

# **Notes on Safaris in East Africa**

**by**  
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There are three important decisions that need to be made when deciding on a Safari in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania). These are (1) What do you want to do – view or photograph (I'll leave hunting out but there are still hunting leases in East Africa) (2) When do you want to go, or more properly, what are your interests and (3) How much time and money do you have. I'll deal with each in order....

## **1. What do you want to do?**

If you want to see the birds, animals and scenery but are not interested in serious photography you can join any number of Safaris that, usually using minivans, cater to groups of 5-7 people per vehicle and roar about the landscape like demented taxicabs, never stopping for more than 15 minutes at any animal, and often never even turning their engines off. These are the least expensive means to “go on Safari” and are certainly a good training experience for those aspiring to diplomatic careers (or for those needing that gentle nudge to push them into becoming homicidal psychopaths). This sort of tour is generally going to range to about \$2,000/week. Please remember your instamatic.....

If you want to experience the wildlife and its place in the ecosystem while bringing back photographic memories that are worthy of sharing with others you will want to be somewhat more selective in your choice of a Safari company. You want a company that offers experienced, professional guides, four-wheel drive vehicles with open tops and windows, not canvas sides. There should be no more than one photographer per row of seats (not one per window, if you have the left front window there is not a chance that the guy sitting at the right front window will let you take a photo of the cheetah making a kill on his side until it all over!). This generally limits the number of clients per vehicle to three. This sort of tour is going to be upwards of \$5,000 per week; figure about \$750 to \$850 per person per day in 2012 high season in Kenya.

Some relevant vehicular related tips for the photographer are:

- a) You want “windows” they are easily closed in the event of rain and dust. When closed you can still see out through them fairly well and you do not need assistance in opening/closing them. Zip down canvas sides with clear vinyl “windows” in them require outside assistance in furling/unfurling and zipping up/down; once down they are little better than fun-house mirrors for “seeing” through.
- b) Dust, did I mention Dust, yes DUST! Dust is everywhere unless it rains. If it does rain there is no dust anywhere but, unless you are in a Land Cruiser or Land Rover with 4WD, you are not anywhere either. Rain can make the tracks in East Africa only slightly less treacherous and slippery than greased ice. If you are in a 2WD minivan you are going to see a lot of the Camp and not too much else. That is a pity since there is generally a great deal of action after and before a rain (during too, but cameras are not generally all that well suited to underwater work). For DUST I always carry my camera in a case, either a zipped closed long lens bag or a backpack with the lens mounted. Pelican cases work well here too, though transporting them is a pain. This case is then strapped to the seat next to

me with both a seat belt and a bungee cord. The seat is great at cushioning your behind from the impacts of the rough tracks and roads of East Africa, why should you not use that cushioning for your camera as well? It is not as if there is someone who is going to be sitting there (only 3 photographers in the vehicle, remember?). Anyhow once the camera gear is secured to the seat you are going to cover it with a large beach towel. This will keep your bag “less dusty” which will, ultimately, keep your cameras and lenses cleaner.

- c) Use a bean bag. Bean bags are portable, empty they weigh only ounces and you can buy dried beans, corn etc. throughout East Africa and fill your bags once you are there. Trying to use a tripod in a land rover is something that more properly belongs in the circus. Being done by clowns. Window mounts are sexy, heavy, immobile but sexy. It takes three hands to transfer one from the right side to the left side of the vehicle and four hands to get the silly thing configured for use on the roof. A bean bag is a grab-n-toss; set camera/lens on it and go. Total time is 15 seconds tops!
- d) On the roof, up on the roof... yes you need that ability. Birds in trees, leopards in trees, lions on the other side of bushes, cheetahs on vehicle hoods (bonnets for those of you from where English is the spoken language) and seeing over the grass to get a shot of whatever it is down in the weeds without having to shoot through the grass. All of these things are a reason to get a vehicle with roof hatches that can be opened while driving or while taking pictures.
- e) Clothing – HAT! Yes HAT is first! The Serengeti/Mara ecosystem is generally at 5,000 to 6,000 feet (1,500-1,800 meters) in elevation and it is within a degree or three of the equator. You have some need to look like a demented lobster, forget the hat, otherwise remember one with a retention strap (neck strap) to keep it in place as you drive. You will want a few pairs of long pants that the legs zip off of at the knees to become shorts, a sweater/jacket (yes it does get quite cool at night, I’ve seen it down in the 40’s (5-10C)). You will want lightweight shirts (fishing shirts work quite well) and shoes or boots for those times when you just have to see about replacing a tire that has somehow let all the magic gas out due to an enchanted thorn (pretty nearly every bush in East Africa sports dagger-like thorns, many capable of puncturing a tire as readily as a 16d nail). Strangely enough you may notice your guide NOT driving through Elephant or Rhino dung... they eat the acacia trees/shrubs, thorns and all, and their post processed output is quite literally bristling with two inch long thorns... remember the enchanted thorns? That’s how they get that way.... For inside the vehicle I strongly recommend sandals, Teva or the like. If you absolutely have to go out and check the tires (use the bush toilet) they are adequate and they will keep your toes nice and cool as the thermonuclear blast furnace in the sky begins to ascend to its midday “melt” setting.
- f) HELP Change that flat tire. Post a lookout on the top of the vehicle (in it looking out from the hatch); remember there are meat eating nasties out there. That is why you came to East Africa after all. Get the rest of your group out of the vehicle to help. Strangely enough, the sooner the tire is changed out and everything is stowed back in place, the sooner you will be on your way to see that interesting meat-eating nasty or whatever it is that you were on your way to see or do before the magic gas escaped. At about \$100/hour for your trip cutting the tire changing time down by 75% is in your best interests. Generally with three guys working on the jack, spare and lug nuts we found that we could change a tire in 10-15 minutes and be on our way.... Also, since your guide was spared doing “all” the work you are likely to have a better time all around. Happy guide = Great Safari.

