

Everything I wish I Knew Before Booking My South Africa Safari



Ella McKendrick



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I'VE LEARNT THE HARD WAY SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

I first set foot on the African continent back in 2012. Naive and ill-experienced, it would take trips until I realised that booking with an overseas travel agent wasn't actually the best option.

Sitting over a roaring fire in the bush of South Africa, I found myself talking to a couple who were also on safari. They told me that they'd booked their safari with a local tour operator and the difference in price compared to mine was staggering. I couldn't believe I'd been paying over the odds for so long!

Since that moment I have always booked my safaris through local tour operators. Though this wasn't the end of my struggles.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of local tour operators available in each country, all seemingly offering the same services. As I quickly learned however, not all tour operators are created equal and careful research is required to find the best ones.

From ill-thought-out itineraries with more time on the road than on game drives to unfriendly guides,

bookings at run-down accommodations and so on, the tour operator that you choose is very important.

I've now got dozens of trips to Africa under my belt and been on hundreds of safaris across 10 different countries. I now have a rigorous process in place for finding the best tour operators and I've built up a list of tried and tested tour operators who I can trust. Contacts who you will hear from shortly! As well as putting you in contact with my recommendations, in this guide I'm going to give you dozens of tips and tricks to help you arrange the perfect safari of your dreams.



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MY RECOMMENDED TOUR OPERATORS

It's taken me hundreds of hours worth of research and numerous safaris to finally have a handful of tour operators who I feel confident recommending.

The first part of the process involved scouring the internet for every local tour operator in South Africa, putting every single one into a spreadsheet and noting down key facts such as online reviews. My final list was several hundred tour operators long.

I then contacted every single operator, requesting a quote for my upcoming safari.

I reviewed every proposal meticulously, comparing them on factors such as price, attention to detail, accommodation choice, and simply if they've included everything I asked for (you'll be amazed how many didn't do that). Speed or response and friendliness was also important to me.

This process narrowed down my favourites considerably. But the search wasn't over yet.

I then went on safari with all of the tour operators who had so far passed my checks. There was a vast difference in the experiences I received and I knew that I wouldn't be comfortable recommending some of them.

My personal experiences gave me a small handful of tour operators who I trusted. However, the story doesn't end here.

I frequently review my recommended tour operators, ensuring their prices remain competitive and their reviews remain top-notch.

I also ask every customer at the end of their safari how they found the experience and even the smallest complaint is taken into account.

I'd also like to add here that I get contacted multiple times a week by tour operators who wish to be part of my recommendations. However, I'm passionate about only recommending the best so that you can have a seamless safari.



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COST OF A SOUTH AFRICA SAFARI?

The exact cost of your safari can vary depending on a range of factors, which we'll go into shortly.

The typical costs of a South Africa safari in the Greater Kruger region start at around \$400 per person per day. This price assumes a budget lodge in one of the more affordable private reserves and that you're visiting outside of peak season.

Your price per day will then go up if you choose a luxury lodge in a premium reserve like Sabi Sands, or visit during peak season between June and October.

See the chart below to see how the prices increase depending your comfort level.

If you are a solo traveller the prices will be higher as fixed costs can't be split between you and anyone else,

and if you are travelling as part of a larger group, prices will be slightly lower. For example, lodges often charge single supplement fees for solo travellers.

