

Planning your safari

Why do I need a safari consultant?

This is a question frequently asked by independent-minded, seasoned travelers once they have decided to embark on the long journey to Africa for a safari.

Arranging a safari looks pretty simple until you Google “African safari” and are faced with several thousand enticing web offerings in a half a dozen countries.

Yes, it is possible to make reservations directly online. It is, however, unlikely that you will be able to save money as the rates quoted are what is called “rack rates” while consultants and agents usually work on a basis of STO (Standard Tour Operator) rates that eventually add up to about the same or even less once their commission is added. And you run the real and imminent risk of purchasing a second rate trip.

It is true that some consultants might factor in additional commissions for their services and expertise. After all, you are not only tapping into their extensive personal knowledge and experience at the planning

stage of the trip but should be able to rely on them throughout your journey for assistance and adjustments in case of any unforeseen crises along the way.

Stay away from anyone in the business that simply sells you the trip, hands you the vouchers and bids you *bon voyage*.

Insist on being able to communicate with your safari consultant directly or indirectly in the event of an emergency. It is his or her job to work with the service providers in the field to find the best possible solution to any problem that may arise along the way.

A safari consultant worthy of his or her title needs to be willing to step in and assist with alternative arrangements necessitated by sickness, cancelled and missed commercial flights. He or she should also insist on regular reports from the field during a clients’ journey to be sure that everything is going smoothly.

Keep in mind that even the softest bed and most delicious food do not make a good safari. It is only part of the total experience. Much more important are the



Safari Snaps



Leaving for safari country



Hemingway Classic



Lunch in the wild



Hemingway on Steroids



Lounge in the wild



Relaxing at a waterhole

quality of the field guide or ranger and the quantity and variety of animals to be seen. Even the best guide cannot produce wildlife where there is little or none.

A consultant relying on first-hand experience should be able to lead you to the best destinations. He or she should also be able to customize your journey to suit your own preferences and budget.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Following are a few questions that you may want to ask when you approach a safari consultant to take care of your arrangements.

About the consultant

- **Do you have extensive safari experience?** (This is very important.)
- **Do you have first-hand knowledge of the parks and lodges that you recommend?** (As important as the first question).
- **Do you specialize in African trips?** (If it is a larger tour operator that handles other exotic destinations you at least want to know that it has an African department with knowledgeable people who qualify on the previous two counts).
- **How many years have you been in the business?** (While it is obviously reassuring to work with a business that has a proven record, it would be unwise to rule out a new one, especially if it has recruited experienced safari specialists to join its team. Remember every business has to start at some point).
- **Do you have former clients in my neighborhood that can be contacted for referral?** (This is more important than the previous question. Word-of-mouth recommendations do count, even in young businesses).

- **What are your or your service provider's professional affiliations and track record?** (It is comforting to know that a specialist who handles your money on up-front payments belongs to recognized trade associations and is insured. But that is not enough. It is your responsibility to take out travel insurance that ensures a refund should you have to cancel your trip at the last moment or cut short your visit for medical or other catastrophic reasons).
- **On what basis do you charge for your services—a fee or commissions included in your price?** (Most specialists, including me, will derive their payment from a commission in the price quoted to you. Some might, however, charge you a fee for their advice and assistance).
- **Do you handle commercial flight bookings, if needed?** (While some consultants can do this, you might want to make these arrangements separately, especially if you have a stack of mileage points or belong to a credit card company that offers special deals on major airlines. Your safari should include charter flights between camps).
- **Do you monitor my movements with your associates in Africa** to be sure that everything is going smoothly and can my friends or relatives back home reach you at any time, day or night, in case of an emergency.

About the Destination

- **What kind of animals can I expect to see at this game reserve?** (Keep in mind that no one will guarantee the Big Five or any other animals but they should be able to tell you whether they are present in a reserve or park. Also remember that game reserves that do not have all of the Big Five often offer other unique sightings that are just as exciting and interesting).



