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A ride on the wild side: Your guide to a picture-perfect safari

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An early morning game drive looking for zebra, Okavango Delta, Botswana. (Steve Haggerty/TNS)

Steve Haggerty/TNS

MAUN, Botswana — “Look, look, she’s standing up. No, she’s coming over here,” whispered my nephew Eric, turning pale and clutching my hand as the lioness we’d been watching — one of 11 dozing under a tree — stood up, yawned and ambled in our direction.

“Take a picture, take a picture,” urged his sister, Sarah, next to my husband in the Land Rover’s rear seat. Fearless, eager for adventure, she leaned forward for a better look.

“Sit still, sit very still and watch. They are only curious,” said Moro, our tracker at Shinde Game Lodge, who had moved from his seat on the fender to a seat in the car. “You are fortunate to see such a big pride, so healthy. If they aren’t strong enough to hunt, they starve.”

My family, traveling together on an African safari, were lucky indeed to see so many lions. Fifty years ago there were 200,000 in Africa; today there are fewer than 15,000. As for African elephants, their numbers are worse. Ninety years ago there were an estimated 10 million on the continent, but four years ago there were just 350,000.

Poaching for skins or meat, habitat loss and conflicts with farmers are the killers. But in recent years, a handful of Africa’s 54 countries have realized that wildlife has value, for tourism if not for cultural or ecological reasons. Parks and preserves are saving savannas and forests and wildlife conservation is taught in school. But success is still a question.

Which is why my husband and I decided to treat our family to an African safari in Botswana, South Africa and Zambia, three countries where wildlife conservation is at the center of public policy. We wanted the kids to experience the African bush the way we have, while there’s still time.

If you’ve been thinking about going yourself, you are sure to have questions. Is African travel safe? Which countries have the most wildlife? What are game lodges like, and how do they find animals? Do you stay in a tent, or in a lodge, and do they have bathrooms? What about visas, clothes, the weather? Where can you learn about game lodges and safaris?

Where to start looking

Since most safari lodges now have websites, comparing them is easy. Treat yourself to a leisurely tour through Uyaphi.com and Go2Africa.com, travel and touring companies that book family, individual, group and customized safaris. The websites are a treasure trove of photographs. Descriptions include locations, indoor and outdoor areas, gardens, views and extras, from mokoro (canoe) rides to spas and swimming pools. Prices per-person per-night vary widely because they include not just full-service game lodges but area hotel rooms. When you find something you like, search the site for an email contact. The person who gets back to you can answer questions, create a plan and make reservations.

A 'game drive' timeline

5:45 a.m. – You've slept your first night at your African game lodge, which serves as your home base, when a staffer knocks with a wake-up cup of tea and toast. Dressing in your khaki-colored shorts, shirt and hat (laundry is done every other day, no charge, so two changes are enough), you rush over to the main lodge. Your guide and tracker – and fellow guests – are waiting at the car, an open-top Land Rover, ready for the morning's four-hour drive in search of lions, elephants, giraffes and antelope. A half-way stop includes a delicious breakfast treat.

10:30 a.m. – As the sun rises in the sky and the animals seek shade, the group returns to the lodge. This is your free time to join a guided walk, enjoy lunch, write in your diary, visit the gift shop or crash for a nap.

4:30 p.m. – Changing into long pants and a light jacket, and adding a coating of mosquito repellent, you join the afternoon drive. As the sun begins to sink, male lions awake and stretch, leopards come down out of the trees and antelope move closer together. At 6 p.m. the guides park for a "sundowner" stop, toasting with wine, gin-and-tonics, crackers and cheese. A male lion roars and you shiver down to your toes. A second lion answers. Down at the waterhole a thousand frogs sing at top volume, an unearthly chorus. If a leopard appears, you'll follow it.

8 p.m. – Back at the lodge, with shirt changed and hair combed, you gather for a four-course dinner with wine, a feast usually served at long tables. The guests, numbering from eight to 24, tell and retell of their adventures and each new sighting.

10:30 p.m. – Bedtime, but because it's dark out, an armed guide escorts you back to your cabin. He will remind you now and every night, NEVER, EVER walk alone in the dark without an escort. Once in your cabin, stay inside until morning. If you hear huffing or rustling it's animals prowling through

the camp, curious and probably hungry. Guests have been killed walking alone.

My favorite lodges

My Botswana favorites, all in the Okavango Delta, are traditional lodges with eight to 10 spacious tent cabins bolted onto wood decks, per conservation regulations. Shinde is close to water and open plains; Kanana, near water, adds mokoro (canoe rides) to birding islands. Chiefs' Camp and Stanley's Camp explore a mix of wooded islands and surrounding lagoons.

In Kruger National Park, my favorite is Londolozi (www.londolozi.com), highly rated and a sentimental destination. Now enlarged and divided into four different lodges, it remains true to its origins as the country's first leopard conservation project.

In the Sabi Sands Preserve, also in Kruger National Park, Bush Camp (www.sabisabi.com) is a big, lively lodge that would fit best in the resort category. It has 25 luxury suites and is an ideal place to meet other travelers and their children. Activities include daily game drives, cultural community visits, swimming pools, a spa, an exercise gym, a child-care play center, a gift shop, and a waterhole near the dining room, where guests sip tea as the elephants come to drink.

In Zambia, the Bushcamp Company Group, in South Luangwa River National Park, is unique (www.BushcampCompany.com). The main lodge, with an open-air lounge, casual restaurant and 12 adjacent cabins, is a 30-minute drive from Mfuwe town, thus a handy getaway for passing travelers and area residents who come to watch the elephants that walk through the lobby. More importantly, this is headquarters for eight distant lodges, intimate, isolated and rustic hideaways sleeping no more than eight. At cozy Bilimungwe, you'll meet the elephant family. At Chamilandu you can spend a morning up in the "Hide," as it's called, waiting for the parade of animals that comes daily to drink.

Why choose southern Africa?

Not only do these countries have many animals, but they use 4x4 vehicles with open tops and bench seats for game drives. Open-air seats allow unimpeded views and better photography while sitting. In East Africa (Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya) most parks permit only minivans or enclosed cars with open tops, limiting viewing.

Reasons to book through a tour company

It's possible to book your own plane flights, game lodge reservations and ground connections. But many North American travelers would rather spend more for a trip they can plan on the phone with an experienced representative from a full-service tour company. It's a relief when a local employee meets you upon arrival, helps with luggage, drives to your hotel or lodge, drives you to the next day's lodge or flight, and helps with visas, customs and local money.

A partial list of top-rated companies includes Sanctuary Retreats (www.Sanctuaryretreats.com); Ker & Downey (www.Ker-downeyafrica.com); Wilderness Safaris (www.Wilderness-Safaris.com); Bushcamp Company in Zambia (www.BushcampCompany.com); Abercrombie & Kent (www.Abercrombie&Kent.com); and SabiSabi Company (www.Sabisabi.com).

Tips for health and safety

If you are flight-hopping between game lodges, remember that light high-wing planes enforce space and weight restrictions. Pack light, no more than you can fit into a 36-inch by 18-inch duffel, plus a carry-on for your camera, money, passport, medications and toiletries.

Mosquitoes carry malaria but are rarely a threat during Southern Africa's dry months, from July to mid-October. Prevent bites with light-colored or khaki long-sleeve shirts and long pants and insect repellent. Or use a prophylactic drug from your doctor. We recommend travel and medical insurance, including emergency evacuation back to South Africa.

When to go

June through August (winter) are dry months, with chilly nights and mild, sunny days. September and October are warmer and dry with less foliage on the trees, but they offer better game viewing because of it.
