



THINKING ABOUT AFRICA ? ? ?

Having had over a quarter of a century's partnering our clients visiting Africa, Wildlife Safari Consultants have prepared the following in order to assist you in your preparation for a safari to Africa. The following raises many questions, and answers some of them. In your planning, you will have many issues to address, and this is where our specialist advice will be invaluable to you.

Decisions, decisions...

Africa is vast continent - more than four times bigger than Australia and consists of 54 nations. It can provide places of interest for almost everyone's taste. Its landscapes range from the swamplands of Botswana's Okavango to the grass plains of the Serengeti, to the ice-caps of Kilimanjaro and the deserts of Namibia. Distances can be deceiving, and transport services are not as frequent or reliable as they are in many other areas of the world.

Before you choose an area to visit, read as much as you can about the whole continent. There are numerous travel guides to the region and "Africa Specialist" travel consultants who will share their wealth of personal experience with you.

You can purchase "set tours" and these are usually designed for "budget" travellers and generally do not deliver the best African experiences. In Africa many more travellers decide upon an itinerary to suit their exact interests. Talk with those who offer the set tours, and to the specialists who can create an itinerary to suit you. You might receive personal recommendations from friends. Quiz them about their experiences, however remember they can only speak of the little that they have been able to experience and cannot compare that to what is available. Your experience might not be the one they had.

To get started, here are some of the more spectacular destinations. For classic Africa "big game", choose from Tanzania's Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater, Kenya's Masai Mara, Zambia's Luangwa Valley, Botswana's Chobe and Namibia's Etosha Pan.

For birdlife, go for Kenya's Rift Valley (Lakes Baringo, Bogoria, Nakuru and Naivasha), Tanzania's Lake Manyara and Botswana's Okavango. For mountains and forests with a variety of unusual wildlife, try Uganda's west and south, Ruaha's Volcanic Mountains, Kenya's Mt Kenya and the Aberdare Range, and Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro and the crater highlands.

If you want to explore more remote and wild areas, you could start by researching exciting places such as Tanzania's Ruaha and Selous Reserves, Zambia's Liuwa or Busanga Plains, Botswana's Makgadikgadi Pans, Namibia's Skeleton Coast and Botswana/South Africa's Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

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Africa in bite-sized chunks...

You will find a host of itineraries on offer, but with some tour companies you can make up your own. The best advice is to visit just a few places and spend more time in each, rather than trying to see too much too quickly. Too many visitors to Africa spend half of their holiday bouncing along dusty roads and sitting in airports, rather than viewing wildlife. "Overland safaris" are long road journeys interspersed with short glimpses of game viewing and other activities.

In a three-week safari, limit the number of regions you visit. If you are visiting classic wildlife parks, you will need time to find all the hot spots where the animals are congregating, and time to watch the natural dramas unfold. By staying in the same area for a few days, you'll start to understand how the animals behave, rather than just snapping them with your camera. The minimum number of nights we recommended in any camp is three. Any less will not afford you the opportunity to see much of the local area and game. Beware of packages which offer 2nights+2nights+2nights. These combinations hardly provide you with time to become acquainted with the local environment, and reward the tour operator/charter companies by having you undertake more (often expensive) charter flights between their camps.

The ideal length for your safari is around three weeks - longer trip durations tend to be very taxing, especially when you wake before dawn and are on the go all day, sometimes in very taxing climates. You will tire sooner than you imagine. Try to arrange a few "down" days (non-safari) in the middle of your tour, or at the end to wind-down.

Travelling Companions...

Many people like to plan their own itinerary and go it alone, however this is not recommended on a first time visit to Africa. There is too much choice and too much to learn about, before you can cope with visiting game reserves teeming with potentially dangerous wild animals. Let a local operator take care of all the worries and help to you relax and enjoy yourself.

