BUSINESS INSIDER TRAVEL

There's never been a better time to visit the Masai Mara and Serengeti - but it won't last long

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Review

Lions on the plains of the Serengeti. Photo: Andrew Thompson

- **A trip to the Serengeti, Masai Mara, or both is worthy of its bucket-list status.**
- **There may also never be a better time to visit in terms of price and visitor numbers.**

- **Currently, it's possible to secure last-minute discounted bookings at some of the region's most sought-after camps, which offer total luxury and escapism.**
- **Wildlife sightings are also unsurpassed, particularly if you time it to coincide with the Great Migration.**
- **And entry for South Africans is easy - there are direct flights, no visas required, and just a single negative PCR test gains you access.**
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As far as arrivals at holiday destinations go, there can be few more perfect than the small aeroplane flight into the Masai Mara or Serengeti. Although the quick flights are a costly but practical necessity - road transfers, if available, can take the better part of an uncomfortable day - they could be classed as an additional bucket list activity on their own.

It takes just under an hour for the first rapid descent. Suddenly you're flying low above flat-topped acacias, snaking rivers, and herds of elephant, wildebeest, and giraffe - which is usually the moment you realise the pilot is aiming to land on an impossibly short strip of dirt in the distance.

Three exhilarating takeoffs and landings later, the pilot looked over his shoulder and signalled it was my time to leave the plane. Even before the deafening din of the propeller had dissipated, Rekero Camp guide Kisemei Dickson Lenkoko, or Lenkoko for short, greeted me by name and somehow relieved me of my bag.

Moments later, we were bumbling along on the rutted roads of the Masai Mara, passing herds of Thomson's gazelle, sloshing across swollen rivers, and we even stumbled into a pride of sauntering lion.

Lion cubs in the Masai Mara. Photo: Andrew Thompson

The guiding model employed by most camps in East Africa means that a single guide is typically responsible for everything that happens outside of the camp - including airstrip transfers, bush breakfasts, cooler box supplies, and finding - and then answering inane questions about - wildlife.

As is customary, Lenkoko used the slow drive to the camp as a gentle intelligence-gathering mission, subtly asking about my safari history and sightings preferences.

Tempting as it is to offer a democratic platitude about liking all animals, Lenkoko later told me how important this information is for guides who will actively work to find you the wildlife you desire to see. This is especially true at Rekero, where at times, it feels as if there's a smorgasbord of potential sightings awaiting the arrival of your Landcruiser.

With diverse sighting options and endless comforts, days in the

Masai Mara quickly fall into a comfortable rhythm. Morning drives start with a wake-up call, fresh coffee, and cookies. Usually, these drives culminate in breakfast served in the bush, sometimes while enjoying a sighting, other times at a scenic location.

View from the main deck at Rekero. Photo: Supplied

Midday is for lunch, napping, reading, or meandering about the camp, and in one like Rekero, this doesn't mean you'll be short of action. During my three-night stay, I witnessed a crocodile attack and then lose a zebra while I was attempting to snack on a lunch of my own. A day later, two lions tiptoed across the river in the distance. Despite her enthusiasm for each sighting, manager Becca Gibson confirmed that events like these are not, in fact, a rare occurrence at Rekero.

At 4pm each day is high tea, followed by an evening drive that culminates in a cold beverage or two of your choice as the sun slips below the horizon.

A cheetah stands over its prey in the Masai Mara. Photo: Andrew Thompson

Although obviously untrue, at times in the Masai Mara it felt like animal sightings were almost pre-arranged or available to order.

A lioness with cubs, who'd found a home 700 metres from Rekero, made for the perfect start or end to any game drive. Lenkoko also regularly found the resident pride of lions named after the camp. Two separate hours-long cheetah sightings were worthy of the camera crews that followed them. As was a sighting of leopardess Bahati, who's already had a fair share of television airtime thanks to Animal Planet.

At each sighting, however, the vehicle numbers were limited, and in many Lenkoko and I had the sightings to ourselves - which he frequently remarked was due exclusively to low tourist numbers due to Covid-19.

An experience like this would be enough to check East Africa off most bucket lists. But with the Mara River so close and September an ideal time to witness the iconic river crossings of the Great Migration, it would have been a shame to head home.

Sunrise in the Masai Mara. Photo: Andrew Thompson

And so it was that I found myself taking another PCR test - this one done in the comfort of my tent - and then en-route to The Emakoko, a peaceful and convenient stopover point set atop the trees in Nairobi National Park. After a night in the fascinating reserve that literally borders the bustling capital city, I took another small-plane flight into the northern Serengeti in the hopes of witnessing one leg of the Great Migration.

