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Planning The Ultimate African Safari

by Tanya Steel
on 04/02/13 at 03:00 PM



This year, thousands of lucky Americans will check off a bucket list item by taking an African safari. We asked Marcia Gordon, who runs [Extraordinary Journeys](#) with her daughter Elizabeth, for her tips when planning this trip of a lifetime. With 30 years experience in the African travel industry, there's no one better than this veteran to give us the lowdown.

Epicurious: When polled, Americans often cite an African safari as their dream trip. Why is this? What does it represent to them?

Marcia Gordon: Africa is so appealing because it combines adventure and nature. The wildlife and game-viewing you get in Africa is unlike anywhere else in the world and for people who love animals or watch National Geographic channel, the chance to see them becomes a life goal. Many people are also drawn to the wild and remote vision of Africa and are in search of an experience that is totally different from their everyday lives. It is exotic, there is a mystic around it, from its unique cultures to the dramatic colonial past. All of this means that people don't know what to expect and that is a big draw.

Epi: What are some criteria first-timers should use when choosing a safari outfitter?

M.G.: The criteria might vary depending on whether or not the client is looking for a custom safari or a package tour.

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-  Tanya Wenman Steel
-  Siobhan Adcock
-  Patricia Reilly
-  Sara Bonisteel
-  Lauren Salkeld
-  Kemp Minifie
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If you want a custom safari you of course need to find someone who knows the region well, travels there frequently, and has seen many properties first-hand. Feel free to ask them how often they've been? Where did they go last? We also think any good outfitter working in Africa should have strong opinions and a personal philosophy about the impact of tourism, responsible tourism, conservation, and giving back to the community. Those opinions mean they have thought critically about their role in the industry and the role of the properties they have chosen to work with.

At the same time you also need to find someone who understands your values and tastes and asks a lot of questions about you as a person, your goals for the trip, your interests. If you want a custom safari and to get the above, finding a smaller company where you are actually talking to the owners or one of a handful of employees is a good idea. With a small company you will be able to ask those questions and speak to someone who has personal experience in the region and can put together something personally tailored to you. Feel free to ask detailed questions about the pricing for the itineraries they send you. They should be able to give you clear, concise explanations for everything.

Remember with a custom safari you are paying for exclusivity not necessarily luxury, the smaller the camp the better the experience and the higher the price.

If you want a package tour then look closely at their website, marketing materials, etc., and try to get a sense of whether or not the aesthetic matches your personality. Find out how big their groups are; in general groups of over ten people are tough, so aim for packages with groups smaller than that. Ask about the guides--are the guides local to the country or are they "escorts" from the U.S.? You get what you pay for and it is hard to have a quality experience below \$300 per person per day. Look at equivalent programs, do some comparisons; if some program is much higher with the same properties ask questions.

Epi: If you could choose the ideal ten-day safari for a first-timer, where would they go and do? What about those who are on a strict budget? *(See her answer after the jump.)*



The Tasting Room at Le Quartier Français

M.G.: You can't go wrong with three nights at Victoria Falls (from Zimbabwe or Zambian sides) and then six nights in Botswana at two different camps; the first in the Selinda/Linyanti area and then three nights in the heart of the Okavango Delta. This trip is a safe bet for anyone in terms of safety, accommodation, minimizing culture shock, good infrastructure and guaranteed great game-viewing. A trip like this can also be done for a wide range of budgets.

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If we think that the client has a sense of adventure or really wants a strong cultural component we would pick Kenya. For a first timer the trip would have to include the Maasai Mara (Kenya). We also like to include some time in another area such as Laikipia, Meru, or Samburu that has more activities like horseback riding, walking, opportunities for cultural interaction. An example might be three nights in Samburu, three nights in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and three nights in the Maasai Mara. A stop in Nairobi at the beginning or the end of the trip with a trip to visit the elephants at Daphne Sheldrick orphanage is also sure to be a highlight. We always prefer small camps in private areas outside the main national parks for a more exclusive experience but there is a price premium for those properties. At the same time a Kenya program can be done for a really wide range of budgets.

