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AFRICA

# Wildebeest Migration Guide

By safari specialists  
Cedarberg Africa



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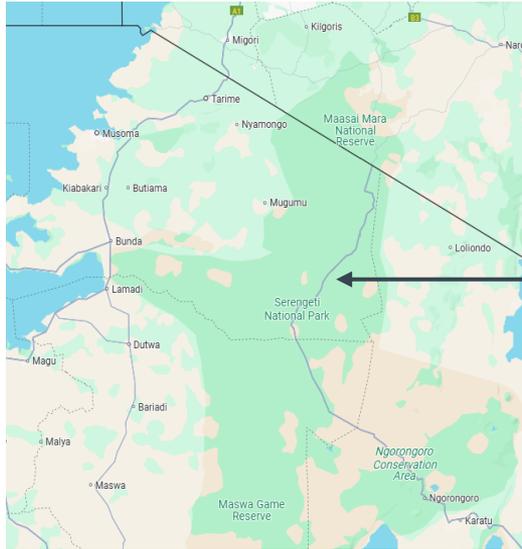
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Next Steps

A large herd of zebras is captured in a dynamic scene, likely during a migration. The zebras are running across a dry, dusty savanna landscape. The background shows a vast plain with scattered trees and a hazy horizon. The foreground is filled with the black and white stripes of the zebras, creating a sense of movement and energy. A semi-transparent green banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text.

**Where is the Serengeti & Masai Mara?**

# “The world’s last remaining great overland wildlife migration takes place in East Africa”



On an ancient annual cycle, nearly two million wildebeest, plentiful zebra, Thompson's gazelle and other antelope travel between northern Tanzania (Serengeti National Park and environs) and southern Kenya (the Masai Mara) in search of new grasses and water.

# “The greatest wildlife show on earth”

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The spectacle spreads over 40,000 km<sup>2</sup>, extending far beyond the borders of the famous World Heritage Site of the Serengeti National Park itself.

This whole area is referred to as the Serengeti ecosystem.



A wide-angle photograph of a savanna landscape under a clear blue sky. In the foreground, a herd of wildebeest is gathered around a shallow, muddy watering hole. Some are drinking, while others are standing nearby. The middle ground shows a vast, flat plain with scattered wildebeest and a few acacia trees in the distance. A semi-transparent, olive-green rectangular box is overlaid across the center of the image, containing the text "Migration Seasons & Movement Patterns" in a dark, serif font.

# Migration Seasons & Movement Patterns

# Migration Seasons

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If you are planning a Serengeti safari, bear in mind that there is no ONE season for the 'Great Migration'. It's happening all the time.

Though there are periods when the herds are more dispersed and times when they are massed together, there is pretty much constant movement. It is also an extremely dynamic and unpredictable phenomenon, dependent mostly on the rains.

This makes it sound as though it's impossible to plan a good migration safari. Or that you might as well just take pot luck! There are, however, four reasonably distinct seasons.

So depending on the time of year, we will suggest you stay in different areas.



# Migration Seasons



**December to  
February/March**

*The dry green season  
between the short and  
long rains*

**Mid -March to mid  
May**

*The 'long rains' over  
about six weeks  
sometime between Late  
March & mid May*

**June to  
Sept/ October**

*The long, dry winter  
season, typically  
considered the 'peak'*

**October or  
November**

*Couple of weeks of 'short  
rains'. Migration is on the  
move south*



# Movement Patterns

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The first thing to say is that not all wildebeest are equally mobile! There are both migratory and non-migratory populations. So, it would be wrong to imagine that in the 'off season' for an area that you will be faced with empty bush, devoid of animals. Resident wildebeest remain in woodland areas and form small herds of females and young offspring. Territorial predators remain with them.

There are also mini-migrations, such as the eastern migration when zebra and wildebeest come down from the Loita Hills into the Mara amid the thunder and lightning common in April.

Wildebeest can often be seen forming columns, one behind the other and as much as 40 km long, which give the impression that the migration is an orderly progression. Which is far from the case.

