

NOVA EXPEDITION

The Complete Kenya Safari Planning Guide

Everything you need to plan the trip of a lifetime — honestly.

What this guide covers:

- When to go — and the honest trade-offs of every month
- Where to go — 8 ecosystems, what each delivers, what each cannot
- The conservancy vs reserve question that determines everything
- How to build an itinerary that works for your specific trip
- What things actually cost, itemised and honestly
- How to choose an operator and a camp with the right questions
- Health, insurance, visas, packing — the practical essentials
- 10 mistakes that ruin a safari — and how to avoid every one

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2026 Edition — Updated Annually

How to Use This Guide

This is not a brochure. It does not present every Kenya destination as equally excellent or every camp as extraordinary. It is a planning document written in the belief that you make better decisions with honest, specific information than with promotional copy — and that the people who plan their Kenya safari with the most rigour have the best experiences.

The guide is organised in seven parts that follow the natural planning sequence. If you are beginning from scratch, read it in order. If you are already partway through planning, jump to the section that addresses your current decision.

A note on honesty

Throughout this guide you will find statements that other Kenya travel resources rarely make. August in the Maasai Mara national reserve is genuinely crowded. Some highly-rated camps are overpriced; some barely-mentioned camps are extraordinary. The Great Migration is not an August event — it is a year-round circuit of 1.5 million animals, and the river crossing is one chapter of a much richer story. These honest assessments are here because they produce better trips, not because they are contrarian. The Discerning Explorer — the traveller this guide is written for — has no use for information they can get from a brochure.

Three values that run through every recommendation

Every recommendation in this guide is filtered through three values that define what makes a Kenya safari genuinely transformative rather than merely spectacular.

Access: Private, uncrowded, off-track — the conservancy model over the national reserve, the early morning game drive before the day visitors arrive, the guide who can follow the cheetah wherever it goes without waiting for other vehicles to clear.

Intimacy: A guide who knows the individual lion by family history and not by GPS coordinate. A community relationship that generates actual lease income rather than a sustainability claim. An experience designed for the specific people in the vehicle, not managed at them.

Time: Staying long enough in one place for the landscape to become familiar and the unexpected things in it to register as unexpected. Five nights in one conservancy over two nights in each of three. The freedom to stay at the river crossing through the midday heat when the guide says the herds are building.

Access. Intimacy. Time. These are not marketing claims. They are the specific and measurable differences between a great Kenya safari and one that is merely very good.

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PART ONE

Understanding Kenya

The philosophy, the ecosystem, and the model that changes everything

CHAPTER 1 • WHY KENYA

Why Kenya Is Different

Every African safari destination has advocates who will tell you it is the best. Tanzania has the Serengeti's scale. Botswana has its water safari exclusivity. Rwanda has mountain gorillas. South Africa has self-drive accessibility. Kenya has, consistently and by most experienced assessments, the best overall combination of factors for a first safari on the continent — and for many experienced travellers, for any safari anywhere.

Kenya's advantage is not any single feature. It is the combination. The wildlife is extraordinary and reliably concentrated across multiple ecosystems year-round. The tourism infrastructure is sophisticated enough to be comfortable without being so sanitised that the experience loses authenticity. The guide quality, regulated by the Kenya Professional Safari Guides Association (KPSGA), is the highest average of any African country with a significant safari industry. The diversity of landscapes and experiences within a single country is unmatched on the continent. And the Nairobi conservation experiences — the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, the Giraffe Centre, Nairobi National Park within the city limits — provide a contextual introduction to the bush that no other African capital can replicate.

The guide quality point deserves emphasis. The KPSGA certifies guides at Bronze, Silver, and Gold levels through standardised examinations covering ecological knowledge, wildlife identification, first aid, driving standards, and client communication. A Gold-certified guide who knows the individual lions in a Mara conservancy by family history, who anticipates a cheetah hunt by reading behaviour before the action begins, and who explains the ecological relationships between everything you are observing — this guide is available in Kenya in numbers that no other African destination can match. For a first-time safari visitor who has not yet developed the field knowledge to compensate for a weak guide, this matters enormously.

Year-round wildlife reliability is the second major advantage. Tanzania's Serengeti is spectacular but wildlife distribution varies significantly by season. Botswana's Okavango Delta is extraordinary

during the flood season and much quieter outside it. Kenya's combination of the Mara, Amboseli, Samburu, and Laikipia means that regardless of which month you visit, a park or conservancy with outstanding wildlife concentration is available. The planning risk for first-time visitors — who often cannot time their trip around specific seasonal peaks — is meaningfully lower in Kenya than in most comparable destinations.

→ Read more: *First Time in Africa? Start with Kenya* — novaexpedition.tours/journal

CHAPTER 2 · THE CONSERVANCY MODEL

The Conservancy Model — The Concept That Changes Everything

Before you book a single camp, before you look at a single price, before you choose a single month — understand this: the single most important planning decision in any Kenya safari itinerary is whether your camp is inside a national reserve or inside a private conservancy. Everything else is secondary.

The national reserve — the Maasai Mara National Reserve, Samburu National Reserve, and their equivalents — is managed by the county government or the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and is open to any vehicle that pays the entrance fee. Inside the reserve: designated vehicle tracks only, no driving off-road, no night drives, no walking safaris, and unlimited vehicles at any wildlife sighting simultaneously. In August, during peak migration season, a single lion or cheetah can attract 25–40 vehicles. The vehicle limits are zero. The experience is what the numbers produce.

The private conservancy — Mara North, Olare Motorogi, Naboisho, Ol Kinyei, and the others surrounding the national reserve — operates differently. Maasai families and group ranches lease their land to conservancy operators in exchange for monthly lease payments. The operator builds a small camp, sells safari experiences to a limited number of guests at a time, and pays the lease from the revenue. The conservancy operating agreement enforces vehicle limits at wildlife sightings: typically 3–5 vehicles per sighting maximum, regardless of season or demand. Night drives are available. Walking safaris are available. Off-road driving is standard. The limit holds in August exactly as it holds in January.

The conservation science behind this model is documented by the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association (MMWCA) and verified by independent researchers. Approximately 65% of the wildlife in the greater Mara ecosystem exists outside the national reserve, on Maasai-owned land managed as conservancies. A study published in *Conservation Biology* documented that lion

density in Naboisho Conservancy is higher than in the adjacent national reserve. Maliasili Initiatives, a conservation consulting organisation, documents that well-structured conservancy arrangements generate 3–4 times more income per hectare for Maasai landowners than cattle grazing alone. The conservancy model is simultaneously the best wildlife experience for visitors and the most financially rational land use decision for the Maasai communities who own the land.

The conservancy vs reserve question is not a preference question. It is the difference between following wildlife wherever the guide judges safe, and following a marked track to a designated viewpoint. Ask of every camp you consider: "Is this inside the national reserve or a private conservancy?"

What the conservancy model delivers — specifically

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Off-road driving | Follow wildlife wherever the guide judges safe · No track restrictions |
| Night drives | Nocturnal wildlife — serval, aardvark, hunting lion — invisible in daytime |
| Walking safaris | Guided bush walks with armed ranger · Minimum age typically 14–16 |
| Vehicle limits | 3–5 vehicles per sighting maximum · Enforced regardless of season |
| Animal behaviour | Animals habituated to low pressure behave naturally at close range |
| Guide depth | Multi-day familiarity with specific individual animals by name and history |
| Community income | Lease payments documented at \$4M+ annually across Mara conservancies |
| Land protection | Wildlife-compatible land use economically rational vs subdivision |

What the conservancy does NOT change

Being in a private conservancy does not mean you will definitely see a river crossing in July. The migration herds do not respect conservancy boundaries — they range across reserve and conservancy land based on rainfall and grass quality, not on tourism zones. A conservancy position gives you the best vehicle and access conditions when the herds are present. It does not guarantee their presence on your specific dates. Manage this expectation clearly before booking.

