

INSIGHT ■ AFRICA MIDDLE EAST INSIGHT

# Safari operators expect to feel the love from 'Lion King' release

By Dorine Reinstein | Jul 25, 2019

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Lions in South Africa.



Dorine Reinstein

Disney's much-anticipated remake of the 1994 classic "The Lion King" hit the big screen this month, and although tour operators say it's too early to tell what kind of impact the movie will have on travel to Africa, they agree it will be an inspiration for travelers around the world to consider the continent when making travel

**f** plans.

Several tour operators said they have already seen increases in demand as a result of the movie. "Requests for Micato Africa brochures have gone up by 9% compared to the same period last year since the movie was released. That we historically feature

lions on the cover in full color probably doesn't hurt," said Dennis Pinto, managing director of Micato Safaris.

According to Pinto, the movie has the potential to reinforce what he calls the "otherworldly beauty of Africa." He said: "The impossibly colorful sky, for instance, with its reds and golds and purples is real. Travel advisors have a great opportunity here to say, 'You know, it really looks like that, only it'll be 10 times more vivid in person.'"

Sean Kritzinger, executive chairman of Giltedge Africa, said, "The Lion King is an extremely family-focused movie and a great exposure for Africa's wilderness areas, so we expect an increase in family inquiries as well as couples or honeymoon bookings."

Tour operators who have compiled dedicated Lion King itineraries said the themed vacations have seen great interest. Steve Yu, Zicasso's vice president of marketing, reported that the company's "[Lion King](#)"-inspired itinerary has been a hit, especially with families wanting to experience going on their first African safaris.

Said Yu: "We designed this itinerary with families in mind by carefully interweaving many of the iconic African safari destinations that are tied to the scenes from the movie. For instance, based on our research, Hell's Gate National Park in Kenya was where Disney animators spent weeks understanding specific animal movements and characteristics to render the most accurate depictions of the animal species that were included in the film, and Zicasso travelers are able to trace the steps of the animators [and their inspirations]."

Jenieen van den Heever, Ker & Downey Africa's head of sales, said the company noticed a global demand for African safaris when the trailer premiered, and she believes the hype will continue for the coming months. The recent launch of Ker & Downey's [12-day Lion King Safari](#) received an overwhelming response from clients. "Playing on the element of nostalgia, the film not only appeals to the little ones who are watching it for the first time, but also adults who grew up with the original animation," she said.

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### Everyone's a critic: Operators have a laugh over Disney's artistic license

Although wildlife and conservation are at the heart of Disney's new remake of "The Lion King," there are a couple of inaccuracies in the movie that make tour operators who are on the ground in Africa chuckle.

"The poor hyenas. They are narrowed down to scavengers, when they are actually efficient hunters," Mefi Pishori Alapat, safari designer at Journey to Africa, said with a laugh.

She added that when she was watching "The Lion King" with her children, her 10-year-old son pointed out the sheer number of animals living together and co-existing. "We know that is not true with real wildlife. I will have to add a note to the guests about this so they are not disappointed," she said.

According to Steve Yu, Zicasso's vice president of marketing, many travelers on their first African safari will realize that the interplay among different animal species is quite unique and spectacular. "Viewers of the film might find it disappointing that mandrills like Rafiki from the film wouldn't be getting up and personal with a lion cub or that warthogs wouldn't get too close to lions," he said.

The bottom line, according to Angama Maya CEO

Most tour operators, however, have not noted any significant increases yet but noted that it is still early days. Sherwin Banda, president of African Travel, said that while it's still too early to predict the impact "The Lion King" will have on travel to Africa, the film's exciting real-life animation is likely to lead to an uptick in interest in the continent, specifically the great migration countries of Kenya and Tanzania.

"Journey to Africa has not seen a dramatic increase in requests, but the interest in Masai Mara is there. I have a feeling it will come as the release is a few days old and the viewers will start planning for summer 2020 after watching," said Mefi Pishori Alapat, safari designer at Journey to Africa.

Jim Holden, president of Holden Safaris, said many people will be inspired to think about safaris due to seeing the movie. However, anyone hoping to rely purely on the release of this movie to generate interest in safaris is going to be disappointed, he warned. Instead, he urged the travel industry to continue to promote and distribute accurate stories of the unique experiences of safaris on social media. "This will get the attention of the many people who already have safaris on their bucket list," he said.

"Many factors contribute to making a decision of where and when to travel, and hyperfocus on Africa once again due to an iconic movie such as 'The Lion King' will surely keep the charm and adventure of African safari going as well as elevate it as a dream destination to new audiences," said Lisa Carey, spokeswoman for Singita. "The Lion King brand is so strong and well-loved all over the world that we hope this renewed focus will last for another 25 years or more."

Nicky Fitzgerald, is that what visitors will see on an actual safari will certainly outdo even the most entertaining computer-generated tricks that Disney can put on the screen.

"The joy of seeing a pair of elephant calves in a playful tussle or the thrill of watching a male lion scouting out his new territory soon cancels out the need for singing lion cubs or dancing warthogs," she said.



Lion cubs in the Masai Mara. Photo Credit: TW photo by Eric Moya

One thing all tour operators agree upon is that awareness for conservation and the plight of lions on the African continent is likely to receive a massive boost as a result of the movie.

Journey to Africa's Alapat said the movie will make the wildlife experience more personal for travelers. "Once on the ground, I know guests fall in love with

wildlife and have a more vested interest in conservation because it is personal now," she said.

Micato Safari's Pinto agreed that "The Lion King" has the capacity to raise awareness about virtually any conservation or preservation issue as long as Disney -- or really any entity, tourism-related or otherwise -- seizes this moment when the world's attention is trained on the movie.

"There's fictional, near-Shakespearean drama unfolding in the film, and that's not a bad jumping-off point for a conservation organization to say, 'Look, there's plenty of drama in this movie, but let us tell you about the real-life drama lions are enduring right now on the savannahs of Africa,'" Pinto said.

Simon Stobbs, Wilderness Safaris' business manager for North America, said that although he hopes the new movie will result in more travelers choosing to visit Africa, more importantly it's a major opportunity for the industry to work together to educate people around the world about lions and to turn that awareness into support for conservation.

Said Stobbs: "Disney has pledged \$3 million to the Wildlife Conservation Network's Lion Recovery Fund (LRF) as part of the Protect the Pride campaign. As founding members of the Lionscape Coalition, Wilderness Safaris is also deeply committed to help the LRF achieve its vision of doubling the numbers of lions in Africa by 2050."

For young people to learn about these magnificent creatures through this film might be the first step in inspiring and educating them about lion conservation, said Banda. "The Protect the Pride campaign that Disney and the LRF teamed up for to promote conservation awareness and educate audiences is a wonderful thing."