



DESTINATIONS

10 best places to go in Africa (and what to do there)

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With 54 countries calling it home, Africa's topography, landscape and activities vary drastically by region. I've been to the continent 26 times, yet each time I go I'm surprised at just how many new things there are to see and do.

To make it easier for you to plan a trip, I've highlighted some of the most popular countries and best places to go in Africa, as well as what to see and do there, when to go and where to stay. Hopefully this primer will get you motivated to hop on a plane — it's worth the long flight to get there.

Uganda

Why go: One of only three countries in the world where you can trek to see mountain gorillas in the wild (there are only 900 mountain gorillas left in the world), the experience in Uganda is truly amazing.

Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda is home to the Nyakagezi gorilla family with its five silverbacks (adult males). It holds a certain allure, since it boasts one of the highest concentrations of silverbacks within a family. Tours are small, no more than eight people, and once the gorillas are spotted, you have 60 minutes with them — and believe me, it goes really fast.

I was surprised to see how playful the juveniles are, not unlike my own little kids. One even came up and gave me a light fist bump to the leg (the animals can do what they want, but we were instructed to stay 7 meters away from them; they came much, much closer).

For me, witnessing the adult silverback males in action was the most moving experience. Pounding their chests, making conversation with guttural sounds, climbing effortlessly up the bamboo trees to build a nest — they seem so human-like, which isn't surprising given that these mammals share 98% of our DNA. Seeing the gorillas in their natural habitat was one of my favorite experiences in Africa.

When to go: Since it's a rainforest, there's a chance you'll get wet anytime, so there's no really bad time to go. Just be sure to pack appropriately.

Where to stay: Mount Gahinga Lodge is just a short distance away from the gorilla trek, and its backdrop against the Virunga Volcanoes is stunning. Be sure to take part in the cultural tour of the Batwa pygmies, the oldest inhabitants of the Central African rain forest.

Kenya and Tanzania

Why go: Kenya and Tanzania are often combined into one trip. Many people consider these two countries among the best places to go in Africa because they're where you can see the Great Migration — where 2 million wildebeests, zebras and gazelles make a migratory circle from the Masai Mara in Kenya to the Serengeti in Tanzania and back again.

But even if you don't go during the migration, Kenya and Tanzania have some of the most extensive populations of wildlife in all of Africa; it's not uncommon to see 50 elephants in a herd, or to see the Big Five (lion, rhino, Cape buffalo, elephant and leopard) on your first game drive.

And, of course, Tanzania is home to Mount Kilimanjaro — one of the great bucket-list hiking destinations in the entire world.

When to go: "Avoid the long-rains of April and May. If you're going to catch the migration, it's July through September," says Daniel Saperstein, co-owner of Hippo Creek Safaris and an Africa travel specialist.

Where to stay: Singita Serengeti House is located on 350,000 acres in the Grumeti Reserves in the heart of the Serengeti in northern Tanzania, and you'll see plenty of wildlife — including cheetahs, wildebeests, giraffes, lions, elephants, buffaloes and leopards.

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Zambia and Zimbabwe

Why go: Head to these two countries to see Victoria Falls, the largest waterfalls in the world. Plus, you can go whitewater rafting down the Zambezi river, chock-full of crocs and hippos (it's an amazing experience and one I highly recommend).

“Additionally, Zambia focuses on fantastic walking safaris in wonderful national parks like South Luangwa and the Lower Zambezi. In the latter, you can also do canoeing and fishing in addition to the game drives and walks,” says Hippo Creek Safari's Daniel Saperstein.

“The game is very good and the experience in Zambia feels like Kenya did 30 years ago — still very raw and real.”

Combing these two countries gives you a look at Victoria Falls from both sides and you'll see different game.

When to go: “Peak season will be their winter time, when it is dry and mild — anywhere from June through September is ideal,” says Saperstein. “It can be very hot from October through January.”

Where to stay: Luangwa River Camp has a great location nestled on the banks of the Luangwa River and is home to plenty of hippos, giraffes and more than 450 bird species.

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Namibia

Why go: In Namibia, you can climb some of the highest sand dunes in the world (or better yet, take a hot-air balloon ride over them). The scenery is dramatic and vaults Namibia into the discussion for one of the best places to go in Africa.