→ *Read more: Private Conservancy vs National Reserve — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

Kenya's Eight Ecosystems

Kenya has more ecological diversity within its borders than most countries have across an entire continent. Eight distinct ecosystems, each with its own wildlife character, landscape aesthetic, climate, and cultural context. Understanding what each one delivers — and what it cannot — is the foundation of every good Kenya itinerary.

1. Maasai Mara

The most famous safari destination in Africa and, on a per-hectare basis, the most wildlife-dense ecosystem on the continent outside the Ngorongoro Crater. Open savannah plains, riverine forest along the Mara River, and the 19 private conservancies surrounding the national reserve. The Great Migration passes through from late June through October. Resident lion, cheetah, leopard, elephant, buffalo, and giraffe are present year-round. The private conservancies produce the best Big Five safari experience in Kenya — off-road access, vehicle limits, night drives, and guides who know the individual animals by name. The national reserve produces the most-photographed migration crossing images and the most vehicle-dense sightings in any African ecosystem during peak season.

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Best for | Big Five, Great Migration, predator encounters, first Kenya safari |
| Best months | Jan–Feb (calving, Kilimanjaro, low crowds) · June (first herds, low fees) · Jul–Oct (migration) |
| Avoid if | You cannot tolerate crowds — stay in a conservancy, not the reserve |
| Altitude | 1,500m — cold mornings (10–14°C at 6am in June–August) |
| Drive time from Nairobi | 5–6 hrs road · 45 min charter from Wilson Airport |
| Park fee (reserve) | \$100/day Jan–Jun · \$200/day Jul–Dec (doubles July 1) |
| Conservancy fee | \$80–150/day — usually included in all-inclusive camp rate |
| Minimum stay | 3 nights minimum · 4–5 nights for genuine depth of experience |

2. Amboseli

Kilimanjaro visible from the ground, rising 5,895 metres above the pale alkaline plain. The Amboseli Elephant Research Project, founded by Dr. Cynthia Moss in 1972 and the world's longest-running study of any wild animal population, has documented over 3,000 individual elephants across five decades. Every adult elephant you encounter in Amboseli has a name, a family

history, and a behavioural record. The underground water system fed by rainfall on Kilimanjaro decades ago creates permanent swamps — Enkongo Narok and Longinye — that draw elephant families every morning in numbers the dry season concentrates dramatically.

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| Best for | Elephant research encounters, Kilimanjaro photography, landscape |
| Best months | Jan–Feb (clearest mountain, lowest crowds) · Jun–Oct (dry season concentration) |
| Photography window | 6am–9am daily — mountain obscured by convection cloud after mid-morning |
| Altitude | 1,100m — warmer than Mara, dawn temperatures 14–18°C |
| Drive time from Nairobi | 4–5 hrs road · 50 min charter from Wilson Airport |
| Park fee | ~\$60/day year-round — no seasonal variation |
| Key research site | AERP headquarters inside park — arrange researcher briefing before first drive |
| Minimum stay | 3 nights minimum for Kilimanjaro photography probability |

3. Samburu & Laikipia (Northern Kenya)

Two distinct but complementary ecosystems that together provide the most complete northern Kenya safari experience. Samburu National Reserve and the surrounding conservancies (Kalama, Namunyak, Sera) deliver the Samburu Special Five — five endemic species found nowhere else in Kenya: Grevy's zebra (IUCN Endangered, fewer than 3,000 globally), reticulated giraffe, beisa oryx, gerenuk, and Somali ostrich. The Ewaso Nyiro River is the primary dry-season water source for the entire northern ecosystem, concentrating wildlife along its banks in ways the wet season dispersal never produces. Laikipia, the high plateau at 1,700–2,600 metres, holds Kenya's largest rhino population, the last two northern white rhinos on Earth at Ol Pejeta Conservancy, and the most diverse activity programme in Kenya — horse riding among rhinos, foot-guided rhino tracking, mountain biking, and the Bortle Class 2 night skies at Loisaba.

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| Best for | Samburu Special Five, northern species, rhino encounters (Laikipia), night skies |
| Best months | Jun–Oct dry season (wildlife concentrated at Ewaso Nyiro) · Jan–Feb also excellent |
| Avoid if | Heat-sensitive — Samburu reaches 33–36°C in the afternoons year-round |
| Northern white rhino | Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Laikipia — last two individuals on Earth |
| Drive from Nairobi (Samburu) | 5–6 hrs road · 90 min charter from Wilson Airport |
| Key experience (Laikipia) | Horse riding among rhino at Lewa or Borana — unique globally |
| Park fee (Samburu reserve) | ~\$50/day year-round |

Minimum stay 3 nights per ecosystem — combine Samburu and Laikipia in one trip

4. Tsavo East & West

Kenya's largest protected area — Tsavo East and West combined cover over 20,000 square kilometres, larger than Wales. The rust-red elephants of Tsavo are a visual signature specific to this ecosystem: the iron-oxide-rich volcanic soil the elephants dust-bathe in coats their grey skin a deep rust-red, producing the most visually distinctive elephant colour in Africa. Finch Hattons in Tsavo West — a luxury camp with a swimming pool overlooking a natural spring where wildlife drinks continuously — and Satao Camp in Tsavo East at the Satao waterhole are among the most atmospheric camp experiences in Kenya. Tsavo is genuinely hot and remote, which is exactly what recommends it to travellers seeking the wild Kenya that the more polished Mara cannot replicate.

| | |
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| Best for | Red elephants, remoteness, less-visited alternative to Mara, dramatic scenery |
| Best months | Jun–Oct dry season · Jan–Feb — avoid April–May (long rains, tracks difficult) |
| Key experience | Rust-red elephant herds at Aruba Dam (Tsavo East) and Satao waterhole |
| Temperature | 28–38°C in the dry season — Kenya's hottest safari parks |
| Drive from Nairobi | 3.5–5 hrs road · 45 min charter to Tsavo airstrips |
| Drive from Diani coast | 2.5 hrs via Bachuma Gate — excellent for coast combination |
| Park fee | ~\$52/day each park · No seasonal variation |
| Hidden advantage | Almost no vehicle pressure at sightings — even in peak season |

5. Lewa & Borana (Northern Conservancies)

A 65,000-hectare private wildlife conservancy in Laikipia with a specific conservation focus on rhino protection — 10% of Kenya's total black rhino population lives within the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy fence. The partnership between Lewa and Borana creates one of the largest fenced wildlife areas in Kenya, offering horse riding at dawn beside rhino and giraffe, foot-guided rhino tracking with rangers who know individual animals by name, and a children's programme that makes Lewa one of the most consistently recommended family safari experiences in East Africa. The Lewa Wildlife Conservancy was awarded the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) Champions of the Earth Award and is independently governed by a community board structure.