# Influenced by the Rains

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Not only is the timing unpredictable but the herds split away from each other, travel both clockwise and anti-clockwise and cross and re-cross rivers. If you want a ringside seat at the 'Greatest Wildlife Show on Earth' it is best to be philosophical. You can do as much research and planning as you like. But you may still not get to see crocodiles jumping at hapless thrashing wildebeest fording a river. Nevertheless, you are still likely to have an amazing safari as your guide will know where to drive for good game viewing at any time of the year.

Animal movement in the Serengeti is influenced by the quality and quantity of both grazing and water but there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the interplay of these factors. But, by and large, the end of the rainy season sees the wildebeest and zebra herds begin an exodus from their wet season range in the south of the Serengeti, up to their dry-season range in the north-west.

Then the onset of the short rains sees them travel south-east and then south again to their preferred nutrient rich sweet grasslands to give birth.



# The Eco System & Migration

A theoretical model of their movement would read something like this:

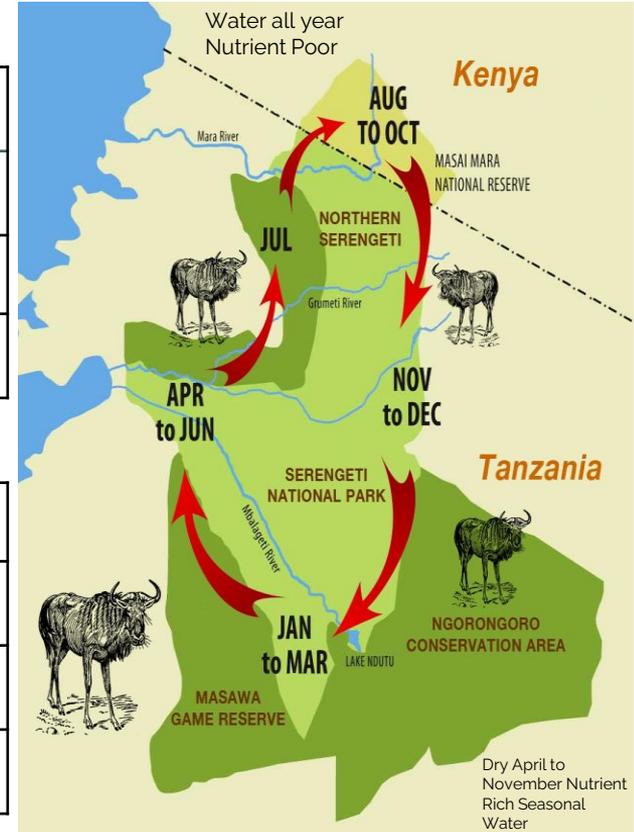


## Wet Season: December through to May

December	Heading south-east toward the Southern and Eastern <b>Serengeti Plains</b> in Tanzania, both in the NP and Loliondo
January & February	Zebra and then wildebeest giving birth and relatively static in the southeast and the <b>Ndutu</b> woodlands
March	Spreading out in search of fresh grazing toward <b>Seronera</b> and <b>Maswa</b>
April & May	The "long rains" and herds heading north-west into <b>Seronera</b> then the <b>Western Corridor</b> . Rutting starts toward the end of the rains

## Dry Season: June through to November

June & July	Crossing the <b>Grumeti River</b> in Western Serengeti, heading north into <b>Lobo</b>
August	Main herds in the north-east, some crossing the <b>Mara River</b> into Kenya and others lurking in Lamai
September & October	Most migratory animals now in Kenya's <b>Masai Mara</b> , with some herds still in northern Serengeti National Park
October & November	The start of the "short rains" means fresh sweet grasses so herds head south into <b>Loliondo</b> and toward <b>Ngorongoro</b>



A savanna landscape with a herd of zebras, wildebeest, and giraffes under a clear blue sky. The animals are in the foreground and middle ground, with a giraffe standing tall in the background. The text "Migration Dogmas Questioned" is overlaid on a semi-transparent green rectangular box in the center of the image.

# Migration Dogmas Questioned



# Migration Dogma Questioned

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From this, you can see that there's a good place in which to see the migration at any time that you are free to travel.

However, the number of people you share the experience with will vary depending on the different times of the year.

As the arrival of the great thunderstorms may vary as much as two or three months from year to year, visitors trying to pick a good time to travel tend to hone in on December through to mid-March and then from June to September as the 'best times'.