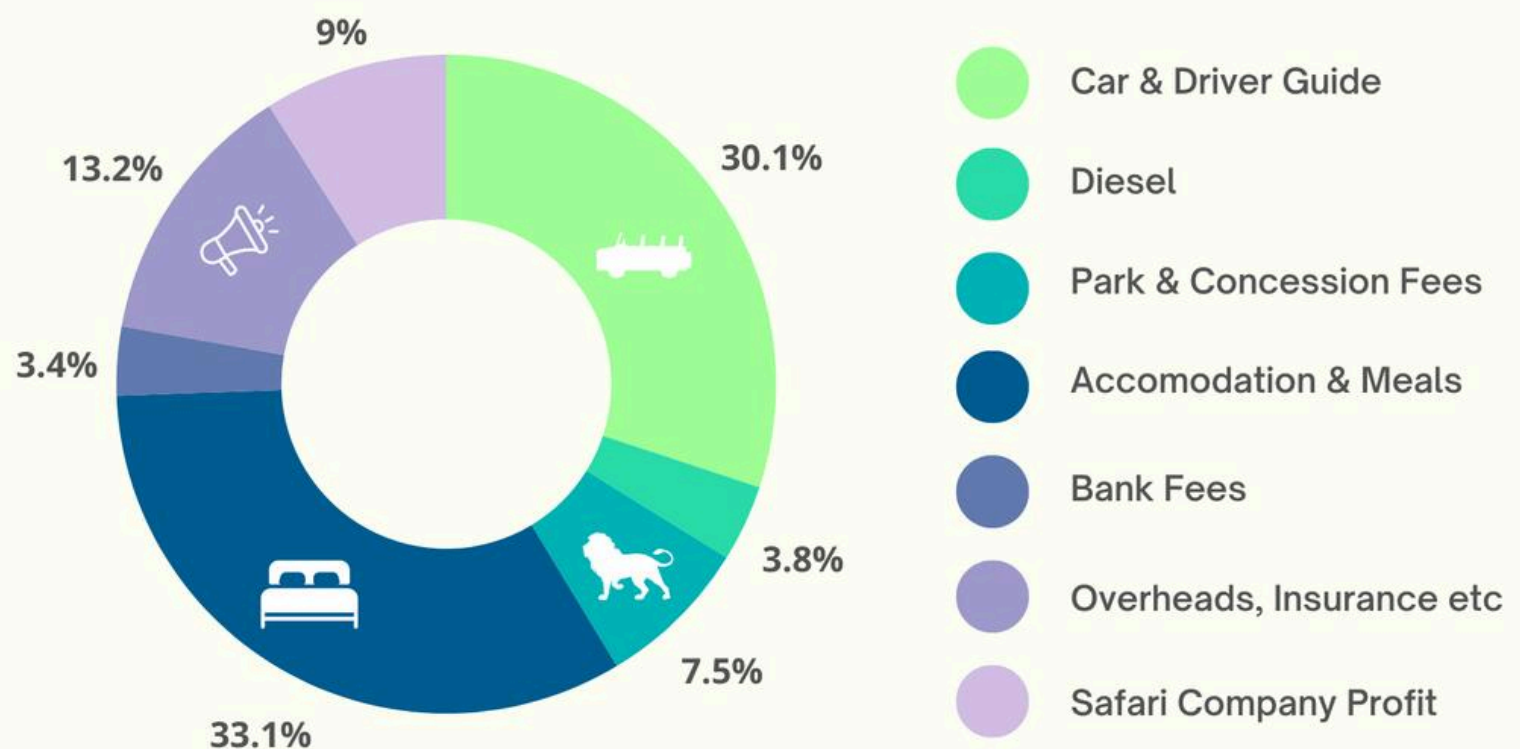
I'll go into more detail on the breakdown of safari costs on the following page but the overwhelming bulk of a South Africa safari cost is made up of accommodation, game drive vehicle and guide costs.

Booking your safari through a local tour operator is, in my opinion, the perfect balance between cost-effectiveness whilst still enabling you to have a stress-free experience. It's a lot cheaper than booking through an international tour operator.

Whilst more expensive than self-drive Kruger National Park safaris, wildlife viewing opportunities are much better in a private reserve with an experienced guide.

Typical full board price inc game drives, per person per day
Excluding international flights, tips and visas.
Based on 2 people sharing.





*BREAKDOWN BASED ON A MID-RANGE PRIVATE RESERVE SAFARI

DETAILED SAFARI

COST BREAKDOWN

The above chart shows the rough cost breakdown of a Greater Kruger safari booked with a local tour operator (based on 2 people in your group). As you can see, car and driver guide costs and accommodation costs make-up over 60% of your total safari cost.

Whilst it is possible to go on a cheaper South Africa safari, and stay within either Kruger National Park or other national parks in the country, in my experience Greater Kruger provides top-tier wildlife encounters, and thus my focus in this guide is on that region.

The other 30% of your safari is split between park fees, fuel, bank fees, the local company's overheads and finally around 9% profit for the local tour operator.

Unlike most destinations in Africa, South Africa's park and concession fees aren't that high. However, the limited number of lodges and campsites within the private reserves mean that accommodation quickly becomes the most expensive part of your South Africa safari.

Camps and lodges are remote and due to strict regulations within the reserves, these lodges have higher overheads than hotels elsewhere. These camps are also built, furnished and run to high standards due to the exclusivity of Greater Kruger Reserves.

Your 4x4 vehicle and driver guide is another important safari cost. The specification of vehicles in South Africa is generally very high and the level of guiding is arguably the best on the continent. Additionally, as well as being accompanied by a skilled driver guide on your safaris in South Africa, you will also have a dedicated tracker with you in the vehicle.

