PACK LIGHTLY

WHERE THE SAFARI ACTUALLY HAPPENS

Kenya

Lodge or tented camp, when the Migration actually crosses, and what a real game drive costs before the markup.



p. 28 Lodge vs camp vs mobile tented: the real safari choice

p. 19 The Great Migration, month by month, no guesswork

p. 33 What a safari day costs, printed as a till receipt

46 PAGES KES PRICES ETA REQUIRED EDITION 2026.08

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

the shape of a Kenya trip, what it costs, what to sort first



Kenya is East Africa's safari anchor: the Masai Mara and Amboseli for the Big Five, Lake Nakuru for flamingos and rhino, then Diani Beach on the Indian Ocean coast to unwind after the dust. Most first trips run a 4x4 loop between two or three parks and end on the coast. This guide is built around choosing the right park combination and the right lodging style, since those two calls set the entire budget.

The shape of a trip

Most first-timers run 7 to 10 days: Nairobi as the hub, 3 to 4 nights across two parks, then 2 to 3 nights on the coast. Ten to fourteen days adds Lake Nakuru or a third park.

What a day costs

Budget camping safaris run about 60 USD a day, mid-range lodge safaris around 180, captured August 2026. The full breakdown is on page 33.

Sort before you fly

Kenya requires an Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA), about 30 USD, applied for online at least 3 days ahead. Page 35 covers the full booking order.





HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01 The country 06

02 Where to go 09

03 Safari, worked out 18

04 Stay and go deeper 22

05 Routes and itineraries 26

06 When to go, what it costs 31

07 Practical 34

08 Safe and smart 39

09 Tools, print cards, sources 43

QUICK JUMPS

Lodge vs camp vs mobile tented, compared 28

The Great Migration, month by month 19

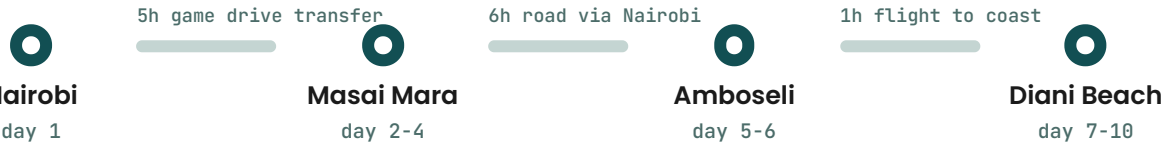
What a safari day really costs 33

Your trip on one page

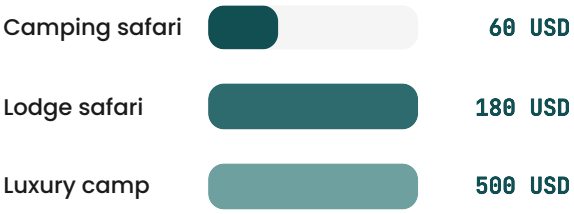
10 days · 60 to 180 USD/day · best Jan to Mar or Jun to Sep

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The classic first-timer route runs Nairobi to the Masai Mara to Amboseli over 7 to 10 days, then finishes on the coast at Diani. Budget from the bars below, not from lodge rack rates. Book the safari itself (vehicle, guide, park fees, camp) 6 to 8 weeks out; the coast extension can wait until you land in Nairobi.

THE ROUTE



BUDGET PER DAY



BOOK FIRST

01	International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out	Skyscanner
02	The Masai Mara safari itself, 6 to 8 weeks out	Viator
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS



Kenya at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Tourist infrastructure	70
Safety	60
Budget friendly	55
Nature	95
Food and drinks	70
Culture	80

Budget travel	60 USD/day
Mid-range	180 USD/day
Luxury	500 USD/day

NATURE · ADVENTURE · BEACH

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-08

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP













01

The country

What Kenya is, what it is not, who goes, and the five regions worth knowing before you pick a park combination.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One country, five regions, four readers 07

What Kenya is

55M people · 5 regions · the safari that set the template for all the others

A republic of roughly 55 million people straddling the equator in East Africa, with Nairobi as both capital and safari-logistics hub. Kenya invented the modern safari circuit: the Masai Mara sits at the northern end of the same ecosystem as Tanzania's Serengeti, and it is where most people's mental picture of "African safari" actually comes from. Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta Airport is the regional gateway, with same-day connections to every park by light aircraft or a half-day 4x4 transfer. The trade-off is exactly that centrality: the Mara in July gets crowded with vehicles at a good sighting, and the tourist-facing safari economy has its own well-worn scripts. This guide shows you the version that still delivers once you know how the parks, seasons, and lodging tiers actually work.

CAPITAL
Nairobi
safari logistics hub

POPULATION
55M
40+ ethnic groups

CURRENCY
KES
safari packages often quoted in USD

BEST MONTHS
Jun-Sep
dry, Migration in the Mara

FIVE REGIONS, FIVE CHARACTERS



Nairobi

gateway city · 1 night in, 1 night out · mild year-round

Where every safari starts and ends. Nairobi National Park, a wild park inside city limits, is a genuine half-day option if a flight connects tight.



Masai Mara

the headline park · 3 nights minimum · Migration Jul-Oct

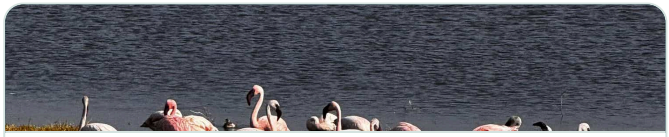
Big Five density unmatched in the region. The Great Migration river crossings, when they land here, are the single most requested sighting in African travel.



Amboseli

elephant country · 2 nights · Kilimanjaro views clearest at dawn

Kenya's best elephant photography, large herds against Africa's tallest peak, weather permitting. Two hours from the Mara by light aircraft.



Lake Nakuru

rhino sanctuary · 1-2 nights · closest park to Nairobi

A fenced rhino sanctuary and, in the right season, thousands of flamingos along the shoreline. The easiest add-on to a Mara-based trip.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time safari
7 to 10 days, mid-range lodge, the Mara to Amboseli to Diani loop.

Migration chaser
Jul-Oct dates, Mara-focused, willing to book a year out for river-crossing camps.

Budget-conscious traveler
60 USD a day, group-joining safaris, camping over lodges.