You will find that there are an enormous range of tours: from cheap-and-cheerful safaris offering trips with eighteen other people in four ton trucks, to very exclusive tours in your own Land Rover. So make a shortlist to suit your pocket, and within this you will find a great variety on offer. Then look carefully for the type of tour that really suits your interests, and do not leap at the first good offer you find. Price does count, and in Africa the quality and reward of your experience are directly linked to the price charged. There are also some itineraries that appear very low cost, until you read the small print which outlines what "additional costs" you have to incur and pay for, or perhaps exactly how much time you spend in Parks and Reserves undertaking actual game-viewing. The old adage of "what you pay, is what you get" is extremely true in Africa. "Skimping" on your once in a lifetime safari, could result in disappointment for you in the long run.

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Increasingly, “package operators” are including African destinations in their offerings. These are definitely built around a minimum number of participants, often travelling in coach-style transport. Their destinations are commonly not the best locations for game-viewing, and often disregard the weather. Less frequented parks during the rainy seasons can be ridiculously cheap..... !

Even some of the more expensive safaris have six to eight people (sometimes eight to ten) in each vehicle. If you are a photographer you probably don't want more than 4 persons per 4x4 vehicle. Determine the vehicle size, the number of clients in each, and take much care about the type of vehicle it is (if there is rain about then a Nissan Minivan is the last thing you would wish to travel though Kenya's “black-cotton” soils in).

Being in a vehicle all day with people you don't know and who have very different interests can be frustrating. Imagine being a keen ornithologist and spending two weeks in the bush in a Land Rover, with five other people who only want to stop for “big cats”. You may end up wanting to throttle them. The solution is to make sure you ride in a vehicle with a small number of like-minded enthusiasts - either your friends, or people on an appropriate specialist tour.

Packing cases...

Don't get caught out by taking the wrong clothes. People assume Africa is hot, but it is rarely hot all of the time. Much of Africa, for example, is at altitude. Kenya's Nairobi, Namibia's Windhoek and South Africa's Johannesburg are all over 5,000 feet (1,500m) above sea level - the height of Australia's alpine resorts - and some reserves are at even higher altitudes (Mt Kilimanjaro is permanently snow-capped, as is Mt Kenya, which sits right on the equator!) The nights can be cool, and early morning drives in open vehicles can be chilling. Overnight temperatures in southern Africa in June/July are often below zero. Always pack some warm jumpers or a windproof jacket - you can always peel them off as the day warms up. Desert nights can approach freezing, while lowland days can reach the high thirties, even during winter. October can be oppressively hot in many areas with over 40 degrees being common. Do some research to ensure that you choose the right clothing for your destination at that time of year.

Always take sturdy footwear. If you intend to join walking tours, then remember that acacia thorns will go straight through the soles of running-shoes. Also that dust & dirt will turn your new, white, \$200 trainers permanently black before you return home. Even if you intend staying in your vehicle, there will be times when you will alight, and good tough shoes are handy to wear even in vehicles. Wearing sandals or thongs is not really recommended as general footwear. Walking around villages, near rivers and lakes, and wading streams all invite dangers from things you may tread on. At night keep a good look-out for what you are stepping on. In the dark, scorpions can be a real issue with inappropriate footwear. (no matter where you are walking at night, using a torch to show the immediate pathway is very highly recommended.)

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In Africa, you, and your clothing will get dirty. It will be very dusty in most parks, unless you go in the wet seasons. Most lodges or camps will have a laundry service, but take your own soap powder in case you are caught without fresh clothing on a brief stopover - hand washed clothes dry fast in the tropics. Also note that many lodges and camps will not wash your "smalls" (men and women's underwear), so be prepared to wash these items yourself. The dust will not only dirty your clothes, but may well get inside your suitcase/bags. An airtight plastic bag for "good clothes" may be your solution.

Tropical sunshine at high altitude is very powerful stuff, so take high-factor sun screens, a light long sleeved shirt, long trousers and the essential hat (a "cap" may look smart, but how much coverage does it provide,, particularly on the "nape" of your neck, which is a prime target for sunburn and sun-stroke). Much wildlife viewing is from roof hatches or open safari vehicles, where you can easily fry, and so you need to cover up as the sun rises. If you are undertaking walking, either in the bush or in a town, remember the sun.