As these also coincide neatly with popular times for annual leave in Europe and North America; they have become established as the 'peak' safari seasons. The pattern thus gets reinforced.

And the other months of the year get even more disregarded...

## ... and a bit about neighbourly rivalry!

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Then add in the school summer holidays/vacations. And the fact that, in August and September, historically the best place to see the migration is in the Masai Mara in Kenya, So that the famous Kenyan park has become almost synonymous with a migration safari.

Until quite recently, this has been great for Kenyan safari operators and lodges. But in the last few years they have almost become victims of their own success.

As more and more camps and lodges have been built. Visitors have been disappointed to see large numbers of vehicles crowding round a wildlife sighting.





# No passports if you are on four legs, rather than 4x4

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Plus it's important to note that animals are unaware of the national borders and plenty of wildebeest mill about in the northern part of Serengeti even while other herds have crossed the Mara River and are far to the north.

So, if you want to see the migration between July and October but don't want to compete with 30 or 40 other safari vehicles, you can choose whether to base yourself in either:

- One of the less busy parts of the Mara – such as Elephant Pepper Camp in Koyaki
- Or in the northern part of the Serengeti in Tanzania

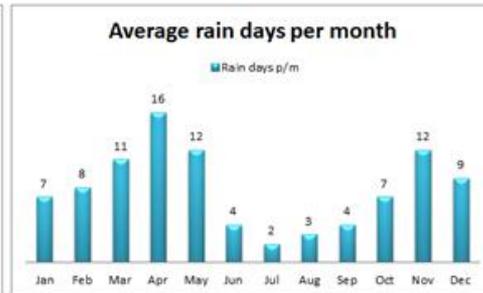
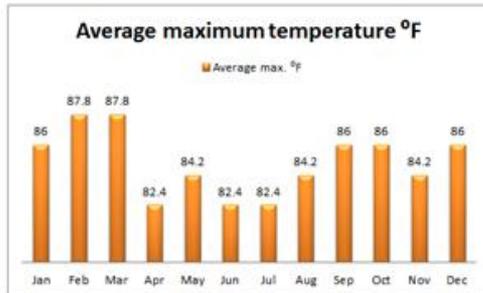
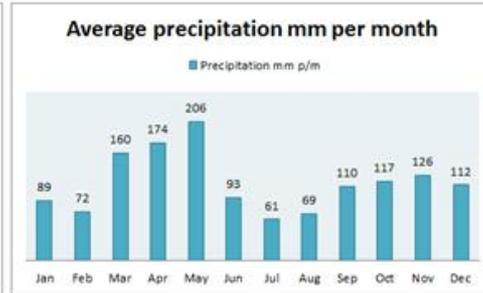
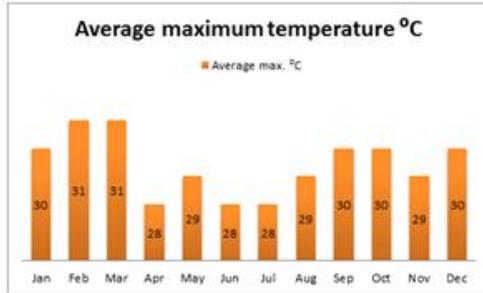
## **Time and luck**

Not only is the timing unpredictable, but the herds split away from each other, travel both clockwise and anti-clockwise and cross and re-cross rivers. If you want a ringside seat at the 'greatest wildlife show on earth' you need TIME plus a dash of luck on your side.

# I must avoid the long rains at all costs, right?



April and May are avoided by many because of the fear of impassable roads, getting stuck in the sticky black cotton soil of some parts of the Serengeti and of torrential downpours. But northern hemisphere visitors trying to dodge the rainy seasons should bear in mind that African rains are far less predictable than the tropical monsoons of Asia.



*70% of the time there is less rain than the mean average. Most people going on safari in October and November experience only a couple of rainy days.*

*Even if you venture a safari in the riskier months of April and May, you may have only a few downpours and enjoy clear, dramatic skies and vastly reduced costs! **Especially towards the end of May...***

What can you expect to see on a  
**Migration Safari?**



# Local People: The Masai

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The Maasai have had a far more significant role in your migration safari than merely posing photogenically in their brightly - coloured plaid Shuka's with a spear in hand.