The cost of your accommodation also covers all of your meals and the standard of food within private reserves is extremely high. You will also be very well-fed! As well as your usual three meals, South African safaris include morning tea and snacks in the bush as well as afternoon snacks before your second game drive sundowners drinks and snacks.

FACTORS AFFECTING YOUR SAFARI COSTS

Curious to know more about the factors determining your safari cost? I'll detail the biggest variables that have an impact on your safari cost below.

Your Choice Of Reserve

Different reserves have different price-points and this factor can actually have quite a significant impact on your own safari cost.

More cost-effective Greater Kruger Reserves include Balule, Olifants West and Manyeleti (starting prices \$400 per person per day). At the other end of the scale, Sabi Sand, boasts a much higher starting price of \$1,000 per person per day.

Your Comfort Level

This will have a large impact on your safari cost. Opting for budget accommodation choices rather than mid-range can decrease your safari costs by as much as \$100 per person per day.

I will caveat here that the food for your safari is provided by your accommodation so the better the accommodation, the better the food.

Group Size

Your group size is less important in South Africa than it is in other African locations as safaris in South Africa are typically shared with other lodge guests. This means that vehicle, fuel and driver guide costs cannot be split amongst your group as lodges already assume a full car.

However, lodges have a single-supplement fee of roughly 30% for solo travellers, and larger groups can stay in family units which work out as less per person. Road transfer costs can also be split between your group.

The Time of Year

Park and accommodation fees vary depending on the time of year that you visit. You can save as much as 40% off some lodges by visiting out of season. Note savings are higher for more luxurious accommodation choices.

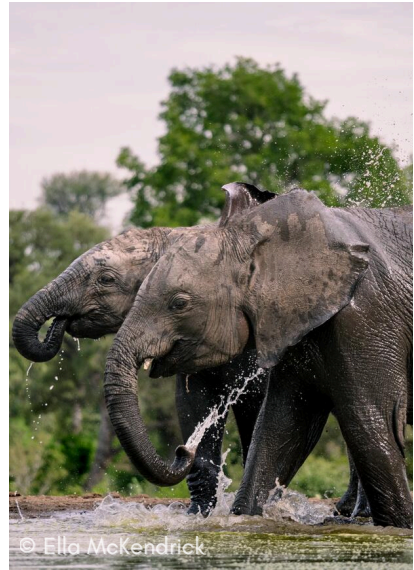
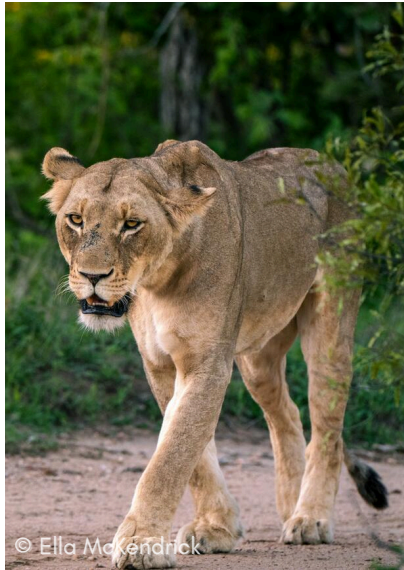
Mode of Transport Between Parks

There are two key ways to travel between parks. The typical and more cost-effective way is to drive.

However, travelling by light aircraft is also an option. Every park and concession has an airstrip so its easy to fly between the different destinations. Flights typically cost around \$300 per person per flight and they have strict baggage allowances that are typically below 20kg per person (including hand luggage).



WHEN SHOULD YOU VISIT SOUTH AFRICA



South Africa has two distinct seasons, the dry season and the green (wet) season. Both times of year offer something special.

I'll delve into the pros and cons of each season below to help you make the right choice for you.

The Dry Season (May - October)

Pros: the best weather, died back vegetation makes wildlife spotting easier, African wild dogs are denning making them easier to locate

Cons: parks are at their busiest (although this is less noticeable with Greater Kruger Reserves), costs are high, nights are cold between June and August whilst October is the hottest time of year

The dry season yields dry, sunny days with low chances of rain. The vegetation has died back, making animal spotting easy.

At this time of year African wild dogs settle down for denning. This makes them far easier to locate and your chances of spotting them are massively increased by visiting at this time of year.

