

# ON SAFARI IN EAST AFRICA

**It's the trip of a lifetime and the ultimate adventure!**

by David Skillan

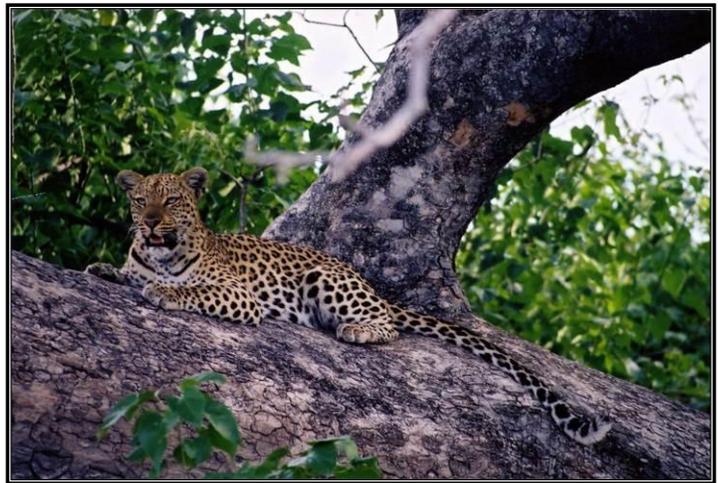
Ever dreamed of going on safari in East Africa? Judging by the profusion of TV documentaries about African wildlife, apparently many people have. But for years, owing to prohibitive costs, only Hollywood movie stars and the very wealthy could afford it.

This situation has changed dramatically since the early 1970s, when jet travel for the masses really started. A safari may still be a trip of a lifetime, but it is now well within the financial reach of budget-conscious travellers.

*Safari* is a Swahili word that has been adopted around the world to represent any type of rugged journey. In East Africa, however, whether you're making a weekend trip up country or to the coast or embarking on a three-week expedition, you're going "on safari."

Recognizing its wildlife as a prized national heritage, Kenya banned hunting in 1977, bringing the days of the hunter's triumphant return to camp bearing leopard skin and elephant tusk trophies to an end—at least in Kenya. Tanzania still permits hunting, but only in certain restricted areas. Hunting is, of course, banned in all Tanzanian game reserves and national parks.

Since the 1970s, photo safaris have become increasingly popular, as more and more people have come to shoot at the world's largest concentration of big game with cameras, recording their adventures on film or disk. One popular excursion is to float over the East African plains in a balloon, followed by a champagne breakfast.



For the first-time visitor to Kenya and Tanzania (many seasoned travellers will tell you these two countries offer the finest wildlife viewing in all of Africa, though others claim Botswana or Zambia is the best), one of the most popular and comprehensive holidays is a two-week safari followed by a few days of relaxation on the renowned coral coast of the Indian Ocean or on the island of Zanzibar.

Most people are attracted by the well-known names: Treetops, where Princess Elizabeth first heard of the death of her father, King George VI; Meru, former home of Elsa the lioness; Masai Mara and Serengeti, scene of the remarkable migration of plains game; Olduvai Gorge, better known as the Cradle of Mankind; Ngorongoro, the world's largest caldera; Lake Manyara Park, once famous for its tree-climbing lions; Lake Nakuru, awe-inspiring scene of a million pink flamingoes; and Amboseli, dominated by Africa's highest and most spectacular mountain, the 19,340-foot snow-capped Kilimanjaro.

The best times to visit are September to April, when the days are warm to hot, clear, and sunny. The rains, both long and short, fall in the intervening months, making the game more dispersed, the earth roads slippery and dangerous, and vehicles liable to bog down. Throughout the year (except on the lower plains and the coast, where it tends to get



humid), nights can be cool and even very cold.

