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## LIVING

# From lions to luxury, a Kenyan safari like no other

See the "Big Five" on the Serengeti, then dip your toes in the Indian Ocean

BY BAZ DREISINGER / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Elephants roam the northern Mara Conservancy in Kenya, which celebrates its 50th year of independence from Britain this year.

Kenya marks 50 years of independence from Britain this year, and there's no better way to celebrate than by visiting the original home of the safari — a local word for "journey."

New openings throughout the East African country are poised to make Kenyan journeys, from city to bush to coast, extra luxurious — and stunningly sundry: the tourist-friendly country, divided by the equator, boasts a dramatic diversity of climate, culture, language and landscape.

Safaris generally kick off in Kenya's bustling capital, Nairobi, at the Norfolk Hotel, a 109-year-old institution that's hosted the likes of Teddy Roosevelt, Ernest Hemmingway and Robert Redford, who filmed "Out of Africa" there.

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The colonial-style property's lush, sprawling grounds are decked out with a 1903 rickshaw and Model A-Ford Roadstar — but there are plenty of new features: the hotel recently completed a \$12 million restoration that included the addition of hypoallergenic suites and extensive refurbishment of all guest rooms.

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Also in Kenya's concrete jungle, two hotels opened their doors. Hemingways Nairobi is a 45-suite boutique hotel set in an exclusive suburb, while Hotel Villa Rosa, in the city center, will be Kempinski's first property in Kenya. With 200 rooms and a host of dining options — including a pan-Asian restaurant, Italian bistro and Moroccan Rooftop Lounge — Hotel Villa Rosa will also offer conference facilities and a spa.

Nairobi is a cosmopolitan city of over 3 million people, but visitors can fast forget that in Nairobi National Park, the only protected area in the world close to a capital city. Along stretches of acacia bush, wildlife roam: rhinos, lions, leopards, cheetahs, buffalos, giraffes, zebra and more.

Have a sunset cocktail or sumptuous Indian buffet dinner at the new Ole Sereni Hotel's chic Big Five restaurant, overlooking the park. Then check into The Emakoko, a modish lodge on the park's southern border, which opened in 2011.

Spy on buffalo while taking a bath in one of 10 open-plan cottages, or enjoy a game drive like none other: Ogle zebras on one side and the Nairobi cityscape on the other.

A short flight from Nairobi is the Masai Mara region, and one of Kenya's most famous nature reserves. It's classic savannah — 700 square miles of vibrant grasslands and crimson-colored earth — where animals abound and the Masai, decked out in vibrant beads and tartans, tend to their cattle.

The Mara hosts a renowned seasonal animal migration — up to 2 million wildebeest, thousands of zebra and an escort of carnivores from the Serengeti plains — but any time of year guarantees prime animal viewing. The popularity of the Mara makes animals accustomed to visitors — which means an elephant or lion is likely to graze your open-air vehicle.

Snap shots of topi, spotted hyenas, noble-looking impalas and sprightly Thompson gazelles. The odds of catching sight of all of Kenya's feted "Big Five" — lions, leopards, elephants, buffalos and rhinos — are exceptionally good, and expert safari guides are eager to share their encyclopedic wealth of animal knowledge.

As for accommodations, If camping in Kenya evokes notions of roughing it in meager tents, you haven't been on safari lately. It's possible to go bare bones, but the ultimate experience is eco-luxury: elegantly decked-out canvas tents; bush breakfasts and lunches featuring gourmet cheese platters and as-you-like-it omelet stations; nightly "sundowners" at sunset with a fully staffed bar, canapés and a campfire magically appearing in the bush.

Two eco-luxury camps in the Mara boast exceptional service and style. Elephant Pepper's eight elegant tents are nestled in a grove of giant ebony and elephant pepper trees. Sans generators, fences, cement or permanent structures, the camp boasts "bucket showers" — order your shower in advance, and the golden tank will be filled up when you're ready for it. Gourmet meals are served outdoors or in the candlelit-dining tent, decked out in classic safari style: gold and dark-wood furniture, brightened by beaded Masai accents.



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1) Women from the Masai Mara sing in front of the traditional boma (thorn-hedge) surrounding their village.