The middle of the dry season (June - August) is the coolest time of year to visit and the nights can get pretty chilly so bring plenty of layers and wrap up warm. The average nighttime temperature is 6°C/42°F,

In contrast, October (the end of the dry season) is the hottest time of year and temperatures are typically 34°C/93°F during the middle of the day.

The Green Season (November - April)

Pros: lush, green landscapes, wildlife spotting is still good, a good time to see baby animals, migratory birds visit, prices are lower, parks are quiet

Cons: rain showers are common, especially in January and February, some roads become impassible due to the rains, making journeys harder

The arrival of the rains means that South Africa's landscape turns lush and green. This abundance of food makes it the ideal time for herbivores to give birth and as a result it's the best time of year to see baby animals.

Denser vegetation and an abundance of water sources makes wildlife spotting more challenging than the dry season, but there will certainly be no shortage of wildlife sightings. This is the best time for bird lovers.

You can expect there to be some rainfall at this time of year, however, unless you are visiting in the wettest months of January and February, it shouldn't be too heavy or continuous.

During times of heavy rainfall, some roads become impassible which can increase the lengths of your journey times and cut-off some parts of the parks and reserves.

The rains make this time of year less popular than the dry season and so the parks are very quiet and safari prices are lower as a result.

In my opinion, if you avoid January and February, this time of year can be really magical.

HOW TO CRAFT THE PERFECT SOUTH AFRICA ITINERARY

Deciding on your safari itinerary is in my opinion the second most important factor in having a great safari, after choosing your tour operator. Your itinerary of choice determines how long you spend in each reserve and what unique experiences you have. All of these choices can affect your enjoyment and what animals you see.

South Africa is a huge country with national parks that are vastly spaced out. Combining Kruger with another national park like Madikwe or Kgalagadi just isn't logistically straightforward, requiring several domestic flights and long layovers in between. For that reason, I recommend sticking to the Greater Kruger Region. The region itself is huge with lots of wildlife diversity.

By sticking to Greater Kruger, you're cutting down driving distances drastically.

I recommend flying to the Kruger region, either to Hoedspruit (closer to Timbavati, Balule, Olifants West, Klaserie and Manyeleti) or Skukuza (closer to Sabi Sand) from either Johannesburg or Cape Town. Driving distances to the reserves are then just a couple of hours.

The biggest driving distances are when you travel between different reserves. These can be up to 4 hours depending on the reserve.

As the reserves are close to airports (Hoedspruit and Skukuza) it's easy to add Cape Town or Victoria Falls to the end of your safari.



WHICH PARKS & RESERVES SHOULD YOU VISIT?

Sabi Sand Reserve ★★★★★

Highlights: big cats, Big Five

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Skukuza: 2 hours

Tips: My personal favourite Greater Kruger Reserve. Fantastic place for seeing leopards and lions. Accommodation is limited to luxury and luxury+ guests.



Timbavati Game Reserve ★★★★★

Highlights: big cats, Big Five, white lions

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Hoedspruit: 1 hour

Tips: Another favourite of mine. Very good for wildlife viewing and especially good for lion lovers and it's one of the few places where you have the chance to see white lions. Has more of a range of accommodation available compared to Sabi Sand.

Thornybush Game Reserve ★★★★★☆

Highlights: Big Five

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Hoedspruit: 2 hours

Tips: A good all-rounder reserve with high chances of seeing the Big Five. Has a range of accommodation options to suit most budgets. Is one of the more popular reserves so can get busy in peak season.





Klaserie Nature Reserve ★★★★★☆

Highlights: Big Five

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Hoedspruit: 1 hour

Tips: A quieter alternative to Timbavati and Thornybush but still has great wildlife viewing opportunities. A range of accommodation to suit most budgets.

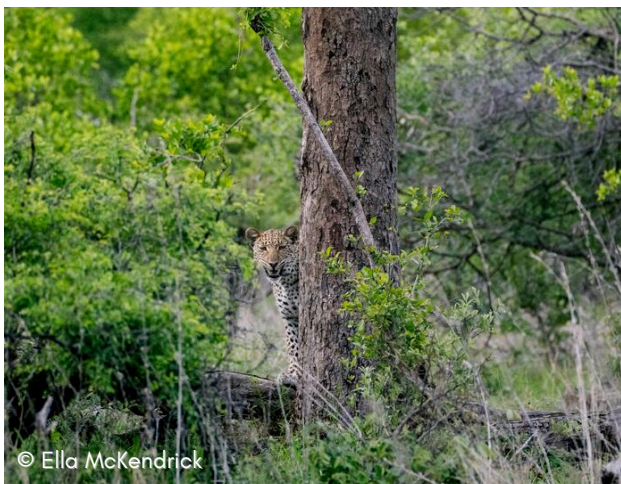
Manyeleti Game Reserve ★★★★★☆

Highlights: Cheetahs

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Hoedspruit: 3 hours

Tips: The busiest private reserve as it allows self-drivers and day visitors whilst other reserves don't. One of the best reserves to see cheetahs due to its open plains.



