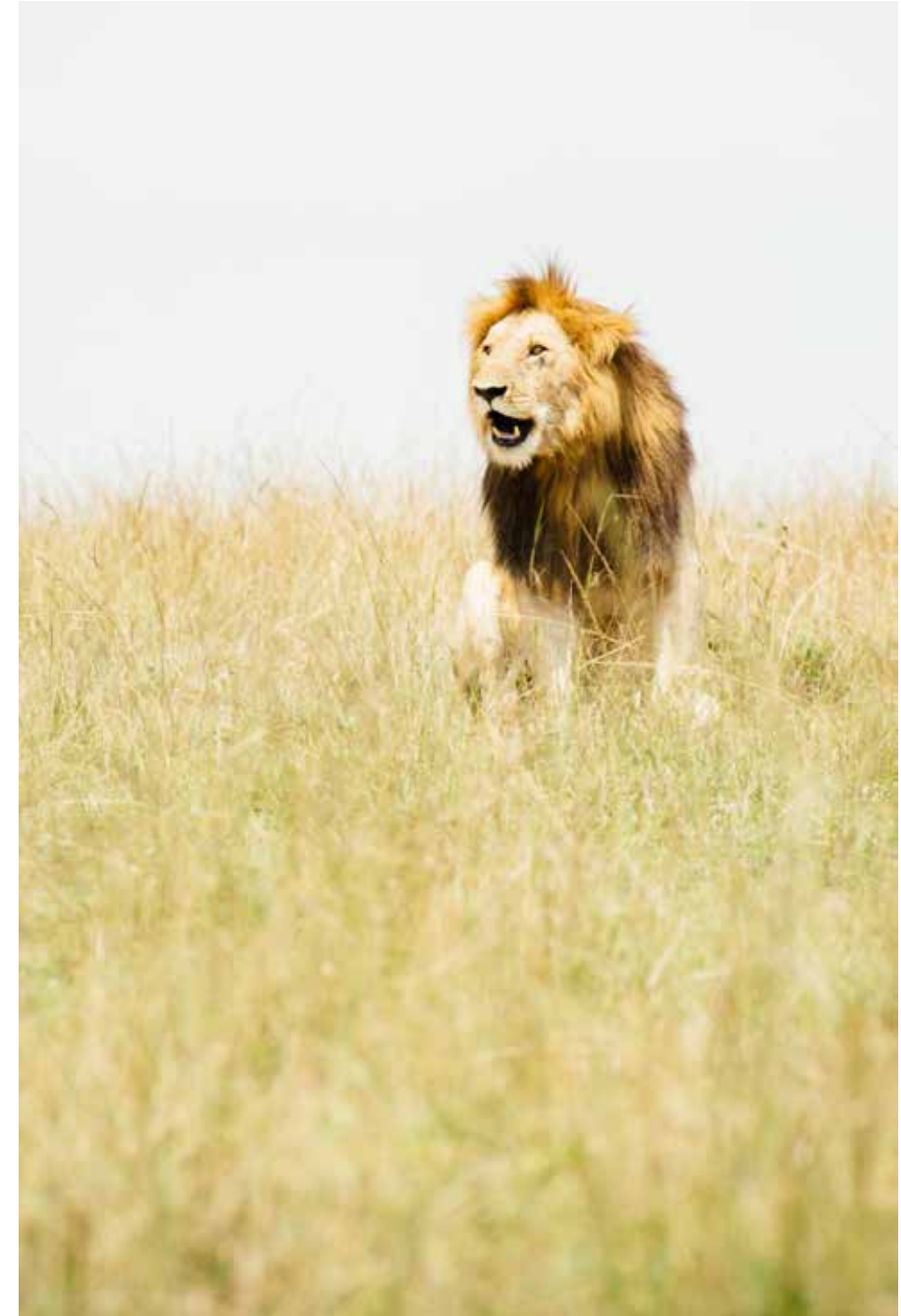


THE GREAT
EAST
AFRICAN
SAFARI

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It's been over a century since the first Europeans flocked to the exotic African landscape to undertake a new-fangled trip of a lifetime. The 'safari', a Swahili word meaning 'long journey,' is now part of everyday Western vernacular. Today, the thrill of big animal spotting remains, while 21st-century comforts and conveniences take the trip to the next level: think jeeps equipped with a mini-fridge, stove and phone charging station; apps that track the wildlife; Wi-Fi and cell signals in the middle of nowhere; and luxury lodges set in the thick of the action. There is even eco-friendly mobile tent accommodation: tents the size of small apartments - festooned with feather beds, washrooms, and multi-course gourmet meals a few steps away. In short, the contemporary safari has arrived. Here's where to go, what to see, and the best spots to stay for an East African odyssey.

