

## Why Kenya Is the Best Place for a Safari, According to a Seasoned Local Guide

Veteran tour guide Kitonyi "George" Kamonde describes what it's like to work for one of the world's leading safari companies.

BY DANIELLE POINTDUJOUR

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Ask almost anyone and they'll surely tell you that a majestic safari experience is at the top of their travel bucket list. From South Africa to Tanzania, the stunning images of seemingly endless green plains, towering giraffe, and the formidable "Big



5" (African leopard, African lion, Cape buffalo, African elephant, and rhinoceros) have captivated adventurers the world over. However, much like people, not all safari destinations are created equal. Each location offers something special that speaks to those fortunate enough to indulge in its wonder. This is true for Kenya where various spectacular landscapes, such as Amboseli, Lewa, and Masai Mara, are home to rarities like Grevy's zebra, black rhino, and African wild dog.



**When he's not home in Kenya's sunny, bustling capital city of Nairobi, Kitonyi Kamonde – better known to adventure seeking travelers as George – is in the bush serving as an expert guide with one of the world's best safari outfitters, Micato Safaris.**

For a decade, George and his warm smile have provided local insight into Kenya's wildlife to generations of safari goers in order to give them the experience of a lifetime. From recalling historic facts and seeking out rare animals to helping guests indulge in luxurious accommodations like Elewana's Kifaru House, George is the man you want by your side – whether you're on your first or your fiftieth safari.

*Travel + Leisure* caught up with the knowledgeable veteran to learn more about how he got started in the industry, his most memorable experience, and what mistakes he wishes first-timers would stop making on safari.

## **T+L: How did you get started as a safari guide?**

**Kitonyi "George" Kamonde:** "I've always had a fascination with wildlife. I grew up on a small farm (what we call a *shamba*) about two hours from Nairobi, very close to a national park. That exposed me to the wonders of the wild from an early age – and I joined Kenya Wildlife Clubs to learn everything I could about Kenya's magnificent wildlife and birdlife. Next, it was off to college where I graduated with a degree in Tourism & Wildlife Management.

I was a driver-guide for some years before becoming a safari director for Micato, where our training is always ongoing. The process of becoming a certified guide takes many years of study and, like every Micato safari director in Kenya, I earned the prestigious Silver-Level certification awarded by the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association. I am very proud to have achieved the Silver Certification and, as part of my always ongoing learning about safari guiding, I am working towards my Gold level. Those exams are very difficult, but I am confident that I will be ready if I study hard enough."

## **What do you love most about being a guide?**

"I love meeting guests who love the wild as much as I do, and eventually [becoming] friends. I'm excited each day about guiding and educating them about my country, people, history, culture, and traditions. And we must never forget that our guests are here for the wilderness and the animals. Whether it's a lion or dung beetle, they give us a different show to narrate every time. I also love working with my fellow guides who always find ways to challenge me with their own knowledge. And of course, every day is different. When a morning begins with a loping lioness on the hunt and ends with a 10,000-pound bull elephant bathing in a hippo pool, well, let's see what our afternoon looks like."

## **What advice do you have for others looking to get started as a guide?**

"Being a Safari guide is so much fun! We always find time to laugh, but you must remember that there is much to learn. It's one of the best professions in the world and you will enjoy it if you do your homework well. You have to be well rounded,

have a sense of humor, and be ready with the knowledge and information and answers at your fingertips to keep your guests informed, entertained, and happy. And never give an answer you are not sure of. If I don't know the answer, I say so and then find it."



### **What's your most memorable safari experience?**

"You know when news of a really good party spreads like wildfire? Imagine a grand and glorious male lion, six feet long and weighing at least 400 pounds, in a fight to death with a pack of hyenas over a juicy wildebeest kill. When we arrived at this primal scene, there were five hyenas, which was exciting enough, but then word got out and suddenly more swept in from all directions and soon there were 30 at the party. Adaptable and opportunistic, the hyenas immediately surrounded the lion, some trying to grab bites from the kill. The lion flayed and snarled, starting to scare them off, but they retaliated en masse by biting the lion's tail, rear legs, and rear end. At least one hyena died in the fight, but the lion eventually had to retreat, running to safety in a nearby marsh.

Not the end of the story! The hyenas followed and pushed him deeper into the water where he crouched to avoid the relentless attacks. The lion was finally rescued from these daring hyenas by his brother, who eventually emerged from some distance to find his sibling in danger. I was as amazed as our guests were about that one!"

**Which safari region is your personal favorite, and why?**

"The beautiful landscape and the abundance of game in the Maasai Mara is difficult to beat. The splendid beauty of the big cats, alongside leopard, cheetah, [and] elephant, so readily seen, is one of the world's most impressive marvels."

**What's the best time to visit Kenya on safari?**

"Kenya is good to visit year-round due to its location on the Equator, though April sees the most rain. We always make sure to find – and create – the finest experience for our guests."



### **What are three mistakes you often see guests make on their first safari?**

"Overpacking. No need to bring things like hairdryers and shampoo and lots of other things that Micato makes sure are in supply. Too many shoes. And too many clothes. Micato includes complimentary laundry service every day in the bush.

For those who are interested, bring a good camera with a good lens, for birds and other far-off shots. Some guests, who have only their phone for pictures find that they wish they had a longer lens. But of course, the new phones are getting so good that they can be a great tool for many people. My best advice is to know what you are after and know what your equipment is capable of doing. Then bring what suits you best.

People on safari can get excited about an animal sighting and noise can end up making shy cats disappear into the bushes. Micato guests catch on pretty quickly and get pretty quiet, especially if an elusive leopard is nearby."

### **How has COVID-19 affected the safari industry in Kenya?**

"Of course, there have been ups and downs. It was difficult when Kenya was shut off to international flights last spring. Safari and all tourism was brought to a standstill for months. Many camps and lodges had to close, at least on a temporary basis. Things were very quiet in the bush. The best moment was when flights to and from Kenya started again on Aug. 1 [2020]. Now that was a good day! When we re-started our safaris, we as guides were so pleased to have happy guests with us again. Many safety measures went into action right away. Along with Micato, the airlines and the lodges we use have put rigorous COVID safety protocols in place and our guests have been very happy with Micato's protocols. Our guests have told me that the best decision they made was to travel during these times and not wait. That is so nice to hear."

### **What three words describe the beauty of a Kenyan safari?**

"Exhilarating. Incredible. Awesome – and, may I add, the only thing missing? All of you!"