Olifants West & Balule ★★★★★☆ Nature Reserves

Highlights: Rhinos, peacefulness

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Hoedspruit: 1 hour

Tips: The best reserves to see black rhinos. They also receive far fewer visitors than other reserves and so provide an intimate experience. Still good for wildlife sightings. I saw all of the Big Five in Olifants West.

FAQS

WHAT ARE SOUTH AFRICA'S ENTRY REQUIREMENTS?

To enter South Africa you need a valid passport with at least 30 days validity beyond your planned departure date, plus at least two blank pages. Many countries including the UK, EU nations and USA don't need a visa for stays up to 90 days. There are no mandatory vaccinations for entering South Africa. More information on this is provided in my 'Good To Know Before You Go' guide which you'll receive once you've booked with one of my recommended tour operators

IS THERE MALARIA IN SOUTH AFRICA?

Yes there is a risk of malaria in the Greater Kruger region in South Africa. I'd recommend wearing long-sleeved clothing and bug spray to decrease your risk of bites. I also recommend consulting your doctor about the possibility of anti-malarial tablets.

IS SOUTH AFRICA SAFE?

The safari areas in South Africa are safe. The Greater Kruger region is a well-established tourist destination with excellent security. Take standard precautions when in Johannesburg or other cities, such as not flashing valuables and using reputable transfer services. More information in my 'Good to Know Before You Go' guide.

DO I PAY MORE BY BOOKING THROUGH SAFARIS BY ELLA?

No. I have an agreement with each of my recommended tour operators which promises you a best price guarantee.

This means that the price that they give you is their best price and you won't get a better price by contacting them directly through their website.

HOW HAVE OTHER PEOPLE FOUND THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR RECOMMENDED TOUR OPERATORS?

Feedback from customers who have booked with my recommended tour operators has been overwhelmingly positive. But don't just take my word for it, you can [read over 150 reviews here](#).

I ask every customer for feedback at the end of their safari and each piece of feedback I take onboard. Whilst 98% of the of feedback is 100% positive, any critical feedback I receive, no matter how small, is noted down and passed to the tour company's owner for them to ensure it doesn't happen again. For example, someone told me that their guide seemed tired and so I passed the feedback to the tour operator who told me they'd implement more time off for guides between safaris.

If I receive the same complaint on two occasions, I will then review the tour operator and ultimately if they don't fix the issue, I would have to stop recommending them. However, the tour operators have been extremely receptive to feedback and I've never received the same complaint about one of them twice as the tour operators are passionate about providing the best services possible.

DO YOU KEEP IN TOUCH THROUGHOUT MY SAFARI?

Yes! You get my help and support throughout the whole booking process and safari experience. I have direct access to the tour company owners and so can ensure speedy responses and resolutions to any queries you may have.

For example, a few months ago one of my recommended tour operators informed a customer of a lodge change due to recent reports of the food going downhill, but due to the last-minute nature of the change it took some time to find a new lodge to match the customer's specifications. The customer let me know she was worried and I was able to speak to the company owner. Once aware of the situation, the owner swiftly got involved and started messaging the customer and the situation was resolved incredibly quickly. The customer went on to have an incredible safari and loved the new lodge.

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE

If you've found this guide helpful, you'll be pleased to know that there are more guides on the way!

Once you've made your booking with one of my recommended tour operators, I'll send you the next guide in the series: 'Good To Know Before You Go*'.
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This 10 page guide contains everything you need to know about preparing for your upcoming safari, including entry requirements, a packing list, device charging guidance, tipping guidelines and much more.

I will also provide useful checklists so you don't forget a single thing!



*If your safari is taking place within 12 months of booking, let me know as soon as you've booked by replying to any email from me, to ensure you get your guide asap.

**FREE quotes from the local tour operators I use to book my own trips - safarisbyella.com
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Disclaimer: Information correct to the best of my knowledge at the time of writing. Always check official sites for up-to-date and country specific information for your case.



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