

## Getting Started

So you have decided to go on an African safari after hearing from others about their unforgettable experiences, seeing a documentary or reading a book about life in the African bush. You turn to your search engine on the Internet and are confronted by thousands of Safari offerings.

They all look great but the problem is which one to select. That is why most prospective safarists need input from knowledgeable and reliable experts. But it does help to do your own homework as well.

Planning a safari in Africa is something that takes time. It is a long journey, regardless from which part of the world you start out. Following, are a few issues to consider before you approach a specialist to help arrange your safari. *Most of these are discussed in greater detail in separate chapters. Simply click on the links:*

### Start early

The growing popularity of safari destinations in Southern and East Africa and the large number of repeat visitors make it necessary to start early. Some private game lodges and camps provide accommodation for as few as 8 to 12 guests and fill up

a year ahead. Although the national game parks are less likely to be booked out quite as early, foreigners compete with the locals for accommodations in these less expensive rest camps.

### Cost

When planning a safari—as in most other things in life—cost is usually the first consideration. At the bottom end of the scale are safari destinations at reasonably low prices in national parks and at the top end privately-owned destinations that are quite expensive. The price tag per person per night ranges from about \$100 in the cheapest self-service unit in a national game park to \$2,000 per person in luxurious private bush establishments that win truckloads of accolades and awards abroad. The low-budget traveler is obviously best advised to concentrate on the national game parks. In these parks there is a choice of staying in state-run lodges or renting self-service units. These visitors do their own driving or rely on tour operators. The old saying, you get what you pay for and nothing more, definitely applies. Be on your guard against “tour operators” that offer you everything for next to nothing. You definitely do not want to join the day trippers who crowd into vehicles lined up to take a peek at animals at great distance. Rule of thumb, if your budget is tight, economize on the air travel to Africa and spend your money on the best possible safari experience.



## National Parks

Most national parks offer an abundance of wildlife and comfortable accommodations that vary from self-service rondawels or bandas (circular thatched roof chalets) to fully serviced lodges. The term rest camp is commonly used to describe a grouping of chalets or, in some cases, tents. In most national parks you are confined to the road. There are, however, a few exceptions. In Kruger National Park, for instance, special off-road safaris are offered under the guidance of game wardens.

## Private Reserves

Extra dollars at the private game lodges buy exclusivity and personal care. From the moment they arrive until they depart, guests are pampered with good food, plush accommodations and personalized safari excursions. Facilities and meals compare with the best in the world. Instead of waiting along the road for animals to come to them, guests are taken to the animals by experienced field guides in sturdy 4x4 vehicles. In most private game reserves visitors are treated to night drives to view nocturnal wildlife—something that is not allowed in national game parks where a curfew is in effect from dusk to dawn. *(For further detail read [Bush Chic](#))*

## Safari Consultant

The first step is to find a reputable safari consultant, agent or tour operator who knows Africa and has been on safari often. It is not wise to simply pick a trip out of glossy brochure and hope for the best. Rely on real experts who know the various destinations that they promote or suggest on a first hand basis. Conditions change. New private lodges spring up in the bush and long established ones wither on the vine. *(For further detail read [Safari Consultant](#))*

## Where to go

Game parks and reserves differ in their animal population. For example, Kruger National Park and Serengeti National Game Reserve—and their satellite private game reserves—offer an almost complete range. Kruger might offer greater variety but no other



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*Africa's most dangerous animal*

park comes close to Serengeti in sheer numbers of wildebeest and zebra. Chobe in Botswana is known for its large elephant herds. Grevy's zebra and the reticulated giraffe are limited to East Africa and Burchell's zebra and common giraffe are mostly found in Southern Africa. Hluhluwe Park in South Africa is known for its thriving white rhinoceros population as it was the recovery site for this species that became almost extinct in other parts of the continent. Etosha in Namibia offers the best viewing of the black rhino. St. Lucia in South Africa is a birders paradise and Lake Nakuru in Kenya turns into a sea of pink as two million flamingoes congregate in its soda-rich waters. The main focus in Uganda is on the gorillas. Mahale Mountains Park along Lake Tanganyika in Tanzania is the foremost area for chimpanzee viewing. It should, however, be remembered that none of these destinations guarantee visitors a sighting of every animal during the limited time at their disposal. These are game parks where animals roam freely, not zoo's. *(For further detail read [Where to Go](#))*

