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EAST AFRICA – SHOULD YOU GO?

Although some of the travel writers who have dispatched from East Africa have been rather rough on the place, I believe that Kenya and Tanzania remain two of the world's great travel destinations.

The single characteristic of the first-time safari returnee, is the acquired self confidence that comes from being able to sit down in Applebee's with friends and begin a sentence with the line "When I was on safari in the Serengeti".

I've noticed that nearly everyone who I send off to Africa intends, on departure, to go only once. The vast majority begin making plans to return before they've touched back down at O'hare.

That is not, of course, to say that travel to East Africa is without risk. Earlier this year, Conde Nast Traveler asked a number of its contributors, around the globe, to file reports outlining tourist safety in their native lands.

As their reporter based in Nairobi was filing the report from a downtown phone booth, he was mugged - in broad daylight.

The game park wardens have been dealing with poachers, particularly those seeking elephant tusks, for years and gunfire has been a part of those dealings.

Unusually careful precautions must be taken by anyone contemplating travel to East Africa, including a meeting with a local witch doctor in one of the tropical medicine clinics attached to Good Samaritan, Edwards, or Hinsdale Hospital.

But after all is said and done, East Africa is absolutely wonderful, offering memorable game reserves, surprisingly lovely beaches, rich tribal culture, gambling, and a varied assortment of shopping options, half of which seem to represent rather pronounced body parts sculpted in wood.

And then there is golf. British-style, full of pomp and circumstance and not a little tweed.

One can just imagine the local caddie giving instructions to visitors from White Eagle and Naperville CC as they are about to tee off at Arusha International: "Careful chaps, off the fourteenth green you hit an eight iron over a pygmy village - and if your ball lands short, well they have these darts".

It's hard to figure out just when you should go to East Africa. The Kenyan Tourist Board claims that they have a twelve month season. But I believe tourist board statements like I believe that my local city council is anti-growth.

There is a rainy season in April and May. Some flooding can occur and I would recommend staying away. These two months can ruin a good pair of Florsheim's. October through January is a sort of lesser rainy season, meaning that your hotel lobby is not actually washed downstream. If you're seeking the coolest temperatures, travel in July and August. This is a time worth considering.

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If you travel to Kenya or Tanzania during the dry season, the dust is going to kick up all around your Land Rover. This can cause havoc with a properly mixed martini.

Tanzania is nicest between June and September but the herds have already left the Serengeti for the Masai Mara in Kenya. Don't go in April or May, when rainstorms produce mud bogs and potholes larger than the Chicago Bears defensive line.

Some old Africa hands recommend that the lesser wet season is best because the roads are damp and the dust doesn't kick up so much.

Do remember to pay some attention to camera lenses and protective bags.

Of all the great migrations, that of the wildebeest is the most dramatic. It can be seen in Kenya between July and October.

The biggest concern on safari is never described in the brochures and has to do with one's lower intestines. The problem is that you're going to be doing a good bit of your game viewing in the early morning hours before breakfast. This means that you will not be having your early morning coffee until you have been chasing some just-awakened lions or a small herd of elephants. Some of us cant imagine attempting a drive down route fifty-nine without our morning coffee so a drive in the Masai Mara before breakfast seems positively daunting.

Food is always a concern in East Africa. I always advise those who seek my opinion to totally ignore whatever their guide says about food. These guides are all acclimated, they live in Africa. It's macho to eat whatever is served.

In truth, you shouldn't touch peeled fruit or salad. Avoid anything on a buffet made with mayonnaise. Hot meals are fine and the level of luxury in the better lodges or tented safari camps is surprising. If you're staying at one of the deluxe joints like the Windsor Country Club outside of Nairobi, they will probably offer to take you to the Carnivore Restaurant. This is one of the most repelling dining experiences on earth, but the food is quite good. Large sword-like skewers, stuck through various cuts of meat from a variety of animals. is paraded around each table. Cuts are sliced onto your plate, devoured until the next server arrives. "A chunk of zebra madam"? What I like best about the place is the fact that the servers don't introduce themselves.

"Hi I'm Rick, and I'll be bringing you your elephant, lion, winderbeest, pig, tiger, and monkey tonight".

You're going to see some curry served in the lodges along with deep fried pastries filled with tartare called sambusas and the aptly named ugali which is cornmeal made into a thick porridge. Of course you can wash this all down with Tusker or White Cap, local beers that can make you positively anti-beverage.

Lions are a lot like the people who live along the North Shore of Chicago. They kind of run things, have long white manes, and a reputation for ferocity.

In fact, they're pretty nice. It's the veggie animals you really have to watch. Water Buffalo are said to be the meanest, with hippos a close second. Rhinos

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are said to have the worst natural body odor. But I've smelled worse in certain sections of Milwaukee.

The big no-no in Kenya is changing money on the black market. It's not hard to find the black market because it's virtually on every street in every city. The police are so anxious to get awards from people illegally changing money that they often arrest tourists who have simply handed money over to a spouse in public. The proper technique then, is to meet your spouse, at an appointed time, in the privacy of your hotel bathroom. Arrange your finances for the following day in this manner.

There are some tough decisions to be made when planning a trip to East Africa. The first has to do with where you're going to go. Kenya is more tourist-sophisticated than Tanzania and both countries have an extraordinary variety of wildlife. Kenya's game parks come equipped with better roads has more developed facilities. It's also far more crowded than Tanzania. But Tanzania offers the Serengeti, Lake Manyara and the Ngorongoro Crater. You will probably begin your Tanzania safari in Arusha, a boring town set in a beautiful valley with a startling view of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

There are a number of fine Africa tour operators to choose from, including Kerr and Downey, Micato, and Abercrombie and Kent. Don't go with one of the off-brands. Clout is important in East Africa and when you're dealing with a corrupt, bloated bureaucracy in an impoverished country like Tanzania, you had best be in the care of someone who knows their way around.

Finally, do work on developing the proper mental attitude for a visit to East Africa, a land where, the saying goes, "It is always five minutes to twelve".

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