Beach-and-bush couple
A short safari plus a longer stretch at Diani, splitting the trip roughly in half.

photos: Wikimedia Commons

02

Where to go

Four parks, one coast, one city. Pick your combination before your dates: the Mara in August is a different trip than the Mara in April.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Masai Mara 09

Amboseli 10

Lake Nakuru 11

Diani Beach and the coast 12

Off the beaten path: Lake Turkana and beyond 13

National parks, the wider picture 14

Diving and the marine parks 15

Islands: Lamu and the coast 16

Nairobi, briefly 17

Masai Mara

the headline park · 3 nights minimum · Migration Jul-Oct



THE MARA RIVER CROSSING, MIGRATION SEASON

The Masai Mara is the northern extension of the Serengeti ecosystem and Kenya's single best chance at all of the Big Five in one visit. Resident lion prides, leopard along the river tree lines, and the largest elephant herds in the country are here year-round; the Great Migration adds over a million wildebeest and zebra crossing from Tanzania between roughly July and October, with river crossings the single most requested sighting in African safari travel.

Three nights is the minimum to see past a single lucky (or unlucky) game drive. The reserve itself has fixed rules on off-road driving and vehicle numbers per sighting; private conservancies bordering the reserve relax both, at a higher nightly rate, in exchange for far fewer vehicles at any sighting.

Game drives run dawn and late afternoon, when animals are most active and the heat has not peaked. A 5:30am departure is normal, not an upsell.

A guide promising a "guaranteed" river crossing on a specific day is overselling. Crossings follow herd movement and weather, not a schedule.

The Mara River crossings

Best odds July through September; camps near the river give the fastest response when a crossing starts.

Private conservancies (Mara North, Naboisho)

Bordering the main reserve, with night drives and off-road access the reserve itself does not allow.

Balloon safaris

Dawn launch over the plains, landing in a bush breakfast; the single most-booked add-on in the Mara.

Maasai village visits

Community-run visits pay a direct entry fee to the village; ask your camp which ones are locally operated.

GO DEEPER

The full Kenya best-places ranking and the Migration calendar on page 19 cover the rest of the park timing in more depth than fits here.

Amboseli

elephant country · 2 nights · clearest Kilimanjaro views at dawn



Kilimanjaro clouds over most afternoons. The 6 to 8am window is the reliable one for a clear peak shot; do not wait for a mid-morning drive.

The lake bed itself is dry most of the year and can be dusty in a strong wind. Pack a scarf or buff for open-vehicle drives.

Amboseli's dried lake bed and swamps concentrate wildlife in the open, and its herds of large-tusked elephants are the best documented in the country, some tracked by researchers since the 1970s. The park's signature shot pairs those herds against Mount Kilimanjaro across the Tanzanian border, clearest in the hour after sunrise before cloud builds over the peak.

Two nights covers it: a dawn drive for the Kilimanjaro backdrop, an afternoon drive for the swamp wildlife, and one night in between. Amboseli connects to the Masai Mara by a roughly one-hour light-aircraft hop, which is how most itineraries link the two rather than driving between them.

Observation Hill

The one spot in the park visitors can leave the vehicle; a panoramic view over the swamps and herds below.

The swamps

Enkongo Narok and Longinye stay green year-round and draw the largest concentrations of elephant and buffalo.

Amboseli Elephant Research Camp

Some lodges arrange a visit or talk with the long-running research project tracking the park's named elephant families.

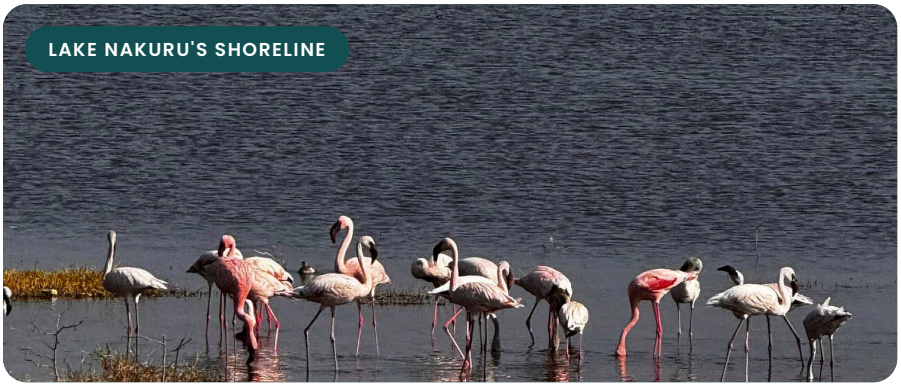
Maasai cultural centers

Several community-run centers near the park gate offer a more grounded alternative to a roadside photo stop.

READ ON All 15 of Kenya's parks, wildlife focus by park, are ranked in the national parks guide.

Lake Nakuru

rhino sanctuary · 1-2 nights · closest park to Nairobi



LAKE NAKURU'S SHORELINE

Lake Nakuru National Park is fully fenced, a deliberate conservation choice that makes it one of the most reliable places in Africa to see both black and white rhino in the same visit. The lake's flamingo population swings with water levels year to year, from tens of thousands to a scattered few hundred, so a guaranteed pink shoreline is no longer the sure thing older guidebooks describe.

Roughly three hours from Nairobi by road, it is the easiest park to bolt onto a Mara-based trip without adding a flight, and a realistic option even for travelers with only a long weekend.

Flamingo numbers depend on lake chemistry that shifts year to year. Ask your operator for a current count before building a trip around the shot.

The fenced perimeter means predator density runs lower than the Mara. Come for rhino and birdlife, not for a Big Five sweep.

Baboon Cliff

A viewpoint over the full lake basin; a reliable stop even on a quiet wildlife day.

The rhino sanctuary zones

Both black and white rhino are habituated enough here for close, ethical viewing from the vehicle.

Makalia Falls

A short waterfall detour in the park's south, a quieter stop away from the main game-drive circuit.

Menengai Crater

A short drive from Nakuru town, one of the world's largest calderas, worth a half-day if time allows.

MORE ON THE SITE The complete national parks page covers Nakuru alongside the ten other parks worth knowing.

Diani Beach and the coast

Indian Ocean · 3-4 nights · warm year-round



Tides swing wide at Diani. Check the tide chart before planning a swim window; low tide can push the water out several hundred meters.

Beach vendors selling excursions directly on the sand often quote well above the going rate. Book through your hotel or a listed operator instead.

