



SAFARI 101

Photo: Les de Villiers



There are a few basic questions that pop up like hippo heads whenever African safaris are discussed. In the following pages I deal briefly with these questions. I will be happy to go into more detail whenever you are ready to embark on your life-changing journey to one of Africa's animal kingdoms.

Be forewarned, the experience is addictive. If it is your first trip out there, it will definitely not be the last.

I have been going on safaris since the age of eight and after a stint as a hunter turned to wildlife photography. Nowadays I go to Africa at least twice every year to get my fix.

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What is a safari?

Safari—Swahili for journey—was originally used to describe the long trek into the interior of Africa by discoverers and hunters. Today it refers mostly to the viewing of Africa's animals in their natural habitat. Part of the experience is staying in tents, huts or chalets in these wildlife areas. However, most of the day is devoted to game viewing under the guidance of an expert ranger or guide.



Where do I go?

Southern and East Africa offer a whole range of possibilities—each with their own particular advantages. Foremost among the safari destinations are Botswana, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Namibia and Zambia with Malawi, Uganda and Rwanda on the rise and Zimbabwe (once a premier destination) on hold due to political unrest and uncertainty.

How do I get there?

Several major airlines provide direct flights from the United States and most European carriers fly to cities across the region.

The onward journey to safari lodges is usually by smaller aircraft. Often referred to as bush planes these aircraft are capable of landing and taking off from airstrips in the wild.

Apart from their remarkable safety record, these craft also provide passengers with interesting animal sightings from the air as they approach their destination.





What are the accommodations like?

It varies from rustic to regal—depending on your preference and pocket. By the way, rustic can be quite romantic and is far from spartan. No one who wishes to stay in the safari business dares to offer their guests anything short of special. While the best among them regularly walk away with Condé Nast and Travel & Leisure’s “best small hotels in the world” awards, the rest stay close.



What about the food?

A good friend of mine in the business, when criticized for providing too much comfort in the bush, retorted: "To view the animals you don't have to live like them."

The same goes for the food. Safari country has some of the very best gourmet chefs dishing up exotic plates for guests on their return from sorties in the wild.



Dining on safari can be out in the bush, in a fenced-in "boma" or in an elegant Africa-decor dining room.

The food varies between venison and barbeque to gourmet. Special provision is made for vegetarians. The wines are usually South African but most lodges stock products from other parts of the world as well.

What is “The Big Five”?

First coined by hunters to denote the five “most dangerous animals,” the term “Big Five” is today mostly used for promotional purposes. Claiming to have The Big Five—elephant, lion, rhino, leopard and buffalo—is considered to be a plus. However, the animal responsible for the most human deaths per year is missing from the list. Keep in mind that some of Africa’s best safari destinations do not have all of the Big Five and that there are many hundreds of other animal and bird species to see.



*So who is the killer beast
that did not make it to the
“Big Five”?*

*It is the tubby hippopotamus
(or hippo) that lives in the
waterholes and rivers of
Africa. Hippos are not killers
by design but by default. As
vegetarians of the first order
they do not go after prey.*
Usually their victims are
people who unwittingly find
themselves on the narrow
trail used by hippos when they
return to the river after their
nocturnal grazing. One quick
snap of the powerful jaws is
sufficient to dispose of the
unfortunate human obstacle.*