Into the Serengeti

Sayari Camp, in northern Serengeti, delivers on the same high expectations set by others in the Asilia group. It offers the epitome of comfort in 15 tented suites, daily bush breakfasts (and even fresh lunches delivered to your vehicle if you're waiting for a crossing), and exquisite three-course meals, endless high-end wines and cocktails, and a spa and plunge pool, back at the camp.

Uniquely, Sayari even boasts an in-house solar-powered micro-brewery that supplies unlimited craft beer on tap to the bar - and bottled for every game drive.

Sayari guest tent bedroom interior. Photo: Supplied

Mornings and evenings in the Serengeti took a similar shape to those in the Masai Mara, with memorable sightings of lions and leopards. Still, the anticipation of the impending migratory crossings hung thick in the air at Sayari. After short morning drives vehicles would park out at various points along the river, hoping that the thousands of wildebeest would choose that day, and location, to cross.

Within 30 minutes of Sayari Camp guide Manja Olekema picking me up from the airstrip, and establishing that I was indeed interested in witnessing a crossing, I was fumbling for my camera as a few dozen wildebeest thrashed across the Mara.

"It's actually a small crossing," Manja said. "A good start, but I'm sure we will see better."

He wasn't wrong. Although some visit the area for a week and don't witness a single crossing, Manja led me straight to another of a few hundred wildebeest later that afternoon. And on my last evening, he trusted his intuition and drove back to one of the Mara's most treacherous crossing sites, where several thousand wildebeest teetered on the edge of a steep embankment that led down to a boulder- and crocodile-strewn stretch of the river.

The chaos of a migratory crossing of the Mara River. Photo: Andrew Thompson

"There's never been a better time to come to the Serengeti," Manja remarked, as we waited hopefully for the crossing to commence. "On a normal day, in a normal year, there would be a car waiting under every tree for this crossing. Right now, there are just four."

Manja had strategically parked beneath a tree several hundred metres from the riverbank, as crossing protocol dictates. As soon as the first wildebeest touches that water, though, it's a race to the bank for the best position. Later I learnt that one of those four vehicles had been in place for 11 hours - but we waited just 20 minutes before Manja sat bolt upright, lifted his right hand instinctively to the key in the ignition, and his left hand to the gear lever. Before another vehicle had moved, Manja started his engine, jammed the 4x4 into first gear, and was halfway to the crossing site when he shouted over his shoulder: "The wildebeest are crossing. They're going now!"

He threw the Landcruiser around anthills and rocks and over rutted tracks until we reached the riverbank in a cloud of dust - and in the perfect location to watch the massive herd attempt to get to the other side. The crossing continued for more than 30 minutes, at which time the enormous crocodiles began the merciless task of picking off the weakest that remained, one by one.

A hot air ballon ride with Serengeti Ballon Safaris offers a new perspective on the region. Photo: Andrew Thompson

By the time the last wildebeest had succumbed to the rapids or the crocodiles, the excitement and adrenaline waned. In its place was a more sombre mood. Even Manja, who's witnessed hundreds of crossings in his lifetime, struggled to watch as a crocodile placed another helpless young wildebeest in its crosshairs and effortlessly dragged it beneath the rapids. We consoled ourselves with platitudes like 'that's the circle of life' and drove back towards the camp in relative silence, passing through the vast herd of wildebeest spread now out across the fertile plains of the southern side of the Mara River, quietly eating the grass they'd just risked their lives to reach.

As we stood atop a boulder having last-night sundowners, another couple also departing early the next morning threw around cliches like "bucket list" and "once in a lifetime", and I agreed with them that it's worthy of all the praise. That there were just three of us guests there to enjoy the spectacular sunset reminded me once again the phrase I'd been told several times in the past week - that until foreign tourists return to the Serengeti and Masai Mara en-masse, there's no better time for South Africans to visit.

Leopard sightings around Sayari are unsurpassed. Photo: Andrew Thompson

Visiting East Africa

Entry into Kenya and Tanzania requires a negative Covid-19 PCR test no older than 72 hours. Some border posts will also request proof of a valid Yellow Fever vaccination.

Both Kenya and Tanzania issue visas to South Africans on arrival at no extra cost.

There are regular direct flights between Johannesburg and

Nairobi on Kenya Airways, and Johannesburg and Dar es Salaam on Airlink. Safari companies like Asilia, that has several high-end lodges in its collection, can facilitate all internal flights, transfers, and connections between Masai Mara and Serengeti.

It's usually also cheaper to book directly with the lodges, rather than go via travel agents. South Africans currently receive discounted rates at Asilia lodges that are up to 33% less than those charged to overseas visitors. While foreign visitors are starting to return to claim missed bookings during the pandemic, it's still possible to secure last-minute bookings at several lodges that are likely to fill up again in 2022.

Andrew Thompson was a guest of Asilia in Kenya and Tanzania.

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