

The Original Best Glamping Vacation: Safari Travel Is Coming Back

BY LARRY OLMSTED

The past couple of years has seen an explosion of glamping resorts in the United States and Europe, and this style of lodging proved to be a perfect oasis for pandemic travel during the COVID-19 outbreak. The things most in demand during the coronavirus outbreak were standalone lodging with privacy, no lobbies, elevators or common areas, and easy access to the outdoors. Glamping - a combination of glamorous and camping - offered both in turnkey fashion.



Kenya's luxury Cottar's Camp just celebrated its 100th birthday, and tents feature replicas canvas bathtubs used by early explorers. TRISTAN PINTO/MICATO SAFARIS

Last year I wrote about how “Glamping is 2020’s Hottest Travel Trend,” showcasing some new top options, and then followed up with “More Great Glamping Resorts For Your Trips.” But now that the widespread availability of vaccine has allowed people (at least vaccinated people) to start traveling again, one of the hottest vacations of all will be the original glamping trip, the African safari (Read “Best Bucket List Trips For Your Lifetime: African Safaris,” here at Forbes).

After all, just about every top domestic glamping operator, including multi-location brands like Under Canvas, and more luxurious one-off properties such as Colorado’s Dunton River Camp and Missouri’s Camp Long Creek, have basically brought African safari tents to this country. But while we have just a handful of these, there are dozens and dozens of tented camps all around Eastern and Southern Africa, and at a minimum, the luxury tents found in the best lodges include full bathrooms and real furniture, more hotel rooms with canvas walls and plumbing on platforms than camping tents.

But even the finest glamping here cannot begin to compare to the many ultra-luxe camps of Africa, which are usually luxury all-inclusive with great food, top shelf wine and spirits, and increasingly have been adding enormous “suite” tents and many other innovations. At one of my all-time favorites, Zarafa Camp in Botswana, the “tents” are each the size of a pretty nice house, sitting on above ground decks with plunge pools, indoor and outdoor showers, outdoor furniture, and pretty much every luxury you could desire. There’s even the tent version of air conditioning, a high-tech mister/cooler. While most deluxe safari lodges include booze, Zarafa takes this a step further, equipping each tent with full bar built into an antique chest stuffed with things like full sized bottles of 18-year-old Glenfiddich single malt, as well as a regularly iced cooler full of beer and soft drinks. There are thousand-dollar plus Swarovski loaner binoculars, high powered tripod mounted spotting scopes, painting sets to free your inner artist, and early morning coffee delivery service.

That’s glamping!

Because many lodges and top safari tour operators lost most of 2020 and much of the 2021 season, rolled over cancellations plus the suddenly strong post-pandemic trend towards more Bucket List travel has made safaris hotter than ever, and it's not too soon to thinking about booking as far out as 2023 (read about "Why Right Now is The Best Time to Plan Your Travel Bucket List" here at Forbes).

"We saw a strong uptick in bookings from March 2021 onwards once people started getting vaccinated. For this summer we're sold out, in part because of postponements from last year combined with new bookings including many families belatedly celebrating graduations, anniversaries, big birthdays, etc. We are seeing very strong demand for 2022. As of the end of June 2021, bookings for 2022 are more than three times greater than 2020 bookings were by the end of June 2019," said Dennis Pinto, managing director of **Micato Safaris**, widely considered the industry's top luxury operator.

"Safari is largely an engagement with the vast and beautiful African out-of-doors. The camps we use are designed for privacy and airiness and provide the perfect combination of solitude and stellar service. In these times or any other I can't think of a better option for people to truly get away from it all than at our carefully selected, luxurious safari camps amid the most breathtaking landscapes in the world."

There are safari lodges and resorts that are run like normal hotels or have wings of low rise rooms, but having been to many luxury safari camps across Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Botswana, I can say that most of the standouts are luxury tented camps embracing the Hemingway/Roosevelt inspired glamping theme (though one notable exception is Sir Richard Branson's Ulusaba Lodge in South Africa, which goes with a luxury treehouse approach and swinging aerial bridges instead!). These are also typically quite small, with as few or as three or four tents and almost always less than twenty. This scarcity further drives demand.