The Serengeti is 'a wilderness' only to the extent that no commercial roads cut through the Serengeti National Park. And there are virtually no roads in the adjacent village lands, so the animals move much as they have millennia. But this apparent virgin bush is far from having been untouched by human hand!

On the contrary, before the national parks and reserves were created, local people had been utilizing the Serengeti for livestock and hunting in a way that was interdependent with the wildlife.

For more than 200 years, Maasai pastoralists migrated large distances to let the landscape to recover between periods of cattle grazing, though it is only quite recently that their conservation role has been appreciated.

New thinking is that the way forward is to reconnect the needs of the wildlife with those of local communities. And to rebuild the old interdependence. It's increasingly clear that some of the best managed wildlife sanctuaries are Maasai-owned. One of the best ways you can support both the threatened culture of the Maasai as well as wildlife is to spend time in one of the Game Controlled Areas in Tanzania or in the Conservancies in Kenya. Here you will be able to see cattle and game co-existing. And also talk to the Maasai about the future as they see it.





# Landscape & Vegetaion

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The Serengeti National Park, a 27,000 km<sup>2</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Site, lies at the heart of the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem. In the Maa language, 'siringet' means 'endless plains' and this you will certainly see. It is a swathe of high-plateau short grasslands with few trees, especially in the east.

But only about a quarter of the Serengeti ecosystem is grassland. The northwest of the plains is acacia woodland. This is drained by the Grumeti, Mbalgeti and Duma Rivers which flow into Lake Victoria. It supports resident herds all year round.

# Pesky Other Visitors



*Many potential visitors to the Serengeti-Mara are perturbed by hearing of safaris where the number of tourist vehicles seems to outnumber the wildlife. These fears are not groundless, and generally horrify those who have already enjoyed the privilege of seeing wild animals in a more relaxed context. If the idea concerns you, this is where it pays off to plan a little more, spend a little more, or stay a little longer (and preferably all three!). We recommend at least 4 nights if possible.*

*The Serengeti National Park has managed development rather better than the Masai Mara National Reserve, in that very few permanent structures have been permitted after the original round of construction in the 1970s. There are still only a handful of 'brick-built' lodges. So most people stay in tented camps of varying degrees of luxury and quality. The Serengeti National Park comprises areas of high use, occasional use and wilderness. The busier areas are around the main south to north tourist road, along the Grumeti River, around the Seronera Valley and up to Lobo.*

*However, there are plenty of areas to escape from the majority of vehicles, if you have enough time.*

*In the Maasai Mara National Reserve, an area about an eighth of the size of the Serengeti National Park, there are many more camps and lodges. So, in order to avoid the crowds you need to travel to the more remote regions as far from the Sekenani Gate and the busy roads of the east as possible. This usually means flying into the reserve by light aircraft. Or staying, not in the reserve, but in one of the surrounding Mara conservancies where access and visitor impact is controlled. Plus night drives and walking is allowed.*



# Good to Know



**In both the Masai Mara National Reserve and the Serengeti National Park, the areas of congestion relate to a few factors:**

- ❖ Ease of access by road; the closer to the Main Gate, the more vehicles you will see.
- ❖ The number of lodges and camps in the vicinity.
- ❖ How good the game-viewing is in the area.

Of course, these factors work together. The first lodge in a park will be built in the best possible location, (game-rich area) and a road will be built for construction and then later tourist access. A second and third lodge or camp will follow in other excellent locations and a circuit will be created. Because the road networks already exist, these areas will then be good locations for siting further camps. There will be less environmental impact, and it will be more cost-effective.

And so, it goes on...

# The Famous River Crossing

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From July through to October, the 'hot ticket' in the Serengeti is to see a river crossing. Wildebeest in their hundreds of thousands hop about on the riverbanks behaving frantically; fearful of the strong currents and fat lurking crocodiles. But equally powerfully drawn to the fresh green grazing they know lies on the other side. This is the adage of "grass is always greener" with the full cinematic, 'high jeopardy' treatment.

If you are in the right place at the right time, eventually one animal will plough into the water and others will follow, running the gauntlet of the waiting crocodiles.

Most will make it to the other side but plenty won't; as many panic and drown in the river as are taken by the crocs.

