

Five Awesome Wildlife Safaris For The Bucket List Holiday Travel Gift



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The biggest travel trend in recent years has not been Japan or Greece or Venice, it's been experiential travel, and when it comes to having a once in a lifetime travel experience, it just does not get any better than a wildlife safari. I've spent the last 30-plus years covering travel, and I've done every kind of luxury trip imaginable, enjoying awesome experiences in awesome places, but if I could only take one more trip of any kind it would be a safari. It's the very definition of "Bucket List," so if you want to give someone on your nice list the best gift in travel—and a lifetime of great memories—give them a safari.

What To Consider When Choosing A Safari

The animals are why you go on safari, but they vary greatly by region, as does the landscape, so it matters what you want to see. If you like desert landscape, there's the Kalahari and Namibia, but if you love water, there's Botswana. The possible settings are very different.

So is the wildlife. The classic "Big Five" is a tired cliché from hunting, not viewing, and does not reflect what most people want to see on a wildlife safari. Also, you can't see tigers in Africa, and you can't see lions in India, but you can see leopards in both. Cheetahs are much better viewed in the open, on plains or desert, than in the thick bush. Gorillas inhabit their own ecosystem apart from just about any other prized species, and due to poaching, there are lots of places you simply cannot see rhinos anymore. So, whether your obsession is elephants, zebras, or rare African wild dogs, in each case there are better and worse places to go.

The wildlife and nature are the main attractions, but in just about every top safari destination, the luxury lodging is off the hook, with

food and service to match. The best safari camps and lodges are all small, some as little as three rooms — except they don't have rooms, they have villas or luxury tents the size of houses, with private pools, outdoor showers, decks and every imaginable nicety. But where the best camps and lodges excel is by having the best trained guides and trackers, and less guests per vehicle, and nothing will affect the quality of your experience more.

Planning A Safari

By their nature, safaris are among the most logistically difficult trips to plan, since you almost never want to go to just one camp for your whole trip. This means that in addition to knowing which are the best camps in the best regions, and that is really, really important insider expert knowledge you cannot get from internet searches, you then have to assemble a jigsaw puzzle of very limited availability, at the right times of year for each region, and get to each on unscheduled charter flights to private airfields. If you think this is something you can book online, you are either badly mistaken or about to have subpar experience.

More than just about any other kind of travel, planning a safari requires an expert, and in my very informed opinion, there is no one in the world better than Micato Safaris, based in New York, Nairobi, Cape Town and India. Micato is not just the best safari company I've encountered, they are the best company of any kind in all of travel that I have used in the past three decades of covering the luxury travel space. And it's not just me—all the best luxury travel advisors I know use and swear by the company, which has won pretty much every important award you can win in travel, including a special honor as the only company in any field to ever win the coveted #1 *Travel+Leisure* World's Best Award 10 times.



Micato can book any of the following for you at the highest level, but they are a luxury company, and they are expensive, though in this case you get what you pay for, and in the world of safaris, which are all about special access to the best lodges, guides and experts, every customer is a VIP. **I have told many friends planning dream trips this: “If you can afford to go with Micato, you cannot afford not to.”** But on that note, they do scheduled small group trips in addition to their custom privates, which are more affordable and still exceptional. Plus they are one of the few companies in luxury travel that has “guaranteed departures,” meaning if you book a group trip for a couple on your Holiday Gift list and no one else signs up, it still goes and your recipients get a private trip at a steep discount, whereas many travel companies simply cancel and leave them out in the cold.

South Africa

My personal favorite all-around destination pick for safari, South Africa combines some of the very best lodges and wildlife viewing across just about every animal category with the very best non-safari offerings. Many of the best private luxury reserves and camps in the world are clustered around Kruger National Park, but there are also some less visited great choices, including the awesome

Kalahari desert in the north and the Eastern Cape. South Africa is also by far the best choice on the continent for those who find gastronomy an important part of travel, and you sacrifice nothing. It’s also relatively easy to get to by African standards, with non-stops from the U.S. to both Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Gorillas and Chimpanzee

Gorilla safaris are very special experiences, and more people have told me that this was a life changing experience for them than any other kind of safari. On most safaris you view wildlife from a vehicle, a 4x4 or boat, but for gorillas you are on foot, so close they sometimes reach out and touch you, and it is a powerful, unfiltered moment. Mountain gorillas are the largest primates on earth, just majestic, and in the regions you go for gorillas, you can also see chimpanzees, baboons and half a dozen different monkey species.

Single-day permits for gorilla viewing are very limited in both Rwanda and Uganda, the two places you can do this, and most visitors do one day of gorilla trekking and another day or two seeing the other primates. This shorter duration means gorillas are not usually the sole trip, but rather an addition, typically to a more standard safari in East Africa, Kenya or Tanzania.

Tigers

The largest of the big cats—by far—tigers are the single most impressive creature you can see on safari in my opinion, combining the perfect beauty of the leopard with the top-of-the-food-chain dominance and regal bearing of the lion. If the lion is the King of the Jungle, the Bengal tiger is the Emperor. You cannot see tigers in Africa, and the best place on earth is India, which has two National Parks especially famous for tiger viewing, each of which has a stunningly luxurious Oberoi safari camp-style resort for doing it in high style. On tiger safari in India you can also see leopards, elephants, various antelopes, crocodiles, and many other safari creatures, and India also has an excellent leopard reserve, to me the second best big cat to see.

The Great Migration

Kenya and Tanzania are the time honored classic safari destinations, and while I personally prefer South Africa overall, the one thing this region has that no one else can touch is the annual Great Migration, the largest land animal migration on earth. Over two million wildebeest, zebras and gazelles move across the Masai Mara and Serengeti in these two countries, which in turn attracts every lion, cheetah and predator under the sun. This is to wildlife what the Super Bowl is to football, the Bucket List of Bucket Lists, and a big highlight is the dramatic river crossings. But the event lasts many months and occurs at different times in different regions and if you want to see it, expert advice on when and where to go and which lodges to use is indispensable.



Botswana

Pound for pound I have not been to any destination in Africa that packs more wildlife into every day and every acre and every game drive than Botswana, especially around the Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is the largest inland delta on earth and a watershed that attracts so many different animals. I've been to ten different African countries on safari, and there is no place I know of where you are more likely to regularly see elusive leopards, so many lions you will probably stop snapping pictures of them, and in addition to

While many people do pure wildlife safari vacations to Africa, tiger safaris to India usually add in more regular luxury tourism, such as the Taj Mahal, lake palaces of Udaipur, and an entirely different world-class culinary adventure. India is home to many of the very best luxury hotels on earth, with a stunningly good hospitality infrastructure, and it is another place where insider connections and expertise in transportation is very important. **Micato, which has been operating here for half a century, opens VIP doors, such as special access to the otherwise off-limits royal palaces and private tours of the Taj Mahal with antiquities experts who can visit parts of the monument closed to the general public and similar experiences.**

rhino, elephants, zebra, giraffe and all the usual suspects, it's the place you are most likely to see many desirable rarities — on my recent visit I had excellent sightings of both African wild dogs and cats, which most people never see.

One great thing about Botswana is that it is easily combined with the nearby Kalahari desert in northwestern South Africa, a very different and unique experience, for a two-in-one safari with a dense concentration of desert rhinos, in the one setting where you can get out and track them on foot. In the Kalahari is one of my all-time favorite luxury lodges, Tswalu, and combining this with Botswana is a next level wildlife experience.