

SELECTING AN AFRICAN SAFARI DESTINATION

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1. **'Which part of Africa do you recommend: Southern or East Africa?'**

In my opinion three of the five most impressive sights in sub-Saharan Africa are in southern Africa, namely Table Bay & Mountain in South Africa's Cape Town, the dunes at Sossusvlei in Namibia and Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. The fourth and fifth ones? Ngorongoro Crater and Mt. Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania.

Northern Botswana is in a class of its own: In just 10 days there in a late May & June **fly-in safari**, we saw close on 50 lions - twice seen hunting - once for buffalo and the other time for kudu; leopard on three different occasions including one with the remains of an impala in a tree and another one with a youngster; African wild dog three times, once just seconds after they had taken down an impala; and cheetah twice, the latter sighting of a female knocking down and 'delivering' an impala to her five youngsters. This is not to mention the multiple other fantastic sightings including scores of elephants, magnificent Sable antelope, a martial

eagle on a fresh impala kill, a 'Giraffic Park' scene at one of the camps with as many as 23 giraffe in one area, all staring at cheetah and some superb night drives (including my first ever sighting of Aardwolf).

My lasting impression of a September **Discoverer Exploration Safari** such as the **Great Wilderness Journey** is the diversity of the trip: a tremendous variety of wildlife, birds, & scenery observed in an ever-changing landscape, and equally diverse activities: game drives, night drives, walking, boating, mokoro outings & an occasional moment or two to relax or to enjoy the superb food.

On a different **Adventurer Exploration Safari** such as the **Migration Routes Safari** we saw three different prides of lions (26 in all) in Moremi and Savuti, spending several hours observing and photographing them at a kill, with hardly another vehicle in sight. Other highlights included finding Pel's Fishing Owl at a delightful mokoro trails camp deep in the Okavango Delta - and watching a herd of elephants swim across the swollen Chobe River, just the tips of their trunks protruding from the water. A real 'National Geographic' moment!

On a recent winter (May-June) visit we saw almost 40 species of mammals just in **South Africa**, not to mention a wealth of different species of birds. Many private game lodges adjacent to Kruger Park offer consistently excellent game-viewing. At the best lodges, such as Mala Mala, the so-called 'Big Five' mammals can all be seen just about every day. A typical recent October day had the following reported:

- * 16 Lions at the entrance to the camp
- * 60 Elephants in the river in front of the camp
- * 400 Buffalo on the flood plain in front of the camp
- * One leopard in a tree about 1,000 yards from camp
- * Styx pride of Lions on Picadilly opposite the camp
- * Rhino at Campbell Koppies

The game viewing report for that October featured lion, leopard, buffalo, rhino and elephant seen every day. A total of 48 lions were seen on October 6 and a total of 9 different leopards were seen on Oct 22. An average of 26 lions were seen every day during October.

EAST AFRICA

For sheer numbers of game especially in areas such as the Serengeti (Tanzania) and Maasai Mara (Kenya) it is hard to beat East Africa, though. The difference (compared with most parts of Southern Africa) is that the habitat is generally more open, so the wildlife is easier to see.

I re-visited Kenya (Amboseli, Chyulu Mountains, Maaai Mara and the coast) in June 2013 and in my opinion Kenya is still the Rolls Royce of safari destinations. As we all know, Kenya has some problems yet at its core it is still a warm and friendly and amazingly beautiful country which offers visitors an astonishing array of attractions and places to visit.

Nowhere else in the world will you see as much wildlife and so many different species, in just

a week or so. Nowhere else will you be exposed to such cultural diversity in a setting where 'culture' is interwoven with the safari experience: you don't have to take a side-trip to meet with the Maasai or the Samburu. They are where the wildlife is and continue to co-exist harmoniously.

Over the space of a couple of weeks in Tanzania last November, we experienced some superb game-viewing in far northern Tanzania (on the Mara River) as well as in the remote and atmospheric Katavi national park. Buffalo, lions, hundreds of hippo, plenty of general game and few other people. The same package deal also includes several days at the really magical Greystoke Camp on Lake Tanganyika where the main objective is to find and observe a large group of very well habituated chimpanzees. The lake itself is worth the trip and the chimps are a huge bonus.

On an earlier educational trip in Tanzania, the highlights were undoubtedly the Serengeti, where we ran smack into the annual wildebeest migration in early April (it was amazing), and Ngorongoro Crater, which exceeded my expectations. Lately, the Crater has been very busy, and in fact some East African travel experts think that it is over-promised and over-sold. That is true to a degree but of course there is a reason why the place is so popular: it is special. Tanzania is a good choice for people who want to combine wildlife and culture, and we can also offer excellent programs for families with young children.

If you've already visited Kenya and Tanzania's Northern Circuit including the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater then Southern Tanzania might be a great option for you. If you appreciate Africa's truly wild and unspoiled places and everything they offer, then Ruaha National Park and the Selous Game Reserve would be perfect for you. By all means stay for a few days in each area. Certainly no less than three nights, four would be even better. This place is made for slow travel. And Zanzibar is just a short hop from Dar-es-Salaam.