Incomprehensibly, the crossings are not a 'one off' event. At times mothers and offspring will lose each other in the water and both will cross and re-cross in an effort to reunite. Sometimes whole herds will change their minds. And some will be hurling themselves off one bank while others are launching from the other side.





# Babies

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In early February in the course of just one three-week period 80-90% of wildebeest give birth, choosing to do so at a time and place when there is good grazing so that more young will survive.

Although the almost treeless landscape makes it harder for predators that rely on surprise when hunting, the sheer numbers of vulnerable calves make this a bumper season for them.

Many predators also give birth at this time too as food is abundant. Zebra tend to be born a little earlier, in January.

An aerial photograph capturing a massive herd of wildebeest in the middle of a migration. The animals are densely packed in the center and spread out towards the horizon, moving across a vast, green savanna. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a golden glow and long shadows across the landscape. A single acacia tree stands out on the horizon to the left. A semi-transparent green box is overlaid in the center of the image, containing the text 'Key Questions Answered' in a dark blue, serif font.

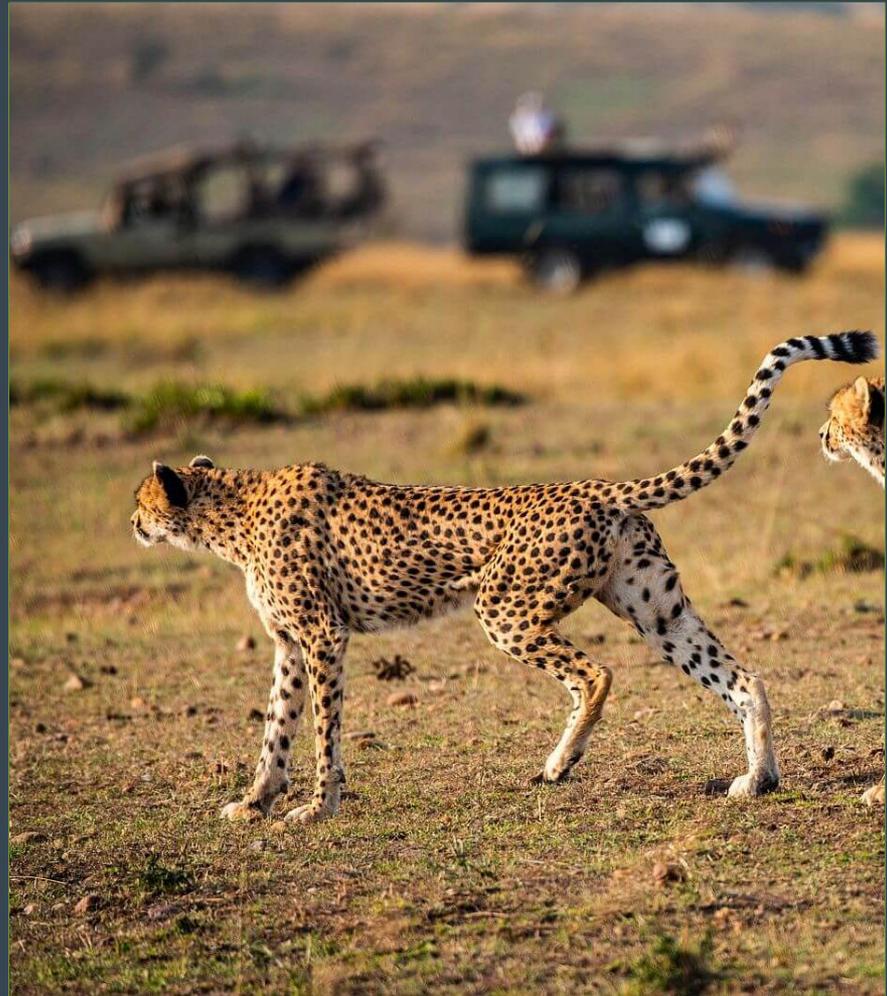
# Key Questions Answered

1.

Tailor-made or  
Scheduled departure?



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# Tailor-made or Scheduled departure?