Diani Beach runs the safari-and-beach combination that closes out most Kenya itineraries: white sand, a reef that keeps the water calm, and a one-hour flight from Nairobi or the parks rather than a long coastal drive. It has more resort infrastructure than most of Kenya's coastline, alongside a genuine reef ecosystem just offshore worth a snorkel or dive day.

Three to four nights covers a real reset after a dust-heavy safari: reef trips, a dhow sunset sail, and enough beach time to justify the flight. Mombasa, an hour north, adds Old Town and Fort Jesus for a half-day if the trip has room.

Kisite-Mpunguti Marine Park

A full-day boat trip south to snorkel a protected reef and, in season, spot dolphins in the Wasini channel.

Colobus Conservation

A local center protecting the endangered Angolan colobus monkey, native to this stretch of coastal forest.

Diani Beach itself

A wide, reef-protected stretch running roughly 10 kilometers; quiet at the southern end, resort-lined further north.

Fort Jesus, Mombasa

A 16th-century Portuguese fort in Mombasa's Old Town, an hour north; a worthwhile half-day if the schedule allows.

KEEP READING

Reef conditions and quieter swimmable stretches sit in the Kenya beaches write-up; dive sites are covered on the diving page.

Off the beaten path: Lake Turkana and beyond

the Jade Sea, Samburu, Mount Kenya · for a second or third trip



Overland routes to Turkana are long and rough. A charter flight from Nairobi, not a road trip, is the realistic way in for most itineraries.

Lake Turkana, the world's largest permanent desert lake, sits in Kenya's remote north, a UNESCO World Heritage site for both its striking jade color and its fossil record, including some of the oldest hominid remains ever found nearby. It sees a fraction of the Mara's traffic, reached by charter flight or a long, rough overland route rather than sealed road.

Samburu National Reserve, north of Mount Kenya, offers species the southern parks do not: Grevy's zebra, reticulated giraffe, and gerenuk, alongside a drier, more rugged landscape. Both destinations reward travelers with extra days and a preference for scale and quiet over convenience.

Lake Turkana

The remote north, reached by charter flight; volcanic landscapes and one of the world's richest fossil sites.

Samburu National Reserve

North of Mount Kenya; species found nowhere in the southern circuit, a quieter alternative to the Mara.

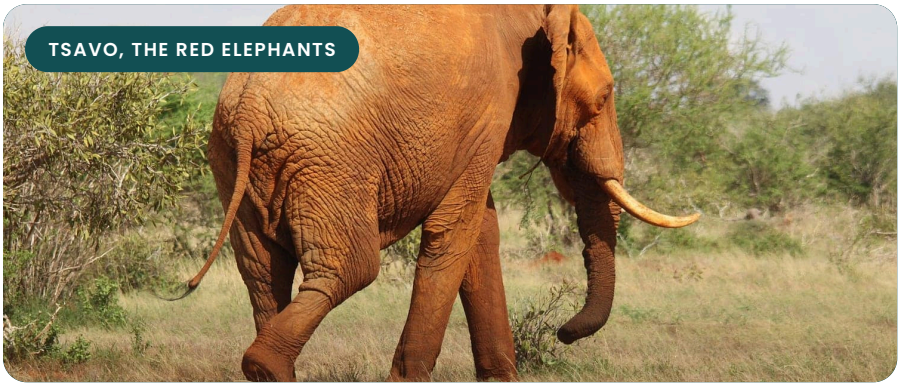
THE LONG VERSION

The complete off-the-beaten-path breakdown maps out both routes with logistics for extended itineraries.

photo: Wikimedia Commons

National parks, the wider picture

15 parks and reserves · beyond the big four



Tsavo East and West are managed as separate parks with separate gates, despite sharing a name and a border. Confirm which one a tour actually enters.

Kenya runs 15 major national parks and reserves beyond the Mara, Amboseli, and Nakuru. Tsavo East and West together form one of the largest protected areas in the world, known for elephants dusted red from the local soil and a genuinely wilder, less-visited feel than the Mara. Mount Kenya National Park protects Africa's second-highest peak and its own trekking circuit, separate from anything on the safari-vehicle circuit.

Most first trips skip Tsavo in favor of the Mara's density, but it is the natural second-safari choice: closer to Diani than the Mara is, and easily combined with a coast extension without backtracking through Nairobi.

Tsavo East

Open plains and the Galana River; the red-dust elephants are the signature sighting.

Tsavo West

More varied terrain, including Mzima Springs, where hippos are visible through an underwater viewing chamber.

Mount Kenya National Park

A separate trekking trip, not a game drive; Point Lenana is reachable by most fit hikers without technical climbing.

Ol Pejeta Conservancy

Home to the last two northern white rhino on Earth, under armed guard, and a significant chimpanzee sanctuary.

ON THE WEBSITE All 15 parks, wildlife focus and access notes, are ranked in the national parks rundown.

Diving and the marine parks

Kisite-Mpunguti, Watamu · warm water, reef in recovery



The northeast monsoon (December to March) generally gives the clearest water; the southeast monsoon (June to September) can churn visibility along parts of the coast.

Kenya's coast runs a warm-water reef system protected in several marine parks, the two most established being Kisite-Mpunguti near Diani and Watamu further north. Visibility and coral health vary with the season and with 1998's major bleaching event, from which some reefs have recovered better than others; Watamu's reef is generally considered the healthier of the two for diving specifically.

Water stays in the high twenties Celsius year-round, so a 3mm wetsuit or less is standard. Most operators run PADI-certified trips from Diani, Watamu, and Malindi, with courses available for beginners alongside dives for certified divers.

Kisite-Mpunguti Marine Park

South of Diani; snorkel-friendly shallows plus deeper dive sites, and a real chance of dolphins on the boat ride.

Watamu Marine Park

North of Mombasa; generally the healthier reef of the two, with a resident sea turtle population.

MORE DETAIL

Site-by-site detail and operator notes sit in the Kenya diving guide.

Islands: Lamu and the coast

Swahili heritage · no cars, donkeys and dhows instead



Lamu is a separate flight, not a coast-road detour from Diani. Treat it as its own 3 to 4 day stop rather than a side trip.

Lamu Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the oldest continuously inhabited Swahili settlement in East Africa, a maze of coral-stone buildings with no cars on the island; donkeys and dhows handle transport instead. It sits far enough north of Diani (a separate flight from Nairobi or Mombasa) that most itineraries treat it as an alternative coast stop rather than an add-on.