** In rare cases hippos have
resorted to eating left-over meat
when going short on veggies.*

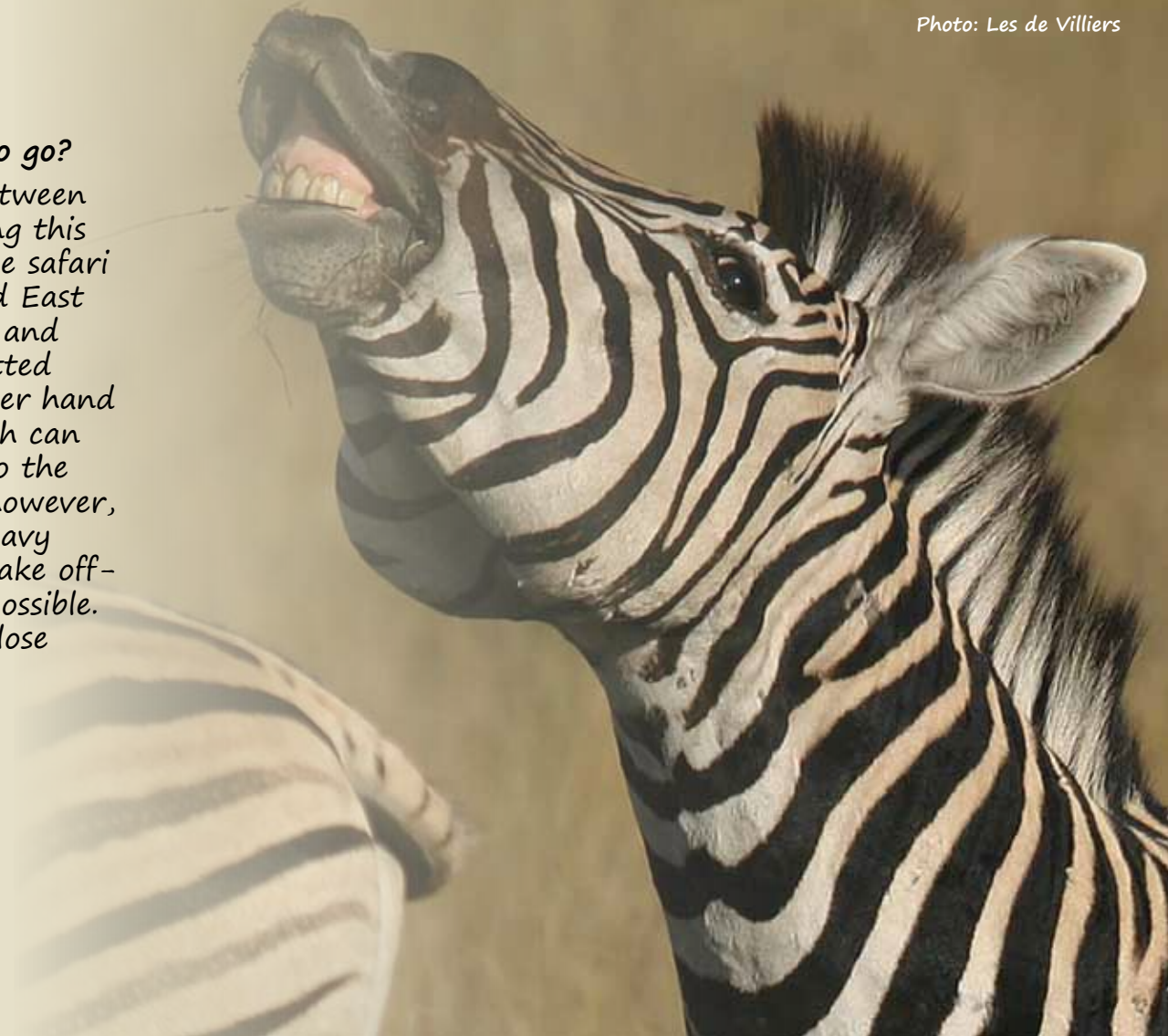


What about birds?

Africa is a birder's paradise. From the shores of Lake Manyara where a million Flamingo gather, to the savannah of East Africa, from the water world of Okavango to the arid desert of Namibia, more than a thousand species compete for attention.

What is the best time to go?

The rule of thumb is between June and August. During this dry winter period in the safari regions of Southern and East Africa, foliage is sparse and the animals can be spotted more easily. On the other hand the lush summer growth can add beauty and color to the experience. Be aware, however, that in some regions heavy summer rains might make off-road game viewing impossible. A few camps actually close during this period.



For how long?

It pretty much depends on how much time you have and the size of your budget. Ten to fourteen days is the average but it can be as short as three days for those who include a safari as an add-on to a tour of the "civilized" part of the region. The secret is to spend at least two days at a specific spot. Game viewing should never be a hurried affair.



