

CHANTE CAILLE

How to Plan Your First Safari, From Two Travel Experts

So you've always wanted to see the Great Migration, or ride beside a herd of elephants, or trek to see gorillas in the mist ...and don't know where to start? We've got you.

Planning a safari can be intimidating—which countries are best? What time of year? Can you even take the kids? What on earth might it all cost? **Cherri Briggs**, founder of Explore Inc., and **Teresa Sullivan**, founder of Mango African Safaris, are two of the most experienced boutique travel experts in the business. Cherri, whose clients include the likes of Gloria Steinem and Susan Sarandon, lives part-time in Zambia, where she and her husband run a nonprofit that empowers local women's community projects and conservation objectives. And Pacific Northwesterner Teresa often travels with her two children around the African continent, from Kenya to South Africa to Morocco, scouting the best family-friendly locations for their clients. We hit them up with our most pressing questions.



How do you even start planning a safari? Any suggestions for first timers?

CB: There are so many great options for safari it can drive you half mad trying to plan on your own. It's essential to work with someone who knows Africa inside and out and is objective in helping you plan. For example, the Kalahari in Botswana is very hot and dry in October, whereas April can be terribly rainy in Kenya or Tanzania, yet the lodge owners will still encourage you to come. It's essential to talk to someone knowledgeable and objective about weather patterns and seasonal differences.

Choosing your destination depends on your interests, dates, ages, physical capabilities, budget, and experience you're looking for, as there are trips for all types of travelers: basic camps and possibly some walking, traditional-style safaris with decent comfort but still not "luxurious," authentic interaction with traditional people, or over-the-top luxury! Some countries are more pricey (Botswana), as are lodges that are truly exclusive and have their own huge private land reserves, versus those which share public spaces, like national parks.

For most, seeing lots of wildlife is a priority. Pending the parameters above, I'd most likely suggest one of the iconic big 5 destinations, including Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa. If people want to visit the gorillas, Uganda or Rwanda are the obvious options.

TS: I recommend people look to either East Africa or Southern Africa for this first experience. Both regions offer incredible wildlife destinations. Two of my favorites are the Masai Mara in Kenya and the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Sometimes it is the other non-safari interests that could drive this process to nudge you in the right direction. If Cape Town or Victoria Falls are very interesting, then look to Southern Africa. If African culture, primates or the beach is of interest, then look to East Africa.



Jack's Camp in Botswana

Is there an ideal age for kids to go on safari? How young is too young? And are there any camps that are ideal for kids?

TS: Family safaris have become a major point of focus for us. I travel often with my 2 girls, currently 9 and 12. We are headed to vacation in Cape Town, Botswana, and Zimbabwe this year. [My business partner] Casey also travels extensively with her daughter Stella, age 7. They are going on a big multi-generational trip to Kenya and Tanzania next year. This is our specialty.

Families can travel with children at any age and have a great time, but we generally recommend families start to look at Africa once their youngest child is 8 years old. We look to secure family units (2-bedroom tents and cottages) so families are together to share the excitement of the entire experience. It is so much more fun to experience Africa together as a family. There are lots of whoops and roars in the night!

A few family favorite camps are Sarara Treetop Camp in Kenya, Little Vumbura in Botswana, Jack's Camp in Botswana, Sabi Sabi Bush Camp in South Africa, and Mkombe's House, Tanzania.

How about for a honeymoon or getaway for two—what is the most romantic safari spot you can think of?

CB: Depends again on your style and what you find romantic! Some young couples think a private treehouse with a netted tent is the most incredibly romantic spot on earth (check out Lion Sands' treehouses in South Africa), or the uber-luxurious Singita Lebombo or Boulders Lodge, with their private pool and butler. Or they may be drawn to the more contemporary Angama Mara in Kenya, which sits on the site where Out of Africa's romance between Robert Redford and Meryl Streep started. We love starting or ending honeymoons in one of the gorgeous small resorts on the white sand beaches of the Seychelles or Mozambique. The romance scale is off the charts.



