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# WARNING: Safaris Are Highly Addictive! A Primer for the Adventure of a Lifetime (PHOTOS)

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I recently returned from Botswana after 12 days on safari. It was my third such trip — the previous two being in South Africa and Tanzania — and the minute my plane left Africa for home, I wanted to return. I've been all over the world, and while I've enjoyed every destination, nothing has affected me so deeply. If you've been thinking about going on safari, be warned: It's highly addictive, and for many, like me, it may change your life.

### Is a safari for you?

I find that being on safari is a magical blend of blissful serenity and unbridled excitement. It's the elusive answer to a little soul renewal. The serenity comes from an almost mythical beauty coupled with a total lack of responsibility. On safari, everything is arranged for you: You'll enjoy game drives — typically four to five hours — in the morning, starting before sunrise, and again before sunset. In between, you can read, nap, or chat with fellow guests. Although camps may offer other activities such as mokoro rides (a small, dug-out boat that sits low in the water), excursions to visit local tribes, or helicopter tours, game viewing is the focus.

The eight to ten hours per day in the bush is where the magic happens. It's like the most thrilling scavenger hunt you'll ever undertake. Around every bush could be a pride of hungry lions. Flying overhead, an eagle. Or a large herd of elephants could come crashing through the trees around you, trumpeting and rumbling in panic, set off by the smell of wild dogs. (This actually happened to me, by the way, and it was absolutely thrilling. See the slideshow below for an image) I don't have the words to describe the feeling you get when you see these extraordinary creatures in the wild. I've never been disappointed. Something interesting or unexpected happens every day.

### How wildlife viewing works

When you get to camp, you're assigned a guide. Depending on the number in your group, you may share that guide and a jeep with other guests. It's a wonderful way to meet interesting people from all over the world. I still talk to many of the travelers I've met on safaris.

On a game drive, you'll find that most animals are pretty unaffected by your presence. It's believed that animals view people in a jeep as part of a single benign being. But if you separate yourself from the jeep by getting out or standing up suddenly, you may be perceived as a threat and invite unwanted attention. Most important: Your guide will assess the animal's behavior. If it shows signs of stress, he'll keep your viewing short or move on altogether.

On a walking safari — and not all camps offer this opportunity — you'll typically observe animals at a greater distance. On the ground, you'll stay in single file behind your guide, who will make sure you are safe but still get an exciting view of the bush.

### Unfenced vs. fenced camps

If you stay at an unfenced camp, animals will roam through at their leisure. In Botswana, a giant bull elephant strolled by 100 feet away. In Tanzania, a lion relaxing at a nearby watering hole serenaded us all night with his territorial roars. Dangerous you ask? Not really, if you obey the rules. Safety is a camp's highest priority. In general, camps establish very clear "human areas": your tent, the walkways that lead from your tent to the rest of the camp, and group meeting areas. Most animals will run away if they hear you coming, and during the day you have the ability to see what's up ahead. After sunset, a staff member will always escort you to and from your tent. Once in your tent, you are perfectly safe. If this setup makes you uncomfortable, though, there are fenced camps that keep the wildlife at bay.

### Multiple camps are the ticket

On safari, it's recommended that you visit more than one camp during your stay so you can benefit from new locations and potentially different species of wildlife. I found that three nights in each camp was my magic number. I had time to unpack, develop a rapport with staff and guests, and explore a new setting.

### Solo travel

If you like to travel solo, a safari is a fantastic opportunity to enjoy quality time on your own while easily meeting new people along the way. The safari vibe tends to be community driven, and I found that it fosters a high level of camaraderie.

### Things to consider

- A camp's operation is different depending on whether it is on private or government-owned property. Private camps, among other things, have the flexibility to offer nighttime game drives to view nocturnal species or go "off road," meaning that if you see an animal 300 feet to the left of the road, you can drive closer to view it. Camps on government property have restrictions, but they can be spectacular nonetheless.
- Some camps don't provide Wi-Fi or offer the use of a computer, so if you can't stand being off the grid, you'll want to double-check ahead of time.
- If you love to pack half your closet when you travel, a safari will not be your cup of tea. Transport is often by small plane, and your luggage must follow suit. In Botswana, for example, bags are limited to 24 inches long, and they can't sport wheels. There are often strict weight limits as well. Prior to your trip, you'll receive clear guidelines. Don't fret; camps usually offer free same-day laundry services, making it easier to pack light.

### How to book your trip

Camps are as varied as nature itself and range from rustic tents to accommodations that offer the height of luxury, with spacious rooms, claw-foot tubs, or other impressive amenities.

To plan your perfect trip, I recommend two strategies: You can book directly through large safari companies that have properties in multiple countries, such as Wilderness Safaris or Sanctuary Retreats. They'll brief you on the best camps based on your desired country, activities, timing, and budget. You can also enlist the aid of a travel expert. I worked with Nina Wennersten of Hippo Creek Safaris; she's been a Condé Nast Traveler "Top Travel Specialist" for more than ten years. She planned my trip to Tanzania two years ago as well. A specialist can truly customize one's journey because she can book camps across multiple companies to guarantee the best adventure.



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