Our clients who have recently traveled to Kenya have all been extremely pleased with the quality of the game-viewing there, and the cultural experience is without rival. Our best advice is to go with a private vehicle and driver. The Classic Rift Valley itinerary offers good value for a private safari with a dedicated driver-guide in a 4-wheel drive Land Rover through-out. Most of the Origins guides are KPSGA SILVER CERTIFIED professional guides and a couple of them even have the GOLD certification. In our opinion, this is the ideal introductory safari for the first time visitor to East Africa. It is perfect - you will see approximately 35 big mammal species, 350 bird species, 3 distinct tribal groups, and much more. Want to spend a bit more time in Kenya? Add 2 nights at Amboseli - in my opinion one of the two or three best places for elephant anywhere in Africa.

Comparable group trips are invariably run on a very tight schedule and many of them spend much too much time in transit, with a minimum of time allocated for actual game-viewing. Some of the packaged itineraries you may see, have lots of big names such as Mt. Kenya Safari Lodge, Treetops etc. but precious little time actually looking at wildlife, which is after all the purpose of a safari.

The wildebeest migration (depending upon local rainfall patterns) usually arrives in the Maasai Mara (from the Serengeti) sometime in July every year. However, the Mara is anything but 'empty' outside of the "migration season". All the animals that can be seen during the migration, can be seen all year round. And they can be seen in big numbers. The big prides of lions do not migrate with the wildebeests, only the bachelors without a home range do. Most

leopards and cheetahs are territorial too and do not migrate either. Many animals are actually moving out of the Mara during the migration, because the big herds of wildebeests compete with them for food. According to an article by Stelfox (Herbivores in Kenya, Journal of Wildlife Management), this is how the wildebeest migration effects other species:

	July (migration)	June (before the migration)
Wildebeests	819,500	101,700
Zebra	107,800	65,200
Tommies	90,500	106,500
Grants	18,500	19,900
Topi	25,500	31,500
Buffalo	31,500	30,000
Kongoni	5,000	8,900
Impala	51,800	59,200
Eland	4,600	8,500

As can be seen, for almost all species the numbers are actually higher in June (or for that matter any other month before July). Only wildebeests and zebras migrate in really big numbers.

So even if you travel to Kenya outside of the 'migration' time (July through October) you will still see a lot of wildlife.

2. Are Kenya and Tanzania over-commercialized? They certainly appear to be from some materials, but are they still the best place for game viewing and cultural experiences?

Too many mini-buses chasing predator sightings is not a very common occurrence in east Africa, although it can happen in some parts of the Maasai Mara and in Ngorongoro Crater, especially in the high season. However, it can largely be avoided by selecting a good operator and staying away from the crowds, in smaller camps. The Serengeti, for example, is so vast that crowding is hardly a problem, even in high season.

There is no doubt that areas such as Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve and Tanzania's Serengeti Plains and Ngorongoro Crater offer a spectacular wildlife-viewing experience, especially if a visit can be timed to witness the annual wildebeest migration. Ngorongoro Crater harbors a wonderful concentration of wildlife species on the continent, including herds of wildebeest, antelope and zebras which attract the large predators in considerable numbers. The Serengeti is unrivaled for sheer number of migratory animals and big game. With over 35 species of large game and 350 species of birds, the Serengeti is a must for any Tanzanian safari. Here you'll find antelope of all varieties, huge herds of gazelle, zebra and wildebeest; plentiful lions, as well as cheetah and other predators.

Compared with the great southern African game parks, the Mara has a greater abundance of animals, including large predators, and the wide open plains make game-viewing very rewarding. If you visit during the August wildebeest migration, you can see as many as 150,000 animals in one area. The Mara is good at any time of the year, however - there is always something to see.

3. Any advantages in selecting southern Africa?

- * The use of open safari vehicles for game drives in many areas (much better for photography than enclosed mini-vans).
- * Walking safaris with experienced guides (less commonly undertaken in east Africa).
- * Night drives with spotlights, a wonderful way to see nocturnal animals such as leopard, genet, civet and African wild cat. This is also not a common practice in east Africa.
- * Game drives by boat and mokoro (dug-out 'canoe') afford a different avenue to see some of the rarer animals and big game drinking or crossing rivers.
- * In general the overall quality of the guides in southern Africa is higher due to better training standards.

4. What are the main advantages of Eastern Africa over Southern Africa?

If you are intent on combining culture and wildlife, East Africa has no equal. Nowhere else can you see Maasai herdsmen with their cattle side by side with wild animals such as buffalo. In Tanzania's northern circuit, for example, there are many opportunities to visit Maasai homesteads or cultural bomas, experience market days in the towns and villages, and to generally experience how wildlife and people co-exist. Another reason to specifically visit East Africa is to view the annual wildebeest migration. This spectacle of seeing hundreds of thousands of animals congregated in one area has no equal in southern Africa, except for the zebra migration in the Kalahari in March/April.

5. How do Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, South Africa and Zimbabwe compare (with east Africa) for game viewing?

