

Kenya on the Rise

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A Micato Safaris traveler is welcomed by a group of young Maasai.

Just a few years ago, Kenya's tourism scene was struggling in the wake of a nationwide crisis that saw visitor numbers drop by more than 50 percent. But since then, the country has stepped up its marketing efforts—and visitors are responding.

Over the summer, Jennifer Opondo, head of marketing for the [Kenya Tourist Board](#), visited Travel Agent's New York offices along with several other members of the board. "Travel to Kenya remains strong and is the No. 2 source market, second only to the United Kingdom," she said.

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"From 2009 onward, total arrivals and U.S. arrivals to Kenya have demonstrated steady growth. By the close of 2011, more than 87 percent of source markets recovered fully and had surpassed 2010 levels." Opondo also noted that tourism destinations across the country remain "unaffected, peaceful and safe. The Kenyan Government has increased its security surveillance and has assigned police officers to a 24-hour patrol across all accommodation facilities situated near the affected areas. It has also deployed police officers and 24-hour aerial surveillance along the Somali-Kenya border to ensure proper maintenance of security measures."



The leopard is one of the "Big Five" species found in the Maasai Mara.

Dennis Pinto, managing director of [Micato Safaris](#), told [Travel Agent](#) that today's traveler to Africa is "more savvy" about interpreting U.S. State Department alerts. "Travel agents and tour operators have done an excellent job of helping the consumer differentiate between levels of risk," he said, noting that risk is "extremely low" in the game parks, which is where travelers spend virtually all their time.

What Visitors Need to Know

It would be disingenuous to ignore the recent safety concerns about travel to Kenya: The U.S. Department of State has issued a formal travel warning to U.S. citizens on the risks of travel to the country. However, the warning did note that the danger levels vary throughout the country. The U.S. Embassy in Nairobi is monitoring the security situation, but as of presstime, no updates had been announced since the summer.

U.S. and Canadian citizens require a valid passport and visa to enter the Republic of Kenya. Application forms can be found on the Kenyan Embassy's website at www.kenyaembassy.com along with instructions and requirements for applying. Allow at least two weeks for processing and delivery. Visas can also be purchased on arrival at Kenya's international airports.

What's New

Of course, not all development has been about safety and security. In the past year, several new hotels have opened, like the [Impala Eco Lodge](#), run by the Kenya Wildlife Service on the shores of Lake Victoria. Situated outside the Kisumu Impala Sanctuary run by the Kenya Wildlife Service, the new eco-friendly lodge has 12 guest rooms—six executive rooms, four standard rooms and two family suites—each with views of Lake Victoria. (Executive rooms are the premier suites, with a private lounge, a dressing room and greater balcony access.) Activities include boating tours on Lake Victoria, picnicking on Ndere Island, hippo viewing, fishing and cycling. The Impala Eco Lodge is just five miles from the Kisumu International Airport.

[Hemingways Nairobi](#), a boutique plantation-style property outside the capital city, is slated to open in November. Private butler service will be available, and the rooms all will have personalized bars. [Segera](#), an eco-friendly property, will open in the Laikipia region around the same time.

Pinto noted that Richard Branson's Mahali Mzuri camp in the Maasai Mara is scheduled to open in 2013, as will Jochen Zeitz's (of Puma fame) Segera Camp. "Additionally, major hotel groups like [Four Seasons](#) have entered the region; in the case of Four Seasons, the first property is in the Serengeti, with additional units being considered for both Kenya and Tanzania."

An advertisement for Fairmont Mayakoba. The top part shows a woman in a light-colored jacket looking at her phone. Below that, a couple is relaxing in a swimming pool. The text reads: "FAIRMONT SAVERS Up to 25% off room rates*". At the bottom, it says "Fairmont MAYAKOBA KIVUA HATA, MEXICO" and includes a "LEARN MORE" button.

Where to Go

Kenya is famous for its wildlife and carefully preserved natural landscape. And rightly so: The country has over 50 parks and reserves that are good for hiking, game viewing and other outdoor activities. Several areas are ideal for solo travelers, families and couples.

Agent Advice

Elizabeth Gordon, who runs tour operator/agency [Extraordinary Journeys](#) with her mother, Marcia, knows a lot about Kenya. She was born there and has lived there for months at a stretch, returning frequently to find new places to visit. Gordon recommends up-and-coming private reserves like [Lewa House](#) in Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. "They've added new cottages and completely redone it. It's great for families."

[Tassia](#) is a good combination with Lewa, she continues, thanks to its strong cultural component." Visitors can spend time with locals and learn about the history and heritage of the indigenous peoples. Also, Extraordinary Journeys is working with Loita Hills in the backcountry to organize a three-day walking tour into the heart of Maasai country. "What's big now is cultural interaction. At Lemarti's Camp [[www.lemartiscamp.com](#)], you can just hang out with the Samburu and Maasai people. It's not as much about wildlife as it is about culture."

Micato's Dennis Pinto also likes Lemarti's, which he notes is owned by Lemarti, a Samburu elder, and his fashion designer wife, Anna Trzebinski. "The combination is electric, as his connection to the land and its people mingles with her elegant style and artistic skill. Luxury has been redefined in this lush hideaway.

"I also love [Rusinga Island Lodge](#) on the shores of Lake Victoria. Guests can fish for 200-pound Nile perch if they wish. [Campi Ya Kanzi](#) in the Chyulu Hills is another favorite. Located in the shadow of Mt. Kilimanjaro, it is a unique living exercise in conservation-consciousness, yet it is completely luxurious."

The Maasai Mara is great for families, with many family-friendly properties and plenty of game viewing. The Mara is also a must for anyone wanting to see the "Big Five" (rhinoceros, lion, leopard, elephant and buffalo), especially from July through October when the Great Migration takes place. Samburu National Park is also a good "off-the-beaten-track" location, and Opondo recommended visiting the Kenyan coast to experience authentic Swahili culture. Mount Kenya is good for adventure enthusiasts looking to hike or mountain-climb, and couples and honeymooners can relax for a couple of days after their safaris at Lamu or Diani Beach.

For golfers, Kenya has more than 30 golf courses in the most scenic locations around the country.

Getting There

In May, [Virgin Atlantic](#) announced it would be canceling its flights between Nairobi and London, reportedly as a result of increasing fuel costs and rising Air Passenger Duty (APD). The last flight on the route was in late September.

But there's good news, too: [South African Airways](#) has increased its flight frequency to Nairobi from Johannesburg, South Africa, adding three more flights into Kenya's capital and increasing the number of flights to Nairobi from seven to 10 per week.

And Kenya's national carrier, [Kenya Airways](#), recently announced its plans to open new projected routes around the country, both regionally and internationally. In addition to flying daily to Kisumu and Mombasa, the airline plans to establish flights to the North Rift town of Eldoret and the coastal village of Lamu. The airline also launched new direct routes to New Delhi.

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