

# A KENYAN SAFARI: CHOOSING BETWEEN THE MAASAI MARA AND TSAVO NATIONAL PARKS

The epitome of wilderness, Kenya's safaris offer visitors a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to come up close and personal with Africa's storybook animals, moving freely across the endless grassy plains that make up the surrounding savannah. The thrilling adventure is for many people, not just the highlight of their entire trip but the very reason they came to this stunning East African country in the first place. And as no two safaris are ever the same, it is important to know exactly what differentiates them – from the specific species you are expected to see to the activities available and the range of accommodation options. In this article, Ieva Staveckaite explores the various offerings at the renowned Maasai Mara and the less-visited, yet just as captivating, Tsavo East and West National Parks to make your decision a little easier.



## MAASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE

A land of breathtaking vistas, endless plains and abundant wildlife, the iconic Maasai Mara, situated in the southwest of Kenya, is not only one of the top game reserves in the country, but also amongst the most famous national parks in the world. Together with Tanzania's Serengeti National Park, found on Maasai Mara's southern border, the reserve plays host to the annual mind-boggling, adrenaline-pumping wildebeest, zebra and gazelle migration between the months of July and October. One of Africa's most dramatic survival stories, the Great Migration, sees herds of more than two million making their way from the Serengeti across the crocodile-infested waters of the Mara River in search of fresh grazing lands and new sources of water. While this thrilling spectacle draws in crowds of more than 10,000 people from across the world alone, it is only one of several reasons the Maasai Mara warrants a visit.

Covering an area of 1,510 square-kilometres, this grassland-dominated natural paradise boasts an incredibly diverse ecosystem. The year-round concentration of game not only includes the Big Five (lion, elephant, buffalo, rhino and leopard) but also large rafts of hippo, endangered black rhinos, towering giraffes, and speedy cheetahs. Birding enthusiasts are additionally incredibly spoiled with over 450 species to look out for, including the red-winged Schalow's turaco, white-tipped crest, and roaming secretary bird.



Lion cubs

Apart from its abundant wildlife, the Maasai Mara is also distinguished by the nomadic pastoralists who call it home. Arguably the single most iconic tribe in Africa, the Maasai are recognised worldwide for their vibrant clothing (*shukas*), beautifully crafted handiwork and lively cultural dance. While the Nilotic ethnic group has modernised in a number of ways, largely choosing to settle in one place, they still adhere to many aspects of their traditional culture, which visitors can experience on daily tours. Offering a unique glimpse into local life along with authentic interactions, these tours typically comprise of a welcome ceremony, during which the jumping dance *adumu* is performed, as well as a guided walk through the huts, bomas and (often) schools found on the settlements, with the chance to purchase expertly crafted jewellery right from its source.

Accommodation options within the reserve vary greatly, ranging from luxury lodges and hotels to budget tented camps. For an intimate experience amidst an exclusive location in the Olare Motogori Conservancy, visitors should opt for the eco-friendly Porini Lion Camp. Offering unparalleled views of boisterous hippos in the adjacent Ntiakatiak River, this private sanctuary is known for its excellent game guides and goosebump-inducing hot air balloon safaris. Those who wish to visit the reserve specifically for the Great Migration should check out the river-facing Sand River Masai Mara, while those seeking one-of-a-kind walking safaris guided by Maasai warriors should opt for community-focused Saruni Mara.





## TSAVO NATIONAL PARKS

At nearly 23,000 square kilometres combined, Tsavo East and West are by far the largest national parks in Kenya, making up approximately 40% of the nation's protected land. In fact, the reserves located in the country's southwest are one of the biggest game sanctuaries in the world, best-loved for their captivating landscapes, herds of dust-red elephants, and the 300 kilometre-long Yatta Plateau – the world's longest lava flow. Their varying terrains mainly distinguish the two; Tsavo East consists of primarily flat grassland and savanna (perfect for spotting the Big Five), while Tsavo West encompasses boggy swamps, rocky ridges, and a lush mountainous backdrop. Being less visited than the renowned Maasai Mara, Tsavo provides a more authentic nature-watching experience on less-populated game areas easily accessible to day-trippers out of Mombasa and Nairobi, with the option to stay overnight.

Home to some of Africa's largest remaining big tuckers – known for their immense tusks, often weighing more than 50kg each – Tsavo presents visitors with the chance to view these majestic and rarely photographed beasts which are continuously falling prey to poachers before their numbers diminish entirely. Tsavo is further the only place in the world where you can see red elephants, who get their unique hue from bathing in the park's red volcanic soil. In addition to these incredible elephant species, as well as the Big Five, the reserves are also home to rhinos, cheetahs, buffalos, hippos, waterbucks, crocodiles, wild dogs, and boast a prolific birdlife of over 500 recorded species.



Walking tours led by experienced guides take visitors to the sites of both Tsavo East and West's captivating geological wonders while exploring the various flora and fauna that survive in this challenging environment. Here brave explorers can walk on the expansive Yatta Plateau – a fascinating formation created from molten rock from the Ol Donyo Sabuk Mountain, and marvel at the abundant wildlife gathered at the crystal clear waters of Mzima Springs, where a semi-submerged hut provides the ultimate view of the incredible creatures as they go about their daily business. Look out for the monkeys that play overhead in the broad acacias and the colourful birds that perch on the swinging raffia palms.

As with the Maasai Mara, Tsavo East and West provide a wide range of accommodation options, including boutique camps, private conservancy-based lodges and rustic canvas chalets. A timeless favourite, Ol Donyo Lodge sits on over 111,000 hectares of private land at the foot of the Chyulu Hills, between Tsavo East and Amboseli National Park. The land itself is owned by roughly 4,000 local Maasai people, who regularly open their homes for cultural tours and lead walking tours across the game-filled plains. Other activities available include conservation and outreach programmes, mountain hiking and biking, horse riding and day and night drives. The 10 private cottages that make up Ol Donyo Lodge also feature roof terraces that can be set up with cosy beds for guests to enjoy a night under the starry African sky, surrounded by the gentle noises of the animal kingdom.



African buffaloes