You could go on safari to any of these countries and see enough game to last you a life-time. The trick is in selecting the right venues, time & operator.

BOTSWANA is the place to go for excellent game-viewing and remarkably diverse scenery, especially if you really want to 'get away from it all'; most of the lodges there are on private concessions where there are few other visitors.

Conventional wisdom has it that the best time to visit Botswana is in the dry season (June through October) and while that generally holds true, there is much to be said for the "Green Season" between December and March, and for the shoulder season from April to June. From April through May, the annual flood moves into Botswana's Okavango Delta. It is an amazing sight to see the ribbons of water from the air, and to observe the changes on the ground, where a particular spot may be dry one day, only to be covered by a thin sheet of water the next.

The Okavango Delta rates very high in my personal "Travel Hall of Fame". It is not inexpensive when done the right way, which, in my opinion, is to fly in and stay at two or three first-class lodges. Three days at a 'mixed-activity' camp (offering both game drives and mokoro outings) and three more at a good game-viewing camp, as well as a visit to the Chobe-Linyanti area should suffice, depending on the time of the year.

The **Moremi Wildlife Reserve** is rated as one of the top two eco-destinations in the world by the editors of the authoritative Weissmann Travel Reports. Here's what they say: "What makes this park so spectacular is that it features an 'ark'-full of big game -- lions, leopards, hyenas, giraffes, elephants -- as well as a dramatic array of bird-life. The reserve encompasses the ecologically unique Okavango Delta, so visitors can go on a game drive in the morning, then, in the afternoon, glide along narrow, papyrus-lined streams to watch eagles, herons, storks, egrets and cranes soar overhead."

A lucky few guests at Wilderness Safaris' **Mombo Camp** on Chief's Island in the Moremi experienced the 'game drive of the year' in September a couple of years ago:

"This must rate as one of the best game drives of the year. One vehicle in one day had this experience. During the morning drive they saw five different leopards before 07h30. They then saw a lion kill a buffalo and continued on to see wild dog hunting. During the afternoon game drive they saw a huge breeding herd of elephant & then saw a cheetah kill an impala. They also viewed buffalo and all the plains game. After their game drive while sitting at the bar in camp they saw two wild dog packs fighting in camp and then both packs fighting hyena. The guests had an unbelievable time!"

Mombo has to be the predator capital of Africa. On one occasion, Wilderness Safaris' Mike Myers spent only one night there with a journalist. They did a morning and afternoon game drive and this is part of what they saw: Lion on wildebeest kill; nine different cheetah in four different sightings; four different leopard - including a group of three which were close up with all sorts of incredible interactions between the three leopard; African wild cat; a herd of 30 plus elephant; lots of buffalo everywhere; a hyena den with five pups... the list goes on and on. They were never out of sight of general game in large numbers too.

Here is what world-famous photographer Paul Augustinus had to say after a summer (February) visit to Mombo: 'The game viewing from the camp was obscenely good. One day a group of guests arrived at midday. Linda was giving them their orientation chat in the lounge as they sipped their frosty drinks. They could hardly concentrate as in front of the lodge two elephants walked by, a group of buffalo were sitting in the shade of one of the trees and in the distance two male lions walked down and drank from the marsh lagoon. One of the buffalo then rushed the lions and chased them off. The guests hadn't been in Mombo for more than ten minutes and they had seen lion elephant and buffalo plus interaction! They were impressed no end!

The views from the tents at Mombo are better than Treetops in Kenya - when it was at its very best. From our own sala in Tent 7 we saw lions and lionesses at midday on six of the fourteen days we were there - it was hard to lie back and rest, there was so much going on. Who knows what happened on that floodplain when we were out on drives in the mornings and evenings? Frankly I did not want to know as on several occasions we came back to find buffalo, elephant, lion, lechwe and bushbuck in front of the camp right next to the main deck - but the good light for photography was gone. It was tricky deciding whether to go out for game drives or stay in camp!"

Ideally one should combine Victoria Falls, Chobe-Linyanti Game Reserve and the Okavango Delta/Moremi. If you're on a budget, consider an overland 'Adventurer' type safari from

Maun, Botswana to the Victoria Falls. These trips such as the **Migration Routes** and its Discoverer equivalent, the **Great Wilderness Journey**, have received good reviews from practically every single guest we have booked since 1990. Overland fully serviced camping trips will be enjoyed by people who are sociable and who love to have other people around to share the experience. The overland trips in Botswana as well as in Namibia are definitely the most 'educational' trips available, as one has the same professional guide for the duration of the trip, who pays attention to every aspect of the natural history.

NAMIBIA should be added to any Africa travel list. The magnificent dunes at Sossusvlei, the stunning geology of the Skeleton Coast, driving across the Namib Desert, the vast expanse of the salt pan in Etosha, the fort at Namutoni and many other places are delightful and easy to get to. Namibia is definitely my personal favorite because it has the unique combination of excellent game-viewing in Etosha and the true desert experience of the Namib. Namibia has vast areas of true wilderness and it also offers some of the best opportunities in Africa for cultural experiences such as meeting the Himba people, one of the continent's least disturbed and most traditional tribes. Swakopmund - which is a little bit like a slice of Germany in the desert - is a delightful holiday destination with many activities. Wilderness Safaris will soon be opening a new property - Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp and like their previous Skeleton Coast camp it promises a lot of diversity and fascinating experiences.

