

A Beginner's Guide to Safari Success

Part I - Choices, Choices, Choices



HILARY HANN PHOTOGRAPHY



Precarious grazing grounds on the edge of Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

Choosing the right safari for you

There are a multitude of organised safaris on the market with a wide range of prices catering to all kinds of people and their specific interests. How to select the best one for you can be difficult and confusing.

Things to consider:

Is there something that you really want to see?

Such as the wildebeest migration that moves between Serengeti (Tanzania) and Masai Mara (Kenya)

Or you might want to see an iconic natural wonder such as Ngorongoro Crater or Victoria Falls

Your particular interest may be large predators and want the best chance to see these

You may want to combine wildlife along with cultural and tribal visits

Landscapes may interest you as much as the wildlife and so locations that have spectacular scenery may be a requirement

Making a list of what interests you the most will help define the kind of safari that would suit you.

What style of travel do you prefer?

Do you enjoy camping?

Is having permanent structures important to you?

Do you require luxury or is a lower level of creature comforts acceptable?

Are you prepared to fly to get to your locations or do you want all travel to be via road?

Can you cope with heat or would you rather safaris that are in more moderate climates?

Do you have an adventurous spirit?

How active do you want your safari to be ... would you like some walking?



Your budget?

Safaris are expensive but they're usually quoted as all inclusive so remember that you normally don't have a lot of extra expenses.

Determining how much you can afford to spend goes a long way to helping you to decide on the right trip for you.

Stretching your budget to include some of the must see destinations will usually be a good idea if at all possible.

Are you passionate about photography?

One of the great joys of travelling is not only the experience and memories that you have, but also the chance to take interesting photographs. Taking a safari with a professional photographer should give you more of a focus on getting the best opportunities to take really good photos. There is a difference within the genre of wildlife photo safaris as some are instructional tours whereas others are more of a chance to observe, ask questions and review your images with the group leader. Not everyone wants to sit down each day and have instruction, or even have instruction in the field. It can, however, be a very useful exercise to do reviews at the end of the day with someone who can critique your images and help you understand how to improve them. It can also be the case that if you are on a very small group trip and always travelling in the same vehicle as the safari leader, you can have advice on how to set your camera settings to make the most of each sighting.

I take the latter view and so my groups are small enough so that we are all in the same vehicle (but with plenty of space) and I can offer advice on the game drive as we go. If you are after more instruction, there are quite a few operators who offer this service but it usually costs more. Most photographic led safari tours cater very well for non photographers as the focus is on the wildlife and although time is spent with particular animals to give the best chance of seeing something interesting happen, unless stated otherwise, it doesn't involve only following one species to the exclusion of most others. It's one of the questions that's worth asking before booking.



How your choices determine where and when you go

To give you an idea of how some of the choices you've made affect your safari I've listed a few of the major considerations below.

Once you've decided what you want to see or do, some research is needed to find out which country would accommodate most of your choices. Travelling from one country to another within a short holiday period becomes expensive and wastes time. A good, knowledgeable specialist Africa travel agent will be able to advise you on the best combination of parks to visit to get the best value for both your time and budget.

Migration

If seeing a migration river crossing is important to you be aware that you can wait for many hours in one place hoping that the animals will decide to cross. Hitting the prime time to increase the possibility that you will see this amazing event will also mean that you are likely to run into the mass tourism season. Careful planning as regards both timing and camp choices can decrease the number of other vehicles at a crossing and increase your chances of experiencing a crossing. For example, Northern Serengeti will usually be less crowded than the Masai Mara, however, it won't offer cheap safari options so your budget will need to be more if taking that option.

Walking

If walking safaris are for you, there are some amazing options available these days including walking amongst the wildlife in Mana Pools NP, Zimbabwe or going on a complete walking safari camping at different locations each night such as offered in Ruaha NP, Tanzania. Zambia is considered the originator of quality walking safaris and there are many excellent options available at some prime National Parks there. Timing is very important when planning a walking safari and will vary from area to area given the rainy seasons, winter and summer change across the latitudes of the continent.

A Focus on Species

It's also a good idea to keep in mind that not all species of animals are inhabitants of every park or every country. It might seem obvious and most people will realise that if they want to see Mountain gorillas, they need to travel to Rwanda, Uganda or DRC (although the latter country is not currently a feasible option). If you want to walk amongst the elephants in Mana Pools, you won't see giraffes there, nor will you see them in Ngorongoro Crater. Whilst the Crater will have bull elephants, if you want to see breeding herds with calves, know that they don't inhabit that area. Nyala, a most beautiful antelope, won't be in any of the Kenyan nor Tanzania parks that you might visit as it is a South Eastern African species. Zebra will be in abundance in many East African parks but if you want to see the rarer Grevy's zebra your best chance is to visit Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Northern Kenya. Wild dogs and Cheetahs are species that most people would really want to see but are very difficult to find. Wild dogs are breeding well in some specific locations but despite being around are tricky to find. Timing is critical. Cheetahs are increasingly under threat but there are still some excellent places to have a high chance of seeing them including the Southern Serengeti plains.

If your biggest ticket item is to see the increasingly rare black rhino, your best chance is to visit one of the private conservancies in Kenya, such as the aforementioned Lewa WC, Solio Ranch or Ol Pejeta. The easily visited and accessible Nairobi National Park provides a good chance to see black rhinos. Kruger NP in South Africa is also a good option as are some of the private conservancies in that country. White rhinos, being grazers, are more easily seen in the few places where they are still kept in reasonable safety including the above mentioned parks.

Birds

If birds are your main focus, Uganda offers an amazing array of rare and beautiful species that would delight any serious birder. Along with some magnificent scenery and some excellent, although underrated game parks, Uganda is a great all round safari destination. However, birds are interesting and plentiful at all National Parks and Conservation areas, ticking off species on your 'Big Year' list is relatively easy when on a safari and provided you choose a quality provider, your guide will be able to identify all but the most rare and usually they carry a bird identifying book to help with those.

Cultural Visits

Many people would like to combine wildlife with cultural visits. Not every country or safari can cater for this interest but some countries are particularly rewarding if you want to spend time with local tribes, learn about their cultural and take photos. If you join a safari with a specific focus on tribal visits, make sure that they have arranged for photographs to be taken and that the people concerned are compensated for your visit. There is more available than just visiting the Maasai or Samburu in their colourful dress and it is worth doing some research. For example, I have an upcoming tour to visit some of the tribes in the Omo Valley, Ethiopia and am in the process of planning a visit to the Gerewol Festival which is also an amazing opportunity to see and experience these colourful people.

As you can appreciate, the options are vast and putting together a safari that would fulfill the most discerning traveller is an art in itself. Buying the cheap, off the rack option is not always the best way to spend your money. Finding a serious and well travelled safari operator to help you put it together is money well spent. I am always happy to help and with a great supportive team can provide most of the information required.

Look out for Part 2 to the Beginner's Guide to Safari Success







A ball of flaming sun hovers over the horizon, Grevy's zebras walk in the foreground, the sound of their hooves in the damp grass making a soft swish and thud as they move. The light shower has freshened the dusty land and given us renewed vigour for the day ahead.

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