

AN HONEST PRIMER

Before you book a safari

What to plan for, what it costs, and how to choose who to travel with.

Milele Kenya



A safari is one of the more complicated trips you can buy and one of the least transparent. Prices vary enormously for reasons that are not obvious. Two itineraries that look identical on paper can produce completely different weeks. And most of the decisions that matter get made before you have spoken to anyone.

This guide is our attempt to explain the things we wish every traveler knew before they started. There is nothing to fill in and nothing to buy. Read it, use it to ask better questions, and hold any company you speak to — including us — to what is in here.

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SECTION 1

When to start planning

Safari rewards early planning more than almost any other kind of travel. The best small camps have twenty beds, not two hundred, and the best guides are booked by name.

You can absolutely put a good trip together in three months. But the camps with the strongest locations, the guides worth requesting, and the single rooms that avoid a supplement all go early — particularly for peak season and school holidays. Here is a realistic working backwards.

12–18 months

Decide roughly when you want to travel and what you most want to see. Start conversations. For peak-season travel, popular camps and specialist guides are already being reserved at this point.

9–12 months

Choose who you are travelling with and confirm the itinerary. Pay the deposit and secure camps. International flights usually open around eleven months out and are cheapest early.

6 months

See a travel clinic about vaccinations. Check passport validity and blank pages. Buy travel insurance now, not later — cancellation cover only works if it predates the reason you cancel.

3 months

Final balance is typically due. Confirm internal flight luggage limits. Start assembling gear, especially anything that needs breaking in or testing.

6–8 weeks

Malaria prophylaxis prescription. Visa or travel authorization. Confirm dietary and medical notes have reached the camps.

2 weeks

Currency, copies of documents, and a plan for medication in hand luggage. Confirm arrival transfers and who is meeting you.

Departure

Carry medication, documents, camera bodies and one change of clothes in hand luggage. Checked bags go missing more often on multi-leg routes.

If you are travelling in July, August, or over Christmas and New Year, add roughly six months to everything above. Those weeks sell out first and discounting does not happen.

SECTION 2

What it actually costs

The single biggest source of confusion, and the reason so many first enquiries end in silence.

Safari is priced per person, per night, and is usually all-inclusive: your room, all meals, game drives, park fees and often drinks and laundry are bundled into one nightly rate. This is unlike almost every other kind of travel and it makes the headline numbers look alarming until you understand what they contain.

What drives the price

- **Season.** The same room can cost three times more in peak season than in the green season. This is the largest single lever you control.
- **Where you sleep.** Private conservancies and concessions cost more than national parks — but they cap vehicle numbers and usually permit off-road driving, night drives and walking. Often the best value in the whole trip.
- **Camp size and style.** A twelve-bed camp with a guide for every vehicle costs more to run than a hundred-room lodge. You are paying for staff ratio and exclusivity.
- **Private vs shared vehicle.** A private vehicle transforms the experience and adds meaningfully to the cost. For photographers it is close to essential.
- **Internal flights.** Light aircraft between parks save enormous amounts of time and cost real money. Driving is cheaper and slower, sometimes much slower.

What is usually included

Accommodation, all meals, game activities, park and conservancy fees, and internal transfers where stated. Many camps also include house drinks and laundry. Always check rather than assume.

What is usually not

International flights, visas, travel insurance, premium drinks and champagne, balloon safaris and other optional activities, private guiding, spa treatments, curios, and tips. These add up to more than people expect — budget five to ten percent of the trip cost on top for extras and gratuities.

The costs people forget

- Single supplements, which can add 30–50% for solo travelers on some properties.
- Park and conservancy fees, which rise regularly and are often quoted separately.
- Tips — typically \$20–40 per guest per day for your guide, plus a camp staff pot.
- Excess baggage on light aircraft, where limits are strict and enforced.
- The gap between a quoted 'from' price and the season you actually want to travel.

How payment usually works

Expect a deposit of twenty to thirty percent to confirm, with the balance due sixty to ninety days before travel. Cancellation terms in this industry are strict because camps are small and a cancelled room is rarely resold. Read

them before you pay, and insure against them.

SECTION 3

Choosing where and when

Most people choose a country first. It is usually better to choose an experience first and let the destination follow.

