

10 OF THE BEST

By Kendall Hill

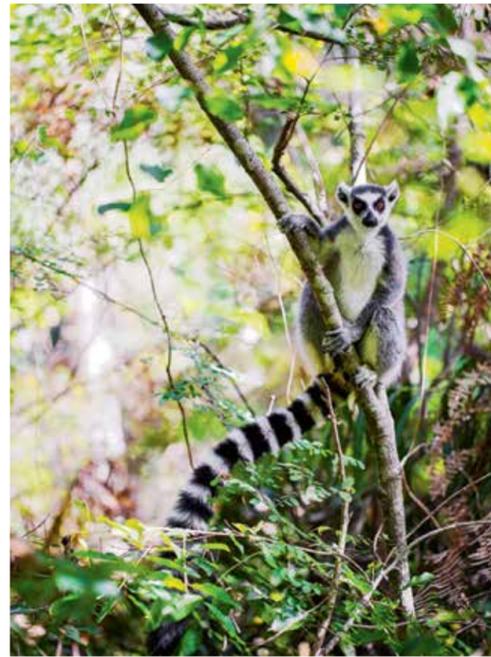
African safaris

Africa's most alluring safaris combine unparalleled access to the continent's unique wildlife, encampments built to rival luxury hotels, and schedules geared to match your interests.

SAFARIS ARE GOOD for the soul. Being immersed in the African wilderness with some of Earth's most charismatic creatures is an experience that stimulates all the senses, not least our sense of wonder. You feel alert to the world around you – all eyes and ears and aahs. No two safaris are the same, and there's an adventure to suit every interest. For first-timers seeking widescreen, Animal Planet thrills, head for the teeming plains of Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania. For more challenging and rare encounters, make a date with the mountain gorillas of Uganda and Rwanda and the unique fauna and flora of Madagascar.

1 GABON'S NEW FRONTIER

The Atlantic coast nation of Gabon is a latecomer to the safari circuit. Its 13 national parks, protecting more than 10 per cent of the country's landmass, were only established in 2002 so "tourism is very new", explains Gabon Wildlife Camps director Jan Fourie. "The country isn't at all service oriented but the people are very, very nice." And the wildlife can be next-level. GWC manages tourism in four of the camps, leading truly pioneering journeys. Staying in coastal bungalows and scenic nature camps, visitors can find forest elephants, western lowland gorillas, almost 500 bird species and, at remote Lopé National Park, a carnival of mandrills. Getting to Lopé isn't easy, Fourie cautions, but the journey's worth it for the chance to be surrounded by 400 mandrills in the jungle, as happened to him. "Up in the trees, on the ground, 360 degrees. And they vocalise a lot. It's insane!" gabonwildlifecamps.com



2 PIECES OF THE EIGHTH CONTINENT

Madagascar is unique, an evolutionary outlier where most plant and animal species (including more than a hundred lemurs and a kaleidoscope of chameleons) are found nowhere else. The landscapes of the oft-called eighth continent are equally otherworldly, from giant baobab avenues to forests of limestone pinnacles and the time-carved canyons of Isalo National Park. But the world's fourth-largest island is too large, and the infrastructure often too poor, to navigate alone for all but the most hardcore explorers. Malagasy-owned Asisten Madagascar combines expert guides trained in South Africa and Kenya with the best fleet of vehicles and characterful accommodation to make a Madagascan odyssey as carefree as possible. The dream itinerary? Andasibe National Park for lemurs including the haunting indri; Tsingy De Bemeraha National Park for the pinnacle forest and baobabs; two nights in Isalo, and then unwind in style on Nosy Ankaio island at the ultra-luxury Miavana resort. asisten-travel.com



CLIFF HANGER

Above: Noka Camp clings to a clifftop above South Africa's Palala River. Top: Lemurs are a common sight on safari in Madagascar. Opposite: Sitatunga Private Island in Botswana offers outings by boat or on foot.