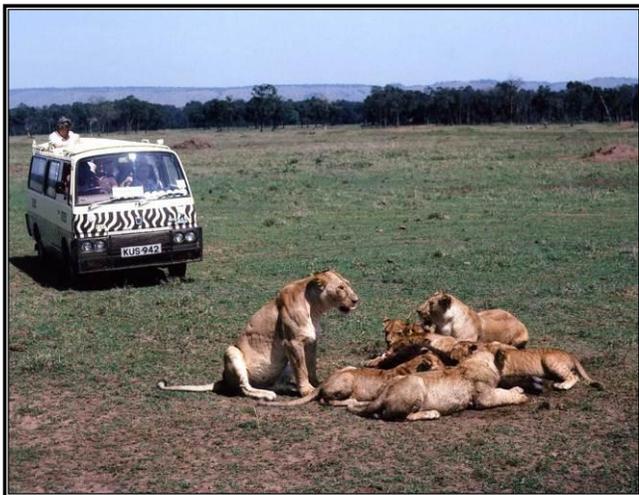
Most Kenyan safaris begin and end in Nairobi, and Tanzanian safaris in Arusha. You and your companions set off in a comfortable, specially reinforced Nissan or Toyota safari cruiser with a pop-up roof driven by an English-speaking African driver with an easy-to-remember Biblical name such as Mohammed, Samuel, or Joshua. You find him friendly and courteous, with an encyclopedic knowledge of animals, eyes like a hawk, and an incredible instinct for seeking out the most well-camouflaged and distant game. A skillful, dedicated man, he is only too anxious to show off his country and describe in detail the remarkable bird and wildlife.

Whichever safari circuit you follow, the game drive travelling pattern is the same. There's a leisurely but bumpy and sometimes dusty ride for three to four hours on a black earth or red murram track to either a game lodge or a tented camp, where you arrive in time for lunch or tea. There you spend one or two nights before proceeding to the next overnight stop. Sleep comes easily after an exciting, full day, and you quickly drop off to the strange sounds of the African night, only to be awakened by a lion roaring in the distance, a hyena cackling in the bush nearby, or a hippo or zebra grazing on the lawn outside your tent or room.

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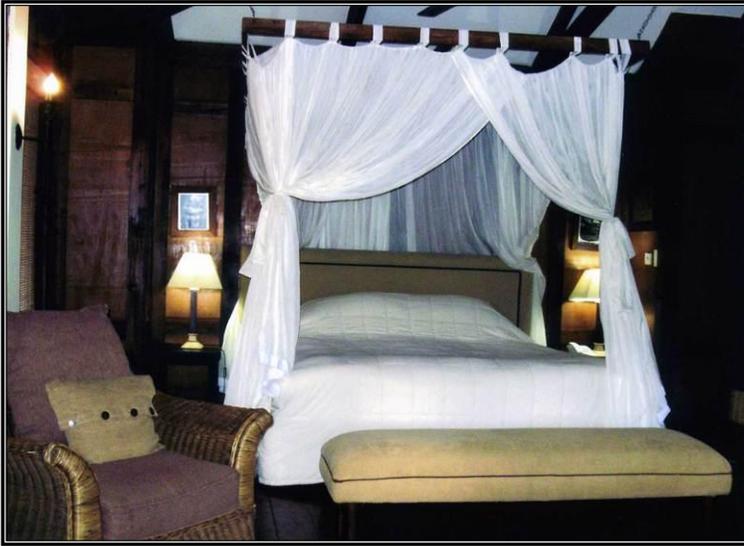


The ideal times to view game are early morning and late afternoon, when wildlife is most active. As you drive, you stop frequently to get the lay of the land through binoculars, and to take photographs. After lunch, the hottest time of the day, you write postcards, take a nap, or go for a dip in the lodge pool, while much of the wildlife retires under cover to rest. After four-o'clock tea, biscuits, and sandwiches (a tradition that dates back to the British colonial era), you go game viewing, again returning to your lodge at dusk.

The lodges and tented camps are situated two or more driving hours apart. It comes as a great surprise to most travellers to find modern buildings and facilities with all the comforts of home, often in spectacular surroundings, in the middle of nowhere.

Spacious dining rooms, elegant lounges, and outdoor swimming pools are the norm. Some lodges are even built close to water holes or salt licks, so you can spot game from your bedroom or while sipping a sundowner on the verandah. The tented camps are mosquito-proofed, have their own showers and toilets, patios, and four-poster beds, and are currently enjoying an upsurge in popularity. Not that long ago, Tanzania lagged well behind Kenya when it came to decent accommodation, food, and service, but not anymore. Over the last several years Tanzania has caught up, thanks mostly to Kenya-based hotel chains' expansion into the region. The most conspicuous is the

Serena Group, whose world-class properties are members of the Leading Hotels of the World, Ltd., and co-owned by His Royal Highness, the Aga Khan.