The wider coast has several smaller islands worth a day trip from Diani or Mombasa, generally reef-fringed and reached by dhow, each with a different mix of snorkeling, birdlife, or quiet beach.

Lamu Old Town

UNESCO-listed Swahili architecture, no motor vehicles; a genuinely different pace than the mainland resorts.

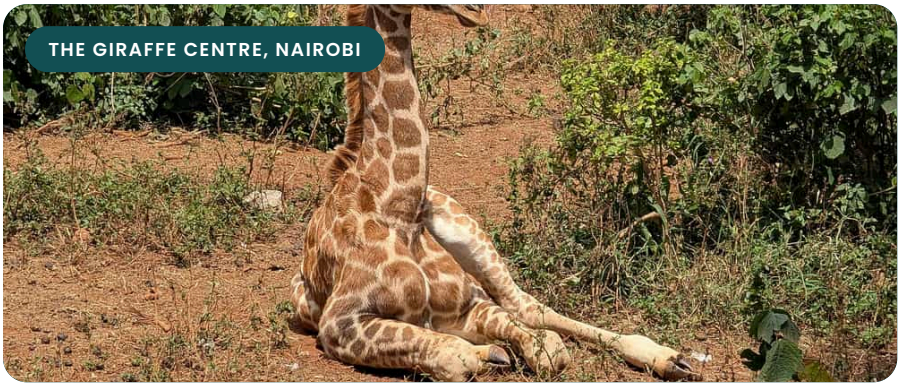
Shela Beach

A short dhow or walk from Lamu town; wide, quiet sand with dunes behind it.

WORTH A READ All of Kenya's coastal and lake islands are covered in the islands page.

Nairobi, briefly

gateway city · 1 night in, 1 night out



Nairobi is where every safari starts and ends, and most itineraries budget one night on each side rather than treating it as a destination itself. That said, Nairobi National Park, a genuine wildlife park with lion, giraffe, and rhino, sits inside the city's southern edge, backdropped by the skyline, a legitimately strange and worthwhile half-day for a tight connection.

The Sheldrick Wildlife Trust elephant orphanage and the Giraffe Centre both run short, well-run visits that fit neatly into a layover day, and both fund genuine conservation work rather than running as pure tourist attractions.

03

Safari, worked out

The Migration calendar, lodge vs camp vs mobile tented, and the etiquette that separates a good safari from an intrusive one. No other trip prepares you for this the way Kenya does.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The Great Migration, month by month 19

Lodge vs camp vs mobile tented 20

Safari etiquette and conservation fees 21

The Great Migration, month by month

the herds move on rainfall, not a fixed date; here is the reliable pattern

The Migration is not an event that happens once a year in the Mara; it is a continuous circular movement of over a million wildebeest and zebra through the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem, following the rains. The herds are only in Kenya's Masai Mara for part of the year, and the river crossings that make the highlight reels depend on where the animals are relative to the Mara and Talek rivers when they arrive.

MONTHS	WHERE THE HERDS ARE	WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE MARA
Jan–Mar	Southern Serengeti, Tanzania	Herds not in Kenya; the Mara still holds resident wildlife and good weather.
Apr–Jun	Moving north through central Serengeti	Green season in the Mara, fewer vehicles, lower lodge rates, no crossings yet.
Jul–Oct	Masai Mara, Kenya	Peak season. River crossings possible most weeks; also the most vehicles per sighting.
Nov–Dec	Moving back south into the Serengeti	Herds thinning out of the Mara through November; short rains can soften some roads.

pattern: long-run Migration ecology, verified against operator reporting, 2026-08

An operator advertising a "guaranteed crossing" in June or November is selling against the actual pattern. July through September is the honest window.

Rainfall shifts the timing year to year by two to three weeks either way. Camps near the river track the herds daily and are the best live source, not a generic calendar.

SEE ALSO Full seasonal detail across all of Kenya's parks sits in the best time to visit write-up.

Lodge vs camp vs mobile tented

the choice that sets your budget more than any single park does

Where you sleep on safari changes the trip more than which park you pick. The three main formats trade off price, comfort, and how close the wildlife actually feels once the generator goes quiet at night.

FORMAT	TYPICAL COST/NIGHT	WHAT IT IS	BEST FOR
Group camping	50-90 USD	Shared dome tents on a mobile group tour, communal meals, budget vehicle.	Solo travelers and budget trips; the entry point to a real safari.
Permanent lodge	150-350 USD	Fixed hotel-style building inside or near the park, en-suite rooms, restaurant.	Families and first-timers who want reliable comfort over atmosphere.
Mobile tented camp	300-800 USD	Canvas tents with real beds and en-suite bathrooms, camp relocates with the Migration.	Repeat safari travelers who want proximity to the herds over fixed infrastructure.

price range: Pack Lightly Kenya cluster + operator listings, 2026-08

A mobile tented camp inside a private conservancy usually means fewer vehicles per sighting and night drives, both banned in the main Mara reserve.

"Luxury tented camp" and "mobile tented camp" get used loosely by marketing. Ask directly whether the camp physically relocates during the season.

GO DEEPER

Stay-area picks with live pricing for each park sit in the next chapter, starting on page 23.

Safari etiquette and conservation fees

what the park fees actually fund, and how to behave around wildlife

Park entry fees in Kenya (typically 60 to 80 USD per person per day for non-residents in the main parks) fund ranger salaries, anti-poaching patrols, and infrastructure, and are usually built into a booked safari package rather than paid separately at the gate. Private conservancy fees run on top of that and go directly to the Maasai landowners who lease their grazing land for wildlife instead of livestock, a model that has genuinely expanded habitat outside the parks' official borders.

Vehicle behavior around a sighting matters more than most first-timers expect: reputable operators keep a respectful distance, limit the number of vehicles at one sighting, and never chase an animal for a better angle. A guide who does otherwise is optimizing for your photo over the animal's welfare, worth flagging in a review afterward.

READ ON

Stay-area picks with live pricing for Nairobi, the Mara, and the coast are next, starting on page 23.

04

Stay and go deeper

Where to sleep at each stop, and the tours worth booking ahead instead of arranging on the ground.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Nairobi and the Mara 23

Amboseli and Lake Nakuru 24

Diani Beach and Mombasa 25

Where to stay: Nairobi and the Mara

prices per night, double room · book the Mara safari itself well ahead

Book only one Nairobi night on each side of the trip; walk-in and last-minute rates rarely beat pre-booked ones there, so lock them in with the rest of the itinerary. The Masai Mara camp is the exception: high-season and river-crossing-season camps book out 6 to 12 months ahead and are worth securing before anything else.

