



Wildlife Photography Africa

African photo safaris .. tailor made for you

The things you need to know before booking a safari

With such a vast range of destinations and wildlife reserves to choose from, planning your safari is often far from straightforward. Whether you intend to go it alone or use the services of a travel company there are lots of things you need to consider before you make your booking; some of them will be important to you, others less so. And for most people, cost is an ever present spectre looming over the planning process.

So what can you do to make sure that your safari lives up to your expectations?
Quite a lot actually.

The tips given here will not suddenly make the unaffordable affordable, but what they will do is help you make sure that you get the best safari possible for the budget you have available. You'll achieve this by establishing your priorities and striking a balance between the areas where you can reduce costs and those where you will not compromise.

So what are the most important things that you need to consider?
The list is not a long one.

Location, Location, Location

It's a phrase we've heard many times and it is as true about planning your safari as it is about buying your home.

Location is critical and your choice of location applies not only to the countries and game reserves you choose but also to the accommodation you choose within those reserves.

Knowing what you want to see and photograph is a good starting point. There are very few species that can only be seen in one location so it should be possible to find places where you can see your chosen species and avoid the crowds that are all too frequent in the popular parks.

Conversely, it doesn't matter how wonderfully appointed a lodge is, if it is in an area with no wildlife it is not going to serve you very well; you need to be where the action is.

Of course it follows that the best accommodation in the prime locations will be more expensive than similar accommodation elsewhere. So you'll need to decide which is more important to you, location or luxury.



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That is not to say that you need to choose 'rough' accommodation; just that you need to get the balance right.

There are parks where lodges just outside the park are around half the cost of lodges within the park. Staying outside the park needn't be a drawback; after all, the animals do not respect park boundaries. A well placed lodge outside a park can often be much better value than one within the park; as long as you are not having to waste too much time travelling back and forth between the lodge and the park, and covering the same ground over and over again.

If you are staying outside the park, then why not arrange to take full day game drives rather than separate morning and afternoon drives?

Guiding

This goes hand in hand with the preceding topic. Do not assume that all guides are of the same standard. It may come as a surprise to discover that several countries – including some of the longest established safari destinations - do not even have a proper training and licensing process for their guides, which means that you will have to rely on some other way of making sure you don't end up with a duff one.

In such countries, some operators make a lot more effort than others to ensure that their guides are more than just 'jeep jockeys'. Just as a good guide can turn an otherwise ordinary safari into a great one, a poor guide can turn what should be a great safari into a mediocre one.

If you are booking a safari where you will be making use of guides that are resident in the camps, it is pretty easy to find out how they are rated by guests. If you are planning a safari where you will have a single driver/ guide looking after you throughout your safari it can be more tricky.

If you don't want to chance it, you might want to consider hiring a private guide. There are a number of independent, or freelance, guides who are not affiliated to any tour operator or lodge. Many of these have been trained in Zimbabwe, the country widely acknowledged to have the best training procedures in place.

Transport

There are 3 basic types of safari vehicle in use in Africa; (a) minibuses (b) 4x4 vehicles that are suitable for road and game drive purposes (c) 4x4 vehicles that are exclusively for game drive use.

Avoid the minibuses.

If you are planning a safari that involves travelling by road between game reserves with a guide accompanying you throughout, you will probably travel in a closed vehicle with a pop-up roof hatch.



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This type of vehicle is OK, but not ideal. Although the windows will open and the roof hatch does give you a 360 view, it is far from ideal as all passengers will be trying to take photographs from the same limited space.

By far the best vehicle, both for game viewing and for photography is an open sided vehicle. These may have a canvas 'roof' to provide shade from the sun, but will often be completely open. When it comes to photographing birds, completely open is what you need. This is the style of vehicle used by lodges and camps for their game drives. There are usually 3 rows of seats and you need to make sure that there will be no more than 2 people per row; allowing everyone room to move and room for their camera bags.

If you are travelling as part of a group of 5 or 6 people it should be pretty straightforward to demand exclusive use of a vehicle. If you are travelling as a couple or part of a smaller party, there will usually be an additional charge for the exclusive use of a vehicle. It is well worth it. Apart from giving you adequate space within the vehicle, a private vehicle means that you can determine where you go, what you see and how long you stay at any sighting.

Travel less, see more

It is a myth to think that if you cram more game reserves into your itinerary you will see more wildlife. The opposite is true.

Quite apart from the fact that any time you spend travelling between parks or reserves is time you won't be spending game viewing, it will also make your safari more expensive. All those transfers cost money.

Far better to carefully choose the reserves you will be visiting and then stay there for long enough to get a real feel for it.

The advantages are many. Not only will you learn where the best places are to get the photographs you want but you will also give yourself time to revisit places if you didn't manage to get what you wanted first time around.

If a park is worth visiting, then it is worth staying at least 3 days, ideally 4 or longer.

Season

Timing is everything. There will always be times to visit a given reserve that are better than others. Those 'best times' will not necessarily be the same for everyone.

A common preference is to visit game parks in the dry season, when water sources are limited and the animals congregate close to the rivers and waterholes. Whilst it is true that going at this time means it may be easier to actually locate the animals, it is not necessarily the best time for photography.



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In the dry season there is a lot of dust and this, combined with the heat, can result in poor visibility and murky skies. Not so much of a problem if you are taking photographs close up, but if you want to use long lenses, then the light is often very poor.

Travel earlier in the year, when there is a bit more water around and the vegetation is greener, the air cleaner.

It is also worth investigating whether what you are hoping to see will in fact be there. Some things only happen at a specific time of year. Kenya's Masai Mara is famous for its annual wildebeest migration, but that only occurs for a 3 month period each year. Hermanus in South Africa is known as THE place for whale watching, but not throughout the year.