At nearby Serian Camp, owned by Kenyan filmmaker Alex Walker, sleep in a four-poster bed while being serenaded by hippos. The camp is set on the Mara River, where river walks and sunset run alongside zebras.

Both camps are members of the four-year-old Mara North Conservancy, a consortium of eco-friendly tour companies partnered with Masai land owners to sustain wildlife and local communities. Land is leased, and the 12 member camps also set up educational and health programs for local communities.

As the Mara's popularity grows, more camps and conservancies open to serve the masses: Marasa Africa, a member of one of the largest private-sector groups in East Africa, purchased three safari lodges in Kenya, including the Mara Leisure Camp, where tents have been refurbished. The Olare Mara Kempinski, featuring 12 elevated tents with private balconies, opens this year in the Olare Orok Conservancy, home to some of the Mara's largest lion prides, and Virgin chief Richard Branson just launched his 12-tent property, Mahali Mzuri — Swahili for "beautiful place" in the Motorogi Conservancy.

From the cool mornings of the Mara, safari-goers can migrate north to the arid, secluded Shaba Reserve, alongside Samburu National Park. This volcanic area is home to some of the largest elephant bulls in Kenya, along with unique wildlife species: endangered Grevy's zebras, reticulated giraffes, Somali ostriches and gerenuk antelopes.

Settle in at Joy's Camp, an elegant oasis opened two years ago on the site of naturalist and author Joy Adamson's tented home. The camp overlooks a natural spring where elephants and lions jostle for watering rights. Do laps in the pool while buffalo and zebras parade before you.



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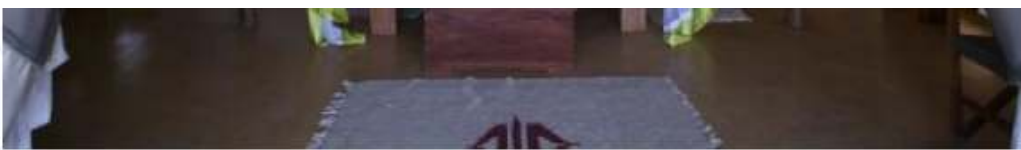


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Elephant Pepper Camp offers eco-luxury in the bush.

Settle into a majestic bed that evokes Princess Jasmine: sumptuous tents are uniquely decorated with Somali cloth design, handmade glass and vibrant local fabrics. Awaken to a symphony of birds: over 1,000 of Kenya's bird species are seemingly right at your doorstep.

After days in the bush, ending safaris on the coast is the ultimate luxury. Fly to the port city of Mombasa, gateway to East Africa and chock-a-block with Arab houses featuring Juliet balconies and brass-studded doors.

Enjoy days of R&R at one of two neighboring resort areas: Lamu features unspoiled beaches, medieval ambience, an architecturally magnificent Old Town and an annual Swahili cultural festival; Diani Beach is a slice of the Caribbean in East Africa, named by CNN traveler as Africa's second-best beach.

Settling into one of Alfajiri's three breathtaking villas — garden, cliff or beach — is the premiere Diani indulgence. The chic beachfront properties are decked out in striking handcrafted furniture, and most rooms boast ocean vistas; the grounds are dotted with palm and frangipani trees and decked out with private infinity pools.

Let the Italian owners roll out the red carpet, all included in your stay: massages on the beach; full-time butlers, babysitters and chauffeurs; gourmet menus featuring local specialties and Mediterranean delights.

Take a Ngalawa — local African boat — to a coral reef for snorkeling, or a middle-of-the-sea sandbar for sunbathing. Enjoy a camel ride on the beach, then sip a local Tusker beer at one of the popular bars along Diani's casual, lively beachfront strip. Pay a visit to the oldest Mosque in East Africa, the Congo Mosque, located along a stunning stretch of white-sand beach, dotted with coconut vendors.

For a more traditionally resort-style Diani experience, book a room at the newly opened Swahili Beach hotel, a sprawling five-star property featuring 110 Swahili-style rooms — think Arabic arches merged with East African touches — eight pools, a spa, a champagne and oyster bar.

And in the end, it all adds up to a safari like none other — from lions to luxury.

Safaris can be coordinated via Extraordinary Journeys: [ExtraordinaryJourneys.net](http://ExtraordinaryJourneys.net)



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