

There's Never Been a Better Time to Book a Last-Minute Safari

BY JENNIFER FLOWERS

This year offers a rare opportunity to snag a spot on an East African safari during the summer high season—and a chance to see the iconic Great Migration.

I'm as thrilled as the next person that Europe is reopening this summer—after a year of confinement, who doesn't want a tête-à-tête at a zinc bar in Paris? But what about watching millions of wildebeest and zebra thunder across the savanna, following the rain in search of green pastures? June marks the beginning of a months-long dry season in East Africa, and it's the ideal time for a safari.



For a nature lover like me, witnessing the planet's largest overland herd movement of mammals is one of the most exhilarating things I've experienced on my travels. And this year, like never before, you can book last minute.

Outfitters and lodge owners in the Serengeti-Mara Ecosystem, a vast expanse of wild savanna that straddles Tanzania and Kenya and includes Kenya's famed Maasai Mara, report they're still operating far below capacity since reopening to tourism last year. Seasonal highlights include the Great Migration, the aforementioned hordes of wildebeest and zebra that roam en masse, which appear in the Mara between July and August before heading south to Tanzania, making dramatic river crossings and luring opportunistic lions and crocodiles.

“Typically, at this time of year it is virtually impossible to book a last-minute high-end safari that includes visits to places like the wildlife-rich Maasai Mara,” says Dennis Pinto, executive director of Nairobi-based luxury outfitter Micato Safaris. “However, due to some countries' COVID restrictions, some international travelers have been forced to cancel their bookings, which has opened up space at some prime locations. So we've been able to accommodate requests for those looking for a safe and crowd-free trip of a lifetime for this summer and the rest of 2021.”

Many of the last-minute requests that are trickling in are coming from parents who had been planning a bucket-list family safari and were able to vaccinate their kids sooner than expected, Pinto adds.

In Tanzania, some of the most coveted luxury accommodations are run by Singita, a collection of five camps and lodges on the private, 350,000-acre Grumeti Reserve. Usually, space at this sought-after reserve is nonexistent between June and August, but Singita reports that in June and from mid-July onwards, there's still plenty of room.

According to Elewana Collection, a group of 16 camps in both Kenya and Tanzania, business at the company's two Mara camps is certainly better than in 2020, and like Micato, it's seeing a mini-trend in last-minute bookings. But the Mara camps are far from reaching capacity: In July and August, numbers are at 60 percent of their inventory volume in 2019.

Asilia Africa has 10 camps in the Serengeti-Mara Ecosystem, including Rehero Camp, which is positioned in the Mara at a key migration crossing point along the hippo and croc-filled Talek River. Because safaris are such a big-ticket purchase, the camp is often booked up to two years in advance and would run at close to 100 percent occupancy from July through September, according to Gordie Owles, Asilia's commercial director.

"After gorilla permits, front-row seats for the annual migration crossings of the Mara in August and September are the first camps in Africa to fill each year," Owles says. "This year there is space—we will be pleased if we achieve 70 percent occupancy over that same period."



Micato Safaris takes COVID precautions seriously, requiring (and providing) PCR tests and frequently sanitizing gear and camps.

As international travel makes a slow postpandemic recovery, other recently reopened destinations are facing low occupancy numbers. Yet Africa has its own unique challenges: In tourism-dependent countries like Kenya and Tanzania, community development and the conservation of uniquely biodiverse wildlife habitats rely



It doesn't get much better than witnessing a lion with his cub.

especially heavily on income from international travelers, and both were imperiled during the pandemic, making a return of visitors feel especially urgent. Africa is also still far less visited than other regions—it's the world's second-least visited continent, according to the U.N. World Trade Organization—which might present a hurdle for first-time safarigoers to imagine navigating pandemic-related restrictions there.

But according to Owles, after close to a year of practice since the Maasai Mara reopened to tourism, it's common to see testing happening all over the region. "The Mara is equipped with easy PCR tests, which are being administered on a dirt runway in the middle of the Maasai Mara Reserve; the samples are flown into Nairobi, with results received by text message about 24 hours later," he says.

To ease the anxiety of pandemic travel rules, Micato is building the legwork of COVID entry requirements and tests into its services at no extra cost to the traveler, calculating the timing of requisite PCR tests and arranging for a medic to fly to a guest's location to administer them. Most of the company's front-line staff have been vaccinated, although the unique advantage of a safari experience is that you're nearly always far away from crowds, are viewing wildlife outside much of the time, and have plenty of personal space at camp.

The extra pandemic measures like testing are a small price to pay for an encounter with one of the world's greatest wildlife shows, according to Owles.

"It is going to be an exceptional year to see the migration," he says.