3 SOUTH AFRICA WITH A SUSTAINABLE CREED

Lapalala Wilderness reserve is a private South African sanctuary home to the magnificent seven (the big five, plus cheetahs and wild dogs) and the modestly named but spectacularly sited Noka Camp. This five-suite lodge, one of just three allowed on the 50,000-hectare refuge, clings to a clifftop high above the Palala River. Sprawling suites feature private pools and sky beds, and the dining is first-rate (prawn dumplings, slow-cooked lamb and ginger crème brûlée, say), but the luxury comes with a conscience. Noka's non-profit owner, Lepogo Lodges, pours all earnings into conservation of Lapalala's fascinating animals, particularly pangolin (a dedicated rehabilitation centre is due to open in 2024), rhino and cheetah. Lepogo also calculates the carbon cost of each guest, then donates that amount to a cause of their choice, from a community stove program to reforestation. Next year, Lepogo will open the 16-guest, exclusive-use Melote House, with rammed-earth walls, magnificent views, and pool. lepogolodges.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE DEXTER (NOKA) & YMAGOO (LEMUR)



4 SERENITY IN BOTSWANA

Safaris, generally speaking, are no holiday. Days tend to be intensely active (pre-dawn starts, after-sunset finishes) and opportunities for R&R are scarce. Sitatunga Private Island, the latest camp from conservation leaders Great Plains, offers respite from relentless bush-bashing on a serene island in Botswana's northern Okavango. Guests arrive by helicopter to this floating lodge of three upcycled suites (maximum eight guests) inspired by indigenous fishermen's baskets and stilted among ebony trees. Each is equipped with a swimming pool and spacious decks and lounges to encourage indolence. Spa treatments are on call. Leisurely breakfasts on the deck are de rigueur, as are lantern-lit bush dinners around an ancient baobab. Cuisine is a standout – seven Great Plains' properties have Relais & Châteaux status – and the camp has its own wine cellar. Outings by boat or on foot are offered; expect to see elephants, monster crocodiles, brilliant birdlife and that elusive aquatic antelope, the sitatunga. greatplainsconservation.com

ZEBRA CROSSING
A dazzle of zebras captured
on a photo safari hosted
by esteemed lenswoman
Piper Mackay in Kenya.

“The key to a photographic safari is a team that understands your technical needs, and ensures you’re always in the right place at the right time.”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIPER MACKAY

5 CULTURAL IMMERSION IN TANZANIA

Entara strips the safari experience back to the essentials: comfortable and well-priced fly (mobile) camps and lodges, handy to wild animals and sometimes even embedded with locals. The operator's Ombako fly camp in Tanzania's Lake Eyasi basin is hosted by Hadzabe bushmen from Dumbachand village, who share their culture, and the tourism revenue. It's a model central to Entara's goal of delivering raw connections to wildlife, people and wilderness in partnership with local communities. When not captivated by one of the world's oldest human cultures, guests can walk with elephants in Tarangire National Park, track big cats at Olmaro Camp and, in the Serengeti, get amongst the great migration. Private guides tailor the entire experience to your interests. The goal, says veteran guide and Entara co-founder Hagai Zvulun, is "to expose people to raw nature, and hands-on cultural tourism and safari experiences while putting less pressure on the eco-systems in which we work". entara.co.tz



6 LET IT FLOW ON THE ZAMBEZI RIVER

At Zambia's fly-in Lolebezi Lodge, opened last year beside the Zambezi river floodplain, guests wake to sunrise views stretching all the way to Zimbabwe. Set on a five-hectare protected reserve, Lolebezi fronts the Mana Pools National Park, Unesco-listed for its landscape and abundance of big game – elephants, buffalo, leopards, cheetahs and Nile crocodiles. Visitors scout these exuberant surroundings on walking and driving safaris and a raft of water-based activities, from morning kayak excursions to sunset cruises.