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| Best for | Families, rhino encounters, horse riding, children's programmes |
| Best months | Year-round — altitude (1,700m) provides comfortable temperatures in all seasons |
| Key experience | Horse riding among rhino, elephant, giraffe — unique in Kenya |

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|----------------------------|--|
| Drive from Nairobi | 3.5–4 hrs road · 45 min charter to Lewa airstrip |
| Conservation status | 10% of Kenya's black rhinos · UNEP Champions of the Earth Award |
| Best camp | Lewa House (all ages, most family-focused) · Sirikoi (most luxury) |
| Minimum stay | 3 nights — activity range rewards longer stays |
| Honest limitation | Fenced conservancy — different aesthetic from open Mara plains |

6. The Kenya Coast — Diani, Watamu & Lamu

Three distinct coastal experiences that share the Indian Ocean but little else. Diani Beach — 17 kilometres of white coral sand south of Mombasa — is Africa's leading beach resort destination, with a calm lagoon protected by an offshore reef, world-class scuba diving on the outer reef, and consistent kusi trade winds driving kitesurfing from June through September. Watamu, 120 kilometres north of Mombasa, combines beach with the Watamu Marine National Park and is the primary base for whale shark encounters (October through April). Lamu, accessible only by air or ferry, is Kenya's UNESCO World Heritage Swahili town — 700 years of continuous Arab-African-Indian architecture, no motor vehicles, and the dhow culture of the Indian Ocean that no resort coast can replicate.

| | |
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| Best for | Post-safari recovery, marine wildlife, Swahili culture (Lamu), kitesurfing (Diani) |
| Best months | Diani: Dec–Mar and Jul–Oct · Lamu: Jul–Oct and Jan–Mar |
| Marine highlights | Whale sharks Oct–Apr (Watamu/Diani) · Outer reef diving (Diani) · Dhows (Lamu) |
| Charter from Mara | 2 hrs via Wilson to Diani/Ukunda · 90 min to Lamu from Wilson |
| Charter from Amboseli | 45 min direct to Ukunda/Diani |
| Honest Lamu caveat | Hot and humid Mar–May and Nov — visit Jul–Oct or Jan–Mar |
| Best Diani boutique | Kinondo Kwetu — private beach, horse riding, most intimate |
| Best Lamu option | Peponi Hotel (iconic) · Private Swahili house in Shela (best value) |

7. Nairobi

The only city in the world with a national park visible from the downtown skyline. Nairobi National Park — 117 square kilometres of protected savannah bordering the city's southern edge — holds lions, rhinos, giraffes, leopards, and cheetahs within 7 kilometres of the central business district. Beyond the park: the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust's orphaned elephant nursery (the single best pre-safari experience in Kenya), the Giraffe Centre with its Rothschild's giraffe feeding encounters, the Karen Blixen Museum in the colonial suburb that inspired *Out of Africa*. Most visitors treat Nairobi as a transit point. This is the most consistent planning mistake in Kenya safari itineraries —

the city's conservation experiences, used well, transform the quality of every subsequent wildlife encounter.

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| Best for | Pre-safari context, orphan elephant programme, city-to-bush transition |
| Essential experience | David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust at 11am — the best pre-safari investment |
| Second essential | Giraffe Centre — Rothschild's giraffe feeding encounter, ~\$25 entry |
| National Park | Morning game drives with lion, rhino, giraffe — city visible behind |
| Best hotel (Karen) | Hemingways Nairobi — 15 min Wilson Airport, most consistently excellent |
| Best hotel (value) | Ole Sereni — overlooks Nairobi National Park, pool, city views |
| Minimum Nairobi time | 1 night arrival · optional 1 night departure |
| Honest note | Nairobi is safe in Karen, Westlands, Gigiri — use Uber or Bolt, not unmarked taxis |

8. Lake Naivasha & the Rift Valley Lakes

The Great Rift Valley lakes — Naivasha, Nakuru, Bogoria, Baringo — form a chain of freshwater and alkaline ecosystems along the valley floor north and northwest of Nairobi. Lake Naivasha provides the most accessible horse riding in Kenya and the only place in the country where you can walk freely among hippos (in carefully guided groups on Hell's Gate National Park's floor). Lake Nakuru, recently upgraded to national park status, holds both white and black rhinos and consistently produces the most reliable leopard sightings in the entire Rift Valley region. Lake Bogoria is the primary feeding ground for East Africa's flamingo populations when lake chemistry is optimal. These lakes are commonly added as a day trip or 1-night stop between Nairobi and the Mara, providing a Rift Valley landscape dimension that neither the Mara nor Amboseli can replicate.

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| Best for | Rift Valley landscape, flamingos (Bogoria), rhino (Nakuru), horse riding (Naivasha) |
| Best combined with | Add as 1–2 nights between Nairobi and Mara for varied itinerary |
| Best months | Year-round · Flamingo numbers vary with lake chemistry — check current conditions |
| Drive from Nairobi | 1.5–2 hrs to Naivasha · 2.5 hrs to Nakuru · 3 hrs to Bogoria |
| Key experience | Hell's Gate National Park — walking and cycling among wildlife (no predators) |
| Rhino experience | Lake Nakuru NP — both black and white rhino in accessible terrain |
| Honest limitation | Less wilderness character than Mara or Samburu — roads and farms visible |
| Best stay | Crater Lake Sanctuary (Naivasha) · Sarova Lion Hill (Nakuru) |

PART TWO

When to Go

The honest seasonal guide — what every month delivers and what it cannot

CHAPTER 4 · THE SEASONAL CALENDAR

The Honest Seasonal Calendar

The most common question in Kenya safari planning is "when is the best time to go?" The honest answer is: it depends on what you are optimising for. There is no single best month. There are months that are best for specific experiences — and the honest guide to those trade-offs is the most valuable planning tool available.

Kenya has four seasons, not two. The Long Dry Season (June–October) is the classic safari period, producing the wildlife concentration and landscape clarity that most marketing images show. The Short Dry Season (January–February) is the most underused and often the best window in the calendar — lower prices, fewer vehicles, clear Kilimanjaro, and the most intense predator activity from calving season. The Long Rains (March–May) are genuinely challenging but produce the most photogenic landscape and the lowest prices. The Short Rains (October–December) are widely misunderstood — afternoon showers that leave mornings clear and prices significantly below peak.

Month-by-month: what you actually get

| Month | Wildlife quality | Crowds | Price | Best for |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|----------|----------|-------------------------------------|
| January | Excellent — calving peak | Low | Lower | Kilimanjaro, predators, coast |
| February | Excellent — calving/predators | Low | Lower | Photography, calving, coast |
| March | Good (early) / variable (late) | Low | Dropping | First half only — rains arrive late |
| April | Challenging — dispersed | Very low | Lowest | Landscape photography, value |
| May | Improving late month | Very low | Lowest | Birding, budget, lush landscape |

| | | | | |
|------------------|------------------------------|------------------|------------|---|
| June | Excellent — first migration | Low | Pre-peak | Best value month overall |
| July | Peak — crossings beginning | High | Peak | Migration crossings — conservancy essential |
| August | Peak — most crossings | Highest | Peak | Migration — conservancy or avoid reserve |
| September | Peak — crossings + predators | Moderate-high | Peak | Better than August overall |
| October | Excellent — herds returning | Moderate | Dropping | Best underused month |
| November | Very good — green season | Low | Below peak | Green landscape, birding, value |
| December | Very good — coast excellent | Low—holiday peak | Variable | Dec 1–19 excellent value |

The Mara park fee calendar — the cost variable most visitors miss

The Maasai Mara National Reserve entrance fee doubles on July 1 every year and stays elevated through December 31. January through June: \$100 per person per day. July through December: \$200 per person per day. For a couple spending 5 nights in the Mara reserve in July rather than June, the additional park fee is \$1,000. This cost is frequently not clearly separated in operator quotes. Always ask: "Is the national reserve entrance fee included in your all-inclusive rate?"