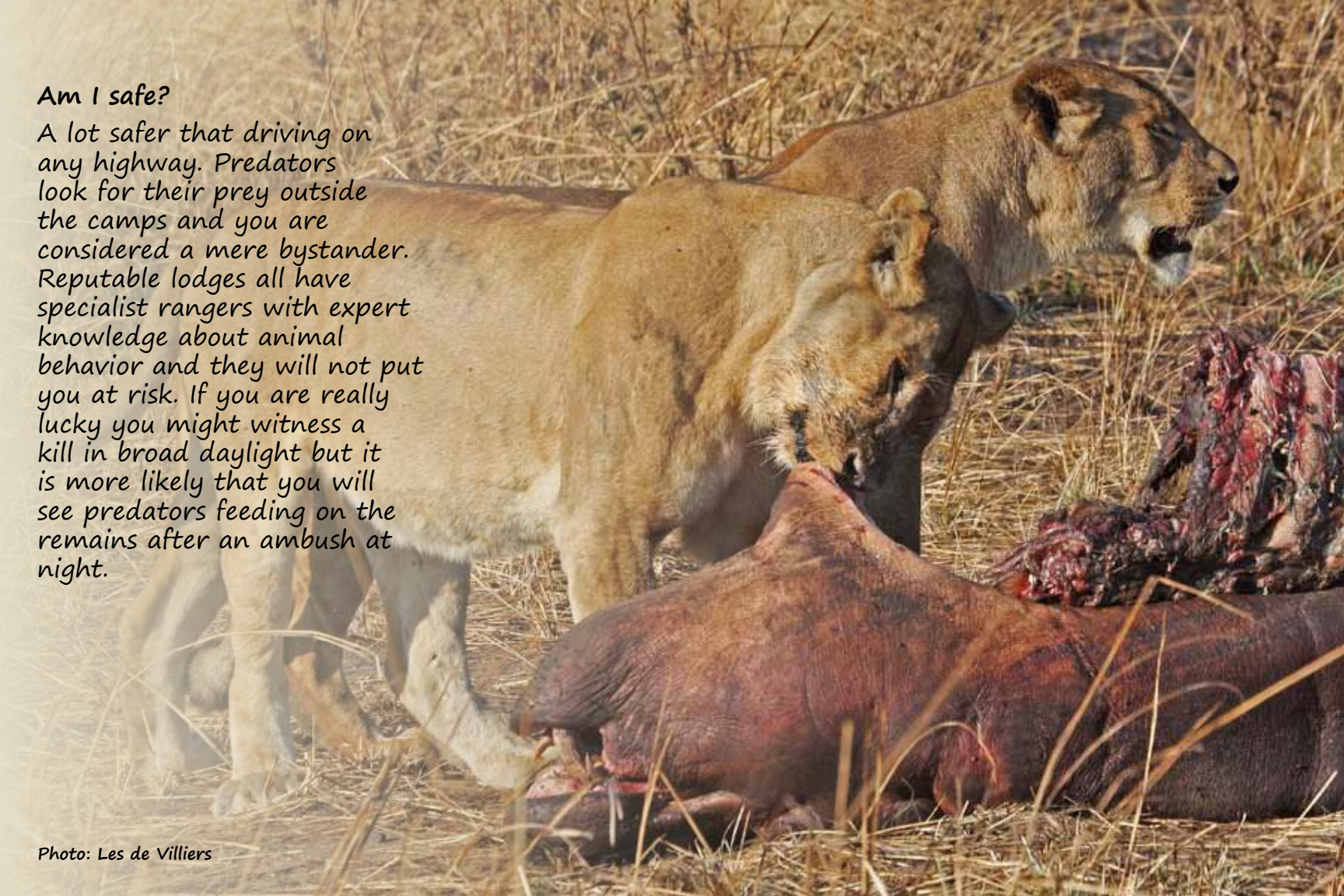
How do you view the animals?

Normally game viewing is done from four-wheel drive vehicles but there are numerous other ways of observing animals—ranging from walking to canoeing, from horse- or elephant backs, hot air balloons and even while relaxing during midday at your camp pool.



Am I safe?

A lot safer than driving on any highway. Predators look for their prey outside the camps and you are considered a mere bystander. Reputable lodges all have specialist rangers with expert knowledge about animal behavior and they will not put you at risk. If you are really lucky you might witness a kill in broad daylight but it is more likely that you will see predators feeding on the remains after an ambush at night.



Where do we start?

With an African safari specialist who has extensive first-hand experience. Everyone of the trips we arrange is tailor-made. There is no such thing as a one size fits all when you work with discerning clients ranging in age and taste. The comment most often heard on their return? "This was the trip of a lifetime. We want to go again."





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When you are ready to go on safari, contact us at info@theultimatesafari.com or at 203-966-9645 (Mobile: 203-219-2321). We will be happy to arrange your trip of a lifetime. In the meantime, you may want to visit www.theultimatesafari.com for further reading.