Scheduled Tours – for specific circumstances only



*The best reason to join a scheduled safari with a group of people you haven't previously met is because you fancy company and are an easy-going, flexible individual. Many people form friendships with people they meet on holiday. You have time to get to know new people; you may be more relaxed; and you may share experiences which forge a bond between you.*

*Travel is supposed to broaden the mind. But if you talk to no-one other than the person you left home with, then the stretch won't be that great! If you travel with a small group then you have plenty of people to chat over the day's sightings with, and to swap photography tips.*

*However, on safari in East Africa you will spend a great many hours in the company of your travelling companions; probably every moment that you are not asleep or in the bathroom. In these days of smaller households, many people are unfamiliar with the little courtesies and compromises that make this tolerable. And many people see their hard-earned annual holiday as 'me time', when they can be a bit self-indulgent. This can make for challenging group dynamics!*



Travelling in a group will be less expensive, per head, than travelling solo or as a couple and this difference tends to increase with the length of the trip. This is partly because road transportation and guide costs will be shared among more people.

BUT many aspects of the itinerary design will be cost-driven rather than quirky or quality-driven. You may be keen to upgrade here and there but that won't be possible as game lodges are pre-contracted.

**Note:** Private safaris will often be THE SAME PRICE as a scheduled safari if you are a group of 4 people. And you have some more flexibility e.g. to Fly back from the Serengeti instead of driving back.

### Travel Tip:

**So DO choose a group departure if you can be flexible with your attitude as well as your trip dates; they can be brilliant.**

**But DON'T opt for a group departure if:**

- ❖ It's what you were offered for your budget by the first agent you spoke to
- ❖ You know yourself to be picky or difficult . Or you react badly to others who are
- ❖ You want to be able to set your own pace, get up late or turn the vehicle A/C on or off to suit yourself
- ❖ You are a keen photographer or birder



2.

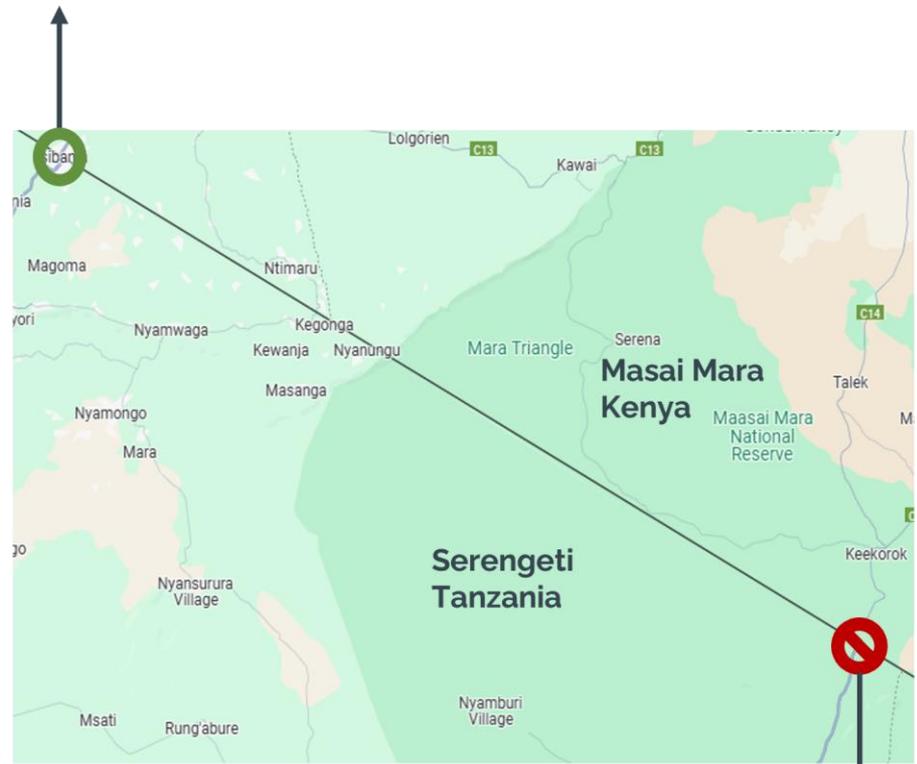
Visiting both the  
Mara & Serengeti?



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Sirari -  
Isebania



Bologonja  
(closed)

# Mara & Serengeti?

This is nothing like as easy as it looks on the map!