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| Jan–Jun park fee | \$100 per person per day — Mara national reserve |
| Jul–Dec park fee | \$200 per person per day — doubles on July 1 |
| Conservancy fee | \$80–150/day — usually included in all-inclusive camp rate |
| Amboseli park fee | ~\$60/day year-round — no seasonal variation |
| Samburu reserve fee | ~\$50/day year-round — no seasonal variation |
| Tsavo East/West fee | ~\$52/day each — no seasonal variation |
| Private conservancy | Fees agreed in conservancy lease — no seasonal doubling |
| Key question to ask | "Is the park/conservancy fee included in your all-inclusive rate?" |

→ Read more: *Best Time to Visit Kenya — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

The Great Migration — The Full Story

The Great Migration is the most marketed wildlife event in Africa and the most misunderstood. It is not a river crossing. It is not an August event. It is a year-round circuit of 1.5 million wildebeest and 300,000 zebra across 40,000 square kilometres of Tanzania and Kenya — and the Mara River crossings are one chapter of a much richer annual story.

The migration circuit has eight distinct phases, each with its own wildlife character and viewing quality. The calving season in the southern Serengeti (January–February) — when up to 8,000 wildebeest calves are born per day at peak, producing the most intense predator-prey action available anywhere in Africa — happens entirely in Tanzania and is almost entirely absent from the marketing of "the Great Migration." The river crossing season in the Mara (July–October) receives 90% of the marketing attention for approximately 25% of the annual cycle. Both phases are extraordinary. The calendar below is honest about both.

| Phase | Location | Months | Character | Viewing access |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|---|---|
| Calving season | S. Serengeti (Tanzania) | Jan–Feb | 8,000 calves/day at peak · Most intense predator action | Tanzania itinerary · Ndotu area camps |
| Northward movement | Central Serengeti | Mar–May | Vast herds in transit · Grumeti crossings begin | Tanzania · Serengeti camps |
| Kenya arrival | Northern Serengeti → Mara | Late Jun–Jul | Herds building · First crossings | Kenya conservancy camps · Mara North best |
| Peak crossings | Maasai Mara | Jul–Sep | Most frequent crossings · Most vehicles | Kenya · Conservancy essential for quality |
| Return south | Mara → Serengeti | Oct–Nov | Reverse crossings · Fewer vehicles | Kenya · Best underused crossing window |
| Southern Serengeti | Serengeti short grass plains | Nov–Dec | Herds returning to calving grounds | Tanzania · Low-season camps |

What the crossing actually involves — and what it does not guarantee

A Mara River crossing occurs when a massed group of wildebeest on the southern bank commits to entering the water simultaneously. The process begins with animals massing on the bank above a recognised crossing point — sometimes for 30 minutes, sometimes for 3 hours. When the leading animal commits, the surge is almost violent: tens of thousands of wildebeest plunging into the river, Nile crocodiles erupting from apparent stillness into violent action, the noise overwhelming at close range. Individual crossings last 15–45 minutes. The herds may cross at one point for three days, disappear inland for two weeks, then cross at a different location.

No operator can guarantee a crossing on any specific day. The guests who witness the best crossings are those who stay at the river through the midday hours when most camps suggest returning for lunch, bring a packed lunch and commit to the position when the guide assesses that conditions are building. The guests who report the most disappointment are those who built their entire trip around a specific crossing on a specific day.

The Great Migration season (July–October) is genuinely extraordinary even if you never witness a single river crossing. The resident wildlife, the predator activity, the landscape — these are exceptional regardless of whether the herds are crossing during your specific stay.

→ Read more: *The Great Wildebeest Migration — The Full Story* — novaexpedition.tours/journal

CHAPTER 6 · PLANNING AROUND YOUR BUDGET

Planning Around Your Budget

A legitimate Kenya safari spans an enormous price range — from \$1,500 per person per week at the budget end to \$22,000 at the ultra-luxury end.

Understanding what each tier actually includes, and where the hidden costs in any quoted price typically live, is the most practically useful financial guidance available before you start comparing operators.

The honest cost framework — 2026 pricing

| Safari tier | 7 nights all-in pp (low season) | 7 nights all-in pp (peak) | What this buys |
|---------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Budget | \$1,500–2,500 | \$2,500–4,000 | Reserve camps (not conservancy) · Road |

| | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--|
| | | | transfer · Some shared vehicles |
| Mid-range | \$2,800–4,500 | \$4,500–7,000 | Good conservancy camps · Charter flights · Private vehicle · Park fees |
| Luxury | \$5,500–10,000 | \$8,000–14,000 | Top conservancy camps · All charters · Full service · Alcohol included |
| Ultra-luxury | \$12,000–22,000 | \$15,000–28,000 | Angama, Bateleur, Cottar's · Peak season all-inclusive · Private guide |

The hidden costs that most quotes do not include clearly

The gap between a quoted all-inclusive price and the actual total cost of a Kenya safari is frequently \$500–\$2,000 per person. These are the line items most commonly excluded from base rates while appearing to be included:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Mara park fee (Jul–Dec) | \$200/person/day — often excluded or not clearly stated |
| Charter flights | From \$180/person/leg — sometimes quoted separately from camp rate |
| Alcohol | Excluded at mid-range camps — \$20–60/person/day additional |
| Gratuities | \$15–25/guide/day + \$10–15/camp staff/day — never in quoted price |
| Nairobi transfers | \$25–50 Uber each way JKIA to Karen or Wilson Airport |
| Travel insurance | \$80–200 for the trip — always additional |
| AMREF Flying Doctors | ~\$25/week — strongly recommended, always additional |
| Laundry | Excluded at some camps — \$5–15/item or daily rate |

The value calculation that most guides miss

The most common budget mistake in Kenya safari planning is comparing a reserve camp at \$400/night all-inclusive with a conservancy camp at \$600/night all-inclusive and concluding the reserve camp is 33% cheaper. The correct comparison: a reserve camp at \$400/night plus \$200/day Mara park fee (July–December) plus alcohol (excluded) plus the vehicle limit problem (unlimited vehicles at sightings) versus a conservancy camp at \$600/night with conservancy fee included, alcohol included, vehicle limits enforced. In this comparison, the "cheaper" reserve camp is often

more expensive in total and delivers a categorically worse experience at sightings. Always ask for the fully itemised total before any price comparison.

Seasonal price strategy

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Peak season (Jul–Oct) | Highest prices, most crowds, best migration. Book 9–12 months ahead. |
| Low season (Apr–May) | Lowest prices, fewest visitors, challenging game drives. 30–40% below peak. |
| Shoulder (Jun, Nov) | Excellent value. Jun: first migration herds, last month at lower Mara fee. Nov: green landscape, birding. |
| Short dry (Jan–Feb) | Underrated. Lower prices, clear Kilimanjaro, calving season predator action, low crowds. |
| School holidays | Jul–Aug and Dec 20–Jan 10 carry premium pricing regardless of wildlife calendar. |
| Best value month overall | June: excellent wildlife, beautiful landscape, last month at lower Mara fee, minimal crowds. |

→ *Read more: Kenya Safari Cost 2026 — The Honest Breakdown — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

PART THREE

Building Your Itinerary

How to structure the time you have for the experience you want

CHAPTER 7 · 7-DAY ITINERARIES

One Week in Kenya

Seven days is enough for a genuinely excellent Kenya safari. It is not enough for everything. The planning principle that produces the best 7-day trips: choose one primary safari destination, stay 4–5 nights, and use the remaining time for Nairobi. Depth over breadth. This principle is consistently counter-intuitive and consistently produces better outcomes than attempting multiple destinations.