- g) Happy Guide – that says it all. You are going to be living in the same vehicle with your guide for several days/weeks. If you buy a drink, buy your guide one too. Treat him/her (there are some female guides) as your friend and you will be amazed at how great a trip you all have.

## **2. When do you want to go or what do you want to see?**

Well if it is the great Wildebeest migration you will need to be in the Mara in August through October. Generally there are lots of crossings of the Mara river in August with more as the rains and fires dictate until the great herds move back into Tanzania in late October/early November. If you want to see predators in action the Mara in January or February is best, this is also the best time for those of you who love bird photography as all the European migrants are in country. If you want to see the Wildebeest giving birth then Tanzania in January or February is where you want to be. Remember to check the climate and rainfall for the time of year that you want to go. Rain makes many tracks impassable even for 4WD vehicles.

If you are a flamingo lover, I suggest Lake Nakuru, Lake Natron or even a visit to the Ngorongoro Crater. Generally a well balanced Kenyan Safari for first timers or photographers includes a mix of the Masai Mara, lake Nakuru, Samburu and Amboseli national parks. If you are time limited just hit Lake Nakuru for a couple of days as it has Rhinos and Flamingos and then spend the balance of your time in the Masai Mara. The Mara has never ever disappointed me.

## **3. So, just how much time do you have or how deep are your pockets?**

Generally if you have about 16 days you can get a 14 day Safari in. In the sort of vehicle I described earlier you are going to be looking at about \$12,000 per person, double occupancy for 14 overnights and so on in Kenya. About \$550/person is just lodging and board, \$75 is park entrance fees, and about \$100/person is for a guide. A vehicle is about \$350/day or about \$120/person. This is \$845/day. Figure tips/gratuities are going to be \$10/person per day to the guide and \$5 per person/day to the camp staff. Total not including drinks, trinkets etc. is right at \$860/person per day. This is where that \$12,000 goes. Sometimes included but not shown is flying doctor service (medevac) and travel insurance. If this is not included DO buy coverage for yourself and your group.

More of the readers of this article are going to want recommendations on where to go to see what and I'll get to that after a brief comment about Malaria. Malaria is NOT fun. It KILLS more people each year throughout the world than almost any other disease. Do NOT tempt fate and avoid anti-malarial drugs. All of the guides that I have had have had malaria, two had re-lapses while we were on safari in a NON-MALARIAL region of Kenya! If they have malaria you can get it from a single mosquito bite from them. No, your guide cannot constantly be on anti-malarials. The antimalarial drugs are toxins that kill the parasites that are the cause of the disease. Taking the drugs too long will kill both you AND the parasites – suboptimal solution for certain. The only way you can certainly avoid malaria is to avoid being unnecessarily bitten, this means mosquito nets, spray and, gasp, mosquito coils AND to take your physician prescribed anti-malarial drugs. I have used both Lariam (once weekly - I do NOT recommend it as you will be as sick as a dog for almost 2 days after taking it) and Malarone (once daily – works best before or at

breakfast, very weird and vivid dreams but manageable side effects). Ask your doctor what is right for you! AND Take it!