Start from what you actually want. Big herds and dramatic river crossings point somewhere quite different from the best leopard viewing, which is different again from desert-adapted species, gorilla trekking, or an easy first safari with young children. Tell a good operator what you want to see and they will tell you where and when — that is the part they know.

Season matters more than destination

Almost everywhere in Africa has a dry season and a wet one, and the trade-offs are consistent even when the months differ:

- **Dry season.** Sparse vegetation and animals concentrated at water, so game viewing is easier and more reliable. Also the busiest and most expensive time, with the most vehicles at every sighting.
- **Green or wet season.** Dramatically lower prices, few other guests, lush landscapes, newborn animals and outstanding birding. Some roads and camps close, and dense vegetation makes animals harder to find.
- **Shoulder months.** Often the sweet spot — much of the dry-season advantage without peak-season crowds or pricing. Worth asking about specifically.

A few honest realities

- Wildlife movements are weather-driven, not scheduled. No reputable company will promise you a specific event on a specific date, and one that does is telling you something about itself.
- Fewer places, longer stays, almost always beats more places, shorter stays. Two or three nights minimum per camp; one night is a transit stop, not a safari.
- Transfer times are routinely underestimated. Ask how many hours are on the road each day, not just how many parks you will visit.
- Combining a safari with a beach or city stay at the end works beautifully and gives you somewhere to decompress and sleep in.

If your dates are fixed by work or school, do not agonize over seasonality. Somewhere in Africa is excellent in every month of the year — the skill is matching your window to the right place, and that is a question to ask, not one to solve alone.

SECTION 4**Choosing who to travel with**

The most consequential decision you will make, and the hardest to judge from a website.

Safari is sold by several kinds of company. A ground operator is based in the destination and runs the trip itself; a tour operator or travel designer is usually based in your country and works with ground operators. Both models produce excellent trips. What matters is that someone competent is accountable, and that you know who.

Questions worth asking before you pay anything

- Who actually operates the trip on the ground, and what is your relationship with them?
- Have you personally been to the camps you are recommending, and when?
- Is my vehicle private or shared, and how many guests per vehicle?
- Is this a national park or a private conservancy, and what does that change?
- What exactly is not included in this price?
- What happens if a camp closes, a flight is cancelled, or someone falls ill?
- Who do I call at two in the morning, and will a person answer?
- What are your cancellation terms, and how is my money protected before I travel?

Financial protection

You are paying a large sum months in advance, so ask what protects it if the company fails — a bonding or trust arrangement, membership of a recognized trade body, or simply paying by card so you keep chargeback rights. Wire transfer offers the least protection of any method.

Warning signs

- Prices far below everyone else. Safari has thin margins and real fixed costs.
- Pressure to pay quickly, or by bank transfer only.
- Itineraries that will not name the specific camps you are staying in.
- Guarantees of particular sightings — nobody can promise you a leopard.
- No physical address, no named staff, no references, and no willingness to tell you when your plan is wrong for the season.

Good signs

- They ask about your budget early and explain honestly what it does and does not reach.
- They tell you when your ideas will not work, and say why.
- They name guides and explain who would suit your party.
- They are specific about what is excluded, unprompted.
- They put fewer places in the itinerary than you asked for, and explain the reasoning.

SECTION 5

Travelling responsibly

Your money is a vote. Tourism funds most of the conservation on this continent, but not all tourism does.

Activities to avoid

A reliable rule: if you can touch, ride, or pose with a wild animal, something is wrong. Cub petting and walking-with-lions operations are widely linked to the captive breeding trade. Elephant riding requires a training process that is cruel by design. Short-stay volunteering at orphanages does documented harm to children. Reputable operators will decline these; be wary of any that market them.

What good practice looks like in the field

- Vehicles keep their distance, do not surround an animal, and leave when a sighting gets crowded — particularly at a kill or with cubs present.
- Guides observe off-road rules where they exist, rather than treating them as optional.
- No baiting, no calls played to draw animals in, no driving between a predator and its prey.
- Limits on how many vehicles attend a sighting, and guides who wait their turn.