The food is good, and there is plenty of it. Western dishes are served at all safari stops, and Swahili food is occasionally on the menu, but most international visitors consider it too bland for their tastes. Both countries are well known for their beers, which regularly win competitions at international festivals. In Kenya, the favorite brands are Tusker and White Cap, while in Tanzania, they are Safari, Serengeti, and Kilimanjaro.

There's a thrill and wonder, as well as an element of risk, in being close to big game in its natural habitat. From beginning to end, the trip is one big adventure. The adrenalin flows when your vehicle pulls up close to a pride of lion, or when an elephant throws up his trunk and makes an "I'll scare you!" mock charge. It's not for the faint-

hearted. You're bound to see a kill or at least vultures, jackals, or hyenas devouring the remains of a carcass. You will probably witness a fight between baboons, and you might even come face to face with a buffalo or elephant near the lodge after dark. This is not a concern these days, thanks to the fact that most lodges are surrounded by electric fences, to keep the most ferocious animals at bay.

It's everyone's ambition to see Africa's Big Five—elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion, and leopard. They're considered the most dangerous species. You'll see them all, except possibly leopard, which is secretive and elusive, with largely nocturnal hunting habits. You'll also see zebra, wildebeest, warthog, giraffe, ostrich, and different types of gazelle, plus a huge variety of other animals, birds, and flora that you hardly knew existed. East Africa is home to no fewer than 200 bird species, some of which are resident year round, while others migrate to and from Europe.

The coastlines of Kenya and Tanzania are equally exotic, but Kenya is the more sophisticated and developed, with some sixty resorts and hotels north and south of Mombasa, the country's principal port and second-largest city. The famed Indian Ocean coast boasts miles of soft, white, sandy beaches and warm, crystal-clear waters, and most of the hotels have discos, displays of native dancing, and romantic candlelit dinners. Since the early 1970s, Europeans have been flocking to this exotic coastline, many regarding it as their Hawaii. Inexpensive charter flights regularly bring thousands of Germans, Brits, Scandinavians, and Italians, bent on escaping winter and lying in the sun. North Americans tend to overlook this area, but the impressive Arabian architecture, coral reef, and national marine parks are worth seeing.

Not everything in this Garden of Eden is as it should be, however. Despite considerable conservation efforts, some of the animal species are dwindling. Poaching and loss of habitat have taken their toll. In the early 1960s, when I first lived and worked in Kenya, there were some 20,000 black rhino alone. Sadly, today there are fewer than 300. The great herds of elephant that once roamed the East African forests and plains, which I knew as a young man, have been greatly reduced and fragmented, and today you usually see them only in small family groups.

East Africa has long appealed to the rich and famous, including distinguished Canadian



artist Robert Bateman. Oprah Winfrey, on her first trip to Africa several years ago, when she went to Kenya, said it was the best trip of her life. She is but one on a long list of celebrities, including movie stars (John Wayne, Katharine Hepburn, Michael Douglas) and writers (Ernest Hemingway, Elspeth Huxley, Karen Blixen), who have experienced East African safaris. Kenya, of course, was home to US president Barack Obama's late father, governmental economist Barack Obama, Sr., who was born in Kanyadhiang and raised in the sleepy little village of Nyang'oma Kogelo, in western Kenya.

Now, increasingly, ordinary people are discovering East Africa for themselves. Prices for an all-inclusive three-week holiday, including airfare from the west coast of Canada, depend on the itinerary and choice of accommodation, and range from about \$4,000 per person for a basic camping safari to about \$15,000 for an exclusive flying safari (instead of travelling by road, you fly everywhere by light aircraft). The average price for a first-class tour is between \$6,000 and \$10,000 per person, depending on duration and itinerary. Most tours include visits to Masai or Samburu villages, allowing you to witness first-hand their remarkable lifestyles and traditions.

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*Go to Africa soon,  
before the animals vanish forever.*

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Whichever safari you choose, you're bound to be enchanted by Africa. You'll undoubtedly depart from the so-called Dark Continent agreeing with safari veterans who say, "You may leave Africa, but Africa will never leave you." Don't be surprised if, once you've been on an African safari, you have an overwhelming urge to return.

A word of advice: go to Africa soon, before some of the animals vanish forever.

*For information about David Skillan's  
regular safaris to Kenya and Tanzania,  
please visit  
[www.skillansafaris.com/david-skillan-tours.html](http://www.skillansafaris.com/david-skillan-tours.html)*