Another very popular trip is the 'Best of Namibia' circuit safari, which includes the massive dunes at Sossusvlei, the fascinating Damaraland Camp and Ongava. Wilderness Safaris' other camps in Namibia, including Doro Nawas, Desert Rhino Camp (rhino tracking & lots of other wildlife) and Serra Cafema (a desert oasis on the Cunene River) offer yet more interesting facets of this truly unique country.

Wilderness Safaris' range of Discoverer and Adventurer safaris in Namibia highlight several exciting facets of this country. Please call or write for itineraries & further details of the 12-night **Great Namibian Journey** and the 10-day **Diverse Namibia** safari.

Wilderness Safaris' '**Diverse Namibia**' trip is a great introduction to Namibia, as it traverses the central and northern-western areas, where the unique hyper-arid Namib desert is encountered at its best. This trip will get you close to nature in the broader sense: nature and wildlife and particularly the desert & dune experience. Of course it also includes Etosha for game-viewing (notably rhino, gemsbok, kudu, springbok) and Damaraland to look for the desert-adapted elephants as well as to marvel at the stark landscapes. Broadly speaking every Namibia is also a fascinating study in the diverse cultures which inhabit this country, from the European descendants to the Ovambo, Herero and Ovahimba people, amongst others.

SOUTH AFRICA delivers good value for money as an African safari destination due to the relative weakness of the South African currency. South Africa is also the best place for rhino - both black and white. At the rate these animals are disappearing elsewhere on the continent, my advice would be to go and see them first!

There are few cities in the world that rival Cape Town for scenic beauty and other than from June through August (when the weather can be dreary & cold) it is almost always worthwhile spending a few days here first, before venturing north on safari. Culture, scenery,

Kirstenbosch, Table Mountain cable car trip, the winelands, museums, great white shark diving, Nelson Mandela's legacy in the area, whale-watching - the list of things to do and see in Cape Town is long.

The best game-viewing area in South Africa is the north-east, with the heart of it being Kruger National Park - one of the great wildlife sanctuaries in the world. Going on safari at the public rest camps inside Kruger Park is interesting and can be very enjoyable, but it is a bit of a hit and miss affair with no off-road driving available and with (often) big numbers of vehicles around high profile mammal sightings.

While more expensive, it is a better idea to spend fewer days in a private game reserve adjacent to Kruger Park in the Sabi Sand and Timbavati Reserves. The properties offer superior game-viewing, comfortable accommodations and great all-round hospitality - and most importantly, first-class guiding in open 4-wheel drive vehicles which are not allowed inside Kruger Park. We particularly like MalaMala Game Reserve where the 'Big Five' mammals are seen practically every single day of the year. MalaMala can also be combined with Mashatu (SE Botswana) in a package deal which delivers probably the best game-viewing available anywhere in Southern Africa over the course of a week.

Game-viewing in South Africa - especially if one visits a couple of different regions - can deliver a wealth of different species. On a recent trip to South Africa we saw no less than 45 different mammals, including some rarely seen species such as Cape Clawless Otter, Bat-eared Fox, Aardvark and Striped Polecat. The game-viewing is very rewarding, especially in some of the private game reserves adjacent to Kruger Park where the big game species are habituated to the presence of vehicles and allow very close approach, making for some fantastic photographs. South Africa has a lot more going for it than just wild-life, though: you simply have to spend a few days in the south-western Cape with its rich historical and cultural heritage, magnificent scenery and tons of things to do and see, including the Cape wine route, Table mountain, Robben Island, and the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve.

The **Garden Route** is a good idea if you have several days; traveling from Cape Town via Hermanus (great white sharks, whale-watching) or via Swellendam to the heart of the Garden Route which is Knysna. Don't forget to visit the spectacular Tsitsikamma area.

Another good side-trip from Cape Town is to go up the West Coast to the Cedarberg, and stay at Bushmanskloof Lodge which is really great - it feels like Africa. The Southern San (Bushman) rock art walks there are superb, and so are the game drives. Terrific accommodation too. Closer to Cape Town there are fabulous places like Bartholomeus Klip (near Paarl) which has superb accommodation and cuisine in a working farm setting, with game drives on their heritage site. Then there's the Overberg, with penguins and whales in spring; Cape Agulhas and De Hoop National Park are also interesting places to visit, with the emphasis on unique Cape flora and fauna. One of the best lodges in South Africa is to be found in the Southern Cape: Grootbos. It is superb in every way, from location to range of activities and general hospitality. One of the positives about all these areas is that they are no more than a 3 hour drive from Cape Town.