Where the money goes

Conservancy and community-owned land is one of the more effective conservation models on the continent: landowners lease land for wildlife and are paid per bed-night, which makes living wildlife more valuable than the alternatives. Staying on that land directs your money into it. It is a fair question to ask any operator — what proportion of what I pay stays in the area, and with whom?

Small things that matter

- Ask before photographing people, and accept no as an answer.
- Buy crafts from community cooperatives rather than roadside resellers where you can.
- Do not buy wildlife products — including things you may not think of as wildlife, like some shells, corals, and hardwood carvings.
- Tip in cash, directly, and ask how the camp's staff pot is distributed.
- Refill water bottles where camps provide filtered water.

SECTION 6**Health, documents and insurance**

Dull, briefly stressful, and much easier if started early. None of this is medical advice — see a travel clinic.

Passports and entry

- Most African countries require six months validity beyond your travel dates, and some also expect validity before travel. Check your specific route.
- You need blank pages — usually at least two, more if you are crossing borders.
- Many countries have moved to electronic visas or travel authorizations that must be obtained before departure. Apply through official government sites only; the search results are full of agencies charging a markup for the same form.

Vaccinations and yellow fever

See a travel clinic six to eight weeks before departure. Routine vaccinations, hepatitis A, typhoid and tetanus are commonly recommended; rabies is worth discussing for remote areas. Yellow fever is the one that catches people out: some countries require a certificate for entry, and crucially, transiting through certain countries can trigger the requirement even if your destination would not. Check the rules for your entire routing, not just your destination.

Malaria

Most safari areas carry some malaria risk, which varies by region and season. Prophylaxis needs a prescription and some regimens start before you travel, so leave time. Bite avoidance matters as much as tablets: cover up at dusk, use repellent, sleep under the net provided.

Travel insurance: the one thing not to skip

- It must include emergency medical evacuation. Remote camps are hours from a hospital and air evacuation is extremely expensive without cover.
- Buy it when you pay your deposit, not before you fly. Cancellation cover only helps if the policy predates the reason you cancel.
- Declare pre-existing conditions honestly. Undeclared conditions void claims.
- Check that it covers light aircraft travel and any activities you have booked.
- Carry the policy number and the emergency line separately from your phone.

Practical health in camp

- Bring medication in original packaging with a copy of the prescription, in hand luggage.
- Camps are remote. A basic kit — rehydration salts, antihistamine, plasters, painkillers, anything you personally rely on — saves a lot of discomfort.
- Tell your operator about allergies and conditions in advance. Camps cater well for almost anything when warned, and badly when surprised.

SECTION 7

What to pack

Less than you think, in a bag that squashes.

If any part of your trip involves light aircraft — and most safaris do — you will face a strict weight limit, commonly around 15kg or 33lb including hand luggage, in a soft-sided bag with no rigid frame or wheels. This is not negotiable at the airstrip. Camps usually do laundry daily, so pack for three or four days and let them handle the rest.

Clothing

- Neutral colors — khaki, olive, stone, brown. Avoid bright white, which glares.
- Avoid dark blue and black, which attract tsetse flies in some areas.
- Avoid camouflage patterns, which are illegal for civilians in several African countries.
- Layers. Early morning drives are genuinely cold, and the same day can hit 90°F by noon.
- A warm fleece or jacket, a hat with a brim, and a scarf or buff for dust.
- Closed shoes for walking; you do not need hiking boots unless you are trekking.

The things people wish they had brought

- **Binoculars, one pair per person.** The single most underrated item on any safari. Sharing a pair halves everyone's experience. 8x42 is the sensible default.
- **A headtorch.** Camps are dark by design and you will be walked to your tent at night.
- **A dust-proof bag for cameras.** Fine dust is the main enemy of camera gear on safari.
- **More memory cards and batteries than you think.** Charging is often limited to generator hours, and cold mornings drain batteries fast.
- **A beanbag or similar support.** Far more useful than a tripod in a vehicle.

Leave behind

Hard suitcases, drones (banned in most national parks and requiring permits almost everywhere else), excessive toiletries, formal clothes, and camouflage anything. Most camps are informal and nobody dresses for dinner.

If you are travelling primarily to photograph, say so early. It changes vehicle choice, seat numbers, camp selection and guide pairing, and it is much cheaper to plan for than to fix.