## Big Five

Many first-time safarists go to Africa with the intention to see the Big Five—lion, elephant, rhinoceros, leopard and buffalo. These animals were

dubbed by big game hunters as the most dangerous creatures in the African bush. While no one would contest the ferocity of any of these animals when cornered or wounded, the hippopotamus is strangely absent, considering that it is responsible for more human deaths than any of the Big Five. The deaths caused by hippos are usually without malice or forethought. The victims are mostly mistakenly perceived as a threat during a chance encounter as the tubby tuba-mouthed vegetarians return along its narrow trail after a night's grazing. Travelers who are obsessed with the idea of seeing the Big Five on their first trip are best advised to spend the extra money and opt for a private game reserve where expert rangers can track the animals into the bush instead of waiting for them to come to the road. On their follow-up journeys these visitors will, like other seasoned safarists, begin to understand that seeing the Big Five is only one dimension of a multi-faceted experience. Beyond the thrill of the Big Five is a whole universe of animals, large and small, that makes for fascinating viewing. *(For further detail read [The Big Five](#))*

### **When to go**

The conventional wisdom is to go on safari during the dry winter season when foliage is sparse and animals can be spotted more easily. Animals gather in large numbers around the remaining water holes. In most regions this means May until September. However, a visit during the summer

rainy season has its own advantages. Animals are in peak condition and it is breeding season for many species. The seasonal impact on animal life is dramatically underscored by the migration of some two million wildebeest, zebra, and gazelle from Tanzania's Serengeti towards greener pastures in Kenya's Maasai Mara. The best period to see the migration from the Serengeti side is usually between June and August as the wildebeest assemble in large herds to cross the Grumeti River on their way north. Visitors to the Maasai Mara can expect to see the large herds arrive between August and September and remain until October or November before they move south again. Even though this migration makes Tanzania and Kenya popular destinations during part of the rainy season other remote game regions can become totally inaccessible in heavy downpours. Bird enthusiasts are also more likely to spot certain migratory birds during the wet season. Safarists who wish to enjoy other attractions in the host countries outside the game parks might have to compromise. In South Africa, for example, Cape Town with its spectacular scenery and great beaches is at its best during the summer months at the very time when game viewing is at a low point up north in Kruger National Park and adjoining private parks. Ultimately the choice will depend on availability and—if there are children involved—on school holidays. Keep in mind that rates are usually reduced during off-peak periods. Our chart on the opposite page is offered



**Two of the Big Five sharing water**

© Les de Villiers



*A universe of animals, large and small*

merely as a useful general guideline. **(For further detail read *When to Go*)**

### **With whom**

Safari for the most part is a group experience. Even individuals and single families starting out by themselves are likely to be teamed up with others once they get to private game lodges. Exceptions are those who opt for a self-driving experience in the national parks (something only for the seasoned with plenty of time) or those who find themselves in an under-booked private game reserve in the off-season—a rare occurrence. It stands to reason that groups in private game parks are usually smaller and assured of greater personal attention from game rangers. Bush ambience makes for easy bonding and it never takes long before groups develop camaraderie. Those who are absolutely dead set against sharing the experience with strangers have the option of making up large enough groups of their own at home—six is sufficient to fill most vehicles in the wild—or get privacy by paying extra. Regardless of whether viewing is with relatives, friends or strangers, group etiquette applies and rangers will often depend on consensus in deciding when to move on from one viewing spot to another. A combination of birders, tree experts and mammal seekers can make for a difficult but not impossible combination. They might even learn from each other. Incidentally, certified

rangers are thoroughly trained to field questions in all departments.

