

Epic South Africa Safaris: What to Know before You Go



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Mar 11, 2020



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Walking safaris. Boating safaris. Wellness safaris. Even running safaris. In 2020, nary a niche goes unaddressed in the world of big game-viewing trips—as you'll find in **South Africa's** legendary reserves and national parks.

But even as the field continues to diversify, we get a lot of requests for a primer on the basics. So here's our Safari 101 course that will lead you to the **Big Five** (lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant, and Cape buffalo)—plus some of the best new **safari options** for 2020, now that

getting to South Africa is even easier thanks to a new nonstop to Cape Town from Newark on United (on 787-9 Dreamliners no less).

Game reserve or national park?

The good news: Either option can be supremely bucket-listy, and choosing between the two is really a question of your priorities. While private reserves allow guides to go off-roading to get closer to any animals that may be lazing in the bush—something you can't do in a government-run national park—you're still likely to have elephants walk right up to your vehicle, if not cross the road in front of you, inside a national park.

Another distinction: **Private reserves** lean luxurious, while national parks often let you camp out and self-drive—among other accommodation and transportation options. (You'll also find budget-minded lodging—with guides and vehicles—within national parks.)

Adding a bit more nuance to the equation, some private game reserves sit *within* national parks. Take **Kruger National Park**—South Africa’s largest (it’s the size of New Jersey)—which houses a number of legendary private reserves, such as **Sabi Sand**. And while the big game can largely roam free among the reserves and the national park, humans who limit themselves to one reserve may miss entire swaths of the park’s gorgeously varying landscapes.



Bottom line: Each experience is amazing in its own right—and budget may well be the deciding factor for you. Whichever way you go, most safari lodges suggest a two-night stay, especially if you're going to be lodge-hopping, as many safari-goers do. Not that you need to make the call on your own: Lots of agencies specialize in tailoring safaris to specific wants and needs, so you may want to talk to a travel pro.

What's the average day like at a safari lodge?

Let go of any notions of sleeping in on vacation: Early morning is one of the best times to see animals, so your first game drive of the day is likely to start at 5:30 or 6 a.m. Don't worry: Any lodge will have coffee and tea aplenty available before you go out. Duly caffeinated, you'll board a safari vehicle—they vary widely, but they're often 4x4s with three rows of seating, open sides, and maybe open roofs or pop-tops—with a handful of other lodge guests (unless you've sprung for private wheels, of course).



For the next few hours, your driver and guide will be using the most recently gathered intel to track the main attractions: presumably the aforementioned Big Five, but you'll hardly be bummed to see the local cheetahs, hippos, zebras, gazelles, hyenas and warthogs.

And while an easy sighting is a beautiful thing, the elusive ones have an effect all their own.

Much as we hate to dignify dating-world nonsense, animals that play hard to get are, well, more satisfying to spot in the end. Still, your guides won't let the thrill of the chase stretch out too long. By 10 or 10:30, you'll be back in camp for a full breakfast—then hours of free time. This is where spas, pools and [Instagram](#) accounts come in.



You'll go out for your second game drive (or perhaps a walking or boating safari) at about 4:30. And after you've been dazzled by yet another parade of beautiful beasts, you'll be treated to the age-old tradition of sundowners: bubbly, cocktails or local beer—paired with a prime viewing spot as the sun slips into the African bush. Then you'll return to camp for dinner, story-swapping and perhaps some live local music under the stars.

Speaking of meeting locals, we should mention one more potential element of your day. Depending on its location, your lodge may offer village visits, which will likely become some of your favorite memories of the trip. If you want tangible reminders, have small bills on hand to buy hyper-local crafts.

When to go?

Though South Africa is a [year-round destination](#)—and global warming is making things less

predictable—you can still largely time trips to your interests: Though the cooler months (May to September) are ideal for animal viewing throughout the country, if whales are your thing, wait until July/August. And while the northern regions can be rainy from November to February, this can be a birder's bonanza season.

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Should we take the kids?

Each camp and safari tour company has its own rules here (some will take kids as young as 5 while others won't let even teens come without prior consent from the lodge manager). But many experts believe eight to be a good minimum age: At this stage, kids can engage with the guide or someone from a local village, and the trip can have a lasting impression.



Also—not for nothing—kids who are eight or older tend to behave better on game drives and back at the lodge. (Especially when you’re spending so much of your day with people you’ve just met, you don’t want to be *that* family.)

What’s new?

The already epic lodging options have been getting some friendly competition of late. For starters, the celebrated Royal Portfolio debuted the **Farmstead at Royal Malewane** in Kruger National Park last summer. This collection of three one-bedroom suites and a private villa is meticulously appointed—with outdoor seating that’s as ample and cushy as the considerably plush indoors (the better to lounge around watching herds of animals amble by your pool).

As for the Farmstead’s villa—dubbed the Farmhouse—it comes with its own pool, chef, butler,

safari vehicle, ranger and tracker—so if you're traveling as a group, this is one of your best (and certainly most luxe) options.



Elsewhere in Kruger—at **&Beyond Ngala Private Game Reserve**—the highly anticipated &Beyond Ngala Treehouse opened just this month. Though *almost* every need is attended to at the super-secluded, 40-foot aerie, here's one you'll have to handle on your own: the near-impossible nightly decision between sleeping under the stars on the top level—or under a canopy one level below.

Meanwhile the Eastern Cape's **Shamwari Private Game Reserve**—which has been undergoing all manner of improvements—just unveiled the new Sindile luxury tented camp, where each of nine new freestanding glamping suites is elevated for sweeping views of the animals and bush. The most indulgent vantage point? It's a tossup between your plunge pool and freestanding tub.

The nitty gritty need-to-knows

- Luggage has to be soft-shell (no frames or hard material) and there's often a weight limit (each safari is different, but 40 pounds is often the max).
- Always pack your own binoculars. Even if the company you're traveling with says the vehicle will have them, you don't want to miss major drama in the bush because your fellow traveler was using the communal ones.
- Pack lightweight, wicking clothes in natural colors (think tan hues). Many safari lodges do laundry at no extra cost, so you don't need to pack a lot.
- Among the things you *do* need to pack? A hat with a reasonable brim. Sunscreen alone won't cut it here.
- Talk to your doctor—or better yet make an appointment with a travel doctor—to see if you need any meds before you go.
- There are [direct flights from the U.S.](#) to Johannesburg and a new nonstop to Cape Town from Newark on United. From there, you'll find flights to the safari region of your choosing.

Ready to explore more? Find [safari tips](#) and even more inspiration and information on the [South Africa website](#), follow [@VisitSouthAfrica](#) on Instagram and watch this [South Africa safari](#) YouTube playlist.

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