“However, don’t go to Namibia expecting to see game. You may see some up north in Etosha, but it’s more about the dynamic landscapes, which are breathtaking,” explains Saperstein.

If you can afford the stopover, it’s worth doing a Living Desert tour, a Ghost Town tour and an overflight of the Skeleton Coast.”

When to go: Namibia is a year-round destination, but remember that since it’s a desert environment, you can get a big shift any day of the year, from very hot to very cold. Pack both warm- and cool-weather clothes.

Where to stay: Little Kulala, located in the heart of the desert, has access to the giant dunes of Sossusvlei.

Botswana

Why go: This country’s focus is on high-end, low-impact tourism, so the properties are all very luxurious and the crowds you see in East Africa are noticeably absent here. It’s where to go in Africa for up-close wildlife experiences, sans crowds.

Plus, the landscape is simply stunning with the Okavango Delta, so instead of traditional game drives by vehicle you’ll be able to go out in mokoros (traditional dug-out canoes), which brings you eye-level with the game. Nothing says safari like being 5 feet away from a bathing elephant.

When to go: The game viewing gets progressively better in the winter, from June through September, after the Okavango Delta floodwaters have started to recede. September is considered peak season.

Where to stay: The newly open Sable Alley, located in the heart the 440,000-acre Khwai Private Reserve, is an ideal spot — you’ll see plenty of game including lions, leopards, elephants, buffaloes and the elusive wild dogs.

South Africa

Why go: From shark-cage diving and malaria-free safari zones to experiencing the flavors of Durbin, an enclave of Indian culture in Africa that rests right on the Indian Ocean, South Africa combines a European and African flair.

Private game reserves abound in South Africa, which makes it easier to see the Big Five animals up close and in limited time than in other destinations. You can also go on wine tours or get in some hiking up Table Mountain — on its own, one of the best places to go in Africa for a day trip.

When to go: Almost any time of the year is great for game viewing, but December through February sees the bulk of the rain and May through July are the coldest months.

Where to stay: Thanda Safari is a great option for a malaria-free multigenerational luxury safari experience on a private game reserve. Thanda welcomes kids (which is a rarity for a safari) and offers a variety of conservation programs for guests, including rhino tracking on foot. The beachfront Oyster Box in Durban is a great post-safari relaxation spot known for its amazing curry buffet and top-notch spa.

Egypt

Why go: Visiting the pyramids and taking a cruise up (yes up) the Nile River is a bucket-list adventure for good reason. “Egypt is the cradle of Western civilization. Few experiences can measure up to the massive scale of the pyramids and the sphinx,” says Claudia Worth, product manager of Abercrombie & Kent.

“Discover the Aswan islands by felucca (traditional sailboat) or privately tour the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, home to artifacts recovered from Tutankhamun’s tomb.” This part of Northern Africa appeals to history buffs and those interested in a cultural journey.

When to go: “Egypt is a year-round destination, but the most comfortable temperatures are between October and April,” notes Worth.

Where to stay: One of my favorite places to stay is the historical Mena House, which offers unbeatable views of the pyramids.

Morocco

Why go: Visit the famous spice markets and entrench yourself in Arab culture. “With a history stretching back nearly 10,000 years, the country’s great cities — Marrakech, Tangier, Fez and Rabat — offer a look into ancient traditions,” says Worth.

Morocco offers so many different kinds of experiences — I did a camel trek in the Sahara Desert and slept under the stars, and had tea with nomadic Berbers to learn about their lifestyle. In Marrakech, known as the Red City, there’s plenty to grab your attention.

“A must is the Djemaa el Fna, the largest market in Morocco and the biggest square in Africa,” says Worth. “Make sure to have a walk around the square in the evening when musicians, dancers and storytellers come out.”

Wander around the many souks adjacent to Djemaa el Fna, where you can buy everything from spices to teapots.

When to go: Morocco is a year-round destination and one of the best places to go in Africa. Marrakesh can be hot in the summer months, however, and the desert gets very cold in January.

Where to stay: La Mamounia, a palace hotel, boasts incomparable views of the snow-capped Atlas mountains as a backdrop.

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