The recommended 7-day framework

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Day 1 | Arrive Nairobi · Sheldrick Trust 11am · Giraffe Centre afternoon · Karen hotel |
| Day 2 | Wilson Airport 6:30am · Charter to Mara conservancy (45 min) · First drives |
| Day 3 | Full conservancy day: dawn drive · bush breakfast · afternoon drive · night drive |
| Day 4 | Full conservancy day: dawn river drive · guide builds on previous mornings' knowledge |
| Day 5 | Full conservancy day: by day 5 guide knows your interests, positions accordingly |
| Day 6 | Final dawn drive · charter back to Wilson by 10am · afternoon Nairobi · Giraffe Centre |
| Day 7 | International departure |
| Key principle | 5 nights in one conservancy develops depth unavailable in shorter stays |

Alternative: Samburu focus (for non-Mara or repeat visitors)

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Day 1 | Arrive Nairobi · Sheldrick Trust · Karen hotel |
| Day 2 | Charter to Samburu (90 min) · Kalama Conservancy · first drives |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Days 3–5 | Full Samburu days · Special Five species · Ewaso Nyiro River · walking safaris |
| Day 6 | Charter back · Nairobi afternoon |
| Day 7 | International departure |
| Why Samburu | Completely different ecosystem · Zero migration crowds · 5 endemic species |

→ Read more: *One Week in Kenya* — novaexpedition.tours/journal

CHAPTER 8 · 10-DAY ITINERARIES

Ten Days — The Sweet Spot

Ten days is the itinerary length that most experienced Kenya operators recommend for a first comprehensive visit. Long enough for two genuine destinations. Long enough to stay in each place long enough to actually experience it. Short enough to fit within most annual leave allocations.

The classic 10-day circuit

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Day 1 | Nairobi arrival · Sheldrick Trust · Giraffe Centre · Karen hotel |
| Days 2–5 | Maasai Mara conservancy (4 nights) · 8 game drives including night drives |
| Day 6 | Charter Mara → Amboseli (90 min via Wilson or direct) · afternoon drive |
| Days 7–8 | Amboseli (2 nights) · Kilimanjaro photography · AERP researcher briefing |
| Day 9 | Charter Amboseli → coast (45 min to Diani) · Indian Ocean |
| Day 10 | Coast morning · charter back to Nairobi · international departure |
| Total domestic flights | 4 legs · \$400–600 per person · Book simultaneously with camps |
| Why this works | Three distinct ecosystems · Three different sensory registers · Complete narrative |

The northern alternative (for repeat Mara visitors)

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Days 2–4 | Samburu Kalama Conservancy (3 nights) · Special Five · walking safaris |
|-----------------|--|

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Days 5–8 | Laikipia — Lewa or Loisaba (4 nights) · Rhinos · horse riding · star beds |
| Days 9–10 | Lamu coast (1–2 nights) · Swahili Old Town · dhow sailing |
| Why different | None of the Mara's migration crowds · Rhinos guaranteed · Cultural depth at Lamu |

→ *Read more: 10-Day Kenya Itinerary — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

CHAPTER 9 · 14-DAY ITINERARIES

Two Weeks — The Complete Experience

Fourteen days is long enough to experience Kenya deeply rather than broadly — long enough for two or three destinations at proper depth, a beach extension, Nairobi, and the unhurried pace that transforms a safari from spectacular to genuinely understood.

Two-week budget framework

| Component | Classic circuit | Northern circuit |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Safari camps (10 nights) | \$6,000–12,000 pp | \$5,500–11,000 pp |
| Coast (3 nights) | \$800–1,800 pp | \$800–2,000 pp (Lamu) |
| Nairobi (1 night) | \$200–500 pp | \$200–500 pp |
| Domestic flights (5–6 legs) | \$600–900 pp | \$700–1,000 pp |
| Park/conservancy fees | ~\$1,200 pp (varies season) | ~\$900 pp |
| Gratuities | \$250–350 pp | \$250–350 pp |
| Total estimate | \$9,000–17,000 pp | \$8,400–15,800 pp |

The most consistent two-week planning mistake: attempting four or five destinations. Two nights at the Mara, one at Nakuru, two at Amboseli, one at Tsavo, two at the coast — this is a transit itinerary punctuated by brief wildlife glimpses, not a safari. Three destinations at 4 nights each delivers the depth that produces genuine understanding. The extra flight costs are a fraction of the extra experience quality they purchase.

→ *Read more: Two Weeks in Kenya — The Ultimate Itinerary — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

CHAPTER 10 • BUSH & BEACH

Kenya Bush and Beach

The Indian Ocean coast is within 45–90 minutes charter of any major Kenya safari area. No other African safari destination makes this combination as naturally and cost-effectively available. The transition from the intense alertness of the bush to the complete ease of the ocean coast is one of the genuinely great pleasures of a well-designed Kenya itinerary.

Coast options and what each delivers

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Diani Beach | 17km white sand · Calm lagoon · World-class diving · Kitesurfing Jun–Sep · 45 min from Amboseli |
| Lamu Island | UNESCO Swahili Old Town · 700 years of architecture · No motor vehicles · Dhow sailing · 90 min from Wilson |
| Watamu | Marine national park · Whale sharks Oct–Apr · More local, less resort character · 2 hrs road from Nairobi |
| Best Diani property | Kinondo Kwetu — private beach, horse riding at dawn, boutique (24 rooms) |
| Best Lamu option | Peponi Hotel (3-generation family operation) · Private Swahili house in Shela (best value) |
| Minimum coast nights | 3 nights — 2 full beach days is the minimum for genuine recovery |
| Luggage note | Leave beach clothes in Nairobi hotel · courier delivers to coast before arrival |
| Best combination | Mara 4 nights + Amboseli 3 nights + Diani 3 nights — classic 10-day circuit |

→ Read more: *Kenya Bush and Beach Holiday* — novaexpedition.tours/journal

CHAPTER 11 • KENYA + TANZANIA

Kenya and Tanzania Combined

The two-country itinerary — Kenya for the conservancy experience and guide depth, Tanzania for the Serengeti's scale and the calving season intensity — produces the most comprehensive East Africa safari available. The most compelling combination: Kenya Mara conservancy (4 nights) for

predator depth and vehicle limit experience, southern Serengeti Ndutu area (3 nights) in January–February for calving season, Diani coast (2 nights) for recovery. Cross-border logistics: Tanzania single-entry visa \$50, available on arrival or online. The cross is managed by your operator through Klein's Camp or Kogatende airstrips on the Tanzania side.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Best cross-border window | January–February: calving season in Tanzania, excellent Mara wildlife in Kenya simultaneously |
| Tanzania visa | \$50 single entry — available online at evisa.go.tz or on arrival |
| Cross-border airstrip (north) | Klein's Camp or Kogatende airstrips — direct charter from Kenya Mara airstrips |
| Tanzania camp recommendation | Ndutu Safari Lodge or Lemala Ndutu for calving season access |
| Kenya operator coordination | Your Kenya operator should handle full cross-border logistics |
| What Tanzania adds | Calving season intensity (Jan–Feb) · Serengeti scale unavailable in Kenya · Ngorongoro Crater |
| What Kenya adds back | Conservancy vehicle limits · KPSGA guide quality · coast combination |
| Honest note | A 14-day combined trip is the minimum to do both countries justice |

PART FOUR

Choosing Right

The operator, the camp, and the budget decisions that determine everything

CHAPTER 12 • CHOOSING AN OPERATOR

How to Choose a Kenya Safari Operator

The difference between a great Kenya safari and a disappointing one is almost always determined before you arrive in the country. It is determined when you choose the operator who designs your itinerary, selects your camps, hires your guide, and manages the problems that arise on every trip.