To find animals and get the best views of them, binoculars are often essential. Even on "photographic safaris", a pair of binoculars will help you scan the horizon or thick bush for that tell-tale pair of ears, or a flick of a tail, that you just won't see through your best lens. Naturally you will have weight limitations in your packing, so a small, quality pair of binoculars should be considered.

Seasonal tips...

Most of Africa's climate is tropical, and so has wet and dry seasons. The rains generally come when the sun is directly overhead. So countries in the northern hemisphere, such as Ethiopia, have long wet seasons during our winter months, while those in the southern hemisphere, such as Botswana will be wet during our southern hemisphere summer. East African countries such as Kenya have two wet seasons, one in our late spring, and the other at the end of our summer. In many locations you are better off avoiding the wet seasons because muddy roads can make it very difficult/impossible to get around (some national parks even close down during the rains), the grass can be very tall thus making game-viewing very difficult, and with plenty to eat and drink, the animals disperse and so are harder to find. Above all, it can be very miserable being rained on all day.

Outside the rainy seasons, African countries can have cold, overcast seasons that are by no means everyone's idea of a perfect holiday. In particular check whether any "low- priced" holidays coincide with these gloomy periods. Conversely, every African country has its magic months, when everything is at its best. In Kenya for example, September is a lovely month - dry, sunny, not too hot or cold, and ideal for most game-viewing. In the south (Namibia and Botswana), try August and early September, before it starts to warm up too much.

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Even during the “wet” seasons, or the oppressively hot months, there are destinations that are still rewarding to visit - so if your travel is restricted to a certain time of the year, then make sure you seek good advice on how rewarding your destination will be, and what alternatives would make good sense to consider.

Memories are made of this...

If possible take a quality camera. In “35mm nomenclature” the following lens “focal lengths” would be useful: 18-28mm for landscapes, a mid-range zoom (35mm-105mm) for close animals and portraits, and long zoom or telephoto (200mm-300mm) for the more distant animals. A 300mm lens does a fine job for most mammals, but for those who specialise in birds, a more powerful telephoto (400mm-600mm) would be needed.

Now, many safari goers are relying upon the cameras in their smartphones as their only camera for the tour. While we have seen some great results from phone-cameras, fast-moving and distant animals and birds are definitely better captured by a dedicated camera. You should also be aware that in some areas (in particular South Africa) taking a smart phone on a game-drive may be banned as it has a GPS unit and can help identify the location of extremely endangered species (such as rhino). Most lodges and camps also ban using phones for calls while on game-drives due to the interruption of game viewing of your fellow travellers and disturbance of the wildlife.

If you need to consider an affordable camera for your safari, then the major manufacturers all produce small “point and shoot” models with quite powerful zoom-lenses for A\$400-A\$600. A small investment when you consider the safari’s costs.

If you are travelling in a vehicle, you can use the windows or the edge of a roof hatch to support a lens, cushioning it with a bean bag, which is just as good as a tripod and far quicker to use. Keep all of your equipment in a camera bag - well-padded for bouncing along rough roads, well-sealed to keep the dust out, but quick to open should a rare animal cross your path. If you wish to keep your camera out of the bag, then have a large dust-cloth to wrap it in, which can be whipped off instantly.

When photographing with a digital camera then there are quite a few issues that you must be prepared for. Vibrations of vehicles can upset your camera. Heat will fry even a digital camera. DUST ... if your camera has interchangeable lenses then this will be your worst enemy as dust will settle on the CCD/CMOS filter and effect all of your photos (even if the manufacturer claims if “self-cleans” the dust). While you have the benefit of the latest photographic technology your digital camera will be very dependent upon external mains power at the end of each day. Ensure you take extra batteries, and a charger, and perhaps even a device to download you images to (or alternatively a lot of Cards). Remember not everywhere you go will have the same power supply, same plugs – or even power at all !! Check in advance, and be prepared.