ZAMBIA is generally quite a bit wilder than other southern African destinations: the Luangwa Valley has terrific game-viewing, and not too many other travelers (except perhaps around

Mfuwe). Zambia offers many options for walking safaris, as well. River Club and Toka Leya (tented) are both charming lodges on the Zambezi River, upstream from Victoria Falls, offering some of the finest accommodation and most diverse activities in all of Africa.

On a wide-ranging inspection trip to Zambia we inspected camps in the three main wildlife regions (Kafue, South Luangwa and Lower Zambezi) and really fell in love with the country. The camps are all quite small, very relaxed and they offer the kind of safari experience which we first experienced in Botswana in the early 90's.

The South Luangwa National Park and the Lower Zambezi National Park are both renowned for their game-viewing. We experienced some of our best ever safari experiences there in bush camps such as Chindeni (the bush camps are ideal for small parties especially if they are keen on doing some walking), Nsefu (terrific game-viewing) and especially Kaingo, where the owner/operators are particularly attuned to the needs of photographers (amateur & professional). We really felt that they put us into the best position for some awesome photographs and their blinds (hides) are the best we have seen anywhere in Africa.

Wilderness Safaris also operate a few camps in Zambia's Kafue National Park - much higher lying and well-watered region. The northern sector of Kafue is remote, wild and diverse with vast tracts of pristine 'pure wilderness'. Mammals in the area are very diverse and aside from the high profile species, such as Lion, Leopard, Elephant, Buffalo and Cheetah, commonly seen in countries like Botswana and Zimbabwe, a number of other species, not readily encountered further south are often seen. Chief among these are Puku, Defassa Waterbuck and Lichtenstein's Hartebeest with rarer species such as Oribi and Roan regularly encountered.

Kafue also delivers when it comes to the high profile species with good Lion and fantastic Cheetah sightings. Leopard are seen quite regularly too while Wild Dogs are occasionally seen. Elephant and Buffalo sightings are excellent, and there are abundant Hippo and good numbers of plains game such as Zebra and Wildebeest.

ZIMBABWE: The Wilderness Safaris camps in Zimbabwe are being filled by savvy Africa travelers who know where to find the finest wildlife encounters, at attractive prices. Safari prices in Zimbabwe very reasonable and the quality is exceptional, as the staff in the camps go out of their way to ensure that each and every visitor has a great stay. There have been no problems at all in Victoria Falls, Hwange, Kariba and Mana Pools, the areas which our clients visit. We do not encourage visits to Harare or self-drive trips to Zimbabwe.

Game-viewing in Hwange - and other Zimbabwe parks - is generally excellent in late winter to early spring (July through October), and you should see between 25 and 35 different species of mammals, not counting bats & small rodents. You simply can't beat Hwange for elephant, at the right time of the year. Zimbabwe has many small safari camps which offer a high quality, personalized service. And it has Victoria Falls which offers not only the spectacle of the famous falls, but also lots of adventure activities such as white-water rafting, canoeing, bungee jumping & flights by helicopter and micro-light aircraft.

One of our best all-round recent trips was a combination of Mana Pools (Ruckomechi) with

Lake Kariba and Little Makalolo Camp in Hwange. Best elephant viewing ever - plus good lions, buffalo all over the place, eland, sable and roan and giraffe. Friendly, small camps with high degree of personalized service. I can't recommend this combination highly enough.

6. Where can I see gorillas?

For a safari to include a gorilla trek I would recommend one of the following:

Uganda

From and back to Entebbe and including game-viewing in Queen Elizabeth National Park and chimp trekking in Kibale Forest.

Main advantage: availability of scheduled small-group departures, best value for money; lower-priced gorilla permits. Not many other people around, lots of privacy.

Disadvantage: Road network not very good, fairly long drives on most itineraries.

Kenya and Rwanda

A safari to include Samburu (superb endemics including Reticulated Giraffe and Grevy's Zebra) plus a few days in the Masai Mara in Kenya (the best game-viewing of any in East Africa) and then a scheduled flight to Kigali, Rwanda for a gorilla trek.

Main advantage: best game-viewing of the three options, good road and air network. Gorilla trekking in Rwanda (Volcanoes National Park) usually somewhat less strenuous than in Uganda (Bwindi Impenetrable Forest) due to less steep slopes.

Disadvantage: More heavily traveled than the other two, substantial number of other vehicles around in safari areas.

Weekly departures (every Friday) for Kenya safaris and many customized options.

Republic of Congo

A 7-night/8-day trip from Brazzaville, Rep of Congo.

Main advantage: Practically the only place in Africa where Western lowland gorillas can be observed. Stunning setting. Very few other people around, only 2 camps in area. Safe.

Disadvantage: Somewhat difficult to get to (best is via Paris on Air France-KLM-Delta), relatively expensive.

Twice weekly departures with Wilderness Safaris.