SECTION 8**What a day is actually like**

Managing expectations is most of the work of enjoying a safari.

The rhythm is consistent almost everywhere. You are woken before dawn, often around 5:30, with coffee at your tent. You drive for three or four hours in the best light and the best animal activity of the day. You return for a large brunch, then rest through the heat — this is not wasted time, it is when the animals rest too. You head out again in the late afternoon, stop somewhere with a view for a drink at sunset, and return for dinner. You will be in bed by nine-thirty and glad of it.

Things worth knowing in advance

- The early starts are real, and they are non-negotiable if you want the best sightings. By day three most people stop minding.
- Game viewing is patient work. There are long quiet stretches between remarkable moments, and the quiet stretches are part of it.
- Roads are rough and dusty. Bring something to cover your face and your camera.
- Most camps are unfenced. Animals walk through at night, which is why you are escorted to your tent after dark. It is safe and it is one of the best parts.
- Connectivity is patchy to nonexistent. Download what you need beforehand and tell people at home not to expect daily contact.
- Camps have age minimums that vary, and some activities — walking safaris in particular — have their own restrictions. Check early if you are travelling with children.

On the Big Five

It is a marketing phrase inherited from hunting, and it makes a poor itinerary. Chasing a checklist tends to produce long drives, rushed sightings and disappointment when the leopard does not appear. The travelers who come home happiest are usually the ones who wanted to watch one thing properly rather than tick five things quickly.

SECTION 9

The mistakes we see most often

In rough order of how much damage they do.

- **Too many camps in too few days.** The commonest and most costly error. Every move eats half a day in transfers and packing. Three nights in each of three camps beats two nights in each of five, every time.
- **Underestimating transfer times.** A short distance on a map can be four hours on the ground. Ask for driving times explicitly before you approve an itinerary.
- **Booking peak season while hating crowds.** If quiet matters more to you than guaranteed conditions, the shoulder months are a better trip at a better price.
- **Budgeting only for the quoted price.** Tips, drinks, optional activities and single supplements are real money. Add five to ten percent.
- **Choosing on price alone.** The gap between the cheapest quote and a good one usually shows up as shared vehicles, camps in poor locations, and long drives.
- **Skipping or under-buying insurance.** Especially medical evacuation cover. This is the risk that turns a bad situation into a catastrophic one.
- **Not saying what you actually care about.** Operators are not mind readers. If you care about photography, birds, comfort, or one particular animal, say so at the start — it changes the whole design.
- **Over-packing.** You will not need most of it, and the luggage limit is enforced.
- **Leaving it too late.** The good small camps and the good guides go first.

SECTION 10**A countdown checklist**

Nothing to fill in — just a sequence to work through.

As soon as you decide to go

- Work out roughly when you can travel and how long for.
- Agree a budget range, and whether it includes international flights.
- Decide what matters most — one or two things you would be sorry to miss.
- Start talking to two or three companies and compare how they answer.

Once you have chosen

- Read the cancellation terms before paying the deposit.
- Buy travel insurance the same week you pay.
- Check passport validity and blank pages.
- Book international flights once the itinerary is confirmed.

Three to six months out

- Travel clinic appointment; ask specifically about yellow fever and malaria.
- Apply for visas or travel authorizations through official sites.
- Send dietary, medical and mobility notes to your operator.
- Confirm internal flight luggage limits, and buy a soft bag if you need one.

The last month

- Fill prescriptions and pack them in hand luggage in original packaging.
- Test camera gear, buy spare batteries and cards, pack a dust cover.
- Copy documents — passport, insurance, itinerary — and leave a set at home.
- Get some cash in small denominations for tipping.
- Confirm who is meeting you on arrival and what happens if they are not there.



Milele Kenya

We design private safaris and run small specialist departures in Kenya, including conservation trips that fund Kenyan organizations directly.

If you would like to talk it through

We are glad to discuss an actual trip — and equally glad if you use this guide to ask hard questions of somebody else instead. Comparing several companies is exactly what we have just recommended.

info@milelekenya.com

+1-602-730-4856 · milelekenya.com

*This guide is general information, not medical, legal or financial advice.
Requirements change — always confirm entry and health rules for your own routing.*