The guide matters more than the camp

The guide is the single most important element of your wildlife experience, and the operator selects your guide. A Gold-certified KPSGA guide with fourteen years of experience in a specific Mara conservancy — who knows the individual resident lion prides by family composition, anticipates a cheetah hunt before the cat begins to move, and explains the ecological relationships between everything you observe — produces a categorically different experience from a generic guide at the same camp. Before booking any operator, ask: "What is my guide's name, their KPSGA certification level, and how many years have they worked in this specific ecosystem?"

Green lights — what excellent operators consistently do

- Personally visited every camp they recommend within the past 12–18 months
- Ask more questions than they answer in the first conversation
- Give honest seasonal advice even when it costs them revenue (tell you June is better than August for your interests)
- Provide fully itemised quotes specifying every cost component individually
- Can name your guide with their KPSGA certification level and conservancy-specific experience
- Are KATO registered — verify at kato.co.ke

Red flags — patterns that predict a poor experience

- Cannot name your guide or describe their specific credentials and experience

- Prices significantly below market rate without clear explanation of what is excluded
- Generic itineraries sent before understanding who you are and what you want
- No in-country Nairobi presence — international agents managing remotely cannot resolve field problems in real time
- Vague answers about when they last personally visited your proposed camps

The eight questions to ask before committing

1. When did you or a colleague last personally visit each specific camp in my proposed itinerary?
2. What is my guide's name, KPSGA certification level, and years in this specific ecosystem?
3. Can you provide a fully itemised quote specifying every cost component?
4. Is my vehicle arrangement exclusively private for all game drives throughout the itinerary?
5. Who do I call if something goes wrong — what is their local mobile number and what authority do they have?
6. Are you KATO registered? Can I verify at kato.co.ke?
7. Have you personally met the camp manager or head guide at these properties?
8. If my budget were 20% higher, what would you change? If 20% lower?

→ Read more: *How to Choose a Kenya Safari Operator* — novaexpedition.tours/journal

CHAPTER 13 · CHOOSING A CAMP

How to Choose a Camp

The camp choice question has one decision that precedes every other: national reserve or private conservancy? Once that is answered, the remaining camp decisions — property tier, specific location within the ecosystem, activity programme, family suitability — can be evaluated with genuine clarity.

The reserve vs conservancy decision matrix

| Criterion | National reserve | Private conservancy |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Vehicle limits at sightings | None — unlimited vehicles | 3–5 vehicles maximum · Enforced regardless of season |
| Night drives | Not available | Standard inclusion at all conservancy camps |
| Walking safaris | Not available | Available with armed ranger · Minimum age 14–16 typically |

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Off-road driving | Designated tracks only | Follow wildlife anywhere the guide judges safe |
| Animal behaviour | Modified by high vehicle pressure | Natural — habituated to low pressure |
| Price | Generally lower base rate | Generally higher — but often lower true total with fee inclusions |
| Park fee | \$100–200/day additional (often excluded from quotes) | Conservancy fee usually included in all-inclusive |
| Booking lead time | 3–6 months typically | 6–12 months for top properties in peak season |

What distinguishes a good camp from a great one

Within the conservancy tier, the difference between a good camp and a great one is almost always the guide, and the guide is almost always the product of the camp's institutional commitment to guide development. Ask about the average years of experience of the guiding team, the percentage of guides with Gold KPSGA certification, and whether guides work exclusively with their own camp or rotate between camps. The best Mara conservancy camps — and Beyond Bateleur, Angama Mara, Serian, Cottar's 1920s — maintain head guides with 10–15+ years of specific conservancy experience and track individual animal families continuously. A guest who spends five mornings with such a guide has a different relationship with the landscape than one who spends five mornings with a guide in their third season.

Tier guide — what your money buys

| | |
|--|---|
| Budget (\$150–300pp/night) | Functional camps, basic food, standard guiding. Reserve often, not conservancy. Adequate. |
| Mid-range (\$300–600pp/night) | Good conservancy access, private vehicle, competent guiding. Genuinely good. |
| Luxury (\$600–1,200pp/night) | Top conservancy camps, excellent guiding, quality food, full inclusions. Very good. |
| Ultra-luxury (\$1,200+pp/night) | Angama, Bateleur, Cottar's, Serian. Outstanding guiding, exceptional food, complete privacy. The benchmark. |
| Hidden gems tier | Mid-range camps that perform like luxury: Saruni Mara, Offbeat Mara, Basecamp Masai Mara. Under-marketed, consistently excellent. |

→ Read more: *Maasai Mara Lodges and Camps — Complete 2026 Guide* — novaexpedition.tours/journal

PART FIVE

Health & Practical

Malaria, vaccinations, insurance, visas, money — everything you need to manage before departure

CHAPTER 15 · MALARIA & VACCINATIONS

Health Preparation

Health preparation for a Kenya safari has two non-negotiable components: malaria prophylaxis and a travel medicine consultation. Everything else — specific vaccinations, altitude considerations, food safety — is important but secondary to these two. The single most consequential health decision you will make before this trip is booking a travel medicine appointment at least 6–8 weeks before departure.

Malaria — the honest risk picture

All major Kenya safari destinations below 1,500 metres carry year-round malaria transmission risk. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) both classify all safari areas in Kenya as requiring chemoprophylaxis for all non-immune travellers. Plasmodium falciparum — the most dangerous malaria parasite, responsible for over 85% of clinical cases in Kenya per the Kenya Ministry of Health's National Malaria Control Programme — can progress from initial symptoms to severe illness within hours in untreated cases. Laikipia, at 1,700–2,600 metres altitude, has significantly lower but not zero transmission risk. Nairobi at 1,700 metres is very low risk for short stays.

Prophylaxis options — the three main choices

Atovaquone/Proguanil (Malarone)

Start 1–2 days before · Daily · Stop 7 days after · Best tolerated · Most commonly prescribed · More expensive

Doxycycline

Start 1–2 days before · Daily · Stop 4 weeks after · Causes photosensitivity · Cheaper · Cannot use in pregnancy or children under 8

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Mefloquine (Lariam) | Start 2–3 weeks before (to test tolerance) · Weekly · Neuropsychiatric side effects in some users · Used when alternatives contraindicated |
| Physical protection (all) | DEET 30–50% at dawn and dusk · Long sleeves · Mosquito nets · Camp spraying at dusk · Not a substitute for medication |
| Key rule for return | Fever within 3 months of return from Kenya = tell every doctor you visited Kenya and ask to be tested for malaria immediately |

Vaccinations — required vs recommended

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Required (some travellers) | Yellow Fever certificate — required if arriving from or transiting through endemic country |
| Not required (most routes) | Direct flights from UK, US, EU, Australia to JKIA do not trigger Yellow Fever requirement |
| Strongly recommended | Hepatitis A · Typhoid · Tetanus-Diphtheria-Pertussis booster |
| Often recommended | Hepatitis B (extended stays) · Rabies (wildlife exposure, remote areas) |
| See a doctor | Travel medicine physician 6–8 weeks before departure — not a general practitioner |
| AMREF evacuation | ~\$25/week from flydoc.org — purchase before departure, not optional for remote areas |

→ *Read more: Malaria in Kenya — Prophylaxis, Risks and Honest Advice — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

→ *Read more: What Vaccinations Do You Need for Kenya? — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

→ *Read more: Kenya Travel Insurance — What You Actually Need — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

CHAPTER 17 · PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Visas, Money, Connectivity

