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HOW TO DO THE MARA-SERENGETI

BRIAN JACKMAN unravels East Africa's greatest wildlife show.

The Mara-Serengeti ecosystem is wild Africa on a scale that's hard to envision, distilled into a never-ending expanse of boundless savannah. The Mara forms the Kenyan part; the Serengeti lies across the border in Tanzania, with the region's limits defined by the year-round odyssey of 1.3 million migrating wildebeest chasing the rains in search

Wildebeest crossing the Mara River

A family tent at Cottar's 1920s Safari Camp



of grass and water. The Mara comprises only a quarter of the total ecosystem, but in terms of concentrated, easy-to-view animals, it's hallowed ground—the greatest wildlife real estate on earth. The Serengeti, on the other hand, delivers lesser concentrations of game but wilderness on a more epic scale.

Logistics are well oiled in both regions, with charter planes that hop about with ease. Then there's that climate: The equator may be only some hundred miles away from the Kenya-Tanzania border, but the Mara-Serengeti's savannahs, with their billowing grasses and flat-topped acacia trees, sit at elevations of 6,000 feet, making for low humidity and blissful temperatures—hot by day, cool by night.

The issue, therefore, is not if one should go on safari in the Mara-Serengeti but which lodge one should book. I have spent four decades traveling to and from Africa, covering its eco-politics and conservation dramas for newspapers and magazines.

THE MARA'S AND THE SERENGETI'S LIMITS ARE DEFINED BY THE YEAR-ROUND ODYSSEY OF 1.3 MILLION MIGRATING WILDEBEEST CHASING THE RAINS.

To even begin to address the question, I considered the three main reasons why people come: to witness the world's greatest wildlife migration, to see their first lion and to experience the immense East African landscape. My recommendations are gleaned from years spent in the Mara-Serengeti, where new lodges are always popping up among the classics I continue to hold in high regard.

FOR THE BEST OF THE GREAT MIGRATION

Catching the wildebeest at the right moment is a delicate task. To see the migration in the Mara, visit July through October, when the herds cluster in Kenya. In the Serengeti, the window is November through July; however, because of the sheer size of the Serengeti, one needs to check which part is playing host to the herds. The sure hit is January through March—calving time in the south. And the Serengeti's **Ndutu Lodge** (rooms, from \$210 a night; Ngorongoro Conservation Area; 255-73/650-1045; ndutu.com), surrounded by the short grass plains where wildebeest have their calves, is ideally located.

For dramatic river crossings, head to the Mara River, which runs from the Mara highlands across the border into the Serengeti, from July through October. The relatively new 12-room **Lamai Serengeti** (rooms, from \$450 a person per night; Serengeti National Park; 255-78/759-5908; nomad-tanzania.com)

THE SAFARI PAPERS

has a sensational location atop a vast granite kopje. During the day, there are unbeatable views of the plains below, and at night you feel like you're sleeping in a giant's rock garden. Also in the Serengeti's far northwest is the **Singita Mara River**

Tented Camp (tents, from \$1,000 a person per night; Serengeti National Park; 27-21/683-3424; singita.com), a new offshoot of Luke Bailes's **Singita Grumeti** camps (see "Update Grumeti," page 158), whose major appeal is also location: It is the only permanent camp in the 150-square-mile Lamai Triangle. Each tent's open-air bathtub overlooks a dramatic U-bend in the Mara River, filled with crocodiles, hippos and elephants.

Serengeti Under Canvas (tents, from \$725 a person per night; Serengeti National Park; 27-11/809-4314; andbeyondafrica.com) has the mobile advantage: Its nine tents (the camp is shared with other clients) are moved to wherever the migration happens to be within Serengeti National Park. Make no mistake: Portability does not equal hardship; the camp has hot bucket showers, flush toilets

and even an electric-lit chandelier in each spacious tent. The Mara alternative is a true private mobile experience, set and struck every few days per a client's itinerary, run by Peter Silvester at **Royal African Safaris**. (See "Going Mobile in the Mara," page 244.)

Those traveling with a young family will enjoy **Sala's Camp** (tents, from \$410 a person per night; Masai Mara National Reserve; 254-20/251-3166; tamimiea.com), run by Mikey and Tanya Carr-Hartley, third-generation Kenyans. It is usually among the first camps in the Mara to witness the arrival of the wildebeest and has a prime spot on the Sand River with views of the Serengeti on the other side. The largest of Sala's seven en-suite tents is designed to accommodate a family of four (from \$585 a person per night).

