exist for participants who need to modify their level of participation mid-activity? What is the maximum group size, and what is the guide-to-participant ratio?

On incident history: Has the operator had any significant safety incidents in the past three years? How were they managed, and what changed as a result? A good operator won't be defensive about this question.

South Africa has over 101 distinct adventure experiences available to visiting groups, across landscapes that no competitor destination can match. The opportunity for incentive planners isn't to make adventure the centrepiece of every programme – it's to stop leaving it off the table because it feels complicated or risky.
The framework exists to make it manageable.
The experiences exist to make it memorable.
The only thing left is the decision to move beyond the gala dinner. 4



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