The lodge has six suites (two of them family doubles), designed with recycled and natural materials to blend into its untamed surrounds, plus a spa, gym and 12-metre horizon pool. Dining is at tree-trunk tables on wood-fired pizze, braais and tandoori feasts. Lolebezi is the latest offering from African Bush Camps, founded by Zimbabwean guide Beks Ndlovu and well regarded for its personally tailored itineraries, expert guiding and individual attention. africanbushcamps.com



7 WHEELCHAIR-FRIENDLY FORAYS

Launching a dedicated safari company so people with disabilities could share their love of the African bush was, in some ways, the easy part. When Mike and Silvia Hill started Endeavour Safaris in 2001, their big challenge was convincing wheelchair users to schlep to Botswana to spend two weeks camping in the bush. But they persevered, designing accessible tents and adapting vehicles and boats to take travellers right into the heart of the action – to the massive elephant herds of Chobe National Park, the vast salt pans of the Kalahari and the beastly abundance of the Okavango Delta. "In the early days there was no such thing as a ramp," Mike says. "No one even thought about it." Today some of the smart delta lodges offer accessible rooms so Endeavour's guests can split their stay between the visceral thrills of wild camping and the creature comforts of a luxury suite. Endeavour plans to open its own eight-room lodge next year on the Khwai River, facing the Unesco-listed Moremi Game Reserve in Botswana's north. endeavour-safaris.com

8 MOUNTAIN GORILLAS IN UGANDA

The reality of most gorilla meet-and-greets is that, after flying across the world and hiking up a jungled mountain, visitors are permitted only a 60-minute audience with the apex primates. That's the standard time limit on a rendezvous with Uganda's famed gorillas-in-the-mist, but there's another option that's about four times more satisfying. Entebbe-based Primate Expeditions leads adventurers to gorilla habituation camps in the Rushaga sector of the fabulously named Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, where two primate families are being introduced to humans. The clock starts when trekkers reach the nest of a family; some of those 240 minutes will be spent searching for your quarry, but interactions are invariably longer and more memorable. Some counterpoints to consider: these gorillas can be shy, the treks tend to be more strenuous and there's a significant price difference – \$US700 for the 60-minute show, \$US1500 for the four-hour extravaganza. Access is limited to just four permits a day, so book well ahead. primatesafaris.info

"If you've ever fantasised about combining all your African dreams in one exhilarating schedule, this is how you do it."

9 SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA FROM THE SKIES

"Where can your imagination take you?" That's the tantalising tagline of Scenic Air Safaris, which specialises in multi-country, multi-lodge, and multifaceted itineraries across southern and eastern Africa. With a private plane at your disposal – anything from Beechcraft seven-seaters to 11-seat Cessnas – plus pilot and guide, Africa's your oyster. Allow two weeks to cover such life-affirming activities as climbing Kenya's active Teleki's Volcano, flying over Lake Natron's millions of flamingos, witnessing the wildebeest migration in the Serengeti and cavorting with chimpanzees in the Mahale Mountains. On the ground, guests stay at standout properties, such as Kenya's Ol Jogi (oljogi.org) and Singita Faru Faru in Tanzania (singita.com). If you've ever fantasised about combining all your continental dreams in one exhilarating schedule – Victoria Falls, Okavango Delta, Serengeti, dhow races on the Indian Ocean, hot-air ballooning above the Maasai Mara – this is how you do it. Guilt-free, too, with all aircraft carbon emissions offset since 2021. scenicairsafaris.com



WILD AT HEART
Scenic Air Safaris offers another view of Africa's wildlife. Below: Picture-perfect elephants on Piper Mackay's photographic safari. Opposite, from top: Migrating wildebeest in Tanzania; Lolebezi Lodge in Zambia.

10 KODAK MOMENTS IN EAST AFRICA

The key to a successful photographic safari is a team that understands your technical needs and takes care of all the logistics including, crucially, ensuring you're always in the right place at the right time. American fine-art photographer Piper Mackay has trained her lenses on Africa for two decades and personally scoped and organised expeditions from Rwanda to Zimbabwe. But her passion lies in the Maasai Mara, where she leads small-group tours to capture the great migration, and with remote Rift Valley tribes. Accommodation is in luxury tented lodges and mobile camps that allow guests to dwell deep inside tribal areas or roam with big game for the full *Nat Geo* experience. Custom vehicles come with drop-down doors, window beanbags for gear and roll-back roofs for unobstructed shooting. By her own admission, Mackay is "quite obsessive," so I've thought of all the details. We are true specialists." meikansafaris.com; pipermackayphotography.com



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIPER MACKAY (ELEPHANTS) & PETER NDJUNGU (SCENIC AIR)