A record 9-time winner of Travel + Leisure's Award for Number One World's Best Safari Outfitter, Micato also won five Conde Nast Traveler World Savers Awards, T+L's Trip of a Lifetime, the World Tourism Award presented by the New York Times, Virtuoso's Best Escorted Tour Operator (in any kind of travel), Porthole Cruise Magazine's Best African Safari Tour Operator and National Geographic Traveler/National Geographic Adventure's Best Outfitters on Earth and 50 Tours of a Lifetime. I have personally traveled with Micato to both Africa and India, the other destination they specialize in, a total of half a dozen times, and in my extremely well-



Most top African safari lodges use tents with large private decks and often jaw dropping views. TRISTAN PINTO

informed opinion, **they are not only the best luxury safari outfitter, but the best tour company of any kind I have experienced** (and I have traveled with many of the most acclaimed tour operators). They are in the business of making dreams come true, with unbelievable access, opening doors no one else has the keys to, and a highly trained staff (100% of whom have been vaccinated), none of the unpredictable sub-contracting many other companies routinely use, plus on the ground multiple regional offices around the world, jointly headquartered in New York and Nairobi. Pinto knows what he is talking about, probably more than anyone else in the travel industry, so I asked him to pick some of his favorite tented camps.

Years ago, South Africa set the bar for the finest luxury camps, but other regions have been racing to catch up, and East Africa has opened a slate of wonderful new properties. Pinto just returned from a month-long safari in Kenya with his parents, wife and children, and told me that "The East African camps have clearly taken glamping to a new level. The new Loisaba Lodo Springs Camp is knock-your-socks-off beautiful. Perched at the top of an escarpment, each of



the nine tents has spectacular views of Africa, stretching hundreds of miles off into the distance. Loisaba is a 57,000-acre concession owned by The Nature Conservancy and is home to the rarest of leopards - the elusive black leopard! Each 900-square foot tent is tastefully appointed with safari-style antiques, and once you check-in you'll never want to leave the room! And the cuisine is truly the best we've had on any safari." Loisaba Lodo Springs is in Kenya and part of the ultra-high-end Elewana Collection of luxury safari camps.

"Sirikoi is part of the Lewa-Borana-Sirikoi concession spanning 100,000 acres. The four tents - complete with fireplaces! - overlook a waterhole. A cheetah walked past the dining deck as we enjoyed lunch on the first day." Sirikoi is also in Kenya.

"We were among the first to stay in the new two-bedroom Jahazi Suite at Mara Plains. The suite is two enormous tents, connected with a living room. The game was the best we've seen, abundant leopard, cheetah, lions, elephants, etc. The camp has just seven tents, including the secluded honeymoon tent on an island connected by a rope bridge. The new Mara Nyika Camp opened just before COVID, shut down shortly thereafter, then reopened a month ago. This is a stunning camp, and the two 2-bedroom family tents are perfect for families."

Both camps are in the famed Masai Mara region of Kenya and operated by esteemed Great Plains Conservation, the same extremely environmentally conscious company behind my favorite, Zafra Camp. "Cottar's Camp in the Masai Mara celebrated its 100th anniversary recently. The tents, replete with canvas bathtubs (much like the early explorers used) are gorgeous." Tents also feature oriental rugs and chandeliers, and Cottar's Camp has previously been named the Best Tented Camp in the World.

In Southern Africa, some of my other favorite tented camps include the flagship original of world-renowned lodge brand Singita, the Ebony Lodge in Sabi Sands, outside South Africa's Kruger National Park. The 12 luxurious suites are hybrid tent/cottages featuring glass and canvas walls with expansive private decks with plunge pools. All the Singita lodges are wonderful and many feature tented accommodations, including several in East Africa, especially Tanzania. Another top camp operator is &Beyond, which has several deluxe tented camps in the ultra-desirable Okavango Delta region of Botswana, with arguably the best wildlife viewing of any location.

Africa has largely reopened for tourism, but some travelers are not yet comfortable making the trip. That hardly matters, because you are unlikely to be able to get into any of the many wonderful "original glamping" camps any time soon, but it's worth starting to plan and book, because when you can go, it will truly be trip of a lifetime.