In general for a strict budget you can get amazing value if you do not travel in peak season (often low or shoulder seasons lower the cost without sacrificing game-viewing). You can also use slightly larger properties or lodges (there are many good ones) and incorporate more driving and less flying. Another way to lower the trip cost is to not to move around between countries or properties and stay more nights in each place. We find this allows people to relax and explore an area in more detail and might allow you to take advantage of longer stay specials. We just got someone three free nights on a ten-day safari using these specials.

Epi: What are good value countries?

M.G.: Kenya, Zambia.

Epi: For those who've been several times, what are some off-the-beaten path ideas?

M.G.: Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Northern Mozambique (the Quirimbas Archipelago), Southern Tanzania (Ruaha, Greystoke Mahale, Chada Katavi), and Republic of Congo (to see lowland gorillas).

Epi: Africa has a bad rap for food in general, both in scarcity and quality, neither of which are true. What are some of your favorite gastronomic centers/regions/countries on the continent?

M.G.: Cape Town obviously, and the Winelands. South Africa is without a doubt the strongest region in terms of food and wine. That said there are many properties throughout East and Southern Africa that provide delicious food from *incredibly* simple safari kitchens.

Epi: If you had to choose your favorite restaurant on the whole of the continent, where would it be?

M.G.: The Tasting Room at Le Quartier is without a doubt an incredible restaurant, one of the best in South Africa. Margot Janse was named Chef of the Year 2012 in South Africa.

At the same time what we really value are properties that provide the perfect, breath-taking setting and amazing food. Hogmead in Nairobi is a great example. Eat a delicious light lunch of curried chicken salad, grilled shrimp, homemade salad dressing, and fresh passion fruit juice on a patio with views of the Ngong Hills in the distance and warthogs and giraffes wandering the gardens in front of you. We find these properties throughout East and Southern Africa that combine delicious food and amazing settings and store them away in our memory to provide the best possible experience for our clients.

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Epi: What is a quintessential African dish that everyone should try if possible?

M.G.: There is no one African dish, but something that is really wide spread is a carbohydrate base (like rice or pasta) usually made of maize flour that is called everything from *ugali* to *pap* to *posho* to *sima* to *fufu* depending on where you are. The best way to describe it is grits that are the consistency of Play-Doh. It is often served with a meat stew or grilled meat (*ugali* and *nyama choma* in East Africa, *pap* and *wurst* in South Africa). It is not necessarily a delicious delicacy but going out to a local restaurant and trying it can definitely be a fun experience.

Something that travelers to East Africa will almost certainly have at some point is chai and samosas. This really shows the Indian influence on East African food but both are really widespread (from luxury properties to airport cafeterias) and pretty consistently delicious absolutely.

Everywhere in East and Southern Africa one of the best experiences will be the quality of the produce. The freshness of the fruit and vegetables are incredible and the chefs at many properties can do absolutely amazing things with it from homemade sorbets to fresh breads all prepared in basically a camping kitchen. It is really very impressive and if you ask for a tour of the kitchen the staff will really get a kick out of showing you around.

Epi: South Africa is producing critically-acclaimed red wines. Are there any countries north of S.A. that are producing some interesting varietals?

M.G.: Unfortunately the answer is no, not really. East Africa does have excellent coffee and tea, some of the best in the world.

Epi: What are some unusual Extraordinary Journeys that are proving to be surprisingly popular?

M.G.: We have many many clients who want to see gorillas. This is everything from Mountain Gorillas in Rwanda (the most common request) to surprising levels of interests in a brand new trip to the Republic of Congo to see Lowland Gorillas, which is very off the beaten path. We also get a lot of clients who come to us in search of really authentic cultural experiences from the Bushmen in Botswana, to walking with the Maasai in Kenya.

Epi: What is it like to work together as a mother-daughter team?

M.G.: It's great because we share the same vision for the company and we have the same values and aesthetic when it comes to travel. In addition, as a mother and daughter team, we each tend to specialize in different demographics of travelers and can relate to them in different ways. Elizabeth works with many young active travelers and honeymooners in their early/mid-30s while I love planning trips for empty-nesters and families traveling with kids of all ages. Best of all we always know the other one has her back.

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