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Health and safety...

Before you visit any African country you should find out from either your local GP/medical specialist or via your travel consultant, which vaccinations are required. Make sure you check on the status of Yellow Fever in your destinations, as a medical certificate is required to enter other countries after passing through the infected regions.

Malaria is a problem in most African countries, and you must obtain the correct anti-malarial tablets for the countries to which you are going. If you take the right tablets over the prescribed period, the chances of suffering malaria are very small. Be warned, - a casual attitude towards taking the tablets at the prescribed interval will put you at risk. You can give yourself extra protection by preventing mosquitoes from biting you at night, with a combination of insect-repellent, long sleeved shirts and trousers, and mosquito nets over your bed. (Remember if the camp/lodge provides mosquito nets, then there are mozzies about, even if you haven't seen them) Mosquito coils, burnt in your room or tent at night, will also provide an excellent deterrent. Malaria is an increasing problem worldwide. Each year more Australians are contracting the disease while travelling overseas. Take malaria as a serious issue, do the right things and then you needn't worry. Stopping mosquitoes biting you will also be the best way to avoid Dengue and other mosquito "vector" diseases.

Another tropical disease common in Africa is bilharzia or Schistosomiasis, but you can catch this only by immersing yourself in rivers or lakes. As a general rule, avoid bathing, wading or swimming in any fresh water. The ocean is safe from the disease.

In short, there is the danger of contracting tropical and other diseases in Africa, but if you take the appropriate precautions the chances of being infected are very small.

Many people become overly concerned about outbreaks of obscure diseases in remote areas. Regrettably the press fails to portray an accurate picture of what the reality is for the average traveller. Modern communications and medicine ensure that the average tourist does not enter areas of risk. Also people fail to realise the vast distances between an outbreak area and their destination.

If there are real risks from disease or civil disturbance then the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (and other International bodies) always issue appropriate warnings.

You should take out "travel insurance" for any overseas trip. In the case of travelling to Africa, it is not the high medical costs, but the remoteness of places you will visit, that can often result in high costs. Examine the policy carefully to see that it covers you for the African region, and that it provides appropriate cover for medical emergencies and hospitalisation. Evacuation by air ambulance, to major centres such as Nairobi and Johannesburg, may be the only option in some areas of Africa, so check to see the insurance company's coverage in regard to this ("Remote Area Evacuation").

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Rhino ? What rhino...

Many of the animals you will see on your safari are extremely dangerous. But you are quite safe from most of them in a vehicle. Elephants, buffaloes and rhinos can attack vehicles but this is extremely rare and they usually give adequate warning. Your guide would be able to recognise the warning signs, and drive off if necessary. If your guide ever wishes to move away, do not try and persuade him otherwise, even if you desperately want that one last photograph.

Walking in the African bush is can be very dangerous, and so never do this on your own. Even a tempting little stroll out of a lodge or campsite can end in tragedy. Some wildlife reserves allow walking safaris with experienced guides, and these, by and large, are safe. Overall, if you stick to the rules of the wildlife reserve and follow the advice of your guide, the risk of coming to any harm is minimal.

Many people are scared of visiting Africa because of human violence, and some African countries have safety issues, in particular the war-torn ones such as Somalia, southern Sudan and Burundi. But other countries which, until a few years ago, were ravaged by war, have recently become very suitable for tourists. Rwanda and Ethiopia are modern power-houses of development compared with a few years ago. At any time your tour operator in Africa will know what the current situation is, and will not send you off into dangerous areas.

Other African countries, famous as holiday destinations, have suffered declines in tourism because of the perceived dangers of bandit attacks, car-jacking and urban violence. The dangers are usually exaggerated or based on out-of-date reports. Often the big cities of USA are far more intimidating than anything you would find in Africa. South Africa has often been reported for muggings and violence, however these rarely involve tourists, and the press always over-exaggerate. The sad thing is that the good news, does not receive anything like the publicity that the few isolated acts of violence do.