Nairobi

hostel **18 USD** mid **60 USD** comfort **150 USD**

Westlands or Karen for a calmer, greener base near the airport transfer routes. Check what a room costs near Westlands before you commit; dorm beds run through Hostelworld.

Masai Mara

camping **60 USD** lodge **220 USD** mobile tented **500 USD**

Book the camp as part of a full safari package, not separately; game drives, park fees, and transfers are almost always bundled in. Compare lodge options in the Mara if you are arranging the vehicle and camp separately.

Lodges and camps across both regions, filtered to what is actually bookable tonight. **Find Stays**

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

3-day Maasai Mara group joining Migration safari, daily departures

from 885 USD

5.0 (51 reviews)

Nairobi National Park and Giraffe Centre guided safari tour

from 23 USD

5.0 (33 reviews)

Nairobi Fairview coffee farm tour and tasting experience

from 36 USD

5.0 (34 reviews)

Where to stay: Amboseli and Lake Nakuru

prices per night, double room · both easy add-ons to a Mara-based trip

Amboseli and Lake Nakuru both work as two-night add-ons to a Mara-anchored itinerary; book them as part of the same safari package rather than arranging separate transfers. Amboseli connects to the Mara by light aircraft in roughly an hour; Nakuru is the closer park to Nairobi by road.

Amboseli

camping **55 USD** lodge **200 USD** luxury camp **450 USD**

Lodges on the park's western edge give the clearest dawn Kilimanjaro views. Compare lodge options in Amboseli if booking the stay separately from the safari package.

Lake Nakuru

camping **45 USD** lodge **150 USD** comfort **280 USD**

The closest major park to Nairobi, an easy overnight add rather than a standalone trip. Check what a room costs near Lake Nakuru.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Lake Nakuru day trip safari, optional Lake Naivasha boat add-on

from 180 USD

5.0 (8 reviews)

DIG IN

Amboseli-specific lodge picks and Kilimanjaro-view timing are covered on page 10; the full park breakdown is in the national parks breakdown.

Where to stay: Diani Beach and Mombasa

prices per night, double room · book the flight from the parks, not the room, first

Diani has enough resort inventory that a room booked a week out is usually still fine outside December and Easter peaks; the flight connecting from the Mara or Amboseli is the piece worth locking in early. Mombasa works better as a day trip from Diani than an overnight stop for most itineraries.

Diani Beach

hostel **15 USD** mid **70 USD** comfort **180 USD**

The southern end of the beach runs quieter than the resort-dense north. Check what a room costs on Diani Beach; dorm beds run through Hostelworld.

Mombasa

hostel **12 USD** mid **45 USD** comfort **110 USD**

Old Town for atmosphere and walking distance to Fort Jesus, Nyali for a calmer beach-adjacent base. Compare hotel options in Mombasa.

Beach hotels and resorts across the coast, filtered to what is actually bookable tonight. **Find Stays**

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Full-day dolphin watching with snorkeling in Wasini

from 150 USD

5.0 (25 reviews)

Kisite-Mpunguti Marine Park full-day excursion

from 120 USD

5.0 (16 reviews)

Diani taxi and airport transfers

from 70 USD

5.0 (89 reviews)

05

Routes and itineraries

Eight paths by persona and budget, a map of the classic loop, and a 10-day route worked out day by day.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip 27

The classic loop, as a map 29

The 10-day route, day by day 30

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths · find yours, jump to the matching itinerary

Who you travel with, how long you have, and what you spend per night decide the safari before any park list does. Find your row below; the 10-day route on the next spread covers path two in full.

SOLO · 5D · BUDGET

Nairobi to Mara group safari

USD 450 · group camping

- Nairobi 1n
- 3-day group Mara safari
- Back to Nairobi 1n

SOLO · 10D · BUDGET

Mara, Nakuru, Diani

USD 900 · camping + hostel

- Nairobi 1 · Mara safari 3
- Nakuru add-on 1
- Diani 4: hostel

COUPLE · 10D · MID

Mara, Amboseli, Diani

USD 4,600 for 2 · lodges

- Nairobi 1: transit lodge
- Mara lodge safari 3
- Amboseli 2, Diani 4

COUPLE · 7D · COMFORT

Mara conservancy and coast

USD 6,800 for 2 · mobile tented

- Mara conservancy 4: tented
- Diani 3: beachfront resort

FAMILY · 10D · MID

Mara, Nakuru, Diani

USD 8,200 · family of 4

- Mara lodge 3: family rooms
- Nakuru 1: rhino sanctuary
- Diani 5: family resort

FAMILY · 6D · COMFORT

Mara only, no coast

USD 5,400 · family of 4

- Mara lodge 5: pool + kids club
- Nairobi National Park half-day

MIGRATION CHASER · 8D · MID-HIGH

Mara river-crossing camp, Jul–Sep

USD 3,800 · booked a year out

- Nairobi 1
- Mara conservancy camp 6, near the river
- Nairobi 1

RETIREE · 12D · COMFORT

Mara, Amboseli, Nakuru, no rough roads

USD 11,500 per couple

- Mara lodge 4: private transfers
- Amboseli 3, Nakuru 2
- Diani 3: 5-star resort

THE FULL PICTURE

Full day-by-day versions online: the 7-day route and the 14-day route.

The classic loop, as a map

Nairobi out to the Mara, south to Amboseli, east to the coast

Light aircraft cover the park-to-park legs in under an hour each; road transfers between Nairobi and the Mara run 5 to 6 hours depending on route and season. Book the Mara safari and the coast flight a few months ahead in high season.



The 10-day route, day by day

Nairobi, the Mara, Amboseli, Diani · the fullest first-timer loop

1	**Nairobi**	Land, settle in, optional half-day at the Giraffe Centre or Sheldrick elephant orphanage.
2-4	**Masai Mara**	Road or flight transfer, dawn and afternoon game drives, one full day dedicated to the river-crossing zone if in season.
5	**Fly to Amboseli**	One-hour light-aircraft hop, afternoon game drive on arrival.
6	**Amboseli**	Dawn drive for the Kilimanjaro backdrop, Observation Hill, afternoon at the swamps.
7	**Fly to Diani**	Connecting flight via Nairobi or direct depending on route; afternoon free on the beach.
8-10	**Diani Beach**	Reef snorkel or dive day, a dhow sunset sail, and enough beach time to reset before flying home.