FOR THE BEST LION SIGHTINGS

Although the Serengeti, from Ndotu all the way north to the Lamai Triangle, echoes with the rumble of lions, the Mara remains the predator capital because its open grass-

lands make for easy spotting and its lions are so used to posing for visitors that vehicles can approach within a few yards. My favorite is the Musiara Marsh pride, one of whose males starred in *African Cats* (Disney called him Kali). His sons still hang out near Governors' Camp in the Mara. The popular stopover is relatively large, with 37 tents, and therefore not the most exclusive place to stay within the Mara Reserve. But there's a smart way around this: **Little Governors' Camp** (tents, from \$340 a person per night; Masai Mara National Reserve; 254-20/273-4000; governorscamp.com), a short boat ride across the Mara River, is much quieter, with 17 tents set around a watering hole that elephants frequent throughout the day. The other big attraction is the hour-long balloon safari that lifts off at dawn to provide an eagle's-eye view of the reserve. **Rekero** (tents, from \$1,000 a night; Masai Mara National Reserve; 27-21/418-0468; rekero.asiliaafrica.com) is where old Mara hands go back time and again—it was built in 1987 overlooking a key wildebeest crossing on

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the Talek River. It has remained the benchmark for intimate bush camps, blissfully comfortable without sacrificing its African soul. Jackson Looseyia, one of Africa's best guides, is a director, and his guiding team has inherited all his bush-wise skills.

Around Rekeru, the roar of lions is never far away. This is also true in the private wildlife conservancies adjoining the nationally protected Mara Reserve, where the big cats are making a dramatic recovery. One of the best examples is the 50,000-acre Mara Naboisho Conservancy, where the density of game—including at least 70 lions—is among the highest anywhere on the continent. Basecamp Explorer's aptly named **Eagle View** (tents, from \$380 a person per night; *Mara Naboisho Conservancy*; 254-733/333-909; basecampkenya.com) is the newest camp in this area, with impeccable ecotourism credentials. (See "The Big Business of Conservation," page 165.) The guides know all the Naboisho lions—including the formidable Ennisikeria pride males that rule the territory.

Bed-Hopping in the Mara-Serengeti

Over a ten-day vacation, it is common to hop between camps (the Serengeti has fewer lodges spread out over greater territory)—taking light-aircraft charters that can fly direct between private airstrips. It's worth it, especially if it means catching the migration in the Serengeti. However, mixing the two areas does involve clearing international border customs at Nairobi (the principal hub for East African safaris) and Kilimanjaro, Tanzania's international airport near the town of Arusha. Recently, a new route opened up for light aircraft between Migori, on the Kenyan side, and Tarime, in Tanzania. First-timers may find it somewhat daunting, as both airports are located outside the parks, and the whole journey takes about five hours, involving tedious road transfers and a customs checkpoint. We recommend enlisting an agent; almost everyone from our "Guide to the Superguides" (page 92) services the region.

FOR CLASSIC AFRICAN LANDSCAPES

It was the Masai who called it Serengeti—the place where the land runs on forever. The word perfectly describes its short grass plains dotted with lonely acacias. But the Serengeti also has riverine forests, open savannahs in its western corridor and beautiful, broken country full of winding *korongos* (seasonal watercourses) in the Kuka Hills. Adding drama to the skyline are kopjes: solitary outcrops of weathered granite that big cats love to use as watch-towers. It's hard to pinpoint exactly where the landscape is best, but Singita's **Sasakwa Lodge** (cottages, from \$1,350 a person per night; *Singita Grumeti Reserves*; 27-21/683-3424; singita.com), built on a high escarpment overlooking the plains, is certainly a top contender.

There are some exquisite expanses of landscape in the Mara as well, especially the places where one can get away from the glut of safari vehicles. Best among these hidden corners is the Mara Triangle, between the Mara River and the Oloololo



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Watching elephants up close with Royal African Safaris

Escarpment, where the savannah is stippled with the parasol silhouettes of desert date trees, and private wildlife conservancies merge seamlessly with the reserve's northeastern border. Here, the place to stay is **Mara Plains Camp** (S tents, from \$570 a person per night; Olare Motorogi Conservancy; 254-722/765-026; greatplainsconservation.com). Reopened last July after a complete makeover, it's a seven-tent camp modeled after the same company's Zarafa camp in Botswana, in a setting where riverine forest meets open savannah in deepest lion country.