Entry requirements

| | |
|---|---|
| Kenya eTA | \$30 · Apply at etakenya.go.ke · Takes 72+ hours · Apply minimum 2 weeks before travel |
| Tanzania visa (if combined trip) | \$50 single entry · Available at evisa.go.tz or on arrival |
| Yellow Fever certificate | Required if arriving from or transiting through endemic country · Not required for direct UK/US/EU/AU flights |

Passport validity Minimum 6 months beyond departure date · Two blank pages minimum

Children travelling Birth certificates required if travelling with one parent or with non-parents

Money and payments

Local currency Kenya Shilling (KES) · USD widely accepted at safari camps and tourist facilities

ATMs Widely available in Nairobi · Unreliable in Lamu — withdraw cash before travelling to the island

Cards at camps Most mid-range to luxury camps accept credit cards · Remote areas may have connectivity issues

Gratuities (cash only) Guides: \$15–25/day · Camp staff collectively: \$10–15/person/day · Always cash, KES or USD

Uber and Bolt Both work reliably in Nairobi · Use for all city transfers · Never unmarked taxis

Airport note Wilson Airport (domestic safaris) and JKIA (international) are separate — 20–30 min apart

Connectivity

Mobile signal Nairobi: excellent · Mara: variable, often absent in conservancies · Samburu: limited

WiFi at camps Available at most camps but unreliable in remote areas — treat as a feature, not a limitation

Local SIM Safaricom is Kenya's most reliable network · SIM available at JKIA arrivals (\$5 with data)

Satellite phones All reputable camps have satellite communication for emergencies even without mobile signal

Emergency comms Your camp communicates with AMREF Flying Doctors by satellite or HF radio — your phone is not needed

PART SIX

In the Field

Packing, etiquette, photography, and cultural encounters

CHAPTER 19 • WHAT TO PACK

What to Pack

Safari packing has one principle that explains every good clothing decision: you will be cold at 6am in a moving open vehicle and warm by 10am on the same game drive. The clothing system needs to manage a 15-degree temperature swing over 4 hours without leaving the vehicle. Three layers that come off progressively — base layer, fleece, windproof — solve this. Everything else is secondary.

Temperature by destination

| Destination | Dawn (dry season) | Midday | Key note |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|---------|--|
| Maasai Mara (1,500m) | 10–14°C Jun–Jul | 22–26°C | Coldest safari area — fleece mandatory Jun–Aug |
| Laikipia plateau (2,600m) | 8–14°C | 22–28°C | Coolest destination — extra layer at all times |
| Amboseli (1,100m) | 14–18°C | 26–32°C | Warmer than Mara — fleece useful for dawn |
| Samburu (900m) | 18–22°C | 30–36°C | Hot year-round — linen/technical fabric only |
| Tsavu (400–900m) | 18–24°C | 28–38°C | Kenya's hottest parks — pack for heat |
| Coast (sea level) | 22–26°C | 28–34°C | High humidity — linen and cotton only |

The packing list

Safari clothing

- 3–4 long-sleeved shirts: khaki, olive, beige, grey — never white, bright blue, red, or black
- 2–3 lightweight convertible trousers with zip-off legs — never jeans
- 1 fleece or light down jacket — the single most important item for any Mara trip
- 1 light windproof outer layer — essential in open vehicle at 10°C at speed
- 1 light packable rain jacket — afternoon showers in shoulder seasons
- Wide-brimmed hat · Polarised sunglasses · SPF 50+ sunscreen
- Trail shoes or light boots for drives · Camp sandals for evenings
- DEET 30–50% insect repellent — apply morning and evening, dawn/dusk are peak mosquito times

Technical notes

- Camouflage clothing is illegal for civilians to wear in Kenya — neutral safari colours only
- 15kg per person soft bag maximum on all charter flights — no hard-sided suitcases
- Camera equipment travels in the cabin as a personal item — not in the baggage hold
- Leave coast clothes in Nairobi hotel — arrange courier delivery to coast accommodation

→ *Read more: What to Wear on Safari in Kenya — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

CHAPTER 20 · SAFARI ETIQUETTE

Safari Etiquette and Conduct

In the vehicle

- Ask your guide to turn off the engine at important sightings — removes vibration blur and changes encounter quality
- Keep voices quiet at sightings — guides will signal when complete silence is needed
- Do not stand in the vehicle unless the guide confirms it is safe to do so
- Follow the guide's lead on timing — do not push to stay or leave against their reading of the situation
- Tip your guide appropriately: \$15–25/day in cash, at the end of the stay, with a personal note

Across the ecosystem

- Never leave litter inside or outside the vehicle at any point in the ecosystem
- Do not play recorded bird or animal calls to attract species — this is considered unethical by KPSGA guidelines
- Do not feed any wildlife regardless of how safe it appears — human-habituated animals are at elevated risk
- Respect other vehicles at sightings — the vehicle limit at your conservancy protects a quality experience for everyone including the animals

Cultural conduct

- Ask before photographing Maasai or any community members — accept the answer without negotiation
- Pay fair rates for photographs: \$1–3 per photograph, \$5–10 for an extended session
- Dress modestly in Maasai communities: shoulders covered, knees covered for both men and women
- Greet in Maa: Sopa (general greeting) · Asante in Swahili (thank you) — the effort is always disproportionately valued
- Do not enter a Maasai homestead (boma) without invitation — wait to be welcomed

→ Read more: *Maasai Culture — A Respectful Guide for Visitors* — novaexpedition.tours/journal

CHAPTER 21 · PHOTOGRAPHY

Safari Photography

Camera settings for the most common scenarios

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Dawn game drive light | ISO 800–3200 · Aperture f/4–5.6 · Shutter 1/250+ for moving animals |
| Bright midday | ISO 200–400 · Aperture f/8 · Shutter 1/1000+ to freeze fast movement |
| River crossing | Burst mode · Shutter 1/2000+ · Continuous AF · Shoot video first, stills second |
| Kilimanjaro dawn (Amboseli) | RAW or ProRAW essential · Bracket exposures · Mountain clearest 6–9am |
| Night drive | ISO 3200–6400 · Wide aperture · Guide controls spotlight — follow the light, don't fight it |
| Smartphone tips | 5× optical zoom for close encounters · Video mode for crossings · ProRAW if available |

The practical rules

- Shoot RAW whenever possible — the dynamic range of dawn safari scenes requires it
- Stay at sightings longer than feels comfortable — the decisive moment is often 20 minutes in
- Ask the guide to position for the light, not the proximity — the best angle is not always the closest
- Download and back up every day — memory card corruption in the field is common
- Video for river crossings, stills for close predator encounters — different tools for different events

→ *Read more: How to Photograph the Great Migration with a Smartphone — novaexpedition.tours/journal*

PART SEVEN

Mistakes and Mastery

The ten planning mistakes that consistently ruin Kenya safaris — and the questions that prevent all of them

CHAPTER 23 • 10 MISTAKES

10 Mistakes That Ruin a Kenya Safari

These are the planning mistakes that experienced Kenya operators see repeatedly — the decisions made before departure that determine whether the trip meets, exceeds, or falls short of expectations. None of them are difficult to avoid with the right information.

Mistake 1: Booking a reserve lodge when you mean a conservancy camp

The most consequential mistake in any Mara itinerary. If your camp is inside the national reserve, you have no night drives, no walking safaris, no off-road access, and unlimited vehicles at every sighting. If your camp is inside a private conservancy, you have all of these. Ask of every camp you consider: "Is this inside the national reserve or a private conservancy?" If the answer is vague, ask again. The answer determines your entire game drive experience.

