

**Ann Abel, Contributor**

I travel luxe but smart: I know what's worth shelling out for.

Changing The Game In East Africa: Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti In Tanzania

“We’re trying to give people a different safari experience,” says James Kostecky, the general manager of Four Seasons’ just-finished resort in the storied Serengeti National Park. The idea, he explains, is to make tromping around the bush palatable to first-timers who may have been curious about safari but troubled by qualms about safety and comfort, especially older travelers and families with children. “You can get rough and tumble here, but you can also chill out.”

The Four Seasons Safari Lodge Serengeti’s 77 sumptuous rooms and villas are linked by elevated

walkways—stretching half a kilometer from end to end—that feel less vulnerable than paths on the ground, especially when plenty of Maasai watchmen are on hand to escort guests after dark. And they’re far more comfortable than the “Lodge” in the resort’s name might suggest. They can be reached by the only elevator in an East African safari lodging, and they have a contemporary African look and such niceties as air-conditioning, massive rain showers, satellite TVs, and Wi-Fi (boo that there’s a charge for it). The 12 suites and five villas have private pools, and all the rooms have bang-up views and terraces for what one manager calls “sofa safaris.”

Then there’s the typically friendly and anticipatory Four Seasons service, and resort amenities like a swimming pool, a kids club (the resort allows ages 8 and up), three varied restaurants (an all-day buffet, a casual poolside restaurant, and an African-themed grill), two bars, and an accessible wine “cellar” (actually on the upper floor, with a savannah view). Meals and surprisingly good house wines are included in the rates, which start at \$445 per person in low season (comparable to some high-end camps in the region, which don’t have all the staff and services).

Although there’s more distance between guests and nature than at more traditional safari outposts, the Four Seasons has a great site, with year-round watering holes that almost guarantee wildlife sightings.



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They’re so sure, in fact, about the one beyond the infinity swimming pool that they’ve trained a camera on it so guests can watch the drinking elephants or waterbucks from their rooms. For guests who want to rouse themselves, of course, the resort makes a fine base for game drives and balloon rides over the Serengeti.

But a reality of safari is that bumping around in a Land Cruiser can get repetitive and back-achy. Even people who think they want to do every drive end up skipping some, and here there are plenty of ways to fill that time. Some are indulgent, like an afternoon by the pool or a

treatment in the spa, which is staffed mostly by Thai therapists but offers local flavor with Africology products and a massage performed with a Maasai implement (very good, not just gimmicky). A yoga pavilion is in the works, and there’s already a gym, which I appreciated after a week of being reminded how much eating, drinking, and sitting safari usually entails.

Others are educational; programs range from tastings of South African wines led by the hotel’s France-trained sommelier, to a Discovery Centre for interactive exhibitions, films, and periodic talks by visiting experts. It’s the first lodge-based conservation and education program in East Africa, and the Four Seasons is justifiably proud of it—you can learn a lot more here than by trying to read a field guide in a moving Land Cruiser. Guests can get involved in research projects too, such as heading out with escorts on walking safaris to set camera traps and watching their recordings the next morning (a huge hit with kids, says Discovery Centre manager Oli Dreike).

Because of its size, the Four Seasons isn’t really in the game drive business, so guests are best off booking through a tour operator such as Micato Safaris (which, along with the Four Seasons, sponsored my trip), which will provide driver-guides and vehicles. After 47 years in the safari business, Micato employs many of the continent’s best guides, has impeccable connections, and offers a great deal of hand-holding—from shipping guests top-flight duffle bags (which guests will never lift themselves) before they arrive to filling out their immigration forms when they depart. Between Micato and Four Seasons, there’s no easier way to experience East Africa.

Seasoned Africa hands recommend flying British Airways from London to Nairobi, as it’s more comfortable than the current options between Europe and Tanzania. (And there are no direct flights from the U.S.) It’s a quick hop from Nairobi to Kilimanjaro, and another from there to the Serengeti.

