

Into Africa

Those who have never visited a wildlife reserve or been on a safari should start with the best place to go – Africa. Despite the cost, the many animals make the trip a good value. A trip to Nairobi, Kenya, (sometimes called Nairobberry because of its poor safety reputation) should include a trip to a nature reserve.

The city of Nairobi may surprise first time visitors with its numerous high rise buildings and cosmopolitan feel. The best cultural museum in the country that can claim to be the birthplace of humanity is the National Museum. It displays the culture of the various Kenyan tribes, fossils, the origins of humans and a bird gallery of 900 stuffed animals. Another museum is the Railway Museum, which pays homage to the railway system developed largely by the British.

Near the city center of Nairobi are a variety of attractions. The Carnivore restaurant allows customers to order a variety of wildlife, which are then cooked in a large open pit. The Bomas of Kenya, located in Langata, is just south of Nairobi. The traditional homesteads, or *bomas*, of Kenyans are displayed. Perhaps more interesting is watching various tribes conducting traditional dances and songs in traditional clothing.

The best time to see the attractions of Nairobi is during the day as it is not entirely safe in the city center at night. Even a short walk of a couple blocks is not advisable. Some areas like Uhuru Park in the city center aren't safe during the day and anyone can get car jacked even Kenyan government officials. Besides taking a taxi at night, selecting accommodations in the attractive suburbs of Nairobi is prudent.

Other safety concerns are the various diseases and the actual animals. A vaccination for yellow fever is required and Hepatitis A and B, polio and tetanus boosters, malaria and cholera pills are recommended. Most of the hotels will include a bed that is surrounded by a mosquito net; additionally spray yourself and the periphery of the bed with DEET mosquito spray. Further, stay away from brightly colored animals which are more likely to be poisonous, as they do not need to use camouflage as a survival tool.

Despite these precautions, don't become paranoid and do enjoy the trip. The government has attempted some reforms to help the safety situation and assist tourists. Most attractions, like The Carnivore, will have a list created by the government that mandates the cost of taxis. Most Kenyans are extremely friendly and honest. Arriving in Nairobi without safari reservations is usually not an issue as seemingly ever Kenyan in the city center is a "travel agent".

Most Kenyan safaris last between four to ten days with much of the differential in price due to accommodation type. The accommodations can range from tents in a campsite without running water to beds in small houses. These beds can be moved outdoors if the weather is favorable. Sleeping outdoors and hearing the animals roam without the interference of artificial light is spectacular. The animals seem to be only a few meters away but there is a safety precaution. A ten-foot fence around the perimeter, usually chopped down trees, surrounds the accommodations. Visitors are not allowed outside the perimeter as a number of people who have, have been killed by animals. This is not a zoo.



Most safari trips originating from Nairobi will include admission to two reserves. The trip to the reserves is noteworthy as the side of the road is littered with zebras that have been hit by vehicles, similar in frequency to white-tailed deer in the Midwest. The first reserve surrounds Lake Nakuru or "The Pink Lake" named because of the massive numbers of flamingos located there gives the lake a pink appearance. This is one of the few places on the safari people can get out of the truck and walk around, because the flamingos wouldn't attack.



The bigger of the two reserves is the Masai Mari Nature Reserve. This reserve is 320 square miles and is connected to the Serengeti. The Maasai people are allowed to hunt in the reserve and are one of few tribes that hunt lion. The Maasai are famous for their bright blood-red clothing, beads around their neck and stretched large holes in their earlobes. Their dating ritual includes dancing, usually by jumping, with the males whipping their long-braided hair on the woman they admire.

Most drives will be via a jeep with a driver and six people uncomfortably fitting through the exposed roof. A drive early in the morning and another late in the afternoon are common, as these are the best times to see the animals. Driving just a few meters away from a pack of lions, observers can see lions easily tear apart a sizable animal, the gnu, as vultures wait in the background for the scraps. The gnu is popular with many animals, as they are one of the dumbest animals in Africa. Zebras congregate with them because when predators attack, gnus take a long time to run away and thus the zebras can escape. Also, they migrate with zebras for hundreds of kilometers before realizing they don't want to migrate and then they dejectedly walk home.

The elephant is another inspiring animal located in Africa. Because the driver thinks tourists give better tips for closer pictures of the animals, onlookers can get very close. The unique giraffes are popular as well as warthogs and hyenas. The vegetarian hippopotamus and meat-eating crocodiles often share space with few conflicts.



There are additional options for a safari trip. A Maasai village is open to tourists and gives the opportunity to drink a cow's blood milkshake. There is no such thing as a soft sell in Kenya and this village certainly is no exception, as tourists will be pressured by villagers to buy goods. This is a good place to buy African art, such as figurines made of teakwood, as Nairobi has more expensive shops. A hot-air balloon trip over the reserve is an additional cost,

but allows a fantastic view. Another possibility is a walking trip escorted by the Maasai to get a close look at the animals.

Many zoos or theme parks try to replicate the African safari experience. There is no substituting an African safari. Sleeping in the same habitat as the animals and get a few feet from the animals is truly amazing. Just don't let the bug beds bite.