GO DEEPER The full 14-day route extends this loop with Lake Nakuru and extra Mara days for travelers with more time.

06

When to go, what it costs

Weather, crowds and prices by month, then a safari day itemized at three travel styles.

IN THIS CHAPTER

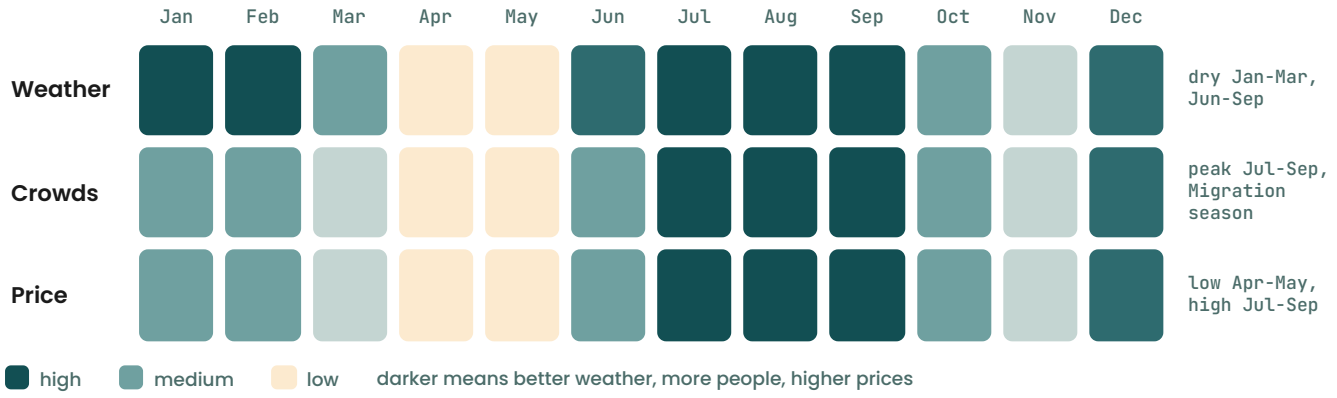
Weather, crowds, price 32

What a safari day really costs 33

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · Masai Mara-weighted

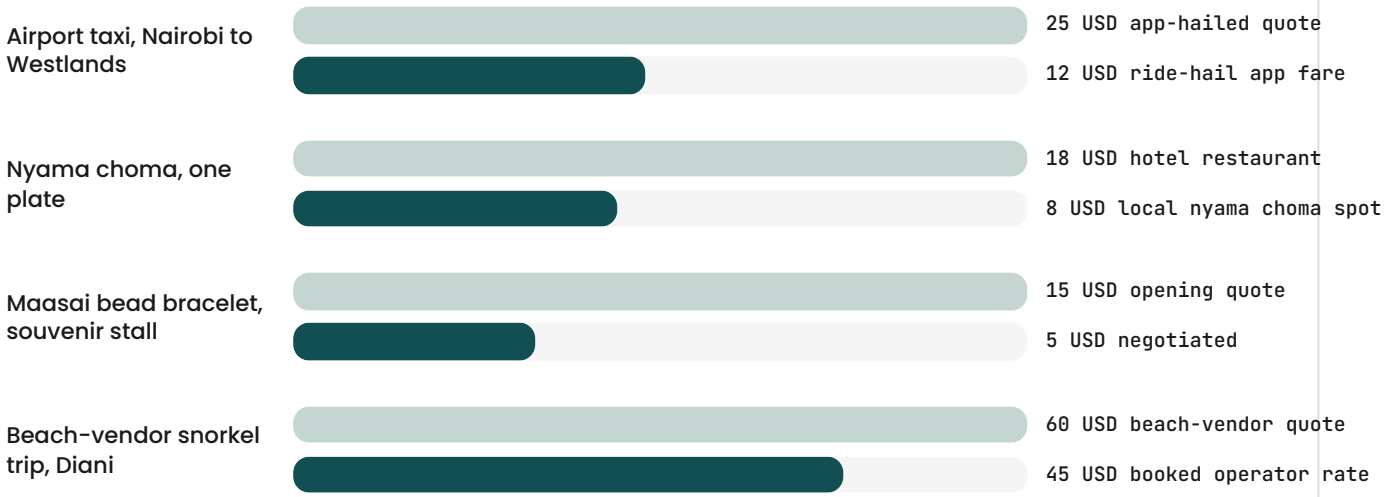
Kenya's safari calendar splits around rainfall and the Migration rather than temperature, which stays warm year-round near the equator. The two dry seasons, January to March and June to September, give the best game viewing since animals concentrate around permanent water; the long rains (roughly April to May) turn some park roads to mud and drop lodge rates sharply.



source: best-travel-time dataset · captured 2026-08-17

WHAT THINGS COST: QUOTED VS PAID

SAMPLE DATA



pack-lightly.com

What a safari day costs

three travel styles · printed the way the day spends it

Safari budgets hide in package quotes, so here is a day in the Mara itemized instead: the tent or room, three meals, the game drive itself, and park fees. Three real versions of the same day.

A DAY IN KENYA

* camping safari *

shared dome tent, per person	25.00
camp breakfast, included	incl.
camp lunch, included	incl.
camp dinner, included	incl.
shared 4x4 game drive, per person	28.00
park entry fee, per person	1.00 avg over 3d
bottled water + snacks	3.00
tips for guide + camp staff	3.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~60 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-08-17

A DAY IN KENYA

* lodge safari *

lodge double room, half board, included	75.00 incl.
private 4x4 game drive, split	55.00
park entry fee, per person	27.00 avg over 3d
sundowner drink	8.00
tips for guide + lodge staff	10.00
souvenirs	5.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~180 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-08-17

A DAY IN KENYA

* luxury mobile tented *

conservancy tented suite, half board + bush meals, incl.	320.00 incl.
private guide + vehicle, incl.	incl.
conservancy + park fees, incl.	incl.
balloon safari add-on	120.00
tips for guide + camp staff	25.00
sundowner + fine dining, incl.	incl.
TOTAL / DAY	**~500 USD**

budget-calculator data · 2026-08-17

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

07

Practical

ETA, money, transport, eSIM, health, packing. The boring parts you only read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order 35

Money and transport 36

Bed, bag, signal 37

Health basics 38

Book in this order

four things before you fly · everything else on the ground

Kenya rewards booking the safari itself well ahead and leaving the coast extension loose. Unlike Morocco or much of Europe, Kenya requires an Electronic Travel Authorization for nearly every nationality, so the visa step is a genuine task, not a formality. Four things reward locking in early, in this order.