7. What animals am I likely to see on safari?

The animals you are likely to see during a week's stay in Botswana, for instance, will include elephant, giraffe, lion, zebra, buffalo, black-backed jackal, hyena, warthog, hippopotamus,

wildebeest, impala, puku, tsessebe, kudu, reedbuck, waterbuck, lechwe, steenbok, duiker, baboon, vervet monkey, tree squirrel, mongoose and crocodile. Animals that you may see with a bit of luck and some night or water drives include leopard, cheetah, sable antelope, sitatunga, bush baby, African wild cat, bat-eared fox, side-striped jackal, wild dog, honey badger, genet, aardwolf, and more. A lot depends on which ecological areas are visited and on luck, but all these animals inhabit the regions we visit.

In a week in Northern Tanzania your list should be very similar, but with subtle differences: elephant, giraffe, lion, wildebeest, zebra, buffalo, black-backed & golden jackal, hyena, warthog, hippopotamus, impala, eland, topi, Thomson's Gazelle, Grant's Gazelle, Kirk's Dikdik, waterbuck, steenbok, duiker, baboon, vervet monkey, Sykes monkey, mongoose and crocodile. Animals that you may see with a bit of luck include leopard, cheetah, lesser kudu, gerenuk, black rhino (Ngorongoro Crater), wild dog, klipspringer, honey badger, bat-eared fox, and more.

8. Is the bird-watching good?

The birding is wonderful in southern Africa with about 600 species being present. Southern Africa offers some of the most diverse habitat - especially in northern Botswana and Zimbabwe - while Namibia has a wealth of endemic bird species. The area is covered by a selection of excellent field guides (detailed information provided upon booking). Wilderness Safaris is renowned for emphasizing more than just the 'big mammals' on safari, and their guides are all familiar with the birds of their particular areas, while some are bird experts in their own right. The bird-watching in East Africa is every bit as good; on a recent trip we saw just on 300 species over less than 10 days of hard driving between camps. The best months for birding are from about November through March, when many intra-African and European migrants are present, and when many birds are in breeding plumage.

9. Is Victoria Falls an absolute must?

It depends on one's itinerary. For example if you are going to spend a few days in Hwange (Zimbabwe) and then going on to Botswana, it makes good sense to include a couple of days in Victoria Falls. For sheer spectacle, nothing can touch the Falls at peak flood in April or May/June. Nice weather at that time of the year, too. The white-water rafting experience in the Zambezi down from Victoria Falls is awesome especially when conditions are ideal (September/October). Not for the faint at heart! If you are pressed for time, then it is ok to leave Vic Falls off - it is rarely the #1 highlight of anybody's trip. Great to see - best from the Zimbabwe side - and we just love spending some time at the grand Victoria Falls Hotel.

10. How long does game viewing stay interesting? Should we select a tour that mixes cultural experiences and game-viewing or stick with game-viewing only? (We are thinking of a trip of about 14 days)

Game-viewing can get repetitive if you stay in the same habitat too long, which translates into seeing pretty much the same vegetation, animals, birds, etc. The key is habitat diversity: look for an itinerary which has a mix of three or four major habitat types such as wetlands, highveld savannah (open grassland dotted with trees), acacia or thornveld savannah

(aka bushveld) and riverine bush. By all means select a tour which will look at all aspects of the natural history of an area, not just game. Try not to get too caught up 'Big Five' fever, i.e. sightings of lion, leopard, rhino, Cape buffalo & elephant. There's much more to be discovered about the African wilderness, particularly its incredible bird-life, smaller mammals, reptiles & amphibians, even insects and butterflies. Not to mention the trees and other plants... If you are receptive to learning about all aspects of the natural history, your trip will be much more meaningful and enjoyable. Don't set yourself up for disappointment by focusing on just one or two of the big cats: especially leopard and cheetah. They are not always seen.

11. Is it advisable to go with a tour group or can I do it myself?

It all depends. For a first visit to Africa - unless you're young, adventurous & traveling as a backpacker - my advice would be to go on a customized trip or a small group safari or . You really have three main options (and may opt to combine two or more of these):

a) Fully independent fly-in safari

For the independently-minded, savvy traveler, this is the way to go. You decide - in consultation with your African destination specialist - how long you want to stay in particular areas & lodges and choose the activities you like, whether it's game-viewing, walking, water activities, culture & history, bird-watching, etc. A single guide does not accompany you all the way, as you go on game-drives and other activities (such as mokoro rides or foot safaris) with knowledgeable local guides, attached to the camp. The fly-in safaris are quite sociable too: even though you are not part of a group as such, you meet up with interesting people at the various lodges, where meals are taken together and there is ample opportunity for socializing.

This is the best choice for someone who does not mind paying a bit more for quality accommodations (all with en-suite facilities) throughout. It has been my experience that game-viewing (especially for big game and cats) is best on a fly-in safari, or at least it is more consistent. The guides at the camps pretty much know where game is concentrated at any particular time, and the various vehicles out on game drives are in radio contact, so everyone is alerted to sightings of special interest.

These trips can also be done with your own private guide and private vehicle throughout and that is the preferred mode of travel in East Africa.

b) Join a small-group safari (scheduled departure).