Angama Mara, Kenya; and Beyond Phinda Mountain Lodge, South Africa; Namiri Plains in the Serengeti, Tanzania.

So many people have the Great Migration on their bucket list—the annual mass movement of wildebeest, zebra, and other species between Tanzania and Kenya. But it can get so crowded. Are there any alternatives or strategies to seeing this breathtaking sight without the crowds?

CB: There are ways to avoid much of the traffic of the key touristy areas. It depends on the location and time of year. The migration is always happening somewhere.... In essence, it's just a giant circle of millions of migrating animals that move in a circular pattern from north to south seeking new grasslands. At certain times of year, it's likely

that the herds are moving from Kenya to Tanzania and crossing the river, where many of the most spectacular crossings take place. There are ways to maximize your positioning by timing it right and choosing the right lodges. And sometimes it's better to forego the mass migration and go slightly off season, when you will see lots and lots of animals, and fewer humans!

TS: Travel during off seasons – take an extra week after school vacation. Stay at tented camps located on private conservancies located adjacent to the National Parks and Reserves, such as the Mara North, Naibosho or the Olare Motorogi Conservancies located next to the Masai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya.

How can you make sure you are traveling with a tour operator or lodge/camp brand that takes a responsible and sustainable approach? What kinds of questions should you ask? How can you make sure they are doing what they say?

TS: Ask questions about how they do business, so it has a positive impact on the local community. Ask specifics, such as: How do you select properties you recommend to consider the conservation and community engagement impact? What non-profit conservation organizations do you support? Because companies who are committed to this spend hundreds of hours a year working on these projects, so they will have a lot to say.



Our Africa's Vanishing Species collection celebrates 6 of Africa's most endangered species by supporting local NGO's working to save them in the wild. For fans of certain animals, can you suggest some of the best place(s) to see...?

Elephant

CB: Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, the mega-crossroads of elephant migration. Samburu in Kenya is also great. Kwando Camps, Sandibe, and Sable Valley in Botswana are especially good.

TS: The Linyanti Wetlands in Botswana

Rhinoceros

CB: South Africa: Sabi Sabi or Sabi Sands reserves or Phinda Game Reserve. Kenya: (Lewa and Borana), certain private concessions in Botswana also are home to good populations of rhino (Mombo Camp and Duba Plains).

TS: Desert Rhino Camp, Namibia

Cheetah

CB: Phinda Lodges (including Rock Lodge and Vlei Lodge) in South Africa, Namiri Plains in the Serengeti.

TS: Nomad Serengeti Camp, Tanzania

Pangolin

CB: There are a number of pangolin protection projects: Lower Zambezi in Zambia, Namibia, and private reserves in South Africa's Kalahari

TS: Tswalu Kalahari, South Africa

Giraffe

CB: Kenya is probably the best place to see giraffes, but they are widespread from Uganda down through Kruger National Park in South Africa. The incomparable Giraffe Manor in Nairobi gives you an extraordinary opportunity to experience them up close and even feed them from your room!

TS: Sirikoi Camp, Kenya

Lion

CB: Hmmm...my front yard. They have been hunting warthogs here lately and keeping us up all night roaring! You easily see lions in the Serengeti and Mara as it's so open, but Botswana, Zambia and SA also have really healthy lion populations.

TS: Mombo Camp, Botswana

Tracking cheetah at Namiri Plains. All photos courtesy of the lodges.

Can you give an idea of what one can expect to spend on a safari trip for a basic level of comfort?

TS: You can achieve a high level of experience from \$500-700 per person per day. It goes up from there. Some of the most legendary camps cost close to \$4,000 per person per day and are arguably worth every penny, if you can consider them into your budget.

CB: Without compromising an authentic quality experience, avoiding large mass hotels—like lodges and hordes of people—we can design a safari that will cost a minimum of \$700 per day if the client is willing to travel off season. This doesn't include transfers, flights, or extras, but is fully exclusive of lodging at high quality, small lodges, all meals, drinks, and safari activities with great guides. We sometimes have inquiries where the budget is too small for us to create a quality experience, so we encourage the client to wait for a year and save up until they can afford a better experience.