

TRAVEL + LEISURE

Intelligent Traveler

TIPS AND TRICKS TO HELP YOU TRAVEL SMARTER

Edited by PAUL BRADY

*Asilia Namiri
Plains, in the
Serengeti, is
known for its
big-cat spotting.*



COURTESY OF ASILIA

Why This Could Be Your Year to Take a Safari

The unprecedented events of 2020 have turned the trip of a lifetime into the trip you should take in the months ahead. **BY PAUL BRADY**

JOHN AND Kathy McIlvaine are not the sort of people who just stay home. They've chartered their own 39-foot catamaran in the Seychelles; they flew to Tanzania just days after the end of the first Gulf War. "It was an Abercrombie & Kent tour and they had 24 guests signed up. Kathy and I, plus two friends, were the only ones who showed up for the 14-day trip," John recalls. "We felt like we had the whole of Tanzania to ourselves."

It was an experience the couple, both retired executives living in Jacksonville, Florida, figured they'd never duplicate. That is, until this past fall, when once again they were among a tiny number of Americans to visit East Africa on a safari. "One of the reasons we wanted to make our trip—other than our cabin fever—is that we're both big conservationists," John says. "And one of the things we knew we could do to help is just go over there to spend some money."

Another way their recent journey was reminiscent of that first safari 30 years ago? The quality of the wildlife sightings. "We spotted a pride of lions—a male, three females, and five cubs—and we just sat there and watched them for two hours, not being pushed away by another vehicle, just talking with our guide," John adds.

Moments like these are no longer unusual, owing to the pandemic,

which upended the safari industry throughout 2020. Borders across the continent were closed to Americans, and demand at lodges plummeted.

But many African countries have had success in controlling coronavirus outbreaks. Botswana, for example, suffered fewer than 50 deaths from COVID-19 in all of 2020 and, at press time, has reported fewer than 14,000 cases, according to Johns Hopkins University. Kenya, meanwhile, reported around 100,000 cases in the whole of last year—about half as many new infections as the U.S. recorded every day in December. That impressive track record has safari destinations in those countries—along with wilderness areas in Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—primed for a bounce back this year.

“It’s the chance of a lifetime to go now—to drive from one end of the Masai Mara to the other, and only see

three other vehicles the whole day,” says Julian Harrison, a safari expert on T+L’s A-List of travel advisors, who recently spent two weeks personally guiding a client around Kenya. “You’re seeing animals in a much

more natural setting—a cheetah chasing prey across the plain—doing the things they were born to do.”

While remarkable wildlife watching is one benefit, another advantage to going on safari this year is the chance to stay in some of Africa’s top lodges, such as Governors’ Camp, in Kenya, or and Beyond Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, in Tanzania. Ordinarily, properties operated by brands such as Asilia, Great Plains Conservation, Nomad Tanzania, Singita, and Wilderness Safaris are booked up a year or more in advance. Much of that space is now wide open as travelers push reservations into the future.

“You really can’t picture how vast and empty it was, and when you actually did see another vehicle, you were like, ‘Wow, there is somebody else here,’” says Anne Goyer, a small-business owner who lives in Sarasota, Florida, and who traveled to Tanzania last fall with her husband. “That’s why we went—to

◀ *Properties like Time + Tide Mchenja, on the Luangwa River in Zambia, are usually booked up many months in advance.*

▲ *Walking through South Luangwa National Park with Time + Tide guides.*



COURTESY OF TIME + TIDE SOUTH LUANGWA

*A tower of giraffes,
seen near Nomad
Tanzania Entamanu
Ngorongoro camp.*



take advantage of the opportunity.”

Of course, precautions are everywhere, and masks, sanitation measures, and temperature checks are strictly enforced. “On the ground, you see COVID-19 taken extremely seriously and what international travelers expect in terms of social distancing, handwashing, all that sort of thing,” says safari expert Chris Liebenberg. The founder of Piper & Heath Travel and an A-List member, Liebenberg planned the trips for both the Goyers and the McIlvaines, after visiting Tanzania himself in August. “The lodges have obviously thought

all this through very carefully, and everyone knows what they’re doing.”

Beyond game viewing, other draws of Africa’s wide-open spaces are sure to be in demand in 2021 and beyond. Lauren Kroger, a Dayton, Ohio, travel advisor who was one of the first Americans to return to Zambia after the country’s borders reopened in July, says the trip was restorative “after months of getting to know my living room intimately.”

“We canoed the mighty Zambezi River, felt the spray of Victoria Falls on our faces, slept in a dry riverbed beneath a mosquito net and a

canopy of stars, and sought out the Big Five on long walks through the bush,” she recalls.

Whatever the focus of an Africa trip, simply going can make a tremendous, positive impact. “We wanted to help the African workers who need our support,” says Mark Lyons, of Medina, Minnesota. He and his wife traveled to Kenya in September, on a trip planned by Craig Beal, the owner of Travel Beyond and another A-List member. “We jumped at the chance when the Kenyan borders opened. We booked it and went a week later.”