Running a close second for best location in the Mara is **Kicheche Mara** (tents, from \$445 a person per night; Olare Motorogi Conservancy; 973-832-4384; kicheche.com). Tucked into a secret valley in the 74,000-acre Mara North Conservancy, this is a truly idyllic spot, with eight spacious tents under the yellow-bark acacia trees. Like all the Kicheche camps, it is highly regarded by wildlife photographers for its views. Another Mara North favorite is **Serian** (S tents, from \$575 a person per night; Mara North Conservancy; 254-718/139-359; serian.net), run by Alex Walker, a fourth-generation West African and son of a Kenyan hunter. It has six canvas tents on raised decks beside the Mara River.

But it's **Cottar's Safari Camp** (S tents, from \$530 a person per night; Masai Mara; 254-733/773-378; cottars.com), operated by Calvin and Louise Cottar, that is the star of the whole ecosystem. It lies at the easternmost end of the Mara on a private 6,000-acre conservancy facing the Serengeti's Kuka Hills. It's hard to think of a more perfect campsite, chosen by Calvin's great-grandfather Charles, who came out from Oklahoma in 1909 to become the country's first professional hunter. The canvas bathtubs, silverware, cut-crystal glassware and wind-up gramophone all contribute to the spirit of the place, along with 11 tents furnished in original 1920s safari antiques and four-poster beds. There's also now **Cottar's Private House** (from \$4,320 for six people), a five-bedroom villa that comes with a staff of eight, including a private chef, guide and game spotter. 📍

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FAMILY CAMPS

The first rule of any family safari is to set a clear goal: To dip one's toes into the wilderness without fully diving in, South Africa makes for an easy transition from bush to big city; for the quintessential big-game experience, Tanzania and Kenya can't be beat; and if the sky's the limit, Botswana's remote camps are the epitome of an African adventure. For those with very young kids, a malaria-free zone (like South Africa's Ant's Nest) is sometimes all a parent wants. For others, it boils down to finding the right tent where everyone can sleep safely closely to one another. Family-safari expert Marcia Gordon stresses requesting a private guide who can keep even the most energetic kids engaged. Ace agent Melissa Biggs Bradley (see "Guide to the Super-guides" for both outfitters, page 92) advises families to ask for their own vehicle, so that late starts or early returns won't compromise the plans of safari-goers not in the brood. With this in mind, here are four kid-tested camps that any family should consider.

ANT'S NEST

Families will appreciate the secluded confines of the South African ranch and its sister property, Ant's Hill, as both allow little ones to freely roam their predator-free grounds. Both camps have spacious family suites and their own pools, and families are entitled to the all-important private guide and vehicle. *Safaris start at \$275 a person per night; Waterberg; 27-83/447-7929; waterberg.net.*

COTTAR'S SAFARI CAMP

Four tented family suites dot the Kenyan property's grounds—each with its own dining room (a convenient feature for young ones not ready to join the mess tent's communal table). Parents shouldn't hesitate to request Calvin Cottar as their guide. According to Gordon, his \$1,000 day rate is worth every penny. (See "How to Do the Mara-Serengeti," page 117.) S From \$530 a person per night; Greater Masai Mara; 254-733/773-378; cottars.com.

FOOTSTEPS ACROSS THE DELTA

The three-tent camp at Shinde, Botswana, is ideal for families of up to six, who can rent it out in its entirety. While it lacks a pool, kids aren't likely to notice thanks to the Young Explorer's program; guide Paul Molesing teaches a range of bushcraft, from how to make a fire using leaves and sticks to how to carve a bow and a quiver of arrows. *Safaris start at \$4,805 a person for six nights; Okavango Delta Safari Reserves; 800-242-2434; expertafrica.com.*

SINGITA FARU FARU LODGE

The two-bedroom family suite at this camp in the Grumeti Reserves won't disappoint. Tech-starved kids can plop themselves by the lounge TV, and creative types can nurture their talents through activities like sketching, painting and flower-pressing. (See "Update Grumeti," page 158.) *Rooms start at \$925 a person per night; Serengeti National Park; 27-21/683-3424; singita.com.* —ANTHONY ROTUNDO