KENYA

Samburu National Reserve

WHY GO: Putting aside the 'Big Five' – the standard animal spotter's brag book of African lion, leopard, black or white rhino, elephant, and Cape buffalo – this excellent park holds a whole extra 'Special Five' of even rarer northern species to boast about. Just ask other safari-goers if they've seen a Beisa oryx, reticulated giraffe, Grevy's zebra, Gerenuk antelope, or Somali ostrich. Not unless they've visited Samburu; and what's more, all of the Big Five, save rhino, are on view here too.

WHERE TO STAY: Nestled on a ridge above the Ewaso Nyiro River, Sasaab Lodge is the top spot to beat the post-safari heat, with each of its nine rooms including a well-chilled (and incredibly reinvigorating) plunge pool. After a dip, watch elephants, dik dik, and impala visit the river from airy Moroccan-inspired rooms, which include beautiful wooden four-poster beds. English-speaking Samburu tribe guides are available for bush walks, village tours, and even camel rides to an incredible, hilltop sundowner spot – and more.



Solio Private Reserve

WHY GO: In a word: rhinoceros. It's tough to spot even one of these heavily poached herbivores from a distance in most parts of Africa. For those wanting a closer look, the 19,000 acre rhino conservancy within Solio's 45,000 acre reserve is one of the best places in the world to do so. Far more than just seeing one rhino, at least 100 are on hand: black, white, babies and family groups. In addition, there's every chance of also seeing lion, leopard, zebra, waterbuck, and lots of other wildlife.

WHERE TO STAY: Solio Lodge provides the only overnight stay within the reserve, and practically guarantees exclusivity, with no more than a handful of people staying and observing the resident animals. Its five cottages' large windows offer front-row seats to the 'ranch' from private verandahs, beds, bath tub, even the shower. Solio's jeeps are kitted out with ultra-high rooftop seats, guaranteeing 360 degree sightseeing; they even cater for bush breakfasts cooked right behind the jeep. After dinner, another creature that's just as rarely seen as the rhino, often emerges: a rescued bush baby, named Murray-Anne, who pops out at night to bounce about the main lodge, delighting guests.



KENYA

Maasai Mara National Park

WHY GO

As one of the most famous parks in Africa, alongside Tanzania's Serengeti – and sharing the same eco-system – the Maasai Mara is a can't-miss venue for anyone on safari. Head to the reserve in July through October and visitors can witness its most famous seasonal residents – a massive 1.5 million wildebeest herd, making their annual migration to the Maasai Mara's green grasses. However, the undisputed highlight of any safari to this reserve is witnessing a mass wildebeest crossing of the mighty Mara River.

WHERE TO STAY

The camouflaged tents of Sala's Camp, set on the wild, southern edge of the Mara, are right in the heart of the action. The Sand River, mere metres away, attracts elephant, antelope, and wildebeest, with the possibility of a small mass crossing right at one's door-step. Pristine outdoor lunches are joined by a chorus of birds, while en suite bathrooms – complete with hot showers and flush toilets – make the quasi-camping experience incredibly comfortable. Fly into nearby Mara Keekorok airstrip, and there's every chance that visitors will see hundreds of wildebeest thundering out of the way of their aircraft on its final approach.



TANZANIA

Serengeti National Park, Tanzania

WHY GO

Rocky ledges topped with big cats, rivers teeming with hippos and crocodiles, rolling plains filled with mega herds. Serengeti is the Africa of documentaries and dreams, and it's easy to see what lures visitors to the country's oldest and most popular park. Millions of wildebeest stream through the reserve during its migration months, the largest population of lions in Africa live within its boundaries, and with so many animals at large all year round (including about 1,000 elusive leopard and a few rhino), ticking off the Big Five is a cinch.