These safaris, which range from luxury fly-in trips to more basic, 'Adventurer' safaris, are for people who enjoy the camaraderie of traveling with a few other like-minded people and who appreciate the many advantages of having a professional guide on hand at all times. Sharing the experience often makes it much more rewarding & having a guide to identify birds, trees & mammals can make all the difference. The cross-country safaris are also ideal for single

travelers of either sex. Overland guided safaris can be tailor-made for private family groups or friends who'd like to travel together. The ideal group size is eight.

If you will enjoy the group experience, if you do not mind an occasional long drive to get from one area to the next, and are looking for a broadly educational trip (not just big game!), you will enjoy the overland safaris. Standards of accommodation varies: even on the more expensive trips such as the Discoverer series in Botswana, there is some mobile tented camping involved. However you get close to nature, you are invariably the only people in the camp, and you have a guide who can answer just about any question you may have.

c) Self-drive safari

The more cost-conscious traveler may consider a self-drive safari in South Africa, or Namibia. These two countries (and especially South Africa) have an excellent road & air network, which makes it easy to get around quickly and relatively safely, without having to resort to 4-wheel drive vehicles. Just plan your trip carefully & book well in advance, especially for the July & December holidays. Please note: South Africa in particular has a bad road safety record and road deaths there are amongst the highest (per vehicle-miles traveled) of any country in the world. Keep in mind that you are most likely to be injured in a road accident, than through any other activity, in Africa or practically anywhere else. We do not recommend extended driving around the major cities in South Africa, or long-distance travel cross-country. Night-driving should be avoided.

12. Is it worth paying as much as \$1,000 per person, per night for a fly-in safari?

Why would anybody pay \$1,000+ per person per day for a safari? There are the obvious reasons such as staying in an elegant, romantic 'out of Africa' style tent, enjoying all the comforts of a hotel, including excellent food and personalized service.

In my opinion the two most important factors, however, are privacy and the quality of the guiding.

The most expensive lodges are almost always located in private concession areas where access is limited to the guests staying at the lodge(s) on the property. Ask anybody who has spent some time on a fly-in safari in Northern Botswana, and they will invariably mention seeing few other vehicles. The privacy and exclusivity of these camps create a wilderness experience that cannot be compared with a stay at a public reserve. I've had some wonderful (inexpensive) experiences in places like Etosha, Kalahari Gemsbok Park, and Kruger Park - which I have visited dozens of times - yet I have also had visits there marred by foolish behavior on the part of other visitors, such as illegal off-road driving, hooliganism and overcrowding, with sometimes dozens of cars converging on a 'kill' scene. Every visit is different and you can have the most sublime wildlife experience in a public reserve (I sure have), but by spending the dollars to stay in a private concession, you do not run the risk of having your vacation spoiled by some idiot throwing a beer bottle at sleeping lions. Most people do not return to Africa year after year, so for them it is a wise investment to spend a bit more in order to enjoy the proverbial trip of a life-time.

At private game lodges such as MalaMala in South Africa and Mombo in Botswana, the quality of the guiding is superb. A game drive with a really good guide is veritable education. He or she does not only find the animals and birds and other wildlife, but he/she interprets their behavior, explains their interaction with each other, and even predicts what will happen next. Being with a real 'pro' guide is like being 'in' one of those National Geographic film.

13. What do I look for in selecting an operator?

I'd suggest that if you get a 'NO' answer on any of the following three questions, you should think twice before dealing with a particular operator or his/her local agent:

* Is the departure guaranteed? There is nothing as frustrating as booking for a trip, spending months in keen anticipation only to be given back your deposit with a lame excuse that the tour was not fully supported or whatever. It happens, so make sure.

* Does the company legally operate an office within the country where the tour is going to take place and does it own the vehicles & equipment and employ the guides? It is essential to go with a group which has in-country back-up, IN CASE THINGS GO WRONG. I cannot adequately stress this point: having a broken down vehicle replaced or an ill guide substituted by someone equally capable - or not - can make either of these a minor inconvenience or a major disaster.

* Will there be 10 or less persons in the group? As an avid bird-watcher, I am perhaps over-sensitive about this, but believe me, a nature tour or safari with more than 10 or so people is not really a good idea. Thing like space in the vehicle, positioning for photographs, enjoying nature peacefully and quietly and so on can become an issue.

14. Who are the best operators? Who are the best guides?

We have been an agent for Wilderness Safaris (head office in Johannesburg where they operate a full-service travel agency, with affiliates in Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Malawi) since 1990 and recommend them highly. We also have good working relationships with Desert & Delta Safaris and Kwando Safaris, and Great Plains Conservation, all three of whom operate properties that are on a par with the Wilderness camps. We also book camps operated by AndBeyond Safaris, Ker Downey Botswana and Sanctuary in Botswana. In Tanzania, we work with Nomad-Tanzania, and our long-time Kenya associates are Origins Safaris, based in Nairobi.

On an African safari, the quality of the guide is a make-or-break factor, so don't compromise on this: a good guide will make a safari interesting - even excellent - no matter the weather or how much game you see. Wilderness Safaris' guides on the overland safaris are all top-notch, going through rigorous interviews before even being hired. Most of their guides have been with them for many years and their evaluation sheets are proof of the excellent service and standard of safari they run. Kwando Safaris in Botswana, Nomad Tanzania and Origins Safaris (Kenya) employ equally top-notch guides, which I know from first-hand experience.

