

South Africa

WHY The top choice for newbies, South Africa is accessible, affordable and a great introduction to the thrills of Africa's wildlife. Well-stocked private game reserves offer Big Five sightings (lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and Cape buffalo) with the advantage of rangers knowing resident creatures' habits, thus increasing the likelihood of a sighting. A private safari will cost significantly more, but guarantees you won't be vying with other vehicles to enjoy animal sightings. Plus, you can decide how long you wish to linger or what you'd like to prioritise. With a local tracker seated up front, checking for paw prints and droppings, you'll be astonished at what's hiding in plain sight.

SAFARI STANDOUT Take the family to Kwandwe Private Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape and snag Uplands Homestead, a private lodge that was once a settler's farmhouse. With a dedicated butler, chef, tracker, ranger, vehicle and swimming pool, you can tailor the trip to suit younger kids, while guaranteed a visual feast of wildlife sightings across 54,000 acres of private wilderness. The ultimate family holiday.

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS The Big Five, including black and white rhino, cheetah, kudu, springbok, eland, red hartebeest, giraffe, black wildebeest, gemsbok, aardwolf, aardvark and a wide variety of birds.

BEST FOR First-timers and families with children.

GETTING THERE Kwandwe offers a variety of luxury accommodation; Uplands Homestead, €2,870 per night for exclusive use of the villa for six guests; rooms at Great Fish River Lodge and Ecce Lodge, €570 per person per night sharing; family suites, sleeping two adults and two children, from €1,850 per night; rates are all-inclusive and include daily safari activities, kwandwe.com.



Out of AFRICA

For many, a safari tops their holiday wish list. From big cat sightings to sundowners in the bush, luxury tented camps, stampeding herds and sunrise over the plains, an African safari is a life-changing experience. **JILLIAN BOLGER** unearths a few cracking options...



Rwanda

WHY Synonymous with gorillas, Rwanda is one of Africa's most biodiverse regions, dense with mountainous rainforest and the majestic Volcanoes National Park. Home to 604 mountain gorillas, amongst a host of other rainforest species, the park comprises five dramatic volcanoes along the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It's here wildlife lovers come to experience the thrill of the indigenous mountain gorilla in its natural habitat, hidden amongst the bamboo forests. Place yourself in the heart of the action at Virunga Lodge, one of Rwanda's most famous gorilla tracking lodges, perched high on a ridge with unforgettable views of the volcanoes, valley and lakes below.



SAFARI STANDOUT Rise early and witness sunrise across the incredible topography of mountains and lakes.
MEET THE NEIGHBOURS Alongside mountain gorillas, you can expect to meet the endangered golden monkey.
BEST FOR Bragging rights. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that everyone will want to hear about.
TAKE ME THERE Africa Odyssey offers three nights at Virunga Lodge on an all-inclusive basis including all transfers, guiding and activities, with one Gorilla Trek and one Golden Monkey Trek from €4,450 per person including return flights from Dublin with Ethiopian Airways, africaodyssey.com.

Zimbabwe

WHY With Mugabe gone, Zimbabwe is set to become Africa's hottest safari destination. Combine the riverside pleasures of Mana Pools National Park, a World Heritage Site in Northern Zim that's skirted by the mighty Zambezi (almost guaranteeing sightings of hippo, crocodile and elephants) with a stay at Hwange National Park, one of the largest in Africa, and you're guaranteed a mesmerising sense of the country's wild beauty. Hwange is home to some of southern Africa's last great herds of elephant and buffalo, with Linkwasha Camp the ultimate in chic, with heart-stopping views of a busy waterhole.

SAFARI STANDOUT Spend a night beneath the stars at Ruckomechi's treehouse at Mana Pools. High above a waterhole, you'll fall asleep to the hypnotic sounds of the bush. With a double bed, flush toilet and armchairs – and an armed guide close by – you can settle in comfortably searching for wildlife with special red lamps.

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS Buffalo, elephant, lion, leopard, wild dog, kudu, zebra, impala, waterbuck and an abundance of crocodile and hippo in the Zambezi.

At Hwange, you'll also find sable, giraffe, wildebeest, impala and cheetah, with over 650 bird species in the country.

BEST FOR A second-time safari, with a chance to spend time on the Zambezi and plan a visit to Victoria Falls.

GETTING THERE Mahlatini Luxury Travel offers a six-night luxury holiday at Wilderness Safaris Linkwasha Camp in Hwange National Park and Ruckomechi Camp in Mana Pools National Park (three nights at each) on an all-inclusive basis from €6,700 per person sharing; includes international flights from Dublin, light aircraft transfers and scheduled safari activities, mahlatini.com.



Kenya

WHY From the golden plains of the Maasai Mara to the cool highlands of the Great Rift Valley, snow-capped mountains to the waters of Lake Victoria and palm-fringed beaches of the Indian Ocean, Kenya's diverse habitats offer up endless wildlife encounters. The wide open savannah grasslands will take your breath away, stretching to eternity and teeming with game and predators.

SAFARI STANDOUT Little beats the views of Africa from the windows of a light aircraft... Except for those enjoyed from the basket of a hot air balloon. Book an early morning balloon ride over the Maasai Mara Reserve and take off just before dawn, rising above the forests and plains as the morning sun illuminates the skies. An unforgettable view during the wildebeest migration.

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS

The Big Five, cheetah, hippo, wild dog and striped hyena, reticulated giraffe and the rare beisa oryx and Grevy's zebra.

BEST FOR Witnessing the greatest show on earth: the annual wildebeest migration – the largest single movement

of herd animals on the planet.

GETTING THERE Tropical Sky offers a six-night Luxury Kenya Discovery at Tortilis Camp in Amboseli National Park, Larsen's Camp in Samburu National Park and Mara Explorer in Maasai Mara National Park (two nights at each) on an all-inclusive basis from €5,499 per person sharing including international flights from Dublin, light aircraft transfers and scheduled safari activities, tropicalsky.ie.



Botswana

WHY With a lower profile than other big name safari destinations, Botswana is, possibly, the most beautiful of them all. A real life Garden of Eden, the Okavango Delta is its beating heart, a breathtaking inland river delta comprising 15,000 square kilometres of water channels, lagoons and islands. Forty shades of green, it's one of the lushest and most varied habitats in Africa. Ranked as one of the world's top wildlife destinations, the pristine wetlands are a dazzle of emerald grasses, lily-covered lagoons, crystal clear rivers and lush palm groves. To the north-east of the Okavango Delta are the Chobe and Linyanti Game Reserves, renowned for their predators and high concentrations of elephant. Stay at a fence-free Wilderness Safaris camp, and you'll enjoy frequent visits from the resident wildlife.

SAFARI STANDOUT Head out on the water from your camp, travelling by traditional dugout canoe, through lily-covered channels and lagoons. Gliding along the shallow waters, there's nothing but birdsong and the purest air to soothe your soul.

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS Year-round excellent game viewing should reward you with sightings of elephants, buffalo, wild dogs, red lechwe, hippo, elephant, sitatunga antelope, leopard, spotted

hyaena, and an incredible roll call of over 590 bird species.

BEST FOR Travellers who aren't easily impressed.

GETTING THERE Mahlatini Luxury Travel offers a six-night luxury holiday at Wilderness Safaris Jao Camp in Okavango Delta and Kings Pool Camp in Linyanti Reserve (three nights at each) on an all-inclusive basis from €7,850 per person sharing; includes international flights from Dublin, light aircraft transfers and scheduled safari activities, mahlatini.com.