WHERE TO STAY

Less-explored areas of the north and east Serengeti offer incredible accommodation sans the crowds that tend to congregate in the park's southern and central regions. For an upscale experience, Asilia Africa's permanent Sayari Camp offers the opportunity to sunbathe by a pool or soak within the private deep stone bathtub inside each tented suite. Or, for mobile luxury camping at its best, try Asilia's Olakira, Kimondo, or Namiri Plains camps. The choice is dictated by the view: Olakira is perched above the Mara river, Kimondo commands vistas of the expansive grasslands, and Namiri Plains is truly isolated—a 45-minute drive from the next nearest camp—in an area known for big cat sightings.



TANZANIA

Ngorongoro Conservation Area

WHY GO

At the heart of this preserved land lies a massive intact and unfilled volcanic caldera – a volcano that exploded then collapsed on itself – the awe-inspiring Ngorongoro Crater. Long inactive, the bowl-shaped caldera now houses millions of animals. Consequently, instead of the long stretches between wildlife sightings that are more typical on the open grasslands of the Serengeti, animals are on display at Ngorongoro practically every minute. Lion, hyena, jackal, elephant, zebra, wildebeest, even the elusive rhino, await around every twist of the road.

WHERE TO STAY

Positioned at the crater rim's highest point, Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge* wins for the area's most magnificent view. Enclosed private decks attached to each of the property's African-style, circular cottages face west (perfect for sunsets), while large-scale windows surrounding the dining and lounge areas offer unobstructed views for those doing their own 'grazing'. Attentive service, creative food, generous picnic lunches, and nightly traditional singing make this a highly appealing package.



Tarangire National Park

WHY GO

Two of Tanzania's icons – its elephant and the baobab tree – have an incredible presence at this park. For those who truly love elephants, Tarangire is unforgettable. About 3,000 of the pachyderms roam the National Park's grounds during the peak dry season, and as it is often overshadowed by its more illustrious companion reserves – the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater – it sees fewer visitors, allowing for more intimate, and leisurely, game drives.

WHERE TO STAY

Smack in the midst of the park, Tarangire Sopa Lodge* offers just the right balance of creature comforts and exposure to nature. There are no fences warding off the wild, and that's a plus. As a result, the lodge's private balconies frequently look out over several dozen trumpeting elephants and poolside lunches are often accompanied by a 'side' of playful monkeys. Those visitors with sharper eyesight may even glimpse the lodge's nocturnal genet cats, who like to lurk in the main building's wooden ceilings.

*For Sopa Lodge properties, visitors need their own transportation and game drive vehicle. We used the competent services of Multichoice Safaris.



UGANDA

Queen Elizabeth National Park

WHY GO

Home to 95 species of mammal and over 500 species of birds, this expansive park is also the spot to see some of Africa's only tree-climbing lions. Fortunate visitors may even see a few big cats lazily outstretched in the branches of shady fig trees at Ishasha. If not, then there are still plenty of prides roaming the park's grasslands. Riverboat trips down the Kazinga River are another highlight of this reserve, allowing those on 'safari' to idly sit back and watch the wildlife come to them; the river banks are absolutely teeming with elephant, buffalo, hippo, and hundreds of birds.

WHERE TO STAY

The 'bandas' of Queen Elizabeth Bush Lodge are right on the Kazinga channel, so that the snorts of its resident hippos become part of the night's lullaby. Nightly campfires and multi-course, candlelight dinners outdoors are a highlight, without destroying the travel budget. For a more luxurious stay, visitors can also choose the Mweya Safari Lodge, or just stop by for a delicious lunch and cocktail.



Bwindi Impenetrable National Park

WHY GO

Accessible only by foot, this dense jungle setting is one of the few places in the world where it is possible to see the critically endangered mountain gorilla (other locations include neighbouring Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo). Getting near these rare primates is the ultimate adventure trek, as this forest isn't called 'impenetrable' for nothing. Tracking a gorilla family can take six plus hours of following a machete-wielding guide, slashing through vine-infested forest. Mud sucks at shoes, branches tear at clothes, and wild elephants occasionally cross the trail. But it's all worth it for that first glimpse of a big male silverback just metres away.

WHERE TO STAY

On Itambira island amid beautiful Lake Bunyonyi, are located the unique geodomes of Byoona Amagara Island Retreat. Made of poles, papyrus, and grass, the domes are completely open, facing both the lake and its island-dotted waters. Despite this apparent lack of doors, locks, or keys, the geodomes are secure and quite private, while well-designed outdoor showers and composting toilets complete the 'natural' experience. Byoona Amagara is a community-run project, so part of its proceeds support local education and sustainability practices.