### **Now about what where to go for what....**

#### **Let's start with Amboseli:**

Amboseli has loads of Elephants, very nice birds in the swamp and marsh, Giraffes, Ostrich, Hyenas, Jackals, some (few and ratty looking) Lions, nearly no Leopard, no Rhino, no Cheetah, some Zebra, almost no Wildebeest and scads of Baboons around the lodges. The best reasons to go there are the birds in the marshes and the chance to stack up a photo with Kilimanjaro as a backdrop for some Elephant or Giraffes. You will want about a 200mm lens on a full format sensor and the animal off at 50-100m with the lens set at f16 to get everything sharp. In fact, for a full frame camera, you want about 160mm if the animal is at 50m and you can get by with 200mm if the animal is at 85m or greater. Since this is going to be a "big scenic" you want to bolt the camera down solidly (or rest it carefully on a bean bag) and let the shutter speed be as slow as it needs to be to get the job done. If absolutely necessary you can use f22. Otherwise just take two shots focused first on the animal and then on the mountain and photoshop it to get the depth of field you wanted. USE a LOW ISO Setting (50-100) if at all possible! Once this has been accomplished it is time for you to go to the birds.

Bird photography.... Small brightly colored birds, big drab ones, nervously flitting ones, there are loads of them in Africa. In Kenya there have been 1,132 different species identified! All of them are a challenge photographically. Long focal length lenses rule here, no question about it. Shutter speeds should be shorter than 1/lens focal length for full frame cameras and less than 1/(focal length multiplier X lens focal length) for crop (1.3, 1.5, 1.6 or 2 X) sensors. This means for a 500mm lens on a Canon 1DS Mark III you want to have 1/500 sec. or less and for the same lens on a Canon 7D you will want to be 1/800 sec. or less!

For active birds in the shade you are going to want to bump your ISO up to the top end of where noise in the images becomes "noticeable." A good guide is Popular Photography's camera ratings where they rate the image quality as "Extremely High" from ISO 100 – 400 or ISO 100-800. Whatever the highest ISO number in this rating of "Excellent" or "Extremely High" is, that is where you want to stay at or below on your camera's ISO setting. For example for a Canon 7D that number is ISO 400, for a Canon 1DS Mark III that number is ISO 1600. For birds in the sun you can go to a mid-range ISO (200 for the 7D or 400 for the 1DS Mark III) if they are active or there is a breeze moving their perch about. If they are stationary then lock it down to the lowest ISO you can and put the f number on f8 and go to town.

Yes, about that whole f-number thing there.... Essentially that is going to define your depth of field or how much of the animal/bird whatever is going to be sharp. Going from f5.6 to f8 at the same ISO and in the same light is going to give you about 40% greater depth of field but it is going to slow your shutter down by a factor of two. If you could shoot at ISO 400 and 1/1000 sec at f5.6 you will be at ISO 400 and 1/500 sec at f8. Most lenses have their best performance "sweet spot" between f5.6 and f8. For birds more than a few meters away try to keep the lens set at f8 and the shutter speed high enough to minimize motion blurring by bumping up the ISO (but

keep the ISO below where the image noise becomes problematic). This is a good balance of depth of field and shutter speed.

Minimizing motion blur – isn't that what my IS/VR etc. lens is supposed to do for me? No – that is there to sell cameras and lenses. Any decent photographer is not going to be hand holding a 600mm f4 super telephoto lens if they do not have to; they are going to have that puppy bolted to a tripod or on a bean bag. All that IS/VR does is minimize hand shake or camera motion. IS/VR doesn't do a thing for that bird doing the tango out on the end of a bobbing branch in a hurricane. Shutter speed is what is going to “freeze” your dancing subject.

Backlit birds – If the sun is behind the bird you are basically photographically toasted. Only exceptions are if you want shots of the sun through their feathers while preening etc. or if you are close enough to whip out your massive mega flash unit and balance an exposure that is at best f16 at 1/ISO at a distance of 10 meters. I've done this but I was using about the equivalent of more than a dozen top-of-the-line Canon or Nikon flash units (over 1,200 Watt-Seconds into a telephoto reflector). This is not something that I can manage to bring on Safari... so you are toast here....

Sidelit birds – If the sun is on the side of the bird you can use your electronic flash and a fresnel lens (better beamer etc.) to help out and, what is even more nifty it can look good. I recommend this approach – set the flash for -1 stop fill on TTL and look at the distance that the flash unit tells you it can manage. Multiply this distance by about 1.2 (the fresnel kit and flash manufacturers both are horribly optimistic!) and if your bird is inside that range you are all set. Focus and shoot! If you are not in range then either go to a lower f number (say, from f8 to f5.6) and/or bump up the ISO until you are. Now focus and shoot! Oh yes, one other thing, put your camera on “M” for manual exposure first and set the shutter speed to 1/250 or 1/200 sec (whatever your camera uses for its synch speed). Done this? Check out the image on the camera's LCD display screen. Is it what you want? If the background is too bright then close the aperture a stop and re-shoot. If the bird is too bright (too much flash exposure) then set the flash for -1&2/3 stops of fill and re-shoot.