8 wk before

International flights

Fares to Nairobi bottom out six to eight weeks ahead for the Jun-Sep Migration window. Most routes from Europe run 8 to 9 hours direct.

Compare fares on Skyscanner

8 wk before

The Masai Mara safari itself

Book the vehicle, guide, and camp together as a package; Migration-season camps near the river fill up 6 to 12 months out in the busiest weeks.

Browse Mara safaris on Viator

4 wk before

ETA + insurance

Apply for the ETA online at least 3 days before arrival, though 4 weeks ahead avoids any last-minute stress. Buy travel insurance that covers game-drive vehicle transfers specifically.

Check entry rules per passport

1 wk before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on the plane. Coverage thins out in the remote parks, so download offline maps before you leave Nairobi regardless.

Set up a Saily eSIM

Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival, plus two blank pages. Yellow fever vaccination proof is required if arriving from certain countries; check before you fly.

Tell your bank the dates before you fly. Kenyan ATMs sometimes flag a first foreign withdrawal and freeze the card.

07

Money and transport

cash, card, and M-Pesa · light aircraft for parks, road for the rest

Cash, card, and mobile money all matter here. The shilling (KES) is straightforward to exchange at Nairobi airport or in-country; safari packages are almost always quoted and paid in USD directly to the operator. M-Pesa, Kenya's mobile-money system, is genuinely useful for small purchases outside tourist zones but requires a local phone number to register, so most visitors skip it and use cash for those.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Camp bed / lodge double	USD 25	USD 75	USD 200
Meal, camp or lodge	incl.	incl.	incl.
Street meal, Nairobi or coast	USD 3	USD 10	USD 25
Shared vs private game drive	USD 28	USD 55	incl. in rate
Local beer (Tusker)	USD 2	USD 4	USD 7

verified 2026-08-17 · per-category numbers in the budget guide

TRANSPORT: WHAT BEATS WHAT

Light aircraft connect the major parks to each other and to Nairobi in under an hour each, the standard way most safari itineraries move between the Mara, Amboseli, and the coast. Road transfers between Nairobi and the Mara run 5 to 6 hours depending on the route and season, cheaper but a full day of driving. Within Nairobi, ride-hailing apps (Uber, Bolt) are the reliable option over hailing a taxi on the street. Inside the parks, the safari vehicle itself, arranged as part of the package, is the only way to move; self-drive is possible but rare among first-time visitors given road conditions and wildlife-proximity risk.

Light-aircraft baggage allowance is tight, usually 15kg in a soft-sided bag. Confirm the limit with your operator before packing for the internal flights.

Matatus (shared minibuses) are the local long-distance option but are not recommended for first-time visitors given driving standards and lack of fixed schedules.

READ ON

Full itinerary transport options sit in the 7-day itinerary and 14-day itinerary.

Bed, bag, signal

camps and lodges · packing for dust and cold safari mornings · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For lodges and camps, Stay22 wins on free-cancellation policy and inventory depth across the parks and coast alike. For hostels and budget stays in Nairobi or Diani, Hostelworld has the deeper review pool. For a full safari, book the camp as part of a package with the vehicle and guide rather than separately; most safari operators handle both together.

BAG: THE 10-DAY SAFARI-AND-COAST LIST

- [ ] Neutral-colored clothing: khaki, olive, brown; avoid bright colors and pure white (dust shows, some colors attract tsetse flies)
- [ ] A warm layer for pre-dawn game drives, temperatures drop sharply at altitude before sunrise
- [ ] Wide-brim hat and sunglasses for open-vehicle drives
- [ ] Binoculars, one pair per person minimum, shared pairs slow down every sighting
- [ ] Starter med-kit: loperamide, paracetamol, electrolytes, motion-sickness tablets for the bush roads
- [ ] SPF 50, reapplied often at equatorial UV levels
- [ ] Type G plug adapter
- [ ] 20,000 mAh power bank (limited outlets in tented camps)
- [ ] Soft-sided duffel, required by most light-aircraft baggage rules
- [ ] Swimwear and reef-safe sunscreen for the coast leg

Signal. Buy the eSIM the day before you fly and activate it on the plane. A 5 GB plan covers a week; 10 GB covers ten days of maps, photos, and uploads. Coverage drops in remote parks and en route to Turkana, so download offline maps before leaving Nairobi.

Set up a Saily eSIM

07

Health basics

malaria risk in most safari areas · yellow fever proof needed from some countries

Kenya sits in a malaria-risk zone across nearly all safari areas, including the Mara, Amboseli, and the coast; antimalarial medication is a standard recommendation from a travel clinic, taken as a course before, during, and after the trip. Yellow fever vaccination is not required to enter Kenya directly, but proof of vaccination is required if arriving from a country with risk of yellow fever transmission, worth checking against your routing specifically.

PRACTICAL BASICS

- [ ] Tap water: bottled or filtered is the safer default outside major hotels
- [ ] Malaria: antimalarials plus DEET-based repellent and long sleeves at dawn and dusk, the highest-risk hours
- [ ] Sun: equatorial UV burns fast even on overcast days; reapply SPF every two hours outdoors
- [ ] Pharmacies are well stocked in Nairobi and Mombasa, more limited near remote parks
- [ ] Travel insurance with medical evacuation cover matters most for the remote parks and any trekking legs

MORE ON THE SITE

The off-the-beaten-path rundown covers remote-route health basics (limited pharmacy access, evacuation planning) for Turkana and Samburu.

08

Safe and smart

The scams that target first-time safari visitors, the etiquette that matters most, and the language minimum that changes how locals respond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The scams that still work 40

Etiquette: do and do not 41

Emergency numbers + phrases 42

The scams that still work

constant in Nairobi tourist zones and beach vendors, absent inside a booked safari

Kenya is safer for visitors than the headlines suggest and more scam-adjacent than the brochures admit, concentrated almost entirely in Nairobi's tourist areas and the Diani beachfront rather than inside a properly booked safari, where the operator handles nearly everything. Knowing three patterns protects most of the money and stress tourists actually lose.