**So the three most practical alternatives are:**

- ❖ Detour north-east by road to the Sirari-Isebania border post between the Serengeti and Lake Victoria, about a 10 hour drive! As a rule, you need to change vehicles AND driver/guides at the border so this is a bit more complex to arrange.
- ❖ Fly from one to the other via Arusha and Nairobi, which is by far the most typical approach.
- ❖ Drive in a large loop and take in the Amboseli National Park for a couple of nights, using the most popular Kenya-Tanzania border post at Namanga

3.

## Game Drives & Safari Flights



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# Game Drives & Safari Flights

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Ideally, your itinerary will combine two or more different regions of the Serengeti and probably some other game reserves as well.

When you are driving between camps within the Serengeti, the transfer will generally be a game drive as well. So while the distance might be covered in two or three hours, you could make a whole day of it.

There is very little difference between the days you are in transit and those where you are staying in one camp; you are on safari all the time.

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat is seen from behind, relaxing in an infinity pool. The pool's edge is perfectly aligned with the horizon, creating a seamless transition between the water and the vast savanna landscape beyond. The terrain is a mix of green and yellow grasslands with scattered trees and rolling hills under a clear blue sky. A semi-transparent green rectangular box is centered over the middle of the image, containing the text 'Camps & Lodges' in a dark, serif font.

# Camps & Lodges

# Lodges

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Some of the older lodging in both the Masai Mara National Reserve, the Mara conservancies and in the Serengeti National Park is of a more traditional construction. These will tend to be larger lodges which can take groups as well as individual travellers.

What you lose in exclusivity and authenticity, you gain in familiar conveniences such as swimming pools and air conditioning or fans. Being larger, the lodges have economies of scale, so they are (with some notable exceptions) a mid-range price option.





# Tented Camps

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Most accommodation in the National Parks and the adjacent protected areas is under canvas. This ranges from budget camps set up in the shared public campsites, through luxury mobile camps with en suite facilities, to semi-permanent tented camps which are as comfortable as and arguably far more luxurious than bricks and mortar lodges.

- ❖ Tented camps can be set up in more remote areas than it is feasible to build lodges. This is generally to their advantage, but it means that they should not be regarded as an economy option!
- ❖ What you lose in amenities (air-conditioning, 24-hour electricity, swimming pool) you gain in ambience and intimacy

A family of four is sitting in a lush, green, grassy field. Two Maasai guides, dressed in traditional red and black attire with beaded headbands, are interacting with the family. One guide on the left is pointing towards the sky with a long, decorated staff. The family consists of a man in a green shirt, a woman in a light green shirt, and a child. The background is a soft-focus landscape of rolling green hills under bright sunlight.

# Family Safaris in the Serengeti

# Family Safaris

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There are several compelling reasons not to wait until the family grows up before taking them to Africa. There is no feeling like watching a child's dawning realization that those huge shapes are real elephants and that there are dozens of them and they are heading your way - with babies! But why chose the Serengeti for a family safari, whether Tanzania or Kenya?

- ❖ Many safari camps, in the Masai Mara in particular, have spacious tents with plenty of room for an extra bed and many offer a reduced rate for teenagers as well as the under 12s.
- ❖ Game viewing in the Serengeti is as 'thrill a minute' as you are likely to encounter anywhere in Africa. If you worry that your child's attention span is short, you can also stay some of the time in a larger lodge with grounds where there is space to run about and/or take a dip in a swimming pool.
- ❖ Yes, you will need to take malaria tablets but, on the other hand, your children can learn first-hand from the Maasai about the life of a 21st century pastoralist as well as hearing the ancestral tales of a great warrior tribe.