- **Does my guide have a thorough knowledge of the animals that we are about to see?** (This question should be redundant when it comes to private game lodges that offer game drives under the guidance of a qualified field guide. It is, however, pertinent when you opt for a tour led by someone who is both driver and tour guide. They are not necessarily certified field guides).
- **Does this game reserve conform to environmentally sound practices?** (You should avoid any establishment where bait is set to attract animals. Although quite rare as offenders risk being ostracized, there have been instances where predators were lured with bait to ensure a “sighting.” This is not only ethically but also environmentally questionable. Insist on going to a place where nature is allowed to do its own thing. You don’t have to travel across the ocean to see a feeding day at a zoo).
- **Is everything included in the price?** (At higher priced private lodges and camps your liquor as well as laundry are usually included in the price but at others you might be charged extra for both. Transfer by air or road between lodges as well as park fees and levies should also be included).
- **Is the lodge situated in a game reserve or is it located outside a game park or on a game farm?** (There is a whole range of possibilities: Private lodges and hotels outside national parks; rest camps, hotels or private lodges inside national parks; and, ultimately, private lodges or camps in private game reserves. Be sure you know exactly what you are being offered).
- **Is it a game reserve or a game farm?** (Some destinations—especially those close to urban centers—are on former farmland stocked with game. These are not to be confused with, for example, private game reserves or private concessions within national parks.).
- **What type of accommodation?** (Private destinations in Southern and East Africa try to outdo each other in bush chic but they are all in essence thatched-roof chalets or suites and luxury tents. More modest versions on the same theme are available in the national parks where visitors may opt for fully or self-serviced units. In East Africa’s popular parks such as Serengeti and the Maasai Mara less intimate hotel accommodation is available).



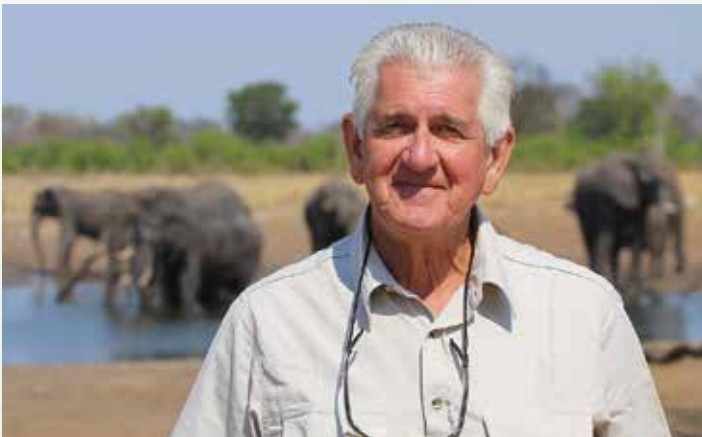
- **Am I assured that I will not be caught up in crowds of people instead of herds of animals?** (Beware of package safari trips where you are hoarded together with numerous other unfortunate souls attracted by cheap offerings. Rather stay home and watch the *National Geographic* channel from your easy chair. Being part of a herd of *homo sapiens* viewing a few animals from afar is most definitely not a safari but a waste of your time and money).

As a long-time safari specialist, published wildlife photographer and incurable addict, I enjoy customizing upscale trips for discerning clients who expect great accommodations and good food far from the madding crowds.

My clients stay at camps personally evaluated and approved by me, They are under the care of professionals from the moment they arrive until they depart.

We guarantee smooth transitions and constant care and bring clients close but safely to the animals, either in an open six-seater vehicle and, if they wish, during nature walks.

Feel free to contact me when you are ready for your trip of a lifetime.



Dr. Les de Villiers
les@theultimatesafari.com
+1-203-966-9645

FURTHER READING

For further information about safari planning please visit our website at www.theultimatesafari.com or click on either of the two book covers.

SAFARI 101 is a free brochure available in downloadable or print format. THE ULTIMATE SAFARI GUIDE can be purchased either in printed book or Kindle format at amazon.com.