### **What it Takes**

Most game viewing is done from a vehicle although there are some areas where walking is allowed or small boats are utilized to observe both land and water animals. It is also possible to go on a balloon ride in some game areas. In the Okavango Delta where marshes and water canals make ballooning complicated, helicopter rides are offered. Occasionally horses, elephants and camels are the mode of transport. Some game parks also rely on stationery hides near water holes where animals congregate. Vehicles are, in effect, movable hides as most animals regard these objects as harmless as opposed to humans approaching on foot. Two basic types of vehicles are used: Minivans or microbuses equipped with pop-up roofs are used mostly in East Africa and customized open four-wheel-drive vehicles are standard fare in Southern African game lodges. While minibuses are quite effective on the open plains of Serengeti they are hardly suitable for off-roading in the rugged Southern African bushveld. Private lodges in Southern Africa always limit the number of passengers in their open eight seater vehicles to six. There have, however, been instances elsewhere where clients found themselves squeezed into middle seats in minibuses run by tour operators. Always be sure to insist on guaranteed window seats. Age and physical condition will obviously determine whether you opt for hiking safaris. Barring Uganda where a rigorous mountain walk is required to get to the gorilla domain, most game viewing requires little or no exertion. Some private lodges make special provision for the handicapped.

### **Children**

On a self-drive safari into national parks the decision whether to embark on the journey with small children is yours as there are usually no age restrictions. Most private game lodges, however, apply age restrictions for obvious reasons. Their adult guests pay big bucks for the experience and although they might be doting grandparents at home they did not plan on spending their game viewing experience with a stranger's toddlers. Still, there are a few private lodges that provide baby-sitters for parents with

infants. It should also be noted that youngsters do not have to wait until they reach driving or drinking age before they are allowed to go on their first game drive. Age restrictions range from between 8 to up to 16 years. When considering taking the kids along, keep in mind that a family safari is bound to turn out as a great experience for all concerned. Television will be forgotten and electronic toys tossed aside from the moment the youngsters set foot in the bush. They are bound to become engrossed in this fascinating animal kingdom and will have much to show and tell when they return.

### How long?

A few days in a private game park where visitors are taken into the bush by experienced rangers might be sufficient to see a wide variety of animals. On the other hand, going to a national park normally requires a greater length of time as visitors have to wait for animals to come close to demarcated roads and trails. Considering the distance to Africa and assuming that you are not only going to view wildlife but to enjoy the total bush experience, at least a week seems more appropriate. Experienced safarigoers usually split their time between several game parks on a single trip and most add on another week to visit the rest of the region. Southern and East Africa have much to offer beyond wildlife safaris—ranging from beaches to bustling cities, tribal cultures to haute couture, golf course, delectable dishes and

*Father and son, aged eight, ready for a morning drive*



delightful wines. Ten days will, however, suffice, including international travel time, if you merely wish to go on safari to two different private game reserves.

### What to wear

Much has been said and written about how wild animals are supposed to respond negatively to bright colors. (There are even those who claim that strong perfume might either scare away or inflame some creatures to go into an attack mode!) Conspiracy theorists might speculate whether the story about clothes was started by stores eager to peddle their latest safari gear. Still, most prospective safarigoers need no encouragement to set off to their neighborhood stores in search of the “right” gear once they have made up their minds to go to Africa. Khaki just seems so appropriate. By the way, most game reserves stock a whole range of safari clothing and headgear with their own logo. Vests with ample pockets for camera accessories and double duty long pants with leggings that can be unzipped to convert them into shorts, are popular. It is important to take along a warm sweater or windbreaker, regardless of the color, to wear during evening and early morning drives. Even in summer, hot days are followed by cool nights. Early morning drives tend to be chilly. Don’t bother to take along heavy walking boots unless your safari plans call for extensive hiking in the bush.

### What to pack

Unless you are determined to make a splendid sartorial statement in the bush, stick with comfortable casual clothes. There might be the odd occasion enroute to the game reserves to dress up for dinner at city restaurants but definitely not on safari. For chilly evenings, pack a sweater or windbreaker. Light, comfortable shoes are called for unless you intend to do some hiking in the bush, which would require heavier footwear. Be sure to take along a wide-rimmed hat, sun-block and sunglasses. All of these items are of course also available at the parks, should you forget. Buy insect repellent from your local store if you are hung up on a specific brand that might not be readily available elsewhere. A flashlight is a convenient accessory. If you have a pair

of binoculars, take it along. *(Read further about Binoculars)*. Otherwise you will have to take your turn in sharing binoculars made available to guests by the game rangers. (Some of the upscale camps actually provide guests with loaner binoculars as a courtesy). Usually visitors are limited by bush pilots and even road transport minibuses to overnight-size bags and required to leave their bulkier luggage at city hotels or the airport. Take along a convenient carry-on bag for this purpose. Some charter air providers stipulate soft-sided duffel bags without wheels. There are safari facilitators that will actually provide you with the appropriate bags at a reasonable cost or as a complimentary item. *(For further detail read What to Pack)*