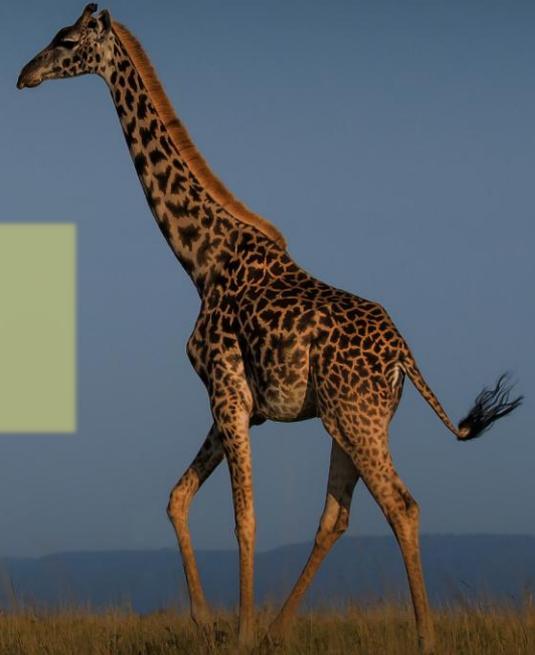
# Travel Tips

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- ❖ Try to minimize moves between reserves
- ❖ Splurge on flights rather than road transfers
- ❖ If you are travelling with just one youngster, the Intrepid lodges in Kenya have excellent kids Adventurers' Clubs, ideal for making new friends
- ❖ Nairobi has more to offer families than you may imagine, including the giraffe centre and elephant orphanage



# Next Steps



# Conclusion & Further Resources



1

Ask yourself how flexible you are prepared to be

2

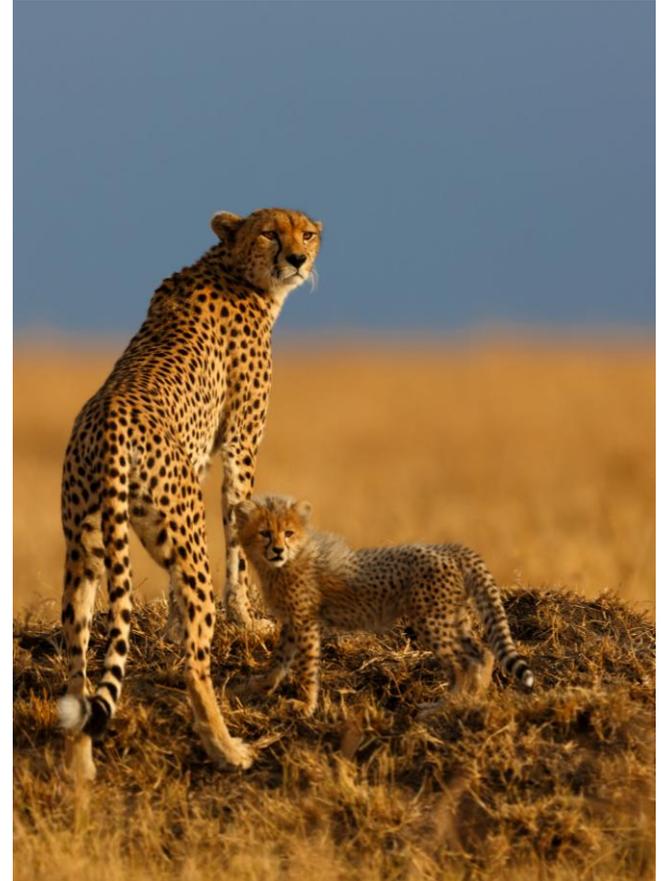
Decide when you can travel – then pick the best country and region for that time

3

Decide on a style of safari and set your budget accordingly OR set a budget and then enjoy the advantages of the style of safari that will determine for you.

4

Find a reputable tour operator, agent or safari company to plan with - such as Cedarberg Africa!



# About the Author

Ginny Russell is the UK Managing Director of Cedarberg Africa, a specialist safari company she co-founded to help people unsure where to turn for friendly, well-informed safari planning.

Ginny has visited and explored all the countries marketed by Cedarberg Africa. First lured to Kenya in the mid-1980s, Ginny continues to travel throughout East and Southern Africa, seeking out the best experiences and most special places to stay.





*Spectacular By Nature,  
Personal By Design*

# Thank You!

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*Cedarberg Africa has been designing tailor-made safaris to Kenya & Tanzania since 1995.*

We'll design an individual safari just for you so that you get the family safari you've always dreamed of. But without wasting hours of precious time navigating the endless possibilities. If you're looking for an authentic and magical safari experience, Cedarberg Africa can help you.

*Have questions? Schedule a time to chat or email us at:*

*Africa Office - [web@cedarberg.co.za](mailto:web@cedarberg.co.za) or +27 27 482 2444*

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