As in any foreign destination, it does pay to be street-wise in the big towns - urban violence is a global issue which has now regrettably grown in the modern African city. Your guide, or your hotel management, will know the danger zones, and can brief you accordingly. If you heed advice and take personal care of your valuables, you should have a safe holiday. Do not take expensive jewellery and valuables away with you you won't need them and they become a tempting target or people who see you as being rich and that you won't miss the item. Unfortunately many robberies in lodges and camps are being traced, not to the staff, but to other guests. This issue has increased in recent years, with lodge staff being the first people being blamed for the theft. Take good care of your belongings throughout your journey.

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Time to stand and stare...

Try to spend at least several days in a wildlife reserve. This gives you time to learn to know where the animals are and even get to know a few individual ones. This is much more rewarding than just ticking off a list of species and "snapping" anything that moves. There is nothing better than to have the time to sit and watch individual animals, and to see how their daily life unfolds. But to do this, you also need to have the flexibility to stay out through your meal times. Many safari drives are organised around strict meal schedules and the drivers must take you back to the camp or lodge according to their watches, and not according to lost opportunities. Ask your travel consultant about this feature. Some operators are happy to provide meals as picnics, or even to stay out as long as need be for that great viewing chance. Unfortunately many Lodges and Camps which are four and five star, are becoming increasingly inflexible when it comes to delivering client satisfaction with game viewing, as opposed to silver-service mealtimes.

Consider taking some snack food along with you each day. It is a very common fallacy that "nothing ever happens in the heat of the day". It is not unusual to find large cats (leopard, lion and cheetah) hunting in the midday sun. Some cheetahs prefer to hunt in the middle of the day, because at dawn and dusk they are harassed by hyaenas. If you find nothing during the middle of the day, you can always return to camp, but if you do, you can sit tight and maybe watch an incredible natural drama unfold in front of your eyes.

If you decide to sit and watch a particular animal, make sure that you are parked well away from it, to avoid any disturbance. This is as much in your interest as the animals. A relaxed, undisturbed animal will behave normally, and so be far more interesting to watch.

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Doing it yourself...

Many people think that by making their own arrangements or booking on the internet, they can save money. This is usually not correct when it comes to Africa. Wildlife Safari Consultants is one specialist who charges you the same price as you would pay if you went directly to the operator. Often we have rates that are up to 30% lower than the direct rate. Our car rental contracts are lower than any rates available directly to the public, and always include unlimited kilometres.

So will booking through the internet save you money ? Probably not. Apart from the time the spent searching, the risk of dealing with someone you know nothing about, and then consider the fact that the amount of complex information that you need to have to join all of the ends together just isn't available to you on the web. (local ground transfers, charter services, immigration requirements, current visa costs, airline connectivity.... All these bits and pieces, if not handled accurately, can destroy your planned safari)

Also the fact that usually the internet is probably no cheaper than a specialist will charge. It is not in the operator's interest to undercut their global specialist' network (that have taken years to build), so the best camps, lodges and operators will always provide their global specialist agents with rates that are the best available. And remember if the price is too good to be true, then it just might be a scam – and lot happen in Africa.

Another issue is that some tour operators, camps and hotels have appalling standards. If Wildlife Safari Consultants know that the people you are considering have such a reputation, we will tell you why they do. Websites like "Trip-Advisor" are known to have bias (often paid for by the lodges and camps). Price-comparison sites like "Trivago" and "Booking.com" have been found by Australian Regulators to clearly favour the outcomes of searches to maximise their returns, and do not cover all options, nor the best (or even genuine) prices.

One other factor to consider, is that many African countries have different rates for foreigners, than they charge to locals - and they require proof of your residency to have the lower "local" price. Often you will read in foreign magazines, or low-cost travel guides, or see on the web, prices that are lower than an African specialist is charging you. Beware of this rate not actually being available to you as a foreigner. It is also worth noting that low-cost travel guide prices are at least 1 year out of date at the time they are printed - so the rate you are reading might be many years old.

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