### Getting There

Regardless of whether you start from the Americas, Europe, the Far East or Australasia, you are guaranteed to arrive in Johannesburg, Windhoek, Harare, Livingstone, Nairobi, Arusha, Entebbe, Maun



*Duffel bag provided to its clients by The Ultimate Safari*

or any of the other transit international airports, somewhat jagged and jet lagged. Visitors might have to spend their first night at a city or airport hotel before continuing on to the game parks, depending on their time of arrival. Some prefer to make their own international air bookings using mileage points on their preferred airline while others rely on a travel specialist to obtain the best rates with the air carriers. The continuing journey from these major airports in Africa might be by commercial carrier to a smaller

airport closer to the game region or by charter or bush planes that can land on airstrips in the bush. In some instances where time is of little consideration or distances not too prohibitive you might choose to go by road to take in some of the countryside. This is obviously the given mode for those who opted for self-drive safaris in a national park in a rented vehicle. Keep in mind that some camps, such as those in private concessions in Botswana's Okavango Delta, can only be reached by air. *(For further detail read Getting There)*

### Road travel

Even though much of your driving to the game area may be on tarmac, dirt roads are common in reserves. Kruger National Park's tarred roads are the exception. Therefore if you intend to take along a laptop computer to download digital images and keep a diary of your trip be cautioned that some of these "roads" can be a challenge not only to the human spine but to fragile equipment. Unless you intend to keep all this stuff on your lap for the duration of the journey, acquire or devise a bag with soft padding to absorb the shock. If your travel plans include extended journeys along unpaved country roads you should also prepare yourself for some amount of dust—especially during the dry season favored as prime viewing time. A few ordinary plastic shopping or garbage bags to wrap around dust-sensitive equipment might come in handy.

### Camera

Even if your camera expertise might have peaked at the point-and-shoot level you should take along some kind of photographic equipment. While your friends back home might not be thrilled having to sit through a long picture show of questionable quality, a few shots of your life in the wild might be appreciated. Serious photographers will obviously take along telephoto lenses as well as specialized camera batteries and accessories. Film is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain and those who are still set on shooting on celluloid are advised to bring along their own supplies. Some private game lodges transfer digital pictures to CDs as a courtesy for guests who need additional space on their memory card. *(For photographic tips read Picturing Wildlife)*

## Travel Insurance

An emergency might necessitate a last-minute cancellation after all the monies have been paid. While on your journey baggage might get lost or someone might get sick, requiring, in the worst case scenario, evacuation and hospitalization. You need insurance to take care of these unexpected unfortunate occurrences. Typically travel protection insurance reimburses financial penalties for late cancellation as a result of illness, injury or death, pays costs relating to medical emergencies on tour, provides for emergency evacuation transportation, and covers lost or stolen baggage. Some safari operators automatically include emergency evacuation insurance in their pricing while others has this as a precondition for visitors. Travel and medical insurance can be purchased through travel agents or directly from insurers. The latter is the preferred course as agents will no doubt add a commission. Several credit card companies provide travel insurance at reasonable rates. ***(For further detail read Travel & Medical Insurance)***

## Health Issues

Malaria has been eradicated from large parts of Africa and many game parks can claim to be malaria-free. Nevertheless, it is prudent to take malaria pills, starting before the trip and continuing for a few weeks afterwards, as prescribed. Travel to a few remote parts of Africa might also require immunization against yellow fever, cholera, typhoid, and hepatitis. Your physician, the local health department and Center for Disease Control (CDC) are all useful sources of information and able to provide assistance. ***(For further detail read Immunization)***

## Passports and Visas

Obviously a valid passport is needed to visit any of these safari countries. In most cases passports are required to have a validity of at least six months from the day of entry. Some of these countries require visas that can be obtained prior to the trip or, in most cases, on arrival at the port of entry. As rules and regulations change it is advisable to check with the respective foreign missions of each country before proceeding. ***(For further detail read Travel Documents and also consult our checklist for every individual country).***

