

HOOKED ON SAFARI

AFTER TRACKING LIONS AND ELEPHANTS BY DAY, AND SLUMBERING BENEATH THE VAST, STAR-STUDDED SKY AT NIGHT, YOU'LL BE SURE TO CATCH AFRICA'S "KHAKI FEVER"

BY CARRIE HAMPTON

Your safari guide suddenly stops the vehicle and you know he's seen something—but what? And where? The guide's eyes are tuned in to spotting well-camouflaged animals, and yours will be, too, in a couple of days. He points to a bough of an old Leadwood tree and says quietly, "Ingwe (leopard)." And there it is glaring at you with piercing golden eyes, claws firmly grasping an impala that he pulled into the tree so that the meal doesn't get stolen by lions or hyenas.

It's times like this that make it worthwhile to embark on the long journey of an African safari.

You may consider a safari to be a once-in-a-lifetime vacation. But let me warn you: You will get hooked! If you didn't see a lion kill this time, or spot a cheetah, or snap a photo of a yawning hippo as the sun sinks over the Chobe River, you'll be eager to return.

"Mind-Blowing" Adventure

For some, the lure of Africa is too great to go unheeded. Susan White Mathis, owner of Mateya Safari Lodge in South Africa's Madikwe Game Reserve, became enamored with Africa after visiting from her native Georgia, in the United States. She built her dream safari lodge for herself and paying guests and filled it with one of the world's finest private collections of African books, art and artifacts.

Then there was a New York City business executive who met and fell in love with the game ranger at Tswalu Kalahari Reserve in South Africa, during her visit. "Khaki fever" sometimes renders people defenseless, and in this case it ended happily with Wendy and Mark Rutherford getting married, having two young children and starting their own game reserve—Gondwana Game Reserve, along the Garden Route near Cape Town.

Of course, every safari has a narrative. Your story will be shaped by the lodges where you stay and the animals you see.

For Lisa Starkey, a bumpy Land Rover ride through the Serengeti will remain indelibly etched on her memory. "The roof was off so you could stand up and look out—we did a 360-degree turn and all you could see were thousands of zebras. Nothing but stripes for miles. It was mind-blowing!" says the Centreville, Md., resident, who traveled with her 22-year-old daughter, Sarah. On another day, Starkey recalls, "we got within five feet of 20 elephants. We were in awe."

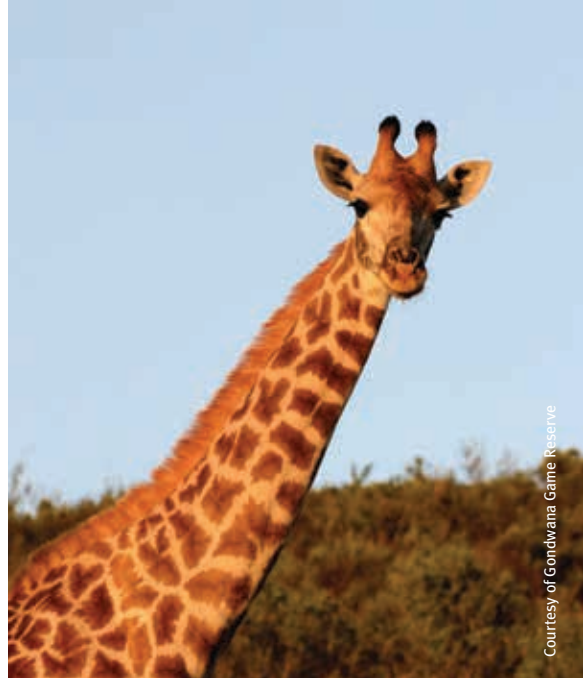
Over the course of their two-week trip, the Starkeys spotted all of the Big Five (lion, elephant, Cape buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros), as well as countless giraffes, hyenas, wildebeests, ostriches and cheetahs (including one

Clockwise from top: African acacia trees in the warm light of a late afternoon, Serengeti National Park, Tanzania/East Africa; giraffe on Gondwana Game Reserve; zebra on Gondwana Game Reserve; safari vehicle from Mateya Safari Lodge; image of the grounds of the Gondwana Game Reserve; elephant on Gondwana Game Reserve.

"Safari Silhouette" ©iStockphoto.com/bandian1122



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Courtesy of Gondwana Game Reserve



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Courtesy of Camp Jabulani/Rikki Hibbert



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From left: Rhinos at Camp Jabulani; two Maasai warriors; Mt. Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain of Africa.

whose belly was swollen with a freshly eaten gazelle). “By the end of the tour, gazelles and antelopes were as common to us as dogs and cats,” Lisa recalls.

With literally hundreds of safari tours and lodges competing for your business, how does one stand out from the rest? By offering superior guides, distinctive interior decor, high-quality cuisine, frequent animal sightings and additional activities like visits to rural villages. When you are planning your safari, be sure to ask about these amenities.

For the Starkeys, a big highlight of their trip was the day they spent in Kenya visiting with the rural Maasai

tribe, a people that has stayed true to its primitive roots. “They still drink cow’s blood. It was eye-opening to be with them—like taking a step way back in time,” says Lisa. While on the Maasai Mara Game Reserve, the duo also enjoyed a sunrise hot air balloon ride, which offered a panoramic view of running animals below.

If you want almost guaranteed sightings of the Big Five, head straight for one of the many South African lodges inside Sabi Sands Private Game Reserve and other private reserves bordering Kruger National Park. Lodges like Richard Branson’s Ulusaba and the family-run Londolozi are well-known.

If you desire close-up elephant encounters and grand colonial style, choose Camp Jabulani, where elephant-back riding is a popular perk. For the best spa in the bush and Chaîne des Rôtisseurs gourmet food, the choice is Royale Malewane in the Thornybush Reserve close to Kruger Park.