15. How safe are safari flights? Should we plan on them or avoid them?

Safari flights in Africa are probably as safe as similar light aircraft operations most anywhere in the world: much safer than ground transportation but not as safe as commercial jet aircraft. The aircraft are well-maintained and - just like in the USA - completely overhauled after a pre-determined number of hours. You'll find that the so-called "bush pilots" are, like the vast majority of their colleagues all over the world, very concerned about safety, that they follow correct procedures and that they will not operate an unserviceable aircraft, or overload it (so watch that luggage limit!) After all, their lives are at stake, too.

16. What about personal safety? I've heard a lot about crime & car-jackings in South Africa?

Urban crime is a problem in South Africa, but the country's major cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban are no more dangerous to travelers than other large African cities such as Nairobi, Kenya or Harare, Zimbabwe. As long as you take good precautions, you should be fine, although the downtown area of Johannesburg is best avoided. Outside of the cities, traveling is safe and relaxed. Botswana, Zambia and Namibia are politically stable and peaceful, and traveling in those countries is not as stressful as visiting South Africa. Zimbabwe has just about fully emerged from a period of political unrest, but tourist areas such as Victoria Falls, Hwange, Mana Pools and Kariba have never been affected. Personal safety is dealt with in detail in our pre-trip information material.

17. Are safaris dangerous?

Obviously, there is a certain degree of danger when you are in the bush with wild animals. However, you will always be accompanied by an experienced guide. Accidents are very rare and the camps have excellent safety records. Provided you use common sense you should be perfectly safe.

18. What are things to watch for as far as price is concerned? Where do you get ripped off?

The most important thing is to make sure that all the essential things associated with the trip are included in the quoted price: ground transportation, accommodation, meals, excursions, guide/driver service and transfers. Some operators tend to confuse the issue with a very low up-front quote for a bare-bones trip which is not what you want and not what you end up paying for, once all the 'extras' are added in. Price is what you pay, value is what you get.

19. When is the best time to go?

It depends. Generally speaking, game-viewing peaks from July through September, but it is good year-round. October through February can get very hot in northern Botswana and Zimbabwe, especially in the Zambezi Valley. For bird-watching, the summer months are better, i.e. October through February/March. Victoria Falls is at its best in April/May, while Cape Town's nicest weather is February, March & April and then again Sept/Oct. Namibia and other arid areas (such as the Kalahari) are at their best in March, April & May, just after the 'rainy' season (what there is of it). Low or shoulder season safari prices are available from

November through June. The lowest prices (in Botswana & Zimbabwe) are for the 'Green Season' from December through March.

Zambia is best visited from June through September, as the national parks are prone to heavy rainfall and impassable roads in the 'high summer' season from December through April/May. Some of the camps in the Mfuwe area do remain open however, and there are some very popular trips which operate in the area at that time. Fantastic birding, best chance of any time of the year for wild dogs, and lots of young animals to be seen.

In East Africa, it rarely gets unbearably hot, although some people prefer to avoid the 'long rains' which fall in April & May. The dry season from July to September is considered the optimum time for the western & northern Serengeti & Kenya's Maasai Mara, while December, January and February are arguably the best three months for the southern short-grass plains of the Serengeti. The months of March through May and June are low season in East Africa, and offer good value for money.

20. Any other tips?

Look for quality and value for money. Don't end up spending \$2,000.00 or more on airfares only to be disappointed by a poorly run, inferior safari. Make sure that the trip has been operated before (don't be a guinea pig!). Repetition equals knowledgeable guides, no unpleasant surprises and finely tuned itineraries. Of course there is nothing like experience so seek it out where possible.

Try to try to avoid too 'busy' an itinerary. We always urge prospective visitors to spend more time in fewer locations. Slowing down a safari has many benefits, not the least of which is that it reduces the 'per diem' cost due to relatively fewer charter flights. Spending several days in any one area enables you to enjoy all the activities in the area, to re-visit favorite spots, and to take the time to look for specific animals and to enjoy their behavior and interaction, as opposed to just finding them. The animals move around in real time, and it never hurts to have an extra day here or there. You will also become better acquainted with your guides and camp managers, and give them a chance to exhibit their particular strengths, for your benefit. Spending less time traveling between locations is the real luxury and will allow you an opportunity to connect with an area and discover the true meaning of 'safari' - Swahili for "journey".

Above all, take the best pair of binoculars you can afford, and have fun!

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Houston-based Fish Eagle Safaris (founded 1990) is a Southern and East Africa safari destination specialist. We are a small family-run operation who know, understand and have a passion for our destination. Just over the last three years, we have made more than 12 different visits to Africa to inspect western Tanzania (Katavi & Mahale Mountains), Zambia, Rwanda, Uganda, Southern Tanzania and the Republic of Congo to re-visit some of our favorite places such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Kenya. As a result we have an in-depth knowledge of practically every place and lodge or camp we recommend.