Mistake 2: Trying to cover too many destinations

Five destinations in ten nights means two nights each — barely enough to learn the landscape, let alone develop the depth of guide relationship that produces the best encounters. Three destinations at 3–4 nights each produces a fundamentally better experience. Reduce your destination count. Add nights to each destination. You will not regret it.

Mistake 3: Not asking for your guide's name and credentials before booking

The guide is the single most important element of the wildlife experience. An operator who cannot tell you your guide's name, KPSGA certification level, and years in the specific ecosystem before you commit has not thought carefully about the most important human dimension of what they are selling. Ask before you book.

Mistake 4: Failing to understand the park fee doubling on July 1

The Mara national reserve fee doubles from \$100 to \$200 per person per day on July 1 and stays elevated through December 31. For a couple spending 5 nights in July rather than June, this is \$1,000 in additional park fees. This cost is often excluded from quoted all-inclusive rates. Always ask for the fully itemised total.

Mistake 5: Booking international flights before confirming camp availability

The best Mara conservancy camps sell out for peak season 9–12 months in advance. International flights can be rescheduled. A sold-out conservancy camp in July cannot. Confirm camp availability first, then build the international flight around the confirmed dates.

Mistake 6: Underpacking for the cold

The Maasai Mara in July at 6am in an open vehicle is 10–12°C with significant wind chill. The most consistent first-safari packing mistake is insufficient warm layers. Every experienced Kenya operator has watched guests spend their first morning drives bundled in camp blankets because they brought only t-shirts and light fleeces. One fleece or light down jacket changes everything.

Mistake 7: Not buying AMREF Flying Doctors membership

Emergency medical evacuation from a remote Kenya location without AMREF membership costs \$3,000–8,000. With AMREF membership, it costs \$25 per week. Standard travel insurance frequently requires pre-authorisation before dispatching an evacuation — AMREF dispatches immediately on a call. Purchase at flydoc.org before departure.

Mistake 8: Building the trip around a guaranteed river crossing

The Mara River crossing cannot be scheduled. The herds move on their own timeline. Guests who build their entire Kenya trip around seeing a specific crossing on a specific day are setting themselves up for disappointment. Guests who come to experience the Mara ecosystem broadly during the migration season, with the crossing as a hoped-for bonus, consistently report extraordinary satisfaction regardless of whether they witness a crossing.

Mistake 9: Skipping the Nairobi conservation experiences

The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust at 11am and the Giraffe Centre in the afternoon are the two best pre-safari preparation experiences in Kenya. Guests who visit the Sheldrick Trust before their first Amboseli game drive report a qualitatively richer elephant encounter because they arrive with an

individual animal narrative framework. This 90-minute Nairobi investment changes the quality of the bush experience that follows it.

Mistake 10: Not giving yourself one more day than you think you need

The extra day you add as a buffer invariably becomes the day you witness the cheetah hunt, see the crossing, or spend the afternoon by the river in silence that you remember longer than any specific sighting. Every experienced Kenya traveller says the same thing: you never have enough time. Build the extra day in from the beginning.

CHAPTER 24 • QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BOOK

The Questions That Prevent Every Mistake

These are the questions to ask before committing to any operator, camp, or itinerary. Each one exists because its absence has produced a specific class of safari disappointment that experienced Kenya operators observe repeatedly.

Questions for your operator

- When did you or a colleague last personally visit each specific camp in my proposed itinerary?
- What is my guide's name, KPSGA certification level, and how many years have they worked in this specific ecosystem?
- Is the national reserve or conservancy entrance fee included in your quoted all-inclusive rate — and if not, what is the additional per-person per-day cost?
- Is my vehicle arrangement exclusively private for all game drives throughout the entire itinerary?
- Who exactly do I call if something goes wrong on safari, what is their local mobile number, and what authority do they have to make changes?
- Are you KATO registered? May I verify at kato.co.ke?
- Have you personally met the camp manager or head guide at each property in my itinerary?
- Can you provide a fully itemised quote specifying every cost component — accommodation, flights, fees, alcohol, laundry, and gratuity guidance separately?

Questions for your camp

- Is this camp inside the national reserve or a private conservancy?
- What specific vehicle limits are enforced at wildlife sightings?
- Are night drives and walking safaris included in the all-inclusive rate?

- What is the minimum age for walking safaris? (Relevant for families)
- What is your emergency protocol if a guest has a serious medical incident – which airstrip, which communication method, which air ambulance service?
- What percentage of your staff come from the immediately adjacent Maasai community?
- What is the documented lease payment rate to the conservancy landowners per hectare per year?

Questions for your travel medicine physician

- Which antimalarial prophylaxis is most appropriate for my specific health profile and the Kenya safari areas I am visiting?
 - Which vaccinations are current and which need boosters before departure?
 - Is a Yellow Fever certificate required for my specific routing and passport country?
 - Are there any contraindications between my current medications and the recommended prophylaxis?
-

Further Reading

All articles referenced in this guide are published in full at novaexpedition.tours/journal. Use them to go deeper on any topic before your planning conversations with your operator.

Wildlife and destinations

- *Elephants at Amboseli: Why This Is Africa's Best Wildlife Experience*
- *The Great Wildebeest Migration: The Full Story*
- *Maasai Mara Lodges and Camps – Complete 2026 Guide*
- *Amboseli Hotels and Lodges – Complete 2026 Guide*
- *Samburu Lodges and Camps – Complete 2026 Guide*
- *Laikipia Lodges – Complete 2026 Guide*
- *Where to Stay in Nairobi – Every Hotel Rated 2026*
- *Diani Beach Hotels – Complete Guide*

Planning and itineraries

- *One Week in Kenya – How to Make the Most of 7 Days*
- *10-Day Kenya Itinerary – The Classic Circuit*
- *Two Weeks in Kenya – The Ultimate Itinerary*
- *Kenya Bush and Beach Holiday*
- *Kenya in July – Migration, Weather and Planning Guide*
- *Kenya in August – Peak Season Guide*
- *Best Time to Visit Kenya – Month-by-Month Guide*
- *Kenya Climate and Weather – What to Expect Every Month*

Practical and health

- *How to Choose a Kenya Safari Operator: Red Flags and Green Lights*
- *Kenya Safari Cost 2026 – The Honest Breakdown*
- *What to Wear on Safari in Kenya – The Honest Guide*
- *Malaria in Kenya – Prophylaxis, Risks and Honest Advice*
- *What Vaccinations Do You Need for Kenya?*
- *Kenya Travel Insurance – What You Actually Need*
- *Kenya Travel Tips: 25 Things to Know Before Your First Trip*
- *The 30 Most Frequently Asked Questions About Kenya Safaris*
- *First Time in Africa? Start with Kenya*

Culture and community

- *Maasai Culture — A Respectful Guide for Visitors*
- *How Conservancies Saved Kenya's Lions*
- *The 7 Best Private Conservancies in the Maasai Mara*

About Nova Expedition

Nova Expedition is a Kenya-based safari specialist operating at novaexpedition.tours. We design private safari itineraries for discerning international travellers, with a specific focus on the private conservancy model that we believe produces Kenya's best wildlife experiences.

Our approach: we tell you honestly when a destination, month, or camp is not right for your specific trip — and we tell you who can serve you better if we cannot. This guide is a direct expression of that approach: the most honest, specific, and practically useful Kenya planning resource we can produce, offered freely to anyone who is planning a serious Kenya safari regardless of whether they book with us.

Tell us what you are looking for and we will tell you honestly whether we can deliver it — and if we cannot, we will tell you who can. Start the conversation at novaexpedition.tours

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The Complete Kenya Safari Planning Guide — 2026 Edition