If you have a yearning for something wilder and altogether more remote, Botswana’s Okavango Delta is calling you. The number of lodges and visitors is restricted by the government, making it high price but low volume and therefore exclusive. It’s quite possibly the best all-round safari destination on earth—a watery



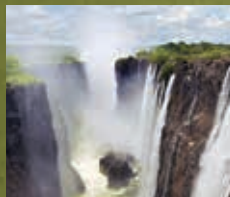
Planning Your Safari

Each southern and eastern African country is renowned for iconic safari adventures:



KENYA: Encounters with Maasai people; flamingoes on Lake Naivasha; hot air ballooning over the Maasai Mara during the wildebeest migration (pictured at left).

MALAWI: Snorkeling in the warm waters of Lake Malawi with hundreds of colorful fish; village visits to meet friendly locals.



ZAMBIA: Walking safaris in wild reserves; game lodges along Lower Zambezi; Victoria Falls (pictured at left) with accommodation alongside the Zambezi River.

TANZANIA: Serengeti plains dotted with wildebeest; the wildlife haven of the Ngorongoro Crater; climbing the ice-topped Mount Kilimanjaro and relaxing on the beaches of Zanzibar.



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wonderland of fast flowing channels and tranquil lily pad lagoons interspersed with lush grasslands and riverine forests. You can get a bird's-eye view of the complex ecosystem from the air if you fly in on a six-seater light aircraft; other ideal observation opportunities include 4x4 game drives and boat and canoe rides. There's never a dull moment in the Okavango; you don't even have to leave your lodge to see game, and in the dark of night, the likelihood of a lion coming to camp is very real. Footprints in the sand the next morning will reveal who came a-visiting.

Of course there are other considerations that will inform your



ZIMBABWE: A wild canoe trip along the Zambezi from Mana Pools dodging crocodiles and hippos (pictured at left); Hwange National Park with hundreds of elephants; visit the other side of Victoria Falls.

BOTSWANA: Canoeing silently past hippos through the Okavango Delta; boat cruises on the Chobe River for iconic sunset photos; elephant-eating lions in Savute.

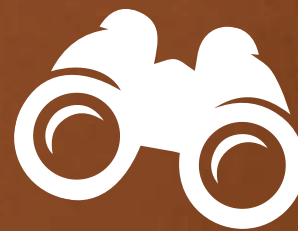
NAMIBIA: Incredible desert landscapes; wildlife in Etosha National Park; nomadic Himba tribe.



SOUTH AFRICA: Sophisticated game lodges; close-up animal sightings; good value public rest camps inside Kruger National Park (pictured at left); climb Table Mountain in Cape Town.

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Wild Nights with a Difference



Some zoos in the United States offer overnight stays to experience the spooky things you miss in daylight, like the “Roars and Snores” package at Philadelphia Zoo and “Bunk with the Beasts” at Denver Zoo, but there’s nothing quite like sleeping in a treehouse surrounded by wildlife that is truly wild! These are some African versions of wild nights:

SLEEPOUT PLATFORM IN KRUGER PARK

Bring out the explorer in you with a two-hour walk through Kruger Park from Rhino Post or Plains Camp to the Sleepout Platform. It’s a multilevel tree house built in the boughs of a huge tree. Peek out of your mosquito net in the dead of night to see who’s at the waterhole.

HONEYMOON NIGHTS

For romance in the wild, book the sleep-out options in Lion Sands or Kapama Game Reserve. Their wooden structures deep in the bush have a four-poster bed, white linen and billowing mosquito nets, with bathroom facilities. Sleep under the stars all snug and safe, but very alone. There are similar offerings at Garonga Camp in Makalali Reserve and Makanyane Safari Lodge in Madikwe, all in South Africa.

DESERT NIGHT SKY

You’ll be mesmerized by the African night sky at Tswalu Malori Sleepout Deck in South Africa’s largest private reserve in the Kalahari Desert. It’s very exclusive, with a price tag to match.

TREEHOUSE WITH RESIDENT SNAKE

“Ignore the snake, he won’t hurt you,” is the advice offered when staying in the Treehouse at Delta Camp in Botswana’s Okavango Delta. Other possible visitors are a large spotted genet (relative to the mongoose), Meyer’s parrots and assorted woodpeckers and pigeons.

IN BED WITH ELEPHANTS

Fall asleep to the snores of elephants at Botswana’s original elephant-back riding camp, Star Bed at Abu Camp. This habituated herd is bedded down for the night within sight and sound of the camp-out platform.

Travelers willing to forgo luxury can sleep under the stars at Garonga Camp (left) and at Makanyane at the Star View Sleep-out Hide.



Courtesy of the Garonga Camp



Courtesy of Makanyane Safari Lodge (www.makanyane.com)



Leopard siting at Londolozi. Children climbing a tree while participating in the Londolozi Cubs program.

final choice of safari destination and accommodation—like can I take the kids? Some lodges have special activities for youngsters, but you should definitely leave the smallest toddlers at home. For advice on planning a family safari, contact Jenni Saunders, whose company Villas & Africa (<http://www.villasandafrica.com/why-us>) specializes in family travels

and sole-use villas in all the best African safari and beach locations. She, her husband and two young sons have tested them all out—a perk of the job.

Wherever your safari takes you, just make sure to budget on coming again, because once is never enough—as Lisa and Sarah Starkey can attest.

“We developed a ‘bucket list,’ with the goal of visiting every continent,”

says Lisa. “But now that we’ve been to Africa, who needs to go anywhere else? We’re dying to go back.”

Travel writer Carrie Hampton has been to more than 200 safari lodges, written coffee table books and guidebooks and has a blog called www.safaritart.com. She visited Africa on vacation 18 years ago and never left.

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