

## **Safari Consultant**

### **Why do I need a safari consultant?**

**This is a question frequently asked by independent-minded, seasoned travelers once they have decided to embark on the long journey to Africa to enjoy a safari. Arranging a safari looks pretty simple until they Google “African safari” and find themselves buried under tens of thousands of web offerings in a half a dozen countries.**

It is possible to make reservations directly online at several of the safari camps and with service providers. But it is unlikely that you will be able to obtain lower rates and even if you do save a few pennies it is at the risk of putting together a lesser and uncoordinated trip by relying on what you see on the web.

While most consultants work on a basis of commissions included in the normal rate it is true that some might factor in additional fees for their services and expertise. After all you are not only tapping into their extensive personal knowledge and experience at the planning stage of the trip but should be able to rely on them throughout your journey for assistance and adjustments in case of any unforeseen crises along the way.

Stay away from anyone in the business who simply sells you the trip, hand you the vouchers and bid you *bon voyage*. Insist on being able to communicate with your safari consultant directly in the event of an emergency. It is his or her job to work with the service providers in the field to find the best possible solution to any problems that may arise along the way.

There have been a few occasions where safari consultants had to step in and assist with alternative arrangements necessitated by sickness, cancelled and missed flights and the rare case of bungling along the way. They should be able to reconstruct and adjust itineraries together with their contacts in the field to the satisfaction of guests. They should also receive regular reports during their clients’ journey to be sure that everything is going smoothly. Even though they are going to destinations that were personally checked out and approved it is the consultant’s duty to make sure that everything goes according to plan. Nothing should be left nothing to chance.

Regardless of who you use, due diligence is advisable. We are listing a few key questions that you might want to ask before you engage the services of a safari consultant.



## QUESTIONS TO ASK

Following are a few questions that you may want to ask when you approach a safari specialist to take care of your safari arrangements.

### About the specialist

- **Do you have extensive safari experience?** (This is very important.)
- **Do you have first-hand knowledge of the parks and lodges that you recommend?** (As important as the first question).
- **Do you specialize in African trips?** (If it is a larger tour operator that handles other exotic destinations you at least want to know that it has an African department with knowledgeable people who qualify on the previous two counts).
- **How many years have you been in the business?** (While it is obviously reassuring to work with a business that has a proven record, it would be unwise to rule out a new one, especially if it has recruited experienced safari specialists to join its team. Remember every business has to start at some point).
- **Do you have former clients in my neighborhood who can be contacted for referral?** (This is more important than the previous question. Word-of-mouth recommendations do count, even in young businesses).
- **What are your and/or your service provider's professional affiliations and track record?** (It is comforting to know that a specialist who handles your money on up-front payments belongs to recognized trade associations and is insured. But that is not enough. It is your responsibility to take out travel insurance that ensures a refund should you have to cancel your trip at the last moment or cut short your visit for medical or other catastrophic reasons).
- **On what basis do you charge for your services—a fee or commissions included in your price?** (Most specialists will include their payment in the form of commissions in the price quoted to you. Some might, however, charge you a fee for their advice and assistance).
- **Do you handle all the arrangements, including flight bookings, if needed?** (While some operators can do this, you might want to make these arrangements separately, especially if you have a stack of mileage points or belong to a credit card company that offers special twofers deals on major airlines).
- **Do you monitor my movements with your associates in Africa** to be sure that everything is going smoothly and can my friends or relatives back home reach you at any time, day or night, in case of an emergency.

## About the Destination

- **What kind of animals can I expect to see at this game reserve?** (Keep in mind that no one will guarantee the Big Five or any other animals but they should be able to tell you whether they are present in a reserve or park. Also remember that game reserves that do not have all of the Big Five often offer other unique sightings that are just as exciting and interesting).
- **Does my guide have a thorough knowledge of the animals that we are about to see?** (This question should be redundant when it comes to private game lodges that offer game drives under the guidance of a qualified field guide. It is, however, pertinent when you opt for a tour lead by someone who is both driver and tour guide. They are not necessarily certified field guides).
- **Does this game reserve conform to environmentally sound practices?** (You should avoid any establishment where bait is set to attract animals. Although quite rare, as offenders risk being ostracized, there have been instances where predators were lured with bait to ensure a “sighting.” This is not only ethically but environmentally questionable. Insist on going to a place where nature is allowed to do its own thing. You don’t have to travel across the ocean to see a feeding day at a zoo).
- **Is everything included in the price?** (At higher priced private lodges and camps you liquor as well as laundry are usually included in the price but at others you are might be charged extra for both. Also ask about transfer fees as lodges usually charge an additional amount if they have to meet clients at a nearby commercial airport and provide transport to the lodge. Expect to pay park fees and levies if you are using the national parks).
- **Is the lodge situated in a game reserve or is it located outside a game park or on a game farm?** (There is a whole range of possibilities: Private lodges and hotels outside national parks; rest camps, hotels or private lodges inside national parks; and, ultimately, private lodges or camps in private game reserves. Be sure you know exactly what you are being offered).
- **Is it a game reserve or a game farm?** (Some destinations—especially those close to urban centers—are on former farmland stocked with game. These are not to be confused with, for example, private game reserves bordering Kruger National Park).
- **What type of accommodation?** (Private destinations in Southern and East Africa try to outdo each other in bush chic but they are all in essence thatched-roof chalets or suites and luxury tents. More modest versions on the same theme are available in the national parks where visitors may opt for fully or self-serviced units. In East Africa’s popular parks such as Serengeti and the Maasai Mara less intimate hotel accommodation is available).