Eventually you will get pretty good at this and it will come as second nature... and it will be time to leave Amboseli.

### **Lake Nakuru:**

Lake Nakuru is a gem. In this national park you will find greater and lesser flamingo (less of the greater and more of the lesser) and it is this that this park is famous for. Look for flamingo feeding, dancing, flying and just acting like bird brains. This is best in the morning before the light gets harsh. As it gets harsher (further from sunrise) try to do more in-flight shots. Shutter speed should be less than 1/2000 sec and the aperture should be f8. This is either ISO 400 or 640 on most cameras. Check the results in your camera's LCD screen and adjust your exposure....

In addition this park has quite a number of leopards, some lions and pretty much everything else except Elephants. This is going to be one of your best places to see a White or graze Rhinoceros and you can even find Black or browse Rhinoceros in Lake Nakuru National Park. Try to photograph the Rhinos on the way to the flamingo in the morning – they look best in the warm

morning light. As Rhino generally don't move too fast (unless seriously provoked) you can go for f11 or even f16 at middle to low ISO and fairly slow shutter speeds (watch for tail movement though, a blur can be annoying). Check out any Oxpecker action on the Rhinos – that can be a great close up action as the birds check out the Rhino's ears for parasites (higher shutter speeds – birds move!). Aperture priority and automatic multipattern metering generally work pretty well on Rhino. Shoot and check; you might want to dial in -1/3 to -2/3 stop of exposure compensation if the background is too bright but even if it is too bright as long as you are shooting RAW image files you can back it off in the computer later since it won't be far wrong.

If you are a birder you are advised to check out the bird feeders at the lodge at lunch. There are loads of opportunities for photos near them for those elusive, just got a glimpse of something blue flitting through, birds you saw out on the game drive.

### **The Masai Mara:**

Now, lets move on to the Masai Mara. The Mara is the Serengeti in a concentrated package. There is virtually everything that the Serengeti ecosystem has to offer in the Masai Mara. In fact the only animals missing are White Rhinoceros – and they were never native there in the first place. Lions – here is the great Musiara Pride, Cheetah still roam but are highly endangered and closely monitored, Leopard lurk and packs of Hyena roam looking for victims. The lowly Wart Hog wanders about with his tail held high – listening to “Radio Simba” no doubt – he is every predator's version of ice cream. Everyone always has room in their tummy for a bit of Wart Hog no matter how much Buffalo has been had!

The Masai Mara includes everything that the vast Serengeti has, in about 1/8 the area. This makes the Mara a photographer's dream. On my last Safari I heard two Leopards calling on our first night, on our first morning we saw them together playing and hunting cooperatively. I know that this “never” happens – but it happens I have the photos to prove that it does indeed. Later that day we found three Cheetahs, brothers no doubt, hunting together. The scads of Wildebeest, Topi, Gazelle, Elephant and birds don't even begin to make the list of what was seen in day one in the Mara. We ended the day in our camp with Bushbabies scurrying about in the rafters of the dining room and the sounds of Lions rumbling and roaring in the distance.

If you have no other chance or are limited in time to under a week I strongly urge you spend that week in the Mara. Of course if all you care about is the Shoe-billed Stork you have made a poor choice of countries to visit but, outside of the few species (Meerkat, Gerenuck, White Rhinoceros etc.), the Mara has it all and it is easy to see.

### **So how about Samburu/Buffalo Springs?**

Well, the upside of Samburu is that there are some really neat critters to see up there. These include the Somali Ostrich, Grevey's Zebra, Vulturine Guinea Fowl, Gerenuck, some really monster Elephants, Reticulated Giraffe (in the Mara you will see Masai Giraffe, in Nakuru you will see Rothschild's and Masai Giraffe and at Amboseli the giraffe are all Masai) Pygmy Falcon and lots of other dry-country adapted birds.

The downside of Samburu is that the terrain is far hillier and less open than the Mara and that there are far fewer animals to see. It is for that reason that I recommend the Mara and Lake Nakuru for first time safari goers and, then if and only if their time and wallets allow I suggest a visit to Samburu. Three nights here will give you a flavor of the place. Longer is better but I would not go there for any less than the three nights I recommend.

If you do go to Samburu do check for Genet in the rafters of the lodge dining area at night. These “quasi-cats” are spectacular little gems and are well worth a look.

Well, there you have it! Those are my simple recommendations for a Safari in East Africa. You may notice that I don't really recommend Tanzania. This is not to slight Tanzania, there are spectacular sights and reserves there, it is just that in Kenya you will spend less time “in-route” and more time “on-safari.”

I hope you enjoy,

Grover and Karen