

The Trip of a Lifetime

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Embark on an unforgettable Kenyan safari with Basecamp Explorer.

No matter how many safaris you go on, the experience never gets old. There is just something magical about waking before dawn, traipsing with slightly bleary eyes down to the open-sided Land Cruiser, bumping down a dirt track as the sun begins to rise, and then suddenly coming fully awake in an instant as first one, then two, then half a dozen lions appear around you.

If it is summer in Kenya, one of the world's top safari destinations, many of these lions are still small cubs. Just a few months old. And parking and watching them play with surprisingly puppy-like movements – rushing a brother, tumbling over a sister, grabbing mom's tail – is an encounter you won't soon forget.

“Safari” is the Swahili word for journey, and every safari you take – be it a morning game drive, a walk through the bush escorted by an armed ranger or a late afternoon adventure that includes sipping gin and tonics as the sun sets over the Masai Mara – is a unique, new experience. You never know what animals you will see that day, if you will witness the circle of life with a kill or more inspirationally a birth or watch a herd of elephants meandering to a waterhole.

Dozens of African countries offer safari expeditions, but one of the most storied destinations is Kenya's Masai Mara ecosystem. Famous for hosting the Great Migration, when upwards of 2 million wildebeest, zebra, gazelle and eland trek from Tanzania's Serengeti National Park to Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve in search of water between June and August each year, Kenya is nonetheless a year-round safari destination. Visiting outside of the

Great Migration – February is a top month to come – garners more affordable rates at lodges, fewer crowds and a plentiful assortment of baby animals.

Choosing a Safari Outfitter

There are hundreds of tour companies offering safaris in Kenya, so choosing the right outfitter can feel daunting. Basecamp Explorer is an excellent choice for a luxe safari experience that won't break the bank. The company operates three permanent camps in Kenya through a community partnership model, an arrangement that creates sustainable income for more than 500 Masai families. The company is also eco-friendly, with camps using solar energy.

While some companies charge a few thousand dollars per person, per night for an all-inclusive outing (expect lodging, all meals, some beverages and game drives to be included in your rate), Basecamp Explorer safaris start at around \$400 per night, with prices varying depending on the camp and time of year. Packages that include stays at multiple Basecamp properties are also available and recommended.



Photography: Shutterstock/ Nibaphoto.

What a Basecamp Explorer Safari Is Like

Basecamp operates three permanent camps in Kenya, and you can visit all three on a weeklong safari. Doing so gives you great diversity in location as well as lodging styles. Basecamp Masai Mara, which is connected to the Masai Mara National Reserve by a footbridge, is the most affordable of the three camps with a mid-season nightly per-person rate around \$365.

A safari here will have you visiting the national park each day. When it comes to the sheer number of animals in one place, you can't beat the national park. If you've never been on safari before, we recommend spending some of your time in the national park for this reason alone.

A single game drive in the Masai Mara National Reserve will usually show you hundreds of zebras, large herds of elephants and, if you are lucky, more than one pride of lions along with rarer cats like leopards and cheetahs.

Seeing cats is never guaranteed, of course, as the animals roam free wherever they please, but guides communicate over a radio system, so when one company spots something, expect dozens of other vehicles to quickly show up. This is also the downfall of being in the national park — there is much more human traffic, and you'll find yourself jostling with other vehicles to get close to the animals.

After two nights at Basecamp's Masai Mara, the other two camps Eagle View and Leopard Hill are inside the Mara Naboisho Conservancy. Sharing the same ecosystem as the national park but just outside its boundaries, the conservancy is a 50,000-acre private conservation area that only five outfitters operate on.

This means a lot less human traffic with nearly as many animals. Safaris in the conservancy also allow you to enjoy experiences like walking safaris and night game drives that aren't available in the Masai Mara National Reserve.



Photography: Courtesy of Basecamp Explorer Kenya.

If You Stay at Only One Camp, Make It Leopard Hill

If you stay at only one of the camps, choose Leopard Hill. It is the most intimate of the Basecamp Explorer properties and the most luxe, but mid-season rates are still an affordable \$520 per person, per night. It has just seven tents, including one designed especially for families and another for honeymooners.

You really feel like you are staying in the bush here. If you want to leave your tent after dark, you'll need a staff escort, as there are no fences separating you from the animals (this is true at all three camps, and for Masai Mara safaris in general). On nights in the Mara, you may be awakened by lions roaring, hyenas cackling and elephants stomping past – but don't worry, it is perfectly safe inside.

The canvas tents are huge, with a king or double beds, two showers (one inside and one open-air), WiFi and an elevated viewing deck with a fireplace. They also feature large window flaps on three sides that you can leave open (mesh keeps the mosquitos out) to feel closer to the wildlife.

The best feature, however, is the tent ceiling that opens completely with the click of a button, leaving only a mosquito net between you and the African night sky. Falling asleep stargazing is a calming and mesmerizing experience.

The food at all three Basecamp Explorer camps is delicious and varied. Dinners are multi-course affairs, and the soups are especially tasty. Additionally, the local Masai guides are superlative. Not only are they extremely knowledgeable about the flora and fauna, they are also funny, conversational and generally happy to share personal anecdotes about their tribe and upbringing.



Photography: Courtesy of Basecamp Explorer Kenya.

Getting to Kenya and Where to Stay in Nairobi

The only direct flights from the U.S. to Kenya are from New York's JFK Airport to Nairobi on Kenya Airways. It is an under-14-hour flight on the way over, while the trip back takes around 16 hours.

Service is great. The business class seats are worth the splurge and more affordable than on many other airlines. You can also bid on business class upgrades preflight (depending on availability), which may result in an even more economical business class seat. Kenya Airways is a member of the SkyTeam alliance, so Delta miles can be earned or redeemed.

From Nairobi, you'll catch a flight on a small plane to an airstrip in the Masai Mara. Your safari outfitter can arrange these flights. Because it's a long journey to Kenya from the U.S. and most safari flights do not depart from the same airport as international flights, most people spend one or two nights in Nairobi on the way in.

Kenya's capital is a vibrant, multi-racial city with excellent restaurants, happening nightlife and some great hotels. Book a room at Tribe. The five-star hotel is gorgeously outfitted with local art, has comfy high-end rooms and suites, and boasts a great onsite restaurant with a creative menu. It's also located right next to the city's top shopping and dining destination, Village Market. It is affiliated with Marriott, so you can use and earn Bonvoy points.