NAIROBI AND TRANSIT

Unofficial "guides" at the airport or CBD

A friendly stranger offering to help find a taxi or hotel is usually working toward a commission or an inflated fare. Use an app-based ride-hail instead.

The "your operator canceled" call

A caller claiming your booked safari operator canceled, offering an "alternative," is a known scam pattern. Verify directly with your operator's official contact before believing it.

Currency exchange on the street

Street money changers commonly shortchange with fast counting or damaged notes. Use a bank or airport exchange counter instead.

DIANI AND THE COAST

Beach vendors quoting inflated tour prices

Snorkel and dolphin trips sold directly on the sand often run well above the booked-operator rate. Book through your hotel or a listed operator instead.

Unlicensed safari resellers

A stranger offering a "cheaper" last-minute safari deal outside a licensed operator's office is a common source of no-show bookings. Book through a verified operator or your lodge.

Overpriced curio-shop pressure

Curio shops on the standard safari-tour circuit sometimes apply heavy sales pressure. Browsing without buying is entirely normal; walking out costs nothing.

08

KEEP READING Full safety context by region sits in the travel safety map.

Etiquette: do and do not

around wildlife, around Maasai communities, around the camp

Most etiquette missteps in Kenya come from treating a safari like a photo tour rather than a visit to someone else's home and land. A few rules cover most situations.

Do

- Ask before photographing any person, especially in Maasai villages; a small fee is often expected and reasonable
- Stay inside the vehicle during game drives except at officially designated stops
- Tip guides and camp staff in cash, USD or KES, at the end of the stay
- Dress modestly in towns and rural areas away from beach resorts
- Greet with "jambo" or "habari" before launching into a request; it changes the tone of the exchange

Do not

- Stand up through the vehicle roof hatch when an animal is close; guides will ask you to sit, and it is for safety, not preference
- Feed wildlife under any circumstance, including monkeys near lodges
- Photograph government buildings, airports, or military installations
- Wear camouflage-pattern clothing; it is restricted for civilians in Kenya
- Assume every "cultural village visit" on a tour circuit is community-run; ask your operator directly

08

READ ON

Conservation-fee context and vehicle-behavior etiquette specific to game drives is on page 21.

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now · the phrases change how locals respond

POLICE
999 / 112
nationwide

TOURIST POLICE (NAIROBI)
+254 20 604 707
English-speaking

AMBULANCE (ST JOHN)
+254 20 6003639
Nairobi and major towns

AMREF FLYING DOCTORS
+254 20 6992000
safari medical evacuation

US EMBASSY NAIROBI
+254 20 363 6000
citizen services

AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL
+254 20 366 2000
Nairobi, English-speaking staff

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND

ENGLISH	SWAHILI (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	jambo	widely understood, tourist-friendly greeting
How are you?	habari?	the more genuine local greeting
Thank you	asante	"asante sana" for emphasis
Yes / No	ndiyo / hapana	basic essentials
How much?	bei gani?	useful for markets and curio shops
No, thank you	hapana, asante	firm, polite decline for vendors
Where is the bathroom?	choo kiko wapi?	practical basics
Help!	msaada!	emergencies only

Save your camp or lodge's name and contact number in your phone before every internal flight; not every airstrip has reliable signal.

English is an official language alongside Swahili and is widely spoken in tourist areas, camps, and cities; the phrases above are a courtesy, not a necessity.

09

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 44

Print cards: cut, fold, take 45

Sources and methodology 46

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Kenya data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Kenya: 60 USD/day camping safari, 500 USD/day luxury tented.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/



Country Map

Every stop in this guide mapped, from the Mara to Diani.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/



Best Time to Travel

Best: Jan-Mar, Jun-Sep. Month-by-month weather for 140+ countries.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/



Visa Checker

Kenya ETA: about 30 USD, apply online at least 3 days ahead.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale · credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

SWAHILI · ESSENTIALS

Hello	jambo
How are you?	habari?
Thank you	asante
Yes / No	ndiyo / hapana
How much?	bei gani?
No, thank you	hapana, asante
Where is bathroom?	choo kiko wapi?
Help!	msaada!

pack-lightly.com

EMERGENCY · KENYA

Police	999 / 112
Flying Doctors	+254 20 6992000
Tourist Police (Nairobi)	+254 20 604 707
US Embassy Nairobi	+254 20 363 6000

My camp/lodge: _____

Operator contact: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Kenya hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/kenya/

Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the camp.

Ask your camp or lodge manager to write their name and contact number on the back before your first game drive.

Image credits

every photo, its author and license

All location, food and wildlife photographs come from Wikimedia Commons. Each is reused under the Creative Commons or public-domain license noted below, with attribution to the photographer. Under CC BY-SA, this list and any reuse carry the same share-alike terms. Click any title to open the original file on Commons.

1. **amboseli elephants kilimanjaro**. Ninaras, CC BY 4.0.
2. **diani beach dhow**. Khanairobi, CC BY-SA 4.0.
3. **kenya cover**. Danijel Mihajlovic, CC BY-SA 4.0.
4. **lake nakuru flamingos**. Letherian3, CC BY-SA 4.0.
5. **lake turkana landscape**. AdamPG, CC BY-SA 3.0.
6. **lamu old town street**. Mzein04, CC BY-SA 4.0.
7. **masai mara migration**. Daniel Case, CC BY-SA 4.0.
8. **nairobi giraffe centre**. Maciej, CC BY-SA 2.0.
9. **tsavo red elephants**. Donald Macauley, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured July 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Lodge, camp, and hotel pricing: Stay22 and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-08-17, Nairobi, the Masai Mara, Amboseli, and Diani Beach.
2. Currency rates: ECB reference rates, 2026-08-17.
3. Visa policy: Kenya eTA portal (etakenya.go.ke), retrieved 2026-08-17.
4. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-07.
5. Climate and Migration pattern: best-travel-time dataset plus long-run ecological reporting, captured 2026-08-17.
6. Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured 2026-08-17.
7. Pack Lightly Kenya cluster pages, retrieved 2026-08-17: hub · best places · national parks · off the beaten path

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months. Budget figures come from the live budget-calculator dataset (with a country-comparison fallback where the primary dataset lags), climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.08: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: February 2027. Not covered here: cruise stopovers, group coach tours, medical tourism.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, follows this page. The cover shows a wildebeest and zebra crossing in the Masai Mara.