

Have Yourself a Super Safe Safari



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Everyone has an idea of a dream vacation. For the animal-loving outdoors person, it might just be an African safari. While there are many types of safaris available all over the continent, a “driving safari” is the most common. Typically, guests will stay in a lodge or a free-standing, permanent dwelling such as a rondavel or a tent in the “glamping” style in or near a wildlife park but will spend most of their time on “game drives.” Some safari packages also offer special accommodations to get clients closer to wildlife such as a pup tent or a treehouse. And keep in mind that outside of marked tourist areas, the wildlife parks are for wildlife. Respecting the rules will allow for a safe and enjoyable experience.

Types of Safaris

Some parks such as Kruger National Park in South Africa, Etosha National Park in Namibia, or Chobe National Park in Botswana allow for “do-it-yourself” drives. For a safer (and more educational) experience, I recommend a safari that includes a qualified driver/guide using a vehicle specially created for game viewing.



Safari Vehicle Features and Marks of Quality



There may be few or no amenities once you leave the lodgings. A good tour provider will know this and anticipate its clients’ needs, especially on day-long drives. Guides will explain what personal items are needed such as a hat, water bottle, and sunscreen, and what will be provided by the company. For half-day and day-long drives a picnic meal and snacks are generally provided as well as cold drinks, including plenty of bottled or filtered water. Beverages are usually kept in a cooler but inquire in advance with the safari provider if you need space to keep medication like insulin cold during the drive.

A well-kitted safari vehicle is equipped with redundant communications systems, including two-way radios, so all drivers can share the location of rare game and support each other in an

emergency. A proper safari truck also has a high clearance to ford streams and manage generally poor, dirt road conditions. (Wildlife does not need asphalt roads nor do we want to introduce unnatural materials into a natural environment where at all possible). The vehicle should be in overall good condition although it will likely have a lot of scrapes and dings from driving through thick brush and trees. Look for tires with good treads, windows without cracks, and lockable doors. The vehicle should also be equipped with extra (external) petrol cans for refueling purposes and at least one extra tire in case of punctures.

Preparing for and Experiencing a Game Drive

A proper safari company will provide you with a comprehensive orientation before departure. Reputable drivers will explain and follow all the rules of the wildlife park, which means no extraordinary measures will be taken to get clients close to wildlife, even if it means missing a great photograph. Safety should be the number one priority!



Game drives usually occur at dawn and dusk when birds, reptiles, and mammals are the most active. Some outfits also offer night drives to maximize your opportunity to see nocturnal birds and mammals. Safari vehicles move at a very slow speed and often have open rooftops for optimal photography conditions. It is not uncommon to stand during a drive, and this can be done safely with instruction. A good vehicle will have handholds and the driver will forewarn passengers of potholes. When moving from one area of the park to another at a more normal speed, clients will likely be instructed to sit in their seats. A common game drive rule is to prohibit passengers from leaving the vehicle except in designated areas. Keep in mind that the same vehicle may also collect you upon arrival in the country and transport you to your lodgings. It should be equipped with a seatbelt for each passenger, and you will be expected to wear it when in transit to/from the park or lodgings.

Game Guide Knowledge

A qualified driver/game guide will enhance your experience and protect your health and safety. There are dozens of game guide training programs in Africa that vary in length and intensity. Most countries require their guides to be certified, but the criteria differ across the continent. Inquire about the training and experience of the staff that will support your trip. At a minimum staff should be prepared to administer basic first aid and CPR. Knowledge of wilderness first aid would be ideal! A reputable safari company will also have extensive emergency procedures to quickly and efficiently respond to foreseeable incidents, including arrangements for medical evacuations.

And from a learning perspective, a game guide should also have knowledge of the habitat, diet, and migration patterns of the park's birds, mammals, and reptiles. Guides will know where

the best places to see game are depending on the time of year you visit. They will also have good relationships with park staff and drivers/guides from other companies. More experienced guides will also see things that you can't until they point it out to you!

Homework is Essential

You may only go on one safari in your lifetime, so make it count by doing your homework. Research your options and ask a lot of questions of the provider. Seek recommendations from others who have gone on a safari in the past. And don't forget to tip your drivers.

